Rethinking the Adventure Education Experience: An Inquiry of Meanings, Culture and Educational Virtue

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RETHINKING THE ADVENTURE EDUCATION EXPERIENCE:
AN INQUIRY OF MEANINGS, CULTURE AND EDUCATIONAL VIRTUE

A Dissertation
Presented to
the Faculty of the Morgridge College of Education
University of Denver

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

by
Benjamin Charles Ingman

June 2013
Advisor: Dr. P. Bruce Uhrmacher
ABSTRACT

This study is an investigation of the adventure education (AE) experience with particular attention to what happens during the AE experience, the meanings participants ascribe to the experience, how personal backgrounds and institutional cultures coalesce in AE, and the significance of the AE experience for schooling. These topics are explored through observing and interviewing participants of adventure education programs under the qualitative framework of educational connoisseurship and criticism. The experiences at the three sites of study—an outdoor challenge course, a wilderness backpacking expedition and a summer adventure program—are described in detail and illustrated through the qualities of the experience (celebratory challenge, novelty, freedom and togetherness, aesthetic vitality, and great experience), cultural coalescence in AE (depicted through cultural rigidity and flexibility), and the participant perceptions of schooling. Findings are inferred through recommendations for AE, including consideration of the qualities of experience, striking a cultural balance in AE, and embodying a shift in thinking regarding the purpose of the AE experience. This study also provokes a reconsideration of contemporary educational paradigms, as the participant perceptions of schooling, when considered alongside the AE experience, provide a fresh perspective of the qualities of educational experience.
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I thank my mother and father, Mary and Charley, for fostering my adventurous character. I also thank my family and friends too numerous to list, who have supported me in this endeavor. Further, I thank the programs and participants of study for accommodating my curiosity and sharing their experiences.

This study is dedicated to my wife, Becky. I thank her for her tireless support, unwavering optimism, inexhaustible energy, and enduring love. I look forward to our continued adventure.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

PROLOGUE..............................................................................................................1

CHAPTER ONE: RECONSIDERING THE ADVENTURE EDUCATION EXPERIENCE 3
Uncovering Adventure Education.............................................................................4
STUDY RATIONALE..................................................................................................6
1. Dearth in the Literature: Understanding the Adventure Education Experience ..........7
2. Dearth in the Literature: Cultural Coalescence in Adventure Education .................8
3. Misconceptions of Adventure as Educative.......................................................9
Study Rationale in Summary .............................................................................12
RESEARCH QUESTIONS ........................................................................................13
Research Questions in Summary ......................................................................15
PREVIEW OF METHOD .......................................................................................16
MOVING FORWARD ............................................................................................17

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE .....................................................18
Illuminating Terms..............................................................................................18
THE FOUNDATIONS OF ADVENTURE EDUCATION ............................................21
  Theoretical Foundations ...................................................................................22
  Practical Foundations .......................................................................................25
Foundations of Adventure Education in Summary ..........................................33
STUDIES OF THE ADVENTURE EDUCATION EXPERIENCE .............................34
  Conceptions of the Adventure Experience.......................................................35
  Studies of Outcomes in Adventure Education .................................................42
  Studies of the Adventure Education Experience Itself ..................................44
  Studies of the Experience in Conclusion .......................................................49
STUDIES OF CULTURE IN ADVENTURE EDUCATION .....................................49
  Cultural Terminology .....................................................................................50
  Studies of Personal Background in Adventure Education ..............................53
  Studies of Cultural Formation in Adventure Education ..............................57
  Studies of Culture in Conclusion ..................................................................62
THE LITERATURE IN REVIEW ...........................................................................63

CHAPTER THREE: METHOD ...............................................................................64
EDUCATIONAL CONNOISSEURSHIP AND CRITICISM .....................................65
  Credibility in Educational Criticism ..............................................................67
  Four Dimensions of Educational Criticism ...................................................69
  Experiential Educational Criticism ................................................................71
STUDY DESIGN ..................................................................................................76
  What Experience? .........................................................................................76
  Choosing the Sites .........................................................................................77
  The Sites and Participants of Study ...............................................................78
  Data Collection Methods .............................................................................82
  Association of Method to Research Questions .............................................86
  Data Analysis .................................................................................................90
LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY ........................................................................91
THE RESEARCHER ...........................................................................................93
CHAPTER FOUR: DESCRIPTIONS OF THE ADVENTURE EDUCATION EXPERIENCE

SHAVANO EXPEDITIONS ........................................................................................................ 99
  Will there be Bears? ............................................................................................................ 100
  Outfitted for Adventure ..................................................................................................... 103
  Hitting the Trail ................................................................................................................ 105
  The Contour Lines of Culture .......................................................................................... 107
  Albert’s Pain ..................................................................................................................... 108
  First Time Camping .......................................................................................................... 110
  Guidelines for Being in the Woods .................................................................................... 112
  The Early Bird Gets the Worm ........................................................................................... 113
  Having a Plan is Important: An Initiative, A Lesson ....................................................... 115
  Look Like a Hiker ............................................................................................................. 116
  The Climb to Fancy Pass .................................................................................................. 117
  Snow! .................................................................................................................................. 121
  Reaching the Summit ........................................................................................................ 122
  Initiatives and the Shelter of the Pines ............................................................................. 125
  I Just Don’t Like it ............................................................................................................ 127
  Is it OK to Harm Nature? ............................................................................................... 128
  Shavano Expeditions in Conclusion ............................................................................... 130

WILSON ACADEMY .............................................................................................................. 130
  A Rabbit, A Fire, Autonomy ............................................................................................. 133
  Fear and Festivity in White Water ................................................................................... 135
  Aesthetic Involvement in an Anesthetic Setting ............................................................... 140
  Splendor to Suffering: The Cold Rainy Evening ............................................................. 144
  Desert Rock ...................................................................................................................... 149
  Bouldering: The Private Perspective .............................................................................. 153
  Summertime at the Reservoir ........................................................................................... 154
  Dinner on the Rock, Thunder on the Wind ..................................................................... 157
  Dancing in the Desert ....................................................................................................... 159
  Together Around the Fire ................................................................................................. 160
  Wilson Academy in Conclusion ..................................................................................... 161

REDCLoud CHALLENGE COURSE ....................................................................................... 162
  Welcome to Redcloud ...................................................................................................... 165
  Warmed Up and Having Fun: Large Group Activities .................................................... 167
  The Howling Wolves: Low Initiatives .............................................................................. 169
  Increasing the Challenge: The Acid River ....................................................................... 173
  Working Together on the Whale Watch .......................................................................... 178
  A Culture for Challenge .................................................................................................... 181
  Tears and Laughter in the Trees ...................................................................................... 184
  Why is the Pole Shaking? ............................................................................................... 189
  A Final Reflection ............................................................................................................. 192
  The Redcloud Challenge Course in Conclusion ............................................................. 194

DESCRIPTIONS IN SUMMARY .............................................................................................. 196

IMAGES OF ADVENTURE ..................................................................................................... 197

Shavano Expeditions Images ............................................................................................ 197
Wilson Academy Images ................................................................................................... 203
Redcloud Challenge Course Images .................................................................................. 210
CHAPTER FIVE: ILLUSTRATIONS OF THE ADVENTURE EDUCATION EXPERIENCE ................................................................. 214
QUALITIES OF THE ADVENTURE EDUCATION EXPERIENCE ................................................................. 216
Quality 1: Celebratory Challenge ................................................................. 218
Holistic Challenges ........................................................................ 219
Suffering ......................................................................................... 221
Learning About Self Through Challenge ............................................. 224
Afterglow ......................................................................................... 229
A Celebration of Challenge ................................................................. 233
Quality 2: Novelty ........................................................................ 234
New Experiences ........................................................................ 234
Perceptions of Novelty ..................................................................... 237
The Pedestrian ............................................................................... 240
The Meanings of Novelty .................................................................. 242
Quality 3: Freedom & Togetherness ...................................................... 245
Freedom ......................................................................................... 246
Togetherness ................................................................................. 253
Freedom and Togetherness ................................................................. 260
Quality 4: Aesthetic Vitality ................................................................. 262
Aesthetic Encounters ..................................................................... 264
Aesthetic Paradox ......................................................................... 268
Signs of the Aesthetic ..................................................................... 273
Vitality .......................................................................................... 284
Quality 5: Great Experience ................................................................. 288
An Underlying Quality ..................................................................... 289
Perceptions of Great Experience ......................................................... 292
Qualities of the Adventure Education Experience in Retrospect ...... 302
CULTURAL COALESENCE IN ADVENTURE EDUCATION ................................................................. 303
The Cultural Arrangement ................................................................. 304
Cultural Rigidity ............................................................................ 305
The Power Dynamic ..................................................................... 306
Guidelines to Adventure ................................................................ 307
The Use of Jargon ......................................................................... 310
Instructor Values at Work ................................................................. 312
Required Adaptation ..................................................................... 319
Cultural Rigidity in Conclusion ......................................................... 321
Cultural Flexibility ......................................................................... 321
Language ......................................................................................... 322
Working Cultural Norms ................................................................ 323
Personal Goal Setting ...................................................................... 326
Sustaining Selfhood ....................................................................... 328
Conclusion to Cultural Flexibility ......................................................... 332
Cultural Integration: Anecdotal Support ............................................. 332
Cultural Coalescence in Summary .................................................... 334
CARICATURES, COMPARISONS, AND CRITIQUES OF SCHOOLING ................................................................. 335
Caricatures of Schooling ................................................................. 336
Comparisons of Adventure Education and School Experiences ...... 340
Critiques of Schooling ..................................................................... 345
Suggestion 1: Interaction ................................................................. 346
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Suggestion 2: Challenges</td>
<td>349</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggestion 3: New and Enjoyable Experiences</td>
<td>351</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggestions for Schooling in Review</td>
<td>354</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant Perceptions of Schooling in Summary</td>
<td>355</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ILLUSTRATIONS IN SUMMARY</td>
<td>356</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER SIX: RETHINKING THE ADVENTURE EDUCATION EXPERIENCE</td>
<td>357</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REVIEW OF STUDY</td>
<td>358</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REVISITING THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS</td>
<td>359</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intersections of the Research Questions</td>
<td>362</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SIGNIFICANCE FOR ADVENTURE EDUCATION</td>
<td>368</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Qualities of the AE Experience Revisited</td>
<td>368</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Striking a Cultural Balance in Adventure Education</td>
<td>369</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constructions of Meaning in Adventure Education</td>
<td>372</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Myriad of Meanings Against a Universal Rationale</td>
<td>376</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rethinking the Adventure Education Experience</td>
<td>378</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance for Adventure Education In Closing</td>
<td>384</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SIGNIFICANCE FOR SCHOOLING</td>
<td>385</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reviewing Educational Experience</td>
<td>386</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational Experience as Idiosyncratic</td>
<td>389</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom in Schooling</td>
<td>389</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Togetherness in Schooling</td>
<td>391</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Character of Challenge in Schooling</td>
<td>392</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuity and Novelty in Schooling</td>
<td>394</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living Education</td>
<td>402</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Tension and Rhythm of Educational Experience</td>
<td>407</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reconsidering Educational Paradigms</td>
<td>410</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questions of Education</td>
<td>416</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE INQUIRY IN ADVENTURE EDUCATION</td>
<td>417</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IN CLOSING</td>
<td>419</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPILOGUE</td>
<td>420</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>421</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDICES</td>
<td>437</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX A: Interview Protocols</td>
<td>437</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX B: Preliminary Codes of the AE Experience</td>
<td>440</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX C: Shavano Expeditions Route Map</td>
<td>441</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Four stages of adventure ...........................................................................36
Figure 2: Perception matrix for the adventure experience ........................................38
Figure 3: The adventure experience paradigm ............................................................38
Figure 4: Three ways to learn about experience .......................................................74
Figure 5: Research sites at a glance ...........................................................................81
Figure 6: Data collection by the numbers ..................................................................86
Figure 7: Acid River puzzle ..................................................................................175

IMG. 1 ......................................................................................................................197
IMG. 2 ......................................................................................................................197
IMG. 3 ......................................................................................................................197
IMG. 4 ......................................................................................................................197
IMG. 5 ......................................................................................................................197
IMG. 6 ......................................................................................................................198
IMG. 7 ......................................................................................................................198
IMG. 8 ......................................................................................................................198
IMG. 9 ......................................................................................................................198
IMG. 10 ....................................................................................................................199
IMG. 11 ....................................................................................................................199
IMG. 12 ....................................................................................................................199
IMG. 13 ....................................................................................................................199
IMG. 14 ...................................................................................................................200
IMG. 15 ...................................................................................................................200
IMG. 16 ...................................................................................................................200
IMG. 17 ...................................................................................................................200
IMG. 18 ...................................................................................................................200
IMG. 19 ...................................................................................................................201
IMG. 20 ...................................................................................................................201
IMG. 21 ...................................................................................................................201
IMG. 22 ...................................................................................................................201
IMG. 23 ...................................................................................................................202
IMG. 24 ...................................................................................................................202
IMG. 25 ...................................................................................................................202
IMG. 26 ...................................................................................................................202
IMG. 27 ...................................................................................................................203
IMG. 28 ...................................................................................................................203
IMG. 29 ...................................................................................................................203
IMG. 30 ...................................................................................................................203
IMG. 31 ...................................................................................................................203
IMG. 32 ...................................................................................................................204
IMG. 33 ...................................................................................................................204
IMG. 34 ...................................................................................................................204
IMG. 35 ...................................................................................................................204
IMG. 36 ...................................................................................................................204
IMG. 37 ...................................................................................................................205
IMG. 38 ...................................................................................................................205
IMG. 39 ...................................................................................................................205
IMG. 40 ...................................................................................................................205

viii
PROLOGUE

It is after midnight. We have been climbing for over 16 hours. The temperature has dropped and the air feels cool on my skin. My headlamp shines bright on the silvery granite wall before me, providing enough light to discern the subtleties of the deep crack in the rock. It is enough light to continue upward. We have some water left, but have run out of food. The fatigue of ascending 2,000 feet of vertical granite has now fully set in; our movements are sloppy, and our pace slows.

I pull up through a section of rock, and place a piece of protection high over my head. It looks solid from here. I clip my harness to the piece and lean back to rest my tired arms. I exhale.

Suddenly, I am falling.

Though exhausted, the unanticipated weightlessness brings with it a shot of adrenaline. In an instant, I am fully alert. The white light from my headlamp shows a projection-like image of the gray wall flashing up and away from me, framed by terrifying obscurity. The air is ominously still and silent as I fall farther into the night. I am simultaneously completely aware of my surroundings and utterly helpless in my position. I rely wholly on the idea that my climbing partner, Travis, is still awake.

The rope abruptly comes tight on my harness and I swing blindly back into the wall, my feet and arms slamming the hard granite violently. After catching my fall,
Travis yells up to me, “Are you OK?” “Yeah.” I quickly reply, fully alive with adrenaline, “I can’t believe that [protection] blew.”

I sit in my harness a moment, trying to let my innate reaction to the fall fade; fear and panic are of little utility here. Though it is too dark to see the ground far below, I am fully aware of my position, and respect the threatening void of calm air and darkness beneath me. Though the only thing keeping me from falling another 2,000 feet to the ground is a rope no thicker than my finger, I am in this position by intention.

The darkness shrinks the focus of my world back to the rock, the crack, and my own body in concert with its features; the rest falls out of sight, experience, and mind. I pull up the rope and engage the section of befuddling rock once more. My arms tired, the air cool on my skin. The world below fades beyond the reach of consciousness, and my thoughts travel no farther than the light of my headlamp. I exhale.
CHAPTER ONE
RECONSIDERING THE ADVENTURE EDUCATION EXPERIENCE

A climber clinging to a rock face high above the ground; a kayaker plunging through unforgiving rapids; an alpinist leaning into high winds and frigid temperatures on a mountain ridge; or a sailing crew fighting to trim the sails as they rip through turbulent ocean waves. These images spark our interest and conjure feelings of excitement or discomfort. They grab our attention as exhibitions of human capacity in concert with extreme natural environments; they embody a harnessing of human agency in the face of adversity in its most organic sense. They exemplify the endangerment of life, and life lived in full. They frighten and fascinate. They are among “those rare and precious human activities that [we] perform for their own sake, and for that alone” (Ullman, 1947, p. 29). They are adventures.

Enthralling though it may be, there are still questions of the role adventure may play in our lives today, and the purposes these experiences may serve by way of education. Indeed it is this basic curiosity that stands at the root of inquiry in this study.

As an adventurer and educator, I too have long considered the connections between education and adventure. Though adventure has taken on particular significance in my own life, the link between adventure and education remains complicated, not adequately explained through simple rationales or causational relationships.
Whether we categorize adventure as educative is often more a reflection of what we consider educational than it is a deliberation of the merits and pitfalls of adventure. If we consider education as the assimilation of “tacit knowledge” (Whitehead, 1929, p. 1), then it may well be that the two have little in common. However, if we consider the varied aims of education, such as self-actualization (Rousseau, 1762/1979), growth (Dewey, 1916), life (Whitehead, 1929), meaning (Eisner, 1985; Phenix, 1964), or happiness (Noddings, 2003), we may begin to see the educational sensibilities of adventure. Disparate conceptions of education aside, there exists a strong body of theory, research, and practice that embraces the correlation between the adventure experience and education. This movement carries the moniker adventure education (AE), and the experiences therein are the subject of this inquiry.

Uncovering Adventure Education

Though “adventure in schooling may seem a contradiction” (Horwood, 1999, p. 9), put simply, adventure education is the use of adventure for educational purposes. As it was presented near the inception of the field:

Adventure Education, uses as a medium those outdoor pursuits that are potentially dangerous. It involves the presentation of meaningful challenge to young people, within a framework of safety, in order to give them deep personal and social awareness. (Mortlock, 1978, p. 3)

Pervasive through adventure education theory is the idea that adventure experiences in outdoor contexts can serve as a means to greater ends, often rationalized through the development of virtue (Hunt, 1999), personal growth (Hopkins & Putnam, 1993) and an improved self-concept (Ewert, 1983). This means-ends approach to adventure stems back

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1 Though it has been argued that adventure has a role to play in even the most traditional of educational aims (Hunt, 1999).
to its founding, and remains a constant focus of both practice and theory in adventure education (Brookes, 2003b; Hattie, Marsh, Neill, & Richards, 1997; Hunt, 1999).

The practice of adventure education has historically reflected the diverse values identified within the AE experience, with contemporary programs emphasizing the therapeutic, educational, technical, psychological, and recreational values of the adventure experience. While the approaches espoused across the field vary significantly (Prouty, 2007), a common theme unites this vast eclectic of programmatic practice: there is often something good within the adventure experience—so good, we might consider its educational value. As Hopkins and Putnam (1993) agreed, there exists an “increasingly commonsense acceptance that adventure education is a ‘good thing’ and that it works” (p. 63), yet these approaches remain on the margins of educational discourse, and largely sidelined in contemporary practices of schooling.

Whether we embrace the popular means-ends conception of adventure education is perhaps beside the point, for it is that “something good” that is of particular interest in this study. It is my contention that we may better understand the value of adventure education by investigating directly the experiences of those who participate in AE in its contemporary forms. Through this inquiry, with particular attention to personal background, ascribed meaning, and educational significance, I enrich collective perceptions of the AE experience toward varied ends. Though this study does not completely demystify the AE experience, it is an important step in the direction of developing an understanding of adventure education as it is experienced. In essence, this study will tug at the veil that has concealed the AE experience in the hopes that we might better learn what it has to teach us.
STUDY RATIONALE

Adventure education, as a concept and as a method, has largely remained an arcane subfield of education, even categorized beyond the boundaries of what many consider educational (Adler, 1982; Hirsch, 1988; 2006). The continued obscurity and marginalization of this field in educational sectors comes at the price of neglecting the potential value that lies within the AE experience. But before the value of adventure education can be applied to broader contexts—an aim that traces back to the inception of adventure education (Mortlock, 1978; 1984; Hopkins & Putnam, 1993)—we must first foster some understanding of what is, in fact, of value in these experiences. As such, I position this study as one step in the collective march toward the enriched understanding and transitive, informed application of adventure education.

This study is necessary on three counts: First, there exists an imbalance in research of adventure education, which focuses heavily on the outcomes of AE while a dearth in the literature remains regarding the qualitative process or experience of adventure. Second, there exists a dearth in the literature surrounding cultural coalescence in adventure education, especially as it relates to the personal backgrounds of participants, and the implicitly championed culture of AE institutions. And third, the educational value of the adventure experience may have been misconceived to this juncture, evidenced through the continued separation between adventure experiences and contemporary schooling. I outline each of these concerns below, as they collectively articulate the necessity of the study at hand.
1. Dearth in the Literature: Understanding the Adventure Education Experience

The recent efficiency movements, volatile economic climate and other questions of validity have pressured adventure education programs to prove their worth through research so that AE might continue to enjoy programmatic growth across America and the world (Attarian, 2001). As Roberts (2005; 2008) argues, this has resulted in an essentialist conception of experience, which oversimplifies (and commodifies) the complexity of the process, presenting experience as an efficient and universal tool toward the outcomes we desire to so produce. The reaction in the AE research community, then, has been to produce an abundance of literature that focuses on the outcomes of the experience—often measured through positivistic research paradigms in an attempt to explain, or prove, the efficacy of AE. This research, overwhelmingly correlational and context-specific, has been critiqued for its “[disturbingly common] emphasis on positive findings and ignoring of negative evidence” (Hattie et al., 1997, p. 49).

Though this outcome-focused research does provide a perspective of the AE experience, it fails to elucidate that experience from a qualitative perspective. As McKenzie (2000) notes, “Much of adventure education research continues to focus on the beneficial outcomes derived from programs, rather than on how these outcomes are achieved” (p. 19). Concern for this dearth in the literature has been repeatedly echoed across the field. To revisit a few recent calls:

“…existing studies still largely evaluate program effectiveness and there continues to be a paucity of research on the process of adventure therapy or programming experiences” (Durr, 2009, p. 451).
“A need has been recognised to develop research that explore the ‘process variables’ of adventure experiences instead of focusing on measuring outcomes” (Davidson, 2001, p. 12).
“… the ‘classical experimental’ approach to researching adventure education has inherent weaknesses which have prevented it progressing towards understanding the process, rather than just describing the outcomes” (Nichols, 2000a, p. 22).
“… we should continue to integrate studies that attempt to explain the adventure education process. There is a recognizable need to understand the process and mechanisms of adventure education…” (Shooter, 2010, p. 293).
“There is a need to recognize the subjective nature of participants’ experiences and utilize more qualitative approaches to understand the complex process involved in experiential education” (Martin & Leberman, 2005, p. 46).

The scarcity of studies that seek qualitative understanding of the AE experience is likely a consequence of the difficulties associated with observing and interviewing in the wilderness settings associated with adventure (Davidson, 2001). Indeed the unique demands of investigating the AE experience qualitatively may require a particular type of researcher.

This dearth in the literature is not the problem per se; rather, of issue is our continued weakness in understanding. In adventure education, we may have put the positivistic cart before the empirical horse, and are left with quantitative explanations of a process that remains, at base, qualitatively mysterious. The extensive calls for qualitative conceptions of the process, or experience, of adventure education presents this study as one among many required to address this staggering gap in understanding.

2. Dearth in the Literature: Cultural Coalescence in Adventure Education

A similar scarcity in the literature exists regarding issues of culture, personal background, and the participant process of interacting with the adventure education environment on a cultural level. Purdie and Neill (1999) agree, identifying a “potentially important but relatively unexplored area, is the impact of cultural differences [in adventure education]” (p. 48). The adventure experience has been likened to one of culture shock for some participants (Fabrizio & Neill, 2005; Kraft, 1992), and adventure
programs have even produced varied results with particular cultural groups (Orren & Werner, 2007; Purdie, Neill, & Richards, 2002). Others have articulated repeated calls for responsive facilitation techniques for participants of particular personal or cultural backgrounds (Warren, 1998), and identify cultural awareness as imperative for the continued relevance of adventure education (Meyer, 1994).

Though it is clear that a body of research does exist on the topic of culture in AE, few studies have attended to the issue of institutional culture and personal background within adventure education, particularly as it pertains to the participants’ experience of this process. The disturbing evidence to date, combined with the repeated calls for research in this area, situate this study as contributing to this second dearth in the literature. Through investigating the coalescence of participants’ personal backgrounds and the institutional culture, this study is situated to enrich collective perspectives of adventure education as a cultural practice.

3. Misconceptions of Adventure as Educative

The third issue that substantiates the importance of this study is the continued marginalization of the educational value of adventure. Though adventure education was originally conceived with explicit ties to formal education, the two have grown apart to the degree that their conceptual ties are more imaginative than practical.

An often-neglected foundation of outdoor education is that its original intentions were based on the premise of a “return to nature and to outdoor experiences as a basic educational necessity” (Freeberg & Taylor, 1961, p. 235). Adventure education was introduced with similar intentions: improving schooling was identified as “precisely the goal of adventure education” (Wood & Gillis, 1979, p. 10); “Adventure education should
be … basic to the education of every young person” (Mortlock, 1978, p. 23). However, these seminal intentions have effectively been jettisoned from the AE institution, as evidenced through the absence of adventure education in formal education, and limited attempts to establish AE as an element of school curricula. The adventure education handbook was even renamed *Adventure Programming*, in its most recent edition, “because this new title more accurately reflects the terminology of the profession as it has evolved” (Priest, 1999a, xiii). This change in name stems from two important undercurrents within the AE research community: the somewhat apathetic acceptance that adventure experiences are to remain on the periphery of educational discourse, and the belief that AE researchers should focus on the improvement of practice in these alternative settings.

Accordingly, mainstream education may continue to perceive adventure education as recreational² “fun and games”; too far removed from the business of schooling to be incorporated with intention as an element of an educational program (Mortlock, 1978). As Kraft (1992) acknowledged, in spite of the conceptual and historical overlap between adventure experiences and education, “adventure education is far from being accepted as a mainstream teaching-learning process” (p. 8), particularly in American schools.³ Mortlock (1978) identified this very issue in his inception of adventure education as a field, and his call for a reconsideration of the educational aspects of adventure stands equally relevant today, over three decades later:

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² Though the field of AE presents slightly different definitions for recreational and educational adventure programs (Webb, 1999), the experiences facilitated within the two disciplines are characterized by more similarity than difference.

³ As Neill (1997) noted, the spread of outdoor education to mainstream education in other countries, Australia in particular, has been quite successful.
Far too often Outdoor Pursuits are seen by Headteachers and staff uninvolved in the subject, as peripheral to the important academic work of the pupil… Far too often those teaching Outdoor Pursuits are content to give technical skills instruction in a vacuum, and are either unable or unwilling to try and communicate the more fundamental values implicit in their work. (p. 33)

Fifteen years later, Hopkins and Putnam (1993) expressed similar concerns:

Despite this greatly-enhanced understanding and acceptance of the value of adventure experience, … The renewed emphasis on the learning of basic skills, the reaction to the liberal educational experiments of the 1960s, the rapid pace of economic and social change, and above all the attempt to justify all new initiatives on the basis of cost-effectiveness, have thrown up a major challenge to all engaged in outdoor education. The principles may have been established, but the environment is changing again, quickly and dramatically. (p. 59)

To these still relevant issues, we may add the recent accountability legislation (No Child Left Behind, H.R. 1, 2001; Race to the Top, S. 844, 2010), movements toward a national standardized curricula (Common Core, 2013), and dedicated attempts to “deskill” the teaching profession (Dimitriadis & Hill, 2013) in American schools as additional hurdles to adventure education in schooling. Schooling in America has predominantly continued in the scientific modernist (Bobbit, 1918; 1924), industrialist (Taylor, 1911), academic rationalist (Adler, 1982; Hirsch 1988; 2006) tradition. With our focus in schools now drifting farther away from the experiences of our students (Dewey, 1938; Eisner, 1967; Noddings, 2003), instead toward the prefigured outcomes they produce (Mager, 1962; Popham, 1972), we have perhaps never been further from realizing the educational import of adventure experiences. Discourse of educational experience is in dire need of a resurrection, and we may well inspire such a discussion through peering beyond our popularized approaches to contemporary education. The adventure education experience presents one such potentiality.
This third issue is likely a reflection of the first: If we posses an underdeveloped comprehension of an experience, then it is only expected that we misunderstand the educational significance embedded therein. From this perspective, through enriching understanding of the AE experience, I hope to revitalize discussion of the value of adventure, and sketch the potential significance of these experiences for schooling. If there is something good in adventure education—and the accounts of human experience to date suggest that indeed there is—then something may be lost when we neglect these experiences in the schooling of children.

**Study Rationale in Summary**

To briefly review, I have clarified the importance of this study through three central points: 1.) A dearth in understanding the AE experience, 2.) A dearth in understanding cultural coalescence in AE, and 3.) Misconceptions of adventure as educative. Within the body of research concerned with adventure education, there has been a great diversity of studies, but to my knowledge there exist few, if any, that investigate the AE experience on the grounds of ascribed meaning, cultural coalescence, and educational significance, and none that investigate the AE experience utilizing arts based research.⁴ Accordingly, this study breaks new conceptual ground in the field of adventure education, and embodies a broad scope of potential impact for a number of contexts.

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⁴ Kime (2008) and Victor (2012) have also researched adventure and outdoor experiential education through arts based research, though their studies were markedly different in scope and focus.
RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions in this study stem from both my personal experience as an adventure educator and gaps in the literature of adventure education. In this section, I introduce these questions, and clarify the concerns central to each. The four research questions of this study read as follows:

1. What happens to participants during the adventure education experience?
2. What meanings do participants of adventure education ascribe to those experiences?
3. How do the personal backgrounds of participants coalesce with institutional cultures in adventure education?
4. What is the significance of the adventure education experience for schooling, if any?

*Question 1: What happens to participants during the adventure education experience?*

This broad question provided the framework necessary for better understanding the process of adventure education through the lived experiences of AE participants. Though this question could be misinterpreted as a focus on the outcomes of the experience (e.g. what happens in the longitudinal sense), I asked this question in the quite literal and immediate sense (note *during*). Again, though many studies measure the outcomes of AE, few focus directly on the lived experience of those undergoing adventure programming (Davidson, 2001; Shooter, 2010). Through specific attention to the various happenings, conditions, and interactions within adventure education settings, I was able to contextualize the participant experience in AE through rich descriptions, and the qualities of the AE experience.
**Question 2: What meanings do participants of adventure education ascribe to those experiences?**

Questions of meaning can inspire complicated conversations (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Phenix, 1964; Seidman, 2006; Uhrmacher, 2002), though my intent is to confront this complexity through simplicity. For the purposes of this study I use the term meaning in that it relates to the sense a person makes of an experience, based on what they communicate about that experience. Further, I acknowledge that addressing this question depends on the context in which that meaning is constructed and communicated. For example, we might ascribe different meanings to a particular experience if it has particular relevance to our current life context. The same experience, reflected upon at a different time, with an alternative life context, may take on alternative meanings (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Further still, the sensibilities and tendencies of the individual constructing meaning also influences the type (or realm) of meaning constructed (Phenix, 1964; Uhrmacher, 2002). Complex though this question may be, it was addressed in simple terms through providing participants the opportunity to both construct and communicate their meanings of the AE experience, and by welcoming various types of meaning in participant responses.

**Question 3: How do the personal backgrounds of participants coalesce with institutional cultures in adventure education?**

This question is one of coalescence between individual and institution; how do the two, participant and organization, come together on a cultural level. There is cause for investigating this issue when we consider one of the explicit aims of adventure education
is to introduce individuals to an unfamiliar environment—and implicitly, a foreign cultural reality (Walsh & Golins, 1976).

In this question, I am particularly interested in how participants’ personal backgrounds interact with the AE institution. I use the term personal background to account for various identity categories, intersectionality, and personality (McLaughlin & Heath, 1993). It is from this perspective, considering the idiosyncrasy of the individual and in a pragmatic orientation to questions of culture (see Dewey, 1916; Locke & Stern, 1942), that I ask questions of personal background and institutional culture in order to glean insight into how the two may coalesce in AE.

*Question 4: What is the significance of the adventure education experience for schooling, if any?*

I bring forward a question of significance because, as an educational critic, I am interested in identifying the educational value of these experiences (Eisner, 1998). By significance, I refer to the lessons the AE experience might have to teach us in the context of schooling. Given the original intention of adventure education (as educational) and the current marginalization of adventure in education, it seems that identifying this educational significance may well serve to communicate what one has to do with the other. Although implications are often included as an implicit component of research, I have expressed educational significance as an explicit dimension of this study in order that this interest may guide all phases of the research.

**Research Questions in Summary**

To address the above questions is not a direct linear undertaking, and the ways I attend to these questions depends heavily on the approach to knowledge I espouse
throughout their investigation (see Dewey, 1916; 1929). Accordingly, I disclose up front that I do not provide definitive “answers” to any of these questions. These questions are suggestive of a direction in inquiry, rather than an end location at which we may hope to arrive—a markedly different approach to inquiry than the majority of research on this topic to date. It is through traveling in this direction that I am able to portray a response to these questions of the AE experience. These questions are the source and the substance of the following chapters. But before I can begin to address these questions, it is important that I provide an overview for how they were explored in this study.

PREVIEW OF METHOD

In this study, I utilize the research paradigm of educational connoisseurship and criticism in that I describe, interpret, evaluate and thematize the AE experience in the interest of identifying and communicating the educational value therein. I also utilize my antecedent knowledge of adventure to identify and disclose the subtle nuances of the AE experience (Eisner, 1998). To investigate these research questions I observed and interviewed participants of three adventure education programs in Colorado, a backpacking expedition, an adventure program, and a challenge course. I selected these sites for their variance within the field, as well as for their shared domain in adventure education. I also lean heavily on my own experience as an adventurer to corroborate findings from the field and enrich the illustrations of the AE experience. These methods of inquiry resulted in a significant collection of data across the three sites to inform responses to the original questions of this study.
Though this method does not definitively conclude the issues raised through these research questions, it does enrich our perceptions of the AE experience, and may well inform our educational practices in schooling and AE alike. To preview what follows: Chapter Two reviews the foundational perspectives that inform and explain adventure education in its contemporary forms, as well as outlines the body of literature to which this study contributes. Chapter Three outlines in detail the method of this study, including the sites, participants, and numerous tactics involved in data collection and analysis. Chapter Four provides descriptions of the AE experience at the three sites while Chapter Five presents more discursive illustrations of these experiences through the qualities of the AE experience, a presentation of cultural coalescence in AE, and the participant perceptions of schooling. Chapter Six draws the study to a close through revisiting the research questions, sketching connections, and postulating recommendations for AE and schooling respectively.
CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter is a review of the pertinent literature of the adventure education (AE) experience. In the following segments, I clarify several key terms before outlining the theoretical and practical foundation of adventure education. I showcase studies of the AE experience, noting the popular conceptions of the adventure experience, studies of the outcomes of AE, and studies of the AE experience itself. I also clarify the language used to discuss culture in this study, and review studies related to identities and cultural formation in AE. With a review of both the theoretical and practical background of adventure education, and mindful of contemporary research on the AE experience as it pertains to the questions of this study, a thorough but pointed review of the literature is presented.

Illuminating Terms

Prior to proceeding with a review of the literature, it is necessary to address a few semantic concerns as they relate to this inquiry by clarifying the language utilized throughout. This is not to define these terms, but merely to explain their use within the confines of this study. Particularly, I must address concepts of adventure, education, adventure education, and experience.
**Adventure**

Adventure has enjoyed a diversity of functional definitions, each of which serve the purposes of those defining the term. Mortlock (1984) puts adventure on a spectrum, as falling between recreation and misadventure. Mitchell (1983) associates it with flow, putting it on a similar continuum between alienation and anomaly. Priest (1999c) argues that adventure stems from leisure in that “it must be entered into voluntarily and of free choice; … it must be intrinsically motivating in and of its own merit” (p. 112), and “the outcome must be uncertain” (p. 112). Hopkins and Putnam (1993) agree with Priest in the regard that adventure is “an experience that involves uncertainty of outcome” (p. 6). Others discuss the nature of risk (Nichols, 2000b; Zink & Leberman, 2001) leadership (Priest & Gass, 1997) danger (Ewert & Hollenhorst, 1996) and other concepts of the adventure experience, and discourse of this concept continues.

Though popular rationales present this conversation as one complex, I aim to let adventure mean what we collectively think it means. To ground this conversation: Adventure is “a course of action which invites risk; a perilous or audacious undertaking the outcome of which is unknown” (Adventure, n.d.). Within the context of this study, I further qualify adventure as pertaining to those outdoor experiences which are commonly associated with adventure programming. As Berry (2011) presents them, “rock climbing, kayaking, mountain walking, expeditions/campcraft and problem-solving/initiative exercises” (p. 33), as well as other adventurous endeavors in wilderness settings.

**Education**

We are best positioned to locate educational virtue if we do not unnecessarily limit our definition of education. As such, I am intentional in presenting education in its
broadest terms, inclusive of the myriad of curricular and pedagogical orientations (Eisner, 1985); from the traditional, to the progressive, from the conservative, to the radical.

Further, contemporary education is normatively defined by society as that practice approximately correlated with schooling. As such, I invite the working definitions of the reader to fill the pages of this study with respect to education, and anticipate different readers may identify differing educational virtues in the AE experience accordingly. In sum, education, like adventure, means what we collectively think it to mean.

**Adventure Education**

Though a diverse lexicon of terminology exists in this field of education (Priest, 1999c), I chose the moniker adventure education as it best represents the focus of this inquiry. As I have abstained from explicitly defining both adventure and education, it would seem that adventure education is similarly without bounds. However, in this study, adventure education is primarily defined by its form in practice: It is the intentional use of adventure with an eye toward value or educational virtue; it is the two things so united that they may be considered one and the same; it is the field of those adventure programs operating today in a myriad of forms and functions.

Surely, if a defining characteristic of adventure is that the outcome is unknown, to consider it educational requires some imagination, as our contemporary iterations of education rarely inspire images of the unexpected. But as evidenced in the genealogy following this segment, adventure education has taken many forms, with varied aims, under various organizations, and with numerous populations. In light of this definitional eclectic, it is clear that those who speak of adventure education conceptualize it uniquely, and this study aims toward an inclusive definition of these varied practices.
Experience

Defining experience is decidedly more difficult than to define education or adventure. Suffice it to say that while this term, linguistically, is utilized various ways within this study, with respect to the subject of inquiry—the adventure education experience—I frame experience as those lived endeavors and encounters occurring during adventure programming. This is to be inclusive of both mundane and extraordinary moments of adventure education programming.

Terms in Closing

To understand this subject of study is to understand adventure and education in relation to one another in theory and practice, and to consider the lived encounters these practices produce. I present these terms not to contrive the parameters of the study, but to place boundaries on the study so that it might take meaningful form. With a language defined, we turn forward with intention to understanding the history and philosophy that supports adventure education in its contemporary form.

THE FOUNDATIONS OF ADVENTURE EDUCATION

In this section, I delineate the theoretical and practical foundations of adventure education in America in the interest of further grounding this study in historical and theoretical context. Because a number of terms have been utilized to describe this discipline, and there is not an agreed upon definition of adventure education (Bailey, 1999; Prouty, 2007; Wurdinger, 1997), the lineage so constructed here is based on my interpretation of texts and scholarly discourse. This foundational history includes a great

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5 Even John Dewey, after decades of experiential philosophy, expressed some chagrin with the ambiguity and varied meanings of the term, experience (Roberts, 2012).
variety of philosophies, individuals, and practices, which continue to influence the field to this day. It is with the intention of better understanding adventure education as a contemporary practice that reconstructing this lineage is a valuable exercise, not in the hopes of providing a definitive genealogy of adventure education.

As I have mentioned, a conglomerate of terminology has been utilized to describe similar activities within the broader domain of adventure and outdoor education. A few of the most prominent include: adventure education, experiential education, wilderness education, environmental and ecological education, adventure programming, adventure learning, wilderness therapy, outdoor learning, camping education and others. Though each of these terms represents a distinctive philosophy and practice, they all stem, in some way, from a shared history. Accordingly, what follows is an attempt to trace the history of AE back to its foundation in the hopes that its current form is theoretically and practically contextualized.

Theoretical Foundations

“The idea of impelling people into adventurous situations in order to gain certain educational goals is not new” (Hunt, 1999, p. 115). Indeed, the philosophy of adventure education can be traced back to the ideas of Plato and Aristotle. Plato was the first to acknowledge how adventure and physical activity can be utilized in the process of education—as a means to the development of virtue (Hunt, 1999). Aristotle similarly contributes to contemporary AE movements through his “comprehensive and sophisticated discussions of character, virtue, and [judgment]” (Stonehouse, Allison, & Carr, 2011, p. 23).
Comenius also contributes to AE theory through the idea of education through primary exposure to the content and material as learned through the senses in accordance with nature (Keatinge, 1931). This idea of natural education was perhaps most famously refined through Rousseau’s (1762/1979) *Emile*, where he argued for an individualized and unrestrictive environment for the child, and championed the interests and curiosities of the child as central to an education by nature. Pestalozzi brought Rousseau’s philosophy to practice through his own approach, which focused heavily on the experiences of students in interaction with objects, rather than secondary sources of information (Smith, 2011). This early lineage of Comenius, Rousseau, and Pestalozzi laid a strong foundation for the experiential rationale that supports much of AE today.

In the late 1800’s, William James (1910/1995) embraced Plato’s perspective regarding the use of adventure as a means to ends in virtue; adventure could serve as “the moral equivalent of war” (p. 17). As Hunt (1999) explained:

> While James applauds the military virtues, he abhors the use of war to teach these virtues. … What is needed, says James, is a substitute for war that will bring out the desired virtues. The substitute which James proposes is impelling young people into adventurous situations utilizing nature as the medium. (p. 117)

Through these adventurous situations in nature, James believed educators could develop the virtues such as, “Fidelity, cohesiveness, tenacity, heroism, conscience, education, inventiveness, economy, wealthy, physical health and vigor” (James, as cited in Hunt, 1999, p. 117). James effectively articulated Plato’s sentiments regarding the use of adventure toward virtue, and this rationale of the experience—as means to ends in virtue—remains at the core of contemporary adventure education (Hunt, 1999).
Another vein of theory that supports adventure education was that of progressive education. Alfred North Whitehead (1929), for example, critiqued a dedication to “inert ideas” (p. 1), and championed the stages of educational experience through a fluid conception of educational rhythm (Hunt, 2011). Whitehead (1933/1967) also championed the virtues of adventure in life, for “without adventure, civilization is in full decay” (p. 279).

Also in the tradition of progressive education was perhaps the most celebrated and readily cited author in adventure education, John Dewey (1916; 1938). Though the application of Dewey’s work spans far beyond adventure education, his philosophy of experience and rationales of education (1916) have been repeatedly credited as laying the foundation for adventure education (Crosby, 1981; Panicucci, 2007). Perhaps Dewey’s most referenced theory in adventure education was his philosophy of educational experience, which he characterizes through two criteria: continuity—being the connection to the learner’s past and future life; and interaction—being the interplay and balance between the objective environment and the subjective sensibilities of the learner. Though Dewey also presents the need for guidance, freedom, and the development of purpose as components of educational experience in this work, these perspectives seem less celebrated by the field of AE, which has been critiqued for oversimplifying Dewey’s broader message (Roberts, 2012).

Dewey (1916) also articulated processes of learning that have since been conceptually refined (Kolb, 1984), though his ideas of indeterminate situations, inquiry as the impetus for engagement, and the utility of reflective experience remain at the core of most adventure education practice today. Dewey remains the most heavily cited
philosopher of experiential, adventure, and outdoor education, and discussions of the foundational philosophies of these educational movements often reach satisfactory ends with the works of Dewey (Crosby, 1981; Hunt, 1999). That is not to say that AE philosophy has remained stagnant for the last century, but merely to emphasize the salience of his perspective for this educational movement. With this theoretical foundation outlined, I turn now to the practice of adventure education, which traces its own historical lineage.

**Practical Foundations**

While Dewey (1916), Whitehead (1929), and others (Bode, 1927; Counts, 1932/1978) championed progressive education in the interest of schooling, others began developing programs that embraced the benefits of outdoor experiences on the margins of education. It was in the limelight of progressive education that practice of outdoor and adventure education began to take shape in America. As the theory of adventure education can be traced to Plato, AE as an intentional practice in America similarly traces a history to the school camping movements of the late 1800’s. Though I present this portion of AE’s foundation as practical, these practices are also reflective of continued developments in theory; the two are not clearly disaggregated. Further, as others have clarified this history of practice to impressive detail, I encourage those so interested to review the works of Freeberg and Taylor (1961; 1963), Hopkins and Putnam (1993) or Raiola and O’Keefe (1999), as what follows is but an abbreviated version.

Though each identify different events as pivotal to adventure education, it appears common to credit the *Gunnery School for Boys* in 1861 as the first school-based outdoor camp in America (Freeberg & Taylor, 1961; Raiola & O’Keefe, 1999). In the years that
followed, other private camps were established, espousing an eclectic of methodological approaches and aims, including the “pursuit of health … combined with acquisition of practical knowledge outside the usual academic lines” (Rothrock, 1913, as cited in Freeberg & Taylor, 1961, p. 187), or “moral, mental, and physical development” (pp. 189-190). The number of private camps in America grew rapidly over the decades that followed; from two in 1890, to 150 in 1910 (Freeberg & Taylor, 1961). This growth led to the formation of the American Nature Study Society in 1908, an organization associated with progressive educational movements of the time, and championing enjoyment and appreciation as an important aspect of the educational process (Raiola & O’Keefe, 1999).

Organized camping movements continued to grow in the early to mid 1900’s in eclectic fashion under the guidance of LB Sharp. As director of Life Camps in 1927, Sharp was among the first to use outdoor education for “underprivileged city children” (Raiola & OKeefe, 2011, p. 48) and was also the first to research the practice of school camping through his now seminal dissertation (see Sharp, 1930). Perhaps most famously, he first coined the phrase “outdoor education” (Knapp, 2000). As he presented it:

That which can best be learned inside the classroom should be learned there. That which can best be learned in the out-of-doors through direct experience, dealing with native materials and life situations, should there be learned. (Sharp, 1943, pp. 363-364)

This initial thesis for outdoor education, framed as intentionally simple and general, welcomed virtually all forms and practices of outdoor education (Carlson, 2011). Sharp believed the definition still sufficient as late as 1957 (Smith, 1957), and this idiom was
long accepted as “the thesis of outdoor education stated in its simplest terms” (Freeberg & Taylor, 1961, p. 73).

While the camping movement boomed in America under Sharp, Kurt Hahn, under the theoretic influence of William James, sought to establish a new educational program in the UK. Like James, “Kurt Hahn was not primarily an outdoorsman. His main concern was with education in general and with the use of adventure as a broad educational tool” (Hunt, 1999, p. 122). In 1941, Hahn founded Outward Bound, with the adage, “The training … must be less a training for the sea than through the sea, and so benefit all walks of life” (Holt, as cited in Miner, 1999, p. 58). Outward Bound, seen in this light, contains a “character change component [as facilitated through] a form of metaphoric education” (Bacon, 1983, p. 2).

Back in America, outdoor education and camping continued to grow through the 1950’s, which inspired Julian Smith (1957) to ground the field to its philosophical roots while expanding on Sharp’s initial definition:

I see outdoor education as significant because it is a part of the curriculum. It takes place on school time. It provides opportunity for returning something to children that has been taken away by urbanization. … It gives some opportunity for city children to see the earth, to live cooperatively and democratically, and to learn to assume responsibility. It even provides an opportunity to live creatively for a time. (Smith, 1957, p. 15)

Smith’s comprehensive understanding of the term, now inclusive of the value of nature, personal responsibility, creativity, cooperation and democracy, reflects an expansion of the aims of outdoor education in practice. Further, this definition also associated outdoor education with the progressive education movements, making explicit the long-shared
philosophy of the two (Knapp, 1994). Smith (1957) further integrated these movements by presenting outdoor education as a remedy to traditional modes of education:

[The high dropout rate] is a symptom of the greater problem. They point up with inexorable clarity the inadequacy of traditional high-school offerings to meet the needs and challenge the abilities of that docile herd of captives which remains within the school’s walls… [Outdoor education] is one of the most logical and promising tools modern educators are learning to use as part of the process. It can make a significant contribution to meeting the needs of millions of boys and girls our high schools are now losing—in whole or in part. (p. 6)

Further, Smith (1957) spoke of outdoor education as involving an experience intentionally separated from normal social life:

Ideally [outdoor education] will include all-absorbing activities that contrast sharply with the surroundings of one’s working life, so that he will be drawn out of himself to emerge later refreshed and regenerated. Thus environment is an all-important factor in identifying what are worth-while recreational experiences for each of us [emphasis added]. (p. 2)

In the years that followed, a number of definitions were put forward in the hopes of further clarifying the field. Among the most widely accepted was Donaldson and Donaldson’s (1958), which defined outdoor education in simple terms once again:

“Outdoor education is education in, about, and for the outdoors” (p. 17). This definition makes explicit a purposive bend to outdoor education as “For implies both a mental attitude toward the outdoors and a set of skills and abilities which will enable the learner to do something about his attitudes” (p. 17).

Shortly thereafter, Freeberg and Taylor (1961) further defined the field, by explaining the ties of outdoor education to schooling and life experience:

[Outdoor education] involves intelligent planning by all teachers using nature and real life experiences in interpreting subject matter areas found in the school curriculum. Through direct experiences with nature, people, objects, things, places, and by actually ‘learning by doing.’ (Freeberg & Taylor, 1961, p. 90)
Somewhat conflicting with this rationale for outdoor education, was Outward Bound, which made its debut in the American outdoor education scene in 1962 through the *Colorado Outward Bound School* (Raiola & O’Keefe, 1999). Outward Bound, with its ambitious objectives of virtue development and service, and its unique methods of challenge and adventure toward these ends, changed the standard for what outdoor education would resemble in America for the next several decades. Outward Bound was perhaps the first to fully embody something akin to what we consider contemporary adventure education, as “a reality vested in people, in their relationships, and in their experiences in magnificent wilderness environments” (Taft, 1980, p. vii). Though Outward Bound has evolved substantially since its inception in Wales,

… it has not departed from Hahn and [Alfred] Holt’s essential concept of an intense experience surmounting challenges in a natural setting, through which the individual builds his sense of self-worth, the group comes to a heightened awareness of human interdependence, and all grow in concern for those in danger and in need. (Miner, 1999, p. 58)

A major addition that Hahn brought to America was his sentiment of social justice; “It is important to note that the building of character, the development of morality, is but a first step in the educational process for Hahn” (Pace, 2011, p. 10). Hahn’s moral education through adventure was not only toward the ends of virtue development in the general sense, but toward the development of particular virtues in the hopes of improving the world (Panicucci, 2007).

Only a few years later, in 1965, American mountaineering legend Paul Petzoldt founded the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) to prepare the “real leaders” needed by outdoor education, with a focus on technical prowess and leadership in outdoor settings (O’Connell, 2011). To this day, NOLS is considered among the leading
outdoor schools for developing the skills necessary to succeed in outdoor pursuits (Bachert, 1999).

Hahn, with his explicit intentions of virtue development through adventure, and Petzoldt (1974) with his purpose, “to teach how to enjoy and conserve the wild outdoors” (p. 14) effectively pushed the outdoor education field in a particular direction. Though this adventure-heavy brand of outdoor education did not necessarily conflict with the historical roots of practice, its emphasis inspired the development of a more intentional lexicon for outdoor education, and a corresponding disaggregation of the field as divided into two categories: environmental education and adventure education (Priest, 1986).

Another important aspect of adventurous outdoor education was the ropes or challenge course, which boasts a history all its own that reaches back to the late 1800’s (Rhonke, 1999). Though a complete review here is imprudent, suffice it to say that this approach to outdoor education introduced the element of adventure through various contrived⁶ and often physically invigorating experiences. Historically, these courses were utilized by military, Outward Bound and NOLS programs, with various standards of safety and toward varied ends. These courses did not reach their standard form until the 1970’s under the guidance of Project Adventure (established in 1971), which sought to bring the Outward Bound methods and philosophies to formal education (Prouty, 1999).

“During the 1970s, there was a growing awareness that the impact of adventure programs was due to changes in the self-perceptions of the participants and to the way each person absorbed the experiences into his or her self-structure” (Hattie et al., 1997, p.

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⁶ Debate remains concerning the contrived nature of adventure education (see Duenkel & Streufert, 1999).
In other words, the aim of the facilitated experience became an altered self-concept. Metcalfe (1976) explained this sentiment at the time:

Many claims are put forward by the [adventure] program promoters, such as improvements in self-image, self-respect, self-satisfaction, self-realization, strength, endurance, decision-making, coordination, determination, compassion, increased potential; and heightened sensory perception and awareness of and respect for individual differences. Such claims may be difficult to prove, but if anything, they are equally hard to disprove. (p. 9)

Programs based on adventure have been effective with people from almost every social class and culture. … The programs have given opportunities for the development of self-confidence, a feeling of worth, and a knowledge that individuals have some control over their future. (p. 12)

In the same year, Walsh and Golins (1976) released The Outward Bound Process in the hopes of clarifying “the structures, components, and conditions whose presence and interaction insure that an experience is educative along the lines of Outward Bound” (p. ii) so that the many programs utilizing similar methods could guide their facilitation with this manual. Walsh and Golins’ “model has provided the basis for understanding adventure-based experiential learning since its publication” (Martin & Leberman, 2005, p. 46). To paraphrase their approach: Prerequisites to participation include physical ability and motivation; The environment must be unfamiliar, and the outdoors is “especially potent in this regard” (p. 4); Group size should foster conflict, resolution and shared objectives (7-15); Objectives should be organized, incrementally introduced, concrete, manageable, consequential and holistic; Experience should be one of dissonance; anxiety is addressed through mastery; The primary goal is mastery, which the participant may find rewarding.

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7 Adventure education programs have evolved since this conception of adventure, and the challenges implicit to adventure education are now accessible to persons with disabilities (McAvoym & Lais, 1999).
In light of the rapid spread and success of adventurous outdoor education programs,\(^8\) it was necessary that a new brand be fashioned for the methodological adoption of adventure as educative; to harness the benefits of an adventure experience toward the aims of developing virtue and improved self-concept. The phrase first appeared in Mortlock’s (1978) book *Adventure Education*,\(^9\) as follows:

Adventure Education, a major aspect of Outdoor Education, uses as a medium those outdoor pursuits that are potentially dangerous. It involves the presentation of meaningful challenge to young people, within a framework of safety, in order to give them deep personal and social awareness. The situations provided will involve them on mental and emotional as well as physical planes. (p. 3)

Mortlock (1978) delineated the objectives of adventure education as developing a balanced awareness, respect, and love for self, others and environment. Expanding on Mortlock’s early conceptions of adventure education was Wood and Gillis (1979), who defined adventure education as “the popular term used to describe collectively those programs of a stressful nature which occur in an educational setting and which are based on the Outward Bound model” (p. 5). These adventure education programs were built on a “defined teaching progression” (Wood & Gillis, 1979, p. 7) that typically included:

1. Basic physical conditioning and skill training
2. Application of skills
3. Major activities such as courses in ropes, climbing (natural and/or artificial), canoeing, sailing, and backpacking, depending upon the geographical location and conditions of a particular program (p. 7)

Reflected in this definition is the influence of the artificial environment to meet the aims of AE; wilderness was no longer a necessary variable and, from a definitional

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\(^8\) The Wilderness Education Association (WEA), yet another step in the professionalization of the field, was also founded in the late 1970’s (Teeters & Lupton, 1999).

\(^9\) Mortlock’s *Adventure Education* was originally published in 1973, though original copies are rare.
perspective, adventure education had taken a step out from under the umbrella of outdoor education. In light of this separation between adventure and environmental education, Priest (1986) argued that the definition of outdoor education required revision to represent the field as it had evolved:

… outdoor education is an experiential process of learning by doing, which takes place primarily through exposure to the out-of-doors. In outdoor education the emphasis for the subject of learning is placed on RELATIONSHIPS, relationships concerning people and natural resources. (p. 13)

Priest’s reasoning for presenting this new definition—which including the two major factions of outdoor education at the time (environmental and adventure education)—was in the hopes of reuniting them under the original umbrella term. In this same piece, Priest (1986) presented his own idea of AE:

Adventure Education programs, involving outdoor pursuits, have traditionally concentrated on the intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships. They have been successful in bringing about positive changes in individuals through overcoming wilderness challenges. (p. 14)

In the years that followed, the outdoor industry (in adventure settings in particular) was credentialized and standardized, which has been met with mixed responses by those in the field (Hunt & Wurdinger, 1999). Though the language used to describe the practice of AE varies, in practice it has remained fairly consistent since the early iterations of AE—it is the practice of impelling individuals into adventurous situations in the hopes that they might find value in the experience.

**Foundations of Adventure Education in Summary**

These practical developments have not been without ongoing consideration of the theories that support them. While outdoor education in the early 1900’s enjoyed somewhat of a philosophical homogeneity, the past few decades have seen the rise of a
philosophical eclectic which mirrors the practical diversity of the field today. As such, obvious variance exists regarding the purpose, scope, and methods to be utilized in the field of adventure education. Dialogue continues to shape the field in a number of areas including the transfer of learning (Gass, 1999; Sibthorp, Furman, Paisley, Gookin, & Schumann, 2011), the use of artificial environments (Duenkel & Streufert, 1999; Proudman, 1999), the ethics of virtue development (Hunt, 1999), conceptions of wilderness (Haluza-DeLay, 1999), processing and facilitation techniques (Knapp & Havens, 1999), standardization (Hunt & Wurdinger, 1999), and program duration (Hattie et al., 1997). Though there exists a plurality of approaches to adventure education today, all stem in some way from the theoretical and practical history outlined above.

There is a variety of philosophical and practical credit to distribute, and delineating an exhaustive genealogy is beyond the purview of this study. A few notable exclusions from this genealogy include Maria Montessori, Cornel Francis Parker, Rudolf Steiner, Johann Frederick Herbart, Henry David Thoreau, William Unsoeld and others. This is not to disavow the contributions of those individuals, but merely to carve a clear and concise history for the purposes of this study. The ideas and movements represented through this philosophical and practical genealogy have evolved and come together piecemeal, and can fairly be considered as constituting the foundation of adventure education. It is with this foundation in mind that we move forward to empirical and conceptual studies of the AE experience.

**STUDIES OF THE ADVENTURE EDUCATION EXPERIENCE**

The adventure education experience has enjoyed a plethora of studies, most commonly noting the beneficial derivatives of experiencing adventure. Other
perspectives of this research include conceptual explanations of the experience and participant perceptions of the experience itself. In this section, I provide an overview of these three types of studies to clarify the body of knowledge to which this study ultimately contributes. I review four seminal rationales that explain the adventure experience conceptually alongside a few critiques of AE, before outlining studies that examine the outcomes of adventure education, and finally reviewing studies that focus on the experience itself in empirical terms.

Conceptions of the Adventure Experience

Though many have discussed the adventure experience, several conceptions in particular stand out as explaining this experience, and reviewing these perspectives may further enrich our understandings of AE. In this section I review the AE experience as conceived through stages (Mortlock, 1978; 1984); flow (Mitchell, 1983); an experience paradigm (Priest & Martin, 1985); growth (Hopkins & Putnam, 1993) and criticism (Beames, Higgins, & Nicol, 2012; Brookes, 2003a/b). Each of these perspectives is reviewed in turn.

Stages of Adventure

The seminal presentation of the adventure experience in educational context was Mortlock’s (1978; 1984) four stages of adventure. As he conceived it, the adventure participant was always in one of four stages: recreation/play\(^\text{10}\), adventure, frontier adventure, and misadventure (see Figure 1: Four stages of adventure). In this model, the goal was stages two and three, where “positive and satisfying human feelings” (1978, p. 11) and the successful overcoming of difficult challenges reside. Mortlock noted that

\(^{10}\) Mortlock (1978; 1984) changed the name of this stage across publications of this model.
every person has a unique “adventure threshold” (p. 11), and thus, any given challenge will have different stage outcomes for different participants. This spoke to the personal outcomes of a given facilitated experience—conceiving adventure as both an individual and communal undertaking.

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<th>Four Stages of Adventure</th>
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<td><strong>Stage I</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Stage III</strong></td>
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Figure 1: Four stages of adventure

**Adventure as Flow**

Through his study of dancers, musicians, chess players, surgeons, basketball players and rock climbers, Csikszentmihalyi (1974; 1990) put forward an experience-type he termed “flow.”

Flow refers to the holistic sensation present when we act with total involvement. … It is the state in which action follows upon action according to an internal logic which seems to need no conscious intervention on our part. We experience it as a unified flowing from one moment to the next in which we are in control of our actions, and in which there is little distinction between self and environment; between stimulus and response; or between past, present, and future. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1974, p. 59)

To Csikszentmihalyi, we reach flow, or “peak experience,” when our abilities and the demands of the task at hand are equally paired; when the environment demands the entirety of our agency. As rock climbers were participants in Csikszentmihalyi’s original study, it takes little imagination to qualify adventure as ripe with potential for flow experiences.
Mitchell (1983) further explored and applied Csikszentmihalyi’s (1974) ideas to the experience of mountaineers. To Mitchell, these criteria of flow reached their pinnacle in the so-called “mountain experience,” where “the climber’s concentration is heightened [and] focused on a narrower range of concerns—in space on problems literally at hand, and in time on the present” (p. 166). Further evidence of this flow-like experience lies in the self-fulfilling nature of adventure. Discussing the value of climbing, Mitchell declared, “The reward of climbing is climbing itself. Reaching the summit is not the culmination of the climb but a waypoint marking the end of upward travel” (p. 155).

**Adventure Experience Paradigm**

One of the foremost conceptual frameworks referenced in adventure education is Priest and Martin’s (1985; Priest, 1999b) adventure experience paradigm. This model articulates a direct relationship between risk and competence in the adventure experience, and identifies the potential effects of misperceiving risk and competence in adventure. The model synthesized a number of ideas in the field at the time, uniting Mortlock’s (1978; 1984) stages of adventure and ideas of objective and subjective danger with Mitchell’s (1983) presentation of flow in adventure. The result was a model that categorizes experience based on varying degrees of risk and competence. Priest and Martin (1985) argued that to under, over, or accurately perceive risk and competence stems from nine characteristic behavior-types, as delineated in the figure below (Figure 2: Perception matrix for the adventure experience).
In this model, competence and risk are understood as the X and Y axes of experience, which collectively result in five experience types: exploration and experimentation; devastation and disaster; adventure; misadventure; and, when risk and competence are matched, peak adventure (see Figure 3: The adventure experience paradigm). Priest and Martin (1985) present the peak experience, similar to the frontier adventure, as embodying a “state of flow” (p. 2). With this relationship between perceived risk and competence, the exemplary disposition was that of the astute adventurer, and the experience of aim was the peak adventure experience.
Adventure as Growth

A fourth perspective of the adventure experience is Hopkins and Putnam’s (1993) perspective of adventure as growth. Most notably differing from previous conceptions of adventure experience, Hopkins and Putnam sought to understand the impact of these experiences on people; “What do [adventure experiences] do to people” (p. 71). They presented the idea that the various outcomes evidenced in studies of adventure education could collectively be categorized as “growth” as a result of experiential learning (see Kolb, 1984). Growth, to Hopkins and Putnam (1993) was explained as follows:

This concept of growth … is not just the result of exposure to wild places, or the simple discipline of working with others. It is the inevitable outcome of the process of confronting oneself within the context of other people and the environment. (p. 15)

This growth was mainly considered a direct result of the adventure experience, as they later explained:

The nature of the [adventure education] activity forces the individual to see him or herself. So often our lack of self-confidence manifests itself in a belief that we can never quite live up to our expectations. The power of adventure learning however, is that it can provide us with this evidence, and in such a way that we can use this now established fact in other spheres. (Hopkins & Putnam, 1993, p. 104)

Clear through these excerpts is the idea that adventure is educational not because it could aid in the assimilation of information, but because it actualized a learning of self. It was through this deepened understanding of self that the adventure experience was reasoned as one of growth. From this perspective, we may perceive the transformational quality of the adventure education experience, as these experiences may serve as pivotal moments in life for some participants (Fox, 1999; Stringer & McAvoy, 1992). As Quinn (1999) reasoned, this growth is the very purpose of adventure:
So the answers to the questions, why risk, why engage the possibility of penalty and discomfort, and why approach one’s personal limit, become obvious. Without actively seeking, without attempting to, and going beyond what one already knows one can accomplish, there is no growth. Where there is no growth, where stagnation is the rule, a human being offers nothing, either to one’s self or to society. (p. 151)

**Criticisms of Adventure Education**

As the adventure experience has been presented through these largely optimistic rationales, it has also been critiqued for its unfounded underlying principles (Brookes, 2003a) and for the time, resources, and energy it consumes with limited evidence of proceeds (Beames et al., 2012). As Beames et al., argue, “in the field of traditional outdoor education, provision has developed in the absence of a substantial and convincing body of evidence to support it” (p. 3). They further critique AE:

[Outdoor education has] become increasingly focused on adventurous activities conducted in highly controlled environments (e.g. ropes courses). These often take place far from the school, have few connections to the school curriculum, and are provided by instructors trained to facilitate these activities using specialized equipment. … *Programmes of this nature are expensive, require specialist skills, are rarely progressive, and consequently are experienced infrequently by most children* [emphasis added]. (Beames et al., 2012, p. 4)

They also argue that educational experience must involve “genuine issues, rather than addressing contrived tasks in meaningless settings” (Beames et al., 2012, p. 12)—an intrinsic critique of the challenge course environment—and present that:

These programmes that take place far from participants’ home communities are often justified by their experiential approach and further predicated on the assumption that the participants will be able to transfer their learning to life back home. This is a noble goal, but one that is very difficult to prove. (p. 40)

Beames et al. (2012) further reason that adventure education, in its current form, is both an unnecessary inconvenience, and has limited value because of its disconnect from the broader local community:
It is not unusual for conventional outdoor adventure education courses (usually focused on personal and social development of some kind) to ignore the communities in which they take place. (Beames et al., 2012, p. 68)

They also critiqued the adventure education experience for its narrow duration and scope, and criticize the instructor-led format of learning common to daily AE programs, which inspires a lack of responsibility on the part of participants (Beames et al., 2012). Indeed these critiques raise issues, as adventure education is more expensive than staying in the school, does often require significant time and effort, and does supplant other potentially meaningful experiences. Though this critique, of inconvenience and unverified efficacy, is contradicted somewhat by the continued growth of AE in America, the critique per se is an important and rare counter perspective of this practice.

Roberts (2012) has echoed these critiques somewhat by questioning the validity of transfer of the AE experience. In his words:

Wilderness and the sublime feelings it evokes are always temporary—like a visit to a mistress that, while potentially pleasurable, entails the hard crash back down to the realities of domesticity and the everyday. We may have powerful, transformative, and direct experiences in distant, sublime, and wild places, but, upon return and re-entry into ‘civilization’ and our more ‘debased’ local spaces and places, do the feelings linger? (pp. 44-45)

Brookes (2003a/b) on the other hand, critiqued adventure education for its continued reliance on character development as a founding principle. He presents that while participants of AE may well present behaviors, and attest to feeling their fundamental character had changed or developed as a result of the experience, these assertions are psychologically unfounded. Brookes correspondingly recommends a more intentional development of theory in AE, particularly regarding social and cultural formation in AE, considering alternative rationales of character development, and
inquiring into how participants make meaning of these experiences. In sum, Brookes (2003a/b) argues that the rationale at the core of adventure education, though it persists to the present, is fundamentally flawed. While others have taken great efforts to note the benefits and romantic potentialities of the AE experience, these critiques, when considered as a collective, remind us that adventure education can just as easily be criticized for what it lacks in practicality and tangible utility.

Conceptions of Adventure in Summary

These perspectives of the AE experience do not account for all orientations or rationales surrounding the experience. The AE experience has been presented as simply as a “black box” (Ewert, 1983) by which outcomes are produced, while others have attempted to disaggregate the components of experience as associated to these outcomes (McKenzie, 2000). Though this has not been an exhaustive representation of theory surrounding the adventure experience, these conceptions do account for the central historical perspectives of adventure and effectively ground our understanding of the form and function of the adventure experience. With these varied views of the adventure experience in mind, I segue forward to more empirical studies of this experience.

Studies of Outcomes in Adventure Education

The outcomes, results, effects, or derivatives of participation in adventure education are among the most documented and celebrated aspects of the literature concerning AE. This body of research implicitly supports the historical rationale of adventure experiences as serving ends outside of the experience (Hunt, 1999; James, 1910/1995). While derivatives of the experience are not the focus of this study, this scholarship does present a point of referral for enriching our awareness of the experience.
The research on the outcomes of AE, as a collective, is somewhat disjointed. Though meta-analyses exist (Hattie et al., 1997; Neill & Richards, 1998; Wilson & Lipsey, 2000), they are plagued with the inconsistency of programmatic variance, eclectic measures, varied populations, small sample sizes, and other inconsistent variables across studies. Several studies, however, stand as particularly relevant to the research at hand. One such study is Goldenberg, McAvoy and Klenosky’s (2005) survey of 216 Outward Bound participants, which presents a diversity of outcomes as associated to various aspects of the course. Of the many consequences mentioned, among the most consistent are knowledge/awareness, relationships, personal growth, and determination.

Another study of outcomes of adventure education was Gass’ (1987; 1990; Gass, Garvey, & Sugerman, 2003) research, which offers a rare short and long-term perspective of participating in a 5-day outdoor adventure curriculum. Of particular interest to this study is the qualitative inquiry focused on the long-term effects of this program a full 17 years after facilitation. Interviews of 16 participants revealed three major themes: Challenging assumptions of self and others; Peer friendships as a support network; and Long-term positive effects of the program (Gass et al., 2003). This serves to validate the earlier work of Fletcher (1971), which similarly identified some of the long-lasting positive outcomes of AE.

Other areas of research on the derivatives of the adventure education experience reveal that individuals participating in such programming benefit from increases in self-efficacy, self-confidence, or self-esteem (Berman & Davis-Berman, 1995; Ewert, 1983; Kolb, 1988; Sheard & Golby, 2006); resilience (Beightol, Jevertson, Carter, Gray, & Gass, 2012; Neill & Dias, 2001); empowerment (Shellman & Ewert, 2010); perception of
peers (Gordon & Dodunski, 1999); academic achievement and attitude (Cason & Gills, 1994); and subjective well-being (Durr, 2009). These positive effects have, in part, inspired the field of adventure therapy, which seeks to foster personal and social growth in participants through wilderness and adventure experiences (Bandoroff, 1989; Hendee & Brown, 1988). Though the process by which these positive effects are produced is still a point of debate (Carr, 2004; Gist & Mitchell, 1992; Goldenberg, Klenosky, O’Leary, & Templin, 2000; Goldenberg, Russell, & Soule, 2010), adventure experiences continue to carry a reputation of positive outcomes in a variety of domains, such as, “self-esteem, leadership, academic, personality, and interpersonal relations” (Berman & Davis-Berman, 1995, p. 229).

Though these various outcomes serve to enrich our collective perceptions of the AE experience, identifying the outcomes of an experience is but one perspective of experience. As Davidson (2001) offered:

The value and meaning of outdoor education cannot be fully measured by outcomes or credits gained, or self-concept scores increased. To stand or fall on these conditions is to limit the potential of adventure to enhance our capacity for living. (p. 19)

Accordingly, further investigation into the literature is necessary, particularly focused on studies that explore the subjective realities of adventure education; studies of the experience itself.

**Studies of the Adventure Education Experience Itself**

Though repeated calls for an increased qualitative understanding of the adventure experience have been echoed for decades (Ewert, 1989; Martin & Leberman, 2005), this literature remains underdeveloped. A few recent studies, however, have begun to shape
our understanding of adventure education as it is experienced, moving discussions of the experience itself away from the margins of discourse toward the center of dialogue.

Martin and Leberman (2005), for example, sought to understand the “real meaning” of the experience through open-ended survey questionnaires of 157 Outward Bound participants. They found that while it was “primarily the physical activities that took [participants] out of their comfort zones,” (p. 56) outcomes of self-awareness and self confidence, “came from the group, reviews and solo” (p. 56) experiences.

Hastie (1992) also investigated the perceptions and reactions of adventure education experiences through 60 New Zealand 14 to 15-year-old students before and after a week-long adventure education program. Though few significant findings were revealed\(^{11}\), this study does attest to the overwhelmingly “positive” responses to the activities, and to students’ desire for more intense experiences, “such as ‘longer drops’ for abseiling … ‘bigger rapids’ for whitewater rafting, and ‘tighter squeezes’ for caving” (p. 46). In sum, this study speaks to the enjoyment of adventure education experiences.

Also inquiring into participants’ perceptions of the adventure experience, Kalisch, Bobilya and Daniel (2011), obtained survey data from 330 past Outward Bound participants to identify what participants viewed as most enjoyable and difficult about the final expedition. Further, the authors compared this data to the statistics pulled from a previous study in an attempt to further ground positivistic results in qualitative understanding (Bobilya, Kalisch, McAvoy, & Jacobs, 2005). With this collective of data, Kalisch et al. (2011) found that participants were mostly excited upon entering the solo

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\(^{11}\) In Hastie’s (1992) study, enjoyment of horse trekking significantly increased \( (p < .01) \) while enjoyment of hiking decreased \( (p < .001) \) as a result of these respective activities.
experience and mostly peaceful during the solo (though some participants reported feeling bored or anxious during the solo). Perhaps of utmost importance in the inquiry at hand, the findings reveal that those aspects of the experience that participants found most challenging were also commonly the elements of the experience that participants most valued, further establishing the role of challenge as a vital and at times enjoyable component of the AE experience.

Another pertinent study, conducted by Loeffler (2004), focused on the meanings of participating in outdoor programs at universities through photo elicitation. Through her 14 participant study, Loeffler presented three themes based on the participant explanations of personal photographs from the outdoor program: Spiritual connection with the outdoors, which participants described with “words ‘awe’, ‘beauty’, and ‘spiritual’ to describe the deeper connection they felt” (p. 544); Connections with others through outdoor experience—the outdoors provides a unique environment for the cultivation of camaraderie and friendship; and Self-discovery and gaining perspectives through outdoor experience—the outdoors gave participants a fresh perspective on their own lives through living simply and with little distraction.

The three themes central to Loeffler’s (2004) study reveal what is often overlooked in the quest for quantifiable outcomes: that these participants enjoyed and valued the experience on a number of affective dimensions. Other studies (Daniel, 2003; Fredrickson & Anderson, 1999) mirror Loeffler’s finding of the ineffable qualities of experiences in wilderness, and an entire vein of literature focuses on the spiritual significance of experiences with nature (Fox, 1999; Heintzman, 2003; 2008; Stringer &

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12 A solo was defined as a 24 to 72 hour period of intentional solitude in this study.
McAvoy, 1992). The participant identification of nature as a salient quality (Loeffler, 2004) is further supported by McIntyre and Roggenbuck’s (1998) 28 participant study of rafters, which found the “nature/person transactions” to be a central and important theme of the experience. Similarly, Hattie et al. (1997) noted that, “While participants expect physical challenges, this outcome was far less important to them than enjoying the beauties of nature in the wilderness” (p. 76).

Another recent study (Brewer & Sparkes, 2011), an ethnography focused on the meanings of outdoor activity for parentally bereaved youth, revealed four categories of meaning: a sense of freedom; distraction/escapism; retaining memories; and family cohesion. Alternatively a study of the wilderness experiences of 24 women found that they identify escape, challenge and survival, new opportunities, natural awe and beauty, and solitude as the central themes of the wilderness (Pohl, Borrie, & Patterson, 2000). These studies, contrasted with other studies of meaning in this review, reveal how the life contexts of participants may influence the meaning of experience (see Seidman, 2006).

Yet another study focused on the meanings of the AE experience was Davidson’s (2001) case study of an outdoor education course at an all-boys Catholic school in New Zealand. Through six weeks of observations and interviews of four boys who participated in the course, Davidson identified three themes across their experiences: the ongoing enjoyment of overcoming challenges; building confidence and mental strength; and the freedom of choice. She explains her first theme, the enjoyment of overcoming challenges, as follows:

It appears that challenge is not only a good way to learn, but also a good thing to learn. According to these students, overcoming challenges helps to make them feel competent—which is fun—and an on-going display of competency in
challenging situations continues to make them feel positive about themselves, and optimistic and excited about the future. (Davidson, 2001, p. 16)

Davidson’s (2001) second theme relates the cyclical nature of challenge, success, and further challenge; our accomplishments lead us forward to future challenges and further accomplishments (White, 1959). The final theme, “the freedom to choose” (p. 18), speaks to the importance of implicit motivation in adventure experiences; “intrinsic motivation is a prerequisite without which there is no ‘experience’ of adventure” (p. 18). Davidson further argues that allowing students the freedom to choose, resulted in “developing the capacity to enjoy life” (p. 18), effectively articulating the potential for deep significance in the AE experience.

Further, Davidson (2001) suggests that the experiences had by participants in her study, satisfy Dewey’s criteria of educative experience, citing the criteria that such an experience “arouses curiosity, strengthens initiative, and sets up desires and purposes that are sufficiently intense to carry a person over dead places in the future” (Dewey, 1938, p. 16). She also offers that the participants in her study “have become ‘experience[d] adventurers’, astute in their perceptions of risk and competence, and actively seeking activities which match these two variables to achieve ‘peak adventure’” (p. 17). Here, Davidson argues that these experiences satisfy Dewey’s second criterion of educative experience, continuity; the experiences are connected to future living in a direction of growth because they instill an intrinsic appreciation of life and challenge.

Perhaps most importantly, Davidson synthesized a number of theories in the field of adventure education and presented Dewey’s educative experience and Priest’s conception of peak adventure not as disparate theories by which to discuss adventure
experience, but as internally related. These qualitatively rich findings in Davidson’s study are perhaps the most substantial contribution to the body of literature on this topic, and her calls for more research of this type add further credence to the study at hand.

**Studies of the Experience in Conclusion**

In this section I have reviewed the pertinent research of the adventure education experience, including conceptual explanations of adventure, studies of the outcomes of adventure, and studies of the experience itself. Though there exists an impressive body of literature concerning the AE experience, these studies seldom inquire into the meaning and happenings of the adventure education experience. Accordingly, this study is well situated to enrich our collective perceptions of the AE experience by addressing this longstanding dearth in the literature. With this review in mind, we move onward to another perspective of adventure education: studies of culture in AE.

**STUDIES OF CULTURE IN ADVENTURE EDUCATION**

Adventure education has a long history of facilitating adventure experiences with individuals from various backgrounds (Dimock & Hendry, 1939; Sharp, 1930). It is “grounded in Euro-North American epistemologies, … and dominant discourses focused on individualistic identity, cognition, linear verbal processes, and political/ethical undercurrents” (Fox, 2008, p. 39). It has been considered both a white privilege activity (Roberts & Drogin, 1996), and an exemplary method for “at risk” populations (historically of African American or Hispanic ethnicity (Nieto, 1999)). Outreach to populations of different backgrounds continues today with programs designed for “at-risk youth” and “urban youth” (Davis-Berman & Berman, 1999; Herdman, 1994; Lewis, 1988), adventure therapy programs (Bandoroff, 1989; Gass, 1993), gendered groups
(Boniface, 2006; Whittington, Mack, Budbill, & McKenney, 2011) and other subgroups based on the identities and categorical experiences of participants (Brewer & Sparkes, 2011).

In spite of continued efforts to reach out\textsuperscript{13} to diverse populations, the adventure education industry has been, and for the most part remains, ethnically homogenous (Floyd, 1999) and culturally arcane (Mitchell, 1983). As Roberts (1996a) contends, “It is well known that people of color, as both participants and leaders, make up a very small percentage of those involved in experiential education” (p. 226). Acknowledging this history, in conjunction with the questions of the study at hand, calls for a review of literature of the AE experience on cultural grounds. In accord, through this section, I clarify the terminology utilized to discuss culture in this study before presenting studies of identity in adventure education as well as studies of cultural formation in AE.

**Cultural Terminology**

As Locke and Stern (1942) noted, “the universality of cultural interchange” (p. 37) has proven both constructive through cultural communication and collaboration, and detrimental through imperialism and conflict. Dewey (1916) similarly noted how cross-cultural communication and associated living is key to a functioning democracy. Other scholars concerned with education have applied these concepts to schools, exploring the implications of cultural practices in the context of schooling (Eisner, 1985; Gay, 2000; hooks, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Each who researches the coming together of individuals and institutions tends to focus on particular aspects of that merging, which stands as a reflection of the theoretical principles they espouse (Schwab, 1978; 1983). For

\textsuperscript{13} Roberts (1996b) has argued that these “outreach efforts” have been lacking genuine effort.
example, culture can be viewed through lenses of racial, sexual, religious, national, socioeconomic or ethnic backgrounds, (Gay, 2000) as an intersectionality of those identities (Shields, 2008), or through alternative means altogether.

To inquire into something as ubiquitous as cultural interchange requires an intentional lexicon of working terminology. As such, I present working definitions for personal background, institutional culture, and the coalescence of the two as they characterize this domain of inquiry (see third research question). As with previous terms presented, this is not to define these concepts, but to clarify their use within the study.

**Personal Background**

In this study personal background is not presented from the essentialist perspective, which may correlate ways of being with various identity groupings (such as race, ethnicity, nationality, socioeconomic status, and so forth). While identity categories and their intersections (Sheilds, 2008) certainly deserve consideration in discussion of identity and selfhood, to allow these categories to supplant the idiosyncrasy of individuality may undermine the lived experience of the individual. Accordingly, in this study I have selected the term “personal background” to honor this individuality. Personal background is presented as a broad and inclusive approach to the background, norms, preferences, tendencies, and distinguishing characteristics of a given individual.

**Institutional Culture**

My conception of institutional culture in adventure education is based upon the philosophy of Alain Locke (1935/1989; 1936/1989; Locke & Stern, 1942; Moses, 1999). As Locke (1935/1989) argued, all humans across all cultural groups have similar basic desires, but when groups are isolated from one another, they develop their own unique
sets of values and attitudes, which stem from these common needs and desires. When cultural groups reconvene, it is easy to overlook the underlying similarities and shared attitudes from which these varied values have sprung, and our differences in value can spur conflict or confusion. The longer these groups are isolated—geographically or otherwise—the more disparate may be their cultural norms and values (Locke & Stern, 1942; Moses, 1999).

Though Locke’s work related to groups of drastic difference on a global scale across centuries, the fundamental logic of this framework applies to the development of institutional culture in AE. In other words, we may consider the adventure education institution as a sufficiently isolated cultural group, which has developed its own unique set of values and attitudes. Accordingly, in this study, I present institutional culture as the set of practices, values, norms, and customs purported by a particular institution.

**Cultural Coalescence**

With these two concepts—personal background and institutional culture—in mind, we turn to a third: the coming together of the two, or cultural coalescence. To coalesce is to “cause to grow together, to unite, combine” (Coalesce, n.d.) and this idea of coming together represents the basic conceptual framework of cultural interaction in this study. When individuals and institutions interact, reciprocal interchange occurs as one influences the other, and vice versa (Bonnett, 2009). Though this concept may be conceived through a variety of frameworks, it is perhaps best conceived in its simplest terms. As such, I present cultural coalescence as the coming together of personal backgrounds and institutional cultures.
I present this concept not to undermine inquiry that conceives of identity or culture from a categorical perspective, but merely to explain my pragmatic orientation to this domain of inquiry (see Locke & Stern, 1942). In this study, I am not concerned with examining how different gender, ethnic, or religious categories perceive adventure education, nor do I aim to essentialize AE as a singular cultural mode. My intention, instead, is to better understand how the AE experience is manifest on cultural grounds, based on the unique personal backgrounds of individuals, and the perpetuated messages and norms of the varied institutions therein.¹⁴

Studies of Personal Background in Adventure Education

Several studies have investigated the ways that individuals from varied backgrounds experience adventure education. This literature, however, is presented with a caveat: The majority of research concerning personal backgrounds in AE presents the topic as an issue along categorical lines of identity rather than from the perspective of dynamic personal backgrounds. Though this difference is subtle, it is important to acknowledge that the studies included in this section of the review seldom share a conceptual foundation with this study. As such, these studies contextualize, but do not necessarily explain, how cultural coalescence may occur. Nevertheless, this literature does serve to validate the importance of personal background in AE, showcasing studies that reveal both adverse outcomes with particular groups, and positive effects in programs where mindfulness of participants’ backgrounds was a central theme in facilitation.

¹⁴ Though I perceive personal backgrounds to be inclusive of various identity categories, I acknowledge that my decision to utilize such a conceptual framework of identity may reflect my personal background as a white, heterosexual man.
For example, Green, Kleiber and Tarrant (2000) examined how adventure based programming influenced the resiliency of low-income (predominantly subsidized housing) racial minorities (99% African American) through a quasi-experimental design. With a substantial sample size (treatment group, \( n = 25 \); comparison group, \( n = 95 \); control group \( n = 57 \)), this study established that participation in an adventure program with an educational processing component was significantly effective in instilling nine protective factors of resiliency. Perhaps most important, the post-hoc analysis between the adventure-based program and the summer camp comparison group revealed significant \((p < .001)\) results in every variable measured, with the adventure-based treatment group showing more substantial gains toward resiliency than those attending the summer camp.

Though the above study alludes to the positive results of AE with ethnic minorities, other studies suggest quite the opposite outcome. Through interviewing 50 people of color in experiential education, James (1996) outlined four major barriers that still prevent particular cultural groups from participating in environmental education: lack of exposure to natural settings; cultural and organizational barriers; and racial stereotypes. “Barriers resulting from differences in cultural norms were mentioned most frequently. … Within this category, the most frequent barrier cited was that environmental organizations do not know or accommodate cultural differences” (James, 1996, p. 129). James drew further implications from this study to the field of experiential education, arguing that the culturally unresponsive nature of environmental education is mirrored in experiential education:
The results … have direct implications for experiential education with regards to the significance of recognizing and affirming the contribution of diverse cultures to the field, and how this may change program content and delivery. (p. 133)

Accordingly, as James argues, the methods of AE require re-examination in light of the barriers they may present toward particular cultural groups.

More recent studies have further verified the importance of identity in adventure education. Orren and Werner (2007) found that in an ethnically heterogeneous group, African American participants’ self-concept actually decreased as a result of an outdoor wilderness program. Though the sample size of African Americans in this study was negligible ($n = 9$), the results were significant ($p < .001$). These alarming outcomes were explained by Orren and Werner as the product of honesty and humility in the post-test, and while this may be the case, it still begs the question as to why this program failed to increase the self-concept of its African American participants while it succeeded with participants of other ethnic backgrounds.

Purdie and Neill (1999) found similarly disturbing results, with largely ineffective outcomes regarding the development of self-concept with a group of 30 Japanese participants. As they report, “the Japanese students' self-concepts were not enhanced anywhere near the level of what is typically achieved by outdoor education programs” (pp. 55-56), and as such, outdoor educators “need to pay closer attention to the cultural relevance and impact of the activities and methods they use” (p. 56).

In a later study, Purdie et al. (2002) also found that participants who identified as more Australian (nationality) tended to experience more positive outcomes as a result of an outdoor education program ($N = 721$). Similarly, Rodriguez and Roberts (2005) found that a service-learning program coupled with a week long outdoor experience resulted in
more positive outcomes for white participants than for racial minorities participating in the program ($N = 503$).

Other research has similarly noted the unresponsive nature of adventure education programming across gender lines, arguing that AE champions hegemonic masculinity, which influences individuals of gendered groups in different ways (Humberstone, 2000). Preliminary successes through gendered programming (Henderson & Bialeschki, 1987; Whittington et al., 2011) add further credence to the potential for gender-sensitive facilitation (Warren, 1998) and validate the importance of personal background in the AE experience.

Beyond these studies that warn of disparate outcomes amongst different groups, and call for amending practices in light of identity, are a few studies that have documented preliminary success through a consciousness of personal backgrounds in the facilitation of AE. A recent community-based participatory research study in Canada (Ritchie et al., 2010), for instance, addressed the issue of low mental health and high suicide rates among Canadian Aboriginal youth through culturally congruent adventure programming. The adventure program was implemented with instructors trained to be mindful of this specific cultural group’s norms, values and needs, and found success in raising the level of self-esteem and overall mental health of the aboriginal youth who participated (Ritchie et al., 2010). This study further validates previous assumptions of the potential of AE for participants of varied backgrounds, and strengthens the call for considerations of personal backgrounds in facilitation.

Disappointing results with participants of particular backgrounds (James, 1996; Orren & Werner, 2007; Rodriguez & Roberts, 2005), juxtaposed with the preliminary
success of culturally conscious AE programs (Henderson & Bialeschki, 1987; Ritchie et al., 2009), further justifies the importance of enriching our understanding of how participants’ personal backgrounds and institutional cultures coalesce in adventure education. This grouping of studies ultimately reminds us of Martin and Leberman’s (2005) insight: In adventure education, “each course participant comes with different experiences reflective of his/her stage in life and, therefore, gains different personal learning from the same experience” (p. 46). With this conception of the importance of the individual, I transition forward to studies of cultural formation in adventure education.

**Studies of Cultural Formation in Adventure Education**

Adventure education and the outdoor industry has been critiqued for its culturally homogenous makeup as a predominantly white, male, privileged class activity (Norton & Hsieh, 2011; Warren, 2005). As Haluza-DeLay (1999) argued, the “Wilderness is an elitist landscape—a privileged opportunity for only a few” (p. 136). Conversely, we acknowledge that adventure education is now frequently presented as an exemplary method for individuals from various backgrounds (Christian, 2011; Davis-Berman & Berman, 1999). These two perspectives, taken in conjunction, present a need to understand adventure education as a cultural interchange between the institution and the individual. This final segment of the literature review serves to highlight studies of cultural formation as it has manifest in the AE institution and as it occurs for participants of AE, before revisiting popular recommendations in the literature for cultural consciousness in adventure education.

To revisit Locke’s (1935/1989) rationale, because adventure education has been considerably isolated from other groups, it has developed its own unique “civilization-
type” concerning norms, customs and practices. Recent research supports this rationale, presenting the outdoor and adventure industry as counter-cultural (Humberstone, 2000), and noting the differing ways adventure is presented in different countries (Lynch, Moore, & Minchington, 2012). Vanreusel and Renson (1982) identified climbers as possessing a unique subculture by way of its “specific cultural pattern of values, norms, sanctions, beliefs, rituals and symbols” (p. 184). For example, within the adventure and outdoor education cultural group, common cultural mores include technical jargon, a masochistic appreciation of suffering, the value of equipment and immaterialism, and unique conceptions of risk, danger and uncertainty (Mitchell, 1983; Vanreusel & Renson, 1982). Though institutional cultures certainly vary from program to program, many of these customs appear pervasive throughout the field of adventure education in America.

Beyond the cultural norms of the AE institution, other studies have inquired into the development of groups in adventure education. These group interactions in AE are commonly likened to Tuckman and Jenson’s (1977) five-stage model of group development (forming, storming, norming, performing and adjourning) (Bunyan, 2011; Ewert & Garvey, 2007). Alternatively, Kraft (1992) and later, Fabrizio and Neil (2005), have presented the outdoor education experience as one of culture shock for some participants. As Fabrizio and Neil argue, the relatively static norms of outdoor education, and the foreign nature of the outdoor environment for some participants, adds cultural indeterminacy to the experience, which may well result in the four stages of culture shock (Oberg, 1960): honeymoon period; crisis; adjustment and reorientation; and adaptation, resolution or acculturation (Winkelman, 1994). Though this research provides conceptual referral for how groups may grow together (Ewert & Garvey, 2007), and how individuals
may grapple with this new environment (Fabrizio & Neil, 2005), it seldom solicits participants’ perspectives of these processes.

One hallmark exception to this theme in the literature is Haluza-DeLay’s (1999) ethnographic study of a 12-day wilderness adventure program, which provides a rare portrayal of the cultural processes in the adventure experience. As Haluza-DeLay argues, “The wilderness program group forms group norms, behaviors, interpretations of events, and stories” (p. 130). The most salient social norms in his study included, “The trip is about teens interacting with teens in the wilderness; Deliberate attention to nature is a little odd; and The trip is about challenge” (p. 131). As he noted,

the participants on the … trip created a mini-society with its own norms and ways of operating. … These [cultural norms] influenced the participants’ experience of and relationship with the natural world. (p. 134)

Haluza-DeLay (1999) goes on to acknowledge the complexity of cultural development as well as the union of societal and group cultures:

Obviously this creation of a culture was not done in a vacuum. The group members came out of a society with its own entrenched social norms, including a worldview in which nature is objectified and considered something to be used for human purposes, for instance, as a resource. (p. 134)

Though he speaks of societal norms in general terms, he effectively identifies the coming together of disparate cultures in the AE experience, particularly as they relate to the unfamiliar wilderness setting. He draws further implications for cultural coalescence and personal experiences in this setting:

Youth without a social scheme that supports attention to nature or environmental concern are not likely to go against social standards that see these interests as irrelevant. On the other hand, it was also clear that individuals in the group related to the natural world in different fashions. Although the group norms tended to ignore the natural setting except in times of spectacular moments or program-
guided attention, individuals could have meaningful and deep-felt connections with the same natural setting. (Haluza-DeLay, 1999, p. 135)

As Haluza-Delay argues, it appears that each participant is subject to social schemes within (and beyond) the group, but also maintain individuality within this cultural group. Further, his study also identified a tension between exploring the unfamiliar, while maintaining contact with certain aspects of the familiar. This puts instructors, Haluza-DeLay argues, in a difficult position:

On the one hand, adventure education is founded upon keeping people off balance in unfamiliar social and physical environments. … On the other hand, too foreign, challenging, or terrifying an environment is not likely to be conducive for real learning, or become a place with which one could build positive affective bonds. (p. 136)

Indeed, introducing participants to a foreign environment is an implicit aim of adventure education (Walsh & Golins, 1976), which presents both potential benefits and concerns. As Hattie et al. (1997) agreed:

As adventure experiences take place in different and often unfamiliar environments, there is much reassessment of the strategies used by participants to cope with and understand their world and their conceptions of self. Many of the strategies previously used to explain and cope with the world no longer work. (p. 75)

The weight of this charge, to be conscious of the institutional culture, as well as the personal backgrounds of participants, has matriculated as a requisite competence for AE instructors in recent scholarship. Warren (2002; 2005), for example, has introduced the idea of incorporating culturally responsive dispositions and social justice theory into instructor training programs. She (2002) argues that responsiveness training, as an element of effective facilitation, is crucial if adventure education is ever to gain relevance for participants from various backgrounds.
In a recent study, Lange (2011) assessed this cultural competence across the field of challenge course facilitators through a self-assessment survey, and found that facilitators reported an awareness of “how their own cultural background influences the way they think/act which impacts their professional practice with culturally different people” (p. 98). While a majority of these facilitators rated themselves as “good or very good” (p. 101) regarding facilitating programming with culturally different participants, “facilitators rated cultural competence as their least proficient skill compared to all other [industry related] skills” (p. 82). These results add further support to Neill’s (2007) calls that addressing cultural incongruence in AE might have dramatic effects on program efficacy with culturally diverse participants.

Other conceptual work in this field has focused on revising the methods of adventure education to be mindful to participant backgrounds. Roberts and Rodriguez (1999), for example, present ten recommended strategies for outdoor educators to utilize in proactively changing the field to address issues of multiculturalism. Of primary importance to issues of cultural formation in AE are the following recommendations:

1.) Hire and train teachers and leaders who understand cultural issues and are sensitive, knowledgeable and ethnically competent. … 6.) Balance and accommodate different learning styles, and organize the curriculum to include goals of social awareness, knowledge of multiculturalism, and action-oriented behavior. … 9.) Use reflection and personal history/background as tools for experiential learning. Program instruction can begin using the participant’s worldview and experience for dialogue and/or problem solving. (Roberts & Rodriguez, 1999, p. 1)

Indeed implementation of these various recommendations could certainly have meaningful import in cultivating an adventure education program that welcomes varied backgrounds into the shared cultural space of AE.
Norton and Hsieh (2011) similarly addressed the deficit in practice around cultural considerations in adventure education and adventure therapy. They present a prospective methodology for implementation; “an adventure-based framework for developing the therapeutic relationship cross-culturally” (p. 176) through shared adventure and “cultural bridging” (p. 176). The primary argument of this model is that when instructors are conscious of general frameworks of cultural competence, “shared adventure experiences, may lead to cultural bridging and create greater connection and common ground” (p. 181).

Though insightful recommendations such as these have grown common in the field of adventure education, uncertainty remains on the topic of individual and institutional cultural coalescence. Neill (2007) recently presented a cogent summary of this intersection in the field: “Although these speculations and pieces of research can be cited, the reality is that it is still early days in developing a mature understanding of [the intersections of culture in] outdoor education” (p. 2).

**Studies of Culture in Conclusion**

Though issues of ethnicity, gender, ability, and other categories of background have received consideration in the literature of adventure education, questions of the cultural mores perpetuated by these institutions, as well as the participant experience of those cultural realities, remain. This body of literature serves to contextualize the importance of these issues, but is decidedly lacking in studies that solicit the participant perceptions of this process. Further, observational data of participants negotiating the AE experience on these grounds is almost entirely absent. It is this dearth in understanding, among others, to which this study contributes.
THE LITERATURE IN REVIEW

The broad inquiry of this study necessitates an equally broad review of literature. To this point, I have provided working terminology as it relates to the adventure education experience and cultural coalescence, and illustrated a theoretical and practical genealogy for adventure education as a contemporary practice. I have presented studies of the AE experience pertaining to conceptions of adventure, outcomes of adventure, and studies of the experience itself, and have also reviewed studies relevant to culture in AE, reflective of personal backgrounds and the formation of culture in AE. In sum, I have laid the foundation of knowledge to which this study ultimately contributes. With this history and body of literature in mind, we turn forward to Chapter Three where the method utilized in this study is delineated.
CHAPTER THREE

METHOD

This third chapter outlines the strategy and tactics for inquiry into the adventure education (AE) experience. As mentioned in the study rationale, research of AE is predominantly positivistic and optimistically causational, focusing heavily on the consequential outcomes of adventure experiences. Though several studies (Davidson, 2001; Haluza-DeLay, 1999; Loeffler, 2004) have sought to understand adventure education through qualitative perspectives, the prominent understandings of the AE experience continue to reflect a homogenous epistemology within this research community. Though some have addressed issues within outdoor and adventure education through arts based research (Kime, 2008; Victor, 2012), the use of these methods remains on the margins of AE discourse, and “To deny the potential role of artistic attention and artistic representation in investigations of educational issues is to limit our approaches to knowledge” (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 43).

From this standpoint, the dearth in the literature surrounding the AE experience can be attributed to our selective methods in research; our lack of understanding is the result of our selective forms of inquiry. As Eisner (1994) analogized, “The kinds of nets we know how to weave determine the kinds of nets we cast. These nets, in turn, determine the kinds of fish we catch” (p. 41). Indeed it seems there is some consensus in the field of educational research that privileging particular forms of inquiry over others
constrains, rather than enriches, our collective understandings (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Bredo, 2009; Eisner, 1988/2005; Goodman & Fisher, 1995). In sum, in the field of adventure education, our limited understandings of AE reflect our selective inquiry into the topic; we have privileged positivistic inquiry at the expense of epistemological corroboration. These various realities in the research community at present, and my own inclination to artistic forms of research, situate this study to break new ground in the field of AE.

In this chapter, I introduce educational connoisseurship and criticism as the methodology of this study, before clarifying my own bend to this method through experiential educational criticism. I also present my study design, complete with a review of the research sites and participants, and a delineation of the methods utilized in this inquiry. Finally I explicate how my research questions are addressed through these methods before reviewing the data analysis process of this study. I close by outlining the limitations of the study, and disclosing my personal history with the subject of inquiry as educational critic.

EDUCATIONAL CONNOISSEURSHIP AND CRITICISM

Educational connoisseurship and criticism (or educational criticism), stems from the broader field of arts based research, which similarly branches out from a subjective-qualitative approach to knowledge (Dewey, 1929). Educational criticism investigates reality as it is experienced, rather than as it is deduced through experimentation. As an arts based research method, it embraces the power of human perceptivity through thoughtful consideration of the experiential qualities of perception (Dewey, 1934).
Arts based research is an effort to extend beyond the limiting constraints of discursive communication in order to express meanings that otherwise would be ineffable… [It is] rooted in aesthetic considerations and … at its best, culminates in the creation of something close to a work of art. (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 1)

This approach to research can communicate meanings not possible through other forms of investigation, and consequently serves to expand the perceptual capacity of researchers and readers alike (Barone & Eisner, 2012).

Elliot Eisner (1976/2005) first presented educational criticism as a means for researchers to celebrate the power of perception as connoisseurs and disclose these perceptions as critics in the interest of improving educational environments. Accordingly the educational critic’s search is ultimately one of value in a given context in order to “function as a midwife to perception” (Eisner, 1985, p. 217). Following is a more exhaustive overview of these central actions of the educational critic: connoisseurship and criticism.

Connoisseurship is “the means through which we come to know the complexities, nuances, and subtleties of aspects of the world in which we have a special interest” (Eisner, 1998, p. 68), and therefore requires the “ability to make fine-grained discriminations among complex and subtle qualities” (p. 63). It is to appreciate, though not in the affirmative sense; “Appreciation here means an awareness and an understanding of what one has experienced” (Eisner, 1976/2005, p. 40). To be a connoisseur requires that researchers be attuned to the idiosyncrasies of their particular settings, a task only possible through some degree of antecedent knowledge of that environment (1998); it is to make note of both the qualities and the respective histories that give rise to those qualities. In Eisner’s (1998) own words, it is the “ability not only to
experience qualities, but to experience qualities as a case or a symptom of factors that have a bearing upon the qualities of the [thing] experienced” (p. 65). In sum, it is “to exploit what one knows as well as what one sees” (Uhrmacher, 2011, p. 29).

Criticism, or “the art of disclosure” (Eisner, 1985, p. 219), is to share our perceptions with a broader audience in the hopes that divulging these reflections will contribute to the evaluation and improvement of educational settings. “Criticism is judgment” (Dewey, 1934, p. 322), and to critique in this regard is to take the private act of connoisseurship into the public sphere. It is “a reconstruction” (Eisner, 1998, p. 86) of that which is known through connoisseurship in the hopes that it might be known to others in new ways; “The function of criticism is the reëducation of perception of works of art” (Dewey, 1934, p. 338). As Eisner (1998) clarified the relationship of the two concepts, “One can be a great connoisseur without being a critic, but one cannot be a critic of any kind without some level of connoisseurship” (p. 86). With an understanding of both connoisseurship and criticism, I move to concerns of credibility with this method.

Credibility in Educational Criticism

Given that this approach to research celebrates a “plurality of ways to know the world” (Eisner, 1998, p. 108), it is inappropriate to evaluate this study with the traditional approaches to validity and reliability.15 Eisner addressed the trustworthiness of this method through three key evidentiary sources for credibility: structural corroboration, consensual validation, and referential adequacy. An overview of each follows.

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15 For a further discussion of these issues, concerning reality, knowledge and truth as it relates to validity, reliability or trustworthiness, see Eisner (1998).
Structural corroboration relates to the use of various forms of data in the presentation of “a confluence of evidence” (Eisner, 1998, p. 110). Similar to triangulation, structural corroboration, “is a means through which multiple types of data are related to each other to support or contradict the interpretation and evaluation of a state of affairs” (p. 110). Attention to structural corroboration leads to the construction of a coherent argument supported with an evidentiary base.

Consensual validation is “agreement among competent others” (Eisner, 1998, p. 112) regarding the evidence and assertions provided in a given study. The building of consensus can occur one of two ways, first through alignment of evidence and assertion—“given the evidence presented, consensus is engendered” (p. 112)—and second, through the use of multiple critics. This study utilizes the former over the latter to construct a convincing case for consensus among readers.

Finally, referential adequacy relates to the reader’s ability to perceive what the researcher has identified in the context studied. In this case, if the findings of the AE experience within this study can also be perceived by others in the field of adventure education, the study would hold a degree of referentially adequacy. In the sense that it directly relates to the experience of the researcher and others, educational criticism is “utterly empirical; its referential adequacy is tested not in abstractions removed from qualities, but in the perception and interpretation of the qualities themselves” (Eisner, 1998, p. 114).

Through attention to structural corroboration, consensual validation and referential adequacy through all phases of this study, the product presented is palatably coherent and convincing (Eisner, 1998). Revisiting the aim of educational criticism, the
hope is not merely that the story holds up, but that the story is credible and serves the utility of building perceptual capacity. The purpose of this study is thus, “to raise significant questions and engender conversations rather than to proffer final meanings” (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 166).

**Four Dimensions of Educational Criticism**

Eisner (1998) presents four dimensions by which this re-education of the subject studied is structured: description, interpretation, evaluation and thematics. Though they are presented as categorically exclusive, this is only in the interest of putting forward a palatable framework for the varied exploits of the researcher in this methodological paradigm. These categories are interrelated layers; their presentation as separate should “not imply that each is wholly independent of the others” (p. 88). A brief overview of each dimension, and a delineation of how these aspects of educational criticism manifest in this study, follows.

Description in educational criticism “is an effort to characterize or render the pervasive and purely descriptive aspects of the phenomena one attends to” (Eisner, 1976/2005, p. 41). Quite literally, to describe what it is I, as critic, see, hear, smell, taste and feel in the context of AE. This is to offer the reader a rendering, not only of what adventure education resembles in practice, but to provide a sense of the specific events and interactions as I perceive them, and facilitate a form of vicarious participation.

The interpretive dimension of educational criticism is to make sense of what is gleaned from inquiry in the search for value. It “represents an effort to understand the meaning and significance that various forms of action have for those in a social setting”
Interpretation, in this sense, guides description; deciding what to attend to in light of the research questions is ultimately an interpretive act.

The evaluative dimension is to offer value statements about the various events perceived, described, interpreted and portrayed. Given the educational focus of educational criticism, this dimension asks the question,

‘What is the educational import or value of what is going on?’ To deal with the educational import of the classroom life is, … to make some value judgments about it with respect to its educational significance. … Educational critics ultimately appraise what they encounter with a set of educational criteria; they judge the educational value of what they see. (Eisner, 1976/2005, p. 44)

Of the various educational environments that have been examined through educational criticism, this study is among the least traditional, as the educational merit of the AE experience remains a point of contention. In AE, there is no classroom, the students are often transient visitors, and the activities are typically marked by more difference than similarity to contemporary schooling. However, I contend that educational value may not be reliant on conformity to contemporary educational structures. The explicit search for value in educational criticism, paired with the unarticulated value of the AE experience, further positions educational criticism as an appropriate methodology for this inquiry.

The thematic dimension of educational criticism relates to “identifying the recurring messages that pervade the situation” (Eisner, 1998, p. 104). Through uncovering the pervasive qualities of the subject studied, educational criticism seeks to deepen understandings of contexts similar to the one studied. It is through the examination of the particular that we may enrich our perception of the general. In the context of this study, it is anticipated that themes pervasive throughout the experiences explored herein will relate, in some sense, to other settings of AE, however, these themes
are presented as a “guide, not a guarantee” (Eisner, 1998, p. 105). With these dimensions of educational criticism clarified, I transition forward to outline my particular use of this method through an experience-focused brand of educational criticism.

**Experiential Educational Criticism**

Educational connoisseurship and criticism serves as the paradigm for inquiry in this study, as one aim of this research, among others, is to identify the educational value of the AE experience. As Eisner (1998) offered, educational critics “attend to everything that is relevant” (p. 71) and tend to celebrate the broad boundaries associated with such an approach, often collecting unique and innovative combinations of data. This attention to relevance applies to both what we direct our attention, and how we attend to it. As such, educational critics consciously bend the lenses through which their connoisseurship occurs to serve their purposes. In so doing, each researcher effectively presents a unique brand of educational criticism and this study stands as no exception. In this light, I review and provide a rationale for the sources of data utilized in this study, and the lens through which this data was interpreted.

Given the focus of this study on the participant experience of adventure education, I entered the field conscious of my own experiences in adventure as well as informed with a number of theories of experience in educational and adventure contexts alike (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Dewey, 1916; 1934; 1938; Hopkins & Putnam, 1993; Mitchell, 1983; Mortlock, 1978; 1984; Priest & Martin, 1985; Uhrmacher, 2009). Though I initiated inquiry with only this basic scaffold for inquiring into experience, a more robust framework for understanding educational experience quickly took shape, which I present through experiential educational criticism.
Three Ways to Learn about Experience

My rationale for experiential educational criticism celebrates the idea that the more forms through which we inquire into a topic, the more we may learn about that topic (Barone & Eisner, 2012). This approach embraces Marton’s (1981) perspective of first and second order questions in research:

In the first and by far the most commonly adopted perspective we orient ourselves towards the world and make statements about it. In the second perspective we orient ourselves towards people’s ideas about the world (or their experience of it) and we make statements about people’s ideas about the world (or about their experience of it). Let us call the former a first-order and the latter a second-order perspective. … as both perspectives are complementary, we advocate the use of both. (Marton, 1981, p. 178)

As educational criticism has proven amenable to both orders of questioning, and because “both perspectives are complementary,” I exploit each of these perspectives in this study to facilitate a corroborative understanding of experience. It is to know experience through its observable conditions alongside the perceptions of those who so experience it.

Further, to these first and second order questions I add a third: the experiential. Whereas first and second order questions relate to the observational and the conversational respectively, the third is a measure of reflective participation and criticism (in the Eisnerian sense); to participate first hand in the experience of study in an attempt to further characterize its nuances, qualities, and character. As Dewey (1916) offered:

To ‘learn from experience’ is to make a backward and forward connection between what we do to things and what we enjoy or suffer from things in consequence. Under such conditions, doing becomes a trying; an experiment with the world to find out what it is like; the undergoing becomes instruction—discovery of the connection of things. (p. 140)

Consequently, my personal experiences with adventure have carried substantial influence throughout this study. As Eisner (1988/2005) argued, “Qualities we cannot experience,
we cannot know” (p. 113). So, to experience the phenomenon of inquiry firsthand is to strengthen my own understanding of the experience, and in turn, enrich our collective perceptions of the subject of inquiry. This is accomplished through referrals to my past experiences and through participating in the adventure experiences alongside research participants. This is not in the interest of displacing one perspective for another, but to supplement data collected in the field with an additional ontological perspective. My unique perspective as an adventurer presents utility both in perception, and as an experiential referral, ultimately serving as yet another point of structural corroboration within this study. I present this new paradigm of inquiry, or brand of injunction (Wilber, 1999), in the interest of cultivating new understandings.

To summarize experiential educational criticism: I have presented three major sources from which our understandings of an experience might stem: 1.) Observation of others involved in the experience, 2.) Disclosure from others regarding their perceptions of the experience, and 3.) Direct participation in the experience. Through attention to the congruencies and inconsistencies across these three sources, we may arrive at a convincing understanding of the experience, and by adopting an educational lens throughout, we are situated to clarify how these experiences may enhance or hinder our educational lives.

In analogous terms, it is fair to imagine me, as researcher, in a boat on the waters of experience. The first way I may learn about this experience is by watching closely as others dive into the water: I can see the water washing over them, hear the splashing of their strokes, and smell the humid air above the water. A second way to learn about the water is through listening to what the swimmers tell me about the water; what it feels like
on their skin, sounds like underneath the surface, or even describing what being in the water means to them. A third way to learn about the water is to jump off the boat myself—to submerge into the waters of experience, conscious of my own interactions with the water. It is through a confluence of these three perspectives—the observational, conversational, and experiential—that I arrive at an empirically corroborative understanding of experience (see Figure 4: Three ways to learn about experience).

![Figure 4: Three ways to learn about experience](image)

Though I have provided a thoughtful rationale for inquiring into experience in this way, I prefer the justification serendipitously offered by one of the research participants in this study, Kate. When I told her I was busy observing, and could not help her climb a boulder, she lectured me: “You’re here. You’re in the action. You get a better observance by doing it.”

Ultimately, our collective understandings of experience stem from the things we are able and willing to say about experience, and the things we are able to say are based on our modes of inquiry into the topic. Without observation, we cannot speak to what an experience may look like from the observer’s standpoint; without interview, we cannot well know what sense participants make of an experience. Similarly, if we are unwilling to adopt experiential modes of inquiry into a topic, then we limit our understanding of the
experience, and this perspective may remain concealed. If each mode of inquiry is partial, we may well arrive at a more robust portrayal of the topic through embodying a diverse methodological arsenal. Through researching the AE experience with these three categorical sources of data, I have come to know the experience on a new level, and achieved an enhanced perception, which bleeds through the pages of this study.

**Discrepancies in Experience**

As I have addressed elsewhere in this study, I am a connoisseur of adventure; an experienced adventurer and a member of the cultural in-group, with extensive antecedent knowledge of these experiences and educational programs. The participants, conversely, ranged from novice to moderately experienced with adventure. As a result, there exists an experience gap between the research participants and researcher, and it is fair to assume that differences in meaning may reflect this disparity; my meanings may well be different than their meanings as attributed to our disparate histories with adventure.

However, this is as much an issue of all qualitative inquiry of this kind as it presents a concern for this study in particular. For example, while phenomenology highlights the similarities across an experience with respect to meaning (Van Manen, 1990), phenomenography showcases the individual differences between experiences (Marton, 1981). As such, inquiry into experience may well honor both of these perspectives (see analysis and synthesis, Dewey, 1910). Ultimately, it is their experience I aim to understand, and these experiential modes of data are only helpful insofar as they further illuminate their experiences. My perspective is not included to supersede the perspective of participants, but to corroborate understandings of this experience from the experiential point of view.
STUDY DESIGN

In this study, I investigated the adventure education experience through three settings of adventure education in Colorado. I spent time observing and interviewing participants and instructors\(^\text{16}\) in each setting in order to glean insight into the AE experience in a broad sense. In this section I place conceptual parameters on “experience” in the study, clarify my reasoning for selecting the sites, introduce the sites and participants of study, explain the methods of data collection utilized, and delineate how the research questions align with these respective methods.

What Experience?

What constitutes the adventure education experience is an issue deserving of attention, which I turn to Dewey to resolve. As Dewey (1934) notes, experiences are bookended by what comes before and after; \textit{an experience} has a beginning, middle and end. My aim in this study was to investigate the AE experience in its entirety as facilitated by the three participating programs. While the majority of conceptual frameworks for adventure education focus on the pivotal moments within this experience,\(^\text{17}\) this study considers the less enthralling moments associated with AE alongside the more exhilarating or pivotal experiences. The experiences on the ground, in the van, or in the parking lot before and after the facilitated activities effectively bookend the AE experience, and therefore, I argue, deserve consideration as a part of the larger whole. In sum, if it happened to participants while they were interacting with the program of study, it was considered a part of the AE experience and is included in this study.

\(^{16}\) Though the sites utilize different descriptors for their leaders, I refer to all as instructors for consistency.

\(^{17}\) See peak adventure (Priest & Martin, 1985), frontier adventure (Mortlock, 1978; 1984), or flow experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Mitchell, 1983).
Choosing the Sites

AE carries with it a broad definition, and the field today represents an impressive eclectic of programmatic realities “with almost every conceivable type of educational or therapeutic grouping” (Prouty, 2007, p. 14). These programs take various forms, incorporate different activities, utilize different reflective methods, and ultimately work towards disparate ends (Miles & Priest, 1999). Therefore, it is beyond the scope of this study to investigate adventure education in all its myriad forms. This diversity, however, is further grounds for investigating the AE experience broadly as it manifest with markedly different programs.

Accordingly, I investigated the AE experience through study of three different programs, which champion differing aims through varied means. Though different, all programs fall under the banner of adventure education in their intentional use of adventurous activities toward diverse ends. As Berry (2011) states, “Activities common to adventure education programmes include rock climbing, kayaking, mountain walking, expeditions/campcraft and problem-solving/initiative exercises” (p. 33). I chose these three programs purposively, precisely because they embody different approaches under the shared discipline of adventure education, while still satisfying a reasonable request for convenience in that they are all within the state of Colorado (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010). Investigating the AE experience in this manner allowed me to describe the happenings particular to each setting, as well as illustrate the shared qualities across these settings of adventure education. Though each of these sites is described in detail in the following chapter, a brief overview of the experiences and participants of each site is in order.
The Sites and Participants of Study

I investigated the adventure education experience through its form at three sites, each of which was assigned a pseudonym in the interest of confidentiality: Shavano Expeditions (Shavano), Wilson Academy (the Academy), and the Redcloud Challenge Course (Redcloud). Research participants in this study were recruited from those already participating in adventure education at the three sites reviewed, and were not recruited for participation in AE by me. I introduce these sites and participants briefly here to clarify the parameters of the study, as a more exhaustive description of each is forthcoming in the following chapter. In total, this study includes the experiences and interactions of 62 participants (20 instructors, 41 participants and 1 researcher), involved in adventure education during the summer and fall of 2012. All names presented of participants and instructors in this study are pseudonyms.

Shavano Expeditions

Shavano Expeditions is designed to provide nature and adventure experiences to those who would otherwise not have the opportunity. The institutional mission of this organization is to promote the appreciation of natural environments through providing wilderness adventures and offering opportunities for interpersonal growth through bringing participants from disparate cultures together in shared experiences. The program I observed was a four day backpacking expedition in the Holy Cross Wilderness area,

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18 Verbatim program mission statements are withheld in the interest of confidentiality.
which also included activities such as fly fishing, hiking, swimming, climbing to a pass, and “low element” initiatives.¹⁹

The 7 participants at Shavano, aged 10 to 13, were recruited from a school in the Denver metro area by Shavano instructors. All participants (6 boys, 1 girl) qualified for free and reduced lunch at their school as a prerequisite to participation in the program. All participants questioned reported a limited experience with adventure settings and experiences. Three instructors (2 men, 1 woman) facilitated the trip and all three participated in the study. I also interviewed one past participant (18-year-old man) of several past Shavano programs, who came recommended from Shavano instructors (see snowball or chain sampling (Atkinson & Flint, 2001)).

**Wilson Academy**

Wilson Academy is a non-profit outdoor enrichment and summer adventure program in Colorado that boasts the mission to provide participants with enriching experiences in outdoor contexts toward aims of compassionate, responsible choices, learning creatively, and environmentally conscious behavior. The program I observed included activities such as rock climbing (indoors and outdoors), bouldering, rafting, hiking, camping, playing games, swimming, and many other activities. This program offered eight days of programming with 4 overnights across 11 days.

The 14²⁰ (4 girls, 10 boys) Academy participants hailed predominately from backgrounds of affluence²¹ and all participants questioned reported past experience with...

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¹⁹ “Low initiatives” are those elements taking place on or just above the ground where participants typically work together to solve a collective task (Attarian, 2001).

²⁰ Though the program only allows 12 participants, several participants withdrew and others enrolled at the mid-program break, which resulted in 14 participants total.
adventure to varying degrees. Two instructors led the program throughout, though transient activity-specific instructors repeatedly facilitated particular activities, which resulted in a total of 7 instructor participants (3 women, 4 men).

**Redcloud Challenge Course**

The Redcloud Challenge Course is a challenge course in the mountains of Colorado that offers single day programming to a variety of groups. As per Redcloud advertising materials, this program is designed to embrace the working goals of the transient groups that participate in its experiences, touting ends of leadership, teamwork, problem-solving abilities, self-esteem, and other outcomes. These experiences are intended to allow participants to learn more about one another, about their own capabilities, and to equip them with the skills necessary to thrive in their normal social lives. The adventure experiences facilitated at Redcloud during my observations included “low ropes” or teambuilding initiatives, games, and “high ropes” elements, in which participants climbed trees and completed objectives while high above the ground.

The 19 participants (9 girls, 10 boys) who attended Redcloud during my observations were from organized groups and schools in the state of Colorado, including an honors program, a class from a career and technical school, and a program designed to support students at risk of dropping out of school. During my observations, participants

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21 Through overhearing participant conversations of vacation homes, housekeepers, and other aspects of their lives, it was clear that the participants at the Academy reflect a different socioeconomic status (SES) group than that of Redcloud or Shavano. Though Wilson Academy utilizes a sliding pay scale to encourage participants from a variety of SES groups, the participation of lower SES participants in this program was marginal.

22 Though many participants were engaged in the experiences at Redcloud, obtaining consent proved difficult, and it should be noted that this number does not represent the number of individuals who participated in Redcloud experiences during my observations. Observations and interviews were focused on those consenting instructors and participants at Redcloud.
ranged in age from approximately 23 10 to 19 years old, though the majority of participants were high school aged, and those participants questioned expressed varying degrees of experience with adventure or wilderness settings. I also observed or interviewed 10 different instructors at Redcloud (5 men, 5 women).

**Sites and Participants in Summary**

While the three sites of study share similarities, they also exhibit marked experiential and programmatic differences. The casting of this wide net was by intention, in the hopes of identifying the underlying qualities of the AE experience broadly defined. Accordingly, the collective of participants, programs and experiences that inform this study present a snapshot of the wide spectrum of the adventure education experience (see Figure 5: Research sites at a glance). Though institutional aims and means across the three sites are varied, all programs are alike in their use of adventure experiences in wilderness contexts in the hopes that participants might find value in these experiences.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Shavano</th>
<th>The Academy</th>
<th>Redcloud</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Length of program</strong></td>
<td>4 days, 3 overnights</td>
<td>8 days, 4 overnights</td>
<td>1 day(^{24})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Activities</strong></td>
<td>Backpacking, fishing, low initiatives, hiking, swimming, camping</td>
<td>Climbing, rafting, camping, hiking, swimming, games</td>
<td>Games, low initiatives, high initiatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of participants</strong></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age of participants</strong></td>
<td>10-13; 18</td>
<td>9-11</td>
<td>10-19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Experience level of participants</strong></td>
<td>Limited prior experience with adventure</td>
<td>Significant prior experience with adventure</td>
<td>Varied prior experience with adventure</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5: Research sites at a glance

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\(^{23}\) Demographical data was not collected for all participants, so presented ages are estimates.

\(^{24}\) I researched six different single-day programs at the Redcloud Challenge Course.
Data Collection Methods

Researching the AE experience at these three sites was made possible through a variety of data collection methods. As I have alluded to elsewhere in this study, data was collected through three categorical mechanisms: interview, observation and experience. In this section, I review each method separately before discussing how these methods align with the research questions.

Interview

The research questions in this study present interviewing as a critical method of data collection. In this study, I utilized three formats to interview participants of the AE experience: one-on-one semi-structured interviews (Seidman, 2006), mobile interviews, and group interviews (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). All interviews but two occurred while in the field with participants. The two exceptions include one instructor at Redcloud, and a past participant of Shavano Expeditions, each of which took place at the residences of those research participants. All interviews were facilitated, recorded, transcribed, and filed by me in accordance with the University of Denver IRB.

Given the wilderness setting of these interviews, I utilized a form of “informal,” “mobile,” or “conversational” interviewing, where “interviews are serendipitous, occurring while you hang around a setting” (Rossman & Rallis, 2012, p. 177). These interviews were often mobile in a quite literal sense as I hiked, paddled, climbed, and camped alongside participants while they were engaged in the AE experience. Questions in these interviews were as simple as, “What’s up?” and as complex as, “What does this experience mean to you?”
I also used semi-structured interviews, which varied in length and quality across participants and contexts of study, though most followed a structure congruent with Seidman’s (2006) recommendations. As he explains, in the phenomenological interview approach, “interviewers use, primarily, open ended questions… to build upon and explore their participants’ responses to those questions. The goal is to have the participant reconstruct his or her experience within the topic under study” (p. 15). These semi-structured interviews took on one-on-one and group formats (Rossman & Rallis, 2012).

For more information on the evolving structure of these interviews, please see the included appendices, which reveal my initial and final interview protocols (see Appendix A: Interview Protocols) and highlight the metamorphosis of the questions I asked in response to preliminary “hunches” (Seidman, 2006, p. 91). I also adapted interview questions to honor and inquire into the individual experiences I perceived of each participant, effectively tailoring each interview to the lived experience of the interviewee. Given the wide net I cast with these research questions, and the fleeting time for interviewing participants during the experience, these interviews varied greatly and often reached unique depth with each participant based on their preliminary responses and my continued encouragement for elaboration and qualification. All interviews with instructors were member checked (see participant validation, Rossman & Rallis, 2012) via email in the months following the interviews, and a form of cyclical member checking and confirming with participants was implemented through recurring interviews and clarification of responses within the interviews (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007).

As mentioned previously, I utilized mobile, group and semi-structured interview techniques to bring voice to participants engaged in the AE experience. Though I present
them separately, the distinction between these interview paradigms was often indiscrete. One-on-one interviews turned to group interviews when a curious friend would join us, and formal “sit down” interviews would turn mobile as we were interrupted by storms, activities, or other events. Though operating from the same shell of an interview protocol, interviews took quite different forms from one participant to the next.25 I attribute my relative success in interviewing participants to a willingness to be adaptive, resulting in a considerable accrual of interview data, totaling 74 interviews ranging from 30 seconds to 60 minutes for a total of over 10 hours of conversation, with a mean interview length of 8 minutes, 21 seconds.

**Observation**

From an observational perspective, I utilized an adaptive middle-ground position with regards to participation in the facilitated adventure activities, which varied from co-participant to removed spectator (Rossman & Rallis, 2012, p. 148). In certain settings—such as at the Redcloud Challenge Course—it was not necessary (or possible) that I partake in these activities in order to observe participants, therefore I recorded my observations from a respectable distance from the group (usually 20 to 40 feet, depending on the activity). At other sites, it was required that I participate in order to observe; I could not well observe participants engaged in the rapids of the river at the Academy, or the steep climb up the pass at Shavano without paddling and climbing beside them respectively. Though I was often participating in the activities of adventure, the majority of my time in the field was spent perched atop a nearby boulder with notebook in hand. I

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25 Though some may present this as a limitation, I hold some confidence knowing that even Piaget, in his seminal psychological research with children, did not use a standardized language (Duckworth, 2006).
also collected artifacts from the three sites in the rare occurrence that they arose; their limited use is reflected in their sparing referral in this report.

These observations were recorded through various creative methods, including photographs (Goldstein, 2007), videos, audio recordings and field notes, which resulted in a considerable accrual of data. In this study, across 183 hours of observation, I captured 837 photographs, 96 videos, and 52 audio recordings (for a complete delineation of data types collected at each site, see Figure 6: Data collection by the numbers). These various observations were recorded and stored in accordance with the University of Denver IRB. Written observations and drawings were recorded on paper notebooks (and on a laptop at Redcloud) and I did not utilize an observation protocol for field notes (Creswell, 2007).

**Experience**

A third and final mechanism of data collection in this study, as I introduced through experiential educational criticism, was my firsthand experience with the phenomenon of study. As other research paradigms, such as autoethnography (Cutforth, 2013; Starr, 2010) autobiography, or self-study (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001), have stated, inquiring into the experiences of the researcher can yield unique insights otherwise unattainable. Accordingly, I referenced both my past experiences with adventure and engaged in the adventure experiences at the three sites as appropriate. For example, I backpacked alongside participants at Shavano and climbed and paddled

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26 Field notes also took on artistic form, as I repeatedly drew pictures to both record and illustrate my evolving perceptions of the AE experience (Leavy, 2009).

27 To my knowledge, this body of data represents the largest qualitative study of the AE experience to date.
alongside participants at the Academy to further understand the AE experience from this internal perspective.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Type</th>
<th>Shavano</th>
<th>Academy</th>
<th>Redcloud</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Photographs</td>
<td>270</td>
<td>427</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>837</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Videos</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audio Excerpts</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hours of Observation</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 6: Data collection by the numbers

These multiple modes of inquiry into the AE experience are reflective of an educational maxim purported by Eisner (1994): that each form may “perform unique epistemic functions” (p. 19) in this inquiry. The various data collection strategies in this study were adjusted throughout data collection based on my perception of their suitability for addressing the central questions of study. A more explicit review of this association—between methods and questions—is included accordingly.

**Association of Method to Research Questions**

With the research settings, participants and collection mechanisms clarified, I now return to the research questions to clarify how the various methods espoused address these questions respectively. Each of the four questions is reintroduced below, followed by an explanation of how the various methods utilized address the question.

**Question 1: What happens to participants during the adventure education experience?**

To address this question, it was necessary that I collect a significant amount of data to accurately and convincingly describe the adventure education context and experience. This was accomplished through documenting the happenings of the adventure education environment through various forms of observation, including photographs, videos, audio recordings and field notes. I also gained a level of
understanding to what happens in the AE experience, by engaging in many of the experiences firsthand. Recording these observations in a variety of forms resulted in a representatively rich data set, which paid dividends through the descriptions of the adventure education experience. These descriptions are also supported with images of the AE experience, which stands as a complementary representation of “what happens.”

Question 2: What meanings do participants of adventure education ascribe to those experiences?

It seems the best way to understand the meaning a person makes of an experience is to ask them (Seidman, 2006). As such, I addressed this question of meanings through interviewing the participants of AE during and following the AE experience. These constructions of meaning, in immediate relation to the experience, are then reflections of the current meanings of the AE experience in the varied life contexts of participants. It is to understand the meaning of an experience while not removed from that experience by space or time, and to welcome various types or realms of meaning (Phenix, 1964; Uhrmacher, 2002).

As I have explained elsewhere, my aim was not to reveal the meaning of the AE experience (Van Manen, 1990) but to explore the numerous meanings the participants ascribe to their unique experiences. Given the difficulty of questions of meaning, and the developmental level of many research participants (as young as age 9), questions of

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28 The meanings we ascribe to an experience are reflective of our life contexts, and given changing life contexts, the meanings of our experiences may evolve over time (Seidman, 2006). Further, meaning is culturally mediated by the conditions in which that meaning is constructed (Uhrmacher, 2002).

29 It should be noted that my intention is to circumvent philosophies of singular meaning to remain empirically grounded with respect to meanings. As Phenix (1964) stated, “Meaningful experience is one of many kinds; there is no single quality that may be designated as the one essence of meaning” (p. 5).
meaning were often challenging to participants. As such, it was necessary that I facilitate some collaborative and reflective thinking with the participants in order to come to understand what these experiences mean for them. I asked questions, for example, of significance, importance, and feeling, and prompted participants to reconstruct their experiences and reflect on how they felt before, during, and after the experience. I also asked participants if the experience connected with their lives, or taught them anything about themselves, or if they identified aspects of the experience as noteworthy for any reason. As ideas emerged through our conversations, I continually presented opportunities for participants to construct meaning; a tactic evidenced through the statement of one research participant, Becky, who critiqued, “Why do you keep asking, ‘Why?’” Through these tactics, I was able to understand the numerous meanings participants ascribed to the AE experience.

**Question 3: How do the personal backgrounds of participants coalesce with institutional cultures in adventure education?**

I approached this question from two perspectives: by observing the various interactions between participants and instructors during the adventure education experience, and by interviewing participants and instructors of AE.30 Through observation, I attended to the cultural norms purported by the AE institution through those involved in the facilitation of the AE experience. The participants’ norms were also given attention during observation, with particular consideration to how personal backgrounds were honored, marginalized or disregarded within the shared cultural space.

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30 I also collected artifacts from the various institutions of study in the hopes that materials would further clarify the institutional culture, though the limited availability of artifacts rendered this a largely inconsequential tactic.
of adventure education. Interviews were also administered throughout and following the AE experience to ascertain participants’ perceptions of the following: their individual histories with adventure; the institutional culture, or norms of behavior in AE; and how their backgrounds came to coalesce with these institutional culture. I also interviewed instructors to understand their intentions for participants of the AE experience, which framed cultural coalescence from an additional perspective.

The developmental level of participants typically resulted in indirect conversations of culture, which served as the basis for understanding the broader process of cultural coalescence in AE. I asked participants if they felt like they could be themselves in AE, if they had trouble interacting with people in this environment, or what they thought of the guidelines for being outdoors. Through these interviews, in conjunction with attention to cultural coalescence during observations, I was able to provide a degree of structure to this otherwise nebulous interaction.

**Question 4: What is the significance of the adventure education experience for schooling, if any?**

To address the significance of these experiences for schooling requires that these experiences be considered not only as they stand alone, but also as they measure in comparison to the schooling experience, with an eye toward how one may inform the other. This was addressed two ways in this study: through asking participants about schooling, and through applying the broader findings of this study to contemporary educational discourse and practice. I review each of these strategies accordingly.

During interviews, I provided participants with three categorical prompts related to their experiences with school and adventure: 1.) Describe your school experience, 2.)
Compare your adventure experience with your school experience, and 3.) What suggestions, if any, would you provide to your school in light of this experience? Through responses to these prompts, participants collectively provided thematic caricatures, comparisons, and critiques of schooling.

A second approach pertaining to the educational significance of these experiences was accomplished through a review of the findings as they relate to contemporary discussions of education. The educational significance of any experience relies on both the qualities we identify in an experience, and our beliefs about the character of educational virtue. Significance, in this regard, requires some degree of inference, so it is through an investigation of the first three questions that I am well situated to infer a response to the fourth. Through the methods delineated herein, I aim to shed enough light on the adventure education experience that we can begin to see its shape, and consequently, we may consider how this shape might “fit” into schooling.

Data Analysis

Though any analysis of data is subjective, iterative, and indeterminate, it is important to review the process by which the findings of this study were revealed. All audio recordings and field notes were transcribed and organized by me as they were collected, and I was conscious of informal and iterative analysis throughout this process. This preliminary analysis allowed me to amend methods of collection and follow various hunches or points of interest as I continued to collect data.

Once all data was collected and organized, it was repeatedly analyzed to identify the salient themes within the AE experience at the three sites of study. This iterative process, though painstaking and challenging, yielded rewards in the form of the qualities
of the AE experience, the key aspects of cultural coalescence in AE, and caricatures, comparisons and critiques of schooling (see Chapter Five). With respect to the qualities of the AE experience, an original list of 60 codes was distilled to five qualities (see Appendix B: Preliminary Codes of the AE Experience). The caricatures, comparisons, and critiques of schooling were categorically organized and weighted with respect to frequency to arrive at the thematic perceptions of schooling. Other findings presented, such as the relationships between the qualities of the AE experience, and the categorical portrayal of the various aspects of cultural coalescence in AE, were ascertained through some degree of creative interpretation, aided through the use of artistic inference (Eisner, 1985/2005), conceptual mapping (Davies, 2011) and visual representations of the data (Leavy, 2009).

As a final mechanism of analysis, I elicited the insight of a peer debriefer (Rossman & Rallis, 2012) well versed in matters of curriculum and instruction and experienced in adventure education. Reviewing early iterations of chapters with this additional critical perspective ensured assertions were warranted in the data, and ultimately served as a measure of consensual validation within this study (Eisner, 1998).

**LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

Though this study contributes to the body of knowledge surrounding the adventure education experience, there exist a few limitations to this study by design, and in execution. One major limitation was the relative unavailability of the adventure education field. By virtue of the work, adventure educators are seldom available for contact, as most are preoccupied with the demands of the field (during the spring and summer months especially). In total, I contacted eight different AE organizations in
Colorado and Wyoming, and though cordial and supportive, three declined to participate in the study, and two were unable to accommodate research in 2012.\textsuperscript{31} As such, though my original intention was to review a wider range of AE programs and experiences, the three sites in this study still represent a healthy diversity in experience and participant background.

Another limitation relates to the search for meaning within this study. While Seidman (2006) recommends a three interview series with participants to understand the meaning of an experience, and I did organize my interview protocol after his recommended framework, I did not achieve the depth Seidman recommends through three 90-minute interviews with any of the research participants. This limitation is due primarily to the setting in which interviews occurred, and the developmental level of most research participants. Also, though long-term meanings of these experiences is a valid topic of inquiry (Victor, 2012) constructing long-term meaning was beyond the purview of the study at hand, though this may serve as an avenue of future research.

Also, the length of each program corresponded to the rapport I was able to establish with participants at these sites. While I grew to know participants at Shavano and the Academy quite well, I never spoke to some research participants at Redcloud. Compounding this issue, the aggressive pace of the Redcloud Challenge Course allowed few opportunities for interviewing, however those interviews I was able to conduct at Redcloud were of a high quality and effectively revealed the participant perspective of the Redcloud experience.

\textsuperscript{31} This is potentially a reflection of the “long-standing tradition of anti-intellectualism” (Michalec, 1995, p. 34) in the field of experiential education.
Further, the type of data I was able to collect varied across sites based on varying levels of informed consent from participants at those sites. While every participant at the Academy and Shavano participated in the study, some participants declined to be interviewed or photographed. At Redcloud, participation rates were much lower, and consequently, opportunities for photographing group activities or interviewing participants were rare. These limitations in data collection are reflected in the data itself, and transitively influence the findings of the study as a whole.

Finally, given the conceptual difficulty of several research questions herein, and the relative youth of the participants, creative tactics were utilized to arrive at understandings of meaning, cultural coalescence, and educational significance (as outlined above). While these methods were fruitful in revealing perspectives from participants, my occasional reliance on conversational cadence may similarly be considered a weakness in method.

THE RESEARCHER

Researchers embracing subjective modes of inquiry—such as educational criticism—influence the study at all phases of the study. Consequently, the interpretations, descriptions, illustrations, and arguments presented in this study are all reflections of my personal history just as they are expressions of the subject of investigation. Accordingly, it is imperative that I disclose my own personal history as it relates to the topic of study; namely my background as an adventurer and educator.

As a child, I was successful in school, but not as a student. I found the more traditional academic subjects uninspiring, and reveled in the artistic, social and athletic aspects of education. I preferred Physical Education and Art to Mathematics or History,
and I found meaning as an athlete in school, rather than as an academic. I have always been inclined toward adventure in wilderness settings, and formative experiences in my youth solidified this value as a part of my identity. Over the past decade, I have developed particular expertise in the discipline of rock climbing and mountaineering.

In the last 8 years I have worked in the field of adventure education as an instructor at 5 different adventure education programs including challenge courses, outdoor adventure programs, and climbing programs. Through these experiences, I have enjoyed working with participants from a variety of ages, abilities, and cultural backgrounds. It is important to disclose in particular my experience working at two of the three sites in this study: the Redcloud Challenge Course (two seasons), and Wilson Academy (one season). Further, I have been certified as a Level II challenge course facilitator (ACCT, 2013), a Leave No Trace Trainer, and a Wilderness First Responder (NOLS, 2013). I also regularly partake in other activities associated with adventure education, including backpacking, cross country skiing, trail running, hiking, and canoeing, and have limited experience with other adventurous activities, such as downhill skiing, mountain biking, rafting, and kayaking. To date, I estimate I have climbed well over 700 roped climbs of various grades and over 100 multi-pitch climbs in 12 states and Mexico, though the particular peaks and cliffs I have ascended to date are inconsequential to this study. Suffice it to say I have experienced adventure in many forms: I have been scared, regretful and ashamed, as I have been content, happy, and

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32 Multi-pitch climbs are those greater than a rope length (200’).

ecstatic. I have made mistakes and been criticized for my ambition as I have had successes and been complemented for my fortitude.

Though I have found value in the adventure experience, I still question the varied meanings of these experiences for others. Also, having facilitated adventure education experiences with participants representing a rich eclectic of personal backgrounds, I have noted the curious intersections between institutional culture and personal backgrounds in AE. These personal curiosities have informed my research questions, and in this sense, my originally private inquiry has found public outlet within the parameters of this study.

As an educational critic, I come to adventure education as a critical friend in the hopes of improving practice (Eisner, 1998). Through my antecedent knowledge of adventure education, and training in the art and science of research, I am uniquely positioned to enrich our perceptions of this experience. Concurrently, this past experience serves as a limitation, as subjective understandings are indelibly influenced by our personal experiences, “Yet who does not approach a phenomenon with limitations of some sort resulting from their personal life history?” (Peshkin, 1986, p. 18).

I, as subjectively qualified connoisseur (see judgment, Dewey, 1910), am capable of perceiving and disclosing the complexities and subtleties idiosyncratic to adventure education in a way that “illuminates, interprets, and appraises the qualities that have been experienced” (Eisner, 1998, p. 86). It is not through simple translation, but through attentive perception and artistic reconstruction that our collective understandings of adventure education are enriched through this study (Eisner, 1988/2005; 1998). It is with this eye toward enriching perception that we move forward to the descriptions of the adventure education experience.
CHAPTER FOUR

DESCRIPTIONS OF THE ADVENTURE EDUCATION EXPERIENCE

In this chapter, I present the adventure education experiences as I observed and experienced them at the three sites of study. I describe these experiences in detail in an attempt to both clarify what happens to participants during the AE experience, as well as to render these experiences somewhat tangible for the reader through their retelling. As Dewey (1934) notes, the experience in itself must be our point of departure for any further illustration:

In order to understand the esthetic [experience] in its ultimate and approved forms, one must begin with it in the raw; in the events and scenes that hold the attentive eye and ear of man, arousing his interest and affording him enjoyment as he looks and listens. (p. 3)

These experiences are presented with such detail in an “attempt to identify and characterize, portray, or render in language the relevant qualities” (Eisner, 1985, p. 230) of the AE experience, and facilitate some form of vicarious participation within that experience. To consider the experience in its original form is an important step in both understanding (as Dewey noted) and criticism, as Eisner explained, “Criticism is empirical in the significant sense that the qualities the critic describes or renders must be capable of being located in the subject matter of the criticism” (p. 217). These qualities are so located in this study through a confluence of perspectives of the AE experience—the observed, disclosed and experienced.
This description also serves to ground the more abstract illustrations of the AE experience, which effectively serve as the subtext of the chapter at hand to be further explored in Chapter Five. By clarifying the specific events and happenings of the AE experience, this chapter may also serve a measure of referential adequacy for any illustrations to follow (Eisner, 1985). In sum, these descriptions will guide us toward an understanding of the qualities within the experience, as well as provide a contextual reference for understanding those qualities.

These vignettes are not included on the grounds that the happenings therein were exceptional or unique in adventure education. To the contrary, these vignettes are included as they collectively represent those common happenings in the AE experience. Through these specific storied examples, with descriptions of the experiences at each of the three sites, this chapter also allows for distinction between these programs, as evidenced through the varied experiential realities. I also thread my own experiences and interpretations throughout this chapter in order to add another perspective to AE, and divulge the interpretive dimension of this study. These descriptions are presented as such in the hopes that the story of the AE experience might unfold as a rich novel, rather than an abrupt report.

To paraphrase the research questions, this inquiry is focused on what happens to participants during AE; the meanings ascribed to the experience; cultural coalescence between the institution and the individual; and the educational significance of these experiences. As such, it is with these questions in mind that the reader may carry forward with some intention as the story unravels.
In the sections that follow, I give an overview of each site, complete with a rendering of the structure, basic intentions, and participants of each program, as well as the parameters of the experience at each site. I offer relevant vignettes for each site as they exemplify the experiences of those programs respectively. These sites are presented in the order in which they were researched as this sequence influenced what I was able to perceive at the three sites respectively; first, Shavano Expeditions (Shavano), then Wilson Academy (the Academy), and finally the Redcloud Challenge Course (Redcloud). These descriptions are supported with photographic representations of the AE experience, which are referenced in text (e.g. [IMG. n]) and made available for review in the subsection at the end of this chapter, “Images of Adventure.” I conclude this chapter with a summary of these descriptions, and transition forward to a more intentional discussion of the thematic qualities of the AE experience.

In sum, my hope is that through this rendering of the adventure education experience, made possible through a diverse arsenal of data collection methods, readers might smell the evergreen in the morning breeze, touch the cool rushing water of the river, feel the burden of a heavy pack after a long day on the trail, taste the warmth of a hot drink on a cold rainy evening, see the fiery orange sandstone of the desert against a dark blue sky, and hear the pattering of rain from the safety of a dry sleeping bag. This vicarious participation is presented with intention, both to depict this experience for those unfamiliar with settings of adventure, and as a measure of educational criticism. It is a deliberate step in the walk toward knowing the AE experience in a new light.

98
SHAVANO EXPEDITIONS

Shavano Expeditions (Shavano) is a community outreach program sponsored by a national organization, with the explicit intent of providing free wilderness adventures to children who would otherwise be unable to partake in such activities. Their advertising materials purport goals to promote the appreciation of natural environments through providing adventurous experiences in wilderness contexts to “urban youth” and adults, and to provide opportunities for cross-cultural experiences in outdoor settings.

Shavano Expeditions targets this population through recruiting youth enrolled in free and reduced lunch programs at their schools. Shavano operates entirely on the time and energy of volunteers, and with donated equipment from a national organization. A storage shed at the back of a local middle school serves as the headquarters for Shavano, with large wooden shelves piled high with ready-for-use outdoor equipment. This gear has been utilized heavily over the past several years on a variety of trips including day hikes, night hikes, birding, mountain biking, snowshoeing; service outings to do trail maintenance, or care for rescued wolves; and trips out of state to the Sierra Nevada range, Yellowstone, and other locations.

The program I joined was organized and facilitated by three instructors—Travis, Laura and Steve—who recruited participants from a middle school in the Denver metro area. All seven participants on the trip spoke Spanish, had limited experience with the outdoors, and were all enrolled in free and reduced lunch. The program participants were comprised of six boys and one girl, between 10 and 13 years of age, with several familial ties within the group (two cousins; two brothers; and a close friendship).
This particular trip was a four-day backpacking and fly fishing expedition into the White River National Forest in central Colorado in the vicinity of Mount of the Holy Cross and Mount Jackson. This area—known for pristine alpine lakes, high mountain passes and sweeping Colorado vistas—served as a new environment for these kids\textsuperscript{34} to experience the rocky mountains, most for the first time. The main activity of the outing was to hike a loop from the Fancy Lake trailhead (elevation 10,000 ft.) with stops at any of the alpine lakes in the area for fly fishing and camping. We stayed one night at Hunky Dory Lake (11,280 ft.) and two nights at Fancy Lake (11,540 ft.) and hiked to the apex of Fancy Pass (12,380 ft.) (see Appendix C: Shavano Expeditions Route Map; Warren, 2008). With these basic parameters of the experience and participants clarified, we transition forward to the stories from the trail at Shavano.

**Will there be Bears?**

Two adolescent boys are being outfitted by Shavano Expeditions in the parking lot behind their middle school. One boy, Albert, is in attendance with his mother, who holds a 1-year-old child in her arms. Another boy, Joe, stands with his mother, father, and younger brother Kenny. The sporadic rainfall does not deter the excitement of the boys, who move their backpacks close to the side of the building for cover from the rain. They hunch over their packs, excitedly pulling on the various straps, cords and zippers.

Laura, the trip leader for this outing, rifles through the vast gear closet of Shavano Expeditions, pulling down backpacks, sleeping bags, boots, rain jackets, tents, stoves and other equipment to lend to the participating backpackers. She is friendly and welcoming.

\textsuperscript{34} In the descriptions of the AE experience, I use terms “kids” and “participants” interchangeably to honor the varied language used by both participants and instructors of AE to describe the youth participating in these programs (see Cohen et. al., 2007).
to the newcomers, and carries a “down to business” attitude in outfitting the young to-be backpackers. In her thick southern accent, “Hi, I’m Laura. What size shoe do ya wear?”

As participants are being outfitted, I strike up a conversation with one boy, Albert.

Ben: “So, is this your first time backpacking?”
Albert: “Yeah.”
Ben: “Are you excited?”
Albert smiles, looking down at his backpack shyly.
Albert: “Yeah, I’m really excited.”
His mother is quick on his heels, adding, “He is excited and his father and I are also very excited for him.” (July 16, 2012)

Albert returns to his new pack, reaching in the deep pockets, and toying with the buckles and seemingly superfluous amount of fastening straps. As he is in the midst of decoding the pack, figuring out which buckles attach to one another and which straps to pull to close the bag, he is pulled away from his work by Laura to try on a pair of boots. He slips his foot into the boot, leaving it unlaced, and knows instantly, “Yep, it fits.”

Laura stops him, “Now, we need to be sure it really fits. Can you lace it up and go like this?” Laura bends her knee and points her shoe toward the ground, lightly kicking the hard concrete with her toe. Albert follows instructions, lacing the boot and tapping his toe on the ground. Laura asks, “Do you feel your toe hitting the end?” For a moment, Albert thinks, either contemplating what the right answer might be, or trying to discern what, exactly, Laura means by “toe hitting the end.” He shakes his head and Laura is satisfied that the boots must fit.

Albert changes out of the boot and immediately returns to his pack, reengaging in the puzzle of straps and buckles, his mother watching happily beside him. He notices me watching him, and reaches out to me with his water bottle, asking, “Where should I put this?” As a white male, with long hair and a beard, I certainly look the part of someone
from the cultural in-group. “Well, you’re going to want to drink water while we are hiking, so put that somewhere where you can get to it easily.” “OK.” He slips the empty water bottle in his top pouch, and pulls the zipper shut. He prepares for the hike, though it is still days away. When I ask him how his pack feels, he smiles and looks at his mother, who smiles back at him. I further inquire, “Heavy, huh?” He and his mother laugh and Albert nods his head, leaving the impression that he has little idea of what to expect, though he appears to be excited about whatever it is that is coming.

A friend of Albert’s, Joe, is also outfitted for the trip as his younger brother, mother, and father watch him get acquainted with the equipment with smiles on their faces. Joe seems quiet and reserved. He goes through a gym bag of clothing, pulling out articles, one by one, asking Laura, “Should I bring this?” Laura replies “No” to the first few pairs, and then stops Joe, informing him that too many extra clothes will not be worth the weight. Joe’s father agrees, joking with his son about the weight of his pack—his chuckle is contagious and I share in their laughter.

Albert continues to interject with questions for Laura, “What should I wear when I come on Thursday?” “How far are we hiking?” “Will there be bears there?” Laura is patient with his inexperience and desire to know more about this new experience, answering each of his questions while continuing to pull gear down from the large wooden shelves of the garage. After 30 minutes of waiting for additional participants to arrive, it is evident that no other children will be joining us for the “mandatory” pre-trip planning meeting. Laura later explained that this is a common problem for the free programming they provide—there is little commitment on the side of the participants, who often haphazardly change their minds about the trip. Joe’s younger brother, Kenny,
who has been standing by, patiently watching as his brother is outfitted, is quickly moved into candidacy for participating in the trip. Kenny agrees to participate—his big brother will look after him and carry some extra weight to make sure Kenny, only 10 years old, can keep up. Both boys have their packs fashioned with supplies in short order, and acquaint themselves with the straps and buckles in a manner nearly identical to Albert. The three boys all appear excited but somewhat apprehensive about the upcoming experience, just days away.

**Outfitted for Adventure**

The morning of our departure, new participants arrive to be outfitted for the trip. Word of our initially low enrollment spread quickly to others, who recruited friends from school. Two cousins, Jose and Pedro, appear to be excited about the trip. They introduce themselves to me with young, firm handshakes, and immediately move onto examining their gear, speaking quickly to one another in Spanish as they stuff clothing and other equipment in their packs.

Ivan, another new recruit, fumbles with his newly loaned pack and backpacking equipment. He desperately solicits my help, “I don’t even know how to open this,” he says, while pulling at the straps, buckles and cords at the top of his pack, somewhat frustrated. I show him the sequence of buckles to unsnap and cords to pull to open the bag. He thanks me, and returns to packing his bag with a sense of urgency.

Sally, the final recruit and lone girl in the group, sits deflated in a camping chair, her arms crossed over her black tank top as her dark brown eyes stare blankly forward. She was not thoroughly vetted on what this experience would entail, and missed the pre-trip meeting, which, in hindsight, may well have prevented her participation from the
outset. In her pink backpack, among other things, she carries a hair drier, curling iron, and small makeup kit. These personal amenities, particularly heavy and of limited utility in wilderness settings, are quickly swapped out for gear loaned her by Shavano Expeditions: a sleeping bag, rain jacket, food and other group gear. This is handled in a somewhat hurried fashion amidst the flurry of outfitting many of the other participants—perhaps too quickly—leaving Sally somewhat shocked with the reality of the trip. As she comes to terms with the nature of the trip—first, that there will be no electricity; second, that there will be no cabins or beds; and third, that she will be carrying everything on her back—she grows more resistant and outspoken about her lack of desire to participate. “I thought we were gonna be camping by a car.” She remains seated in the camping chair as others excitedly pack their bags around her.

Sally is handed hiking boots in her size, but protests, “Can’t I wear my own shoes?” Laura, looking down at Sally’s stylish white sneakers, responds, “Well, just try these on.” Sally reluctantly obeys, kicking off her untied Adidas and slipping into the new boots with visible disdain. Watching this unfold, I attempt to cut the tension of Sally’s experience with a joke, “Are those shoes too dorky for you?” I say, smiling to her. But she remains stone cold in her matter of fact retort, “I don’t like those kind of shoes.” She glances at the rain pants provided her by Shavano, clearly disgusted with the fashion norms associated to backpacking. She is resolute in her quiet protest.

Before long, all kids are outfitted with new clothing, sleeping bags, tents, food, and other gear, though to say they are prepared would be an overstatement. Many still have no idea what to expect, and continue to ask the trip leaders questions that reflect a
severe lack of understanding for what they are about to experience: “Are we staying at one place, or no?” and again, “Will there be bears there?”

One of the instructors for Shavano, Steve, summons the group to join him in a large circle in the grass adjacent to the packs, gear and vehicles. He stands confidently at the edge of the circle as others join him, wearing a khaki baseball cap, glasses and a light green collared shirt, his hands on his hips. The circle fills with Shavano leaders, kids, their parents, and myself, and Steve begins talking to the group, though I cannot be certain what he is saying as his lecture is entirely in Spanish. My limited comprehension of the Spanish language helps me understand that Steve is explaining to the kids and parents what the kids will be doing on the trip. Parents occasionally nod and smile, as Steve continues to explain the trip. His choice to present the parameters of the experience in Spanish effectively sets the tone for a language norm that pervades the program: both English and Spanish are spoken here. Before long, we pile into vehicles and embark on our journey to trails and experiences unknown.

**Hitting the Trail**

Pedro swings his pack around his arm, allowing it to thump onto his back. He staggers off to the side three steps before stopping the momentum of the pack and regaining his balance, the enormous bag still hanging on one shoulder. A friend supports him by grabbing his side. He leans forward, and pushes the weight of his pack up, balancing it on top of his back as he pushes his arms through the unfamiliar straps. He stands up straight, and the momentum of the heavy pack carries him backward a step—his young frame no match for the massive weight of four days of food, clothing and shelter. He leans forward again to regain some semblance of a center of gravity, and
fidgets with his trekking poles—looking at the straps and feeling the grips. “How’s that pack feel Pedro?” I ask him. He smiles through his response, “Heavy.” [IMG. 2]

We begin up the trail, and he strides forward with enthusiasm, quickly finding a rhythm with his new trekking poles. They stab into the loose gravel of the trail in sync with his feet, moving steadily up the first of many hills. Though spirits are high, the visible weight of Pedro’s pack paints his upcoming experience an ominous shade. He has never been backpacking before, and the entire experience, even while he is engaged in it, is one of mystery, uncertainty and, as the sweat on his brow stands as evidence, challenge. He pushes forward up the hill with a sense of enthusiasm, maintaining the pace of his friends as his wiry frame buckles forward under the weight of his pack. [IMG. 1]

Less than five minutes up the trail, Sally turns to me and asks,

Sally: “When are we going to stop?”
Ben: “I’m not sure.”
Sally: “But like minutes right, not like hours?”

A few minutes farther up the trail, I check in with her again.
Ben: “How is it going so far?”
Sally: “Bad.”
Ben: “Why bad?”
Sally: “It looks like it’s going to rain, and when it rains my hair gets curly, and I like my hair straight.” (July 19, 2012)

Sally, with arms low at her sides and shoulders slouched, unenthusiastically carries forward, but quickly drops to the rear of our line of hikers, where she remains for the day. Her slow pace may reflect a subtle protest to the experience as a whole—she did not plan on backpacking today, this is not something she wanted for herself, and now, alone in the woods with us, she has no choice but to stay with the group. Between Sally and Pedro, it is clear to see that the conditions of the experience are embraced differently from person
to person. The uncertain, new, and challenging can be eagerly anticipated, or merely tolerated, depending on the individual.

**The Contour Lines of Culture**

Steve sits on a small boulder between two boys, Pedro and Jose. He pulls out a large topographical map of the wilderness area we are currently navigating, and begins explaining to the boys how to read this type of map. The sun shines down on the three of them, sitting together on the rock, as intermittent drops of rain tap the map in Steve’s hands. ![IMG. 4]

Jose interjects with questions, as Steve points to different points on the map. Pedro’s large pack restrains his movement, pulling him back by the shoulders, but his attention is forward, to Steve and the large map in his hands (see Appendix C: Shavano Expeditions Route Map). Steve explains how the contour lines of the map indicate change in elevation, how far we have come, where we will go, and what the lines mean for going up or downhill. Pedro nods to Steve in understanding as he continues to explain. Steve’s efforts to explain the hike to these boys may stand as evidence that he has an interest in demystifying aspects of this foreign experience for them, and their continued questions reflect their curiosity as they hike farther into the unknown.

I am unable to ascertain the specific details from their dialogue, as their entire conversation is in the boys’ first language: Spanish. Though I could comprehend relatively little of the discussion, the conversation is one with which I am familiar, due to my own experience explaining topographical maps to similarly inexperienced and curious participants.
This blended use of English and Spanish at Shavano was an instant norm across the group, beginning with Steve’s thorough introduction to participants and parents. Conversations tended to remain in one language or the other, but some leeway was exercised within this loose linguistic framework, as participants and leaders alike often bounced freely between the languages in communication. Like the contour lines of the map in Steve’s hands, their backgrounds flow together while remaining distinct within this shared experience; individuality is not lost within the group, though the group begins to grow as a whole. They are isolated from their individual worlds and driven together through the shared task of traversing miles of mountainous wilderness, carrying everything they need on their young backs.

**Albert’s Pain**

After an hour or so up the trail on our first day of backpacking, the weight of the experience begins to wear on one boy in particular in our group, Albert. I first notice Albert’s deteriorating condition as he staggers up the trail toward me and offers, “I don’t think I’m ever going to do this again.” He doubles over, panting, dropping his hands to his knees. His slightly overweight frame is no match for the weight of his backpack—he is likely being physically pushed beyond the comforts with which he may have some familiarity. Sweat drips off his face under the heat of this high altitude sun. He mumbles to himself, “I can’t do this. … I can’t do this no more.”

We continue marching up the trail for merely a hundred feet before Albert stops and unbuckles the waist belt of his backpack—still standing in the middle of the trail. He announces for whoever is willing to listen, “I just can’t do this no more.” Albert appears desperate for any relief from the strenuous monotony of the task at hand—putting one
foot in front of the other—but receives little sympathy from the group. We continue up
the trail another hundred feet, “How many miles are left?” and a hundred feet farther,
“This is the worst day of my life.” He takes his gaze off the trail for a moment as he
stands in the trail, looking to the mountains high above us. “Are we going all the way up
there?” he asks me, pointing to the top of a nearby peak. Though I assure him that we are
not climbing to the top of these surrounding peaks, he remains unenthused with the
activity. “So tired,” he continues.

Before long, Albert breaks down again, sitting in the middle of the trail,
unprompted by any announcement that we are, in fact, taking a break. He leans forward
against the weight of his pack, repeating his newly adopted mantra between gasps for air:
“So tired. … So tired. … So tired.” I ask Albert to show me how he feels for a
photograph, and he makes a face communicating his overwhelming exhaustion and
seeming disgust. [IMG. 9] We share a laugh, and continue climbing up the trail together.

To add insult to injury, the once unthreatening sprinkle suddenly picks up in
intensity, and we find ourselves hiking through a classic Colorado mountain
thunderstorm. Albert is quick to shuffle through the top of his pack and find his bright
green rain jacket, which he throws over his gray cotton t-shirt, now wet with sweat. The
soon steady downpour adds yet another degree of unpleasantry to Albert’s already
unbearable struggle on the trail. We stop for a rest and Albert sits in the wet dirt with his
head down underneath his hood as the rain pounds his jacket and the trail around him.
Albert is suffering.

I am admittedly somewhat taken by Albert’s molasses-like progress up the trail.
He catches my attention early, and as we continue climbing, I only grow more interested
in his strife, notable for its extreme degree. To further complicate my own sense-making of this experience, I overhear Ivan completely contradict his comrade’s struggle: “This is the only fun I’ve had all summer.” Shocked, I ask Ivan, “What have you been doing all summer?” He responds, “Being at home. Honestly being stranded out here is better than being stuck at home.”

I can empathize with both Ivan’s appreciation and Albert’s suffering. I enjoy the walk, but the pack I wear is also heavy on my back. I fidget with the straps, looking for a way to escape the sheer weight of several days of food, clothing and other equipment. The sun beats down hot on my body, and sweat drips from my brow. The longer we hike the sloppier my foot placements on the rocky trail, and the more often I slip and stumble forward. Thoughts in my mind rotate from the pain in my shoulders to the tiredness in my legs. I shift the pack repeatedly, still hopeful that the right positioning, and unique combination of weight distribution will render the pack weightless and provide an escape from the suffering inherent to this long and relentless climb. It is a feeling I have grown familiar with, and I know better than to expect the pain to lessen as I carry forward. Still, I look forward, alongside Ivan and Albert, hopeful for a sign that our destination is near—perhaps just around the next corner—and that I will soon be free from the burden of this pack.

**First Time Camping**

After a several hours on the trail, we arrive at our first camp. Tall pines line the edge of a small alpine lake, nestled amongst a rocky backdrop, and a steep field of large boulders rises up to high rocky peaks across the lake. Kids swim out of their heavy packs without hesitation, desperate for reprieve from the weight on their shoulders and legs.
They remark at how light they feel without the added weight of the pack, and stand in explicit awe of the scenic beauty of this new environment. As Ivan describes it, “This place is amazing!” Soon, the entire group arrives, and bags are dismantled in a feverish search for tents, poles and sleeping bags. Kids exhibit varying degrees of understanding how to put together a tent, though most have no experience with the task. Even Albert, once in camp, transforms from a miserable child to a happy bubbly boy. The weight of his pack off his back, he explores the alpine lake and surrounding wilderness with a few friends, and appears eager to help with the tasks of establishing camp.

Albert: “How do you set up a tent?”
Pedro: “You never set up a tent before?”
Albert: “No.”
Pedro: “It’s easy.” (July 19, 2012)

The trip leaders disperse to the self-divided tent groups to give instructions on assembling the tents. Albert, Kenny and Joe pull their white tent from its bag, still adorned in their brightly colored rain jackets from the wet hike in. The three of them have never slept in a tent before, and they are all eagerly engaged in the task of putting it together. [IMG. 7] All three boys pay close attention to Laura’s instructions, as she shows them how the poles slide through the bright orange sleeves of the tent, creating a nylon dome shelter.

Before long, the tents are erected and staked firmly to the ground, with sleeping pads and bags rolled out inside. Kenny, upon entering a tent for the first time in his life, declares, “It’s pretty comfy in here.” He smiles, then yells, as if he has made a profound discovery, “Guys! It’s comfy in here!” He eagerly unpacks his sleeping bag and spreads it out alongside his brother’s bag. Albert and Joe are close behind, and the three of them
excitedly converse in Spanish inside the tent, reveling in a joy I know well. For some reason, the feeling of a marginal but sufficient shelter in an otherwise dangerously remote setting instills a sentiment of happiness and safety not often found in the comfort of my own bed.

I set up my tent a short distance from the boys, and savor the familiar smell; a blend of nylon, dirt and pine. I realize I have the same smile on my face, and likely, thoughts in my mind as Kenny. After a long day of walking through intermittent rains, with tired legs and aching feet, and with the temperature dropping as the sun drops lower in the sky, it is hard not to appreciate the sanctity of a warm, dry sleeping bag.

**Guidelines for Being in the Woods**

The group convenes in the kitchen area as directed by trip leaders to go over a few guidelines for the expedition. Participants and instructors sit on logs organized in an approximate square only about ten feet across, with tall pines marking the corners of our gathering place. The conversation begins at the onset of dusk, and rolls through the fall of night. The air grows colder throughout our conversation, and kids still wearing shorts and t-shirts huddle together on the logs for warmth much as a pack of huskies might.

The rationale for obeying this predetermined set of guidelines is provided by Steve: “We want you to be **safe** and **healthy** in the woods.” Steve initiates the discussion by noting leftover hot coco in one participant’s mug, and uses this as an example to explain that excess is problematic in the wilderness because it is difficult to dispose of. Steve continues, explaining why kids need to cover their head and eyes in the mountains with sunglasses and hats (intensity of the sun), why they need to drink a lot of water
(altitude sickness and exercise), and why they need to layer clothing (dramatic changes in temperature). These guidelines are delivered as directives: “You need to wear good layered clothing to stay comfortable.” Kids remain silent, abstain from asking questions, and occasionally nod in acknowledgement to the guidelines for behavior on the expedition. They are also presented “how-to” instructions for other simple behaviors, such as urinating, defecating (complete with demonstrations, much to the delight of these young adolescents), cleanliness and bear safety. These rules are pitched precisely as such; these are non-negotiable rules for behavior while living in the wilderness.

A few of the boys grow restless near the end of the lecture-style conversation while sitting on the log. Steve silences them by bringing a tone of seriousness to the discussion of bear safety, and emphasizes the importance of these guidelines through the dire consequences that non-compliance may bring about. Throughout the conversation, he interjects Spanish vocabulary—seemingly when he detects the use of an English word the participants may not be familiar with: “If you don’t take care of your feet, you will get blisters—ampollas.”

The meeting is adjourned in agreement that participants will follow these rules, and all break from the huddle to collect “things that smell” from their tents in the interest of bear safety. One boy, Kenny, is sufficiently alarmed by the bear safety discussion, and brings back the clothes he was wearing during dinner, fearful that they may smell like food to a bear. He hands me his clothes and walks back through the dark toward his tent, where he will sleep in a sleeping bag for the first time in his life.

The Early Bird Gets the Worm

“JOE! I CAUGHT A FISH!”
I open my eyes and roll onto my back, still in my sleeping bag. I feel simultaneously exhausted from the previous day of data collection, and alarmed that my sleeping habits may cause me to miss important observations. I peek at my watch, it is 6:00am on the nose. As I begin to doubt that I heard someone, the call repeats, louder, and somehow with more urgency, “JOE!!! I CAUGHT A FISH!!!”

Though I’ve only known him for one day, I recognize his voice already; it’s Albert. His dedication to learning how to fly fish last evening, and apparently getting his fly in the water early, has yielded rewards in the form of a tug on his line. I emerge from my tent, notebook in hand, eager to document Albert’s success. I find Joe and Kenny crowding Albert as he releases the terrified fish back into the lake. The three of them have apparently been up for some time, free to fish and explore the grounds around our camp with limited supervision. Albert walks back up to camp, notices me, and immediately informs me of the great news, “I caught a fish!” I reply with tiredness still in my voice, “I heard!”

This autonomy in the early hours of the day quickly became a habit for these three boys. Each morning of the expedition, no matter how early I rose, they were always engaged in activity prior to my awakening. Often, I would find them at the lake adjacent our camp, with lines in the water, sometimes atop the boulders near our camp, other times, I would see them from afar, traversing new ground or exploring new waters in the cool morning air. They celebrated their freedom together, sharing in the adaptive parameters of unsupervised activity in wild new places. [IMG. 14]
Having a Plan is Important: An Initiative, A Lesson

As the morning sun warms our camp, Steve gathers the participants for a teambuilding initiative. He presents them with a simple but complicated objective: to get in order from youngest to oldest without speaking. Steve asks if they would like to develop a plan first, or just go for it, and the kids decide to attempt the initiative without a plan. They sit silently in a small circle, holding up numbers, pointing to themselves and others, and displaying a myriad of gestures to one another. Their silence is occasionally broken with laughter as they struggle to communicate. Albert, in particular, attempts to coordinate their effort, pointing around the circle as individuals hold up numbers for him, though there is no agreed-upon language for what these numbers mean (age, month, day, or year of birth). As a result, their first attempt is a failure, and the boys eventually concede.

Steve encourages them to try again, this time, developing a plan for how they will communicate to one another. They agree upon a working language and attempt the activity again, this time quickly lining up, with many holding up numbers at the same time, as they shuffle up and down the line. Upon finishing, they look to Steve silently, who questions, “Are you done?” A few nod, and Steve goes down the line asking each to state their age, revealing their success in the initiative. Steve prompts the group to gather in a seated circle, and processes the experience with the boys: [IMG. 10]

Steve: “What was the key to your success in this?”
Albert: “Teamwork.”
Steve: “Sure, but teamwork can do a lot of things. You guys could’ve just walked off that way together and it would’ve been teamwork.”
Kids, evidently, don’t know how to respond, looking at the ground and at each other as they sit silently.
Steve: “What about having a plan?”
Pedro: “We had a plan.”
Steve: “So having a plan is important for activities like this. I’m going to be having you do more of these activities throughout. Good job guys. We’ll have breakfast in a few minutes.” (July 20, 2012)

Upon hearing Steve’s conclusion, the participants disperse across the woods silently; some return to their tents, others continue exploring the waters of the lake below camp. Steve’s moral lesson, “Having a plan is important,” reverberates into the silence of this pristine alpine environment. Though Steve’s portrayal of the lesson is convincing, in my mind, it is not necessarily a lesson learned through this brief encounter.

**Look Like a Hiker**

Tents are packed into backpacks, and water is filtered as we prepare to embark on our second day of hiking. Instructors continue to help kids with the unfamiliar backpacks, pulling nylon straps and snapping plastic buckles to keep the bags tight to their backs. The participants appear much more conscious of weight today, bartering to carry less as they pack their bags, whereas yesterday bags were haphazardly filled without much consideration for weight. Ivan, conversely, appears eager to absorb some of the weight from his comrades’ packs, and happily parades around the camp with his newly weighted pack. No one else notices, but he continues, wearing his pack long before departure as if those who happen to see him could perceive the impressive weight on his back. Today, Ivan will earn his keep.

A few participants engage in playful banter as they prepare for the hike, discussing who snores the loudest, citing evidence from the past 24 hours together. These jabs appear playful, as the accused laugh along with the accusers. One instructor, Travis, surveying the kids and packs, declares to the group, “You guys look like hikers today.” I,
too, notice this instant adaptation across the group. The kids now appear comfortable in their packs, even after only a day of hiking. They stand more confidently in their boots, hips bent forward slightly to maintain a familiar center of gravity with the added weight of their packs. They show little resemblance to the pack of stumbling, off balance, tired, backpackers of the previous day. Albert and Joe, unprompted, both agree with Travis:

Albert: “I’m ready to hike today.”
Travis: “Albert, that’s the way your pack should look. Like a rectangle.” Then, again, looking over the group quickly, Travis continues, “You guys look good today.”
Joe: “Yeah. It just feels like a backpack today.”
Travis: “You guys look solid.” (July 20, 2012)

In only one day in the wilderness, it seems these kids already feel adept and familiar with the activities associated to this recently unfamiliar setting and activity. Water bottles are filled, laces are tightened, straps are pulled, zippers are closed, and the group departs our first campsite toward an abandoned mining town, and the second campsite of our expedition at Fancy Lake. The alpine sun beats down on the group, as they head out on the trail with rested legs and a skip in their step. [IMG. 11, 12 & 13]

The Climb to Fancy Pass

The group activity of the day was initially presented as optional: kids would choose between hiking to the pass, or hiking to a new lake for a day of fishing. Most kids, intimidated by the pass looming high above our camp, informally elect fly fishing at the new lake. However, inventory of fishing equipment reveals that the lake will not be an option due to an unexpected shortage of flies—evidence of the group’s inexperience with fishing. The entire group will climb to the pass. Participants respond to this news with comments to one another and questions to their instructors (and me) about the nature of hiking to the pass. They appear uncertain and intimidated when looking up at the pass
from camp. Indeed, they have their work cut out for them: “From the lake, to 12,400-foot
Fancy Pass is a climb of about 800 feet in about 0.5 miles”\(^{35}\) (Warren, 2008, p. 122).

Midmorning, Steve directs participants to grab their water bottles, rain jackets, and a snack for the day, and once ready, to gather in a circle to discuss the hike to the pass. The focus of his discussion will be surrounding expectations—“expectativas”—for the day. He begins with a question:

Steve: “Who thinks they know what this might look like?”
Kenny: “It’s gonna be like a straight [hill].”
Steve: “Yeah it’s gonna be up, not much [flat]. How about you Joe?”
Joe: “A lot of rocks.”
Steve: “A lot of rocks right, yeah. So it’ll be a challenging hike, fortunately it’s very short, so that’s what’s good. So the pain will be acute. Like, it’ll hurt, but it’ll be short. Some of you will have a really good time too. We don’t need to rush up it super laser-fast, so we can go at good paces.

“I expect, from you guys, to hear a little bit of complaining. I’ve seen this before. My hypothesis is this: Some of you guys will be like, ‘OK I’ll just do it.’ Some of you will have a hard time, but you’ll still do it. And some of you will do it but you’ll complain the whole time. I’ve seen this before, that some of you will maybe resist, like, ‘I’m not doing this, I’ll stop.’ So I’ve seen all this before, and it’s not that big of a deal because everybody eventually gets going. It’s better not to resist us though, because if everybody can just walk at their pace and make their way up as best as possible, it’ll be better for everybody. Because we’re all going to the top unless something really makes you sick. …

“So it should take us about two hours to go up, something like that, if we’re moving pretty slow. And once we get to the top…” Steve notices Kenny engaging in a side conversation with his friend, and interjects, “Kenny, por favor.” Then continues, “Once we get to the top I expect you guys to see one of the prettiest things you’ve ever seen in your whole life. That’s what I promise to you guys. You will have one of the most beautiful views you’ve ever had in your whole life.”
Travis interjects: “And you’ll have earned it.”
Steve: “Yeah. So that’s why we’re taking you up there, because we know it’ll be good for you, but you don’t know that yet, so what happens usually is students will resist and they’ll fight me and fight on it, and then once they get to the top they’re like, ‘Oh my god that was amazing.’ That’s usually what happens, so I expect that to happen to you guys too. Where you’re sweating and tired, and then you get to the top and you’re like, ‘Oh my god that’s amazing.’” (July 21, 2012)

\(^{35}\) For those not well-versed in matters of elevation across distance, this is quite steep.
Steve then reviews a few logistics regarding water, food and jackets, and ends his brief introduction to hiking the pass with excitement, “Let’s do it! Team [Middle School]! Team Latino [Middle School]!”

Only minutes later, Steve’s premonition of a struggle becomes a reality, though his predictions of complaints and resistance from the group fail to materialize. In fact, I am taken aback at the simultaneous halt of conversation as the trail steepens. Kids stagger in a quite literal sense, slipping up the loose rocky trail, their feet unfamiliar with the rough terrain, and their legs not accustomed to the stress of a long, steady climb. They are silent in conversation, sweating and panting, the blistering sun beating down on us through the thin air, well above 11,000 feet. I share in their strife as we make slow but steady headway up the steep trail to the pass, still formidable before us.

The struggle of the group, for a moment, is so extensive that I find it comical to a degree. I am reminded of my own climbs and struggles in the mountains, recalling the simplistic schizophrenia of the inner dialogue many of them are likely experiencing at the moment. It is a spirited debate between mind and body: “I am tired, I want to stop—Keep going, almost there.” “My legs hurt, the sun is too hot today—Keep your legs moving: left, right, left, right.” “I feel my heart pounding in my face! I need to rest!—Don’t rest too long, thunderstorms will roll in soon.”

Though I often question my own desires to climb high peaks and passes while in the moment, I question the activity all the more when I see the struggle and apparent misery on the faces of these kids. Albert, predictably, resurrects his mantra from several days ago, “So tired. … So tired.” A widespread desire for the end transpires through an incessant curiosity regarding the length of time and distance before we reach our
destination, a sentiment typically universal to those who climb long, steep slopes such as these. [IMG. 19]

As we progress up the trail, Travis stops the group periodically to introduce kids to some of the local flora, explaining how this unique alpine environment causes plants to grow a particular way. Kids stand by, panting, looking at the plants as they struggle to regain their breath from the continued grind uphill amidst this thin air. [IMG. 18] Seeing our tents below, a few participants remark at how high we have come, but remain primarily curious about how much remains.

The trail goes thin in one section, and the group mistakenly finds their way off-trail onto loose terrain. [IMG. 20] Kids use their hands and feet in some sections, holding onto the rock for purchase as the trail goes steeper and the footing becomes less certain. Kids move slowly across this difficult section, placing their feet with intention amidst the loose rocks and gravel that litter the mountainside. [IMG. 17] Upon regaining the main trail, Pedro announces with relief, “We’re alive!” celebrating their successful off-trail traverse and return to safety.

As they resume hiking uphill, I am struck by Pedro’s comment. Though the participants were not in danger, Pedro’s message is revealing of a common insight to adventurers. Indeed, the realization that, “We’re alive!” is one I have often felt in response to having escaped unfavorable circumstances, but it is also what I feel when things are progressing as planned. It seems feeling alive is the one predictable outcome of this experience, and we are living in our hike up to Fancy Pass. As the sun bears down on us, the muscles in our legs grow weary, our boots kick through loose rocks, and our breath is labored, we are alive.

120
Snow!

We round a bend in the trail to the unexpected surprise of a small snowfield, to which the participants react with uninhibited glee: “SNOW!!!” Those first to see the snowfield announce to hikers behind them, “You guys! Snow!” Upon news of the snow, the pace of the group doubles in an instant. Kids rush forward to the edge of the small snowfield, and stragglers in the group approach the snow with quickened paces, and smiles on their faces. This unexpected surprise along the trail serves to reconvene our group, which has been spread out across the slopes of this long climb. Some reach their hands deep into the soft wet snow without hesitation, remarking at how cold it feels. Others march into the snow with exaggerated stomps, the soft snow crunching under their feet. A few snowballs are thrown down the valley before we resume our hike uphill.

This same snowfield is the site of a crash course in glissading on our return down from the pass back toward camp. Though a technical approach to descent, the only distinction between a professional glissade and a fun slide is the disposition of the individual, and kids are predictably in love with the new “technique”—some even walk back up the snowfield to slide down again. Before long, a snowball fight breaks out, as some slide down the snowfield while others throw snowballs across their path. Kids giggle constantly and explode in bouts of group laughter at the sight of a well-placed snowball to the chest, or a hard fall onto the sloppy, wet snow. As we walk away from the snowfield, Ivan reflects, “Who else in Colorado can say they had a snowball fight in the middle of summer?” Both up and down the trail, the snow served as a welcomed

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36 Glissading is “the fastest, easiest, and most exhilarating way down many snow slopes” (Cox & Fulsas, 2003, p. 328).
interruption; a unique and unexpected surprise along the way, and a memorable and gratifying experience in and of itself.

**Reaching the Summit**

Pedro, hiking slightly ahead of the group on the continued climb to Fancy Pass, senses his proximity to the summit above, which is guarded by somewhat of a headwall. The trail grows rocky enough that in many places, both hands and feet are required for passage, but this does not slow Pedro. In spite of the thinning air and the increasingly technical trail, his pace quickens exponentially as the steep grade gives way to the broader pass. I try my best to keep up so I can witness his reaction upon reaching the summit, but am no match for his enthusiasm. I am, at least, within earshot when Pedro reaches the pass. I hear him say to himself, “Oh, we’re here!”

I join Pedro on the pass, who is already perched atop a large flat rock on the very edge of the pass, overlooking the new vista to the West. He turns back to me, “You were right Ben.” “Right about what?” I say, still panting from the blistering pace Pedro set for us over the final 100 meters. He responds, “You said I could make it, and I made it.”

Moments later, apparently also influenced by Pedro’s hurried pace and the allure of the pass, Ivan joins us. After looking over the edge, he reflects on his success at climbing the pass, “I’m surprised I could make it up here.”

For a moment, I forget that I am conducting research. I look down over the other side of the pass to a newly earned panoramic view of high Colorado peaks as I regain my breath. My relaxation does not last long, and soon the rest of the group joins us on the pass. Most appear simultaneously relieved to be done with the long climb, and thrilled

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37 Second to third class terrain (Cox & Fulsaas, 2003).
with the view over the other side of the pass. They remark, “Look at that!” “Look at those mountains!”

Travis takes oxygen and pulse ratings for the kids on a handheld fingertip oximeter. Kids seem entertained by knowing their statistics for pulse and oxygenation saturation, and point their fingers out to Travis for a reading. Albert is crowned victor of highest pulse rate: 135 beats per minute and 90% oxygen saturation. His gray t-shirt is completely saturated with perspiration, the line of sweat reaching his waist. His mantra, “So tired” seems entirely justified.

Steve prompts the group, “Who thought they were gonna quit on the way up?” Albert, still regaining his breath, instantly raises his hand along with Kenny. Accompanying this sense of exhaustion, a mood of pride and accomplishment spreads across the group. Kids are interested in how far they climbed to serve as a talking point when they return home, “I want to tell my parents how high we went.” Pedro’s pride at being the first to the pass is revealed when Steve arrives at the summit, “Steve. … El primero,” he says, holding up a number one.

Kids eat their snacks and sit together in groups on the dramatic rocky pass, which falls away steeply to a view of alpine lakes, meadows and snowcapped peaks. As they regain their energy, they break back into conversation in their usual mix of Spanish and English. A steady but pleasant breeze blows across the pass, as the sun shines through patchy but building white thunderheads. Sally walks away from the group, up the ridge to the east some 50 meters, and disappears behind a boulder. Later, I ask her why she left the group, and what she was doing over there. She responds in her typical blunt, yet guarded manner as she walks past me, “I was sleeping. I like the view.”
After 30 minutes on the pass, with the breeze, sun and view washing over us, the group begins the descent back down toward camp. I find myself lingering behind the group on the pass, for a moment, listening to the breeze and taking the experience of this place in for myself, if only for a few breaths. During the descent, conversation across the group is marked by a jovial mood of accomplishment earned through hard work. Kids laugh and chat as our feet carry us forward downhill back to our campsite.

Upon returning to the tents, the sun feels hot, and kids are motivated to try their hand at swimming in the crystal clear alpine lake below camp. Though some jump in without hesitation, most walk in to their waists, holding their arms up at their sides above the frigid water. [IMG. 23] Subtle, playful splashing quickly leads to an all-out water war, with all adults and kids screaming and laughing, taking no prisoners in their collective mission to ensure everyone near the water is thoroughly soaked. The battle ends as quickly as it started, and the sun disappears behind a now ominously positioned thunderhead, which projects rumblings of things to come through the canyon. The shade and sudden breeze end swimming in an instant. Kids and adults alike swim out of the water and begin the uphill walk toward our tents as the first drops of rain fall on their still-wet bodies. The rain quickly turns to hail, and Albert excitedly announces the news to whoever hadn’t realized it yet, “Hail! Hail!!!” The drastic swing in weather sends kids running up the hill to our campsite while still adorned in swimwear. They dive into their tents for reprieve from the storm, finding refuge from the pea-sized falling ice beneath a paper-thin layer of nylon. The storm grows severe, complete with violent thunder crashing just overhead. The hail, after laying a thin blanket of ice over the entire camp, eventually gives way to a steady rain that remains constant for several hours. Mentally
and physically exhausted, and with kids safe in their tents, I fall asleep to the pattering of a hard rain on my tent, and the muffled conversation of 10 to 13-year-olds surviving their first hail storm in the mountains.

**Initiatives and the Shelter of the Pines**

One evening in camp, Steve gathers the kids for a few activities. The parameters of the first activity are as follows: Participants are put into pairs, with one participant blindfolded. Sighted participants guide their partners to a location of their choosing, and blindfolded sees feel their surroundings for a minute or so before being returned to their starting position. Then blindfolds are removed and participants try to retrace their steps and find their exact location, feeling rocks, trees, and plants for something familiar.

Steve facilitates the activity twice so that each participant has the opportunity to be blindfolded and to be a guide. He then conducts a brief group reflection of the activity, seemingly attempting to elicit a particular response from the group. It seems that, in Steve’s mind, this activity is important for a particular reason, though he abstains from telling them what that reason is. He instead uses open-ended questions until garnering responses worth repeating, such as: It’s important to trust people. It’s important to pay attention to details. He concludes the reflection, “Isn’t it interesting how everything is a little bit different than everything else? … That’s called paying attention to details.”

This, evidently, concludes the activity and the group transitions to another activity (Camouflage). Steve provides a set of rules to begin with, but presents the caveat that they can change the rules as need be. As the game goes on, another thunderstorm moves into the area, this one seemingly more threatening than other storms that have passed.
over our camp in the last few days. Thunder rips in the distance and echoes convincingly through the surrounding box canyon.

All kids effectively ignore the impending thunderstorm moving steadily up the canyon toward us, and even the first drops of rain inspire no comment from the kids related to the storm. The weather is ignored in favor of continuing to play the game. Their ignorance, however, only carries them so far, and before long, participants are sent running for their rain jackets as the storm arrives in full. Serendipitously enough, Laura and Travis have finished cooking dinner to coincide with the arrival of the storm; their timing is impeccable. Kids rush to the shelter of our kitchen, at the base of a tight grove of pines. Kids are impressed at the ability of this cluster of pines to protect us from the rain, and gather closely around the warmth of the gas-burning kitchen stoves. Lightning rips overhead, and the storm accelerates the fall of night. The harshness of this storm is juxtaposed with the warm soup and smiles found amidst the safety of our pine grove.

There seems to be a general feeling of warmth, camaraderie, even family, amidst the group as we share soup in the safety of the trees. We are incredibly removed from the rest of the world—left alone to bear the brunt of this storm. Though this experience is marked by a degree of loneliness, it is also characterized by an intense familial togetherness. It is together that this storm is faced, and grouped together in this marginal shelter, we find ourselves driven closer together, if only for a few days. I cannot help but feel happy to be part of the group at this time, as we share the experience of moderate shelter and warm food beneath the darkness of a very real storm. I find myself further submitting to my role as a member of the group, rather than to envision myself as somehow removed from these repeatedly shared experiences.
I Just Don’t Like it

As we hike out of the wilderness, Sally transforms into an entirely unfamiliar person. This otherwise reserved and quiet girl bubbles up, engaging in discussions with Steve about language, other countries, and places she wants to visit. She says she is excited to get home, but for now, it seems she is enjoying the downhill path to get there. I am mystified by this change in behavior, and engage in conversation with her:

Ben: “You seem really happy today.”
Sally: “I’m happy because we’re leaving.”
Ben: “Are you excited to get home?”
Sally: “Yes.”
Ben: “Do you like backpacking?”
Sally: “No.”

I laugh at Sally’s painful honesty, and further inquire, “Why not?”
Sally: “I don’t like carrying a heavy backpack. I don’t like not being able to straighten my hair. I just don’t like it. I thought we were just going camping in like a cabin.”
(July 22, 2012)

Though we cannot be sure of the meaning of this experience for Sally, as she denied all invitations for any formal interview, we similarly cannot deny that statements such as these are convincing evidence that Sally characterizes this experience as one of unnecessary suffering. In her own words, she just doesn’t like it.

Sally’s perspective is not indicative of a broader sentiment across the group. Quite to the contrary, I find her perspective noteworthy as it stands as the exception to the norm within this group. Participants reported, more than anything else, enjoying the experience facilitated by Shavano programming, reveling in the new aspects of the experience. Conversely, Sally only reported such enjoyment at the prospect of drawing this experience to a close. From my own experience, the end of trips like these typically carry
a similar feeling, with dreams of warm beds, home cooked meals, and the comforts of indoor living on the mind as we struggle to push our tired legs forward out of the wild.

As we near the parking lot, Jose announces, “Oh! You can see the cars.” Sally, on his heels, replies excitedly, “Huh?! No way!” She takes a few hurried steps forward down the trail to where Jose saw the cars, peers through the woods and celebrates, “Yay! I’m so happy!” To Sally, the otherwise mundane sight of cars may well be more beautiful than the scenic vistas of alpine lakes and mountains we have enjoyed for the duration of the trip; it is a long awaited finish line. Whether she enjoyed these experiences or not, she does not hesitate to celebrate drawing it to a close.

**Is it OK to Harm Nature?**

The final morning of our trip, once the water was filtered, bags were packed, and the group was fully prepared for the hike back to the cars, the group convened in a circle for a final discussion of how nature may have been impacted on this trip. [IMG. 25]

Steve: “I’m going to go from person to person, and I want you guys to think of one way that we impacted—one way that we did like a little bit of damage to nature in this area. There are some that are obvious and some that aren’t so obvious.”

Albert: “Walking.”

Steve: “Yeah. And how does that impact nature?”

Albert: “Squishes it.”

Others give their responses with Steve’s characteristic feedback.

Jose: “The branches on the trees. For fire, people broke those.”

Ivan: “Some people have left trash.”

Steve: “As much as we looked, I guarantee that we left some food or trash here.”

Kenny: “Washing the dishes. Like when you throw the water, you can probably kill them with the soap.”

Joe: “I’m not sure.”

Steve: “Did we play a game over there?”

Joe: “Oh yeah, we were squishing plants when we were walking.”

Travis and Laura also offer impacts left by the group, and give a few final lessons and best practices for how to mitigate human impacts in nature. Steve concludes their discussion by offering a final question for participants to consider on the hike down. “Is it OK for people to impact nature? Is that OK?” (July 22, 2012)
Back at the cars, after a long hike out, and several days spent together in the wilderness, we enjoy a late lunch of sandwiches while standing in the parking lot. Adults and participants alike are tired, the fatigue of days in the wild, carrying heavy loads and sleeping on the ground showing through on all their faces. We join in a casual circle, some standing, others resting their legs, leaning on the back of cars or sitting in the yellow, dusty gravel of the lot. The original question posed prior to our hike is resurrected with an invitation for responses: “Is it OK for people to harm nature?”

Participant responses vary from, “No. It’s not OK to harm nature ever,” to, “It’s a bit of both, it goes both ways.” After a few reflections from kids, instructors conclude the conversation by explaining the dilemmas at the heart of these issues. It seems participants have been encouraged to embody an almost absolutist approach to conservation, as evidenced through their offerings that it is never OK to harm nature. Instructors highlight the paradox between a desire to preserve nature so that we can continue to enjoy it, but acknowledging that enjoying it does inflict some damage.

The institutional agenda of Shavano emerges in full view through this final discussion. These norms of behavior, and value-laden questions are no longer presented as a means to ensuring appropriate behavior while on the trip. Presenting these values a final time, as the trip now draws to a close, reveals an intentional dimension of this program: That these values be instilled with some permanence, and that participants are in fact changed to hold this set of values regarding the relationship between people and nature.
Shavano Expeditions in Conclusion

Watching, hiking alongside, and talking to participants at Shavano reminded me of my own inauguration in many of these activities; my first backpacking trip, or learning to fish, or being thrilled at the sight of snow in August (I even captured some in a jar for safe keeping). The Shavano experience also brought to bear past experiences of long and painful treks, when our ambition as we planned the trip later punished us as our bodies cried for mercy several miles short of the destination. Indeed in the experiences of the Shavano participant I perceive reflections of my own, as I grew to know adventure and wild places for the first time.

The Shavano experience is both one of firsts and one of experimentation with a new mode of living. Participants traveled to new places, saw new things, participated in new activities, and shared in their adaptation to an unfamiliar environment. This experience was one of growing together as a group, as they shared in the concrete but challenging task of covering many miles with a heavy pack while simultaneously being introduced to the ethos of protecting nature. It was also one of simply enjoying life in nature; to appreciate the thrill of a well-placed fishing line in an alpine lake, feel the fresh breeze of mountain air, the heat of the sun, or the chilling rush of an alpine lake. It was an adventure. [IMG. 3, 5, 15, 24]

WILSON ACADEMY

Wilson Academy (the Academy) is a non-profit organization that operates out of a public school in the mountains of Colorado, transforming this familiar educational environment into a headquarters of adventure experiences. This outdoor enrichment and adventure program boasts the mission to provide youth outdoor adventures and
experiences toward ends of creative learning and environmental stewardship. Though these institutional aims are broad and ambitious, Academy administration and instructors tend to pride themselves in a non-prescriptive approach toward these ends. Regarding aims of environmental stewardship, an administrator, Logan, offered:

“You can’t protect something you don’t love, and you can’t love something you don’t know. So getting out there and having a positive experience in the outdoors is, for me, the most important part of laying down a foundation for future environmental stewardship.” (August 2, 2012)

And as another administrator, Doug, explained:

“I mean you put the right people in the right places, you put creative people who are psyched to be outside first. … [And] I think by putting the right people in place, sometimes they don’t have to be very conscious about, ‘What am I gonna talk about?’ ‘Cause… it’s just gonna happen.” And later, “We’re not a summer camp; we’re a program. We don’t have campers; we have students or participants. We don’t have counselors; we have instructors, which is a big thing to me.” (August 2, 2012)

Though their curricular approach is clearly flexible to the instructor, they seem to emphasize an educational agenda based on positive experiences more than anything else.38

During the summer months, the Academy transforms an otherwise idle public school into a flurry of activity. Classrooms serve as rendezvous points for the various programs, but desks and chairs are pushed to the walls, making room for activities and interaction on the floor as participants file in every morning. A fleet of white, high clearance 15-passenger vans, equipped for the mountains with four-wheel drive, serves as the transportation for these programs. [IMG. 29] Each morning, like clockwork, kids and instructors pile into these vans, and roll out of the school parking lot. These vans are

38 Indeed the instructors interviewed at the Academy similarly presented positive experiences and adventures outdoors taking precedence to external aims (a point further explained in Chapter Five).
driven by the summer instructors of the Academy, and the seats behind the instructors are filled with local youth between the ages of 5 and 17, some of whom live in the area year round, while others summer in Colorado. These children predominantly hail from affluent backgrounds, though a sliding pay scale and scholarship opportunities offered by the Academy ensures that cost is never a barrier to participating in these programs.

Some vans haul trailers full of mountain bikes, others boast additional equipment wrapped in blue tarps and strapped atop the van. Some vans depart for weeks, others only for the day, but all head out into wild environments in search of adventure. This fleet disperses amidst the surrounding wilderness to different rivers, lakes, meadows, mountains and forests in search of whatever the world has to offer. Instructors take kids to novel places for new experiences with engaging activities outdoors, such as climbing, biking, hiking, camping, backpacking, bouldering, rafting, canoeing, swimming, exploring and playing. The local mountain ranges and wilderness, or “the backyard” as Academy instructors affectionately refer to it, provides an ideal environment for all of these activities. A vast and dramatic mountain range, with several peaks rising well above 14,000 feet, and valleys dropping thousands of feet below them; renowned for its dramatic vistas, high mountains, rough rivers, heavy snowfall, pristine lakes, and flourishing wildlife, it is perhaps the quintessential rocky mountain wilderness area.

The Academy ran over 100 different programs in the summer I conducted research with their organization. I joined one such program, which included many of the conventional adventure education activities and experiences, such as rock climbing, white water rafting, hiking, camping, and bouldering. This program, open for participants aged 9 to 11, spanned two weeks, with participants and instructors convening for day-trips on
Monday, and then joining together for extended overnight trips together from Tuesday through Thursday of each week, totaling eight full days together with four overnights in the wilderness. The program was advertised on Academy advertisements as a program developed specifically for “rugged and spirited” individuals who seek adventure, and the program delivered as promised, boasting an itinerary of rock climbing, rafting, hiking, and swimming.

As we pile into the van, the two instructors for this program, Mary and Phil, exude positivity on the 12 kids who fill the seats behind them. I sit in the third row of seats, towering over the much younger participants I would come to know well over the next two weeks, as our van pulls out of the school parking lot. The vignettes that follow comprise the story of our adventure.

**A Rabbit, A Fire, Autonomy**

I am drawn from my tent by the murmured discussion of a few of the boys in our program. I quickly gather my tape recorder, notebook, pen and camera, and emerge from my tent, the fatigue of days in the backcountry with 9 to 11-year-olds surely visible to anyone willing to notice. The air is still cool from the evening, but the sun is already intense, and at over 10,000 feet in elevation, I assume things will warm up quickly.

Five boys, up early, depart camp together to the South, walking downhill to an old fire ring tucked in the shelter of a few evergreens. They investigate the old ring together, poking at the ash, still wet from the hours of rain the evening before. The boys are drawn beyond the ring of rocks, farther down the hill into uncharted and undiscovered woods and meadows beyond our campsite. Others begin to rise from their tents, including the instructors, Mary and Phil, who tiredly walk about the grounds, taking stock of the wet
tents and gathering materials for breakfast. Soon thereafter, the boys return from the woods, reconvening at the fire ring, before marching across the field to the East, and disappearing back into the woods where a small creek flows past our campsite. [IMG. 55] Kyle’s voice emerges from the woods, “Guys! Look at that Rabbit!”

For the next few minutes, I hear them from afar, crashing through the foliage by the creek, occasionally calling to one another through the underbrush as they travel together in no specific direction, and with no particular objective. Mary, now putting things together for breakfast, looks over to the woods in the direction of their voices, seemingly monitoring them from afar, but not intervening in this unstructured time.

Rick is the first to re-emerge from the woods. He runs across the field of tall wet grass toward camp, and checks on his socks, which he left drying in the sun. I ask him what they were doing down by the creek.

Rick: “Looking around. … We saw a rabbit.”
Ben: “Why do you do that—look around?”

Rick’s comrades in exploration are not far behind, emerging from the forest at different places, some walking, others running across the field in the bright morning sun, back to the tents and camp.

Much to their excitement, upon their return from the woods, the boys are granted permission from Phil to start a fire in the fire ring. They disperse about the hillside gathering twigs and in short order are huddled around the circle of stones. They attempt to start a fire, some kids working together, others independently, and others standing outside the circle monitoring the progress from above. Within the fire ring there are as many as three separate fires being constructed with paper and twigs, unfortunately still
wet from the previous evening’s storm. They fail to succeed before the breakfast call
from their instructors, [IMG. 32] and kids momentarily abandon the project, but quickly
return with plates of food in hand. With some persistence, they are able to light some
paper, and perhaps even a few sticks ignite. They are thrilled at the progress, and
excitedly note the different colors they see flickering in the ring: “I see blue!” “I see red!”
“I see pink!” “I see orange!”

Those not directly manipulating the sticks, matches or paper, watch attentively
from above, standing over those crouched down and working on the fire. Kate, in
particular, provides a stream of commentary and advice, “Don’t blow yet.” “The fire only
goes up. Not down.” They continue to discuss the best way to establish a viable fire, and
their conversation grows more hurried and panicked as it piddles out before them. The
lack of progress leads to disinterest, and a few tangential conversations break out within
the group about Big Foot, X-Box and iPods. Soon, the fire is abandoned. Kids walk back
up the hill toward camp, seemingly prepared for something new. Soon, Phil provides just
the opportunity they were looking for, with a wiffle ball and yellow plastic baseball bat in
hand, he offers, in characteristic excitement, “Who wants to play mountain baseball?”

[IMG. 37]

Fear and Festivity in White Water

The air is thick with anticipation as kids line their boats at the water’s edge. The
current rushes past the tips of their individual rubberized kayaks—or “duckies” as their
boating instructor, Lynn, refers to them. Kids are equipped with helmets, personal
flotation devices (PFDs), bright blue water jackets and paddles. Kids sit silently, gazing
out at the ripping current of murky brown water, tainted with a recent heavy rainfall and
mudslides upstream. [IMG. 35] Only moments ago, Lynn had gathered them for a crash course in white water kayaking, and introduced them to the terminology associated with this activity: up-river, down-river, river right, river left, eddy and others. [IMG. 39] Days ago, they learned stroke techniques and practiced maneuvering these same boats in a calm, still, pond. [IMG. 27]

I walk up and down the bank of the river, asking kids how they feel at this moment, and the overall sentiment is remarkably consistent: “nervous but excited,” though some decline to comment, preferring instead to stare blankly out at the water. I cannot blame them. The rushing current seems to have little semblance to the pond from days ago, and though some have been down rivers before, most of these kids have never rafted, and have little idea of what to expect.

Lynn pushes her boat out into the water, and takes three powerful strokes to turn her boat upstream. She holds this position in the current, paddling upstream and looking over at the line of first time boaters still perched on solid ground. All eyes are on Lynn. She calls out a few final reminders and words of encouragement over the rushing current, while holding position in the middle of the river, then concludes, “We ready?” but the kids remain frozen in their boats. Lynn flashes them a smile, and gives the nod to other instructors, and me, to start launching their boats into the current. Though Lynn has provided an excellent formal education for these amateur boaters, the anxious expressions on their faces as they are pulled away into the current reveals a collective insecurity and intensity across the group. Mary and Phil cheer and applaud as the kids are launched out into the water, “Paddle, paddle, paddle!”
I launch my boat into the water toward the rear of the group and, as an amateur when it comes to boating, find I have completely forgotten about the kids and the study. In an instant, I am entirely preoccupied with the rocks and rushing water immediately before me as I struggle to navigate my own boat down-river. I am immersed in the feeling of the boat moving beneath me, as I move with it, riding the varied and unique waves of the water, interacting and manipulating my position as I roll downstream with the kids and instructors. I feel I have control over my vessel, but I am also at the mercy of the river.

I am fully preoccupied with the new feel of river rapids in a small boat such as this. I feel somewhat insecure, because the activity is one I am not familiar or even comfortable with. I feel nervous that I will fall out of my boat and not know what to do—and imagine that the kids in their boats are feeling the same insecurity; I, too, am nervous but excited. Though the water is not high, and the rapids are not overly intimidating when viewed from the safety of the shore, I feel the need to focus hard to preserve my own well-being through the first stretch of river. I also note that I am thrilled to have these feelings of discomfort, and crack a smile through the first set of rapids as I start to feel more at ease with the activity. [IMG. 36]

I make mistakes, failing to judge the speed of different currents, or the appropriate force to use on strokes. I do not fully know where I want my boat to go, nor how to get it there, often resulting in water splashing up on my skin—a refreshing relief under the unforgiving July sun. I cannot read the river as an experienced rafter might, and am surprised at every rock I hit, or current that spins me. Before long, I feel comfortable in
the water, and momentarily revel in my novice abilities before redirecting my attention to
the experiences of the participants, rather than my own. This comfort is short lived.

As we bounce through a particularly difficult set of rapids, my boat becomes
entangled with Adam’s, and his boat flips, ejecting him into the deep cold water. He
grabs the edge of my boat and looks up to me. We lock eyes as the water crashes down
around us. Adam is speechless; his long brown hair now soaked, his hands clinging
tightly to the edge of my boat, and his face full of alarm.

Instinctively, I reach back and pull Adam’s small body into my boat and resume
paddling through the section of rapids. “You OK?!?!” I yell back to him, while struggling
to negotiate the rapids. “Yeah!” he yells back instantly, his young voice accented with
adrenaline as he crouches down in the small space at the back of my boat. I, too, feel a
rush of adrenaline and heightened sense of awareness in the river, conscious of the added
precious cargo in my boat. In the moment, I feel happy to have served some supportive
role in the trip for Adam—literally pulling him from harm’s way—and proud to have
performed to some extent, on a level that may have been expected of me. Once we escape
the rapids, other instructors chase down Adam’s boat and paddle, and he is soon
resituated in his boat for another round against the river, not deterred by the catastrophe
on the previous rapid. I later asked Adam how he felt about his unexpected swim and
time in my boat during this traumatic fiasco. He reported feeling cold and scared in the
water, but “really safe” in the back of my boat.

As we continue down the river, the kids remain silent, seemingly preoccupied
with the task at hand, rendering conversations not related to the next 100 feet of river
superfluous. What little communication does take place from boat to boat pertains to the
task at hand: “Watch out for that rock!” “Go this way!” or “Help!” The remainder of the trip down-stream is enjoyable—for the kids and me alike. I join Phil in his constant cheerleading for the kids to “Keep paddling” also lending the occasional hand when a boat gets stuck against a rock. We stay together as a group, eddying out periodically to regroup and allow Lynn to check in with the boaters. While floating down an easy section of the river, I ask James if he still feels nervous and excited, as he did at the beginning. He claims still feeling parts of both, because he hasn’t flipped out of his boat yet and doesn’t want to because the water feels cold. Another participant, Seth, unprompted, interjects, “I still feel just happy.”

Before long we have completed the two mile stretch of river and rapids. Kids all eddy out with confidence at the end of the river run, and boats come ashore enthusiastically, with the added excitement that we had, in fact, made it. On the shore, the kids explode with excitement and celebration, some hardly able to contain themselves: “That was awesome!” “So cool!” and, “That was my favorite thing so far!” The kids high five one another, and thank their instructor, Lynn, profusely.

We pile into the waiting 15-passenger van, our mobile headquarters, and the positive energy surrounding the river translates to jovial conversation in the van. The kids retell memorable segments of their trips down-river to one another. Phil, as usual, beams his positivity onto the group, “You guys did so well!” “Nice work!” and, “Wasn’t that just awesome?!” He surveys the kids in the van, “Raise your hand if you had fun on the river.” And all six boys seated in the van at the time raise their hands to touch the ceiling of the van, evidently reaching higher to emphasize the degree of fun they experienced. Rick even requests, “Can we do this again on this camp?”
I try to start up an interview with Adam in the back of the van, and even engage in a somewhat productive line of questioning. The researcher in me wanted desperately to understand what the kids were feeling and thinking in this moment, however my questions were no match for the slowly amplified thumping bass of Lady Gaga’s music. As the music was turned up, Adam was pulled into the rhythm, dancing with his friends seated beside him before my questions could yield noteworthy responses. The music provokes a continued celebration within our van, too important to be interrupted by a few silly questions from a researcher. I fall victim to the contagion of positivity in the back of the van, and dance along with the kids as we celebrate our successful voyage down the river together. I feel happy to have just shared this new adventure with these kids, and satisfied to add this experience to a long list of adventures in my own life. It seems anything but celebration at this point, would be inappropriate.

After a few upbeat songs, our singing and dancing subside, and the music is turned down. Conversation, giggling, and dancing all give way to exhaustion and relaxation; a sense of satisfaction spreads across the group. The breeze flows in our open windows, drying our hair, still wet from shared adventures on the river, as an aura of afterglow spreads over the group. We leave a wake of gravel dust and good memories as we speed up the road toward camp, sending the vibrations of music accompanied with the gleeful shrieks of children into the nearby woods for anyone willing to listen.

**Aesthetic Involvement in an Anesthetic Setting**

Kids file into the gym and gather on the large blue mats where Dan, their climbing instructor, is waiting to greet them. Behind Dan rise 25 to 30 foot constructed rock faces, made of a light grey concrete mixture designed to resemble a rock-like
surface. Brightly colored amorphous plastic shapes, highlighted by gymnasium style florescent lighting, jut out from the otherwise featureless walls. These textured plastic attachments serve as the hand and foot holds, making it possible to climb these otherwise improbable indoor “cliffs.” Many ropes (perhaps twenty) hang down from the top of the wall, presenting a myriad of options for the prospective climbers below, who change into nylon harnesses and specialized rubber climbing shoes.

Phil gathers the group together on the large blue mats, “Alright everybody come sit over here by me.” He holds a small whiteboard with climbing commands and actions written out in black marker, and explains that a sequence of commands must be used for climbing. He presents the commands to the kids who report varying degrees of familiarity with this formality unique to climbing. After presenting the commands to the group, Phil quizzes them as a collective. [IMG. 45]

Phil: “So, first thing climber says?”
Participants: “On Belay.”
Phil: “Then what does the belayer say?”
Participants: “Belay on.”
Phil: “And during that time what do they do?”
Participants: “Check each other.” (July 30, 2012)

After about ten minutes of review, Phil is satisfied with the demonstrated knowledge across the group, and releases them to practice tying the knots—again, familiar to some, but completely new to others. Dan quickly reviews the knots with the experienced climbers, and then gives a more directive set of instructions to those with less experience. [IMG. 44] Kids manipulate the ropes, practicing the knots and proper belay techniques, often watching one another in an attempt to more quickly learn this new trade. They occasionally request the advice of Dan, Phil and Mary, who move about the room from
participant to participant as needed. Hannah approaches me, and hands me a knot she has tied in the rope, asking hopefully, “Is this right?” I look at the knot, “Yep. This is right. Good job Hannah!” “Yessss.”

After several minutes of trial and error with the ropes, Dan intervenes individually with the kids who do not yet have the techniques mastered, providing a much more direct set of instructions, coaching them through each step. As kids demonstrate proficiency to Dan, they are released from the instruction to begin climbing. As more kids finish with the instructions, the gym transitions from a place of training to an arena of adventure. Kids disperse amongst the hanging ropes, those who know how to belay are hard at work; their short arms pulling the rope through the metal belay devices on their harnesses as climbers on the other end of the rope ascend the walls. [IMG. 43] The gym is a buzz of commands, advice and encouragement. The voices of many can be heard bouncing off the walls:

- Phil: “Get your right arm up out to your right.”
- Mary: “Let’s go! Let’s stand up on those legs! Nice job.”
- Phil: “Pull yourself up, get your chest up there. Get your chest up there, Jeff!”
- James: “Take and lower”
- Phil: “OK, I got you.”
- Brady: “Bruce, put your foot above that blue one.”
- Kyle: “Bruce, get up to those jugs.”
- Rick: “Jeez, this is scary!”
- Dan: “You got it Rick! Just keep moving!”
- Kevin: “Let’s go Rick, you got this!”
- Mary: “Nice job Jeff!” (July 30, 2012)

Jeff takes a strange, unexpected fall low on the wall. Mary, belaying him, instinctively pulls the rope tight, catching him, but his odd body positioning flips him upside down, swinging just 3 feet above the ground. He is initially alarmed, but is hysterical with laughter within seconds as he looks down to the ground. Mary, while
trying to steady him, is pulled into the contagion of his deep chortle as she slowly lowers him to the blue mat below, which he lays on, continuing to laugh. Jeff would later profess, still giggling, “That was my favorite part, when I got flipped upside down.”

Mary and Phil are beacons of positivity, cheering as they belay, and helping kids up the wall with strategic advice and emotional support. Participants not climbing stand in line, awaiting new climbs as they watch others climb and cheer alongside Mary and Phil. “You can do it!” “You got this!” “Grab that green one!” Their cheers continue to bounce throughout the hollow room, making communication difficult at times, but no one seems to mind. The calls from the floor echo together as one, and the room is a hum of positive energy and encouragement.

The anesthetic physical environment of this climbing gym—with dirty-beige walls, florescent lighting, and horrendous acoustics—is juxtaposed by the profound aesthetic engagement on the part of participants climbing up the wall, who assimilate massive amounts of sensuous input second by second as they feel their way toward the top of the wall. Those on the ground are also engaged, either watching above as others climb, or taking responsibility for the safety of the climbers above, which is also considered part of the fun, as Rick, unprompted, offered, “Belaying is fun.”

Our time in the gym flies, and soon kids are given a five minute warning for departure. Many try to squeeze in a final climb before hurriedly removing their harnesses and changing back into their sneakers. We are sent rushing back to the classroom to meet parents at the end of the day. As Rick slips back into his shoes, he offers, “I can’t wait to do some real rock climbing.”
Splendor to Suffering: The Cold Rainy Evening

“I think it’s this way.” Mary declares, unconvincingly, with one hand on the wheel and the other pointing through the windshield to a seemingly insignificant opening in the woods. She turns the wheel toward the narrow passage, and we continue our approximate progress through this rough wilderness. The roads are unmarked, and our destination, deep in the mountains, is known only to the privileged few. We will be camping two nights, and kids appear eager to see and camp in this new, exceptionally remote and apparently coveted location.

We left the pavement miles behind us, so it comes as little surprise when the road quickly deteriorates to the city dweller’s nightmare. The rain transforms the thick bed of thin gravel to mud, and persistent ruts in this unmaintained road quickly fill with runoff, some turning to small rivers before our eyes. Though the rain can render roads such as these impassable, the terrain is no match for our high clearance, 4-wheel drive vehicle.

Mary, a talented aggressive driver, speeds through the deep puddles and thick mud with a sense of defiance as fat drops of rain slap the windshield. The rough road, much to the excitement of the kids, tests the suspension of the van and the strength of our seatbelts.

Kids hoot and holler as we bounce through the erratic weathered ruts of the road, splashing muddy water up on the windows of the van and out into the surrounding dense forest. Admittedly, I also take some delight in the fun of bouncing around in the van. I catch myself smiling along with the much more expressive kids, who scream with delight as we are launched from our seats in the back of the van. Dave Matthews Band thumps through the speakers, creating an ambiance where uncertainty is celebrated rather than feared. This wild ride up remote, rough and wet roads is an adventure, though certainly a
different brand than the quintessential adventure education experience. Though the kids have no control over their position, uncertainty remains; they are figuratively and quite literally, along for the ride.

Before long, we have nearly reached our destination, but have gone as far as the vehicle will take us. The van doors swing open, effectively releasing the gates to a new type of experience; our transition from haphazard celebration and fun to persistent suffering is almost instant. Phil climbs the back of the van, the hood of his bright green rain jacket pulled tight over his head. He removes the straps and pulls back the wet, blue tarp that has protected our gear from the rain to this point. Phil makes haste to pass equipment from the roof of the van down to me, and I hurriedly pile the equipment up for kids while Mary empties the interior of the van and directs kids in her signature intonation—caring but firm, “Put on your rain jackets and find your pack over here!”

After kids have had the opportunity to fumble through their packs in search of jackets, they are outfitted with backpacks, tents, bins of food, and other sundries for two nights of camping. What they cannot fit in their backpacks they carry in their arms, often sharing the burden of especially heavy items with a friend. Mary leads them on a march uphill toward our campsite just over a quarter mile away, but the miserable weather and the heavy loads render this a formidable distance for the young hikers.

I head up the trail alongside Phil at the back of the group, and we soon encounter stragglers in the group ahead of us. Seth reports that he and Becky are unable to carry their loads up the wet and rocky trail. “It’s too heavy! We need help!” Phil, his hands full of supplies himself, directs two other participants to help them, “Adam, Rick, help these guys out.” Adam and Rick rush to their sides to share the burden of the load. Our
progress up the trail is remarkably slow, with tired hikers repeatedly stopping along the way either to air general grievances, or to ask, “Why can’t we just stop here?” Phil, at the back of the pack, continues to cheer them on, remaining positive in the face of these undesirable conditions; slogging up through the mud with heavy loads as the rain grows more consistent.

A very long quarter mile later, we arrive at our campsite: a grove of tall pines amidst a wide, open meadow with views of jagged mountain peaks in all directions. These views, however, were obscured upon arrival by the inclement weather. The intermittent bouts of rain throughout the day seemed to have joined forces in the production of a steady, persistent, drizzle. Mary looks up to the sky, presumably hopeful that the storm will blow over, but does not find the volatility in the weather she has grown accustomed to working in these high mountains for the past three years. Seemingly mindful of what an evening of cold rainy weather can mean for a group of participants this age, she privately forewarns me, “We may be in for a long night.” She is right. The once irregular drizzle turns to a steady, cold, downpour which persists well into the evening, putting the kids, instructors, and me, to the test. [IMG. 28]

Phil tries to start a fire as several kids crowd around him desperate for the entertainment, light, and heat that only a fire can provide. They huddle in close together, gazing down at Phil’s work as the water pelts their hooded backs. Phil’s attempt is a Hail Mary—the twigs, sticks and brush are saturated, and drops of rain continue to fall on any paper he is able to light. [IMG. 30] After a few minutes, the drenched fire pit is abandoned, leaving no reprieve from the rain for our group.
Adam is the first to break down. He is in tears, misses his dad, and wants to be brought home. Soon after, Seth succumbs to the pressure applied by the elements, attributing his discomfort to home sickness and a stomachache, which eventually causes him to vomit. Jeff and Becky are not far behind, all brought to tears at some point for missing their families as they endure the misery inflicted by the rain and the cold. In spite of the Academy’s recommended gear for all participants, kids are underprepared for the weather, and tend to get wet, cold, and sad, usually in that order.

The instructors are steadfast in their desire to keep kids engaged in the program—looking beyond their desire to go home by reminding them of the fun they will have tomorrow; a tall order given the miserable conditions we have for camping. It is pouring rain and getting colder by the minute. The crisis within our group provokes me to abandon my responsibilities as a researcher and revert to a familiar role as an Academy instructor—a function I maintain for the remainder of the evening. The camp is chaos with the two instructors and myself rotating the tasks of consoling homesick, crying, cold, wet kids; organizing gear; cooking dinner; and trying to keep the remaining kids positive while in these dismal conditions. As I try to put a positive spin on standing in the rain for hours on end—“At least it’s not windy!”—I am fully reminded of the difficulty of this work, and gain a newfound respect for Mary, Phil, and others engaged in this type of adventure education.

Kids “enjoy” their dinner gathered together under the modest shelter of a small tarp tied to surrounding pine trees. Several homesick kids take bites between bouts of tears as they sit in the cold mud. Seth, his face wet with rain and tears, notices Adam crying over his dinner. He asks, “Are you homesick?” Adam forces a response, “Yeah. I
miss my dad,” as his freckled face tightens, and he quickly sobs. Seth sits down next to Adam in the mud, his cap pulled down does not conceal the welling of tears in his eyes as he professes, “I am too.”

After dinner, and following Mary and Phil’s best attempts at keeping kids positive, Mary intervenes by gathering the homesick kids for a walk out into the rain. Some 30 minutes later, the homesick participants return with Mary, in higher spirits. Mary’s pep talk, and warming up on the walk, evidently pulled them from what appeared to be an irreparable downward spiral of emotional toil. With their brightening mood, the rain begins to subside, though the thick, foggy cloud cover remains. Soon the steady pour of rain tapers off, and drops of water continue to fall from the wet branches overhead. Spirits are lightened, and we all enjoy a game of Camouflage. We run and hide amidst the wet underbrush as the starless sky grows steadily darker, and our evening of suffering and tears finally gives way to sporadic laughter amidst the trees.

Our collective suffering has finally drawn to a close, which somehow elicits an emotion of celebration across the group; it is almost as if we are deserving reward having just gone through such a trying evening, even though no performance or accomplishment was presented on our part. The absence of suffering, and having just endured it, is worthy of commemoration. Indeed, to conclude our trying evening, each of us is rewarded with a piping hot, 25-cent cup of hot cocoa worth its weight in gold. The light of a nearby headlamp shines down into Kate’s cup, highlighting the steam rising from the thin plastic cup against the dark rich brown color of its contents. She cradles the cup, pulling it close to her chest and allowing the rich steam to rise up to her smiling face. She deserves it.
Desert Rock

We hike the sandy trail up to the cliff band above our campsite, a deserted rock climbing oasis hidden amongst this arid valley. Though only a two hour drive from the school, the valley is an entirely new environment, with sandstone cliffs rising out of loose dusty hillsides, large boulders strewn about the landscape with short juniper bushes and small cactus dispersed throughout. The air is dry and water is scarce, and 4,000 feet lower in elevation than the school headquarters, the days are much hotter. This otherworldly natural landscape is periodically cut by rough dusty roads, which dart through this seldom-visited valley to unknown destinations.

At the base of the cliff, we are met with a pleasant breeze, and the constantly moving desert air keeps us comfortable in these dry conditions. Kids excitedly reach up to touch the cool sandstone, still in the shade and yet to be heated by the sun. Upon touching the abrasive surface of the stone, James exclaims, “This is so cool! This is such good rock to climb on.” We continue along the sandy trail at the base of the cliff in single file, occasionally walking around, over, and under the enormous boulders, which litter the hillside below the prominent cliff band. We round the corner of the cliff to enter an arena of rock, walled with 50 to 80 foot red and orange sandstone cliffs. Several brightly colored ropes hang down the length of the cliff in different places, designating the established climbs of the area. We drop our packs in the dust and stand in the shade of a few overgrown juniper bushes, looking up at the ropes and wall. Dan, in his characteristic thick Australian accent, spurs the participants into action, “Alright! Who wants to climb?”
Kyle quickly changes into a white helmet, harness and climbing shoes and ties one of the hanging lines to his harness. I ask Kyle how he is feeling, just moments before his climb. He replies, “A bit nervous but excited.” Kyle anxiously looks up at the fiery red sandstone, which appears all the brighter against the deep blue sky. He reaches his hands behind his back into his chalk bag, clipped to his harness, and rubs the white powdered chalk into his young hands.

After completing commands—“On belay?” “Belay on.” “Climbing?” “Climb on.”—Kyle starts up the imposing vertical wall of rock. His head is on a swivel, looking up, down, left, and right, closely examining the rock as he deciphers a path upwards based on what he sees on the face of the rock. He finds small fractures and features in the stone for his hands and feet, he feels them, trying a number of combinations to best find a way upward. Soon, Kyle reaches a prominent crack on the face, which provides features inside and on its edges; places for him to place his hands and feet amidst the otherwise smooth rock face, and making continued forward progress possible.

Kyle’s friends cheer from below, some giving general encouragement, “You can do it Kyle!” and others giving specific advice “Kyle, I think there’s a big ledge to your right that maybe you could stand on.” Together they tackle the challenge posed by this rock face, trying to help Kyle make it to the top, if only to be lowered back to the ground. Soon, Kyle reaches the top of the cliff, celebrates briefly, and then calls down to be lowered. As he is lowered, he walks his feet backwards down the rock he just worked so hard to ascend. Upon reaching the ground, I ask Kyle, “How are you feeling?” and his response is overwhelmingly positive, “Awesome! That was really fun. That was maybe
my first time crack climbing.” Kyle quickly transitions to the role of belayer, and coaches Hannah through the same challenging climb he just experienced. [IMG. 54]

Meanwhile, on an adjacent climb, Abby is starting out her first ever rock climb outdoors. She appears visibly frightened, but continues to make slow but steady progress up the cliff face. As she ascends the cliff, her legs begin to shake involuntarily, rendering the already marginal purchase of her sneakers on the small rock ledges all the more questionable. Dan provides a wealth of support from the ground, both strategic and emotional, giving her advice on where to place her hands and feet, and also giving affective counsel, “It’s OK to feel scared. That’s perfectly normal.” Abby remains silent while she climbs, making many of the same motions as Kyle—searching the rock face for clues and feeling for a path forward. She moves her hands from feature to feature, feeling for which one is best, and which may help her move upward. She does the same with her feet, taking time to decipher the appropriate sequence to solve this riddle of a cliff. [IMG. 52] Before long, she reaches the top to the cheers and applause of her friends watching from the ground, and Dan lowers her back to the safety of the ground. She sighs a deep breath of relief, her face relaxes, and she drops her hands from clenching the rope to her sides. She smiles to a friend and satisfies an offering of a high five from Dan, who compliments her, “Good job girl!”

Later, Rick attempts to climb this same wall, I observe him from above, perched on the edge of the cliff, and watch his steady progress up the blank face. Dan yells advice from below, but Rick either cannot hear him, or willfully disregards his advice, moving up to holds he sees which contradict Dan’s advice. The heels of his feet shake vertically while the toes of his tight rubberized shoes hold purchase on small ledges no wider than
an inch, some 50 feet above the ground. His eyes are wide, scanning the rock in a near panic as he shuffles a free hand across the subtle features of the bare rock face—searching for something, anything, to grab a hold of. Though I am only 10 feet away, he does not notice me. It seems he is entirely lost in the moment of the rock before him. [IMG. 46, 51, 53]

A strong gust of wind whips up from below without warning, adding yet another aesthetic dimension to Rick’s experience, and causing me to reconsider my decision to observe from the edge of the cliff. Rick appears un-phased by the gust and remains steadfast in his focus to ascend this obscure rock face in its entirety. “Almost there,” he mutters to himself, reaching for the top of the cliff. He finds a spot for his right foot, shifts his weight over onto this new foothold and stands up, stretching his arm high up over his head to reach the top and finish the climb. The few people on the ground at the time of his climb cheer and applaud Rick’s achievement. I cheer along with them, before asking Rick how he feels right now. He can’t muster more than a one-word response, “Awesome” amidst panting breaths, before Dan takes the rope tight on his harness and lowers him to the ground.

Later in the day, Rick and Bruce disappear on their own private hike, seeking the true summit of this long rock outcropping by some means other than the established roped climbs, which typically stop just short of the lip of the cliff as a safety precaution. They are gone for some 10 minutes before I see them on the summit of the rock, looking out over the desert landscape together. They are down from the top in short order and both report to their friends that the summit, “Was awesome!” Other kids, inspired by Rick and Bruce’s deposition, embark on their own quest for the highest point of this
broad, rocky mesa. They seek it out, not to know the view from the top, but to discover what the path to get there may hold for them.

**Bouldering: The Private Perspective**

“I can’t do it,” Bruce reports, his hands clinging to subtle features of a hard gritty sandstone boulder, and his feet precariously balanced on edges five feet above the ground. “Yes you can,” Dan responds from below, his hands high above his head, poised to catch Bruce in the event of a fall, as Bruce is not protected by ropes. Bruce resumes scanning the face for holds as Rick peeks out from the top of the boulder, providing advice on which holds Bruce can grab to reach the apex of this enormous rock. Bruce follows Rick’s instructions, and is soon atop the boulder, where he is greeted with the congratulations of both Dan and Rick.

Toward the close of a long day of observing participants bouldering, I grow more envious of their experiences, as beside the routes they climb are appetizing lines for the experienced climber. I have been a patient kid in this candy store of boulders, and jaded with envy, I predictably succumb to the calling of the rock. I find an attractive and steep 15 foot boulder, scout the line, and begin climbing. In an instant, a familiar switch is flipped in my mind and body. The once arbitrary rock face is transformed into a new, interesting, and immediate physical puzzle. I hone in on the subtle features of the rock that might aid in upward progress, scanning the face above and below for hand and foot placements. Reaching out to them, if only to instantly categorize them as inadequate and reach on to others as I inch upward. My toes balance on small edges as my fingers, weathered from a decade on the rock, grope the face in search of something to grasp. I possess subconscious and immediate body awareness, with my conscious attention lost to
the moment before me. There is nothing beyond the purchase of my feet, the tiredness in
my arms, and the grip of my fingers.

I am conscious of the friction, quality, and strength of the rock, and also carry an
awareness of the growing distance between my feet and the ground. The uncertainty
embedded within this experience—between the height of the boulder and the
questionable rock—render it as one of adventure for me. The demands of the climb
summon a heightened sense of awareness, both of my body and the environment. I am
especially suspicious of the rock quality toward the top of the boulder, and knock on the
last holds with my fist, listening closely for indication of the integrity of the rock, as one
might look for a stud in the wall. I find my way to the top of the large boulder, and sit
happily on this admittedly insignificant summit amidst a valley full of rocks just like it.
Though I have climbed cliffs much more difficult and much higher, I still feel glad to
have climbed this one.

As I have noted elsewhere in this study, there are marked discrepancies between
my experience with adventure and the experiences participants might have with
adventure. Climbing, for me, feels like coming home, while to many participants, it is a
completely foreign and new experience. That said, there are aspects of the experience that
are shared, and I have attempted to highlight those congruencies across our experiences,
rather than to supplant their understandings with my own.

Summertime at the Reservoir

Kids flood out of our van, eager to escape the confines of the vehicle after the
long ride to this unique destination—the deep blue waters of the over 2,000 acre reservoir
stand in stark contrast to the dry sandy shore, and tall mountain peaks on the horizon. It is
an oasis amidst this high, treeless desert, characteristic of much of the geography of the area. It is yet another new place to experience.

We rush toward the waters edge with a sense of necessity; the hot sun quickens our pace across the parking lot toward the cooler air blowing off the water. We find others on the dock, paying careful attention to something below the surface of the water. Our group of 12 kids cannot curb their collective curiosity, and uninvited, join the strangers in gazing down into the water. The 5-gallon bucket beside these strangers reveals that they are fishing for crawdads, already having caught at least 20 of the crayfish. Participants eagerly peek into the bucket at the new strange creatures. The stranger who caught the crawdads shows the kids how she cleans them, “for good eatin.’” She abruptly snaps the claws off, then rips the tail from their torso, rendering the crustacean to suffer a fairly gruesome death. “You’re killing it!” Kate proclaims, alarmed to have witnessed such a grotesque execution, while a few boys take joy in the disembodiment of the miniature lobsters.

Soon, the boys are given strings with strips of bacon by Phil, who explains the method for catching the crawdads—tying bacon to a string, dangling the bacon in the water near the crawdads, and waiting for them to latch on, at which point they can be pulled ashore onto the dock. A few boys adopt crawdad fishing as their new purpose for existence, and crouch over the edge of the dock as they entice the local crayfish to take the bait.

As a few boys patiently fish for crayfish, Rick interrupts the otherwise peaceful lapping of water on the shore: “A snake! A SNAKE!!! YOU GUYS—A SNAKE!!!” Others rush to see, peering into the rocks where Rick saw the snake, “What kind is it?”
“A garter.” The snake is cornered amidst the talus of shore, and is soon captured and photographed in the arms of Phil and Brady. Some kids come up and pet the snake while others prefer to observe from a distance, occasionally shuddering at the sight of it wrapped around Phil’s arm. The snake is released at the waters edge, and immediately slithers away into the water, much to the excitement of the participants, who remark at its eel-like properties. The snake disappears into the depths of the blue water, and the attention of kids is immediately transferred, surprisingly, to the prospect of joining the snake by taking a swim.

Participants enter the water down shore from the crawdads and snake. A few quickly decide to swim to the large island 50 meters off shore under the supervision of their instructors. Others continue to fish for crawdads, continually dipping strips of raw bacon into the water. The island-bound group quickly grows to a fleet of strong swimmers, who stroke across the broad channel as a group, soon arriving on the shore of the island. A few girls sit together on the beach, looking back to the shore from whence they came, while others disappear into the tall reeds on the island. Storm clouds begin to build behind them, and the sky toward the horizon is a much darker gray, but the sun still shines through the water, highlighting it an aqua blue. To be sure, we are in a unique location, where rocky shores, hot sun, and mountain thunderstorms frame kids on a summertime escape to explore an island amidst Caribbean blue waters. I take a moment to enjoy the setting alone on the beach—dipping my toes in the unfamiliar and unique waters, with one eye on the changing weather, and the other on the lookout for crawdads and swimming garter snakes.
Dinner on the Rock, Thunder on the Wind

“Dinner! Come eat!” Phil’s booming voice can be heard for a 100 meters in every direction, as echoes of thunder give warning for what the midnight blue clouds across the valley may hold in store for our camp in the hours to come. Kids, still adorned in face-paint from an earlier activity, run about camp, gathering their bowls and utensils, before forming a loose line by Mary, who serves up heaping bowls of macaroni and cheese for the hungry participants. “What do you say?” she reminds them of their manners, continuing in her motherly role for these kids, as they shuffle through the line. Participants gather together with their food on the flat top of a large rock outcropping adjacent to the cooking area. This rock, perched on the edge of a ridge, which falls away to a long expansive valley, is the perfect place to watch this storm roll through this shallow basin.

Flashes of lightning interrupt the dark sky across the valley, some five miles away. The air occasionally carries the scent of rain, but remains ominously still throughout dinner as the thunder subtly echoes off the cliffs above our camp. Kids display the activities of the day as badges of honor as they sit together on the rock, one still wearing his climbing helmet, others adorned in face paint, and others transition to jackets in anticipation of the cooler temps to come with night. They look out toward the storm, watching for bright flashes, or changes in the cloud patterns while sharing stories, talking and laughing. They are gathered together closely—the features in the rock dictating where seating is possible. Their proximity to one another likely a reflection of how they have grown together over the last two weeks. Though 12 participants are enrolled in the program, one group sits atop the rock awaiting the storm.
Though progress is monitored on the storm for over an hour, it arrives somewhat unexpectedly. The wind arrives before the rain, gusting up violently without warning as the time separating flashes of lightning and clashes of thunder condenses. Phil and Mary hurriedly pack up the dinner equipment, while the kids scramble to the shelter of their tents. The first drops of rain intercept the kids as they run to their tents, further romanticizing their sprint to shelter. To their horror, both groups of boys find their poorly staked tents slowly rolling away amidst a field of enormous sandstone boulders and juniper bushes. They waste little time securing their tents and staking them back into the ground while the wind, thunder, and rain whip around them. I provide a few pointers on how they might drive the stakes in so this will not happen again, and the boys seem eager for the advice. They feverishly pound the stakes deeper into the hard sandy soil, as the wind and rain intensify. Their loosely coordinated effort bears immediate results, and their tent is re-established aside an enormous boulder. James, stands outside the tent with his arms held close to his body, inside his oversized rain jacket. I ask him, “What do you think of this weather James?” He looks up to me and grins as tiny drops of rain pelt his back, “It’s awesome.”

In moments, the tents are secured, and kids file in through the zippered doors to the haven of their sleeping bags. Though it’s far too early to call it a night, laying in a sleeping bag is certainly preferable to the alternative of bearing the brunt of this storm without the refuge of a tent. I wander over to the other tents to see the doors zipped tight shut, and hear murmured conversations beneath the pattering of rain. I walk back to my tent to ride out the storm as the rain turns the ground a darker red and white light flares across the darkening sky.
Dancing in the Desert

After an hour of listening to the consistent tapping of rain and the rumbling of thunder inside our tents, it becomes clear that the worst of the storm has passed. The rain has left the ground a thick, cakey mud, but the rocks surrounding camp dry quickly with the cool desert breeze. Kids slowly emerge from their tents, walking slowly through the muddy ground, which sticks to their shoes. It is much colder and darker now as the sun sets behind the storm clouds, but still too early for bed.

A few kids wander about amongst the tents, quietly remarking at the accrual of mud on their shoes as they stand in the dark. Then, unannounced, Mary and Phil open the doors of the van and blast the theme song of the program, *I got a feelin’* by the Black Eyed Peas. Rick, Kyle and Bruce respond immediately, rushing over to the van, dancing in the mud for a moment before quickly deciding to climb the enormous boulder adjacent the van. They hurry around to the far side of the boulder where the climbing is easier, and emerge one at a time atop the 20-foot wide by 10-foot high white sandstone behemoth. The boys resume dancing, showing a renewed energy after the storm has passed.

Others are pulled from their tents by the music, wandering up toward the van to find the boys dancing atop the rock. As kids arrive, they immediately join in the activity, disappearing behind the boulder to appear moments later dancing on the stage. Mary acknowledges the popularity of the dancing, and she quickly composes a playlist of upbeat music on the vehicle iPod. The kids dance furiously on top of the boulder as Mary takes pictures of her participants—evidently proud of this impromptu creative expression.

[IMG. 49]
Before long, Mary, Phil, and I are pulled into the party, climbing the backside of the boulder to dance with the kids. We continue dancing atop the enormous boulder as dusk turns to night, prompting a few of the kids to break out lanterns and headlamps, which they set to the emergency flashing setting—“for strobe lights,” as they explained. We savor this bizarrely unique experience. The bass thumps out loudly through the desert air as we perform atop our boulder of a stage for an infinite audience of rock, sand, and stars.

Together Around the Fire

As the dancing on the boulder winds down, Phil anticipates the transition in activities, and builds a fire as Mary—all dancing anyway—continues to dance for a few moments with the kids atop the rock. As the smoke and bright orange light flare up into a fire, kids descend from the rock to embrace the warmth of the group while recovering from the exhausting dance marathon on the boulder. Kids share seats fashioned from nearby rocks and logs as the orange glow of the fire lights their faces and warms their bodies. They gather closely together as a family might: Mary and Phil continue in their parental roles for this band of brothers and sisters. My role is somewhat that of a tourist to the group, reflected in my position outside the fire with notebook and scribbling pen in hand.

The light of the fire dances on their faces as they converse, holding their hands out close together toward the warm light. They are so very alone, miles from any human-made structures or civilization, only connected to the outside world through a long, rough dirt road. The heat and light of the fire is insignificant in the vast scale of this desert
landscape, but it spreads across their faces before shining out into the cold darkness that surrounds camp. Though alone, they are together.

The kids have come to know one another well. They have shared much with one another: experiences, as well as private whispers while seated around the fire, or beneath the shelter of a tent. They have known suffering together, through a long evening of cold rain, and an arduous hike up a steep trail in the sun, as they have known challenges together, be they the indoor climbing gym, ascending the steep sandstone of the desert, or paddling the rapids of a rough river. They have also known success and celebration together, basking in the accomplishment of navigating the river, reaching the top of the cliff, or merely surviving a cold rainy night. Though the challenges were often presented in individual terms, they were embraced and experienced as a collective; these adventures—complete with uncertainty, suffering, success and celebration—were shared.

Wilson Academy in Conclusion

Through my studies and experiences of adventure at Wilson Academy I was reminded of some particular qualities of my own experiences with adventure. The familial sense across the group is reminiscent of the sense of camaraderie I have felt on many an expedition, and the flexibly structured time for participants reminded me of childhood summers in the ravine behind my home. Watching participants engage with many of these activities for the first time (and embarking on new adventures alongside them) also reinvigorated faded memories of my earliest experiences climbing, camping, and paddling.
The flexible structure and summertime pace of the Academy left programming open to serendipity. This loose curricular framework, in conjunction with summer instructors’ intentions (to be explained in the following chapter), resulted in an operational aim of enjoying the present experience. Whether it was bouncing in the back of the van on rough roads, exploring unique new places, [IMG. 33, 42] carrying heavy loads, [IMG. 38] dancing atop a boulder in the middle of the desert, catching a snake, bathing in mud, [IMG. 60] learning about rocks from a geologist, [IMG. 47] or watching as a lake was restocked with fish, we celebrated these moments together merely for being ours. [IMG. 34, 48]

**REDCLOUD CHALLENGE COURSE**

The Redcloud Challenge Course (Redcloud) is tucked away in a ponderosa pine forest amidst the high peaks of Colorado. “No experience [is] necessary” to partake in the adventure experiences facilitated at Redcloud, which include games, low teambuilding initiatives, and challenges well above the ground, with safety ensured through ropes and harnesses. As per Redcloud advertising materials, this programming is presented as a vehicle for the varied goals and aims of the groups that participate in these experiences, though they do cite general aims of increased awareness, and the development of new interpersonal skills for normal life contexts. Instructors trained specifically to facilitate this challenge course are tasked with implementing this agenda through daily programs.

I observed six unique groups hailing from three different organizations during their participation at Redcloud: a support program for students at risk of dropping out of school; a group from a career and technical high school; and a high school honors program from a large public school. Each of these six groups visited on different days,
typically spending six to eight hours at the course. This collective of participants, aged 11 to 19, embodied a rich diversity of backgrounds and histories.

The parameters of the experience at Redcloud, which follows a structured progression across a single day of programming rather than a multi-day expedition (such as the Academy or Shavano) influenced the type of data I was able to collect. While I engaged in much of the experience alongside Shavano and Academy participants, I did not partake in the Redcloud experiences, and did not grow to know these participants on the level that I did at other sites. This observational difference is reflected in the character of the vignettes herein, with more direct quotations from the field and fewer referents to my own experience. Further, I reiterate that I am familiar with the activities and initiatives of this course through years of experience as a challenge course instructor, with two seasons of experience working at this very course.

The Redcloud Challenge Course, where all observations and interviews for Redcloud participants took place, sits on a broad ridge, with elevation on either side of this ridge falling away into the denser forests below, revealing clear views to impressive snow-capped mountain ranges. Though quite accessible by steep gravel roads, the course carries a strong sense of remoteness. “The main area,” as its referred to by Redcloud instructors, where groups typically convene for formal instructions, games, and final farewells, is a large open area at perhaps the widest section of this ridge-turned-challenge course. The ground in this area is covered in woodchips and free of obstacles, making grounds safe for participants to run and play games. Also, toward one edge of this area is

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39 Ages are estimates, given that I did not collect demographic information from all participants at Redcloud.
a large white truck with a walk-in trailer. The opened doors reveal an organized chaos of sorts: Alongside ropes, helmets, harnesses and pulleys can be found stuffed animals, rubber dinner-plate sized discs, bandanas, hula-hoops, oversized puzzles, tent poles, floatation noodles, oversized jump ropes, playing cards, and other items. [IMG. 64]

This main area is surrounded by large ponderosa pine trees, which serve as the structural foundation for the “high ropes” challenges at the course. A first glance at the trees reveals small platforms approximately 40 feet up in the air, convincingly secured to these trees with substantial hardware. Upon closer examination, thick metal cables can be seen running horizontally from tree to tree—some 40, others 50 feet above the ground. Thick ropes hang down from these cables, swaying slightly as the breeze pushes the trees above, but restrained somewhat by the weight of knots and metal hardware on their ends. At the base of these trees are metal pegs, which give way to oversized staples hammered into the tree higher up. [IMG. 70]

Other high elements are less inconspicuous, for example, an enormous cargo net—50 feet across and 10 feet high—hangs suspended between two trees 40 feet above the ground. [IMG. 63] Also well above the ground, oversized trapeze rings hang down from a wire secured to a different set of trees. Farther down the ridge, other curious organizations of human-made objects in conjunction with this natural environment can be found hidden in the woods: A large platform constructed of lumber rests precariously on a fulcrum in the center; cables attached to several trees, all at the same height just 12 inches above the ground; a 10 foot high wooden wall with a platform on one side; large telephone pole stumps emerging from the ground only 18 inches in the air beside a platform, and a few long 2” x 4” boards; an elastic spider web pinned between two trees;
and other curious combinations. These boards, ropes, platforms, wires and logs are brought to relevance by the instructors and participants of the Redcloud Challenge Course, who transform these otherwise inconsequential materials into the parameters of memorable and unique experiences. Following are the stories of these interactions, which serve to describe the adventure education experience as it manifests at Redcloud.

Welcome to Redcloud

Andy, a seasoned Redcloud instructor, walks up the dusty road ahead of a fleet of participants, who carry water bottles and jackets in their arms. He reports to his colleagues like a general giving orders: “Forty-two kids. All new people, so ‘Have you Ever?’ will work well.” He looks to his watch, “It’s ten o’clock. We may want to keep the games short, or maybe cut one. What if we just did, ‘Have You Ever’ and then ‘Concentric Circles’ and then we’ll split?” Instructors, gathered around him, apparently comprehend his suggestion, wrought with specialized language, and break out from the huddle to attend to the various tasks implied by this change in plans.

Andy revert his attention back to the group, directing them to stand on thin rubberized discs the size of dinner plates, which are pre-arranged in a large circle 20 feet across. As participants and instructors fill the circle, Andy, standing at the edge, calls the group to attention with his booming voice: “Welcome to the [Redcloud Challenge Course]! Alright. Good morning everybody. How you guys feeling?” before entering a formal introduction to the course:

“One thing to know about this park is we are about 2,000 feet above Denver, so I do want to stress the importance of drinking a lot of water today, and also putting on sunscreen—we’ve got a big giant thing of sunscreen right over here and we have a big water cooler, and lots of extra water as well. If you didn’t bring a water bottle, just see one of us and we can grab you one that we can loan you for the day. Also
you’ll notice that we don’t have any trashcans up here. … So we have a leave no trace, pack it in—pack it out, policy.” (September 16, 2012)

Andy then explains the basic schedule of the day, somewhat demystifying the experience to the participants, and effectively outlining the progression of the Redcloud experience.

“Kind of how our day is gonna look: We are gonna do a few big group games to kind of get warmed up here and have a little fun. [Then we’ll] break up here and do a few smaller groups and then ‘till about lunch time we’re gonna work in those small groups on maybe some low elements just barely off the ground or on the ground, to get you guys working as a team maybe of about ten people. And then after lunch we’re gonna open you guys up and let you guys get up on the high elements if you want to. I do want to say that we’re not going to force anyone to do anything today. We just encourage everyone to give one hundred percent, but choose their own challenge. We’ll talk a little bit about that later on, so don’t be nervous, we’re not gonna force you to climb any of these trees or anything like that.” (September 16, 2012)

This brief prelude effectively lays out the day-to-day operations of the Redcloud Challenge Course, which embodies a routine of sorts. Each day I observed, this basic progression—large group games, small group low elements, lunch, high elements, and a final group reflection—was followed with fidelity. Also made explicit was the role challenge played in the experience for Redcloud participants—it was something presented as an opportunity with which participants can engage with on their own terms.

Andy continues, further explaining the institutional intentions for the day while soliciting responses from the participants:

Andy: “Every day we are up here we have a couple goals that we have for you guys, but I would like to hear from you guys. Do you have any goals that you would like to see, just to get out of the day?”

A participant raises his hand, and Andy acknowledges him with a nod. He turns toward one of the high elements, points up into the trees, and declares: “I would like to pass that.”

Andy: “Awesome. Alright, cool. … Anything else?” Andy pauses for a moment, then continues, “Can anyone guess what our goals for you might be?”

A participant: “Have fun.”
Andy: “Have fun! Yeah, number one right there. We just want to have fun up here.” Andy looks out to the group again, his hands clasped at his chest, encouraging other responses. Another participant bites: “Safety?” Andy, is enthusiastically on his heels: “Safety! Yeah, that’s our other goal. Yeah. So, safety, and having fun. I see some people want to accomplish some of the high elements. Anything else that we might want to get out of the day?” Yet another adult offers: “Increase our confidence.” Andy: “OK. Awesome, yeah. So I think we’ll be throwing a lot of challenges at you guys and give you guys the opportunity to build up on your confidence. Um. Anything else?” Again, an adult offers another potential goal: “Teamwork.” Andy: “Teamwork. Awesome. Yeah, so you guys are working as a team, it’s definitely a huge focus of the day. … Alright, I believe Anne has our first activity.” (September 16, 2012)

Andy steps back out of the circle and on cue, Anne emerges from the edge of the circle, walking forward slowly toward the middle as she explains the first activity for this large group of participants. They have begun.

**Warmed Up and Having Fun: Large Group Activities**

Anne reiterates Andy’s rationale for the activity: In her own words, “just to kind of get everyone warmed up and having some fun.” She explains the rules:

“I’m gonna stand in the middle, say my name, say something about myself, and then if that is true for you, you have to walk off your [rubber disc], high five someone in the middle of the circle, and then find a new [rubber disc. Then, whoever does not have a disc at the end is the next person to stand in the middle.]” (September 16, 2012)

After explaining these basic rules to slightly more depth, the game, similar to musical chairs, begins. “Hi, my name is Anne!” The group responds in unison, with a booming, “Hi Anne!” She responds, “And I like ice cream.” Virtually every participant walks off their rubber disc and walks out into the middle of the circle, where chaos ensues with many participants high fiving and bumping into one another. The middle of the circle is
quickly evacuated, as participants fill the rubber discs on the edge of the circle, leaving one person standing in the circle without a disc to stand on.

After a few rounds, Andy introduces that participants will add a movement to the game, “I’m going to say how we move through the circle. So, what’s up, I’m Andy.” The group, again in unison, responds, “Hi Andy!” and he continues, “And you are gonna move through the circle like a gorilla.” He presents a convincing imitation of a gorilla walking on its hind legs while grunting, and breathing heavily as a gorilla might. Several participants laugh at this display. He breaks from character to give the final prompt, “And I like skiing or snowboarding!”

The group engages in the ridiculous crouched posture modeled by Andy, grunting and hooting through the circle as they move to new positions. Many break from character while in the middle of the circle, overcome with laughter, a bout of giggling is contagious amidst the chaotic center of the group. They repeat this activity, displaying a variety of ways to move about the circle, including dancing, and walking like a penguin, Egyptian, or backwards. Redcloud instructors partake in the activities alongside participants, often pulled into the laughter and smiling with the group.

Redcloud facilitated a number of large group initiatives similar to this one, all serving the same purpose to initiate the intentional structure of the day’s activities. Other games I observed included “Paranoia,” “Wizards, Elves and Gelflings,” “Hamburglar” and “Concentric Circles.” These unique activities, with comical twists, evolving rules, and the use of creative props, reliably had participants interacting with one another, moving, and laughing. To revisit the explicit intentions of this activity, these early
morning large group activities appeared to serve their purposes well; to get people warmed up and having fun.

The Howling Wolves: Low Initiatives

Following these large group games, Redcloud instructors typically divided up the large group into a few smaller groups of eight to twelve participants. These smaller groups dispersed throughout the course grounds, walking to different areas and engaging with different and unique activities as posed by the instructors. Groups of 40 or 50 are quickly diluted across the vast wooded course, and these smaller groups have the instant feeling of being quite alone with one another. One day at Redcloud, I followed “The Wolves,” as they named themselves, a group of eleven 9th graders.

Jake, their instructor, convenes the group, in the cool early fall air, asking that they stand in a small circle as he introduces the first activity: a name game using the “thumb ball.” He presents the instructions for this activity, where participants toss the grapefruit sized ball to one another, and then share something about themselves based on where their thumb lands on the ball (which is tiled with a number of prompts). They also share, at Jake’s encouragement, “A big challenge facing you as a 9th grader.” Participants toss the ball around until everyone has had a chance to share the challenges they face, such as, “Keeping my straight A’s going,” “Getting all my work done,” and, “Being an individual in a school.” The air is quiet around them for this first activity, and their soft voices carry through the dead air of the woods. Jake stands in the circle with them, and listens closely to their responses, his hands clasped behind his back. He concludes the activity through clarifying his intentions for them, which brings some context to the
participants’ sharing challenges in school: “I hope that each of you can walk out of here with even a little nugget of learning that relates to your life.”

Jake then poses a challenge to the group: to pass the ball around the group in the same order it was first tossed as fast as possible. “How fast do you think we can do this?” Participants respond enthusiastically, “55 seconds!” “5 seconds!” The group aims for 10 seconds as their goal. They toss the ball rapidly across the circle to one another and back to Jake, who stops his watch and announces, “10.4 seconds.” Participants respond, disappointed but hopeful: “Awww man!” “We can do this!” They try again, repeating the sequence, some kids fumble the ball, and others catch and throw in one motion. “9.4 seconds.” The group claps and cheers, and Jake offers, “Can we improve on that time?” Participants are unanimous in responding that they can go faster, and appear eager to start again. A girl states, “This is exciting!” The time drops to 8.3 seconds, much to the celebration of the group. Jake provokes some creative thinking by reminding participants of the rules, and encouraging that they further discuss their strategy.

Participants engage in spirited conversation regarding how they may do this faster, with many talking at once. It is difficult to discern the comments from my vantage outside the circle, though I hear one epiphany above the others: “We could rearrange! We could get in the order that we passed it and then just pass it along.” The group instantly adopts this new strategy in their next trial, and quickly passes the ball around the perimeter of the circle. “5.7 seconds!” The group cheers at the news, but celebration is short-lived. Jake offers yet another opportunity to rethink their method, “Any way of getting the time any faster?”

170
This process is repeated several times over as the group methods transform from one tactic to the next. Participants eventually create a ramp with their hands, and roll the ball down past all their hands for an unprecedented time of 1.4 seconds. At the news of this new group record, the participants explode with applause, cheering, high fiving, and other celebratory actions. Jake encourages them, “Let’s celebrate!” he says, over the continued cheering of these eleven kids in the woods. One participant offers, “Let’s do a wolf call!” Another, “One, two, three!” The group joins in unison with a resounding howl, surely detected by other groups and local wildlife. They smile and laugh, as Jake, standing slightly outside the group, directs them to a pointed discussion of the activity.

Jake: “So, we’re talking about teamwork here. What are some things that make up teamwork?”
Participants respond: “Problem solving.” “Communication.”
Jake: “One thing we mentioned about communication is that if everyone is talking at once, there tends to not be much communication.”
Participant: “We’ve all been talking together and figuring out problems together.”
Participant: “Things like identifying each others strengths, sharing ideas together, that kind of thing.”
Jake repeats and often paraphrases what he hears from the group as their comments come in, before turning the conversation to one of application, “How do we do that on a school project or something?”
Participants give responses regarding situations in school when they are working together, on school projects and sports teams, before Jake closes the conversation, “Keep thinking about these things throughout our day.” (September 26, 2012)

Jake moves the group to another initiative, where the group is tasked with getting their entire team over an “electric fence” (a rope tied between two trees at about three feet high) while maintaining physical contact with the group throughout the activity. The group engages with this activity in a cycle of discussion and experimentation similar to their process in the first activity. As the final participant prepares to jump over the wire to complete the activity, the other members of his group encourage him: “You got this.”
“We love you.” “You got this bro.” To much anticipation, he successfully jumps the wire to the exploding cheers and applause of the group. Again, Jake announces, “Alright, let’s celebrate!” I catch myself smiling along with them as they break out in a group wolf call, “Oww, Oww, OWWWW!!” Their howling echoes out once again into the woods, emphasizing the togetherness of this small group against this otherwise remote natural backdrop. Jake discusses this activity with slightly more intention:

Jake: “So guys, we’re talking teamwork here. Instead of asking, ‘What made this work for you?’ The question I’m going to pose this time is, ‘What did you see, hear, that you can apply, say, in your school environment?’”
Participant: “Encouragement.”
Jake: “OK. Encouragement then.”
Participant: “Planning.”
Jake: “Planning?”
Participant: “Yeah, strategies.”
Jake: “What is the planning process, away from here, for like, a project at [your school].”
Participants respond: “Trying something new.” “You gotta know what to do and when to do it.” “You gotta try a whole lot of different things.”
Jake: “And do they give you the time to do that at [your school]?”
Participant: “I think, too often, you don’t plan when you should.”
Jake: “I guess what I’m getting at here is, maybe based on what we’ve done here, when the next project comes along, might you reflect on this and say to yourself, ‘Hey, we might need to plan here, to come up with something.’ I dunno.”
Kids nod in agreement, acknowledging Jake’s soft recommendation.
Jake: “You guys are awesome. Any other comments on what we just did here?”
Participant: “I like this.”
Participant: “Do other kids do it this way?”
Jake: “I really like the way you guys shared ideas and tried some different things.”
Participant: “I think we eventually got it in the end. I didn’t think we were going to get it.” (September 26, 2012)

Jake guides the group on to the next activity where, as is typical at Redcloud, they can expect a slightly higher level of challenge, be it physically demanding or mentally puzzling. The group members maintain a steady chatter with one another as they walk away from their early morning activities together, on to greater challenges.
Increasing the Challenge: The Acid River

A group of participants gathers around a seemingly random assortment of telephone pole stumps, embedded deep in the ground, rising 18 inches above a thick blanket of woodchips. Alex, their instructor, drags several 8 foot long 2” x 6” boards over to the group, and stands in the partial shade of the nearby pines as she introduces the parameters for the initiative. The participants, a group of high school students, stand attentively behind one of the platforms and listen to her instructions. The activity, as she presents it, is relatively simple: The objective is to cross an imaginary “acid river” as a team, without touching the ground, by placing boards on the erected stumps, and walking across these boards. The group of fourteen is split into two smaller groups of seven, each assigned to a starting platform and directed to a shared finish line—a platform on the other side of the “river.”

From the outset, both groups engage in the activity with little hesitation, reaching the boards out to the first stump, and walking out on the boards one at a time. They pass the large boards forward to their teammates at the front of the group, who lay them out onto the stumps, before slowly, carefully, walking across, with arms outstretched to the sides for balance or toward their teammates for physical support. [IMG. 67, 68] Some participants adopt leadership roles in the groups—dictating what needs to be done, and how to do it—while others remain silent throughout the activity.

Participants progress slowly across the imaginary river, pulling boards from the back of the group when they are no longer in use, and passing them forward to teammates at the front of the line, all while balancing on the 2” x 6” temporary bridges from stump to stump. The limited number of boards (three for each group of seven) requires
teammates to share unique and often uncomfortable physical spaces as they leapfrog the boards forward. To maintain balance on the boards and stumps in these tight quarters, participants often embrace physically, resting arms on shoulders for support as they balance together just above the ground. I notice as many as seven participants sharing one eight-foot board, their arms draped over one another for balance. Though perhaps only acquaintances in school, they get to know one another on a quite different level as they embrace, balancing just above the ground. [IMG. 65]

As groups near the platform on the far side, they encounter an unexpected obstacle: The stumps at one particular section are too far apart; the boards do not reach. Participants grapple with this mental puzzle, played out in physical terms, by trying various combinations of stumps and boards, only to find that a direct path from log to log is not possible. One participant, Kim, stands toward the front of her group, watches the other group grapple with this same dilemma, looking at the stumps and boards in search of a solution. She bursts out, “I just got it. I got it! I got the idea and I’m not going to tell them!” Revealing both her revelation, and her natural competitive tendencies.

Soon, Kim is able to demonstrate her understanding to her group: the stumps are in the thoughtful configuration that one stump cannot be reached from other stumps, but can be reached from the middle of a board already on two adjacent stumps (see Figure 7: Acid River puzzle). This problem is encountered as both a physical and a mental challenge for participants; though the initiative is executed in purely physical terms, passage to the other side of the river requires troubleshooting and mental problem solving. In this activity, as in others, participants are given no guidance from instructors
during the activity, and are allowed to freely engage in the activity together, developing their own process for planning and executing the initiative.

The groups soon both realize “the trick” and as they near the same platform, which is only accessible from one stump—the organization of the stumps effectively funnels the two groups together. Kim realizes how this collaborative interaction was by design, “That’s the catch. They separate you to make you think you are separate teams, but you have to work together to finish it.” Kim, already leading her group, assumes the role of leader of both groups as they come together, now dictating instructions to both teams. Discussions are logistical and rarely (if ever) related to anything but the activity at hand.

Figure 7: Acid River puzzle
Dark boards represent the correct path; light boards show how passage is impossible from stump to stump.

When it is evident that the groups have a plan that will work to quickly finish the activity, Mike introduces a new challenge to the two groups, apparently aiming to keep them at a constant disequilibrium. Their goal is now to get all fourteen participants on the four-foot square, finishing platform at the same time. The island is small enough that the participants must resort to balancing and counter-weighting boards across the island to create enough room for everyone. As participants pile onto the island, their personal
space norms are likely pushed to new limits, jamming classmates together in a group hug for a few minutes as the final participants arrive at the finishing platform. When the final participant steps onto the island, the group cheers and claps briefly, and then disperses, spreading out away from the crowded platform in all directions. Kim concludes the activity, speaking to anyone willing to listen, “This is fun. I like this place. This is really fun.” As is the habitual sequence at Redcloud, Mike gathers the group in a semi circle for a facilitated reflection of the activity.

Mike: “Well done everybody! … What did you guys think?”
A few participants give miscellaneous responses about working together with other teams. Mike intervenes, structuring their conversation.
Mike: “So we look at the day as kind of a progression—that’s how we think about it. So if we look at the day as a progression, we want to work on, obviously, your ability to communicate and your ability to work as a team. So from your first activity to this next activity, what do you feel like you improved on?”
Mike: “OK. Communication, teamwork.”
Kim (participant): “Awkward space! We improved on awkward space—it’s not so awkward anymore.”
Mike simultaneously accepts and rejects their answers, pushing them to further explain the details behind their responses, and clarifying what they mean when they mention communication and teamwork.
Mike: “So, I love communication and teamwork, ‘cause that’s what we want to work on, but those are kind of like, umbrella terms. Those encompass a lot of different things. So can you specifically say what you improved on? What part of communication you got better at, and what part of teamwork you got better at?”
Participant: “Well, part of communication is to keep quiet when it’s not necessary to talk and saying… people listening. Listening and being constructive and trying to … constructive instructions and listening, even in stressful situations. And being helpful.”
Kim: “Everybody had a voice, and everyone got heard.”
Mike: “OK. And, you know, honestly, that is the thing that most groups struggle with. There’s usually lots of ideas. It’s very difficult to work with a group with all those ideas happening simultaneously and not a lot of listening. Also that’s a really good point—constructive instructions. You’re not just talking you’re saying, ‘This is the thing I want you to do.’”

…
Mike: “So what do you think we could still work on for our next activity—let’s think of more in the teamwork frame. Because, I would say your communication is really
good. There’s a lot of good listening, and there’s a lot of quiet, which is a really good sign. Because, usually the problem, especially for this element, the back of the group can’t communicate with the front of the group because there’s too much distance. So you guys are doing some good listening, and you’re doing well in that area. So what do you think about working as a team—what are some things you could focus on to get better?”

…

Participants respond: “Encouragement.” “Sharing.”

Mike: “Encouragement, awesome. That’s actually going to be really helpful this afternoon as well. Uhh. Sharing, can you expand on sharing?”

Kim: “Like in a couple different ways. One of them, sharing awkward space, it didn’t become that awkward. And trying to like, share, like, the boards with each other when we got to the end. Trying to figure out which one needed to go first, and where we needed what.”

Another participant adds: “Letting go of stupid problems, like who gets there first.”

(September 25, 2012)

Through these comments, Mike inspires a reconstruction of the experience mindful toward the applications and lessons learned as a result of the experiences facilitated just moments prior. Though Mike conducts a fairly open-ended and responsive reflection of this activity, these “lessons learned” and the fashion in which they were presented varied from instructor to instructor. For example, Alex once discussed the same activity as follows with a different group:

Alex: “Very nice work. Was that a little frustrating at times?”
Participant: “Yeah.”
Alex: “Was it a lot frustrating at times?”
Participant: “Too many cooks in the kitchen.”
Alex: “What do you mean by that?”
Participant: “Too many ideas. Yeah.”
Alex: “So too many people spouting ideas at the same time?”
Participant: “Yeah.”
Alex: “So part of that is your communication.”
Participant: “It was good, don’t get me wrong…”
Alex: “Yeah the cooperation was awesome. But there’s one thing that this really brings out is the ability to talk and listen, and when we have… When Candy was standing over there, do you think that helped?”
Participant: “She was one less body to worry about at the moment.”
Alex: “She was one less body, and she could see the whole picture. ‘Cause when you’re standing on a board, one—you’re worried about your balance, and two—
you’re seeing what’s directly in front of you, and you kind of get tunnel vision going on. But when you step back, you can more see the whole picture. … Cool?”
(September 16, 2012)

Kids nod, acknowledging her response, and she concludes the reflection. Though the conversation is posed as an open-ended question to the group, she delivers her own answer to the question regardless of their responses, as a moral lesson to learn from this experience. Again, though methods for processing initiatives and the conclusions presented of the experience were varied, the experience was more similar from group to group than different. The basic process of groups engaging with an unfamiliar physical challenge, which presented a unique puzzle to be solved in physical terms, was pervasive across many of these group oriented initiatives. Another example of one such element is the Whale Watch.

**Working Together on the Whale Watch**

Anne stands atop a 15-foot by 10-foot wooden platform, facing a group of ten participants, who stand amidst dry brush and grass on the hillside beside her. The sun is unforgiving, and bears down on this group as the noon hour approaches. The Whale Watch, as Anne explains, “actually works like a giant teeter totter” with a fulcrum in the middle. The challenge implied by the initiative is to balance this large unstable platform while all participants are on the platform. But, as Anne explains, in *this* activity, the participants will decide the ultimate specifics of their goal:

“We would like to give it to you this time, for you guys to create your own challenge. So come together as a group and figure out what a good goal looks like and how to set that goal, and how you’ll know if you’ve met that goal. It’s a really good life skill to be able to set goals and understand when you’ve met them.” (September 15, 2012)
At Anne’s encouragement, the group huddles together and decides they will try to keep the large platform balanced for 20 seconds. The group then spends several minutes strategizing their approach to the activity, with many talking at once in their shared discussion, as they brainstorm potential approaches to this unfamiliar activity. They slowly walk onto the platform one by one, and begin to try to balance the enormous, yet sensitive wooden frame. They all stand on the weathered wooden surface, which creaks as they struggle to keep the platform level. The ends slam down on either side as the participants shift their weight back and forth, collectively overcorrecting for the precarious platform, and sending their balance out of control. Participants are subject to a very foreign sensuous condition, and struggle to react to the subtle cues one feels while balancing. One participant notes, “There’s a problem with shifting weight on our feet, we need to stop shifting our weight.”

They stand in place tenuously; eventually slowing down and deciding that one participant, Andreas, will do the balancing to halt their perpetual overcorrection. The group stands still as Andreas slowly leans to one side, lifting the platform into a balanced position and then makes subtle adjustments to keep the platform from falling to either side. After several attempts, they manage to balance the Whale Watch for a full 20 seconds. Anne, watching her stopwatch, enthusiastically proclaims, “Success!” sparking the celebration of the group, which applauds their own effort. Having achieved their goal, Anne steps up on the platform as participants gather back on the adjacent hillside. Predictably, Anne debriefs the activity:

Anne: “The reason I love this is because it’s a great opportunity to create and set your own goals, which I thought you guys did an amazing job of. So just as a quick debrief, I just want everyone to think of something that they noticed about your group
dynamic, like, how you were. … So for instance I noticed that people took ownership. So I heard Colin say, ‘I know I’ve been doing this myself.’ When you were talking about shifting the weight. Or I noticed that Andreas was like, ‘Oh my bad’ when the thing fell. So I noticed that people were taking ownership for when things weren’t working and when things were working.

“So just think about something that you noticed about your group, and kind of call out like popcorn, or a Quaker share. … Whatever you feel comfortable to share, you can just shout it out. … So take a minute, and if you feel like you want to share you can just popcorn it out, just using the ‘I noticed’ frame.”

An adult chaperone responds: “I noticed the group listens really well, especially the kids. Like they do a good job of paying attention and listening to what works and what doesn’t. So we’ve done [these] challenges pretty well.”

Participant: “I also noticed that we didn’t step on each others toes when we were expressing the ideas.”

Participant: “I noticed we failed a bunch of times, but everybody stayed positive. We thought we could do it and we did it. It didn’t matter that it took ten, twelve, fifteen times.”

Andreas: “I noticed that we collaborated a lot, sharing ideas.”

Anne: “That’s a great noticing. I noticed a lot of determination, so that willingness to keep going.”

Mike: “Yeah, I noticed the same thing. It seemed to me that every time you guys failed, instead of becoming discouraged, you became more focused. Like, I could kind of see in your faces that everybody was like, ‘Yeah, we’re gonna get this.’”

Adult Chaperone: “One thing I want to say, I noticed that people were willing to say ‘OK we’re all going to be still and let Andreas move around.’ And sometimes that’s hard for people to say, ‘Oh I want to be doing stuff’ you know. And the fact that everyone was willing to cooperate with that. Because I think it made it easier.”

Anne: “Picking a leader and being an active follower.” (September 15, 2012)

Challenges of this nature, where a collective group solved mental puzzles in physical terms, were abundant during my observations at the Redcloud Challenge Course. Other notable initiatives included passing all members of the group through an elastic spider web; pushing one another up to the top of a blank 10 or 15-foot wall; [IMG. 66, 72] traversing three wooden platforms as a group with the aid of a few 2” x 6” boards; and walking across a set of cables attached to trees just a foot above the ground. These unique challenges, and the unfamiliar arrangements they inspire, were also always “processed” or “debriefed” by Redcloud instructors much as Mike, Anne or Alex did in
the activities above—with each instructor embodying their own style, and usually alluding to the deeper morals or lessons embedded within the experience. While the degree to which participants may learn these metaphorical lessons remains a point of contention, their repetitive use is nonetheless suggestive of a desire to distill the experience to a few concise morals.

**A Culture for Challenge**

Mike calls out to the group in his characteristic authoritative cadence, “Alright when you’re done with harnesses, join me in the large circle over here!” Groups already adorned in their bright blue harnesses and white helmets walk over to the circle of rubber discs where they started their day. Most stand by their friends in the circle, facing in and chatting as the circle fills in, often looking up to the cables and ropes in the trees in anticipation of activities to come. The group convened, Mike launches into an apparently well-prepared lecture, clarifying both the role and utility of challenge at this course as well as the logistics of engaging in the afternoon activities—the high elements.

Mike: “So let’s talk a little bit about a learning model we use here called ‘Challenge by Choice.’ … I’ve got a circle here just to represent some zones for us kind of in our mind.” He walks toward the center of the circle, where he has kicked a small circle out of the mulch, and stands in the middle of the circle, surrounded by the kids. He continues, “This one in the middle is what I like to think of as our comfort zone. So in my comfort zone… is things I do every single day, that I don’t really even think about anymore. Can anybody give me an example of something that would be in their comfort zone?”

Participants respond: “Driving a car.” “Brushing your teeth.”

Mike repeats these responses, in some cases explaining how they qualify as belonging to the comfort zone. He continues, “So the comfort zone, is awesome. But, the thing is... The reason we do what we do up here is, in the comfort zone, we don’t really learn a whole lot. ‘Cause we’ve already learned things in our comfort zone. So the idea for today is that, if we get you out here into this zone here…” He walks away from the center of the circle, pacing in the middle area of the circle between the center, and the participants on the perimeter, holding his hands out at his sides with his palms facing down, “We like to think of [this] as the challenge zone; the learning
zone. And hopefully today, you guys have been challenged, maybe pushed outside of your normal every day-to-day. Has everyone here been challenged yet?”

A few kids respond in the affirmative, that yes, they have been challenged. Mike honors these responses, then continues with his monologue, “So we like to get you out in this challenge zone ‘cause we feel like you learn a lot when you push yourself into kind of new areas that you may not be familiar with. … But!” Mike paces back to the edge of the circle, walking past the perimeter and stopping a few feet outside the circle. “What we’d like to avoid is you getting past that challenge zone, all the way out here. And what do you think we should call this area?”

Participants give a few responses: “The Danger Zone.” “Hazard Zone.” Mike: “The Danger Zone, yes! So, honestly you’re not really ever gonna be in any significant danger here, physically, because we’re gonna make sure you stay safe. But emotionally and psychologically you might get out here and almost be in this freak out zone here, right? And the thing about that freak out zone is that only you know if you’re getting close to that freak out zone. So… if you feel like you’re getting close to that freak out zone, what’s something you can do to get yourself back to that challenge zone?”

Participants and Mike discuss some of the options, such as: “Think of a happy place.” “Take deep breaths.” “Stop.” “Tell somebody.”

Mike concludes this portion of his discussion, repeatedly paraphrasing the participant responses, and offering a brief discussion noting the difference between encouragement and peer pressure in the interest of keeping people out of the “freak out zone.” He reiterates, “Only you know when you’re getting close to that freak out zone.”

Mike then transitions his discussion to the commands that will be used for high elements, effectively part two of his lecture. “So, that said. … I want to go through some quick commands that we’re gonna use for when we climb this afternoon. I need everybody to do exactly what I do.” (September 15, 2012)

Participants acknowledge the shift in the conversation, and seem to welcome this return to physical engagement. Mike stomps his feet to either side while grunting, then wind-milling his arms out in martial artist fashion, complete with an imitative high pitched Samurai yell, stopping his hands up and above his shoulders, framing his face somewhat. Participants mock each of Mike’s movements in turn, complete with sound effects, and all hold this final position while Mike transitions seamlessly back into his lecture.

“Alright! Right now you are all in expert spotting position!” He goes on to explain the
purpose and method of spotting and then clarifies the belay commands that will be used during climbing:

Climber: “Spotters ready?”
Spotters: “Ready.”
Climber: “On Belay?”
Belayer: “Belay on.”
Climber: “Climbing?”
Belayer: “Climb on.” (September 15, 2012)

Mike is discrete in his explanation of the belay commands, and has participants say the commands along with him as he explains what each command means, even clarifying that belay, “is actually a French term for tension.”

Following Mike’s presentation of challenge and belay commands, Andy emerges forward from the edge of the circle, and describes the high elements set up for the group, including how participants are to engage with the element. He emphasizes personal goals as a central aspect of the high elements:

“It’s your guys’ choice. You guys set the goal on how high and what you want to do. If you are climbing the Power Pole and only want to climb halfway up and climb back down, that is totally OK with us.” (September 15, 2012)

Following Andy’s comments, the group disperses in a disorderly fashion, with different groups of people moving to disparate areas of the challenge course. The air is rich with anticipation and energy as the participants disperse to the various high elements in small groups, some kids volunteering to go first, others preferring to watch their classmates attempt before they will partake in the activities, and others still neglecting to participate altogether. The buzz of chatter amongst participants is an expression of both their excitement and apprehension for these new, unknown, unique physical challenges.
Tears and Laughter in the Trees

Sofia, an approximately 15-year-old girl with long black hair under her white helmet, has just finished swinging her way across a high element at Redcloud, and is being lowered back to the ground. I notice her from afar because, as opposed to others in her group, who often smile, laugh, scream, and yell to their friends as they are lowered, Sofia is silent with her face buried in her hands. Upon reaching the ground, her instructor, Andy, shares a private word with her while unclipping her safety equipment. Sofia quickly walks away without responding, as she wipes tears from her face. Her friend Denise is soon by her side, handing her back her jewelry, which she removed for the initiative.

A teacher in the group approaches Sofia, “Did you have fun?” Sofia subtly shakes her head as she puts her jewelry back on her fingers and wrists, her eyes still welling with tears. She crosses her arms and stands a few feet back from the rest of the group. Andy, apparently attentive to her condition approaches her again and they share a private discussion as she continues to wipe her eyes. An adult in the group approaches Sofia moments later, “Are you OK?” But Sofia gives no response. Another adult approaches, “Good job! You showed your strength.” He puts his hand up for a high five, which Sofia unenthusiastically satisfies, lightly touching his hand and lowering her hand back to her crossed arms. Denise continues to stand by Sofia, the two look up at others engaged in the activities, and soon, it is Denise’s turn to try a new element: the Partner V—a team challenge. Denise invites Sofia to participate in the activity with her, and Sofia inexplicably agrees.
Denise eagerly skips over to the element and leans in toward the tree with outstretched arms, looking up with a bright smile on her face as Mike attaches the rope to her harness with metal carabiners. Denise continues to gaze up, looking at the staples pounded into this impressive ponderosa pine, which lead to a small platform 40 feet above the ground. From this platform, two thick metal cables stem out to different trees, effectively forming a gradual “V” parallel to the ground, the vertex of which is at the platform. Mike steps back to his rope and two of Denise’s classmates step in to her sides in the spotting posture. Denise eagerly grabs the first staples and begins to climb, but Mike halts her progress:

Mike: “Before you go up, what are your commands?”
Denise glances off with a smile, then a quick laugh: “I forgot.” She smiles, back at Mike, who towers over her in stature and authority.
Mike: “You gotta say, ‘Spotters ready?’”
Denise: “Spotters ready.”
Her spotters reply, with hands raised up toward Denise: “Ready.”
All pause for a moment of silence, as Denise looks to the tree, then back to Mike.
Denise breaks the silence: “Can I go?”
Mike: “And then what’s the next one?”
Denise: “I don’t know.” She flashes a smile at Mike again, charming her way to forgiveness.
Mike: “On belay.”
Denise: “On belay.”
Mike: “OK. Belay is on.”
All pause again for a moment, again, waiting for Denise. One of her spotters saves her the embarrassment of asking once again by whispering to her loudly, “Say ‘climbing’!”
Denise: “Climbing.”
Mike: “Climb on.” (September 16, 2012)

Denise responds to this command as a horse would the abrupt opening of a gate. She effortlessly pulls the staples from overhead down to her waist, powering up with her legs, her feet balanced on the protrusions of metal in the tree. In moments, she is on the
platform above, looking down at the crowd of spectators below, who snap photographs and encourage her, “Go Denise!” “Yeah Denise!”

Following Denise’s success, Sofia executes the commands perfectly, but climbs the pole much slower than her friend. She is methodical about her foot and hand placements on the staples as she climbs the tree. Those mindful of Sofia’s recent struggle on the last element provide additional cheering, showing enthusiastic and continuous support for Sofia as she works her way slowly up the tree, “You got this Sofia!” “You’re doing great Sofia!” Though the speed with which they climbed the tree was varied, both were silent while climbing, as appears common for activities this physically engaging.

Before long, Sofia rolls on top of the platform where she is greeted by Denise, and the crowd below breaks out in applause, congratulating Sofia for her climb.

The girls, now on top of the platform, share in a private conversation beyond earshot from the crowd below, and hold hands for a moment as they stand side by side looking out at the cables stretched out over the void. Denise breaks their collective silence, yelling down to the supportive crowd below, “What do we do now?” and their instructor, Nicole, gives them a few directions to get started. They each step off the platform onto the wire while holding onto the side of the platform and each other. A large gust of wind arrives in their canopy high above the ground, literally shaking their tree, the wires, and the platform. They freeze for a few moments, not speaking as they wait for the long gust of wind to pass.

They each drop their second foot onto the wire, and join hands. Both facing squarely into one another, they raise their hands over their heads, their feet balanced precariously on the thick cable as they lean in on one another for support. [IMG. 71] Their
feet wobble somewhat on the wires, as they slowly side-step out and away from the platform. As the girls make progress out on the wires, the boisterous cheering from the ground grows in frequency and intensity, “Nice Job!” “You got it!” Sofia, in particular, receives heavy support from those on the ground. With each step the girls take, the wires on which they stand grow farther apart, forcing them to lean in farther, rendering their physical position all the more unstable and improbable. Denise coaches Sofia as they move out on the wire, “Push up! Push towards me!”

Denise shrieks with excitement, laughing and smiling as she looks down, celebrating the instability she feels by bending her knees and bouncing somewhat on the wire. Sofia, on the other hand, quickly transitions into a contradictory response. In an instant, a switch is flipped in Sofia; she goes tense, white in the face, and freezes on the wire, her hands clasped tightly to Denise’s.

Mike, apparently noticing Sofia’s abrupt change in disposition, calls up to the girls, “How are you doing up there? What would you like?” Sofia responds by burying her face against the shoulder of her outstretched arm and starts to cry while Denise, seemingly unaware of Sofia’s struggle, continues to giggle as she looks down to the ground far below. Denise’s giggling turns to laughter while Sofia remains frozen on the wire, staring down with the tense look of desperation on her face. Again, she hides her face in her shoulder, escaping the experience for a moment, taking two long breaths. An adult on the ground, noticing Sofia, interjects: “Sofia, you doing OK or do you wanna get down?” Sofia breaks from her freeze immediately to reply, “Get down.” Nicole, upon hearing this, talks Sofia through the details of returning to the ground.
As soon as the girls weight their ropes they are pulled from one another’s hands. Denise continues to celebrate the position, stretching her arms out to her sides as if she is flying, her bright smile glowing down to spectators below. Sofia, on the other hand, buries her face in her hands, failing to disguise her quick sobs. Upon reaching the ground she is comforted by Nicole, but her tears paint the experience a somber color. An adult approaches Sofia: “You wanna take a walk?” Sofia does not speak and stands with the group for a moment, then walks to the back of the group, removing her harness and helmet, and once again crossing her arms. Soon, she leaves the group and walks to the picnic tables for a snack with her friend. Denise, after completing another element, joins the girls at the picnic table, where they share in a private discussion.

At the end of the day, during a final group processing, Sofia volunteered her reflection from the day to the entire group, as a thank you to those who supported her:

“I want to thank Donny for encouraging me when I was up there bawling my eyes out, ‘cause I was so scared, and Denise too, and all the people that were in my group that helped me conquer my fear of heights a little bit.” (September 16, 2012)

While on the wire, Sofia and Denise project contradictory responses to the same objective conditions of the experience. Both seemingly of the same age (15), ethnicity (Hispanic), and from the same school, Denise giggles and celebrates this unique experience, while Sofia appears terrified, miserable, crying, and eager for any opportunity to escape the experience. These disparate responses to the experience shed a significant light on the question of how personal backgrounds may coalesce with the AE institutional culture, as their example stands as a convincing case for attending to idiosyncrasy in AE.

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40 Denise’s response, as written, could be explained as an expression of fear equal to that expressed by Sofia. However, given Denise’s effortless success with all other elements, I would contend that her laughter was a genuine sign of glee, rather than a defense mechanism. Accordingly, the central point remains: the responses of the two girls were wildly different in spite of their shared categorical backgrounds.
Why is the Pole Shaking?

Sadie, an approximately 16-year-old girl with long brown hair stands tensely with her arms straight down at her sides, her hands balled in tight fists. She wears a white helmet and full-body harness over her bright green sweatshirt and black sweatpants. As Mike, the instructor, clips the metal carabiner to her harness behind her, he asks:

Mike: “What’s your goal?”
Sadie: “What do you mean?”
Mike: “What do you want to do?”
Sadie: “Get to the top and jump.”
Mike: “Alright, get to the top and jump. We’re with you.” (September 15, 2012)

The Power Pole is perhaps the coup de grace of challenge courses in their current form. At Redcloud, the constructed element consists of an erected telephone pole approximately 30 feet in the air, with 12” staples pounded into the sides leading all the way to the top, which is sawed off flat. A trapeze bar hangs approximately eight feet away from this pole, suspended in the air by cables strung between nearby overgrown pine trees. The implied objective for participants is to use the staples on the sides of the pole to climb the pole to the top, and then to stand atop the pole before diving out into the air in an attempt to catch the trapeze bar, which hangs some 35 feet above the ground.

This initiative is quintessential in its demand of mental courage in the face of physical performance while reconciling unique and likely unfamiliar aesthetic conditions. Sadie’s goal—“Get to the top and jump”—is certainly easier said than done.

A group of fifteen or so participants gather on the hillside above Sadie to provide encouragement as she slowly climbs up the pole. “Way to go Sadie!” “You got this Sadie.” Their voices muffle the thunder of an approaching storm, which they ignore in favor of supporting Sadie. Participants reflect a degree of interest or investment as they
watch deliberately from the ground as Sadie nears the top of the pole. The once consistently audible crowd goes silent as Sadie carefully places one foot atop the pole, causing the pole to shake beneath her. Sadie’s accelerated breathing can be heard from the ground between faint echoes of thunder, as she reaches one hand out into the air for balance. She keeps her other hand rested on her bent knee, frozen for a moment as she considers her next move: to bring her second foot atop the pole, only about one foot in diameter. The tension can be cut with a knife. Her nervous energy spreads through her body and down her legs, shaking the pole beneath her feet. She asks desperately but rhetorically, to whoever is listening, “Why is the pole shaking?!”

This comical plea cuts the anxiety of the crowd below, which breaks out in boisterous laughter, and resumes cheering for Sadie through the final step to the top of the pole, causing Sadie to crack a smile as she balances high above the ground. Abruptly, Sadie steps her second foot atop the pole, while maintaining her posture, and looking down at her feet. The crowd responds by applauding this maneuver, cheering Sadie onward to the next phase of the element—the jump to the trapeze bar.

The crowd grows silent again as Sadie appears to be freezing up in this position, she holds her shaking hands by her sides, as she counts out loud, “One… two…” but pauses, and neglects to deliver the third count. She tries counting again, “One… two…” and again, “One… two…” and again, “One… two…” Mike tries to break her out of the freeze by adding motions to each count: On one, bend your knees; on two, swing your arms back; and on three, swing your arms forward and jump. Sadie tries this once, but freezes up again at two. She pleads, “I keep looking at the ground!”
The crowd below continues to shower Sadie with encouragement, and some take videos and photographs—recording this noteworthy event for future reference. The support from the ground is a constant flow of overwhelmingly positive expressions. Sadie counts again, “One… two… three!” this time launching forward on the third count, catching the bar, and swinging forward with nothing but air beneath her feet. The crowd goes wild with applause and cheering as Sadie swings back and forth on the trapeze bar. After a few celebratory swings, she releases the bar, letting her weight fall onto her harness, and is lowered to the ground with a prideful smile. [IMG. 74] Her classmates crowd around her as she returns to the ground, offering congratulatory high fives and pats on the back while Mike unclips the rope from her harness. Moments later, another group of participants arrive to the area, and Sadie is reunited with a friend. They hug with excitement, and Sadie immediately spins around, reporting, “I just jumped that!” as she points up enthusiastically to the Power Pole, still smiling with pride in her effort.

Participants interacted with this element in many ways: some are overcome with fear at the mere sight of this pole and abstain from participating while others haphazardly execute the element in its entirety displaying little visible signs of fear. As Bill confided to me upon completing the Power Pole, “That was easy. I wasn’t scared at all.” [IMG. 73] Most, however, find themselves between these two extremes, which allows for a great variance in the behaviors exhibited by participants near the top of the pole: some shake and some are steady; some complain and some celebrate; some laugh and some cry; some view their experience as a success and others as a failure. Though variance is significant, a general emotion of positivity seems to surround these activities, and when participants return to the ground, they almost always exhibit wide smiles on their faces. As I heard
two girls reflecting on the experience: “That was all super fun.” Her friend agrees, “Yeah, that was really cool.”

Participants were presented with a myriad of challenges far above the ground. Other notable high ropes elements facilitated while I observed at Redcloud included climbing across an enormous cargo net 40 feet above the ground, traversing cables with the aid of unique combinations of ropes or cables, climbing a “Giant’s Ladder” with the help of a friend, walking across unstable wooden planks without the aid of handrails, [IMG. 78] or swinging from rope to rope as a monkey on vines might [IMG. 76] all 30 to 50 feet above the ground. Though many of these high activities are designed as individual challenges, elements of camaraderie are evidenced through the encouragement and frequent communal approach demonstrated in their execution. Though often only one or two participants are engaged in the element formally, support from the ground ensures that they are far from alone.

A Final Reflection

Back in the main area at the end of the day, as the sun dips lower in the sky and tiredness is in the eyes of participants and instructors alike, Andy gathers the large group of participants together around an old climbing rope tied in a loop. He instructs the participants to grab a section of the rope and lean back, stretching the loop out taunt in a near-perfect circle—a final novel experience—before prompting the group to sit down in their circle, about fifteen feet across. Andy creates an intimate and comfortable setting for this group situated on the long, broad ridge overlooking thousands of acres of wilderness.

Andy: “How you guys feeling?”
Participants respond in unison: “Good!”
Andy: “Good? Alright, awesome. So just to kind of close out the day, I would like to hear from some of you, or all of you if you would like to speak. If you would like to share something, what you’re gonna do is just stop that knot between your two hands as it comes around.”

Andy points to the obvious lone knot in the loop of rope, and continues, “I guess what [I mean] by that is, something that maybe you learned today, something that maybe you experienced, maybe one of the highlights of your day, maybe something that you guys can apply back at school or just back to normal everyday life.” (September 15, 2012)

They begin to send the knot around the group; some pulling on the rope hand over hand, others letting it slide through their fingers. They are silent, and most eyes are focused on the knot, which passes through the hands of the participants one after the other, making its way around the circle. When a participant decides they want to share a reflection with the group, they stop the spinning loop of rope with the knot between their hands.

Given Andy’s open-ended invitation for responses, these comments vary greatly from participant to participant, ranging from simple reflections, “I had fun” to personal feelings, “I’m proud of all of you, I saw a lot of positive energy today,” to recollecting particular initiatives of the day, “The ten foot wall. We all had teamwork. That was cool to see,” to sharing the internal stories of the day, “I overcame my fear because Jenny helped me, she’s one of my best friends, and I overcame my fear.” Other comments from participants in the group include:

“This was fun. I got to know a lot of you guys, and conquer a little bit of my fear of heights, but it was fun. A good day.”
“I think the best part of today was when I did the trapeze thing there. Because everyone was really encouraging and it felt really awesome. Standing up there I felt like the bomb. … And I’m scared of heights, so it’s kind of awesome to stand on the top of a pole, and jump. And I actually caught it.”
“It was a lot of fun, even though I didn’t actually make it to the top of the telephone pole. I got there and then I didn’t want to stand up, so I got back down. But everybody was really encouraging, and nobody was annoyed at me for not jumping,

193
they actually told me I made a good choice in not jumping, so that was really nice.”
(September 15, 2012)

More than anything, there is a sense of warmth in this tight circle of open reflection, and comments trend overwhelmingly toward the positive aspects of the experience—namely personal triumphs, favorite moments, or highlighting individual and collective performances. It seems Andy’s activity for sharing keeps reflections brief, and prevents these reflections from taking a conversational tone, while still providing an open forum for participants to voice their thoughts.

After a few minutes of the knot spinning around the circle, interrupted by many participant responses, Andy concludes the reflection by thanking the group and sends them on their way. As participants disperse, there are continued congratulations and a prolonged ambiance of accomplishment spreads across the group; even a four-way hug between two participants and two adults, as one adult offers, “I’m so proud of you!”

They walk back up the dusty gravel road from whence they came early this morning. The dry mountain breeze is welcomed in this hot afternoon sun, which shines down on their backs, casting long shadows up the road. They chat with one another as they walk, many still reflecting on notable moments during the day, reviewing pictures on cameras and phones, reminiscing, laughing, and cataloging this day as a memorable experience in their lives.

**The Redcloud Challenge Course in Conclusion**

My experience researching at Redcloud was different than observations at the Academy or Shavano in that I was kept at somewhat of an arm’s length from participants, though that is not to say that my research did not inspire reflection of my own.
experiences. Much as Denise and Sofia on the Partner V, I can remember the first time I attempted the Partner V. I recall my coworker looking across to me as we leaned in on one another, “Push! Push!” he said, as his eyes, no doubt reflecting my own, grew wider with each step farther out on the wire. I remember the tension reverberating through our bodies, shaking the wires violently as we fought the inevitable fall. I can similarly recall the feeling from the first time I stood atop the Power Pole. Though it was a number of years ago, I still remember failing to push the butterflies out of my stomach as I stared out from the pole to the trapeze bar in front of me, much as Sadie must have felt.

While participants often consider the Redcloud experience as a break from ordinary routines—an experience noteworthy for its distinction from normal life—it is clear that the challenge course itself operates on a routine of sorts. Redcloud, from one day to the next, embodied a habit of facilitating progressively more difficult challenges to participants, interrupted by reflective discussions of these experiences. Seen in this light, Redcloud programming may be considered as embodying a quest for disequilibrium: When an activity or initiative becomes comfortable, the parameters of the experience are often altered through new rules or additional tasks. This operational dimension of the curriculum, coupled with an ambitious timeline, may well be at the heart of many of Redcloud’s practical operations.

Along with disequilibrium, the Redcloud experience is often noteworthy for the unique aesthetic scenarios to which participants are subjected. The AE experience at Redcloud is to stare down from high in a tree while standing on a wire, or balance on the top of a telephone pole. It is to solve larger than life bizarre puzzles as a collective. It is to try something new and unfamiliar, and to engage enthusiastically in challenge. Though
much the same from day to day, to transient participants, these experiences are likely noteworthy precisely because of their difference from everyday life.

**DESCRIPTIONS IN SUMMARY**

In this chapter, I have given a detailed description of the adventure education experience as I observed and experienced it at the three sites of study: Shavano Expeditions, Wilson Academy, and the Redcloud Challenge Course. These descriptions, presented as they correspond to three distinct brands of the AE experience, serve to showcase the similarities and differences across these sites, provide a degree of vicarious participation in the AE experience, and ultimately contextualize the illustrations of the AE experience, to be presented in the following chapter. These stories are further supported through the images of adventure, available in the pages forthcoming.

The stories and experiences herein will be a point of referral in the chapters that follow as the more discursive aspects of the AE experience are presented, and the educational significance of these experiences are explained. This concrete point of reference grounds future argumentation and abstraction as I transition forward to an illustration of the AE experience.
1. Jose helps Pedro up after a rest
2. Ivan adjusts Pedro’s pack
3. Joe casts a line
4. Pedro and Steve review the map
5. Pedro celebrates catching his first fish
6. Albert and Kenny prepare to sleep in a tent for the first time
7. Kenny, Joe and Albert set up a tent for the first time
8. The group preparing dinner and enjoying hot cocoa
9. Albert’s response to “Show me how you feel right now” amidst his suffering on the trail
10. Steve processes a team-building initiative with the participants
11. The group backpacking through an alpine meadow
12. Participants explore an abandoned mining town
13. L to R: Joe, Ivan, Kenny, Pedro, Albert and Jose
14. Joe, Albert and Kenny partaking in their morning ritual of fishing and exploring
15. Albert and Joe set up their tent at camp 2
16. The group begins the hike to Fancy Pass
17. Pedro negotiates loose 3rd class terrain on the climb to Fancy Pass
18. A rest stop on the hike to Fancy Pass
19. The long climb to Fancy Pass
20. The group traverses a talus field near Fancy Pass
21. Pedro and Jose relax on the summit of Fancy Pass
22. Albert and Jose enjoy the view
23. The group cools off in the frigid waters of Fancy Lake
24. Joe and Albert pack their bags and dry their wet clothes
25. The group discusses “Is it OK to harm nature?”
26. The group begins the descent out of the wilderness
27. The participants learn to paddle
28. Phil points to a potential campsite prior to the cold rainy evening
29. The 15-passenger Academy van
30. Phil’s Hail Mary attempt at a fire amidst a downpour
31. James, excited about sleeping in a tent
32. Participants line up for breakfast served by Mary and Phil
33. Participants skip rocks in a pond
34. Participants at sunset, L to R: (top row) Bruce, Seth, Kevin, Jeff, Rick, Kyle, Hannah, (bottom row) Kate, James and Adam
35. “Nervous but excited” at the edge of the water waiting to raft downstream
36. Rafting the river
37. “Mountain baseball”
38. Mary helping Adam with his backpack
39. Lynn explains river currents
40/41. Face paint on Kate and Rick
42. The participants taking a break
43. Rick gives Kevin a belay in the indoor gym
44. Dan shows Abby and Hannah how to tie a figure 8 knot
45. Phil reviews the belay commands
46. Rick’s first outdoor rock climb
47. Beth explains a rock formation to participants
48. The group celebrates their arrival in the desert, L to R: Kevin, Hannah, Abby, Bruce, Brady, Kate, James, Kyle, Rick and Dan
49. Dance party on the boulder
50. Bruce boulders as Rick points out holds from above and Dan spots from below
51. Rick climbing
52. Abby high above the valley on her second outdoor rock climb
53. Rick nears the top of the cliff as Dan belays
54. Kyle lowers Hannah as Kate gives a back up belay
55. Rick, Kevin and Becky crossing a stream
56. Bruce bouldering
57. The group gathers around the fire
58. Kate is lowered from a climb as Phil and Bruce explore the summit block
59. Brady, James, Kevin and Rick around the fire
60. Participants playing in the mud
61. Rick, Phil and Brady hunt a garter snake
62. Redcloud instructor, Andy
63. The “Cargo Net” element
64. Equipment in the trailer
65. Close quarters on the “Acid River”
66. Participants work together to overcome the “15-foot-wall”
67. Three participants pass a board forward while balancing on boards on the “Acid River”
68. Participants balance on boards during the “Acid River” initiative
69. Participants attempt to balance the large unstable platform of the “Whale Watch”
70. A participant climbs a tree with the help of oversized staples
71. Two participants stretch out on the “Partner V”
72. Participants lend a hand on the “15-foot-wall”
73. Bill stands atop the “Power Pole” looking out at the trapeze bar
74. Sadie swings as she is lowered from the “Power Pole”
75. A participant poised to leap for the trapeze bar on the “Power Pole”
76. Bill navigating the “Bosun Loops” as Kim climbs the tree in the background to prepare for the “Partner V”
77. Tom catching the trapeze bar on the “Power Pole”
78. Tom balancing across the “Walk the Planks”
CHAPTER FIVE

ILLUSTRATIONS OF THE ADVENTURE EDUCATION EXPERIENCE

The descriptions of the adventure education (AE) experience have offered a point of vicarious participation for the AE experience at the three sites of study. This newfound empirical footing serves as our point of departure as we move from these concrete portrayals toward more discursive illustrations of the AE experience. As we walk out the room of the descriptive and into the entryway of the thematic, we keep a referential foot in the door, as the experiences themselves stand to qualify and support the illustrations of the AE experience.

In this chapter, I illustrate the AE experience in thematic terms through three sections: the qualities of the AE experience, cultural coalescence in AE, and the participant perceptions of schooling. To preview, the qualities of the AE experience include celebratory challenge, novelty, freedom and togetherness, aesthetic vitality, and great experience. Cultural coalescence in adventure education is characterized by cultural rigidity and flexibility by the AE institution, which results in adaptation and sustaining selfhood on the part of the participant. The participant perceptions of schooling are presented through participants’ caricatures, comparisons, and critiques of schooling in the interest of identifying what lessons the AE experience may have for contemporary schooling. My intention is that these three categories of illustration highlight the thematic similarities across the three sites of study, and effectively communicate the distilled
characteristics of the adventure education experience. These illustrations, supported with the voices of participants, collectively serve to reunite us with the original research questions, which are all addressed to varying degrees in this chapter. To review, the questions of interest in this study are as follows:

1. What happens to participants during the adventure education experience?
2. What meanings do participants of adventure education ascribe to those experiences?
3. How do the personal backgrounds of participants coalesce with institutional cultures in adventure education?
4. What is the significance of the adventure education experience for schooling, if any?

While research question one received attention through the descriptions in the previous chapter, it will be addressed on a more discursive level in this chapter alongside question two through the qualities of the AE experience. Question three will be explored through a presentation of cultural coalescence in AE, and question four will receive consideration through the participant caricatures, comparisons, and critiques of schooling. Together, these illustrations represent the findings of this study, and their presentation, in the interest of “the reëducation of perception” (Dewey, 1934, p. 338), satisfies the disclosure of educational criticism (Eisner, 1998). The significance of these findings, and the extent to which these findings support or supplant current discourse on adventure education and schooling, will be discussed in the final chapter.
QUALITIES OF THE ADVENTURE EDUCATION EXPERIENCE

In the interest of enriching our collective perceptions of the adventure education experience, and addressing two of the research questions in this study, I present the qualities of the adventure education experience. To speak of the qualities an experience possesses in thematic terms, as I do here, is not to argue the association of each quality with disparate experiences. Rather, the qualities of the AE experience are presented as they stand together; as actors in the same production. The qualities of the AE experience often overlap, even in the brief vignettes and excerpts that follow, further revealing their union in experience. These qualities are presented separately in the hopes that a greater understanding of the whole is achieved. As Dewey (1934) offered:

For life is no uniform uninterrupted march or flow. It is a thing of histories, each with its own plot, its own inception and movement toward its close, each having its own particular rhythmic movement; each with its own unrepeatable quality pervading it throughout. (p. 37)

This study embodies elements of Dewey’s (1910) analysis and synthesis as grounds to present these qualities separately in order to understand the pervading quality of the adventure education experience. In other words, I explain the quality of the AE experience through discussing the various qualities therein.

I am optimistic that these qualities may come as little surprise in light of the descriptions of the previous chapter. Whereas the inherent presence of these qualities may be considered the subtext of the work to this point, in this chapter these qualities are extracted from their original context, named, characterized, and empirically supported. I utilize a confluence of experiential, observational, and conversational data to present a corroboratively founded and convincing rendering of each quality.

216
Naming the qualities of the AE experience serves to address the first two research questions of this study: 1.) What happens to participants during the adventure education experience? and 2.) What meanings do participants of adventure education ascribe to those experiences? Though these questions represent quite different domains of inquiry, the line between what happened, and the meanings participants ascribed to those happenings, was indiscrete (see Phenix, 1964). Eisner (1988/2005) similarly noted the connection between qualities of experience and the meanings we ascribe to those experiences: “In the end, it is the qualities we experience that provide the content through which meaning is secured” (p. 114).

In another respect, an ascribed meaning to an experience is, in effect, one way to understand the happenings within that experience. Consequently, because the qualities of the AE experience represent a confluence of what happened, and what meanings participants ascribed to the experience (see “cognitive” and “ontological” meanings, Uhrmacher, 2002), questions one and two are attended to together through the qualities of the AE experience. With these caveats and qualifications aside, I present the qualities of the adventure education experience: celebratory challenge; novelty; freedom and togetherness; aesthetic vitality; and great experience. These qualities are discussed to varying degrees—reflective of the salience and complexity of each—and are further characterized through describing particular aspects of each quality (see Figure 8: Preview of the qualities). I delineate the composition of these qualities and organization of the work preemptively through Figure 8, not in anticipation that this outline carries meaning at this juncture, but simply to clarify the structure of the forthcoming portrayal of experience. It is but a prelude to prime the reader as the story of the experience unfolds.
PREVIEW OF THE QUALITIES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experience</th>
<th>Qualities</th>
<th>Descriptors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Celebratory Challenge</td>
<td>Holistic Challenges</td>
<td>Suffering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Learning About Self Through Challenge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Novelty</td>
<td></td>
<td>A Celebration of Challenge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom &amp; Togetherness</td>
<td>New Experiences</td>
<td>Perceptions of Novelty</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The Pedestrian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The Meanings of Novelty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aesthetic Vitality</td>
<td>Freedom: Autonomy; Escape</td>
<td>Togetherness</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Freedom and Togetherness</td>
<td>Aesthetic Encounters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great Experience</td>
<td>An Underlying Quality</td>
<td>Perceptions of Great Experience</td>
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</table>

Figure 8: Preview of the qualities

Quality 1: Celebratory Challenge

Ben: “What makes something a challenge?”
Becky: “[You] have to work for it if it’s really a challenge. If don’t really work for it, and it’s kind of easy for you, it’s not really a challenge. You have to really, like, get up there and try your best for it to be a challenge.” (July 26, 2012)

A challenge is “a difficult or demanding task, esp. one seen as a test of one's abilities or character” (Challenge, 1984). In the context of adventure education, this demanding task plays a central role in the experience (Berry, 2011; Mortlock, 1978), and is treated a particular way by participants and AE instructors alike. As George noted, “an adventure probably wouldn’t be an adventure without a challenge,” and in accordance, challenge played an explicit role in the experiences provided at each of the three sites of study. The inclusion of challenge as a quality of the AE experience is not to merely confirm its employment, but to characterize its use and form across the three sites.

In the adventure education experience, challenges were characterized as holistic in that they were both physical and mental, and were also often marked by suffering or
pain. These challenges were considered a gateway to learning about self, and their completion was celebrated in a form of afterglow. Each of these aspects of challenge in AE will be explained in turn, and supported with excerpts from the field to provide a rendering of celebratory challenge as a quality of the AE experience.

**Holistic Challenges**

Challenges in the AE experience were often of a holistic character; participants were involved in both physical and mental terms. For example, during the “low” challenge initiatives at Redcloud, challenges were presented in purely physical terms—usually completing a physical task within a given set of parameters—but were solved through problem solving, which often required a form of mental agency and collaboration. See, for example, the Acid River or Jake’s low initiatives at Redcloud.

Tom, a participant at Redcloud, explained his understanding of these mental and physical challenges as we discussed his experience with one of the high elements:

Tom: “This puts us in stressful positions in my opinion. It’s kind of like modern day life because that puts you in stressful positions, but this is more physical than emotional… Well… Yeah, than, like, mental.”
Ben: “You think it’s more physical stress here?”
Tom: “Yeah. Here it’s more… Well it’s physical and mental, because here, you are actually climbing heights. It’s more like where you are, Like a fear of where you are, not a fear of what you’re doing. … Well. A little bit of both [emphasis added].”
Ben: “Was [the high element you just completed] physically challenging for you or mentally challenging for you?”
Tom: “Um. … More physically but also mental, because when I walked across there, physically, I just thought where I was. I was kind of going a little bit crazy. And it was kind of just like, ‘Oh crap! I can’t believe I’m this high!’ and everything. Mentally it was just the fact that I don’t like heights. So mentally just a fear.”

(September 28, 2012)

This physical/mental tension was also identified by Brad, another Redcloud participant:

Ben: “Do you find a lot of these things challenging, do you think?”
Brad: “Physically, a little bit; mentally, not really. I mean, *it’s just like putting your mind over the object and accomplishing the task* [emphasis added].”

Ben: “So which parts of it are challenging, is it physically challenging or mentally challenging for you?”

Brad: “It’s physically challenging, definitely, I think it’s physically challenging to anybody.”

…

Ben: “Has anything been mentally challenging for you?”

Brad: “Last year [at this challenge course] I did face a bunch of problems. I was pretty afraid of heights last year, but after I came up here, definitely it feels a lot better. It feels good now. Doesn’t feel paranoid or anything.”

Ben: “OK, and do you like to be challenged in that way?”

Brad: “Yeah. It’s very nice. It opens you up to new discoveries.”

Ben: “Being challenged opens you up? Can you say more about that?”

Brad: “Well, it just, like… I dunno. I guess going through something that you haven’t experienced before, like puts you in a mind state that you haven’t experienced it and now that you have you feel like you’re part of the many few.” (September 27, 2012)

Robin, also at Redcloud, further clarified this through recalling some of her inner dialogue while engaged in the experience:

Ben: “Do you think this, or the Power Pole, is that physically challenging for you?”

Robin: “Um. Yeah. That was physically challenging for me, ’cause when I got to the top it was really hard for me to put my feet actually on the wood, so I had to.”

Ben: “Was it mentally challenging at all?”

Robin: “Not really. I mean, to an extent, because I had to overcome my brain telling me that I shouldn’t be doing this [emphasis added].” She laughs. “But not like thinking about it like, coming up with a plan and stuff.”

Ben: “Could you say more about that? That confuses me, when your brain tells you that you shouldn’t be doing this, but you’re also telling yourself to keep doing it, right?”

Robin: “Yeah. I think it’s just out of… I don’t know how to explain it. … Let me think. … OK so when my brain is like… When I’m scared to do something that’s basically me feeling like… Like I’m telling myself, ‘You don’t have to do this, it’s OK if you don’t.’ But then there’s a part of me that’s like, ‘Yeah you really need to do this to overcome that part of you that’s scared.’” (September 28, 2012)

While the physical demands of some challenges, such as the one Tom completed, were not overwhelmingly difficult for an athletic young adult like himself, this unfamiliar and alarming context—suspended some 40 feet above the ground—invokes a new mental condition, and this once relatively simple task transforms to a challenging undertaking.
As a personal example, walking across a balance beam a foot above the ground, for me, is not a significant challenge. However, when I was presented with this same activity at a challenge course, 50 feet above the ground, I found the activity quite demanding. Though the physical requirements of the task remain unchanged, the context renders the obstacle as significantly more difficult; a uniquely holistic endeavor.

This is not to say that every AE experience involved this internal dissonance, nor did every experience engage the participants in the ways presented above. There was significant variance in how participants were engaged in challenge in mental and physical terms; some were purely physical, others purely mental, but both were involved to varying degrees throughout the AE experience. Certainly some initiatives were more mental than physical; such as the low elements at Redcloud, the initiatives facilitated by Steve at Shavano, or withstanding the dreary conditions of the cold rainy evening at the Academy. Others were more physical than mental; such as backpacking at Shavano, hiking a steep trail at the Academy, or Christy, who reported her arms burning after pulling across a high element at Redcloud. However, the challenges were noteworthy in the way they consistently involved participants both physically and mentally, a form of holistic challenge that often brought about a degree of suffering in participants.

**Suffering**

To suffer is to “undergo, endure. … To have (something painful, distressing, or injurious) inflicted or imposed upon one; to submit to with pain, distress, or grief” (Suffer, n.d.). Suffering, in the adventure education experience, is the state of enduring the conditions of the challenge presented. It is characterized by emotional and physical pain, toil and a desire to find relief or escape from the experience itself. Examples of this
suffering, as associated to the challenges, were persistent across the three sites. An obvious example of this somewhat miserable condition can be found in the interviews of participants at Shavano. At one rest stop on our hike out of the wilderness, a few of the boys expressed their pain and desire for respite from the experience:

Ben: “How you feeling Jose.”
Jose: “Good. Bad.”
I laugh. “Which one?”
Jose: “Bad.”
Ben: “Why bad?”
Jose: “I’m so tired. … [I’m tired] of hiking.”
Ben: “How you feeling [Ivan]?”
Ivan: “Tired. … [and] disappointed ‘cause a while back someone said that it was like 20 minutes and now she’s saying that it’s 15 minutes ‘till we get to the cars.”
Ben: “Oh, so it’s too far?”
Ivan: “Yeah. … My knees are starting to hurt a lot.”
Ben: “Pedro how about you?”
Pedro: “Tired. I don’t want to do anything anymore. I just want to lay here. I wish the car was right here in front of me [emphasis added].” (July 22, 2012)

Even when my questions focused on the more abstract aspects of the experience, participants were unwilling or unable to consider anything beyond that with which they were concretely and immediately engaged: their suffering. As I walked up the trail alongside Pedro and Jose, my questions of the meaning of the experience were usurped by their suffering and longing for relief from the experience.

Ben: “So what does this mean to you right now?”
Jose: “I dunno. I’m so tired right now.”
Ben: “What thoughts are going through your head?”
Jose: “I dunno. When I get there I’m gonna go to sleep.”
Ben: “Pedro, what does this mean to you right now?”
Pedro: “Um. Right now I think I have like 10 times my weight, carrying it.”
Ben: “You’re carrying 10 times your weight on your back?”
Pedro: “Yeah. And I’m tired. I want to just get there and take a nap, eat, sleep.” (July 20, 2012)
Examples of suffering were also evident at the other sites, such as the excessive enduring that took place during the cold and rainy evening at the Academy, or the emotional toil experienced by Sofia while on the Partner V at Redcloud. The tears streaming down their faces is evidence of the pain experienced as a direct result of the AE experience. In fact, Pedro even noted pain as among the most salient emotions associated with the experience.

Ben: “When you think about your experience with adventure, what kinds of emotions come to mind?”
Pedro: “Um. Pain.”
Ben: “Pain?”
Pedro: “Yeah, it takes pain. You have to be strong.” (July 21, 2012)

This is a pain I know well. Adventure has a tendency to drive us to desperation; whether it be gulping unfiltered water from mosquito-infested waters, pulling cactus spines from sunburned skin, or shivering inside a tent amidst an unrelenting alpine storm. Pain is something I, and all adventurers, know all too well as an intrinsic feature of the experience. In retrospect, the suffering I have endured calls to question why I, or anyone, would intentionally subject oneself to such misery. However, it seems this suffering is not without purpose, but is instead a necessary cost of the experiences, and consequently, this suffering was accepted as an unavoidable attribute of the AE experience. Indeed Dewey (1934) noted some degree of suffering as a qualifying condition of the aesthetic experience:

There is … an element of undergoing, of suffering in its large sense, in every experience. Otherwise there would be no taking in of what preceded. For ‘taking in’ in any vital experience is something more than placing something on the top of consciousness over what was previously known. It involves reconstruction which may be painful. Whether the necessary undergoing phase is by itself pleasurable

41 Among the reasons adventure education is likely not for everyone.
or painful is a matter of particular conditions. It is indifferent to the total esthetic quality, save that there are few intense esthetic experiences that are wholly gleeful. They are certainly not to be characterized as amusing, and as they bear down upon us they involve a suffering that is none the less consistent with, indeed a part of, the complete perception that is enjoyed [emphasis added]. (pp. 42-43)

In other words, for these experiences to be “vital,” it must embody some disequilibrium by which painful reconstruction might occur. Whitehead (1929) similarly noted the necessary role of difficulty in education, as “the postponement of difficulty is no safe clue for the maze of educational practice” (p. 16). This disequilibrium was often sought after explicitly by AE instructors, such as Jen, a Redcloud instructor, who offered to one group on a low initiative, “You guys are really good! I might have to take a board away to make it challenging!”

Though these challenges typically resulted in numerous forms of suffering, participants and instructors often embraced disequilibrium as a requisite aspect of the experience. As such, there exists a tension between those aspects of the experience that are not readily enjoyable, such as being scared, tired, suffering and uncertain, and what these experiences may do for us. Much of this is attributed to the utilitarian role challenges may play in the AE experience: as a mechanism of learning about self.

**Learning About Self Through Challenge**

The idea that challenges can help us learn about ourselves is perhaps the most abundant topic of discourse concerning adventure education (Darst & Armstrong, 1980; Ewert, 1989), and has been offered as among the central meanings of the AE experience for participants (see “self-discovery” in Loeffler, 2004). The AE literature is replete with references to awakening these perceptions through increased self-efficacy, new awareness of self, or other transformational qualities of the experience (Berman & Davis-
Berman, 1995; Durr, 2009; Ewert, 1983; Kolb, 1988; Sheard & Golby, 2006; Shellman & 
Ewert, 2010). Indeed, that adventure can serve as a means to greater ends is perhaps the 
unifying principle of adventure education theorists to date (Hunt, 1999).

In practicality, engagement with a challenge, by virtue of not knowing if one will be able to complete the challenge, inevitably results in some degree of learning about self. Examples of this uncertainty of self, as participants were involved with challenges, were abundant in the data. As we resumed backpacking after a break, Pedro confessed, “Let’s go. I don’t think I can make it, but let’s go.” Or as numerous participants on high elements at Redcloud and the Academy aired their insecurities, “I’m gonna fall!” or “I can’t do it!” As such, that participants learned about themselves is not particularly surprising, however, the abundance of this perception serves to validate and enrich many of the longstanding rationales for challenge in AE. As Ivan of Shavano explained:

Ben: “Do any of these experiences make you notice anything about yourself?”
Ivan: “That I can actually do things that I never thought I could. Like yesterday when we hiked the four miles, I never thought I could do that. I never even thought I could backpack like two miles let alone four [emphasis added].”
Ben: “How did that feel?”
Ivan: “Uhh. You get tired but its fun going up.”
Ben: “I wonder if you could explain that a little more, how you get tired but it’s fun.”
Ivan: “You get tired because the backpack kind of gets heavy on you, but at the same time, every time you get closer to where you’re going, everything just changes, like the whole scenery, its just different trees, different … there’s more trees than I’ve ever seen, so, yeah.”

…

Ben: “Have [these experiences] changed how you think about yourself? Or have they taught you anything about yourself?”
Ivan: “Yeah, because this is a pretty hard thing to do, the whole backpacking and staying in the cold and on the ground, so I’ve never really been too much outside. I spend a lot of time inside my house, pretty much just watching TV, so I never really thought I could do anything like that.” (July 20, 2012)
For Ivan, engaging in new activities allowed him to realize the extent of his own capabilities. Joe similarly expressed that these experiences allowed him to learn about himself, an example I find particularly convincing because my initial question was directed toward understanding culture in AE:

Ben: “Do any of these experiences, or has your time here helped you notice anything about yourself? Specifically thinking about your gender, race, or age, or anything like that?”
Joe: “I’ve seen that I can do most stuff that some kids my age can’t do. … Mostly, kids my age that I know would’ve backed down like the first two miles we went. And, yeah, I feel proud of myself. I’m doing things that I didn’t even know I could do [emphasis added].”
Ben: “Like what?”
Joe: “Hiking with a heavy backpack on my back for over three, four miles, and I never knew I could do that [emphasis added].”

…

Jo: “[I like to be challenged] because that makes… Sometimes I do things that I never knew I could do. I do ’em myself and it’s like, ‘Wow, I didn’t know I could do that.’ And yeah, it’s awesome [emphasis added].” (July 21, 2012)

When I asked him if these experiences changed how he sees himself, he answered in the affirmative, and elaborated that he understood these challenges as playing a role in developing his physical and mental capacities, further validating claims that these challenges are often holistic in nature.

Joe: “I’ve started to see myself like, stronger. And I’ve taught myself that I can do much stuff. A lot of stuff.”
Ben: “OK. You think you’re stronger in what ways?”
Joe: “Um, Physically and um… how should I say this… mentally.” He later explained, “Because sometimes I just feel like I can’t do it, and this trip has taught me that I can do a lot of stuff.” (July 21, 2012)

George, also from Shavano, similarly noted this altered perception of self as a result of the challenges in the AE experience:

Ben: “Do you ever notice anything about yourself when you’re out there?”
George: “I mean, not so much. … It kind of brings out things in you. Like uh... Brings out, what is it called, … your attributes, like your traits. … It brings out your
skill, like different skills that you have, like other things you wouldn’t normally use.
… Like building fires, cooking food like that, or just the skills of hiking up there,
pitching a tent, clearing out a spot, getting clean water, fishing. *Just shows what
you’re really capable of,* you know? [emphasis added]” (August 21, 2012)

Though these excerpts are convincing, it is important to note that there were discrepant
cases to this general theme. To the question, “Have these experiences changed how you
see yourself, or have they taught you anything about yourself?” Jose at Shavano and

Sarah at Redcloud offered:

Jose: “No they haven’t changed, it’s the same I think. It’s that I get more tired.”
Ben: “You think about yourself the same way?”
Jose nods. (July 21, 2012)

Sarah: “Um. I dunno. Not really.” She laughs nervously.
Ben: “Can you say more about that? Like you feel the same before and after?”
Sarah: “Yeah. I dunno. I feel like I was glad I did it, but I don’t feel any different as a
person.” (September 28, 2012)

However, while certainly noteworthy, Jose and Sarah’s cases seem to be exceptions to
this otherwise common sentiment toward challenge. As Melissa at Redcloud offered:

“I like to be challenged] ‘Cause I feel like I’m doing something. I don’t want to
just… When I’m not challenged I’m just kind of sitting back and I’m like, ‘Yes, I
know I can do this.’ And when I’m challenged, I get to try new things, and find more
out about myself, and like, realize that I’m braver than I thought I was. That I can do
more.” (September 28, 2012)

Tom from Redcloud further supports that these experiences may lead to new perceptions
of self, even arguing that these experiences somewhat transfer to other areas of his life
(see Luckner & Nadler, 1997):

Tom: “[These experiences have] taught me that if I set my mind to something… Like
my parents have told me this for a while, but I don’t necessarily believe it until I
prove it to myself like this. Whatever I set my mind to, I can actually do. Instead of
just like… In a way, just like limiting myself. Like saying ‘I can’t do that’ and then
being challenged to actually do it. And doing it is kind of like a fulfillment. Like,
‘Wow I can do that.’”

…
Ben: “Do you think [these experiences connect] with your everyday life back in school and at work and at home?”
Tom: “A little bit. Because, like, you deal with stressful situations at home and work and school. Some may not be as stressful as … like if you have a very, very bad fear of heights it might not be as stressful as going up a 30 foot pole. But it’s still stressful and you have to deal with it.” (September 28, 2012)

That these challenges are justified through the growth they instill in the participant is another tenet of adventure education in its current form, and likely the main cause for celebrating its prolific use. As Davidson (2001) suggested, in AE, “challenge is not only a good way to learn, but also a good thing to learn” (p. 16). This idea that challenge can breed new perceptions of self is also supported by Dewey’s (1934) philosophy of aesthetic experience:

Life itself consists of phases in which the organism falls out of step with the march of surrounding things and then recovers unison with it—either through effort or by some happy chance. And, in a growing life, the recovery is never mere return to a prior state, for it is enriched by the state of disparity and resistance through which it has successfully passed. If the gap between organism and environment is too wide, the creature dies. If its activity is not enhanced by the temporary alienation, it merely subsists. *Life grows when a temporary falling out is a transition to a more extensive balance of the energies of the organism with those of the conditions under which it lives* [emphasis added]. (pp. 12-13)

While new perceptions of self were non-existent for some (Sarah and Jose), for others, such as Robin, this new, or reaffirmed perception of self is the primary significance of the AE experience:

Ben: “Are these experiences significant or important to you?”
Robin: “Um. Not necessarily experience, but like, what I get out of the experience.”
Ben: “So the outcomes are important to you?”
Robin: “Yeah.”
Ben: “And what do you think those major outcomes are?”
Robin: “Really just reminding myself what it feels like to overcome something to give me that motivation next time I want to do it.” (September 28, 2012)
Pedro, at Shavano, believed these challenges not only influenced his understanding of self, but carried a transformative quality for him; he believed challenges of this type changed him. As he explained:

“Challenges are really good, and I like them, because they make you stronger. So if you put yourself a challenge to get to that peak, and if you don’t, if you fail it, it hurts your heart, you know? ‘Cause you were into it a lot. So, challenges are… if you make it, you’re proud of yourself. Yeah.” (July 21, 2012)

Also evident in Pedro’s comment about challenge is another characteristic of challenge in AE: Overcoming or enduring challenge results in a sense of pride, accomplishment, and happiness, which I present through afterglow.

**Afterglow**

Afterglow is “a pleasant feeling remaining after a successful or happy experience” (Afterglow, n.d.). In the adventure education experience, afterglow is the reveling or celebration of suffering endured or challenges overcome. This sense of accomplishment, pride, celebration, or satisfaction is presented as an element of challenge in AE as it was through challenge that this emotive ambiance was realized. When I asked Jose at Shavano what emotions came to mind within this experience, he responded that he feels “Proud. … Proud that I made it all the way up there, and climbed all the way.”

Examples of afterglow were abundant across the three sites; seemingly, wherever there was challenge in AE, there was opportunity to celebrate the completion of challenge. As Robin from Redcloud explained, this feeling of accomplishment is the very reason she appreciates challenges:

Robin: “[I like to be challenged] because I like the feeling of overcoming a challenge, and proving to people around me that I can do what they’re asking me to do [emphasis added].” Robin further explained this feeling later in our interview, “It’s not like I have a major fear of heights, but I feel like, accomplished once I overcome
the pole, when I climbed up to the top. And if I didn’t overcome what I [wanted] to do, I’d feel disappointed in myself.”

Ben: “OK. So say more about what that sense of accomplishment feels like.”

Robin: “It’s like… I actually… I dunno how to describe it. Like what do you mean?”

Ben: “Say, when you get lowered to the ground after doing the Power Pole…”

Robin: “I feel like… I feel relieved and… proud and… I have to calm myself down a little bit. So yeah.” (September 28, 2012)

Tom, also at Redcloud, seems to agree with Robin, as he reviewed his experience on a high element:

Tom: “I hate… I hated it at first because I hate heights, but I think I did it and, hell, I overcame something. So that was fulfilling in a way, or accomplishing.”

Ben: “Fulfilling or accomplishing?”

Tom: “Yeah, it feels like you actually did something.” And later, “You feel like you’re facing something—something that you wouldn’t normally face. And once you have to be it, it’s kind of nice. Like once I got down and across it, I felt good.”

Ben: “Can you say more about what you felt when you got down?”

Tom: “Um. I just felt, like, relieved that it was over, and that I actually faced it, instead of like… In the past, before, I’ve skipped out on opportunities because I didn’t want to take the risk of getting up there and being completely scared. So here I was kind of happy that I got up there, took the risk, and I accomplished it.” (September 28, 2012)

The very suffering characterized previously appears to be, at least for some, the gateway to these euphoric feelings of afterglow. When I asked Tom if he liked being challenged in these ways, he offered:

Tom: “Yeah I like being… I hate just looking at it and not doing it. Saying ‘No’ to it. I don’t like giving up on things. I like being challenged in this way. I may hate it while I’m doing it, but the end result I love. So I see it as worthwhile [emphasis added].”

Ben: “Worthwhile because it feels good to have completed it or…?”

Tom: “Yeah. To feel good to have completed it instead of running away with your tail between your legs from fear.”

…

Ben: “Are these experiences fun or enjoyable for you?”

Tom: “Um. … Yeah they’re fun and enjoyable, especially after I do them. Like, during it I may hate myself for making me do it, but afterwards it’s really fun and enjoyable.” And later, as Tom described the experience, “[Before you do these initiatives] you kind of look up and you’re like, ‘Man… What am I doing? What am I doing?’ Then when you’re on it you’re like, ‘WHY AM I DOING THIS?’ And then
once you’re done you’re just like, ‘I’m just happy I did that.’ … So it’s kind of like… Sure, I’m still not looking forward to it, but I’m looking forward to… I see what I’m probably going to feel afterwards, so I’m looking forward to that.” (September 28, 2012)

Similarly, for George of Shavano, being on the other side of these challenges is among the main reasons for engaging in adventure education. As he explained:

“Challenge is rewarding. When you’re on a really hard hike and you finally get to the top, or you’re in the middle of the hike and you’re like ‘Oh man why am I doing this, this is rough.’ And when you get there, it’s like, ‘Aww man. It was so worth it, so worth it.’ It’s the best feeling ever.” (August 21, 2012)

As Tom and George explain, the discomfort brought about by the challenge itself is seemingly the price of admission to the sense of afterglow that follows these experiences. To endure suffering and submit to these dire circumstances can, upon completion, bring about “the best feeling ever.”

That these experiences actualized a sense of pride or accomplishment in participants is one thing, but that participants were encouraged to bask in that accomplishment is yet another characteristic of afterglow in the AE experience. Examples of this structured and intentional celebration of challenge and accomplishment were consistent across the sites, but took different forms at each. At the Academy participants often danced in their seats in the van as their instructors would present enthusiastic reviews of past experiences and challenges completed; at Shavano, they spent 30 minutes at the apex of Fancy Pass, reveling in having climbed to that elevation; and at Redcloud, instructors encouraged participants to cheer and applaud their accomplishments during and following challenges, as Jake repeated during the lows initiatives, “Let’s celebrate!” Afterglow across the group in these forms renders this
aspect of the experience as more than a private emotion; it is a shared emotional ambiance that pervades the group.

Indeed to have completed a challenge—though they were often characterized by pain and suffering—is to feel a sense of worth for having done what we have done. These experiences, for some, are worthwhile merely for the opportunity to be on the other side of these very experiences and revel in relief from the experience itself. In this light, it seems suffering, hard work, and struggle, may often serve as the gateway to afterglow. Dewey (1934) hinted at this sense of accomplishment as an element of the aesthetic experience—noting that the finished product was not the end goal, but that the purpose of these experiences was within the process of living them.

Between the poles of aimlessness and mechanical efficiency, there lie those courses of action in which through successive deeds there runs a sense of growing meaning conserved and accumulating toward an end that is felt as accomplishment of a process. … [A] sign that interest is not exclusively, perhaps not mainly, held by the result taken by itself (as it is in the case of mere efficiency), but by it as the outcome of a process. There is interest in completing an experience. (p. 40)

Like pain, afterglow is a feeling I know antecedently through my time as an adventurer. My beer tastes colder when my fingers are bleeding from a long day on the rock and my camp chair feels like a deluxe recliner when my legs bear the lactic acid of a punishing descent. Jokes seem funnier; food tastes better; coats feel warmer; and the stars look brighter. In afterglow, the simplest of pleasures are celebrated. It is to bask in achievement, however arbitrary, before moving on to the next endeavor. It is the feeling we often have little time for in schools because we instinctively look forward to the following item on our endless agendas.
As Eisner (1998b) pointed out, “Celebration has a spirit that is rare in discussions of American schooling. Celebration connotes joy, ceremony, something special in experience” (p. 21). Without the opportunity to celebrate enduring or completing challenging scenarios, they might quickly accrue to a life of suffering. However, if we draw them to a celebratory close, we allow them to become significant and distinct in life. As Dewey (1934) noted, “we have an experience when the material experienced runs its course to fulfillment. Then and only then is it integrated within and demarcated in the general stream of experience from other experiences” (pp. 36-37). That these experiences are demarcated in such a positive and celebratory light is perhaps the essence of this broader quality.

**A Celebration of Challenge**

Challenge is a vital element of the adventure education experience that pervades the curricular aspects of the experience at the three sites of study. That challenge existed at the three sites is somewhat expected, however, the celebratory approach to challenge serves as a relevant finding in this study congruent with the literature that purports challenge as enjoyable (Kalisch et al., 2011). Important in this quality of the AE experience is not the mere presence of challenge, but the common character of challenge in the AE experience: as characterized by holistic engagement, suffering, learning about self and afterglow.

There is no material utility to balancing a platform for 20 seconds, getting from one end of a cable to another, hiking to the top of a pass, or paddling down a two mile stretch of river. These challenges are engaged with for their own sake, or for what they may provide in nonmaterial terms. Physical suffering and mental anguish are sought
after, if only to have the feeling of overcoming them, and perhaps learn something in the process. Similar across all sites was this shared positionality toward challenge: Challenge is an opportunity, rather than an unfortunate encounter; it is something to be celebrated.

**Quality 2: Novelty**

Seeking out and interacting with the unexpected and unfamiliar was another central quality of the adventure education experience, which I term novelty. Novelty is defined as “Something new, not previously experienced, unusual, or unfamiliar” (Novelty, n.d.). It is the antithesis of a repetitive or commonplace experience, characterized primarily by a sense of mystery and marked distinction from what we might consider pedestrian. In the AE experience, novelty took many forms—from trying new things, seeing new places and reveling in new feelings, to embracing the unexpected, being surprised, and learning to appreciate new activities. As Darst and Armstrong (1980) offered, the AE experience “adds a ‘kick’ to their lives and gives them a chance to try something they have never tried before” (p. 6). In this section, I review the form of novelty at the three sites before sharing the perspectives of participants regarding novelty. I further illustrate novelty by describing experiences that lack novelty (the pedestrian) and ultimately arrive at the meanings of novelty for AE participants.

**New Experiences**

Examples of this novelty were persistent across the three sites of study, and though this “new” quality of the experience has been mentioned in the past (Darst & Armstrong, 1980; Ewert, 1989; Pohl et al., 2000), the presentation of novelty as among the primary qualities of the AE experience is a fresh perspective. For example at Shavano, none of the participants had ever been backpacking before, rendering the entire
trip foreign to participants. The basic activities therein, such as carrying a heavy backpack, fly fishing, sleeping in a tent, and all the sensations and feelings associated with these activities, were all new to participants. This very newness served as a primary motivator to participation for Albert at Shavano, who joined the trip because, “It just seemed interesting. And I just wanted to, like, have an experience of camping and all of that.”

Shavano also provided room for the unexpected, such as discovering a chipmunk nest, finding evidence of a recent lightning strike on a tree, surviving a hail storm, crossing a bridge along the trail, or an unexpected snowball fight in July. These events and experiences, intended or not, were often valued simply for their newness and unexpected character. As Ivan noted, “Who else in Colorado can say they had a snowball fight in the middle of summer?” George also expressed appreciation of the unexpected on trips with Shavano, “That’s another thing that adds to the thrill, just the unexpected. Not knowing what’s gonna happen during those trips. On the way to those trips, on the way out, just anything can happen. It’s just fun.”

Though the participants’ inexperience with backpacking can be considered the root of this abundance of new experiences in AE, novelty was also an important aspect of the experience for the more seasoned adventurers of Wilson Academy. At the Academy, an implicit energy toward chasing the unexpected resulted in many new experiences, such as encountering unique wildlife (ducks, elk, crayfish, a snake, a rabbit, a caterpillar), noticing a deer track in the mud, watching a lake be restocked with fish, playing “mountain baseball,” covering their bodies with mud, dancing atop a boulder in the desert, catching a flying grasshopper, and doing most of this while accessorized with face
paint. The curricular flexibility at the Academy seems to acknowledge the unexpected as rich with potential for experience, and reflects a programmatic fidelity to serendipity. As one administrator, Doug, implied, the curricular organization is simply to “put the right people in the right places.” Academy participant Becky also noted the unexpected as a reliable aspect of the Academy experience, “Even things that you don’t even think that would happen at [Wilson Academy], happens.”

Novelty at Redcloud, similar to Shavano, was a categorical certainty, and similar to the Academy, transpired as somewhat of an intentional aspect of the curriculum. The organized activities and initiatives are sufficiently unique that participants will likely never encounter tasks of this nature outside a challenge course environment. Indeed, in the rare instances when participants did have past experience with initiatives, instructors took measures to ensure the initiatives facilitated were unfamiliar to the group. Conversely, there was little room for unexpected and surprising experiences at Redcloud, presumably due to time constraints and an already ambitious daily agenda. However, playing new games, embracing new and unique challenges, reconciling a unique aesthetic dissonance, and working with friends and classmates in new and interesting ways provided Redcloud participants with ample opportunities for new experiences. Even wearing a harness for the first time, or simply being in the wilderness was a new undertaking for some. This quality of “new” was also acknowledged by participants at Redcloud, as one adult offered during the final reflection, “I just want to thank everyone for coming up here and trying something new and being brave.” Or as one participant explained why she enjoyed the Acid River, “It was just like a different type of experience.”
Perceptions of Novelty

Stating that novelty happened is surely one level of understanding its role as a quality of the AE experience—indeed, we may well consider novelty as an innate characteristic to adventure through its ties to uncertainty. But many participants also identified novelty as among the most salient features of adventure education, and through their perceptions we can further understand the role novelty may play in the AE experience. Indeed for Rick, newness was both the meaning and the cause for enjoyment within this experience, a topic we discussed sporadically through one interview:

Ben: “Do you think these experiences are for all kids or just some kids?”
Rick: “All.”
Ben: “Why is that?”
Rick: “Just because everybody should try new things.”
…
Ben: “If you had to say that these experiences mean one thing, what would you say they mean?”
Rick: “Um. Mean one thing… Probably ‘New.'”
…
Ben: “If you could tell other kids who don’t get to do this stuff, something about this experience, what would you want them to know? Or what would you tell them?”
Rick: “Just that there’s new challenges all the time and there’s new fun things to do and try. And just that it’s really fun.” (July 31, 2012)

Pedro, of Shavano, characterized novelty through his appreciation of seeing new things. When I asked him what he thought of the mountains, he replied, “Pretty. … It’s not something you see everyday, you know?” Later, during a formal interview, he explained his enjoyment of things “you don’t see everyday,” like the view from Fancy Pass, or the snowfield:

Ben: “What did it feel like when you got to the summit of the pass?”
Pedro: “It felt awesome. Something way different and that you don’t see everyday [emphasis added].”
…
Ben: “Anything else you think of up here [on the pass]?”
Pedro: “Nope. … Oh, Snow.”
Ben: “Snow? What was it like to run into the snow?”
Pedro: “Cool. It gave me a memory of back when I was in the winter. When you felt snow, had fun, made snowballs. I made a snowball and I threw it. That was pretty fun.”
Ben: “Was it weird to have snow in late July?”
Pedro: “Yeah. It’s something that you don’t touch every time, everyday or something like that.” (July 21, 2012)

As Rick and Pedro have explained the importance of novelty, Christy at Redcloud also noted that her enjoyment of AE was due to the unfamiliarity of the activities. As she explained what made her experience on a high element enjoyable:

Christy: “I guess that I hadn’t ever done anything like that before, so that was cool.”
Ben: “OK, so just that it was new you think?”
Christy: “Yeah. … I don’t normally do stuff like this.” She laughs and continues, “First time I’ve put a harness on, first time I’ve climbed a tree. It’s just all new.” (September 25, 2012)

Hannah, a Wilson Academy participant, further affirmed the enjoyment of trying new things. Though she has enrolled in many Wilson Academy programs, she prefers trying new programs because, in her own words, “If I’ve already done it, it’s fun, but I’ve already done it. I like to try new stuff.”

Like Hannah, Becky also appreciated the new experiences offered by Academy programs. As we discussed the importance of challenge for her, she further qualified what it feels like to experience this newness:

Becky: “[I like the challenge part] because it pushes you to try to do stuff that you’ve never done before.”
Ben: “OK, and [do] you like to do stuff you’ve never done before?”
Becky: “Yeah. I like to try new things.”
Ben: “Why do you like to try new things?”
Becky: “Because they’re like, new. And you don’t know if you’re good at them, and you don’t know what’s gonna happen, so it’s kind of like a surprise.” (July 24, 2012)
Many participants (particularly at Shavano) considered the novelty, seeing new places and trying new activities, as a central meaning of the experience. This enjoyment of the new is further verified as a primary motivator for engaging in these experiences throughout an interview with Joe at Shavano.

Ben: “Can you describe your history with adventure education?”
Joe: “I’ve been out hiking in the mountains just a few times, but I’ve never gone backpacking before, and it’s really fun.”

…

Ben: “Why are you motivated to participate in these activities?”
Joe: “I’m motivated because I’ve never done most of these things before, so I’m really excited to try most of them.”
Ben: “OK. So because you’ve never tried these things before?”
Joe: “Yeah. I’ve never tried this and stuff, so I’m excited about doing everything.”

…

Ben: “Why do you like to do things that are new?”
Joe: “Because you won’t learn what it feels like until you try.”

…

Ben: “Why did you want to do it. Like, why did you want to hike up here with the heavy backpack?”
Joe: “Because I’ve never been to these places before, and I wanted to see them. And it’s totally worth hiking all those miles.” (July 21, 2012)

Also clear in Joe’s response was that the challenges inherent to the experience were “worth it” for a number of reasons. As described in celebratory challenge, the worth of challenge was often rationalized through the feelings they actualize. But, for many, these experiences were also “worth it” because they involved visiting new places and experiencing new things. For example, as Jose described the climb to Fancy pass:

Jose: “Uh, it was pretty rocky, and it was pretty hard, but it was worth it.”
Ben: “What do you mean when you say it was worth it?”
Jose: “It was worth it climbing up all over there to see the lake and everything.”
Ben: “So seeing the lake was the payoff for you?”
Jose: “Yeah, the lakes.” (July 21, 2012)

Another Shavano participant, Pedro, also found value in the newness of the experience:
Ben: “If you could tell your principal or your teacher something about your experience here, what would you tell them?”
Pedro: “It’s worth it. It’s so worth it. … It’s lots worth it. It’s worth it.”
Ben: “It’s worth trying it?”
Pedro: “Yeah. You don’t see snow everyday. I’m pretty sure lots of kids would want to see snow up here from our school. Make some snowball fights, you know?” (July 21, 2012)

This is not to say that novelty was always present within these experiences. Indeed in the few instances when the AE experience lacked unfamiliarity, it was accompanied by a degree of apathy. To some extent, these ordinary or pedestrian experiences help clarify the importance of novelty, and a further exploration of their qualifying characteristics serves to enrich the portrayal of the novel.

The Pedestrian

The pedestrian is the term I introduce to describe an experience that lacked a degree of novelty. One clear example of the pedestrian came through a discussion with Hannah, as we sat at the top of our hike looking out at the dramatic landscape that surrounds the school headquarters of Wilson Academy. She explained why this view had lost its luster for her:

Ben: “Did you like the hike up?”
Hannah: “No.”
Ben: “Why not?”
Hannah: “Too hard.”
Ben: “Is it worth it for the view?”
Hannah: “No.”
Ben: “Have you been up here before?”
Hannah: “No. But I can see all this from my house.” (July 30, 2012)

The view, though comparable to the view noted as “so worth it” for Jose and Pedro, was not worth it for Hannah. The mountains above town, for Hannah, had become a blank backdrop for her ordinary life living in town. Becky similarly explained what makes an
experience novel as we looked at the mountains above our campsite, as she clarified why she admired *these* mountains:

Becky: “Here, it’s different than [where I live] because I see the mountains [where I live] a lot and I’m used to them. But I’ve never been here before.”
Ben: “Oh OK. So these are all new mountains for you?”
Becky: “Yes.”
Ben: “Do you like that?”
Becky: “Yeah. It’s fun to explore and stuff.” (July 26, 2012)

Another clear example of a commonplace encounter at the Academy was the resident elk herd that often grazes in the wide meadow near the school. As we drove past in our van one afternoon, Phil noticed the herd lying in the field beside the road and announced excitedly, “Look guys, Elk!” But Phil’s enthusiasm was met with apathy on the part of the group, which slowly glanced over at the elk, and then reverted their empty gaze forward to the road, all whilst remaining completely silent. However, when we encountered ducks, a snake, or crawdads, participants were thrilled, and ran to the site of the new wildlife for a closer look. The elk, though impressive, were no longer novel to the Academy participants. From this perspective, we see that the novel relates not to the greatness or degree of an experience, place, or activity, but to variance across those experiences, places, and activities. As Ewert (1989) argued decades ago, “for an environment or situation to be optimally arousing it must contain the proper mix of new activities or old activities done in a new way (novelty)” (p. 86). Novelty requires us to visit new places, try new things, experiment with new feelings and interact in different ways; it is to mix it up.

This effectively adds an important qualifier to many studies to date on the AE experience. While many have viewed awe of nature and relationship with nature as
among the most salient aspects of AE (Loeffler, 2004; Daniel, 2003; Pohl et al., 2000; Fredrickson & Anderson, 1999), this study suggests that such awe may only be actualized when accompanied with novelty. When the experiences were habitual or routine, they lacked novelty, and were thus no longer awe-inspiring.

Again, I perceive parallels between the AE experience of these participants and my personal experiences with adventure. For example, while working in the dramatic landscape of Alaska for a summer, I saw more and appreciated less the mountains around me as the summer progressed. Much as Dewey (1934) noted that things recognized cease to be perceived, an adventure without novelty may cease to be an adventure at all.

The Meanings of Novelty

Enjoying or seeking new places and experiences was clearly a major quality of the AE experience. Further, several participants described the very act of seeking as a learned behavior that they associate to the AE experience. In other words, the disposition toward the uncertain—that it be embraced, or sought after—matriculated as a value for some engaged in AE. Becky of the Academy, explains these connections:

Ben: “So why do you like to do [different programs] instead of just doing one camp over and over again or something?”
Becky: “If I do one camp over and over again I get to see the same scenery, do the same stuff. But if I do different camps I get to see different mountains and different kinds of trees and different campsites and meet different people.”
Ben: “And [do] you like that difference?”
Becky: “Yes.”
Ben: “What are some of the major reasons you like to be around different and new things?”
Becky: “I like to be around different and new things because once you realize how, like, special all the mountains are, and how special the [programs] are, and how special everything is, then it’s just so exciting. You get to do all this new stuff with all these new people.”
Later in the interview, when I asked Becky if these experiences had taught her anything about herself, she replied, “They’ve taught me how tough I could be. Like I
try new foods, and I just try new types of exercise, and I do lots of new stuff. Meet new people, and just try my best at everything, and I see it in myself more… [I’m] way more tougher.”

Ben: “So you think your experiences with adventure have made you tougher in other avenues of life? Or is it in the same areas?”

Becky: “Umm. In different [areas] actually. ‘Cause I’m not that big a camper—I only go camping with [Wilson Academy]. The first time I went camping, when I was 5 or something, I missed my Mom and didn’t like the food, wouldn’t try anything new, didn’t really talk to the other people. But now I talk to other people, try new foods, new things, and it’s just a better experience.” (July 26, 2012)

Trying new things, as Becky explained, became a habit she carried into her life beyond adventure. George, from Shavano, shared a similar insight:

George: “When I was really young I never really thought of doing this type of stuff until I really did it. I didn’t really see myself doing this. It’s opened [me up] to trying new things. Like, I’ve been mountain biking, rafting, skiing, snowshoeing… I’ve just tried a lot of different things. It makes you feel like… I wanna try even more new things [emphasis added].”

... Ben: “Why do you think that is?”

George: “Probably because when I tried these new things, it was so fun and it was so cool. It gives me a good feeling and good memories. It just seems like something I want to keep doing. Keep trying new things and [it] just makes that many more hobbies for you that you can use [emphasis added].”

Ben: “Do you think that applies just to [Shavano Expeditions] and the things you do with them, or does it apply at home too?”

George: “Oh it applies at home too.”

Ben: “Yeah? Why is that?”

George: “’Cause like, if you just do the same things every day, life’s gonna get boring. So if you try new things, you might like ‘em, might not, but at least you’ll know. And you can say, ‘Oh yeah, I’ve done that.’ It makes for good stories to tell people [emphasis added].” (August 21, 2012)

For both Becky and George, trying new things and engaging in unfamiliar experiences has lead to further, new, life-enriching experiences. The desire for novelty, in these cases, percolates beyond its origin in adventure into the activities of everyday life. Much as Davidson (2001) noted engaging in challenges as a learned behavior, it may well be that a cycle of experiencing new things is at work in the AE experience. Two
excerpts from Redcloud participants appropriately capture the breadth of this sentiment in simple terms:

Ben: “If you could tell your principal or teacher one thing about your experience here, about what you went through here today, what would you want them to know?”
Melissa: “Um… I got to try new things that I didn’t know if I was going to be able to do. But I got through them, and I did them, and it really helped… It makes me feel good that I got to do this stuff [emphasis added].” (September 28, 2012)
Sarah: “[I like to be challenged because] it reminds you that… I don’t know how to say this… It reminds you that there’s new things to try and there’s more to life than what you do every single day [emphasis added].” (September 28, 2012)

Though the excerpts provided portray novelty and the unexpected in a positive light, discourse focused on the educational value of these experiences continues. Duckworth (2006), for example, has noted the value of the unexpected, and intentionally trying to facilitate a curriculum that welcomes the unanticipated. Uhrmacher, Conrad and Lindquist (2010) have also rationalized the value of “ephemeral but life-enhancing” detours as they result in aesthetic capital. However, novelty may just as well be considered an unfortunate interruption, and conflict with popular rationales for linear conceptions of continuity (Dewey, 1938; Noddings, 1992). This tension in the curriculum field will be further explored in the following chapter.

Surely, there is an element of novelty innate to adventure, as well as in exploring and enjoying what life has to offer. Without seeking out the new, and engaging in new situations, we run the risk of growing static; development is arrested, and life experiences are tasks to complete rather than experiences to savor. Dewey (1934) argued for a balance between this constant flux and a static repetition, and placed the aesthetic in tension along this continuum:
There are two sorts of possible worlds in which esthetic experience would not occur. In a world of mere flux, change would not be cumulative; it would not move toward a close. Stability and rest would have no being. Equally is it true, however, that a world that is finished, ended, would have no traits of suspense and crisis, and would offer no opportunity for resolution. Where everything is already complete, there is no fulfillment. … The live being recurrently loses and reestablishes equilibrium with his surroundings. The moment of passage from disturbance into harmony is that of intensest life. (Dewey, 1934, pp. 15-16)

Novelty can similarly be likened to Whitehead’s (1929) stage of romance, which he describes as “the stage of first apprehension. The subject-matter has the vividness of novelty; it holds within itself unexplored connexions with possibilities half-disclosed by glimpses and half-concealed by the wealth of material” (p. 17). Oliver and Gershman (1989) further developed this perspective, placing a “significant novel occasion” (p. 164) at the very center of their process theory of education.

To further corroborate these perspectives, I notice novelty in my own adventure experiences as well. Whether it is traveling to new destinations, attempting new activities, or experiencing new feelings, it seems a measure of novelty is always under the surface of my own adventures. Further, considering Dewey’s (1934) notion of “intensest life,” Whitehead’s (1929) stage of romance, and Oliver and Gershman’s (1989) “novel occasion” (p. 164) alongside the participant expressions of novelty, positions this quality as rich with potential for educational import—a point further explored in the following chapter.

Quality 3: Freedom & Togetherness

Togetherness and freedom, as concepts, are opposed in many ways. However, to be together is not necessarily to be bound, just as to be free is not necessarily to be alone. That said, this third quality of the AE experience is presented as embracing facets of both
togetherness and freedom, not as mutually exclusive aspects of disparate experiences, but as they share a domain in the AE experience in the relation of self to other. I introduce this quality first through presenting freedom, which is comprised of autonomy and escape. I then outline togetherness, characterized by supportive environments of kinship, before finally clarifying the connections between freedom and togetherness, and justifying their presentation as a unified quality of the adventure education experience.

**Freedom**

For any experience to offer opportunities for creative expression, it must be one which is freely entered into, freely chosen. Such experiences are undertaken for the intrinsic rewards they offer, not because of any external constraint or internal compunction. (Mitchell, 1983, p. 154)

Freedom, in its simplest terms, is the state of being free, or “Unrestricted, released, loose” (Free, n.d.). Freedom took different forms and meanings across the three sites of study, but was mainly characterized by two categorical types of freedom: autonomy and escape. Autonomy pertains to the granted independence and unrestrictive parameters within the AE experience, while escape relates to the context of the AE experience in relation to the participants’ normal social life. These characteristics of freedom, both reflections of the intrapersonal dimension of the experience, are presented in turn.

**Autonomy**

Participants were given the opportunity to operate autonomously in the AE experience at the three sites of study. Though the form and type of autonomy varied across the sites, common across the experience was the unrestrictive structure of the experience and consistently encouraged independence. For example, at Wilson Academy,
each participant was given their own boat during kayaking, and participants were encouraged to explore the lake as they learned the strokes to paddling their own vessel. Times of unrestricted experience were also regular at the Academy, which participants used to chase grasshoppers, relax in the sun, skip rocks, explore the banks of a river, invent games, look for gold, and follow other imaginative and creative desires.

Freedom in the form of unrestricted experience took a similar form at Shavano, which participants used to follow their own interests, such as fishing, climbing and sitting atop boulders, or exploring the local woods and alpine lakes. Even Sally, who reportedly did not like backpacking, seemed to enjoy the freedom associated with the experience, as she walked up the ridge above Fancy Pass, away from the group, to take the view in for herself. At Shavano, and at the Academy—freedom was alive in a lack of constraints and ample loosely structured time. This is a type of freedom that traces back to the early renditions of adventure and outdoor education: “Children seek the out-of-doors to have fun. They desire to run, jump, swim, play games, sing, in short to have adventure, excitement, and a sense of freedom” (Mand, 1967, p. 81).

At Redcloud on the other hand, this freedom took a quite different form. Again, Redcloud operated on a much more structured experiential progression, whereas Shavano and the Academy had more flexible and serendipitous itineraries. That said, there were still ample opportunities for freedom at Redcloud. One example of this freedom was the overt lack of guidance provided by instructors while initiatives were underway, and an open invitation for participants to do as they pleased within the broad parameters of the activity. As we may recall from the examples of Jake, Anne, Mike and others, instructors often frontloaded activities, and released the participants to engage with the activity in
any way they pleased (barring safety concerns). Participants were free to strategize, discuss, and experiment with the challenge without inference or guidance from the instructors, which typically resulted in boisterous discussion and playful experimentation.

Autonomy also manifest at Redcloud through participants’ abilities to define their own goals and levels of involvement in the activities. As Andy explained in his introduction to the course, “We’re not going to force anyone to do anything today, we just encourage everyone to give on hundred percent, but choose their own challenge.” This sentiment was habitually repeated throughout the high elements in particular. As Andy reiterated:

“It’s your guys’ choice. You guys set the goal on how high and what you want to do. If you are climbing the Power Pole and only want to climb halfway up and climb back down, that is totally OK with us.” (September 15, 2012)

This right to choose was reflected in participants’ varying degrees of participation in the activities, some even declining to put on a harness due to their fear of heights. Even when participants sought guidance for defining their participation, the onus was redirected to the participants. For example, when one participant, prior to attempting the Cargo Net element, asked, “How high do I go on this?” Alex, the instructor, replied, “It’s up to you.” This “freedom to choose” (Davidson, 2001, p. 18), has been identified as among the most important themes of the AE experience, and examples of participants’ ability to define their participation were also noted at the Academy and Shavano.

Another common form of autonomy in AE was exploration, which quickly developed as a morning ritual for participants at both Shavano and the Academy. These autonomous experiences are best exemplified through vignettes in the previous chapter entitled “The Early Bird Gets the Worm” and “A Rabbit, A Fire, Autonomy.” Though
simple, the opportunity to be free in this way at the Academy and Shavano was appreciated by participants. For instance, Joe, Albert and Kenny all reported liking the autonomy granted at Shavano, and likened it to their home rituals, which included Xbox rather than fishing. Adam, at the Academy, also appreciated the opportunity to be independent, as we discussed his experience boating down the river, “[I liked having my own boat] ‘cause I could be my own captain, and I could go where I wanted instead of wanting to go where the other person was.”

Ivan, from Shavano, believed this granted autonomy related to feelings of efficacy. When I asked him about hiking up the trail ahead of the leaders, he reflected, “We went up the right path without needing any help from the leaders. … It made me feel like we could actually do something alone, and we didn’t need to rely too much on someone.” Becky similarly believed the implications of this granted freedom and independence allowed her to grow as an independent, or “better,” person.

Becky: “It just feels so different when you’re camping ‘cause you’re so independent, and you can’t rely on anybody… Well, you can rely on some people but not as much as your parents. And it’s just a way to become, like, more independent and just a better person [emphasis added].”

...  
Ben: “If you could tell other kids something about what you’ve experienced with adventure education, what would you want other kids to know?”  
Becky: “I would want them to know that it’s a great adventure and it’s a good way to have fun and be more independent. And it’s also a way to keep up with your schoolwork and just being smart. Its great education too.”  
Ben: “It’s a good way to keep up with your schoolwork?”  
Becky: “Yeah, because you can be more independent and you wouldn’t ask your teacher silly questions about your paper or something.” (July 26, 2012)

Often free from rigidly structured activity, the participants at the Academy enjoyed exploring, and the opportunity to live independently. Much as the Redcloud participants exercised independence through setting personal goals and deciding the
extent to which they would participate, Academy and Shavano participants practiced their own independence through engaging with the world around them and living with consequence—responsible for their own food, tents, mess kits, and other aspects of daily living. Though instructors were certainly responsible for their safety and well-being, participants were encouraged and allowed to take care of themselves, practicing a level of autonomy perhaps not common among children of this young age. Though autonomy was an integral element of the experience, the AE experience presented another type of freedom through escape.

**Escape**

A quite different aspect of freedom, beyond a granted independence, is the feeling of being cut loose, or to escape from pre-existing constraints; to be freed from the confines of normal life. The AE experience at the three sites of study was typically facilitated in environments somewhat unfamiliar to participants, requiring them, if only for a day, to live in this world away. Having been removed from familiar environments and activities, the AE experience may categorically be considered one of separation from normal social living. Though this sentiment—of evading or taking reprieve from one’s own life—was not expressed frequently, those participants who did identify escape as a quality of the AE experience often proclaimed this meaning as perhaps the most salient aspect of the experience. While taking a break from hiking up the trail at Shavano, Ivan professed that escape was his primary motivation to participate in the experience:

Ben: “So why do you do this stuff?”
Ivan: “Just to get away from my family. … The nagging. The bothering. ‘Cause every time I want to be alone they’re just bothering me.” (July 19, 2012)

Ivan later expanded on this notion of “getting away:”
Ben: “What motivated you to [join this trip]?”
Ivan: “Because at home it’s just pretty much boring all day long so I just wanted to get out of there. You know, go outside.”

Ben: “In just a few words, what does this experience mean to you.”
Ivan: “Uhhh… Pretty much, just… Being away from everything that drags you down [emphasis added].”
Ben: “OK, and yesterday, we talked a little bit about how this [helps you get] away from your home life…”
Ivan: “Yeah, around home I pretty much just spend too much time by myself, maybe a couple times around my family, and my family isn’t… The good thing is that they’re not controlling and stuff, but I just like to get away from them. There is some pushing, and I pretty much spend… a lot of my year is spent just studying. Trying to be the best in school. But I just can’t push myself too hard.” (July 20, 2012)

Like Ivan, Tom, at Redcloud, also noted the chance this experience provides him to escape from his normal life circumstances. For Tom, the AE experience is a break in the routine—a chance to recharge his energy for everyday life:

“[This experience] allowed me to get out of the day for a second. … Out here, it’s like a recharger, even if you’re using energy to do something else, it’s still a recharger, just by you’re doing something. … Because I’m up and moving, I’m not just sitting around. And even [when] I’m in football, it’s like a routine. This is breaking out of the routine, like I said a little bit earlier [emphasis added].” (September 28, 2012)

For students like Ivan and Tom, who are both engaged in academic and extracurricular activities, the AE experience was a chance to escape the daily grind. George, a participant at Shavano, expressed that this experience was an escape for him as well, though his life struggles are of a different type than those of Ivan and Tom, which he explains through the following interview excerpt:

Ben: “If you had to pick a couple reasons for why you go on these trips, what would they be?”
George: “Um… One is to… The first, my main one, is probably just to take a break from life. Get away from all the negative things that are happening, if there are any. And um… If there is any bad things happening in your life at that time then you just take a break from the stress and the, gosh, like, reality. … It’s hard not to have a good
time when you’re out, just free. Able to do whatever you want really. Relax without anybody telling you what to do [emphasis added].”

Ben: “So you mentioned a couple things there, one is, like, taking a break from life here, are you talking about life in the city?”

George: “Yeah. … Just the stress of work and paying bills and, just all that stuff. … Just the stress of life, yeah. My life’s been pretty hard from the beginning really, and I never really had a break until I started going on these trips. It’s just a good escape, you know? Like a good coping skill, just to use [emphasis added].” (August 21, 2012)

Later, when I asked George about the role of challenge in his experience, he returned to the quality of freedom, or escape:

George: “I think it’s just probably the whole idea of hiking in with your whole inventory on your back, and just the feeling of adventure. The feeling that you’re getting away from normal life, and it almost feels like you’re going back in time, ‘cause it feels like that’s what the pioneers used to do [emphasis added]. … ‘Cause we’re so used to just turning a knob and starting a flame on our stove. And when you get out there you catch your own fish, you can get your own wood to start a fire, you build your tent every time you go to sleep, and take it down, pack it up.”

…

Ben: “And what would you tell [other kids] about what it’s like to be out there?”

George: “Umm. I’d just tell them that it’s a really good feeling once you get out there, it’s good to get away from all the stress. That’s probably the main thing to tell them about it, is how good it feels to get away from all the stress of life, ‘cause that’s what most kids struggle with these days is stress, or drugs. That’s why I think it’d be a good therapy tool. … It’s just good therapy I think [emphasis added].” (August 21, 2012)

George’s poignant deposition, further than qualify the nature of freedom in AE, is a mark of the significance the AE experience can have for some participants. Though George identifies freedom in the AE experience on a number of levels, most salient in his responses is the desire to escape. Darst and Armstrong (1980) have similarly noted this “escape from the complexities of modern life” (p. 6) as an important element of adventure education, which has been subsequently supported through studies of a variety of participants of the AE experience (see Brewer & Sparkes, 2011; Pohl et al., 2000). Clearly, the AE experience serves different meanings for different participants, but a
commonality among Ivan, Tom, and George, in spite of their varied life contexts, was that this experience served their desire to escape their everyday routine stresses.

Freedom has been a point of discussion in many popular educational theories. Dewey (1938), Whitehead (1929), Piaget (1962), Holt (1972) and Rogers and Freiberg (1994) have all noted freedom as a crucial element of any educational program, often placed in tension against discipline or control. But prior to engaging in any discussion of the educational value of freedom, I draw our attention to togetherness, which is packaged with freedom as a shared quality of the AE experience.

**Togetherness**

To be together is to be “Into one gathering, company, mass, or body” (Together, n.d.). In the context of the AE experience, *togetherness* represents the way in which participants grew together through the shared experience of adventure. As freedom pertains to the *intrapersonal* dimension of the AE experience, togetherness is a view of the *interpersonal* domain. Togetherness represents a growing sense of community across the participants at each site of study, made possible by the challenges, shared experiences, and group oriented tasks common in AE. This sense of camaraderie and kinship manifest in different ways at the different programs, and was perhaps more pronounced amongst those groups that spent more time together in AE settings.

Indeed, that the groups grew together in this way as a result of the AE experience is not new to the literature. Loeffler (2004) noted connections with others as a critical theme of the AE experience, and Ewert (1983) seems to agree: “the nature of the adventure experience is such that it can, and often does, have a kind of bonding effect on the participants” (p. 40). This process of coming together has commonly been described
through a five-stage model of group formation: forming, storming, norming, performing and adjourning (Bunyan, 2011; Ewert & Garvey, 2007; Tuckman & Jenson, 1977).

Though togetherness is much like challenge in that its inclusion is of little surprise to those well versed in AE, it is worth noting the different ways togetherness manifest across the three sites in order to further understand freedom and togetherness as a quality of experience.

The major source of these individuals coming together was often attributed to the shared experiences of the program. As Becky of the Academy explained, though it was difficult to talk with others at the beginning of the program, their shared experiences made talking to others easy in this setting:

Ben: “Was talking with others in this setting easy or difficult for you?”
Becky: “Um. It was medium because at some points it was hard because everybody was like, new, and didn’t know anybody. But now I know everybody.”

...  
Ben: “And so [do] you think it was just getting to know these people that made it easier to talk to them?”
Becky: “Um. Yeah. Probably because I know what stuff to talk about, and we get to talk about the stuff we did already, like the cool stuff like rock climbing, and playing capture the flag, and doing all this fun stuff.” (July 26, 2012)

The challenges commonly presented in AE are almost exclusively related to the objective conditions of the environment; the river, the wall, the platform, the mountain pass, or the trail. As a result, a “we’re in this together” sentiment seems to transpire somewhat consistently across the group, rather than the competitive tendencies common to comparatively physically demanding activities (though that is certainly not to suggest competition was absent). To establish camp, balance the platform, or navigate the river requires that the group work together; it demands a sense of comradeship and a sense of
solidarity. As a few participants in Jake’s morning group explained during a brief reflection, “We’ve all been talking together and figuring out problems together.”

Another Redcloud participant, Christy, also noted the authentic sense of working together during the low initiatives. When I asked her about how her classmates were interacting with one another, she explained:

“Mostly it’s better [here], just because, you know, these types of things we’re having to do makes us work with each other, or work out our thoughts with each other, as opposed to where we were at school, you know, you do it all yourself.” (September 25, 2012)

For Christy, this experience was one marked by a significant difference from the school experience because the tasks required that they genuinely collaborate. As another Redcloud participant described it: “It’s like you have to… you have to think together.”

Embracing these challenges as a group, however, was not limited to group initiatives. Even when challenges were presented in individual terms—to climb a rock face, or jump from the top of the Power Pole—participants engaged with these initiatives with the support of the group. At times this support came in the physical form, such as pushing a classmate over the wall or leaning on a friend for balance. But perhaps more noteworthy was the affective support frequently exuded by the group, which was occasionally perceived as critical in helping participants overcome the obstacles encountered. As one Redcloud participant professed during the final processing: “I overcame my fear because Suzy helped me. She’s one of my best friends, and I overcame my fear.”

This form of audible support was common at Redcloud and the Academy in particular, where examples of groups applauding, encouraging, and yelling up to
participants above on the high elements, were overwhelmingly common in my observations. Support during the activity ranged from general cheers—“You got this!” “You can do it!” “We love you!”—to specific advice related to the activity—“Butt in! Keep your butt in!” “Don’t look down!” “Reach back to that last rope and swing! Get some momentum!” “Grab that blue hold!” Following the initiative, participants were typically showered with compliments and congratulations—“Way to go!” “You did great!” “I’m so proud of you!” Redcloud and Academy instructors reinforced this encouragement, as Mike offered, “I love the encouragement. This is awesome!” This supportive atmosphere transpired in different ways depending on the activity. As Sarah explained:

Sarah: “I think [the AE experience] is … good because it *brings your classmates and everybody* together for teamwork and to show support for each other [emphasis added].”
Ben: “Are you thinking about the morning activities, where you are low on the ground, or this stuff up high? Or both of those things?”
Sarah: “I think both. The bottom is more like teamwork and cooperation and communication and everything, but at the top it’s just hearing them at the bottom cheering you on.” (September 28, 2012)

Melissa also explained that the support of others helped her at Redcloud:

“It’s just like conquering your fears and going outside of your comfort zone. … And, like, having other people with you, and them supporting you, helps a lot too.” (September 28, 2012)

This supportive attitude was also clear at Shavano when participants were engaged in climbing, paddling, hiking and other individual and group activities. For instance, as Jose from Shavano walked over a loose rock and yelled back to those hiking behind him, “Hey guys! Watch out right here!” or when participants at the Academy were calling out helpful advice to climbers high above on the wall. As one Academy
participant, Kevin, explained, helping others is an important part of the experience for him:

Ben: “What’s it like to go through challenges and adventure-like experiences with these other people, some of them you didn’t know?”
Kevin: “It’s really fun to go with my friends. They get to experience the fun that I am having too. … I think it builds our friendship and we can get along more and… yeah.”
Ben: “Is that an important part of this do you think or no?”
Kevin: “Yeah, getting along and helping others.”

…
Ben: “In what ways did you help other people?”
Kevin: “Like in rock climbing, giving them tips or helping them up the wall. Um. Swimming, it was really slippery on our last lake that we went to, so helping each other up, and at camp helping each other get ready for breakfast and leaving.”
(August 2, 2012)

Sharing experiences and supporting one another through challenges, allowed these once disparate groups to grow together as a group, an idea reiterated as an intentional dimension of the experience for Andy at Redcloud: “I hope a lot of you learn something about yourself and about your teammates while you’re up here today. It’s a great opportunity to grow together and trust each other.”

Brad, a Redcloud participant, also presented the AE experience as an opportunity to get to know people, but explained that this different context made it possible to know these familiar classmates in a different way. Speaking of why he enjoyed the AE experience at Redcloud, Brad offered:

Brad: “Just the atmosphere, the people, the ability to use teamwork to accomplish a task.”
Ben: “What do you mean by that?”
Brad: “Just like. … I dunno. I guess the feeling that people working around you and helping you achieve and aspire to something greater makes you feel good [emphasis added].”

…”
Ben: “Do you think these experiences are significant or meaningful to you?”
Brad: “Definitely. It helps me connect with my classmates better, and it helps me with everyday life—connect with people at my work.”

Ben: “In what ways [does it help you connect with people]?”

Brad: “Just learning about them, their personalities, enjoying them.”

Ben: “And so what part about this helps you learn about other people?”

Brad: “Um. Going through a task that you just don’t go through every day really changes people’s perspective on things.” (September 27, 2012)

Tom reflected Brad’s sentiment and explained how this experience provided the opportunity to work and grow together as a group.

Tom: “Being able to climb the trees and everything and actually be able to go up and be involved in more of a group instead of just being isolated. … Well, not isolated but like… In school you’re more just worrying about ‘Alright I need to get these grades, and I need to get moving.’”

Ben: “So it’s about working on your stuff and here you’re working as a group more?”

Tom: “Yeah, more. Like they try to implement working group in school, but like, some people either just don’t care or there’s one person doing all the work. Like, here it’s a group effort because there’s also your safety, and people don’t want other people to get hurt. So it’s kind of more group bonding here than there is in the classroom. [emphasis added]” (September 28, 2012)

At Redcloud, this “group bonding” was most obvious during the final group processing at the end of each day, where conversations were predictably warm, emotional and positive.

Kate, at the Academy, also valued these experiences for allowing her to meet new people and make new friends. When the instructor, Phil, asked each participant to name their favorite part of the program, Kate reported, “Getting to know these people.” When I asked her about this later, she explained:

“Well, yeah. Getting to know more people makes more friends. I made a whole bunch even though I knew some of them, most of them. … It’s fun to know people and it’s also fun to get to know people.” (July 26, 2012)

This sense of growing together at the Academy resulted in a somewhat familial kinship within the group, with Mary and Phil playing parental roles for twelve children who had grown close as siblings might (barring sporadic romantic interests across the group).
Hannah reaffirmed these roles somewhat in her statement to Phil, “You remind me of my Dad.” This strong sense of association within the group was most evident in the evenings as participants gathered together during meals or huddled together around the fire. The togetherness between participants was so potent by the close of the program, that it inhibited data collection somewhat; participants were reliably engaged in conversation and activity with one another to the extent that it became increasingly difficult to find volunteers for interviews.

While researching at Shavano and the Academy, I was assimilated to some extent into this togetherness as a member of the group who shared in the adventure. I hiked to the pass, paddled the river, and even climbed the rocks alongside the participants, and through these shared experiences, I grew closer to participants as a member of the group. Pedro and Ivan explained this tendency to grow together on our final evening of our expedition:

Pedro: “I mean, you’re less scared if people come with you, you know, and they try out with you. And you know someone’s always coming with you, feeling the same stuff.”
Ben: “Do you guys think these experiences help you grow closer together?”
Pedro: “Yeah. Like, um. You. … We didn’t even know each other until we came up here, like hiking, you know. Pretty cool, you know?”

Ben: “How about you Ivan, do you feel closer to these people here?”
Ivan: “Yeah. I knew certain people here, but I never really got to really meet them. And it wasn’t until here. So…”
Pedro: “I didn’t know [Ivan]. I thought I wasn’t gonna talk to him, but now we’re close to each other.”
Ivan: “We’re actually in the same tent!” (July 21, 2012)
Just as I had grown close to members of the group at Shavano, I also had a role within the Academy family.\footnote{Though I was somewhat removed from the Academy “family” due to my fleeting participation in the AE experiences, I was certainly considered a member of the group.} Participants grew close to one another \textit{through}, and by virtue \textit{of}, the AE experience. The more I participated in these experiences, so it seems, the more I was pulled into that sense of community. This was a sense of kinship that I have grown familiar with through adventures past, as the conditions of our experience require that we collaborate and depend on one another. For me, this sense of camaraderie, forged through adventure, has carried over into deepened friendships in normal social contexts; the togetherness can transcend the adventure.

This sense of kinship across the group is likely dependent upon the history of the group, and the quality of their experiences together. Evidence of this growing together is found in the new friendships, warm reflections at the end of the day, and hugs and high fives at the close of programming. Participants’ repeated referral to togetherness as an important aspect of the experience at all three sites solidifies it as a central characteristic of this quality of the AE experience, freedom and togetherness.

**Freedom and Togetherness**

Given the clear conceptual differences between togetherness and freedom, to include the two as aspects of the same experience, let alone bundled together in the same quality, may be perplexing. However, in the AE experience, freedom and togetherness find union in the tension offered by their simultaneous recognition, and as they pertain to the inter- and intrapersonal dimensions of the experience. They are snapshots of the same
experience on a similar plane from alternative perspectives, and their meanings reflect these disparate perspectives.

The idea that we are free—we are escaping our normal lives and are offered a degree of autonomy—is not separate from the notions of growing together with the group. To the contrary, this freedom is intertwined with the idea of togetherness: it is together that these participants escape, and through the shared experience of freedom they grow closer together. George may have best explained the connection between these two seemingly opposing attributes of the experience:

George: “[These trips are] therapeutic, I would say.”

…
Ben: “In what ways do you think it’s therapeutic?”
George: “You can talk to [the people]. You connect with people a lot more when you’re out in the backcountry, I feel like. You kind of have, like, a bond. Like, one that’s not normally there if you’re out in the city, you know? It’s different. I don’t know why. It’s hard to explain. I don’t think I’ve figured that out yet. I don’t know if it’s just for me, but that’s just how it is for me at least. I’m not sure about everybody else [emphasis added].”

…
Ben: “What do you think it is about being out there that makes that happen, do you think?”
George: “Probably like, trust. ‘Cause, I mean you’re out in the middle of nowhere. You just have to trust and to be with them. And it’s probably, like, you’re sharing something, like sharing that experience with them, the beauty. It’s just not the same if you do it alone as if you do it with other people. ‘Cause I mean, you do it alone, yeah it’s still fun and it still feels great, but it just feels a lot better when you’re with someone, just sharing that experience with them. Just makes it all that different [emphasis added].”

…
Ben: “I wonder if you could just say what that feels like for you—when you’re so far away from everyone else, yet you’re really close with this group.”
George: “It feels so good to get away from like technology, like life outside in the wilderness. But I mean, I guess it probably goes along with that sharing that experience again, with someone else. Like you’re getting away from life and cars and pollution and people that are just riding on your nerves and…I guess it’s just like, it goes with that. You’re sharing that. You’re experiencing that together—just getting away [emphasis added].” (August 21, 2012)
As George explains, while the AE experience separates him from his normal life, he is not isolated from community. In fact, as George argues, it is through a shared isolation that participants are driven together as a group. In sharing the experience, and in our isolation from normal social circles and society, we are free to grow together (a point verified in the AE literature (see Norton & Hsieh, 2011)).

The two, freedom and togetherness, are then interrelated as a quality of communal isolation from normal life. To present the two together posits a natural tension within the quality itself: solitude in opposition to community, or “being alone together” (Palmer, 2004, p. 51). This paradoxical aspect of the experience is not presented as such to conflate this quality of the experience, but to clarify their shared ground in the AE experience. Freedom and togetherness are unified as a quality in that they pertain to a similar domain of self, as it is in relation to other and in relation to personal life context. Participants interact and experience a degree of togetherness with the immediate group, whilst being isolated from the people and responsibilities of their normal lives; they are free, yet they share their escape. For these reasons, I present freedom and togetherness as another important quality of the AE experience.

Quality 4: Aesthetic Vitality

Aesthetic vitality, a fourth quality of the AE experience, designates these experiences as engaging participants in a degree of aesthetic livelihood. The word aesthetic\(^{43}\) pertains to the aesthetic experience as presented by Dewey (1934) and extended through numerous works since (Eisner, 1985/2005; Moroye & Uhrmacher, 2009; Shusterman & Tomlin, 2008; Uhrmacher, 2009; Uhrmacher et al., 2010). I use the

\(^{43}\) Though Dewey (1934) used “esthetic” these terms are interchangeable.
qualifier vitality with intention; I mean to introduce this quality on the grounds of more than mere sensuous engagement, but a degree of aesthetic liveliness. The striking consistency between Dewey’s (1934) aesthetic experience and the AE experience, positions his theory as the central theoretical point of referral for this quality. Accordingly, a brief forward of Dewey’s theory is in order so that the characteristics of his rationale may be perceived as they arise through this illustration aesthetics in the AE experience.

Dewey’s (1934) aesthetic experience is a philosophy of “fully alive” (p. 17) experience. It is when our minds and bodies are in unison in the present, completely engaged by the direct conditions of our environment. It is to be as one with past and future through the present; when our senses are operating at their peak and inform our actions as we continuously perceive, assimilate, and react to the immediate demands of experience. It is to engage in the reconciliation of present indeterminate situations toward enriched perception. It is emotional and stands as distinct from routine endeavors; “Such an experience is a whole and carries with it its own individualizing quality and self-sufficiency. It is an experience” (p. 37).44

Evidence of this aesthetic quality can be found through the other qualities and descriptions of the AE experience presented herein—indeed Dewey’s theory of aesthetic experience has been a persistent referent throughout the qualities of the AE experience. However, the persistent aesthetic character of these experiences validates that aesthetic vitality be included as a distinct quality of the AE experience. This quality is characterized through revisiting the aesthetic encounters across the three sites, and further

44 For a complete introduction to Dewey’s aesthetic experience, see Art as Experience (1934).
explaining the unique character of aesthetic involvement in AE through aesthetic paradox. I then introduce two persistent signs of the aesthetic, emotion and full attention, before providing a conclusive discussion of aesthetic vitality.

**Aesthetic Encounters**

Clear across the descriptions of the AE experience is that this experience is one often characterized by aesthetic involvement. These aesthetic undertones were frequently an intrinsic characteristic of the experience, but were occasionally made explicit through the manipulation of sensuous engagement. For example, at Shavano, participants were aesthetically stimulated through Steve’s blindfold activity as they felt the ground with attention, or at both Shavano and Redcloud, participants engaged in initiatives in which speaking was prohibited, causing them to communicate through unfamiliar means. This same type of manipulation of the senses occurred at the Academy when Beth, the geology instructor, encouraged participants to stand in silence to try to notice new things about the rocks on the hillside above them: “It can be anything, look at the color, look at the texture.” This attempt to enrich perception was further developed on a geology hunt, as Beth would pick up rocks on the trail during our hike and question participants:

Beth: “What do you notice about this rock?”
Participants, touch, smell, and examine the rock as they provide responses to her prompt: “It kind of feels like sandstone.” “It doesn’t smell good.” “It’s grey and loose.”
Further up the trail, Beth picks up a different rock and says, “Everyone feel this rock and tell me if it feels the same or different [as the last rock].” As kids feel the rock, Beth further prompts them with questions pertaining to the qualities of the rocks, “Does this one feel sharp? … Did the sandstone feel sharp? … Can you see individual grains in this one?” (July 30, 2012)

Apart from these explicit attempts to manipulate and engage participants aesthetically, aesthetic engagement was perhaps more pronounced as an organic
component of the AE experience. At Shavano, participants were aesthetically involved through soaking in the view from a high mountain pass, breathing the thin air, dipping their feet into the cold water of an alpine lake, traversing rocky and steep trails, or sliding down a wet snowfield. At the Academy, this aesthetic engagement occurred as participants bounced through the rapids of a river, felt their way up rock faces, and watched the varying colors of flame as they tried to build a fire. At Redcloud, aesthetic engagement similarly occurred as an implicit aspect of the experiences presented, such as balancing on boards, swinging from ropes 40 feet above the ground, or shifting weight as they balanced atop a large wooden platform.

Participants were conscious of this type of involvement, evidenced through their aesthetic recollections of the experience. For example, as I interviewed James of the Academy between climbs in the indoor gym:

James: “I’m actually really small, so it’s hard to reach on them. … Also sometimes I’m scared if I’m gonna, like, let go and hit the wall or something. … I usually go for the [holds] that indent. You know, like the ones that grab like that.” James holds up his hand in the shape of a hook for me to see.
Ben: “What do those feel like when you grab them?”
James: “Well, they feel a lot safer ‘cause the other ones you can’t really get the best grip with. So, yeah I like those [holds] a lot better. The feet I usually go for the flat ones.” (July 24, 2012)

Becky was also able to recollect the subtle nuances of the plastic holds on this indoor climbing wall, “They’re really grippy, and they’re easy to grip. Some of them are actually really hard to grip because they don’t have a space for your fingers.”

Clear in both James and Becky’s responses is an awareness of both the conditions of the environment, and their interaction with those conditions. This awareness was also reflected through Kim’s description of her experience on the Partner V at Redcloud:
“Once you get up there it’s not that bad. The first step on the wire is weird because it’s not very tensioned and you’re like, ‘Whoah!’ … It felt weird. ‘Cause, like, you’re standing on this little thing [40] feet into the air, almost on your stomach. It feels like, like, ‘Whoah!’ … It’s kind of, I dunno. … ‘Cause when you’re looking down, you’re like, ‘Oh… my god.’” (September 25, 2012)

Many participants at Redcloud shared this “Whoah” or “Oh… my god” feeling. As Christy and Sarah explained their experiences on similar high elements:

Christy: “I think the hardest part of it was stepping from the platform to the loop, ‘cause that was like, ‘Oh my goodness!’ But after that, it was just arm strength.” (September 25, 2012)

Sarah: “It wasn’t that scary. I think its all your adrenaline. And as I was up there I could feel the whole pole shaking and I was like, ‘Oh no!’” (September 28, 2012)

To Becky, on the other hand, these unique aesthetic sensations were embraced not with remorse, but with celebration. As she described her experience rafting down the river:

Becky: “It sort of feels like you’re flying down the river. … And also many waterfalls are fun to go down.”
Ben: “When you go down the waterfalls and the rapids in the ducky, what does it feel like on your body?”
Becky: “On my body… I get butterflies in my stomach, and I kind of like that feeling.”
Ben: “Why is that?”
Becky: “Again, it feels like you’re flying. So I like it.” (July 24, 2012)

George brings into the conversation another aspect of aesthetics, noting the almost ineffable characteristic of the feelings he gets:

“It feels like you’re part of, just a part of nature when you’re out there. … Just that good feeling you get when you’re hiking up a steep, steep hill and you slow down and take a break, drink some of that cold water. Just the feeling I think.” (August 21, 2012)

This feeling was similarly described by Kyle at the Academy, who described what he feels when he climbs: “I feel like I’m free or something like that, and that I’m just going really, really fast.” He later reaffirmed this feeling as he explained why these
aesthetically charged experiences were important to him: “It’s the same with skiing pretty much, you just feel free. You feel like you can do anything pretty much.” Given the activities of adventure education, awareness of this aesthetic engagement may seem self-evident, but its pervasiveness and intensity deserves consideration—especially given the broader context of the work at hand, with an interest in education.⁴⁵

Further than a consciousness of these aesthetic sensations, participants explained how this sensuous awareness informed their decisions within the experience. In other words, they were aware not only of what they felt, but also that what they felt informed their actions. As Kevin explained his decision-making process while climbing:

Kevin: “Some of the grips you had to use your fingertips to push on them so you wouldn’t slip off. And some of the grips were really easy and you just hold on and pull yourself up. … You need to think about where you’re going and climbing. What handholds you’re going to take and what footholds your going to take.”

Ben: “So how do you figure that out?”

Kevin: “So when you’re on the wall, you have to look down at both feet each time you take a step so you don’t slip on a loose hold that probably would slip. And with your handholds, you try to look up and put your hands in there for a second and see if it’s grippy or not grippy.” (July 24, 2012)

For Kevin, decoding a climbing sequence is not a premeditated decision-making procedure, but is a constant process of assessing and adapting to the environment as he interacts with it. When I asked Becky about the kinds of things she notices with her senses while climbing, she similarly explained this immediate decision-making process:

Becky: “I hear counselors and friends cheering for me because I’m almost at the top and I’m about to get there. … And I’m feeling, like, the rock climbing wall, and what kinds of rocks are good to hold onto and which ones aren’t so good, because the good ones help you really get up there, and the not so good ones, they just like, hold you back. So I look for the good ones.”

…

⁴⁵ Indeed, how often can a student in school recollect with detail the features of the desks in which they sit, the hallways in which they walk, the pencils they hold, the books they carry, or the papers they shuffle?
Ben: “In what ways do you react when you feel up for a hold and you don’t know what it’s gonna feel like?”
Becky: “I react to it as if, like, it was just a regular rock and it wasn’t just a rock wall or something. And I would never know if it was a good one or a bad one, and I’m hoping for a good one, but if I get a bad one, then I say ‘OK.’ Then I either try to do it, or I go to a different rock.”
Ben: “How long does it take you to make that decision?”
Becky: “A few seconds.” (July 26, 2012)

Becky’s response shows that her thoughts, decisions and interactions with the environment are united in the immediacy of the experience. For other participants, such as Rick, this continuous process of assimilating new aesthetic information and making new decisions based on that information requires a degree of focus. When I asked him what schools might learn from these experiences, he offered focus as a potential outcome.

Rick: “Probably like, climbing and stuff, it would improve your focus. ‘Cause you have to focus a lot when you’re climbing and rafting, and just doing stuff outdoors.”
Ben: “Could you talk a little bit more about focus?”
Rick: “Just that you have to focus on like… ‘Cause if you don’t focus, and you’re looking around you might fall. And if you’re focusing you’re looking for new handholds and footholds that you can put your feet and hands on. … [In rafting] it’s probably following people in front of you, looking for rocks in the water, and just looking for eddies when you have to stop.” (July 31, 2012)

The aesthetic involvement within the AE experience clarified, I move to further describe the unique character of aesthetic engagement in AE through aesthetic paradox.

**Aesthetic Paradox**

An elemental aspect of adventure education is the tension between exposure to objective hazards while remaining safe from these very dangers. As others have argued (Gonzales, 2003), the perception of danger can heighten our awareness; we are conscious of our bodies, and our senses are on full alert in the moment. Examples of this tension between safety and danger permeate the data at the three sites, and evidence of this internal dilemma was presented in passing through celebratory challenge (see holistic
challenges). At Shavano, examples of the tension between safety and danger include the participants diving in their tents for shelter from the hail storm, lightning ripping overhead while huddled together in a small grove of pines, or escaping unexpected off-trail adventures on loose terrain unscathed. At the Academy, this same tension was evidenced through paddling the rapids, climbing a rock face, or the marginal shelter of a thin nylon tent beneath the force of a wild desert thunderstorm. At Redcloud, this tension was apparent as participants completed initiatives high above the ground, their safety ensured through ropes, harnesses and belayers.

Kevin and Adam of the Academy provided two examples of this tension as they reflected on their experiences rafting down the river. Kevin, who missed the group eddy at one point, and was pulled downstream to fight the rapids alone, reflected on this experience as follows:

“With the entire ride it was fun and scary, but with that part it was mostly scary. … It felt like I was about to dunk under water. It felt like my boat was sinking at one point. I felt water in my boat a lot. I felt like there was a mini hole in it. So I felt a bit unsafe at that part. … I [felt] kind of scared. I was just like, ‘No! Come back! Help me!’ … I felt more safer when I went into the eddy.” (July 25, 2012)

When Adam reflected on our brief but memorable escapade in the rapids together—when he fell out of his boat and I pulled him into my boat—he seemed to perceive the same tension between safety and danger that Kevin alludes to:

Ben: “Were you scared?”
Adam: “Kind of.”
Ben: “I was a little scared too.” I laugh.
Adam: “‘Cause I was under the ducky.”
Ben: “Right. And what did it feel like when you were in my boat?”
Adam: “Well, I felt kind of safer, ‘cause it felt like you know more, you knew how to do it, and like, you were professional, ‘cause you kind of had more experience maybe. Like, it felt like you had more experience.” (July 25, 2012)
Other examples of this tension between safety and danger were noted at Shavano, where several participants were repeatedly wary of the loose footing near large cliffs. As Ivan explained during our hike to the apex of Fancy Pass:

Ben: “Is this a challenge for you?”
Ivan: “Sort of yeah.”
Ben: “In what way?”
Ivan: “That, if you’re not careful you could fall.”
Ben: “So, like, the terrain is hard?”
Ivan: “Yeah.”
Ben: “Have you felt like you’re gonna fall so far?”
Ivan: “Yeah, I almost fell a bit a while back. I almost fell to the side.” (July 21, 2012)

Joe was also conscious of the potential for “hard falls” that come with this dramatic terrain: “Sometimes you’re hiking near like edges where it’s a really hard fall, and if you’re not paying attention you could easily fall and go down the edge. That’d be hard.”

Joe also noted other aspects of the experience in which he views the tension between safety and danger, and feels fear:

“At nights when it’s so windy, or when you’re walking when it’s a really, really hard walk, and like you’re close to an edge, it’s really, ‘Whoah, I don’t know if I can do this.’ You start feeling scared.” (July 21, 2012)

For some participants, these aesthetic aspects of the experience were credited as among the most challenging part of AE. For instance, when one participant was lowered from the Partner V and asked, “Which was the hardest part?” she immediately replied, “The height.”

The tension between perceiving the presence of danger (or perceived physical risk⁴⁶), while still feeling a degree of separation from these dangers, stems from our aesthetic awareness of danger and a consciousness of our own position in relation to

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⁴⁶ Popular works in adventure education have developed a lexicon of types of risk, which draws a distinction between perceived risk and actual risk (see Priest, 1999c).
those dangers. Surely, this tension—to toe the line of danger, careful not to step over—is embedded in the meaning of adventure itself (Mitchell, 1983; Mortlock, 1984). Participants were repeatedly put into scenarios where aesthetic sensation contradicted the rationale that these activities were, in reality, relatively safe.

On the one hand, our senses inform us that we are in a position of extreme danger, potentially eliciting a physiological response of fear, shock, or heightened awareness (Bunting et al., 2000). This perspective comes through our perception of the physical environment in interaction with self; the ground far below our feet, the rough rapids pushing our boat, or the steep cliff just steps away. On the other hand, we reason to ourselves that we are, in fact, relatively safe, and the fear we feel is somewhat unfounded. We recall that we are attached to a harness and rope held by a friend or qualified professional, that there are others in the river to help us if we get in trouble, or that the cliff remains a safe distance away. This conundrum positions the experience as self-contradictory to the participant, and resolving this internal conflict requires effort. This dissonance, between aesthetic sensation and cognitive rationale, is what I mean by the term aesthetic paradox. It is a contradiction of sorts experienced on aesthetic grounds.

Mike at Redcloud honored these conflicting messages, as he offered to one group, “But sometimes your brain doesn’t quite get that message [that you’re safe]. It’s still seeing a 40 foot drop and thinking, ‘Oh everything’s gonna go wrong!’” However, explained or not, these conflicting views of the experience were sometimes difficult for participants to reconcile. For example, as Rick confessed:

Ben: “I just heard you say ‘That was fun, but scary.’ What does that mean?” Rick: “Um. It was fun doing it because it was a challenge, and then, a lot of times I’d almost fall and it scared me even though I had a rope.” (August 1, 2012)
Abby also acknowledged this paradox, and explained her inner dialogue in an effort to reconcile conflicting messages:

Abby: “Well, in my head I’m just like ‘keep on going’ and in my body I’m like ‘scared’.”

Ben: “What do you hear when you’re up there?”
Abby: “My head.”
Ben: “You hear your head?”
Abby: “Yeah, I hear my head telling me what to do.” (July 31, 2012)

She expanded on this idea later, in a separate interview:

Abby: “I just climbed a cliff, and it was very scary, and very high, and very scary.”
I laugh at her overemphasis on the scary aspect of climbing.
Abby: “And yeah, it was very scary.”
Ben: “OK mostly scary. Can you describe what it feels like? What parts were scary?”
Abby: “Everything. Going up high, and if you slip it’s kind of scary.”
Ben: “Why is that?”
Abby: “Because you kind of forget you have a rope and you pretend you’re falling I guess.” (August 1, 2012)

Tom, of Redcloud, also explained this tendency to “forget you have a rope:”

“There’s safety nets around [but] my brain may automatically think like, ‘Don’t. Don’t. You can’t count on those. You have to try to take care of it yourself or just don’t do it.’ But it’s kind of nice to be in control [of the] situation when you challenge yourself.” (September 28, 2012)

Apparent within these responses is that the physical and mental aspects of this experience cannot be easily disaggregated from one another. The activities are presented in physical terms, but require a degree of mental agency, often precisely because of the unique physical position. For example, to walk across a wire while holding onto a rope, as participants sometimes do at Redcloud, is not overly challenging for most. However, when this same obstacle is presented 40 feet above the ground, vertigo and other external conditions render the task a significant challenge. The physical position, high above the
ground, now requires a mental intention not necessary to complete the same initiative on the ground; to reconcile the conflicting messages of the aesthetic and the cognitive. For Bruce and Kevin, this dissonance is resolved through trust of equipment and others.

Bruce: “You just gotta trust the person that’s belaying you and just make sure, just know that you’ll be fine. Just like… Sometimes when you slip, you get kind of scared ‘cause you might forget you have a harness on or something, and you feel like you’re gonna actually fall all the way down.” (August 2, 2012)

Kevin: “Well, you have your own self confidence inside you that you keep saying ‘Oh I can do this, I can do this,’ whenever you get scared, or feel like your belayers are going to drop you. You just know that they are going to hold tight to you and not drop you. You even know when you’re really high and really scared, you know that you’re not going to get injured.” (August 2, 2012)

Living through this aesthetic paradox, and holding these contradictory messages in tension against one another, may well be considered a unique brand of aesthetic experience particular to AE, and its introduction here serves as an innovative conceptual alternative to what we have commonly discussed as, “perceived risk” (Priest, 1999c, p. 113). These sensations contribute to the broader quality of aesthetic vitality, which I further characterize through reviewing the signs of the aesthetic in adventure education.

**Signs of the Aesthetic**

The trembling of feet on the rock, the silence of the once conversational group, and the wide-eyed expressions of alarm on the faces of participants, were all signs of the aesthetic character of the AE experience. These signifiers are further characterized here through emotion and full attention, in the hopes of providing evidence of the aesthetic as a vital quality of the AE experience. This is not to say that every AE experience was marked by these signs, however, explaining their prevalence does serve to further illustrate the degree of aesthetic quality in this experience.
**Emotion**

These experiences were emotive in that they inspired significant emotional swings within the experience. Indeed these experiences seem to be reliably emotional to the extent that the emotional safety of participants is now a central concern for adventure educators (Brown, 1999; Gregg, 2007). The aesthetic and emotional aspects of the experience cannot be separated in simple terms, as Dewey (1934) explained, “Experience is emotional but there are no separate things called emotions in it” (p. 43). Emotions carry a unifying quality within experience:

Emotion is the moving and cementing force. It selects what is congruous and dyes what is selected with its color, thereby giving qualitative unity to materials externally disparate and dissimilar. It thus provides unity in and through the varied parts of an experience. (Dewey, 1934, p. 44)

This does not mean emotion is static in experience, or that it dyes the experience but one color. To the contrary, emotions are as dynamic as the experiences to which they are associated: “Emotions are qualities … of a complex experience that moves and changes. … All emotions are qualifications of a drama and they change as the drama develops” (Dewey, 1934, p. 43).

This “drama” of the AE experience followed a somewhat predictable emotional cycle. To generalize: prior to the activity, participants reported feeling nervous and excited; during the activity, they exhibited undesirable emotions, such as fear, pain, and remorse; and following the activity, participants reported a sense of pride, accomplishment, and happiness. This simplified cycle of emotions is not presented as a

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47 Though even Dewey’s use of the term “emotion” is still a point of contention (see Morse, 2010; Whitehouse, 1978), I use the word in its traditional sense: as pertaining to “any strong mental or instinctive feeling” (Emotion, n.d.).
model for emotion in the AE experience, nor should it be considered a reliable predictor of emotion in AE. I contend that there are as many variations to this emotional cycle as there are participants of the AE experience—some were disdainful and fearful throughout, as others were simply “happy.” Though this emotional series is not absolute, I present it as such in the hopes of further illustrating the aesthetic quality of the AE experience.

Prior to engaging in adventurous activities, participants were typically in a state of anxious anticipation. The uncertainty of the upcoming activity seems to drive these anticipatory emotions, characterized primarily through nervous excitement. For example, as I discussed with Kyle prior to his first crack climb:

Ben: “What are you feeling?”
Kyle: “Um. A bit nervous but excited.”
Ben: “What are you nervous about?”
Kyle: “Um. Maybe that I slip and scrape my knee really badly, something like that, maybe I get hurt. And then I’m just really excited too.”
Ben: “What are you excited about?”
Rick: “That I’m in a new place to climb and it’s really interesting.” (August 1, 2012)

This anticipatory emotion seemed a reliable phenomenon prior to AE activities (see also Kalisch et al., 2011), and is evidenced through numerous explicit expressions from participants. To be nervous and excited simultaneously is to be aflutter; consumed with anticipation for what lies ahead, with butterflies in our stomachs and vague images of an uncertain future in our minds.

During the adventure experience, it seems these initial emotions typically give way to emotions of fear, remorse or elation. Fear is an emotion so common to the AE experience that it likely requires little explanation. I refer to examples of fear already presented in the descriptions of the experience to this point, such as aesthetic paradox,
Abby’s repetitive use of “scary” to describe her experience, and the comments of many engaged in high elements. Bruce further explained what it was like to be afraid in the AE experience:

“Your heart just kind of starts beating faster, and sometimes you just feel like a budge—like your heart stopped, and you feel really scared. And you just, like, budge. You’re really afraid that you’re gonna fall or something.” (August 2, 2012)

Kyle added to this conversation of fear:

Kyle: “One time when I was about a quarter up [on the cliff], my fingers were kind of slipping, and then I switched my hands and barely grabbed it and almost went flying the other direction.”
Ben: “What did that feel like?”
Kyle: “Really scary. I got a chill through my body and it was really scary.” (August 2, 2012)

Often alongside this fear was a sense of remorse or regret for engaging in the activity, evidenced most clearly through the pain reported by Shavano participants during long difficult hikes, and Sofia’s crying while engaged in the high elements. Other participants at Redcloud expressed their remorse in various ways, such as participants on the high elements who offered, “I’m freaking out!” and “I can’t do this dude. … I don’t wanna die today.”

These distasteful emotions stand in stark contrast to the final phase of emotion in the AE experience: euphoria, pride and afterglow. Becky explains the connection of these two emotional phases as she discussed her trip rafting down the river:

Becky: “When I was under water I got kind of scared because the river was going down so fast. It was cold, it was shallow.”
Ben: “And then when you flipped back up, how did it feel?”
Becky: “I felt better, and I felt like, ‘Yay I did it’ kind of thing.” (July 25, 2012)

Unfortunately, what Bruce means by “budge” remains unknown, as I failed to clarify this point during our interview. Still, clear in this excerpt is the intensity of fear he felt on occasion—so substantial that he likened it to his pounding (or stopping) heart.
She later expanded on this sense of fear in relation to accomplishment:

Becky: “’Cause when you get scared, you have like butterflies in your stomach, and you don’t know what to do, but then once you learn how to do those things, it’s really awesome.”
Ben: “Why is it awesome?”
Becky: “Because… You just… It kind of feels like an accomplishment when you’re done.” (July 25, 2012)

Similar to Becky, Rick presents a rationale for fear as it plays a critical role in his feelings of accomplishment:

“Climbing, for me, is fun. Everybody says I’m good at it, and I just like it, ‘cause it’s scary and I usually like it when it’s scary, ‘cause then it… ‘Cause when I’m scared to do it, and then I do it, then I feel really, really good when I do it [emphasis added].” (August 2, 2012)

Feeling “really, really good,” as Rick reports, is the basic sentiment surrounding the final phase of emotion in the AE experience. Other examples of this emotion are readily observable in the descriptions and qualities of the AE experience (see “afterglow” in celebratory challenge). As Bruce explained:

“When you climb the rock wall, when you’re done, when you want to get to the top you just keep on pushing yourself … and you just, like, feel really great when you accomplish it, you feel good.” (August 2, 2012)

This sense of pride was also evident through the comments of participants unable to conceal their delight in accomplishment. For instance, as Hannah at the Academy blurted out, “Guess what?! I climbed every wall!” or Sadie at Redcloud, “I just jumped that!” or Albert at Shavano, “I want to tell my parents how high we went.” Countless examples of this sense of elation saturate the pages of this study.
Again, though these emotions are presented sequentially, there were many exceptions to this cycle, and, at times, even these simple emotions interacted within the experience in complex ways. As Rick explained during one interview excerpt:

Ben: “When you were up at the top you said, ‘I’m shaking.’ What was shaking?”
Rick: “My feet were shaking like up and down, bouncing up and down, and I was either scared or excited. I don’t know which one.”
Ben: “And what did it feel like at the top?”
Rick: “Awesome.” (August 1, 2012)

The important point to note here is not the character of particular emotions, or the cycle in which they may be experienced. Rather, significant in emotion is the level or degree of emotional involvement in these experiences. Nervousness and excitement prior to the activity was substantial, with butterflies and knots in stomachs. The pain endured resulted in sometimes overwhelming emotions of remorse and regret. Similarly, fear was not subtle, but intense and often resulting in observable physiological responses, such as Abby’s trembling body, Rick’s shaking feet, Bruce’s beating heart, or the tears on Sofia’s face. But just as these adverse emotions were substantial, so too was the sense of pride, achievement and afterglow which followed these experiences. These pleasurable emotions in particular have been conceived as innate to human aesthetics, as Clay (1908) offered:

[W]e find that rhythmical movement, or a harmonious combination of colour or sound can by themselves give rise to a simple feeling of pleasure, that is instinctive and quite independent of any mental or intellectual appreciation of the ‘cause. That is to say that the basis of our pleasure in beautiful things is an emotional response to [such a combination]. (p. 282)

In the aesthetic, emotion is not divorced from experience, but is a necessary bi-product and catalyst of having an experience. Reviewing these emotions, or “qualifications of [the] drama” (Dewey, 1934, p. 43), lead us to better understanding the
pervading quality of that experience, particularly when emotional patterns emerge. In the context of the study at hand, emotion was identified as a sign of the aesthetic nature of these experiences alongside another signifier of aesthetic engagement, full attention.

**Full Attention**

A second categorical sign of the aesthetic was participants’ full attention to the immediate conditions of the AE experience. Though there are numerous theories that explain the conditions, benefits, and significance of experiences that require the full attention of the individual,49 I express this level of involvement as an aspect of aesthetic vitality. In this study, this full attention was apparent through the silence of participants during activities, and evident through interview excerpts that reveal high levels of attention in the AE experience, which I present in turn.

The silence of participants while engaged in particularly demanding activities is a reflection of the level of attention to the immediate conditions of experience. As the demands of the experience grew in intensity—be they steeper trails, rougher rapids, or higher elevations—one talkative participants would quickly grow silent. For example, at the Academy, as I stood at the bank of the river to observe the group as they negotiated a set of rapids, I was astonished at the collective silence of this once ebulliently conversational group as they floated past. Further, though I was standing at the water’s edge in plain sight, I am convinced many participants were so engrossed with the demands of the river that they were unaware of my presence altogether. An excerpt from my observational notes recounts this event:

49 See frontier adventure (Mortlock, 1978; 1984) peak adventure (Priest & Martin, 1985), optimal (Maslow, 1968), or flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) experiences.
As the group paddles down-river past me, I notice that none of the kids are talking. Their collective silence is deafening—all that can be heard is the seemingly chaotic crashing of the water, and the muffled voices of instructors, who yell directions to the kids. (July 25, 2012)

Silence was also noted at Shavano when participants began to endure the challenges of hiking steeper grades. As one observational note from the hike to Fancy Pass reads:

As the group hikes uphill, chatter and conversation comes to a screeching halt. Kids are seemingly preoccupied with breathing and walking. (July 21, 2012)

I also found silence noteworthy at Redcloud, as recorded through an observational note of one group at the Power Pole:

The crowd of 14 or so participants is dead silent as he balances on top of the pole. On top of the pole, he is on a stage for all other participants. His feet begin to shake as he stands [up]. He breaks the silence: “I don’t know why I’m shaking!” (September 15, 2012)

Silence of this type was common across the sites for group and individual challenges alike. Whether it be balancing the Whale Watch, walking across boards of the Acid River, climbing boulders, trees and cliffs, or learning to cast a fly rod, silence was a tell of full attention in the AE experience.

This level of attention was further demonstrated through interviews with participants, evidenced in both what they said, and what they were unable to say. For instance, several participants’ were unable to address my questions of meaning while engaged in the AE experience, perhaps best demonstrated through an interview excerpt with Ivan. Though he tried, Ivan was simply unable to answer my questions as we hiked up the trail with heavy packs on our backs:

Ben: “What does this mean to you right now?”
Ivan: “Uhhh…”
He continues to hike up the trail, leaning hard against his heavy pack. He pauses a while, causing me to think a deep and reflective insight may be forthcoming. Instead, Ivan offers, “I have no idea. My mind is drawing a blank [emphasis added].”

Ben: “What’s on your mind?”
Ivan: “Uhhh. How long will it… How much more will we have to walk?”
Ben: “OK. Any other reflections at this time?”
Ivan sighs: “No, not really. Just my back hurting a little bit.” (July 20, 2012)

Ivan’s inability to address my abstract question is reflective, to some extent, of his engagement in the experience. Indeed, as others (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Phenix, 1964; Seidman, 2006) have noted, the meaning of any given experience relies on the greater life context in which the experience resides. As such, to attribute abstract meaning to an experience requires a degree of separation from the experience itself as the experience is considered. But, if the experience engages our faculties to the extent that considerations of past or future are beyond reach, to ascertain the meaning of such an experience during that experience is a self-contradictory exercise. As Csikszentmihalyi (1990) agrees, at the time of a flow experience, the individual “doesn’t have the opportunity to reflect on what this means in terms of the self—if she did allow herself to become self-conscious, the experience could not have been very deep” (p. 66). In other words, we cannot describe the meaning of an experience if the faculties required to understand that meaning are at use within the experience.

Other fruitless interviews conducted while participants were engaged in demanding activities further support that engagement in these experiences results in an inability to entertain abstraction in the moment. Only when the boats were eddied out, the harnesses were unclipped, or the backpacks were removed was I able to glean insight into the meanings participants ascribed to the experience. This level of attention to the present
moment in the experience was also reflected in Melissa’s interview as she recounted her experience with the high elements:

Ben: “Can you describe what it’s like right before you start it, while you’re doing it, and right after when you’re on the ground?”
Melissa: “Right before… Um. I dunno. Just, like, all the thoughts kind of go away and you’re just like… Just want to stay up there and hold on to everything you have, kind of. And then, during it, it’s just kind of, like, you want to just keep going and just keep pushing. … And then afterwards I feel really good that I did it and I feel like I accomplished something [emphasis added].” (September 28, 2012)

When further pressed to describe what she felt during the experience, Melissa struggled to find the words to explain how she felt:

Melissa: “I just think a lot about it, and then I like… I dunno. I guess it’s just fear and everything… I dunno. I dunno how to explain it, you know?”
Ben: “OK, fear. Is there a lot of emotion or…”
Melissa: “Um. Yeah. But… it’s kind of… Like… I dunno how to explain it! It’s really hard!”
Ben: “That’s OK, I understand.”
Melissa: “‘Cause I’m thinking about it when I’m up there, but then once I’m done it’s kind of hard to like… ‘How did I feel?’ kind of.”
Ben: “So do you not remember how you felt?”
Melissa: “Yeah kind of. I don’t really remember what I was thinking. I think I just wanted to just get it over with, and just get it done.” She laughs and adds, “And help my partner out.”
Ben: “So you kind of alluded to this in an earlier response when you said, ‘All your other thoughts go away.’ What’s that like?”
Melissa: “Um. Just nothing else really matters I guess. I’m just like, looking ahead. Looking forward to accomplishing it, and just that. I’m just focusing on that.” (September 28, 2012)

This sense of being pulled completely into the moment during intense experiences with AE, and an inability to recount the experience fully, presents the other side of the coin from those participants—such as Becky, James, Kyle, and others—who could recall their aesthetic awareness in detail. While the tangible aspects of the experience—such as the events, surroundings, and our physical actions—are recollected, the emotional drama appears difficult to reconstruct. These comments are also revealing of the scope of focus
in the AE experience, as Mitchell (1983) explained it, “When the climber’s concentration is heightened in the flow experience, it is also focused on a narrower range of concerns—in space on problems literally at hand, and in time on the present” (p. 166). Because of this degree and type of focus, it would appear that some aspects of the adventure education experience are lost to the experience itself.

This inability to recollect the affective dimension of the experience was also noted by famed pilot Antoine De Saint-Exupéry (1939/1967). As he explained one adventure:

All that I can find in my memory is a few rudimentary notions, fragments of thoughts, direct observations. I cannot compose them into a dramatic recital because there was no drama. The best I can do is to line them up in a kind of chronological order. (p. 51)

Similarly, in my own experience as an adventurer, I can recollect some events to painful detail—recalling exactly the purchase of my feet on a steep snowfield, or the texture of the rock beneath my fingers while trying to stifle the shaking in my legs. However, much like Melissa, and Saint-Exupéry, I am seldom able to recollect the affective dimension of the moment itself. Indeed, if our aesthetic perceptions take full precedence—if we truly lose sight of the world beyond the moment—it seems that even powerful emotions like fear can be pushed out of consciousness.

This attention is further evidence of the significance of the aesthetic dimension of these experiences. As Dewey (1934) offers, “Only when the past ceases to trouble and anticipations of the future are not perturbing is a being wholly united with his environment and therefore fully alive” (p. 17). To let the broader context of life fall away from the experience and to be present in the moment, attending only to the immediate
conditions of experience, are central aspects of the aesthetic, and from this position, full attention stands as yet another sign of the aesthetic quality of the AE experience.

**Signs of the Aesthetic in Closing**

As this experience is further characterized, with Dewey’s conception of the aesthetic experience in mind, the connection between the two becomes clear: The adventure education experience is a quintessential example of the aesthetic experience. It is this degree of aesthetic living, characterized by both significant emotional involvement and full attention to the moment, which I finally characterize through aesthetic vitality. This is not to say that every AE experience involved this drastic level of being lost in the moment, nor was emotion reliably so profound as to bring tears to the eyes of participants. However, this degree and type of involvement was certainly a common and important aspect of the experience, and deserves explanation as a quality in itself. It is this degree of *living* that I hope to illustrate as a quality of the AE experience.

**Vitality**

I have provided significant evidence to convey the correlation between Dewey’s aesthetic experience and the AE experience. These examples from the field, when considered as a collective, illustrate an important quality within the AE experience, which I term, aesthetic vitality. The aesthetic character of the AE experience is congruent with Dewey’s (1934) example of the live creature:

The activities of the fox, the dog, and the thrush may at least stand as reminders and symbols of that unity of experience which we so fractionize when work is labor, and thought withdraws us from the world. The live animal is fully present, all there, in all of its actions: in its wary glances, its sharp sniffings, its abrupt cocking of ears. All senses are equally on the *qui vive*. As you watch, you see motion merging into sense and sense into motion—constituting that animal grace
so hard for man to rival. What the live creature retains from the past and what it expects from the future operate as directions in the present. (p. 18)

And as with people, we are similarly united in experience when our “senses are sentinels of immediate thought and outposts of action” (Dewey, 1934, p. 18). To be alive in this regard is to be consumed by the moment and engrossed with the immediate environment; to follow purpose with instinctive reaction to the direct surroundings, as the conditions of the environment are simultaneously perceived and manipulated. Again, as Dewey explained of the aesthetic:

As we manipulate, we touch and feel, as we look, we see; as we listen, we hear. … Such vital intimacy of connection cannot be had if only hand and eye are engaged. … Hand and eye, when the experience is esthetic, are but instruments through which the entire live creature, moved and active throughout, operates. Hence the experience is emotional and guided by purpose. (pp. 51-52)

With Dewey’s aesthetic experience in mind, it takes minimal inference to see the climber, the paddler, the hiker, and the challenge course participant as exemplars of Dewey’s live creature. Admittedly, Dewey’s words inspire images in my own mind of the AE participants in action, as well as memories of personal experiences in the wild.

However, I do not introduce this quality as merely satisfying Dewey’s conception of the aesthetic experience. Instead, I have qualified this aspect of experience through vitality to overtly illustrate the role and character of the aesthetic in the AE experience. Vitality pertains to “Vital force, power, or principle as possessed or manifested by living things; the principle of life. … Mental or physical vigour; activity, animation, liveliness” (Vitality, n.d.). In fact, Dewey himself used the term to characterize having an experience: “Experience in the degree in which it is experience is heightened vitality” (Dewey, 1934, p. 18). It is not simply that participants were engaged aesthetically, but
through the AE experience, they often reached this point of heightened vitality; they were “fully alive” (p. 17), and fully engrossed in the moment (Csikszentmihaly, 1990).

To introduce discourse of vitality is, on some level, to entertain what it means to be alive, and what defines us as living creatures. Bergson (1913), for example, presents vital impetus or “Élan Vital” as a source of evolution, and Vitalism even presents this vital spark of living things as a physical or electrical property (Bechtel & Richardson, 1998). In a conscious attempt at presenting aesthetic vitality in a package amenable to a plurality of contexts and life philosophies, I circumvent this theoretical melee centered on questions of humanity or living. I side with Dewey in identifying this vitality from an inclusive and pragmatic position: Vitality is the visceral trait of the live creature, perhaps best illustrated through the actions of the fox and the thrush (Dewey, 1934).

Aesthetic vitality, then, is the quality of aesthetic liveliness I have characterized to this point through the AE experience. It is not only that the senses are engaged, but the individual is living in unison with the senses; at full attention, emotionally invested, and engrossed in the immediate demands of the experience. Aesthetic vitality is a descriptor of aesthetic experience, though it is further expressive of a subjective degree of aesthetic involvement akin to a level of liveliness seldom attained in routine endeavors. Aesthetic vitality took many forms, and manifest in different ways for each participant. However, what is common in the AE experience is the opportunity to be engaged in this way, and to this degree. This liveliness, seldom experienced in routine life, can be traced back to early theories of adventure education, as Mortlock (1984) explained:

The presence of vitality… is revealed by the existence of fear in a person. If there is fear, then it testifies that a struggle is going on within the person. … The hallmark of a deep vitality is both an open attitude to all the problems of life, and
an optimistic approach to them. *It is far beyond purely physical exuberance. The whole being is involved in taking on the challenge of life, in all its senses, with vitality closely linked to both determination and self-confidence* [emphasis added]. (p. 74).

Others in AE have also noted the kinesthetic awareness of these experiences (Kiewa, 1999), and recent work articulates how the adventure experience is one of feeling “so alive” (Magnussen, 2012, p. 348). Hahn similarly implied aesthetic quality when “action and thought would not be divided into two hostile camps” (as cited in Hopkins & Putnam, 1993, p. 23) in the AE experience. However, I have been unable to locate significant referral to Dewey’s (1934) conception of aesthetic experience in spite of the overwhelming reliance on his adjacent philosophy of educational experience (see Dewey, 1938).  

As aesthetic vitality may seem somewhat abstract, I conclude this discussion by returning to the source from which this quality emerged: experience. I have come to appreciate my own experiences, so characterized by this degree of aesthetic force, as markers of my own *living* in contrast to merely *existing*. I often identify the intrinsic worth of these experiences in that they are the moments when I am fully present, awake, and alive. Elsewhere in this study, George also described the AE experience as “Worth it, so worth it.” When I further inquired, “What makes it worth it?” his response tied several of the threads of aesthetic vitality together in experience. In his own words:

> “Just the beauty, and the good feeling that you have when you sit down in that cool mountain air when you’re covered in sweat from your hike. Cooling down and just feeling the breeze. Feeling the ground under you while you’re sitting. Tasting the air. When you dip your feet into the lake at the top of the mountain. It’s just nice. It’s

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50 Roberts’ (2012) recent work does, however, entertain the import of Dewey’s (1934) aesthetic in experiential education.

51 A distinction further explained in the following chapter.
rewarding. You feel like… It’s a feeling of accomplishment. That you didn’t think you could do it in the middle of it, and you did it and it’s just a powerful feeling.” (August 21, 2012)

**Quality 5: Great Experience**

These qualities intersect and overlap in a number of combinations, which substantiates their union in experience. For instance, freedom and togetherness overlaps with novelty in the exploration of new places, breaking routine, and growing in community with new people; aesthetic vitality shares aspects of celebratory challenge through the holistic nature of challenges and the emotions associated with suffering and afterglow; aesthetic vitality is similarly related to novelty through new aesthetic sensations, just as novelty overlaps with celebratory challenge in the participant expressed desire for new challenges, and freedom and togetherness intersects with celebratory challenge through shared challenges.52

Many participants identified these connections in their descriptions of the experience, and the meanings they ascribed to these experiences. In fact, it was perhaps more common that participants expressed the connections between these qualities, rather than characterizing each quality for its separate or distinct character. As Adam described his trip down-river:

“It was fun and challenging, and at the beginning I was kind of nervous, ‘cause I’ve never did it before, so I didn’t know what was gonna happen. So I tried it and it actually turned out to be fun.” (July 25, 2012)

We see that these qualities are often united in single experiences, rather than disjointed snapshots of disparate encounters.

52 For a visual representation of these intersections, see Figure 9: Intersections of the qualities.
However, more profound than the links between any two of the qualities presented to this point is the tie between each of these qualities with a fifth and final quality: great experience. Whereas the other qualities of the AE experience were characteristics of that experience, the fifth speaks to the underlying value of these experiences. This value I speak of is the worth, significance, and in many ways, the most persistent meaning of the AE experience.

I present the quality great experience to dignify an experience as readily enjoyable in itself and one considered significant to the individual undergoing the experience. It is an experience of intrinsic worth in its direct contribution to enjoyment, happiness or life well lived. Whereas the other qualities are, to an extent, observable through the actions or conditions of those engaged in the experience (see cognitive meaning, Uhrmacher, 2002), great experience was derived almost exclusively through the perceptions of participants. It would seem that for most engaged in the AE experience, it is the ultimate significance—the fundamental meaning—of these experiences (see ontological meaning, Uhrmacher, 2002). In this section, I review the ties between each of the previous qualities as associated to this underlying quality, before further illustrating great experience through the perceptions of participants.

An Underlying Quality

Many participants identified the link between the first four qualities (celebratory challenge; novelty; freedom and togetherness; aesthetic vitality) and this fifth quality through explaining their enjoyment of the various aspects of the experience. For instance, as Adam explained why he likes to be challenged:
“Because if you’re not being challenged, then it’s kind of boring, ‘cause you’re not like running as hard as you could and doing all these fun things. You’re just like walking around and you don’t have to try as hard, so it’s not as fun.” (July 25, 2012)

Rick similarly identified the role challenge plays in his enjoyment of the experience:

Ben: “Why do you do this stuff?”
Rick: “’Cause it’s fun, and exciting.”
Ben: “What parts are fun?”
Rick: “Challenging things are fun. [It’s fun] to try new challenges, and try new stuff.”
Ben: “Why is it fun to be challenged?”
Rick: “Just because you get more of a challenge it’s harder to do it because you’re so used to other things that you want more of a challenge ‘cause it’s harder.”

…

Ben: “If you could tell other kids who don’t get to do this stuff, something about this experience, what would you want them to know?”
Rick: “Just that there’s new challenges all the time and there’s new fun things to do and try, and just that it’s really fun.” (July 31, 2012)

Also clear in Rick’s response is the appreciation of novelty, which Christy similarly considered the source of her enjoyment. When asked why she enjoyed AE, she explained:

“I guess that I hadn’t ever done anything like that before. So that was cool.”

Participants also identified the ties between freedom and togetherness with great experience. For example, we can recall excerpts from Tom, George, and Ivan, who all believed these experiences found value in providing an escape from their everyday lives.

Togetherness was similarly tied with greatness, as Kate identified, “Getting to know these people” as her favorite part of the experience, and as Kevin explained, “It’s really fun to go with my friends. They get to experience the fun that I am having too.”

Finally, participants identified connections between the aesthetic quality of these experiences and their enjoyment of AE, a point particularly relevant for Kyle, who described duckying as follows: “It’s just really fun. It’s fun to be on water, and being in the [duky], and get wet, and have a lot of fun.”
Later, when Kyle completed a rock climb and I asked him how he was feeling:

Kyle: “Awesome.” He gasps. “That was really fun. That was maybe my first time crack climbing.”

…

Ben: “What did it feel like crack climbing?”
Kyle: “It felt pretty cool. You have to stick your hand in the crack and grab things that stick out, and pull yourself up. … My fingers were kind of slipping on the crack and then I switched hands and I went ‘Mmm.’ … I was thinking, ‘I made it,’ and it was just really fun.” (August 1, 2012)

Through these excerpts, it is clear that the qualities of the AE experience can all be considered “great” in the minds of participants. This overwhelming enjoyment and positive association to the experience is suggestive of an underlying phenomenon, which I further characterize through the comments of participants. Though it is clear that the qualities presented to this point are integrated with as qualities of a common experience, somewhat united through greatness (see Figure 9: Intersections of the qualities).
Perceptions of Great Experience

As the enjoyment of the AE experience was attributed to the qualities mentioned previously, it was also explained as an independent characteristic of the experience.

Several studies (Davidson, 2001; Haluza-DeLay, 1999; Hastie, 1992; Hattie et al., 1997) have similarly noted the enjoyable quality of like-experiences, which further supports the articulation of great experience as a quality all its own. As Kevin and Abby explained, “fun” is an intrinsic quality of climbing:

Kevin: “I love to climb… It’s probably the funnest thing that I’ve ever done.” (August 2, 2013)

Ben: “How’s climbing going for you so far, what do you think of it?”
Abby: “It’s fun.”
Ben: “What makes it fun?”
Abby: “Just… climbing.” (July 31, 2012)

Later, after Abby completed her second outdoor climb and professed that “it was fun” once again, my attempts to further qualify her enjoyment of the activity fell flatter still:

Ben: “What parts were fun?”
Abby: “It was just fun.”
Ben: “What kind of fun?”
Abby: “I don’t know.”
Ben: “Was it fun ‘cause it was thrilling, or fun ‘cause it was hard, or…?”
Abby: “Every fun.”
Ben: “Every kind of fun?”
Abby: “Yeah.” (August 1, 2012)

Becky further clarified Abby’s sentiment—“It’s just fun”—as a primary motivator for participating in AE. When I asked her why she participated in Wilson Academy:

Becky: “Um. Because it’s an adventure and it’s exciting, and there’s so many different options of adventure you could do here, that it’s like, almost impossible to choose.”
Ben: “Do you like that there’s a lot of options?”
Becky: “Yeah because if you do all of them, then… It’s just really fun. It’s just so fun.” (July 26, 2012)
Kevin, when given the chance to comment on his experiences with the Academy, also explained the degree of fun he enjoyed as an important aspect of the experience:

“I would just like to tell some people, if they haven’t done it, like any [Wilson Academy] or anything outside… [This program], or one of the camps with Phil and Mary, is going to be super, super fun.” (August 2, 2012)

The ways participants described their enjoyment of these experiences—such as “really fun,” “Awesome,” “super, super fun,” and “the funnest thing I’ve ever done”—reflects a degree of enjoyment, which may render the experience significant on these grounds alone. However, the significance of these experiences for participants was also reflected in the active process of memory making during adventure education.

At Redcloud in particular, these memories were regularly recorded through photographs and videos of participants engaged in the activities—on the ground and in the trees alike. For example, two girls on the Partner V, when offered the opportunity for a picture from below, instantly responded enthusiastically, “Yes please!” and abandoned their otherwise tense conversation to look down with wide grins on their faces. Though the reasoning for taking these pictures is uncertain, we can infer with relative confidence that we tend to record events in life we hope to later remember. And given the positive associations often (but not always) ascribed to these experiences, it may be fair to assume these are memories to be looked back on fondly by participants.

Even when cameras were absent, the disposition that these experiences would serve as valuable memories was reflected in the participant responses. As Abby explained why she enjoyed these experiences, “Well, I can’t really do [these activities] where I live, so it’s extra special.” She later added that these experiences were important, “Because, you might not ever be able to do it again, and you want to have a memory. A memory of
it.” For Abby, the AE experience was significant both for allowing her to participate in new activities that she may not have the chance to experience otherwise, and also for being a memorable event in her life.

Joe, at Shavano, also recognized the significance of these experiences for him on the grounds that they were enjoyable and memorable.

Ben: “Can you describe your history with adventure education?”
Joe: “I’ve been out hiking in the mountains just a few times, but I’ve never gone backpacking before, and it’s really fun.”

... Ben: “Do you think these experiences are significant to you?”
Joe: “Yeah.”
Ben: “OK, in what ways?”
Joe: “Because I’ll always remember this.”

... Ben: “What are you gonna remember?”
Joe: “Everything. Like the sites, the hiking, the trouble, everything.”
Ben: “What do you think makes this so memorable?”
Joe: “Um. I’m not sure.” (July 21, 2012)

George similarly noted elsewhere in this study that these experiences “make for good stories” and distilled the meaning of some experiences in particular to, “It was just really cool. A cool experience.”

Much like aesthetic vitality, these experiences were often significant to participants in a sense of degree; not only are they good experiences, they are great experiences. This degree of significance is further characterized through interview excerpts with participants across the three sites. For example, Melissa identified these experiences as significant to her for being “milestones” and, “It makes me feel good that I got to do this stuff.” Further than memories, other participants believed these experiences should be opened up to a wider audience because of the feelings they inspire. As Brad and George offered:
Brad: “I think that more people need to experience [this], ‘cause I think it would make them feel a lot better.” (September 27, 2012)

Ben: “[Do] you think these experiences are for all kids or just some kids?”
George: “I think all kids should experience it at least once. At least.”
Ben: “Why is that?”
George: “It’s just something good to put on your list of things that you’ve done, you know. … Like, just that feeling of accomplishment. That you’ve done something that not everybody says that they’ve did.” (August 21, 2012)

George and Brad believe these experiences were significant on the grounds of the feelings they invoke in participants. This feeling of accomplishment, which George identifies as a crucial element of the experience, was further explained by Sarah:

Ben: “Are these experiences important to you, do you think?”
Sarah: “Yeah, I think so, ‘cause. It’s just good to know that you can do it, and you’re gonna be OK. It teaches that for other stuff.” And later, “[Being challenged] reminds you that there’s new things to try and there’s more to life than what you do every single day.”53 (September 28, 2012)

Also clear in Sarah’s reflections of the experience is that these experiences held value for her on the grounds that they opened her up to new perspectives, an opinion shared by Ivan at Shavano, who explained how these experiences fit into the context of his life.

Ben: “Do you think these experiences relate to your past life or future life in different ways?”
Ivan: “Uhh. Possibly, yeah.”
Ben: “How so?”
Ivan: “Well, mostly with my future life, it might affect it because this experience will probably… It has given me a different perspective of things, and I actually would like to go on more adventures like this.”
Ben: “How has it given you a different perspective on things? Like, what’s your new perspective?”
Ivan: “Like, you can’t spend all your life locked inside watching TV and stuff.”
Ben: “Do you consider these experiences significant to you?”
Ivan: “Yes.”
Ben: “In what ways?”
Ivan: “[They help you realize] that there’s so much more to life [emphasis added].”
Ben: “Could you expand on that?”

53 A portion of this quotation was also referenced in the novelty section.
Ivan: “There are many things that you don’t know about what could be out here. You pretty much learn while you’re going around, and you learn by seeing, by feeling, and so, it does change how you think about things.” (July 20, 2012)

Apparent in Sarah and Ivan’s responses is that these experiences have value for them in that they change how they think about things, and open them up to new experiences. These insights move us toward an understanding of the intrinsic value of these experiences, which several participants articulated. Pedro, for example, explained this as something you feel in your heart:

Ben: “What else did it feel like when you got to the summit [of the pass]?”
Pedro: “Fresh.”
Ben: “Fresh?”
Pedro: “Yeah, like something weird I felt in my heart. That I was almost, like, on top of the world, you know?” He laughs quickly.
Ben: “Yeah?”
Pedro: “Yeah. This is the highest point that I’ve gone in my life, and the last one I think.” We both laugh.
Ben: “And you said you felt it in your heart?”
Pedro: “Yeah ‘cause when… It’s beautiful here. So yeah.”

... Ben: “Is there something you want other kids to know about what it’s like to be up here?”
Pedro: “Make a challenge for yourself, ‘cause it’s actually really cool. You don’t want to miss this ‘cause it’s really awesome and one of the best things in your life I bet, ‘cause it is mine—one of my best things in life [emphasis added].”
Ben: “It’s one of the best things in your life?”
Pedro: “Yeah.” (July 21, 2012)

Though Pedro appeared somewhat hesitant to discuss the meaning of this experience for him, clear in his responses—the “fresh” feeling he felt “in his heart”; like he was “on top of the world”; “one of the best things in your life”—is the ineffable quality and significance of this experience for him. He alludes to the almost spiritual value within this experience, and attests to the intrinsic value of the experience on these grounds.
George also expressed the significance these experiences hold for him in the way they make him feel, even referencing his history with drug abuse as a referent to qualify the extreme degree of euphoria he feels in the AE experience. Speaking of the accomplishment he feels after a long day of hiking with a heavy pack, he offered:

“I think it’s almost kind of euphoric. Like you get a natural high, I would say. I mean, I’ve been a person that struggled with drug abuse and alcohol, but I mean, *I don’t think there’s any drug that can top that, that feeling*—at least for me. I’m not sure if I can speak for everybody—but I don’t think there’s any drug that can do that for you, that same feeling. Just the feeling of being up there and sitting there, *its just euphoric, like winning the lottery* [emphasis added].” (August 21, 2012)

Through Pedro’s explanation that the feeling is “one of the best things in life” and George’s description of the AE experience as one of a “natural high” which surpasses any drug high—“like winning the lottery”—we see that these experiences can cultivate feelings so profound that these feelings alone are the significance of the experience.

George further explained the role these experiences play in the context of his life; as significant in and of themselves.

Ben: “Do you consider these experiences important, or significant, or meaningful to you?”
George: “Yeah, I think they’re really important and meaningful, ‘cause it gives you… ‘Cause I look at life as like trying to get as many good… *Like you have a little piggy bank, and you try to fill it with good memories, and good experiences, and all these trips, experiences, each day of the trip … is a fun experience to add into your piggy bank.* You know what I mean? *That’s how I look at life, is trying to fill your happiness piggy bank.* And all those things you can look back on. And I say that you need more happy memories like that than you do bad memories and bad experiences, but you need more happy ones to kind of weigh it out, equal it out. So, I mean, I feel like it helps with that, and being able to look back when I’m 50 years old and look at all the things that I’ve done. You know, it’s really cool [emphasis added].” (August 21, 2012)

Later in the interview, I followed up with him on his “life as a piggy bank” idea:

Ben: “How did you come up with that [piggy bank] idea?”
George: “Uhh. I was just talking to my therapist. … and we were just talking about it, and I kind of had that idea and was talking about it with her, and she thought it was a good idea.”

Ben: “Has that worked for you?”

George: “Yeah it’s a good way to see life. ‘Cause you forget about all the happiness, and if you actually think about it and keep a mental note about all the things you’ve done, then you can look back on it and say, ‘Man, I’ve had a pretty good life so far.’ It’s just something good to think about, it helps you out when you’re in a hard time.”

(August 21, 2012)

George’s life-philosophy, explained through the analogy of a happiness piggy bank, reveals an important aspect of the great experience: the conception of experiential capital. These experiences, for George, are not lost to the moment, but accrue in the form of happy life experiences. Though, their value is still intrinsic—in the experience itself—a compilation of happy experiences serves an external purpose through comprising memories of a life well lived. In his words, “you can look back on [these experiences] and say, ‘Man, I’ve had a pretty good life so far.’”

This example of a piggy bank as the rationale for these experiences alludes to the fundamental meaning of these experiences for George, which he further explained:

Ben: “So if you had to say these experiences mean one thing [for you] what does it mean? What does this mean for you?”

After a long pause, which I had grown accustomed to in asking children and adolescents questions of meaning, I admit, “And I know that’s a ridiculously hard question, so…”

George: “Yeah. Kind of like the meaning of life. Like, the meaning of backpacking.”

George and I laugh at the difficulty of the question. Again, he pauses for what feels like an eternity, though the audio recording reveals only a 15 second pause, before finally talking out his ideas, and arriving at meaning.

“I think the meaning, for me, is probably just the… almost spiritual growth I would say, kind of. Just being one with nature, and just being happy. That’s probably the meaning for me, is just being happy. Using that as a tool to be happy, at least for that moment. Maybe not forever, but for that moment you can be happy. That’s probably the meaning for me. That’s probably as simply as I could put it. … And to get other people to be happy too. Like, just bringing somebody that wouldn’t normally do those type[s] of things on those trips and just seeing the reaction that they get. It just… It means a lot [emphasis added].”

(August 21, 2012)
For George, and in the context of his life, which he describes as “pretty hard from the beginning,” the AE experience is ultimately a chance to “be happy, at least for that moment.” Hard life or not, these experiences were often ascribed with this similar value for participants across the three sites of the AE experience. Brad at Redcloud, and Becky of the Academy summarized this popular but varied meaning of the AE experience in poetically simple terms:

Ben: “If you were to say this means one thing to you, all of this, what would you say it means?”
Brad: “Greatness.” (September 27, 2012)

And Becky, discussing her trip down-river, “Today for instance, duckying down the river … was so much fun. It was just a great experience [emphasis added].”

I use the moniker “great” experience both to honor the comments of participants, and to reflect the significance of these experiences. Great dignifies that “Of more than ordinary importance, weight, or distinction” (Great, n.d.); it qualifies something as remarkable to a degree or extent. These are not simply experiences the participants enjoyed—were they, I would have likely labeled them “good” experiences. These experiences are great in that they stand above ordinary living; they are models for what experience can be as direct contributions toward life. These experiences served many purposes to participants, and the meanings ascribed to these experiences reflect the idiosyncrasy of the participants themselves. However, as participants would reach back toward more ontological forms of meaning (Uhrmacher, 2002), they had the tendency to arrive at a similar descriptive location for these experiences: that they held value for their intrinsic qualities. They were great.

299
In this regard, these experiences are similar to Oliver and Gershman’s (1989) conception of intrinsically rewarding “significant occasions” (p. 165), which they present as the means of a process theory to teaching. Dewey (1934) similarly identified experiences with a degree of aesthetic quality as serving this highest of purposes through his explanation of the “ultimate utility” of the aesthetic experience:

Wherever conditions are such as to prevent the act of production from being an experience in which the whole creature is alive and in which he possesses his living through enjoyment, the product will lack something of being esthetic. No matter how useful it is for special and limited ends, it will not be useful in the ultimate degree—that of contributing directly and liberally to an expanding and enriched life [emphasis added]. (p. 27)

As Dewey noted of the aesthetic, the adventure education experience is often characterized by a similar quality in that its value can be judged in the extent that they constitute live encounters. When an experience serves this ultimate utility, as I am suggesting the AE experience often does, then it may well be that they need not seek validation through external referent or utility.

Interestingly enough, this prominent quality of the AE experience aligns most directly with those earliest premonitions of outdoor and adventure education, rather than the more current discourse, which predominantly presents the experience as a means to ends. As Miner and Boldt (1981) offered, “Life-enhancing experience is obtained through the sea, the mountains, the wild lake country, the desert” (p. 34). And as Smith (1957) stated:

Ideally [outdoor education] will include all-absorbing activities that contrast sharply with the surroundings of one’s working life, so that he will be drawn out of himself to emerge later refreshed and regenerated. Thus environment is an all-important factor in identifying what are worth-while recreational experiences for each of us. (p. 2)
Further, the AE experience has long been correlated with Csikszentmihaly’s (1974; 1990) theory of flow (Mitchell, 1983). However, it is not through a simple matching of ability and difficulty that we may achieve flow-like experiences—clearly, the AE experience is much more than a two variable enterprise. If we consider the broader context of Csikszentmihalyi’s theory, we see further potential and corollaries between flow and adventure, and it would appear that we stand to benefit through reconsidering the purpose of flow, as it plays a role in happiness. To revisit Csikszentmihalyi (1990):

Pleasure is an important component of the quality of life, but by itself does not bring happiness. … When people ponder further about what makes their lives rewarding, they tend to move beyond pleasant memories and begin to remember other events, other experiences that overlap with pleasurable ones but fall into a category that deserves a separate name: enjoyment. Enjoyable events occur when a person has not only met some prior expectation or satisfied a need or a desire but also gone beyond what he or she has been programmed to do and achieved something unexpected, perhaps something even unimagined before.

Enjoyment is characterized by this forward movement: by a sense of novelty, of accomplishment. … None of these experiences may be particularly pleasurable at the time they are taking place, but afterward we think back on them and say, ‘that was really fun’ and wish they would happen again. (p. 46)

Clear in this excerpt is that flow and great experience share much in common. Experiences similar to this type have been discussed and characterized at length by scholars from fields of philosophy, psychology, education and adventure alike. The sublime (Kant, 1790/1951), aesthetic (Dewey, 1934), peak adventure (Priest & Martin, 1985), optimal (Maslow, 1968), flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), numinous (Noddings, 2003), or frontier adventure (Mortlock, 1978; 1984) theories of experiences all interact, complement, and contradict one another in myriad ways. However, these philosophies and frameworks of experience all seem to allude to a common thread, which the great
experience may represent directly. It is the value of these experiences as intrinsic; we seek them out merely for the sake of living through them, and we look back on them fondly. They are “useful in the ultimate degree” (Dewey, 1934, p. 23).

Though it traces a complex genealogy through a conceptual web of experiential philosophy, the great experience is simple, and characterized through three criteria: it is 1.) an enjoyable experience, 2.) that we consider worthwhile, and 3.) that we identify as significant. It is an experience which brings us happiness in the moment, one we are glad to have had, and one in which we identify as significant or important for its desirable attributes and intrinsically satisfying quality. An accrual of experiences such as these results in a life we may look back on with a sense of satisfaction. The great experience, for some, is the means, goal and purpose of a happy life. This is not to argue that adventure is objectively great, but to articulate how those who participated in adventure education identified this greatness.

**Qualities of the Adventure Education Experience in Retrospect**

The qualities of the AE experience—celebratory challenge; novelty; freedom and togetherness; aesthetic vitality; and great experience—collectively illustrate what happens to participants in the AE experience, and what meanings participants ascribe to that experience. The contents of these qualities should come as little surprise to the experienced adventure educator (indeed consensual validation may be lacking had they not). To characterize the qualities of the AE experience to this depth, and as tied to both meanings and happenings, presents the qualities of AE experience as notable findings worthy of further exploration. With the qualities of the AE experience clarified, I move forward to a second category of illustration: cultural coalescence in adventure education.
CULTURAL COALESCENCE IN ADVENTURE EDUCATION

This section illustrates a particular aspect of the AE experience: the coalescence between the personal backgrounds of participants and institutional cultures of AE. As the qualities of the AE experience address the first two research questions, this section attends to the third: “How do the personal backgrounds of participants coalesce with institutional cultures in adventure education?” I reiterate the framework for considering this question of culture in adventure education, which relies primarily on three definitions presented in Chapter Two:

*Personal background* is the background, norms, preferences, tendencies, and distinguishing characteristics of a given individual.

*Institutional culture* is the set of practices, values, norms, and customs purported by a particular institution.

*Cultural coalescence* is the coming together of personal backgrounds and institutional cultures.

Further, I have referenced Locke’s (1935/1989) conception of culture to frame the AE institution as a cultural group, and embody a similarly pragmatic approach to this discussion of culture in AE. It was with this basic framework that I initiated inquiry into cultural coalescence between participants and the institution.

Admittedly, to answer this personal question in general terms carries with it intrinsic contradictions, and this presentation of cultural coalescence is not presented to supersede the validity of anecdotes that contradict this illustration. Each person comes to the AE experience with their own unique history, preferences, and dispositions towards adventure, and each participant understands that experience in similarly unique ways. However, there is utility in addressing how the personal and the institutional come together on a cultural level in thematic terms (Dewey, 1910). It is to paint with broad
strokes the general happenings at the three sites on cultural grounds so that we might enrich our perceptions of adventure education as a cultural process.

Though these three sites shared much by way of cultural coalescence, there was certainly variance between (and within) these sites for how this process transpired. As such, any “answers” to my question of culture are presented with the caveat that this coming together is ultimately an idiosyncratic process. Further, I do not delve into the psychological processes associated to cultural coalescence, as any such inquiry is outside my personal expertise, and beyond the purview of the study at hand. These caveats aside, I am, however, able to speak to this process of cultural coalescence from an empirical and pragmatic perspective, made possible through my observations and experiences at the three sites, and through discussing these issues with participants of the AE experience.

I begin this discussion by outlining the cultural arrangement between the individual and the institution, which frames the process of cultural coalescence. I then review the ways in which the AE institution practiced a degree of cultural rigidity—which resulted in participant adaptation—and, conversely, cultural flexibility—which enabled participants to sustain selfhood. I then provide anecdotal support based on my own experiences in the field before concluding this conversation of culture in AE.

**The Cultural Arrangement**

Much of the cultural coalescence in the adventure education experience can be explained through understanding the structural arrangement of the individual and the AE institution. To one side, there is the adventure education institution, complete with its own intentions, methods, habits, history and norms of behavior. To the other side, participants enter this unfamiliar environment with their own intentions, habits, and
personal life history. Accordingly, the adventure education experience, by definition, presents students with somewhat of a foreign environment and unfamiliar cultural mode of living (Mitchell, 1983; Walsh & Golins, 1976). In cases when participants had little experience with adventurous activities—particularly participants of Shavano and Redcloud—they enter this setting with a cultural vacuum of sorts: With limited prior experience in environments similar to AE, some participants simply do not have norms for interacting in a space such as this. The unfamiliar people, place, and activities render the inexperienced participant, at least to some degree, in need of guidance. For these reasons, the AE experience has been likened to one of culture shock for many participants (Fabrizio & Neil, 2005; Kraft, 1992).

Also, given the formally opposed positions of the participants and the instructors, there exists a power dynamic between the participant and instructor similar to that of the teacher-student relationship common to most American schools (Holt, 1972; Jackson, 1968). Instructors hold power on formal grounds as they direct experiences and maintain the safety of the group, but also because both the activities and the setting are familiar to the instructors and often unfamiliar to participants. This basic structure of the experience provides the context for the coalescence of personal backgrounds and institutional cultures in AE. With this structure in mind, I transition forward to a portrayal of cultural rigidity and flexibility on the part of the AE institution, before entering a more discursive discussion of cultural coalescence in adventure education.

**Cultural Rigidity**

As the AE institution came together with the numerous personal backgrounds of its many participants, there were certain aspects in which a level of cultural rigidity was
exercised on the part of the institution. That is to say, there were interactions between the institution and the participant in which compliance with the institutional norm was encouraged or required. I review aspects of this rigidity on four counts—power dynamic, guidelines to adventure, jargon, and instructor values at work—before explaining how this rigidity necessitates a degree of adaptation on the part of participants.

**The Power Dynamic**

The formal relationship between AE instructors and participants was one of power embraced by instructors and participants alike. The ways in which this power dynamic manifest reflected the different types of experiences offered across the three sites of study. Regardless of the site, however, participants accepted this power dynamic, as they identify a need for authority in this setting. As Jose, of Shavano, and Sarah, of Redcloud, explained:

Jose: “You gotta trust the [instructors]. Trust them like where to go and everything. ‘Cause they know where to go.” (July 21, 2012)

Ben: “When the [instructors] tell you to do something, do you typically do it?”
Sarah: “Yeah.”
Ben: “Why is that?”
Sarah: “‘Cause they know what they’re doing, and it’s safety.”
Ben: “Do you ever feel like that relationship is one of power, like they have power over you?”
Sarah: “Yeah. ‘Cause they know that I have their trust, so…”
Ben: “Does that bother you at all or no?”
Sarah: “No. … They’re good people.” (September 28, 2012)

However, this authority was not always accepted as willingly, as evidenced in Sally’s resistance to wearing the pants and shoes provided her by Shavano instructors. This example aside, the power and authority of instructors over participants was largely accepted as a necessary, and at times helpful framework for the experience. This power
dynamic was most prevalent through the provision and enforcement of a conduct of behavior in AE, which I further explain in the following section.

**Guidelines to Adventure**

   Cultural rigidity on the part of AE was exemplified most directly through the explicit rules or guidelines presented by AE Instructors. These “Guidelines for Adventure,” as they were presented at the Academy, predominantly pertained to the health and safety of the group in outdoor settings. At the Academy, these guidelines were created based on suggestions from the participants, and recorded on the classroom whiteboard by Phil on the first day of the program.54 These guidelines read as follows: “LNT; Stay with group; Hands to [yourself]; Have fun; Listen to instructors; [Be] Nice/Safe/Respectful.”

   Similarly, at Shavano the guidelines for the trip were explained to the participants on the first day of the trip, and pertained most directly to how to live in the woods responsibly and safely (see “Guidelines for being in the woods” in the preceding chapter). As Steve rationalized these guidelines, “We want you to be safe and healthy in the woods.” Implied in these guidelines is the belief that there are a number of basic principles and practices that have proven effective when living in the outdoors, and fidelity to those principles was a necessary prerequisite to an enjoyable trip. The instructors at Shavano were direct with all participants about these principles of living in the outdoors, seemingly acknowledging the very limited experience within the group in outdoor settings. Though some aspects were embraced and others were met with some

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54 Though these guidelines were developed in collaboration between instructors and participants, their creation was at the impetus of instructors, and instructors decided what was recorded as a guideline.
resistance (as Albert offered on a return trip from the hillside where he went to the bathroom, “I don’t like it, I like it better on my toilet at home.”), the guidelines were seemingly tolerated by all participants.

At the Academy, however, many of the specific practices for living outdoors were never explicitly presented to participants, presumably acknowledging the experience across the group with these types of experiences. For example, whereas Shavano instructors gave an explicit demonstration for “how to poop in the woods,” this same practice was addressed nonchalantly at the Academy:

James: “Phil I have to go to the bathroom.”
Phil: “Number one or number two?”
James: “Number two.”
Phil: “OK. You know what you’re doing?”
James: “Yeah.”
Phil: “Alright, go back in those woods there and take care of business.”
I reach down and pick up a rock for James to dig with, hand it to him, and he disappears into the woods, plucking larger leaves off nearby plants as he walks. (July 26, 2012)

When participants at the Academy needed guidance in the matter, it was presented directly. As Mary outlined for one participant:

“Dig a hole with this spade. Poop in the hole. If you miss the hole, do not use this [spade] to get the poop in the hole, use a stick. Then bury the poop and put your used toilet paper in this [plastic bag].” (July 25, 2012)

At Redcloud, perhaps given the shorter timeframe, a listing of guidelines was not formally presented to participants beyond, “Also you’ll notice that we don’t have any trash cans up here. … So we have a leave no trace, pack it in, pack it out policy” or “I do want to stress the importance of drinking a lot of water today, and also putting on sunscreen.” The pressing schedule at Redcloud is likely the cause for skimming over these guidelines, both because this discussion would take precious time away from the
already ambitious agenda, and the short period of time participants are at Redcloud may not require that they learn many of the particular guidelines for living outdoors.

Other guidelines were presented as required rules to participating in the experience and pertained directly to the safety of participants engaged in these adventure-specific activities. This included the use of harnesses and helmets during climbing, personal flotation devices while paddling the river, wearing water shoes while swimming, and wearing hiking boots for backpacking. These requisite aspects of the experience were presented as precautionary safety measures necessary for participating in AE safely and, to me, appear reasonable requests. However, participants did not always greet these requirements without resistance. Several commented that the harnesses were uncomfortable, the PFDs were too tight, or complained that wearing a helmet while bouldering was unnecessary. Perhaps the most pronounced case of this distaste for the required attire in adventure education was, again, Sally, who looked at the pants and shoes provided by Shavano with disdain, instead preferring her blue jeans and loosely laced white sneakers. As she explained, speaking of the hiking boots, “I don’t like those kind of shoes.” Her critique of the fashion faux pas of AE aside, Sally complied with the required attire for the experience, as did all participants in the study. As Melissa at Redcloud explained:

Ben: “What is it like to wear a harness?”
Melissa: “Um. It kind of makes you feel safe, and just good I guess.”
Ben: “Do you think they look weird?”
Melissa: “Yeah, but it’s all good.” (September 28, 2012)

Most of the formal guidelines presented for the AE experience, to me, seem reasonable, as they typically pertain to minimizing impact on nature and the safety and
comfort of participants. They also provide a structure of behavior expected of participants while engaged in the AE experience, which may prove helpful for those entering the program with minimal prior experience outdoors.

When participants were familiar with the outdoors, as were nearly all participants at Wilson Academy, they commonly demonstrated an awareness of these guidelines, and their transition to the expected behaviors in the program appeared relatively seamless from my perspective. Alternatively, when participants were unfamiliar with the outdoors, as were participants at Shavano, the presentation of guidelines were presented more explicitly and, though some resistance was occasionally expressed, participants seemed to quickly adapt to this new mode of living.

**The Use of Jargon**

A common occurrence across the sites that also exemplifies a level of cultural rigidity in the AE experience is the use of terminology and jargon specific to the context of adventure education and outdoor environments. Examples, once again, were prevalent at the three sites but took different forms at each.

At Shavano, jargon was introduced in the form of explaining to participants the various aspects of the natural environment through introduction and explanation of terms such as headwall, switchback, pass and cartographer. Participants were also introduced to the particular aspects of the environment when instructors would make note of the local flora and fauna along the trail, occasionally explaining the ecological webs that surround the plants and wildlife.

At the Academy, similar to Shavano, jargon was used to introduce and explain the natural environment. For example, Beth seemingly sought to teach participants to identify
and name the rock formations in the area, including the local varieties of conglomerate, shale, sandstone and limestone. However, a more consistent use of terminology at the Academy was the introduction and use of jargon specific to adventure activities and equipment. Dan, the rock climbing instructor, introduced the names of different types of harnesses, the belay commands and other terminology to be used when climbing, such as “Slack,” “Take,” “Take and Lower” and “Rock!” Lynn, the boating instructor, similarly explained the equipment and techniques of paddling a boat down-river in detail, complete with terminology including the blade and power end of the paddle, the bow and stern of the boat, rapids, eddies, river right, river left, front stroke, back stroke, eddy out, pinwheel, and others.

This use of activity-specific terminology was not simply introduced, but mandated when it came to the use of climbing commands at both the Academy and Redcloud (see “A culture for challenge” or “Aesthetic involvement in an indoor world” in the preceding chapter). As is evidenced in the descriptions of the AE experience (see Denise at Redcloud), these commands were often entirely new to participants, who regularly struggled with their use.

As Mitchell (1983) noted, this terminology is familiar to those of the cultural in-group, and in the context of adventure education, terminology and jargon may serve as a way to introduce participants to this new environment. However, the vast majority of terms introduced were not necessary to participating in the activity, rendering their use somewhat questionable. For example, we do not need to know a steep hill is called a headwall to walk up it, nor must we know the name of our harnesses to know they keep us safe, or which end of the boat is the bow and which is the stern to paddle down a river.
Though these terms and commands are idiomatic to the instructors, they often appear completely unfamiliar to those participants who have limited experience with adventure education. As such, we may perceive the use of such jargon as an instance of potentially unnecessary, yet possibly enriching, cultural rigidity within the AE experience. The utility of this language is a point to be further explored in the following chapter.

**Instructor Values at Work**

Also clear through the descriptions of the AE experience is the varied approaches implemented by different instructors, which ultimately stands as a reflection of their values and intentions as adventure educators. As each institution purports a unique mission, each instructor similarly embodies a unique set of values and intentions for the participant experience. And because these varied instructors implement the institutional practices, each instructor facilitates a unique brand of adventure education reflective of their values. Accordingly, there are as many different types of adventure education experiences as there are instructors, as each instructor frames the experience differently as a reflection of their own intentions.55 This is what I mean by “values at work,” and why I include these values as an aspect of cultural rigidity. In this subsection, I review the values of the various AE instructors and infer how these values and intentions influence the AE experience before further discussing the shared value of challenge in AE.

**Wilson Academy Values**

The instilment of values on the part of instructors can be uncovered through considering the intentions and actions of Academy instructors Phil and Mary. When I asked Phil of his intentions for participants of the AE experience, he stated:

55 Other studies have noted this intentional dimension of teachers in schools (Conrad, 2011; Moroye, 2009).
“That they start to get less screen time and more outdoor time, and just try to get ‘em more stoked about the outdoors, and showing them the cool spots and the cool things they can do outside. Just so they will be outside more in general.” (August 2, 2012)

He later elaborated on his goal as an instructor via email:

“My goal as an outdoor educator is to get our youth to enjoy their time outside and to teach them games and activities that they do themselves and pass on to their friends. In order to do this I keep our outside time simple, relaxed and fun. I frequently ask the kids to summarize what we did as a refresher so that they remember what we did.” (November 5, 2012)

Considering Phil’s intentions as an instructor, his actions in the field take on new significance. Be it directing an impromptu band of imaginary instruments while we ride in the van or reviewing the activities of the week with signature enthusiasm, reflected in Phil’s actions is his intention that participants enjoy their time outdoors. The other main instructor at the Academy, Mary, identified her intentions for this experience along similar lines:

“I want kids to enjoy being outside and not have to have a structured plan and schedule. I want them to appreciate what’s outside their house, what’s outside the window, and then be able to go out there and enjoy it to their fullest potential. And just really appreciate the natural gifts that we have, and not be so focused on material possessions as well as, I guess, being able to have unstructured play and creative imagination.” (August 2, 2012)

To actualize those intentions, Mary explained, “I like to express my appreciation wherever we’re at. Like, say how beautiful it is, or how lucky we are to be here, and then hope that that gets through to them.” Indeed, I recall numerous moments in the field when Mary would offer aloud, to whoever was listening, an appreciation of the natural environment: “This is amazing!” or “This is so beautiful.” This reflection also paints Mary’s tendency to bring attention to aspects of the natural world an intentional shade. Whether it be a bright caterpillar, deer track, fish in the water, colorful rock, or the full
moon close to the horizon, Mary was quick to notice and call to attention those aspects of the world participants might otherwise take for granted. Clearly, we can see that Mary and Phil’s values inform their varied actions in the field, and influence the participants’ experience in innumerable ways.

**Shavano Expeditions Values**

This connection between values and actions was also evident in the insights and practices of instructors of Shavano Expeditions. When I asked one Shavano instructor, Laura, “What are your major intentions, or what do you hope to see happen with these kids?” she responded:

“The same thing that I could always see happening with my niece and nephews. They would start to get the attitude that they could do anything. If they could do this they felt they were stronger and they just thought they could take on anything. It was a big confidence builder for them.” (July 22, 2012)

This comment puts Laura’s matter of fact, “You can do it” attitude while on the trail in context. For Laura, it is the objective conditions of the experience—the hill to climb, or the pack to carry—that hold value in these experiences. When I asked another instructor, Steve, a similar question, he responded reflexively:

“Um. I guess. Probably for this demographic, being poor and Latino, my hope for these kids is to give them experiences that are different from what they typically get, by a lot. So typically they’ll be just hanging out at the trailer parks in their high-density housing situations in certain parts of [the city]. So I like to get them out of there so they can experience really nice places, like really beautiful clean pure places. With the hope that they can enjoy these places and see some benefit in it and have an experience that will open their minds.” (July 22, 2012)

For Steve, similar to Laura, simply getting participants to the wilderness and providing them with a new kind of experience was the major goal. Steve also expressed a desire to inspire deeper levels of thinking, which matriculated through his use of initiatives and
posing dilemmas and questions that positioned nature against societal development (for instance, “Is it OK to harm nature?”). 

A third instructor, Travis, identified his intentions at Shavano as twofold:

“I think [it’s] a dual purpose here. Here, it’s partly to enrich the lives of the kids, to give them those sorts of experiences whether they’re in need of therapy or not. I mean, I know there’s lots of kids in our particular group that do need that sort of experience, they do need the therapy even though they’re not… formally diagnosed as needing it. But in practicality, you can see that they do. So there are lots of kids that do need that. 

“But then also it’s to build a new generation of environmental stewards, and make sure that places like the one we’re at now are protected and continue to be protected. … I think, after an experience like this a lot of these kids would be motivated to defend a place like this if they knew it were under attack. … So that’s the other half of the motivation.” (July 22, 2012) 

Travis, in line with both Laura and Steve, sees the experience as a vehicle in itself to have potential significance for these participants in particular. Further, Travis’ intentions toward developing environmental stewards matriculated through his periodic explanations of the local flora and fauna along the trail, and his expressions of protecting these same aspects of the environment. 

There were several occasions in which Shavano instructors expressed the importance of both appreciating and protecting the natural environment, and other examples of the instructors’ core values informing their actions are readily available in the descriptions of the AE experience at Shavano. Transitively, these values were successfully instilled in participants to some extent, as Jose and Pedro explained.

Ben: “What do you think of the guidelines and stuff for being up here?” 
Jose: “You gotta be careful.” 
Ben: “OK, in what ways?” 
Jose: “Like, you could slip, or like, damage nature.” (July 21, 2012)
Ben: “So have these experiences changed how you see yourself, or have they taught you anything about yourself?”
Pedro: “Yes. Because it tells you how beautiful the wilderness is, and it tells you how important it is, how you have to take care of it, and not trash it, you know?” (July 21, 2012)

Though the extent to which these values were new to participants is uncertain, what is of importance here is that the values of Shavano instructors influenced the AE experience for Shavano participants.

**Redcloud Challenge Course Values**

At Redcloud, a similar degree of alignment between instructor values and participants’ experience was evident. As one Redcloud instructor, Mike, explained his intentions for the Redcloud experience:

“The hope is that kids learn to interact better with other kids. You know, obviously in a very short period, but, I think that if you have… at least in my own personal experience, that you have very formative experiences about how you work in a group, and if this can be one of those benchmark—very important experiences for those kids, or at least one or two of those kids, that can be the start of a real shift for somebody at that point in their life.” (September 27, 2012)

Mike’s intentions for this experience, “that kids learn to interact better with other kids,” carry into the experience through his intentional framing and processing of the experience, seemingly driving the conversation toward a tangible lesson learned with respect to collaboration. As he once explained to participants in this study:

“So, I love communication and teamwork, ‘cause that’s what we want to work on, but those are kind of like umbrella terms. Those encompass a lot of different things. So can you specifically say what you improved on? What part of communication you got better at, and what part of teamwork you got better at?” (September 25, 2012)

Andy, another Redcloud instructor, similarly described his intentions along the lines of helping groups learn to work together, but also added the facilitation of memorable experiences as an aim. As he explained:
“My intentions are to provide an environment for people, that would add to whatever sort of group dynamics that they already have going on that would hopefully challenge wherever they’re at as a group and build upon that in some way. So my intentions are to look at groups and create an environment that’s memorable, that’s fun, that’s safe, but yeah to really kind of look at the dynamics of whatever group I’m working with and see how I could help them on that day upon how they interact and how they work together.”

…

Ben: “You said one of your aims or intentions was to have it be memorable. So, two questions, why do you want it to be memorable? And how do you do that?” Andy: “I want people to look back at their experience at [the Redcloud Challenge Course] and remember it in a good way, in a good light, because I believe in what we do there and believe that it’s important—whether it be outdoor education, or just being out in the mountains, or this whole teambuilding aspect.” (October 23, 2012)

Regarding how these intentions informed Andy’s actions in the field, he believed the experience somewhat stood for itself:

“I think I definitely play a part of it, but it’s set up to be an environment that’s going to be memorable as it is. Just getting up in trees, getting up on cables, putting a harness on, these things are not things that most people do every day, so they are really excited about it.” (October 23, 2012)

In identifying the intrinsic value of the experience, Andy’s presentation of relatively simple institutional goals to the participants, “Have fun and be safe” are reflective of how he perceives his role in the broader experience. Simply put, to help participants safely interact with the conditions of the AE experience, while invoking a positive worldview toward that experience.

Other instructors at Redcloud reflected a variance of these intentions through the ways they framed and processed the AE experiences, and these “processing” sessions often reflected the stylistic preference of each instructor. However, the use of metaphor to guide meaning making was rather consistent during my observations at Redcloud. Again, examples of this metaphorical teaching are readily available in the descriptions of the AE experience at Redcloud. I reference this use of metaphor as a reflection of value
instilment because these metaphorical lessons are value-laden. To further qualify, it was common for instructors at Redcloud to highlight a particular aspect of the experience, and facilitate an understanding of how that aspect of the experience illustrates a fundamental lesson, or moral. For example, Anne’s processing statements, “It’s a really good life skill to be able to set goals and understand when you’ve met them,” or “You need to rely on the whole group, not just yourself,” are value statements demonstrated through metaphorical ties imbedded within the parameters of the experience. This was also evident at Shavano through Steve’s lessons, “It’s important to pay attention to details” or “It’s important to have a plan,” which both reflect values he holds. The significance of this practice in AE is a point to be further explored in the following chapter.

**The Value of Challenge**

Perhaps more than any other value or intention purported by any of the AE instructors, is the shared hegemony toward challenge. As I have noted elsewhere (see celebratory challenge) the AE experience embodies a particular approach to the utility of challenges: that they are opportunities to engage with willingly, rather than problems to avoid. This pervasive value implied by the AE institution is likely the most significant and consistent aspect of cultural rigidity in AE. Though participants overwhelmingly reported a shared appreciation of challenge, this does raise questions for how those who do not appreciate challenge were left to adapt to this explicitly communicated value. Much as a person who does not value discipline may struggle in the military, a participant who disdains challenge may struggle to find value in the AE experience.
Values at Work in Summary

In review, the intentions of instructors stem from the values they hold, and these intentions ultimately influence the participant experience. The strategies utilized by instructors to actualize their intentions vary from site to site and from instructor to instructor. As such, the intentions and values of the individual instructors may be considered somewhat of a complementary aspect of the AE curriculum (Moroye, 2009), and ultimately influences how participants interact with AE on a cultural level.

Required Adaptation

The activities themselves, such as backpacking, rock climbing, paddling, or climbing a tree, along with the values, interpersonal practices, and interactions unique to AE are all aspects of the experience to which participants must adapt if unfamiliar (which, as noted through novelty, is commonly the case). This adaptation was perhaps most apparent at Shavano as participants quickly adjusted to the arduous demands of carrying a heavy pack over miles of mountainous terrain. Travis noted the participants’ quick adaptation after only one day in the field, “You guys look like hikers today.” Albert similarly noted his own quick acclimatization to the experience, “I’m ready to hike today.” Joe explained this process of adapting to the new activities:

Ben: “Has it been hard for you to interact in this space, or has it been easy?”
Joe: “It’s been both hard and easy because some things are new and I’m still getting used to them, and yeah, it’s fun and all, but I’m still getting used to it.”
Ben: “What things are you getting used to?”
Joe: “The hiking. I’m getting used to it. My backpack feels lighter now. So it feels like a normal backpack I can carry easily.” (July 21, 2012)

While participants quickly grew accustomed to the culturally foreign AE experience at Shavano, Robin at Redcloud explained how this adaptation might take more time for
some, as it did for her. As we discussed her background with these activities, and how
she and others might feel in the AE experience:

Robin: “I go camping a lot and I’ve been real rock climbing and stuff.”
Ben: “So do you feel comfortable in this space? Do you feel comfortable in the
harness and things like that?”
Robin: “Yeah, pretty much.”
Ben: “Do you feel like you can be yourself here?”
Robin: “Yeah.”
Ben: “Do you think other people might not be able to feel like themselves if they
don’t have experience rock climbing or anything like that?”
Robin: “Yeah ‘cause the first time I did it, it was super uncomfortable, and it was just
not that fun.”
Ben: “The first time you did what?”
Robin: “Like, I put on a harness and did like a challenge type thing.”
Ben: “It wasn’t that fun?”
Robin: “Not at first, ‘cause I was too scared to enjoy it.” (September 28, 2012)

As Robin explains, there are aspects of the experience with which the participant must
first grow accustomed in order to enjoy the experience. Steve, an instructor at Shavano,
similarly acknowledged this as among the most important considerations for bringing the
AE experience to inexperienced participants:

“They’ll have these really intense experiences and they won’t necessarily want to
repeat them. So my intention is to work with a couple of these guys in how to scaffold
their experiences so they start with more minor experiences so that they want to
repeat [these experiences] . . . [Especially with] like a 13-year-old kid who’s never
been in the woods and whose parents have never considered taking him to these
places and having these experiences. So the short of all this is helping the kids with
like an overnight car camping trip one week prior to a backpacking trip so they can
feel what it’s like to sleep in a tent and stuff like that.” (July 22, 2012)

In sum, to facilitate the adaptation to this new cultural world with some intention, as
Steve did with Pedro and Jose on their trip, may be one way to prevent “super
uncomfortable” experiences with AE, such as the one Robin described. The incidence of
adaptation ultimately stands as a reflection of the participants’ (lack of) past experience
with the norms and practices of the adventure education institution.
Cultural Rigidity in Conclusion

Across the three sites of study, there were non-negotiable aspects of the AE institutional culture, which were presented to and required of participants. These norms typically pertained to the participants’ health and safety (such as wearing a helmet, harness, or PFD) and compliance with Leave No Trace principles (such as not leaving trash behind, and leaving a minimal impact) (see Leave No Trace, 2013). However, in several cases, examples of this cultural rigidity may be superfluous to these ends, and instead reflects a degree of imperialism or assimilation to the institutional position, which was most clearly evidenced through the application of the values and intentions of instructors.

This rigidity also provides a structure of sorts for the AE experience—a way to act and behave in this new and unfamiliar environment—and consequently presents participants with an opportunity to experiment with a new cultural mode of living (Dewey, 1916; Locke, 1936/1989; Moses, 1999). Conversely, participants met this rigidity with some resistance when those required behaviors were incongruent with personal preferences, though all participants ultimately complied with these required aspects of the experience. This ability and willingness to adapt to the AE institutional culture was likely fostered through the other half of the story with respect to personal backgrounds and institutional cultures: cultural flexibility.

Cultural Flexibility

Adventure education instructors exercised cultural flexibility through embracing the individual backgrounds of the participants within the AE experience. Whereas rigidity

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56 For educational applications of this perspective, see Gay (2000), Ladson-Billings (1995) or Nieto (1999).
can provide structure for an experience, flexibility can allow for personal backgrounds to find a hold within that structure. I review this cultural flexibility on the part of the AE institution through the use of language, personal goal setting, and working group norms before explaining the ways in which participants were able to sustain selfhood in AE.

**Language**

While some aspects of language in AE, such as activity specific jargon and terminology of the environment, maintained a level of rigidity, language use was also accommodating and flexible to the participants. These dynamic language norms were most readily evidenced through the varied use of English and Spanish at the different sites of study.

At the Redcloud Challenge Course, several groups of participants spoke Spanish to one another while engaged in the AE experience in spite of the instructors’ almost exclusive use of English. For instance, two girls working together on a high element spoke to one another in Spanish, but when they called out for guidance or commands to the instructors, they spoke in English. A different set of participants on the Partner V spoke to one another in English at first, but as their bodies were stretched farther out on the cables, they seamlessly transitioned to Spanish. This varied use of English and Spanish, which differed from group to group at Redcloud, likely reflects the personal language preferences of the participants in these groups.

At the Academy, it appeared that only one participant, Jeff, spoke Spanish, though the use of Spanish at the Academy was very limited. Jeff would occasionally speak to himself in Spanish, but interactions with instructors and other participants were almost exclusively in English. Mary and Phil knew little Spanish, but made efforts to
communicate with Jeff in this language, “You want beans Jeff? Arroz?” though examples of even this rudimentary use of Spanish were limited. This linguistic barrier was acknowledged as a point of regret by Phil: “I wish I knew more Spanish to talk to Jeff.” A marked exception to the limited use of Spanish by Jeff and Mary was the Academy boating instructor Lynn, who spoke to Jeff exclusively in Spanish, often offering Spanish versions of her instructions following the large group English version.

At Shavano, the use of Spanish was prolific to the point that it served as somewhat of a limitation to my observations, as I do not comprehend the language well. Every participant and some instructors appeared fluent in Spanish, which resulted in a rhythmic use of Spanish and English across the program, at times to quickly clarify the meaning of a word—“… you will get blisters—ampollas”—and other times entire conversations were held in Spanish.

In summary, participants of the AE experience appeared to make their own decisions with respect to language based on whom they were communicating with, and what they were communicating. Certainly embedded within these examples of language is both a cultural rigidity and flexibility, but what I aim to emphasize in this section is the willingness on the part of the instructors across the sites to engage with participants linguistically. There was openness to language within the framework of the AE experience, and when instructors could engage in participant languages, so it would seem, they did.

**Working Cultural Norms**

Another point of cultural flexibility in the AE experience is the process through which participants and instructors grew together as unique groups over their time together
in these programs. As I have explained previously, through a shared isolation from
normal living, the AE experience often allows for a particular kind of togetherness to
develop across the group (see freedom and togetherness), and one sign of this growing
together was the development of norms within the group. These perspectives of cultural
development are congruent with Haluza-Delay’s (1999) perspective that, “The wilderness
program group forms group norms, behaviors, interpretations of events, and stories” (p.
130).

Certainly, the extent to which these participants grew together was dependent on
both their history together and the circumstances of their interaction through AE. For
instance, the development of new cultural norms was significantly more pronounced for
those groups that spent larger amounts of time together, and those participants with a
shared history came to the experience with a working set of cultural norms already in
place. Accordingly, I review the development of group norms at each of the sites
respectively, mindful of the varied parameters of these experiences.

Participants at Redcloud came to the course as pre-existing groups, (the honors
group from a school, the class from the alternative school, or the “at risk” of dropping out
program) and carried these shared histories into the experience. These groups came
together at Redcloud for just one day, so the extent to which they came together as
groups while at Redcloud was somewhat limited. However, the new space provided by
the experience allowed for new ways of interacting and fresh norms of behavior to take
hold, if only for a day. For example, the wolf calls from participants in Jake’s group, or
the different forms and types of encouragement espoused across small groups. Another
point of interest at Redcloud pertaining to norms is the variance in behavior from one day

324
to the next at Redcloud, which suggests that the experience is amenable to the pre-existing cultural norms of those groups in attendance. This was best exemplified through the variance in cheering, laughter, language, and other behaviors unique to each group across my observations.

At Shavano, there were familial relations within the group (cousins, brothers, and close friends) as well as a shared history across the group as all participants hailed from the same school. But contrary to Redcloud, Shavano participants were on the trip together for four days—eating, sleeping, and living together for the duration. This extended length of time together allowed the group to grow together in ways perhaps not possible through the limited time frame at Redcloud. This resulted in the development of group norms, such as calling the bathroom “visiting the marmot,” speaking a mix of English and Spanish, the tendency to voice complaints during steep hikes, and a shared appreciation of fishing.

The Academy was comprised of participants local to the area as well as those from various parts of the country visiting for the summer. The Academy experience was significantly longer than the Shavano or Redcloud experience, with participants spending a total of eight days together with four overnights, allowing for a more pronounced idiosyncrasy to the group norms (Locke & Stern, 1942). A quick listing includes the tendency for the boys to wear their shirts on their heads to be “ninjas,” the habitual use of face paint throughout the program, several group theme songs, and the instructors’ use of a unique call-response to convene the group (a loon call from instructors, followed by
“Cha, cha, cha!” from the participants). Participants at the Academy even invented their own game toward the end of the program.57

The point of interest here is not the norms developed within these groups, but their existence, evolution, and the degree to which norms are produced as groups spend more time together. Other examples of the development of group norms are readily available in Haluza-DeLay’s (1999) ethnographic study. Though the norms developed are likely forgotten when the group disbands, I note here that the AE institution is flexible to the participants in allowing them to both bring existing norms into the AE experience (Redcloud) and co-create cultural norms within the parameters of the experience (Shavano and the Academy).

**Personal Goal Setting**

In the AE experience, there exist ample opportunities for participants to decide the extent of their own participation, and define their own goals within the activities provided. These personal goals were voiced, adapted, amended, and abandoned to varying degrees at the three sites and, as with other facets of culture in the AE experience, each site addressed this component of the experience in different ways.

Personal goal setting was most evident at Redcloud, made possible through the consistent prompting from Redcloud instructors—“What is your goal?”—prior to engaging in high challenge course initiatives. While this personalization of goals was established as a part of the routine at Redcloud, at the Academy this goal setting was often less explicit, but still a consistent part of the experience. As Mary offered, “We

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57 Only during a break from the game did it become apparent that no one actually knew the rules or purpose to the game, though it seemed to roughly resemble capture the flag without a flag.
want you to challenge yourself, but it’s your choice how far you challenge yourself.”

Though participants rarely verbalized their goals at the Academy, they effectively exercised the same level of independence in deciding their level of involvement in activities, evidenced through their decisions to stop partway up the wall when climbing, climb one boulder over another, or choose to take a different path to the summit. There was also evidence of this goal setting in the pride reflected by participants after they achieved their unannounced goals. See, for example, Hannah, “I climbed every wall!” or the following interview excerpt from Kevin on the topic of goals:

Kevin: “I like both [hard and easy climbs] because the easy climbs I can easily master, but I like the hard climbs too because it gives me a new challenge and a new goal.”
Ben: “Can you say more about that?”
Kevin: “So, when I look at a rock and see if I can climb up it, and I can’t really get a good grip, I set a goal to see if I can get that next time.”
Ben: “Who sets the goal?”
Kevin: “I set the goal myself. I think about what I’m doing and when the next time I might be able to do it.”
Ben: “What does it feel like when you achieve a goal?”
Kevin: “I feel very confident about myself, and then I know that I can climb the wall next time and I get myself new goals.” (July 24, 2012)

Like the Academy, at Shavano, the major activities of the experience—to complete the hike, or to reach the pass—were similarly imposed on the participants, but these experiences offer the opportunity for setting individual goals in a way similar to the other sites. For example, Albert’s apparent goal to catch a fish, or Pedro’s goal to be “El primero” on our hike to Fancy Pass. However, because the basic activities at Shavano were dictated to the group, those who did not internalize those goals in a personal way, such as Sally, may view the experience as one of force, rather than choice.
Personal goal setting is included here to highlight the opportunity to exercise a degree of individuality within the AE experience. Though participants are often presented with activities defined by instructors—to climb the cliff, paddle the river, hike to the pass, or walk the cable—the ways in which they were allowed to interact with these experiences often honored their personal preferences. Participants’ fears and desires found import in the experience through the ability to define, amend, achieve and abandon their own goals. Indeed Davidson (2001) identified the freedom to choose in this way as a crucial element of the AE experience. Individual goal setting is included here as another example of AE’s plasticity with respect to personal backgrounds, which, in concert with the other aspects of cultural flexibility, contributes to the maintenance of selfhood in AE.

**Sustaining Selfhood**

The above examples of cultural flexibility in the AE experience result in the participants’ ability to sustain selfhood in the AE experience. Consistent across the data is that participants in this study felt comfortable interacting with others in AE, and ultimately felt they could be themselves in the space provided by this experience. Whereas the rigidity of the AE institution required that participants adapt in some ways, the flexibility allowed participants to maintain a sense of self in the AE experience.

I draw this conclusion based on the reliably affirming responses to my questions: “Do you feel like you can be yourself here?” “Yes.” And, “What is it like to interact with people here?” “Comfortable.” Further, when I offered participants the opportunity to discuss how this experience caused them to think about their various identity categories, such as ethnicity, religion, gender, or sexuality, their responses were rarely substantive. This response is a reflection of either participants’ near unanimous avoidance of the
question, the developmental inappropriateness of this question, or, as I would contend, that this experience does not tend to marginalize identity with respect to these popular categories.

Exceptions did arise, such as Sally who offered, “It sucks being the only girl” and Pedro who noted that while Latino families rarely do these types of things, he thinks these experiences are for “everyone that thinks they can do it.” In his own words:

Ben: “So what motivates you to do this kind of stuff?”
Pedro: “’Cause us, as Latino families, we don’t do this that much. We don’t do this kind of stuff. And, you know, you have to pay for it. And [Shavano], is helping us to get free and enjoy it. And yeah, it’s cool and pretty awesome that they’re doing that for us.”
Ben: “Why do you think Latino families don’t do this as much?”
Pedro: “’Cause they don’t have the stuff to do it? The equipment.”
Ben: “Is there any other reasons you think or no?”
Pedro: “Um. Low budget I guess, not as much money… And they don’t know as much as you guys do, you know? Like if they know what to do if some emergency case. … We don’t know that much, you know? Beginners.”

Ben: “Do you think these experiences are for anybody, or they’re only for people of certain race groups or religious groups or genders?”
Pedro: “Nope. They’re just for everyone that thinks they can do it. You just have to challenge yourself like I was talking about [earlier]. You have to believe in yourself to do it, ‘cause it’s hard. You think it’s not hard but it’s actually really hard [emphasis added].” (July 21, 2012)

Pedro notes the boundaries that prevent someone from his cultural group from partaking in AE, which are readily documented in the literature (James, 1996). George also mentioned the role Shavano plays in bringing this experience to a rich variety of participants who may not otherwise have the opportunity:

“I mean you get a lot of kids from different backgrounds on the trips. Different races, different ethnicities, and it feels cool to be up there with kids who’ve never done that before, and just to get that reaction out of them and get their insight on what they think about it and whether or not they would do it again. And a lot of the kids like it.” (August 21, 2012)
Though bringing people with little experience in the outdoors to AE contexts raises issues concerning the congruence between the experience and their identities, it seems this issue is handled in personal terms. Christy, for example, does not identify as “outdoorsy” but still found value in this experience:

Ben: “Does going through [this experience] help you understand something new about yourself or does it change how you see yourself in any way?”
Christy: “Um. … I guess I see myself as a little bit more outdoorsy?” We both laugh and Christy admits through our laughter, “I don’t normally do stuff like this.”

…

Christy: “I’ve had a lot of fun. I didn’t think I was going to.”
Ben: “Oh you didn’t?”
Christy: “Um Mm (negative). Because, I dunno. I’m just not really… I don’t know. I don’t like to go on hikes and stuff like that” We both laugh as Christy continues, “And so it was like ‘Oh we’re going outside for the whole day.’ But this was fun. This is like a boot camp sort of. It’s like an exercise—it’s different.”
Ben: “So you don’t normally like to be outside and stuff and here you are outside.”
Christy: “Yeah. I think it was more how I was raised probably because my family doesn’t do anything. Like, we’ve been living in Colorado like 13 years and we’ve never been up to the mountains, so…”
Ben: “So you didn’t think it was going to be for you really?”
Christy: “Yeah, but I’m actually glad I came because I liked it.” (September 25, 2012)

Later in the interview, Christy expanded on her understanding of the experience on a personal-cultural level:

Ben: “So what is it like to kind of join this new cultural group for you?”
Christy: “It’s good. I like it. ‘Cause my family doesn’t really do stuff like this. And I think if I was around more people like this I would do more, but… I wish I would have more opportunities like this, then I would definitely do more of it.”
Ben: “Do you see any issues or challenges with joining this cultural group, or being a part of this?”
Christy: “No. Just, maybe if you were really afraid of heights. You might not be having as much fun—I don’t even know if you would try it. You know, you know yourself, but… For people who like… ‘Cause I didn’t really know if I was afraid of heights or not, and after I got up there I felt like I was!” We both laugh before she continues. “And I was just like, ‘Well…’ and I just went for it and it turned out well.” (September 25, 2012)
Here, Christy sees the value of participating in a new cultural group and does not see it as marginalizing her sense of selfhood. To the contrary, she perceives it as enriching precisely because of its unfamiliarity.

George expanded on how these experiences, though different from his life in the city, can be validating to identity, even describing his character in AE settings as more authentic (Palmer, 2004) than his personality elsewhere. He explains:

Ben: “Is interacting with people when you’re with [Shavano] similar to when you interact with people… down in the city, or is it different?”
George: “Nah it’s different I think. I feel like, when I’m with them, I can just be myself. And when I’m [in the city], I mean I’m not somebody different but, I mean, I just kind of… I act a little different. Just the culture I think, just the… what is it, the… personality kind of changes a little. But I mean, not too much. It’s definitely different [emphasis added].”
Ben: “Do you prefer one over the other?”
George: “I mean no I just kind of enjoy a little change just of people that I hang out with. That’s another thing, the people with [Shavano] would normally be not people I would really associate with in the city, you know. It’s just different people, different types of people.” (August 21, 2012)

In this excerpt, George also notes the value of interacting with different cultural groups, and participating in a level of cultural experimentation. He continued, explaining what it was like on his first trip with Shavano:

“It was pretty comfortable. The people were just really welcoming, they were really nice people, felt really comfortable with them. People that I would trust. And it just opened up new interests for me, a new hobby. I had a really good time. It was something I’d never done before so I didn’t have any experience. And I could feel myself each trip that I would go on I would just get more and more experience and get more and more knowledge about the outdoors and how to camp.” (August 21, 2012)

Clear in both Christy and George’s comments, beyond their expressed maintenance of selfhood in AE, is the potential the AE experience can serve toward the Deweyan conception of cross-cultural communication (Dewey, 1916). Dewey’s theory aside, what
is apparent across the perceptions of these participants is that participants of the AE experience feel like they can be themselves in AE; it frequently offers a degree of flexibility that welcomes the individual into the experience.

**Conclusion to Cultural Flexibility**

The personal backgrounds of participants in the AE experience were welcomed into that space, in varying degrees, through the cultural flexibility of the AE institution. Between the varied use of language, the development of group norms, and setting personal goals, it is clear that the AE institution adapts to the participants of the experience in the co-creation of culture. This responsiveness toward the varied backgrounds of participants allows for these participants to maintain a sense of self in adventure education, typically regardless of personal background. Though they are adorned in harnesses, helmets, PFDs, or hiking boots, and they wield paddles, ropes, belay devices, backpacks and trekking poles, the participants of the AE experience, beneath it all, are still themselves.

**Cultural Integration: Anecdotal Support**

Returning to my own experience, as I researched with an eye toward cultural coalescence, I began to view my own interactions within the group in a new light. I noted throughout my experiences with each program that I began to act in particular ways, in light of the cultural practices of the participants and instructors at each site. At Shavano, this influence was evidenced through my tendency to revert to forms of broken Spanish with the participants, and a growing Spanish intonation in my speech as the program progressed (as documented in interview recordings).
While researching at the Academy, I was reminded of my role as an instructor of similar programs, and at times, reverted to practices I had grown accustomed with while working in the field. As I helped load the van prior to an overnight trip, an administrator, Doug excitedly commented, “Like riding a bike, huh buddy?” My behaviors while in the field were congruent with that of an instructor to the point that several participants embraced me as such, apparent through their seeking my assistance in tying knots, soliciting advice in packing a backpack, requesting belays, and so forth. Further, I was pulled into the playful energy of the program, and channeled a much younger version of myself as I danced atop the boulder, played zombie tag, or bounced gleefully in the back of the van on rough roads.

I also came to notice that I also participated in the practice of jargon while at the Academy and Shavano, apparent through my explanation to Albert regarding features of the environment, or when talking with James about the kinds of holds he liked in climbing. This further reveals both my position as a member of the cultural in-group, and exposes the apparently natural tendency to explain aspects of the experience through language with which we have grown accustomed.

At Redcloud, on the other hand, my involvement as a researcher was less that of a participant-observer than it was at other sites. Accordingly, my interaction with the group culture was reflectively marginal, though the actions and energy of the group still had a notable affective influence on me. I found myself smiling with the group laughter, sympathetic to Sofia’s tears, and holding my breath with Sadie atop the Power Pole. I draw upon these examples both to document the subjective realities of interpretation, and

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58 This disparity is also noted in the limitations section of Chapter Three.
to further illustrate the influence of participants, instructors, and to an extent, researchers, in the collaborative creation of culture in AE.

**Cultural Coalescence in Summary**

I have presented two major perspectives to discuss the coalescence of personal backgrounds and institutional cultures in adventure education, and characterized each through common aspects of the AE experience. Between the two extremes, rigid mandate and flexible acceptance, exist a few interesting inconsistencies in which the AE instructors purported cultural assimilation to institutional norms when these behaviors were not necessarily for the health, safety, or well-being of the participants. However, I reiterate that inexperienced participants may not necessarily have ways of acting in this unfamiliar setting, and in this regard, they were seemingly receptive to the structure provided through this cultural rigidity. It is my contention that so long as these guidelines for participating in AE do not unnecessarily overstep participants’ pre-existing personal norms, requiring a degree of compliance from participants seems a reasonable request, and may serve to actualize forms of productive cultural reciprocity (Locke, 1936/1989; Moses, 1999) or cultural communication (Dewey, 1916).

The institutional norms influence the participant’s behaviors, while the participant’s personal background fills the space provided by the cultural shell of the AE experience. From this perspective, noting the rigidity and the flexibility of the AE institution, and the adaptation and sustainment of selfhood on the part of the individual, we see how the individual and the institution both exhibit a degree of plasticity as they coalesce. One influences the other in the co-creation of a shared cultural new.
Clear through the examples herein, and in the descriptions of the AE experience, is that participants and instructors both make culture happen. All are effectively pulled together from disparate positions toward a cultural mean of sorts. No one is isolated, and no one *purely* maintains personal cultural practices. All those intermingling in adventure education, even researchers, appear to be influenced in some way through the interactions with others in the group, the pronouncement of which likely mirrors the length and quality of time together (Dewey, 1916; Locke, 1935/1989; Locke & Stern, 1942).

While I do not offer absolute explanations about either the rigidity or the flexibility of culture in adventure education, I do name these aspects of cultural coalescence in the pragmatic hopes that we can better understand the intricacies of this process. The complexity of cultural coalescence in adventure education suggests that an essentialist approach to “cultural responsiveness” (Gay, 2000) with respect to identity categories of AE participants (such as gender, race, ability, religion, sexuality, ethnicity, and so forth), while well intentioned, and surely a helpful perspective in many contexts, is likely an insufficient strategy to address the complexity of issues raised through this study. As I would contend, these issues may best be addressed in personalized fashion (Conrad, 2011), in order to reflect the diversity of the AE field and its varied participants. With this presentation of cultural coalescence concluded, I turn us forward to a third and final categorical illustration: the participant perceptions of schooling.

**CARICATURES, COMPARISONS, AND CRITIQUES OF SCHOOLING**

An essential aim of this study is to understand the educational import of the AE experience, as demonstrated through the fourth question of this study: “What is the significance of the AE experience for schooling, if any?” I address this question two
ways in this study: First, through allowing research participants to share their perspectives on the topic, and second, through my own interpretations in light of the collective findings of this study. The first of these is introduced through this section in thematic fashion as I present the participant responses to questions of education. My own response to this question of significance is withheld until the final chapter.

While in the field, I presented participants of the AE experience with variations of three prompts as they related to schools: 1.) Describe your experiences in school; 2.) Compare and contrast the school experience to the AE experience; and 3.) Provide suggestions (if any) for education in light of the AE experience. I revisit responses to each of these prompts respectively through the caricatures of schooling, comparisons of the AE and school experience, and critiques of schooling.

**Caricatures of Schooling**

Just as the meanings ascribed to the AE experience are diverse, the caricatures of schooling varied from one participant to the next. Through their descriptions of schools, participants painted the school experience a mottled, but generally dismal color. These participant caricatures of schooling can be organized into two categories: those who appreciate the school experience, and those who do not.

Kyle, for instance, characterized school as a fun place, where he listened to music while taking tests and learned new things. He reported an appreciation for attending classes, doing long division, and even identified state standardized tests as a fun event at his school.

Kyle: “And one thing that is one of the favorites in our school is TCAPs. They used to be called CSAPS, but it’s this big test that pretty much all of Colorado takes, and
it’s really fun, like, it’s math and measuring and shapes, geometry, and all that stuff. It’s really fun.”
Admittedly, befuddled, I respond.
Ben: “You like taking that test?”

Albert and Kenny also professed to liking school, highlighting the aspects of school they enjoy, such as learning and being with friends. Joe, similarly described his school as a place he likes, one characterized by trips, success and friendship: “I really go to a lot of trips. I have good grades and all. I have a lot of friends.”

However the perspective shared by these few participants was not reflective of the popular sentiment among participants across the study and, in fact, represents somewhat of a discrepant perspective. Much more pervasive was the caricature of school as an undesirable place of boredom and monotony, and as serving a purpose as a means to greater ends. Jose summarized this most pervasive sentiment of schools in but two words: “It’s boring.”

Other participants offered more lengthy explanations in their descriptions of schools, such as Ivan:

“Um. In school, it’s pretty much like any other school. You pretty much just study all day and you learn all day long. And then, usually for me, I go home and then I start studying, start doing my homework, maybe some reading, and afterwards, I just stay at home. … It’s kind of a really boring life [emphasis added].” (July 20, 2012)

Ivan laughs nervously at this assessment of his own life. In talking further, he stated that his favorite class is pottery and ceramics.

Ben: “Why do you think pottery and ceramics was your favorite class?”
Ivan: “Because you get to do stuff with your hands, unlike in every other class [where] you just listen to the teacher, write something down, and you pretty much do that for the whole hour. You do that for six classes until I finally get to pottery and sculpture.” (July 20, 2012)
Pedro also offered a thorough description of his school experiences, identifying the aspects of school that he appreciates, but characterizing school as lacking in those very things he appreciates:

Ben: “Could you describe what it’s like for you on just a typical day of school?”
Pedro: “Um. I mean its pretty boring, you know? But you have P.E. and lunch, which… That gives you like free time basically. … So we have classes, you know, and sometimes you don’t have the classes that you want—like your selections or your choices. Like in 6th grade I had no P.E. the whole 6th grade. No P.E. No cool stuff. They were all reading classes ‘cause I was really low at first, ‘cause it’s hard.” … Ben: “So you don’t really like your normal classes?”
Pedro: “Not really. I mean I wish they had, like, more, like, cool… More stuff that makes you exercise. Like P.E. is just like 45 minutes I think. It’s really short.” (July 21, 2012)

George, who had effectively been pushed out of school as a sophomore in high school, reflected on his school experience in similar ways to these other participants:

“I never really went to school that much. Up until high school I went to school and then in high school I just kind of stopped going to school, and doing drugs and getting in trouble. I just always had trouble with school. I really never liked it. I was bored with it really.” (August 21, 2012)

For George, the undesirability of the school experience was likely one reason he “kind of stopped going” and ended up getting into trouble, revealing the important role school can play in the lives of students, enjoyable or not. Abby similarly acknowledged the importance of school somewhat begrudgingly, describing school as a boring place for her and something she is not good at:

Ben: “Can you describe what its like at your school?”
Abby: “Uhh… I’m not really good at that. I don’t really know.”
Ben: “At describing stuff or at school?”
Abby: “At school. But I’m not that good at describing stuff [either].”
Ben: “Is your experience at school important to you?”
Abby: “Well, I know it’s important, but right now it doesn’t seem that important.”
Ben: “What is it like when you’re in school?”
Abby: “It’s boring.”
Ben: “What parts are boring?”
Abby: “Listening to people talk. And you just have to sit there. … It’s just boring.” (August 1, 2012)

Abby’s reconciliation of the unfortunate aspects of school with her understanding of the significance of school was also revealed in Bruce’s reflections of school:

Bruce: “You have to learn things, but sometimes it can be real boring. But it’s for your own good, so you can get a job when you’re older, or something like that. Then you’ll know what to do when you’re older [emphasis added].”

…

Ben: “So school is boring, but it’s good for you?”
Bruce: “Yeah, sometimes it can be fun though.”
Ben: “OK. What is it like when it’s fun?”
Bruce: “Although normally you don’t learn as much when it’s fun. [It’s fun when] you get to like, go to new places and try out new things, and it’s just a lot of fun to do that because you don’t know what it’s gonna be like.” (August 2, 2012)

Bruce and Abby’s comments hint at another characteristic of the school experience common in participant responses: that these experiences prepare students for the future. Though participants generally characterized the school experience as boring in immediate terms, most saw that this experience served an important purpose in their lives. For example, when I asked Rick if his school experiences were important or meaningful to him, he responded with a similar sentiment to Bruce:

Ben: “Are those experiences in [school] important or meaningful to you?”
Rick: “Yeah.”
Ben: “In what ways?”
Rick: “Just that they prepare you for the real world.” (July 31, 2012)

When asking George the same question, he responded thoughtfully, noting the role education plays in society, as a mechanism to prepare and “process individuals” (Meyer, 1977/2011, p. 494).

George: “I feel like it means, like, if you work hard and get your education, then you can go on to work harder and do what you want with your life. I feel like how you do in school and kind of… If you go on to get your education, it means whether or not
you’re gonna do good in life, you know? [emphasis added]”
Ben: “OK, sure. It’s kind of like a gateway?”
George: “Yeah. Like say somebody doesn’t get an education at all, a high school diploma or a GED, they’re probably not gonna be very successful. I dunno, they could be, but I just think it means a lot to get your education because… There’s a lot of things people can take away from you once you get it, but education isn’t one of ‘em.” (August 21, 2012)

In summary, participants in this study described school a number of ways, ranging from fun to lackluster, though the majority of participants characterized school through its undesirable features. Participants also seemed to agree that experiences in school serve a purpose, or utility, in that these experiences prepare students for future life, or allow students to live a better life in the future. Though the source of these rationales is unclear, we may reasonably infer that this is the message often purported by teachers, administrators, and parents: that school is the gateway to success (Collins, 1971). With these caricatures of school in mind, I transition to a discussion of comparisons between the AE experience and the school experience.

**Comparisons of Adventure Education and School Experiences**

A step toward understanding the significance of the AE experience for schooling, is to consider how these experiences compare and contrast with one another, and perhaps the most empirical way to facilitate this comparison is to ask the participant/students themselves to compare these experiences. These insights were attained through providing participants of the AE experience the opportunity to share their perceptions of the similarities and differences between the two experiences. These comparisons also served the dual function of further characterizing the experiences had in school, while moving conversation in the direction of suggestions for schooling. Some participants drew these comparisons without much prompting, presumably eager to make sense of these
experiences in relation to one another. Consider, for example, the following excerpt from an interview with Becky, who notes the complementary nature of school and adventure experiences:

Ben: “Could you describe what your school is like?”
Becky: “My school is very… I wouldn’t say strict, but like proper and stuff. And in [Wilson Academy] you don’t really have to be proper, you can wear whatever clothes you want. In school you have to wear a uniform, but in [Wilson Academy] you can just be yourself and do whatever you want to.”
Ben: “What does your experience with school mean for you?”
Becky: “Um. I get taught a lot of stuff but, in [Wilson Academy] I get taught a lot of things too, and when you put them together it just makes you a better person I think.”
Ben: “So you think they complement each other well?”
Becky: “Yeah.”
Ben: “How do your experiences with adventure education, or with [Wilson Academy], compare to your experiences with school?”
Becky: “In school they teach me some more stuff like math and literature and in [Wilson Academy] they teach me about adventure and having fun. So when you put those together you’re like a smart person and you’re an adventurous person.” (July 26, 2012)

Participants compared the AE and school experiences in varied ways, though most highlighted the differences between the two. For example, Pedro, when asked how his experiences with adventure compared to his experiences with school, answered:

Pedro: “Way different, way different.”
Ben: “Way different?”
Pedro: “School’s don’t have the same… They don’t trust in you maybe. Sometimes they don’t trust you.”
Ben: “Could you say more about that?”
Pedro: “They don’t think you’ll make it or something like that, and [the instructors here] will motivate us to do it, like, not force us, but, like, give us strength, ideas, to get up here, you know?”
Ben: “So you think that here … they trust you more than the people at your school?”
Pedro: “Yeah.” (July 21, 2012)

Abby, though she could identify the similarities in the experiences, sided with Pedro and other participants, claiming the experiences were probably more different than they were similar. Though Pedro cites the cause of this difference as a dynamic between
participant/student and instructor/teacher, Abby takes the opportunity to critique the school experience for its boring characteristics:

Ben: “How do your experiences with adventure education compare to your experiences with school?”

Abby: “Well you’re with people and sometimes if you’re like at home you’re not with your friends. And so, you get to meet new people at school [and you get to meet new people here]. But something that’s different is that you don’t have to be bored out of your mind.”

Ben: Failing to stifle my laughter, “OK, you’re bored out of your mind at school?”

Abby: “Yeah.”

Ben: “And you’re not bored here?”

Abby: “Yeah. I’m not bored here. … Like, I hate school.” (August 1, 2012)

Another way the school experience was compared to the AE experience was through participants’ reflections of particular aspects in each experience, such as challenge, group dynamics, and collaboration. James and Rick highlighted the differences between being challenged in school and in adventure education:

James: “I usually like challenges, except for school.”

Ben: “Why don’t you like challenges in school?”

James: “’Cause you have to work a lot harder and I want to go home and play, so yeah.”

Ben: “But you like challenges outside?”

James: “Yeah.”

Ben: “What makes the challenges outside different than the challenges in school?”

James: “’Cause you have to work, like, I don’t know. It’s just ‘cause you have to work a lot harder and then they, like, make you do it, so I don’t really like that much.”

Ben: “OK, you don’t like being made to do stuff?”

James: “Yeah.” (July 24, 2012)

Ben: “How do your experiences with adventure compare with your experiences with school?”

Rick: “Um. Adventure is way more adventurous than school ‘cause in school the only adventure is learning new things. And outside there’s finding new things and trying new things and, just more challenging stuff.”

…

Ben: “Is it different when you’re challenged here and when you’re challenged in school?”

Rick: “Yeah.”
Ben: “Why?”
Rick: “Just ‘cause in school you’re challenged to do math and writing, and here you’re doing physical stuff not educational, but some of it is actually educational.”
Ben: “Do you prefer being challenged here or in school?”
Rick: “Here.”
Ben: “What makes challenges here enjoyable?”
Rick: “Just because they’re new and hard.” (July 31, 2012)

Robin also noted the differences between how she was challenged in school and AE:

“These challenges are… It’s not like an intellectual thing. It’s more like a physical and fearful thing that you have to overcome. Like if you’re not strong enough, you just keep pushing, and like in school, you really have to sit down and process what you’re doing and go step by step.” (September 28, 2012)

In these excerpts, Rick, James and Robin express an appreciation of the physical and new challenges presented through the AE experience, and report disliking the types of challenges, or difficulties, they encounter in school, which they characterize as mental, repetitive, and from an external source. Kate also recognized these issues of choice in school:

Kate: “[I like climbing better than school because] you get to choose what you want to do instead of, ‘Do this. Do that, La-Di-Da, homework all day.’”
Ben: “So you don’t choose what you want to do in school?”
Kate: “Well. Only like a little bit—not exactly. But in climbing you get to choose what route you want to do, how fast you want to go, how slow you want to go, which wall, and what holds you want to use or not, and things like that.” (July 24, 2012)

Other participants noted the more natural conditions for working together and collaborating presented by the AE experience, as evidenced through comments from Christy and Kim:

Ben: “Do you think the people in your group … are still interacting with each other in the same way or is it different at all out here, like as they do when you’re in school and stuff like that?”
Christy: “Mostly it’s better. Just because, you know, these types of things we’re having to do makes us work with each other, or work out our thoughts with each
other, as opposed to where we were at school, you know, you do it all yourself.59 Even in like group projects, you’ll run with an idea that may or may not work. And out here you like… there’s like a lot of trial and error, which typically is good. ‘Cause in school you all sort of guess at what it is and the teacher tells you later, but [here] you get more than one chance to figure stuff out.” (September 25, 2012)

Kim seemed to agree with Christy, describing the Redcloud experience as a more organic way to work together, but also remarking on the physical differences of the school and AE environment. Speaking of the AE experience, she shared:

Kim: “It teaches you to work with other people in a more flawless way than school does. I feel like we should do this once a week. … Plus I haven’t been on a field trip in two years.”
Ben: “I heard you mention this was really fun for you, huh?”
Kim: “Oh yeah. This is really cool.”
Ben: “What parts of it are fun?”
Kim: “Everything about it really. I mean the whole idea of it, it’s kind of training you to work well with others and communicate with others in a way that just feels like fun and games. And there’s so many different activities to do. And it’s like, in a really nice environment. Like, school is all gray walls or brick. There’s gross dingy carpet. There’s no fresh air. You can’t open the windows. There’s so much concern with safety there. And here, where you should be concerned with safety, it doesn’t seem to be that big of an issue. It’s like, ‘Alright. Well, I feel safe, now I need to actually focus on what is going on.’” She pauses a moment, watching as two of her classmates negotiate the Partner V high off the ground, then offers, “I like this place… I’m coming back here.” (September 25, 2012)

Ivan also perceived the AE experience as one that “gets you more out there” than his school experience, “And you would think that it’s just a trip and you have fun, but you actually get to learn things along the way.” This difference between the school and AE experience—that participants tended to prefer the AE experience to the school experience—was perhaps the most consistent comparison between the two experiences.

As I overheard one evening while sitting by the fire at Wilson Academy:

Abby: “I hate school.”
Mary: “Why do you hate school?”

59 A portion of this quote was also included in celebratory challenge.
Abby: “It’s just not fun.” (August 1, 2012)

I later followed up on this point with Abby:

Ben: “Why do you hate school?”
Abby: “It’s just not fun.”
Ben: “And was this fun?”
Abby: “Yeah.”
Ben: “What would it feel like if this was school?”
Abby: “I’d not even miss a day of it.” (August 2, 2012)

**Critiques of Schooling**

A third prompt offered to these participants, was providing them the opportunity to critique their own school experience and provide suggestions or recommendations to schools, teachers and principals in light of the AE experience. Participants critiqued the school experience on a number of fronts, and gave suggestions related to different areas of schooling, however participants found agreement in that the majority believed the AE experience had lessons to teach schooling. Given the caricatures and comparisons provided to this point, these critiques for schooling—framed positively in the form of suggestions—come as little surprise. Interestingly, each of the qualities of the AE experience finds referral in these suggestions, further validating that these insights are reflective of the AE experience, and not merely disjointed expressions of dissatisfaction. Though participant perceptions of what needed to change varied, the majority of comments regarding suggestions for school fall into three categories: interaction, challenges, and new, enjoyable experiences in school. I present each of these through the voices of participants.
Suggestion 1: Interaction

As is evident across students’ caricatures of schooling and comparisons of the school experience to the AE experience, many participants consider the school experience boring. When this boring school experience is juxtaposed to the AE experience (as characterized by aesthetic vitality), it comes as little surprise that the most popular suggestion for schools by participants were for more “hands on” experiences, or opportunities for “interaction” with the material.

Ivan noted the ties between interaction, having fun, and an overall sense of engagement in the school experience. He explained how hands on experiences can be used as a way to get children engaged and excited about school:

Ben: “Do you think that schools can learn something from adventure education?”
Ivan: “Yeah. … They can learn to have better trips that could as much teach you as any classroom, but it actually gets the kids paying attention.”
Ben: “So it kind of engages the kids?”
Ivan: “Yeah. Something that gets the kids excited to do something [emphasis added].”
Ben: “And why do you think getting kids excited should be a part of school?”
Ivan: “Because if you’re not having fun doing something, then people are just going to tune out and start doing different things, and it’s not gonna be good for them later on in life.”
Ben: “And if you could tell your principal or teacher something about your experience here, what would you want them to know?”
Ivan: “That, they should really try having things that are more hands on experiences so that… There are a lot of kids that are smart, it’s just that they don’t want to pay attention because the class is not fun [emphasis added].” (July 20, 2012)

Tom also identified this need for more hands on experiences as a suggestion for school:

“It’s also just like, you’re not in a classroom just sitting down, you’re moving around, you’re not just filling out paperwork and everything, you’re actually moving around and stuff, instead of just, like I said, sitting around.” (September 28, 2012)
Christy also critiqued the school experience for this lack of hands on activity, and recommended more interaction in the school experience. She explains her distaste of what appears to be a flipped classroom (Tucker, 2012):

Ben: “If you could tell one thing to your teachers or principals about what happens here … what would you want them to know?”
Christy: “That interaction with students is important, and having hands on stuff. Because, my school in particular, switched their math program, and so our lesson is online, like, we watch a video, a YouTube video, and then the next day we do homework in class and the teacher is there for questions. But I can’t learn off of a video, you know? I’m the type of person who needs to ask questions right away or else I just don’t get it, and so… Like, this kind of stuff, [adventure education,] is really good for me, ‘cause I can learn it, I can see it right in front of me. I have somebody telling me how to put a harness on, but if I watched a video on how to put a harness on, it wouldn’t be… I wouldn’t be able to do it. So kind of that too I guess [emphasis added].” (September 25, 2012)

The sentiment reflected through these recommendations relates to one of two criteria Dewey (1938) identified as crucial to educative experiences: interaction. Dewey presents interaction as the interplay, and healthy balance between the objective conditions of the environment, and the subjective realities of the students. When this interplay is not balanced, and the scales are tipped disproportionately toward the student or the material, the experience is not necessarily of educational quality.

Other participants also noted the necessity for interaction, expanding on Christy’s critique of technology in the classroom in different ways. For example, George’s suggestion for schools was congruent with Christy’s with respect to interaction, though he seemed to adopt an alternative solution considering the use of technology in education. As he commented:

“Probably just get more hands on work. … More visual. Visual and hands on instead of just black and white, you know? Just words from a textbook; reading and writing. More hands on learning. Computers and… The new thing we just got is a SMART
Board. Those are pretty interesting. [They] make learning a little more fun [emphasis added].” (August 21, 2012)

Curiously, another participant, Adam, seemed to contradict George’s statement while agreeing with him on a more fundamental level. Adam argued that technology was not a mechanism for allowing the experience to be more hands on or interactive, but actually contributed to the lack of interaction:

Adam: “I think we need a little less technology [in school]. ‘cause we have three computer labs now in my school, and it’s too busy, and there’s always technology, and there’s high-tech things in there, and it’s just too much. Sometimes it needs to be lowered a level, on the technology [emphasis added].”

Ben: “OK so get rid of some of the technology, huh?”

Adam: “Yes.”

Ben: “And why does this experience make you think of that?”

Adam: “Cause you can learn stuff yourself, and it’s a better way, rather than just looking it up. Like, you can actually experience it, and have fun, and you’ll know instead of just searching it, like, ‘Oh, there it is, that was easy.’ And you don’t know what it actually is like or anything [emphasis added].” (July 25, 2012)

Adam expresses an important point, noting the distinction between knowing something and accessing information about something. Even when we have access to information, from Adam’s perspective, we still “don’t know what it actually is like.” George similarly criticized this objective conception of knowledge in this format as, “black and white.” This belief, that genuine interaction with the conditions of schooling actualized a more complete knowing, was also reflected in an interview with Brad:

Ben: “If you could tell schools, or people who work in schools, something about what happens here, or like, what they could do to make schools better, when you think about your experiences here, what would you want them to know about this stuff?”

Brad: “Definitely interaction. That’s a big key. Interacting with the students and making them interact with their environment definitely helps… [emphasis added].”

Ben: “Can you say more about what you mean by interaction?”

Brad: “Like, just hands on… Students doing it themselves, not being taught to them. And just, like, thinking about it, like, actually do it and they’ve done it before, and they feel it—they know it [emphasis added].” (September 27, 2012)
Noteworthy across these excerpts, is that technology in Adam’s school (and to an extent, Christy’s school) was serving a role not conducive to interaction in the Deweyan sense, whereas technology in George’s (would-be) school may be seen as a novel and exciting way to interact with the material. Though these statements with respect to technology are inconsistent, similar across these comments from Ivan, Christy, Adam, George and Brad is a desire for more interaction and interplay with the conditions and material in school. Also reflected in these comments (most directly from Adam and Brad) is that interaction can lead to subjective or ontological knowing of a different quality than the “black and white” knowledge common to schooling (Eisner, 1986). Accordingly, noting the shared perspective across these comments, we arrive at the first suggestion for schools: More opportunities for interaction in school.

**Suggestion 2: Challenges**

Obvious to this point is the importance of challenge as an aspect of the adventure education experience (see celebratory challenge), however participants of the AE experience believed that challenge need not remain quarantined to the realm of adventure, and offered challenge as one of the central suggestions for schooling. For example, when I asked Kevin what teachers and principals needed to know about AE, he identified the role challenge plays in learning, “I feel like whenever I do something, like get a new challenge, I feel like I find something new that I learn.”

Other participants expressed an interest in being challenged in schools as an opportunity to prove their own agency. For instance, Pedro’s recommendation to schools was to acknowledge, “how much strength [students] have.” Becky also offered that schools, “can push us even harder if they wanted to. I think they should.” Joe also
believed that schools should trust students to be, “able to keep on going when you can’t.”

This suggestion, for challenges in school, was further articulated through an interview with Tom:

Ben: “Would these [experiences] be a helpful part of school do you think, if there was some part of these [experiences] that related to school?”

Tom: “Yeah, I think they would be helpful. Like, I think they connect. It may not be a whole lot, but it’s definitely important because, like, in the school, a lot of people just don’t care. I know a lot of people that, they just don’t care about school. They just figure, if I get by with a C I’ll be able to graduate and move on. Well, [the AE experience] teaches you to challenge… like what I’ve been saying. This teaches you to challenge what you can do, and it can relate to the classroom by, you challenge to go for that A, even if it's an AP class that my parents are having me do. I’m challenging for the A, and I’m pretty close to it [emphasis added].” (September 28, 2012)

Robin also noted the importance of challenge, stating that the feeling of overcoming a challenge is not commonplace amongst students. She also reflects Tom’s insight regarding an apathetic disposition across the student body at her school, and presents challenge as a possible way to address this issue. When I asked her what principals and teachers should know about this experience, she responded:

Robin: “I think they should know that kids need to be faced with challenges, and know what it feels like to overcome them. Not necessarily like, the physical, like the ropes course. If there was another challenge, just the outcome is important.”

Ben: “So to know what it’s like to face a challenge and overcome a challenge?”

Robin: “Yeah. ‘Cause some kids don’t know what that feels like and then they’re not motivated to try in school.” (September 28, 2012)

This comment from Robin aligns with one of the central arguments in Davidson’s (2001) study, that engaging with challenges in AE can be a learned behavior or habit for participants. Robin, however, takes the implications of learning to challenge self a step further by recommending that schools play a role in offering these challenges to students.
Robin’s argument resonates with the other excerpts from Tom, Kevin, Becky, and Pedro, in identifying the utility of challenge, and explicitly requesting the opportunity to be challenged in school. This suggestion finds scholarly support through Dewey (1934; 1938) and Whitehead (1929), who similarly understood challenge and disequilibrium as necessary aspects of any educational program. This common recommendation from participants of the AE experience stands as the second suggestion for schooling: More opportunities to be challenged in school.

**Suggestion 3: New and Enjoyable Experiences**

This third and final suggestion similarly stems from students’ critiques of the boring and undesirable qualities of the school experience by comparison to the AE experience. Two of the qualities of the AE experience, novelty and great experience, find particular import in this final suggestion for new and enjoyable experiences in school. This desire for the new, in particular, was reflected in George’s suggestion for schools:

“I think I would just tell [schools] to teach somebody something *new* and something they want to learn about, or something that is important to them. Something *new* that’s important. I mean, I know a lot of the things already are important, that they teach. Just something new that they don’t normally teach.” (August 21, 2012)

Joe agreed with George’s recommendation for variance:

Ben: “If you could tell your teacher or your principal something about your experience here, what would you want them to know?”
Joe: “That they should make some sort of these trips so kids can learn new stuff, experience everything, new feelings and all.” (July 21, 2012)

Joe’s suggestion, for new experiences and feelings for others, was expanded upon by Bruce, who recommended that schools go on field trips to engage in new activities in different places:
Bruce: “And to tell your principal: I would want to go to field trips where you could
go to lakes and stuff … just for normal field trips and things like that. And for bigger
field trips to go to [other states] or something to rock climb and stuff like that. I kind
of wish we would do that more, ‘cause it’s really fun, and it’s exciting. … *I think it
would make school more fun, and I’d look forward to it a lot more* [emphasis
added].”
Ben: “If you had stuff like this, it would make school more fun?”
Bruce: “‘Cause you’d look forward to it and you’d want to do stuff, and you’d know
what it’s like.” (August 2, 2012)

Bruce reasoned that making the school experience more fun and enjoyable—as
something to look forward to—should be a central aim of schools. Tom further enriched
these connections with respect to offering new experiences in school, as he draws
correlations between repetitive experiences and fatigue, and new experiences as
rejuvenating. Tom also highlights aspects of the AE experience as they stand in contrast
to his school experience, which ultimately frames his suggestion for new and enjoyable
experiences:

Tom: “Sometimes I think the moving around part isn’t, like, necessary in school
because some people get bored of it. Like my intro to fitness class, some people just
don’t feel it some days, and really want to do it other days. So kind of just small
implementations of both of those, that we’re assessed with like a fun experience and
my gym class isn’t that fun, it’s more just like, ‘This is what you’re going to do daily’
and everything like that. It’s a routine. *Like this* [the AE experience] isn’t a routine,
this isn’t normally what you do, so it’s fun to break out of that routine.”
Ben: “OK. So new things that break you out of your routine are important?”
Tom: “Yeah. Like… if they teach you new stuff, like, um… Yeah, new things can
help people learn in my opinion. New experiences like this.”

…
Ben: “If you could tell your principal or your teacher something about your
experiences here, something that they need to know, what would you tell them?”
Tom: “That this just really, like, *it allowed me to get out of the day for a second.* It
allows me… On Monday, or tomorrow, when I’m doing homework, I’m not going to
be drained of energy. *Out here, it’s like a recharger, even if you’re using energy to do
something else, it’s still a recharger, just by you’re doing something new.* And so,
small little bits of this, like if we go on a field trip every once in a while, like,
something like this… [emphasis added].”
Ben: “So you said it’s a recharger for you. Why do you think this experience is a
recharger?”
Tom: “Because I’m up and moving, I’m not just sitting around and even if I’m in football, it’s like a routine. This is breaking out of the routine, like I said a little bit earlier. It’s kind of a recharger just because it’s more relaxing in a way, even though you are still learning something. It’s stressful when you’re actually doing something, like climbing the [high elements], it’s stressful then, but afterwards it’s fun and relaxing.”

In this same vein of enjoyment, Melissa identified the import of some of the activities of adventure education as facilitating both a sense of togetherness in the group, and making school a more comfortable and enjoyable place. When I asked her if schools could learn something from what happens here, Melissa replied:

“I think teambuilding is really good, and like, if you have classmates that enjoy what they’re doing, it helps you enjoy things. And especially if you all know each other more, and you’re more comfortable around your classmates, I think you’d tend to do better sometimes. And you feel more comfortable in school, and you can talk to people and stuff.”

Clear in Melissa’s comment, to develop a culture of enjoyment and camaraderie within the school walls, is yet another tie between the qualities of the AE experience (see freedom and togetherness) and recommendations for schooling, further validating the empirical roots of these suggestions.

With these comments in mind, schools may consider how to provide opportunities for experiences characterized by more difference than similarity, and experiences that the students identify as enjoyable or intrinsically worthwhile. While this point of new and enjoyable experiences in education has received support from notable curriculum scholars (see Dewey, 1934; 1938; Noddings, 2003; Oliver & Gershman, 1989), the participant comments render this perspective as lacking in contemporary school practices. Further, though this suggestion may seem self-evident, that participants were compelled

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60 Excerpts of this interview are referenced elsewhere in this study.
to provide this recommendation is indicative of its dearth in the contemporary school experience. As such, this final suggestion is as simple as it is profound: More opportunities for new and enjoyable experiences in school.

**Suggestions for Schooling in Review**

Other recommendations for schooling were offered by participants, though their incidence was not thematically satisfactory. Most notable exclusions include recommendations to trust students and teachers, and allow a sense of community in school through genuine collaborative group work in schools.\(^\text{61}\) Again, the above suggestions are a reflection of the most salient themes across comments from participants.

To an extent, the school experience already offers a consistent flow of interaction, challenge, and new and potentially enjoyable experiences. However the school experience is also one characterized by monotony, predictability, routine and a lack of interaction, challenge and excitement. The redundancy of the school experience is demonstrated through the caricatures of schooling and the expressed desire on the part of students for more challenges, interaction, and new and enjoyable experiences.

To summarize, participants in this study, as students of schools and participants of the AE experience, collectively voiced three suggestions for schools:

1. More opportunities for interaction in school
2. More opportunities to be challenged in school
3. More opportunities for new and enjoyable experiences in school

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\(^{61}\) Trust in schooling is a point argued elsewhere by Bryk and Schneider (2002/2011), and Tosey (2006) has argued for this sense of community togetherness in schooling.
However, within these requests for more is an implied appeal for less. Accordingly, I offer a fourth suggestion in concert with the above three:

4. Fewer experiences that lack interaction, do not challenge us, and are redundant or otherwise not enjoyable

**Participant Perceptions of Schooling in Summary**

Admittedly, this stands as but one approach to understanding schools and the experiences had therein. Certainly more research is necessary to validate these students’ perceptions of schooling, and to substantiate the suggestions presented herein. However, these descriptions and critiques of schooling are supported somewhat by other research that characterizes the school experience in similar terms (see Barone, 1989; Noddings, 1992; 2003; Silberman, 1970). As Jackson (1968) shared, the school experience does not surprise us, but that does not render it beyond the realm of evaluation.

School is a place where tests are failed and passed, where amusing things happen, where new insights are stumbled upon, and skills acquired. But it is also a place in which people sit, and listen, and wait, and raise their hands, and pass out paper, and stand in line, and sharpen pencils. School is where we encounter both friends and foes, where imagination is unleashed and misunderstanding brought to ground. But it is also a place in which yawns are stifled and initials scratched on desktops, where milk money is collected and recess lines are formed. Both aspects of school life, the celebrated and the unnoticed, are familiar to all of us, but the latter, if only because of its characteristic neglect, seems to deserve more attention than it has received to date from those who are interested in education. (p. 4)

The participant responses to questions of education were somewhat limited by their conceptions of schooling—namely, it is fair for a child to consider education to be “that thing that happens to them when they go to school.” Providing suggestions or recommendations for schools based on adventure, when the two are characterized by more difference than similarity, requires a degree of imagination on the part of children.
As such, and given that these suggestions came from the very people who live through schools, I would contend that their suggestions should neither be granted supreme authority, nor should they be disregarded as the unrealistic dreams of jaded students. I expound on this perspective in the final chapter of this work, adding one more voice to the chorus of bored children in schools: my own.

**ILLUSTRATIONS IN SUMMARY**

In this chapter I have presented the qualities of the AE experience through celebratory challenge; novelty; freedom and togetherness; aesthetic vitality; and great experience. I have highlighted issues of cultural coalescence in adventure education, as characterized by plasticity on the part of both participants and the AE institution. I have also outlined the participant perceptions of education through caricatures, comparisons and critiques of schooling. These illustrations of the AE experience serve to address the research questions of this study, though a further discussion of these experiences is necessary in order to comprehend their significance, and further augment this “reëducation of perception” (Dewey, 1934, p. 338). In Chapter Six, I apply these illustrations of the AE experience to contemporary iterations of adventure education and schooling respectively. With the AE experience both described and illustrated, we continue our walk onto the further discursive act of drawing meaning from these findings.
CHAPTER SIX

RETHINKING THE ADVENTURE EDUCATION EXPERIENCE

This chapter serves as the final destination of this inquiry into the adventure education (AE) experience. With the descriptions and illustrations of the AE experience in mind, I now return to the practical through discussions of the meaning and significance of the findings herein. In this concluding chapter, I discuss the significance of this study in the hopes that we may return to the original context of education and adventure education with an enriched perception of the AE experience (Eisner, 1998). This chapter is further discursive than chapters previous, as questions of significance are addressed through interpretation, inference, and a degree of artistic freedom. I am intentionally provocative (West, 1989) in this reasoned interpretation of—and occasional departure from—the data in the pragmatic hopes of articulating the prospective meanings of this study, toward the ultimate aim of invigorating deliberation and improving educational practice (Eisner, 1998; Schwab, 1983).

In this chapter, I first review the study as a whole, and revisit the research questions, explaining how each is addressed through the study and entertaining the intersections and connections amidst these questions. I then clarify prospective implications and significance of the study for adventure education and schooling, before providing suggestions for future inquiry in AE, and finally drawing the work to a close.
REVIEW OF STUDY

Adventure education, on a basic level, is the use of adventure experience for educational purposes. The idea that adventurous experiences can serve as a means to ends outside themselves is a longstanding assertion that traces a genealogy back to Plato (Hunt, 1999) and remains at the core of adventure education in its eclectic of programmatic practice today (Brookes, 2003b). The ways in which we frame and rationalize these adventure experiences as educative is reflective of what we consider to be educationally virtuous. As such, our varied approaches regarding what we consider to be of educational value, has resulted in a variance of programmatic practice for adventure education, both in means and ends (Prouty, 2007). However, we still purport a form of epistemological homogeneity regarding the AE experience, resulting in an underdeveloped conception of what happens during the AE experience and what this experience may mean to participants so engaged (Davidson, 2001). Further, adventure education has enjoyed significant growth across America in the past several decades. But this expansion has been without significant empirical research concerning how personal backgrounds and institutional cultures may come together within the AE experience. These interests, concerning the happenings, meanings, culture and educational significance of adventure education, were addressed through this study by way of four questions.

1. What happens to participants during the adventure education experience?

2. What meanings do participants of adventure education ascribe to those experiences?
3. How do the personal backgrounds of participants coalesce with institutional cultures in adventure education?

4. What is the significance of the adventure education experience for schooling, if any?

These questions were investigated through educational connoisseurship and criticism in an attempt to describe, interpret, evaluate, and thematize the AE experience. I utilized observational, conversational and experiential data to provide a rendering of the experience at three adventure education programs: Shavano Expeditions, Wilson Academy, and the Redcloud Challenge Course. Through an exploration of the AE experience across these sites, which harbor different means toward varied aims, a collective representation of the AE experience was described and illustrated. The descriptions of the AE experience provide a point of vicarious participation in the experience as it manifest at the three sites, and serves as a point of departure for the more discursive illustrations of the AE experience. These illustrations include the qualities of the AE experience (celebratory challenge; novelty; freedom and togetherness; aesthetic vitality; and great experience), a presentation of cultural coalescence in AE (characterized by cultural rigidity and flexibility and adapting and sustaining selfhood), and a review of the participant perceptions of schooling. These illustrations guide us forward to this final chapter, where the significance and meaning of the study is presented.

REVISITING THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In drawing this study to a close, I revisit the research questions to reiterate how each question is addressed within this study. Such a presentation is not to repeat the
responses to each question, but to explicitly delineate how each question is associated with a given portion of the work.

Question 1: What happens to participants during the adventure education experience?

This question was addressed two ways: through the descriptions of the adventure education experience in Chapter Four, and through the qualities of the AE experience. Collectively, these different perspectives to the experience, comprised of observational, conversational and experiential data, address this question in corroborative fashion; while the descriptions provide an empirical context for what happens, the qualities explore these experiences from an analytical dimension. Together, these empirical and abstract perspectives thoroughly address what happens to participants during the AE experience.

Question 2: What meanings do participants of adventure education ascribe to those experiences?

This question of meanings was addressed through the qualities of the AE experience and the participant perceptions of AE. Again, this has been an inquiry of meanings rather than the meaning of the AE experience, and the responses to this question of meaning were as diverse as the participants themselves. Though presenting the happenings and meanings of experience through a singular set of findings may seem confusing, articulations of the realms and types of meaning associated to experience serve to support this presentation of findings (see Phenix, 1964; Uhrmacher, 2002). Though participants ascribed varied meanings to the AE experience, those who articulated the ontological meaning of the experience had a tendency to arrive at a similar broad conception of meaning, which I have illustrated through great experience.
Question 3: How do the personal backgrounds of participants coalesce with institutional cultures in adventure education?

Like other questions, this interest was addressed through a confluence of data sources. Through observing the interpersonal and cultural interactions in the AE experience, discussing issues of culture in AE with participants, and acknowledging my own experiences in AE on cultural grounds, I was able to provide a representation of cultural coalescence in AE. This coalescence was characterized by instances of cultural rigidity and flexibility on the part of the adventure education institution, which invoked the adaptation and sustaining of selfhood from AE participants.

Question 4: What is the significance of the adventure education experience for schooling, if any?

Questions of significance are value-laden judgments of inference, and the educational value identified in the AE experience is reflective of the educational maxims we espouse. As such, my response to this question is an indication of my personal inclinations and positionality toward education and adventure, which is ultimately framed by my personal experiences with schooling and adventure and our contemporary modes of schooling. Accordingly, I address this question two ways in this study: first by soliciting the perspective of participants concerning the educational value of adventure, and second, by adding my own voice to this conversation of implication. The first of these perspectives was outlined through the caricatures, comparisons, and critiques of schooling in the previous chapter, while the second is clarified in the discussion forthcoming.
**Intersections of the Research Questions**

Though I have presented the research questions and their respective findings in categorical terms to this point, it is important to highlight that all are directed toward a common experience. To entertain these questions at the expense of others is an inherent bias to educational research, and results in a reflectively partial portrayal (Eisner, 1998); asking *these* questions and exploring it *this* way, results in *this* set of findings. Though these questions are distinct, and inquire toward different domains of the experience, they are united through the subject of inquiry. We may well consider the questions themselves as different lenses for a common phenomenon, and through their corroboration, our perceptions of this experience are enhanced. Further, through considering these questions together, we may encounter entirely new understandings; four questions do not necessarily invoke four responses.

To this juncture, I have directed our attention from one question to the next. But in coming to know the AE experience through these questions, we begin to understand the ways in which these dimensions of inquiry intersect, conflict, and support one another. As such, another way to explore these questions is to consider their relation to one another in experience. In this section, I share my perceptions of these intersections, reviewing the connections of questions one and two; one and three; two and three; and finally one, two, three and four.

**Questions 1 & 2: Happenings and Realms of Meaning**

The difference between what happened to participants during the AE experience and the meanings they ascribed to those experiences was indiscrete. Indeed, as Philip Phenix (1964) and Bruce Uhrmacher (2002) have argued, the types of meaning we
extract from the experiences we have are representative of different realms of meaning making. However, as Uhrmacher (2002) noted, “meaning does not come to us in neat and separate packets” (p. 68). Accordingly, ascribed meanings and happenings were both utilized as complementary perspectives in the illustrations of the preceding chapter. From this position, to disaggregate one from the other—meaning from happening—would be to present the findings in contrived and perhaps cumbersome terms. Thus, question one (of happening) and question two (of meanings) were addressed together through the qualities of the AE experience. What I have neglected to discuss to this juncture, is how the meanings communicated are reflective of different categories or realms of meaning. Though Phenix (1964) presents six realms of meaning, of particular relevance to this discussion are the fourth and sixth realms; the synnonetic and the synoptic.

While some of these realms of meaning require a degree of detachment from the subject, synnonetic meaning is based on the engagement of those constructing meaning. We infer a direct, rather than removed or abstract meaning of the experience. In synnonetic meaning,

Objectivity is eliminated and is replaced by subjectivity, or better, intersubjectivity. … In synnonetic understanding the separation between subject and object is overcome and a personal meaning takes place. … Meanings in this personal realm are concrete rather than abstract … concrete in the sense that relational understanding is not a fragment, a perspective, or a transformation of some other more complex experience. Rather, it is itself the prototype of experience in its wholeness or concreteness. (Phenix, 1964, p. 194)

To extrapolate this connection to the work at hand, this type of meaning construction is reflected in participants who articulated the meaning of the experience as a description of the experience itself; the meaning of the experience was precisely what happened during that experience, and in this regard, can be considered a “cognitive” type of meaning
(Uhrmacher, 2002). In sum, participants who stated that the meaning of the experience was to be challenged, to escape, to be engaged aesthetically, to try something new, and so forth, were constructing descriptive, cognitive, synnonetic meanings of the subject/experience (Phenix, 1964; Uhrmacher, 2002).

The realm of synoptic meaning, on the other hand, pertains to “meanings having an integrative function, uniting meanings from all the realms into a unified perspective, that is, providing a ‘single vision’ or ‘synopsis’ of meanings” (Phenix, 1964, p. 235). This realm is inclusive of ultimate meanings, “high order abstraction” (p. 256) or “going to the limits” (p. 244) of meaning. Uhrmacher (2002) similarly discussed this “ontological” category of meaning, as “the kinds of ideas and feelings found in meditative, cosmological and holistic inquiries” (p. 69).

Again, to elucidate relation to the study, more abstract or discursive meanings, and descriptions of the ultimate value of the AE experience, fall under this sixth realm of meaning. Ergo, those participants who communicated that the experience was worthwhile, significant, enjoyable, or otherwise “great” were communicating meanings in this sixth, synoptic, ontological, realm (Phenix, 1964; Uhrmacher, 2002). Further, those who identified the connective relationship between what happened to them, and the value of that experience for them—or identified the happenings as a conduit to value (see great experience)—were similarly operating in this integrative dimension of meaning.

In summary, discussions of meanings with participants crossed over into cognitive (empirical, descriptive, synnonetic) and ontological (abstract, ultimate, integrative, synoptic) realms. Therefore, rather than attempting to disaggregate the meanings of the experience from what happened during the experience, I have presented
the AE experience in largely unabridged terms. Meanings and happenings are presented as interrelated and complementary representations of experience, as one informs the other, and both serve to enrich perception (Eisner, 1998). This is the rationale for addressing questions one and two together through the qualities of the AE experience.

**Questions 1 & 3: Culture Happens**

A step further, as meanings happen, so too does culture. Of importance here is that my frame of reference, with a question of cultural coalescence in mind, influenced what I noticed in the AE experience, which impacted the descriptions of the AE experience I presented in Chapter Four. Without a focus on cultural coalescence, the vignettes included would likely reflect a less culturally revealing image of AE and perhaps a more robust portrayal of other aspects of the experience. This is neither limitation nor augmentation, but merely a point deserving presentation in this discussion of questions in relationship.

**Questions 2 & 3: The Idiosyncrasy of Experience**

Meaning, as I have explained, and as Seidman (2006) and Csikszentmihalyi (1990), Phenix (1964) and Uhrmacher (2002) have argued, is couched within the personal context and background of the individual ascribing that meaning. Further, meaning is culturally mediated, as “all cultures create opportunities for as well as boundaries to meaning” (Uhrmacher, 2002, p. 70). To see similar meanings emerge may reflect a similar positionality toward the experience on the behalf of the participants, just as it is suggestive of a common phenomenon within the experience. Therefore, to understand how these personal backgrounds and institutional cultures come together through
experience, and perceive the unique meanings those participants ascribe to that experience, is to observe two perspectives of the same phenomenon.

As Mclaughlin and Heath (1993) contend, identity has “multiple dimensions [which] situate meaning and circumstance” (p. 213). Further, as Noddings (2003) explains, our unique identities influence the experience as had alongside the meanings we ascribe to that experience:

Because we are uniquely different beings, with different pasts and different fears, our situations are never identical, no matter how alike they seem from the outside. The choices we make in situations of great stress are never completely free; they are always at least partly conditioned by our past experiences. (p. 40)

Every experience is idiosyncratic to the individual and the meanings they ascribe to those experiences are reflective of this unique personal background. As such, both meaning making and cultural coalescence are presented as idiosyncratic processes.

This presents a perplexing dilemma regarding the findings of this study. Namely, to argue that meaning making is an idiosyncratic and culturally mediated process, and in the next breath, to offer the qualities of these experiences in thematic fashion appears contradictory. This is an issue I turn to Dewey’s (1910) synthesis and analysis to resolve:

As analysis is conceived to be a sort of picking to pieces, so synthesis is thought to be a sort of physical piecing together. … In fact, synthesis takes place wherever we grasp the bearing of facts on a conclusion or of a principle on facts. As analysis is emphasis, so synthesis is placing; the one causes the emphasized fact or property to stand out as significant; the other puts what is selected in its context, its connection with what is signified. It unites it with some other meaning to give both increased significance. (p. 114)

It is through this Deweyan conception of placing the points noted through analysis that we arrive at thematic understanding, which renders this inquiry one of empiricism, rather than philosophy. Though meanings are idiosyncratic, they can be synthesized and
associated to generic categories in order to enrich our perceptions of ascribed meaning in AE. In like terms, though cultural coalescence is an individual occurrence, these unique instances can be categorized to describe the broader cultural process.

The point of importance in this section is that each individual experiences adventure education on their own terms, and ascribes meanings to that experience based on their own personal background and life context. Though I discuss the qualities of AE and cultural coalescence thematically, these models are presented to enrich perception, not to usurp anecdotal contradictions; it is a “guide, not a guarantee” (Eisner, 1998, p. 105).

Questions 1, 2, 3 & 4: Framing Educational Significance

Participants’ imaginations of how these experiences might relate to education were limited by their understandings of education from a definitional perspective. Just as their personal backgrounds informed the meaning of these experiences, their personal experiences with education influenced their suggestions for schooling. Some participants saw the two as so diametrically opposed that one had nothing to do with the other, while others perceived how one might complement, supplement, or supplant the other.

Ultimately, it is through the perspectives gleaned through the first three questions that a response to the fourth may be articulated. To pull on this web of inquiry in particular in the hopes of identifying educational significance results in particular implications. Were my first three questions different, I would have likely arrived at different findings, and my recommendations for education would similarly reflect that disparity. Educational significance is thus framed by the means and aims of the study as a whole. Though partiality is innate to all research (Eisner, 1988/2005), I acknowledge that
different studies asking alternative questions will likely identify dissimilar educational significance in the AE experience. These conversations and caveats aside, I move now to a discussion of the significance of this study for adventure education.

**SIGNIFICANCE FOR ADVENTURE EDUCATION**

This study of the AE experience has perhaps most straightforward significance for the practices of adventure education. Through an improved and deeper understanding of this experience, adventure educators may facilitate experiences with a newfound intentionality, and may better comprehend and communicate the value of these experiences in light of this fresh qualitative perspective of the processes, meanings, and qualities therein.

In this section, I revisit the findings of this study with an eye toward enriching the discourse and practice of adventure education. I clarify prospective implications with respect to the qualities of experience, cultural coalescence, and constructions of meaning in adventure education. I also present a rationale for ways in which we may rethink adventure education, highlighting the philosophical schizophrenia in the field and presenting a potential shift in thinking regarding the purposes of the AE experience.

**The Qualities of the AE Experience Revisited**

To characterize the AE experience to such depth, noting the major qualities of the experience as articulated through a corroboratively rich set of data, presents a convincing guide for facilitating the adventure education experience. It is not that these qualities should serve as *the* guide to AE, but through a consciousness of their prevalence that we may better facilitate AE experiences. These qualities, when taken as a collective, may well present adventure educators with new ways to think about the AE experience.
Another way these qualities enhance our perceptions of the AE experience is that these experiential realities are associated with the meanings participants ascribe to AE. As such, this study supports other studies that have addressed the meanings of these experiences (Davidson, 2001; Loeffler, 2004; Martin & Leberman, 2005; McIntyre & Roggenbuck, 1998). While some qualities, such as celebratory challenge, and freedom and togetherness, may come as little surprise to the seasoned adventure educator, their characterization here provides a fresh perspective of these experiential realities as associated to both happenings in the field and meanings ascribed to the experience. Other qualities, such as novelty, aesthetic vitality, and great experience, come as new articulations to what we may have only known anecdotally in AE. Further, to identify these qualities as among the most important aspects of the experience inspires a re-evaluation of our current programmatic practices and rationales for the AE experience.

Other descriptors of the AE experience in this study, such as aesthetic paradox, afterglow, the pedestrian, and great experience as an underlying quality, may well be entirely new to AE discourse. I present these illustrations to the field not to definitively outline or provide firm recommendations toward these qualities, but to add perspectives and articulations of this experience in the hopes that they may enrich perceptions, advance discourse, and improve practice in adventure education.

**Striking a Cultural Balance in Adventure Education**

This study has illustrated the manner by which personal backgrounds and institutional cultures coalesce in the adventure education experience. To review, I introduced the cultural arrangement of the AE experience, and presented in depth the cultural rigidity and flexibility exercised on the part of the AE institution. Showcasing
these perspectives of cultural coalescence in AE serves as a potentially helpful framework for programs to consider the ways in which their practices are culturally rigid or flexible.

Rigidity was highlighted through the power dynamic, guidelines to adventure, jargon, and instructor values at work, ultimately resulting in the required adaptation on the part of the participant. I have argued that cultural rigidity in AE provides a framework for the experience, and actualizes a form of cultural experimentation with a new mode of living. Surely to consider the AE experience one of culture shock (Fabrizio & Neill, 2005) may be an appropriate theoretical framework, however to view culture shock as a solely adverse aspect of experience, the effects of which we need to mitigate, may be too crude a response. In fact, this same quality of experience may be considered satisfying Dewey’s (1916) conception of cultural communication, or Locke’s (1936/1989) view of cultural reciprocity (see Moses, 1999). Further, participants identified the foreign aspects of AE as enjoyable, and to familiarize the experience in the name of responsiveness (Gay, 2000) may well negate this potentially enriching quality of the experience.

Conversely, flexibility was evidenced through language, working cultural norms, and personal goal setting, which collectively allowed participants to sustain a sense of selfhood in the AE experience; through flexibility, participants’ personal backgrounds may find a footing in the new experience. Without some degree of flexibility, we may well consider the experience one that marginalizes identity to an uncomfortable or unproductive degree. The need to be responsive in this regard has been well articulated in both educational (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995) and adventure educational (Warren, 1998) discourse.
To balance these opposing perspectives is indicative of a particular intentionality in adventure education, which may be further illustrated through revisiting a few issues observed in this study. For example, the use of jargon in adventure education may be seen as both a means of cultural communication, and as an unnecessary mandate that marginalizes selfhood in the experience. On the one hand, this language allows for the very novel cultural participation that many participants identify as central to the experience. On the other, however, learning new languages, terminology, or jargon may also be confusing, and being *required* to learn a new language while already engaged in a new and foreign experience can be overwhelming to participants. When we consider our aim as cultural participation, balanced with sustaining selfhood, and take into mind the unique personal backgrounds of the participants, we operate with intention regarding the use of jargon as an aspect of the experience.

Through this example, we perceive that culture in the adventure education experience is a balancing act with a particular aim in mind. The goal, to me, is to allow participants to feel the experience is one congruent with their sense of self (Palmer, 2004), while still providing the opportunity to experiment with a new cultural mode of experience. This broader plan moves us toward the Deweyan (1916) ends of cultural communication, however the tactics utilized toward this end will likely vary from program to program.

Culture is not simple (Dewey, 1916; Locke & Stern, 1942; Nieto, 1999). In fact, this study likely raises more questions than it does proffer answers regarding how individuals and institutions come together on a cultural level. However, I do offer two broad recommendations that I hope may be integrated into practice through naturalistic
generalization (Stake, 1978): 1.) When cultural rigidity enriches the experience and serves as a means of cross-cultural communication, then we should continue to utilize those practices. 2.) Conversely, if our rigidity confuses or unnecessarily marginalizes the identity of the participant, then we should take efforts to embody more flexibility on the cultural domain.

Each program should consider the varied ways participants are asked to adapt and allowed to sustain their selfhood, norms, and behaviors through the AE experience as facilitated with their program. To make these decisions requires an understanding of the broader context of the experience, and cannot be governed through a fixed set of guidelines for practice. It is ultimately a judgment (Dewey, 1910) that must be made in the field, and as such, I leave these decisions to the discretion of AE practitioners.

**Constructions of Meaning in Adventure Education**

The meanings ascribed to the adventure education experience have been a recurrent focus of this study. Apparent to this point is that this meaning making is a personally mediated process, and the meanings ascribed to the AE experience reflect the idiosyncrasy of the individuals constructing that meaning. These varied meanings explain, to some extent, the diverse functions and rationales surrounding the adventure experience toward therapeutic, recreational, educational and social ends. However, this is not to say that the sites of interest in this study reliably structured this meaning-making process in a way that honored this very idiosyncrasy. To the contrary, the techniques through which these meanings were constructed varied significantly from site to site—likely a reflection of the numerous processing techniques utilized across the eclectic AE field at present (Knapp, 1999). As Berry (2011) offered, this is a quite intentional
dimension of the AE experience; “Processing can be defined as the sorting and ordering of information that enables participants to make sense of their experiences” (p. 35).

For example, through Steve’s initiatives at Shavano and the facilitated reflections at Redcloud, it is apparent that many of the low initiatives in particular were intentionally presented as metaphors to arrive at a moral lesson. This is surely a reflection of the historical use of intentional processing techniques in the field of adventure education, which has purported the use of both metaphor (Bacon, 1983), and transfer of learning (Gass, 1999; Luckner & Nadler, 1997; Sibthorp et al., 2011) as integral to constructing meaning in the AE experience. As Bacon (1983) reasoned, by engaging in and successfully completing these initiatives, participants are left with a “success experience,” the utility of which is prefigured somewhat:

In achieving this success experience, the student has installed a new strategy. He now has two ways of responding to this situation: The old way, which leads to failure and decreased self-esteem, and the new approach, which demonstrably leads to mastery. And this new strategy will now be available in any real-life situations that are isomorphic with the metaphoric experience. (p. 10)

Clear through this rationale is that these metaphors serve dual purposes—both to present the experience in a distilled form, and to illustrate the lesson embedded within this metaphor. Bacon (1983) further explained the need to direct these meanings as such:

Since activities can be interpreted many ways, the instructor needs to use verbal and non-verbal behaviors to create the most educationally useful learning context. The primary dressing technique used to adjust the specific meaning of a given activity is direct suggestion. A powerful suggestion, offered in a creative and engaging presentation, will often have the effect of concentrating the students’ attention in the desired direction. (p. 48)

Clear in Bacon’s rationale is the interest in transference of these new skills or knowledge to other avenues of living, through facilitating this processing as an experience in its own
right, rather than solely as a reflection of experiences past (see Dewey’s (1916) reflective experience).

To frame meaning through these metaphors is both an enhancement and limitation on the resulting meanings. The use of metaphor provides a conveniently packaged summative statement for that experience; a distilled message to remember as participants move forward to new challenges and experiences. Further, these metaphors serve as one way to represent the experience, and therefore reveal particular experiential realities within that experience that may otherwise remain ineffable to the participant (Eisner, 1994). While this approach is palatable, and this method appears popular across the field of adventure education (Bacon, 1983; Gass, 1999), this involvement on the part of instructors in the construction of meaning for participants also raises a few concerns, which I review on three counts.

First, these metaphors are often packaged as lessons, and these lessons reflect the intentions and values of instructors. For example, “It is important to have a plan” or “You need to rely on the whole group, not just yourself,” are value statements, which may contradict the beliefs and values of participants. Second, the extent to which these lessons are learned by virtue of the instructor illustrating the metaphor is somewhat questionable. When the instructor explains the metaphor through a Socratic style of questioning (Jarvis, 2006; Plato, 390BCE/1976), it would appear the message might carry the same weight as fable or folklore. Third, and perhaps most importantly, to dictate the meaning of an experience as a generic lesson contradicts the idiosyncrasy of meaning making. When instructors present meanings as universal, they may undermine the unique life contexts and values of the participants and the personal meanings they associate to the experience.
We may well question “whether the facilitator has the right to determine what an individual takes away from the experience” (Bunyan, 2011, p. 7). Further, as evidenced through the profound meanings ascribed to the experience in this study, these personal meanings can often be more significant than any lessons learned or metaphorical example presented. Though there still remains room for interpretation on the part of the participant, instructors’ attempts to construct meaning for the participants in this regard may be overstepping.

That prescriptive meanings may confound personal meanings of the experience is one thing, though quite another is how this practice of contriving meaning may undermine the individual meanings of participants. For example, if one student perceives her experience as meaningful for allowing her to escape from her daily routine, and the AE instructor insists that this experience was important for teaching her to plan ahead, her meanings are then conflated with the instructor’s meanings. This alters her perception of the experience, and may ultimately confound the meanings therein. To manufacture meaning is to obfuscate experience.

In summary, metaphors are a way to represent and understand experience, and insofar as metaphors are representative forms, they both reveal and conceal aspects of experience (Eisner, 1994). The issue is not the use of metaphor, but the extent to which framing experience through metaphors can contrive the meaning of the experience. So long as the presentation of metaphor does not limit, but enriches the meaning of an experience, their use is of little adverse consequence. But, when the metaphorical sense making of an experience is presented as a distilled moral, this inference may confound the value of the experience for some participants. In essence, we must entertain the
possibility that the contents of experience may not fit the package of metaphor, and if we impose these prefigured meanings regardless, we stand to complicate, rather than clarify, the meaning of the AE experience.

These contrasts bring forward a few general recommendations for the practice of adventure education regarding the construction of meaning. Though the practical implications of this finding will likely vary from program to program, the essential parameters of this recommendation may be somewhat universally applicable across AE: If we choose to present metaphors, or otherwise frame the meaning of the experience as it may transfer to normal life, teach lessons, or otherwise leave the participant better prepared for the future, we ought do so in a manner that honors the idiosyncrasy of meaning-making. Our project should be to enrich and personalize, not manufacture or contrive, the meanings of the AE experience.

A Myriad of Meanings Against a Universal Rationale

The idiosyncrasy of meaning has further implications for the practice of adventure education. As I have explained, contriving the meaning of the AE experience may sell short the rich and varied meanings that participants ascribe to these experiences. In a similar vein, when we allow the popular rationales of the AE experience to direct meanings for that experience, we wrongly position adventure education as a reliable intervention for all. Surely, this issue is a reflection of our lack of epistemological corroboration regarding the AE experience; if we inquire into an experience with only the aims of generalizing the outcomes of the experience, it comes as little surprise that our understanding of the experience is reflectively generic.
The problem arises when we consider the myriad of meanings against this universal rhetoric of the AE experience. The two perspectives are complementary, yet, taken as truths, are irreconcilable. As adventure education has championed an increase in self-efficacy and other positive effects, it does so through synthesizing the general outcomes, and presenting the general as universal. This discounts some voices, either through diluting their significance, or excusing them as statistical noise. This perspective of the AE experience purports a universal, rather than eclectic, view of the experience, effectively silencing dissenting voices through generalization. It is my contention that these contradictory voices, though seldom mentioned in the literature and rarely observed in my study, receive consideration if we are to present a valid rationale for the adventure education experience. Surely, some synthesis across experiences is appropriate, however, some analysis is also required for a corroboratively justifiable conception of experience (Dewey, 1910; Eisner, 1998).

Though this issue is epistemologically centered, it carries implications for practice through presentations and discussions of the AE experience. Namely, a generic rationale of adventure education for all students—as an intervention that reliably produces positive effects or outcomes—is unfounded. To say that this experience dependably does a certain thing is to overlook the idiosyncrasy of experience and the context of meaning, as this experience does as many things as there are participants so engaged. Though these experiences may well serve as means to greater ends, in this study, it was clear that this is not the case for all, and in accord, the adventure experience should not be presented as a reliable intervention for all individuals toward prefigured ends.
This is all to say that we cannot simply deliver the AE experience as a silver bullet that “works,” which has seemingly been the underlying rationale of adventure education in practice and scholarship alike (Hattie et al., 1997; Hopkins & Putnam, 1993). As Bunyan (2011) offers:

Today, we probably have to accept that there are as many negative stories about encounters with adventure as there are positive ones. Those providing adventurous activities for others need to accept that individuals react differently and that personal growth outcomes, if experienced at all, will be uniquely different for each individual. (pp. 6-7)

We must honor personal background as it mediates meaning within the AE experience if we are to engage in a valid inquiry of the topic. If AE continues to reason the worth of these experiences solely on the outcomes they reliably produce in participants, it may well fail as a movement, because, on a basic level, this is simply not the case.

I do not present this criticism with the intention of impeding programmatic development in AE, but merely wish to caution against the broad application of any educational practice as universally effective. Like most anything, in certain contexts it works, and in others it does not, and we are best positioned to responsibly implement AE when we honor this maxim.

**Rethinking the Adventure Education Experience**

Adventure education, though it carries a long history in practice and traces a deep philosophical genealogy, is an enigma of sorts. Contemporary discourse often presents the AE experience as a method to standardize, focusing on the outcomes of various programs, with an eye toward best practices (see Shooter, 2010; Stremba & Bisson,
Conversely, empirical studies in AE continue to reflect the diversity of the field as it is practiced, with each study portraying unique findings reflective of the site and participants studied. As such, there remains perplexity in the field with respect to what we may consider these experiences to do and be, and how we might best achieve these purposes.

Surely, to address these broad issues concerning the role of the AE experience is beyond the purview of the study at hand, and as such, I do not aim to lay these discussions to rest in any definitive sense. I do, however, intend to highlight the issues and inconsistencies I perceive in the field of AE in light of this inquiry in the hopes of reinvigorating discussion and ultimately improving current modes of adventure education. I do so through reviewing the philosophical schizophrenia in AE before presenting a prospective shift in thinking in adventure education.

**Philosophical Schizophrenia: Hahn & Dewey**

The philosophy of adventure education may be considered a tale of two philosophies: Kurt Hahn’s and John Dewey’s. On the one side, the philosophy of adventure education is popularly traced back to those scholars who perceived the adventure experience as a means to greater ends in virtue.

A fundamental philosophical concept that is common to Plato, Aristotle, James, and Kurt Hahn in the teaching of virtue, is that whatever methods are used to instill the virtues are mere *means* to the *end* of virtue. The ultimate goals are not to be confused with the means used to get there. (Hunt, 1999, p. 118)

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62 Roberts (2008) has critiqued this “neo-experiential education” because, “In this variation experience becomes something technical and instrumental. It is tightly bounded (in both time and space), rationally constructed, and efficiently controlled” (p. 29).
In other words, one rationale for AE appears to be that virtue development (or character building) is facilitated through the means of adventure, and experiential in the regard that “the virtues be lived in order that they be learned” (Hunt, 1999, p. 120). This practice in AE reflects the approach of the educational perennialist, which, as presented by Sanders (2006), “addresses the need for students to develop intellectual powers and moral qualities … the primary focus of this philosophy is to develop reasoning skills in the context of timeless truths about the universe and the human condition” (pp. 753-754). So the perennialist adventure educator believes there are universal virtues, and these virtues may be cultivated through the AE experience. This is the perspective of Kurt Hahn.

To the other side is the philosophy of John Dewey, whom we tout as “the father of experiential education” (Panicucci, 2007, p. 34; Roberts, 2005, p. 16). Though Dewey is cited heavily in works which trace the philosophy of both adventure and experiential education, his message is often confused as simply “learning by doing” at the expense of understanding his broader philosophy of educational experience (Roberts, 2012). Though inconsistencies arise between Dewey’s philosophy and our practices in AE (Roberts, 2005; Seaman, 2011), what I hope to emphasize here is the theory of experience that lies at base to Dewey’s educational philosophy. Namely, that Dewey (1916) critiqued the use of experience as a solely preparatory enterprise:

The mistake is not in attaching importance to preparation for future need, but in making it the mainspring of present effort. Because the need of preparation for a continually developing life is great, it is imperative that every energy should be bent to making the present experience as rich and significant as possible. (p. 56)

63 I should note that Dewey is also considered the source of other various educational and philosophical movements in America, touted as “the American Hegel and Marx” (West, 1989, p. 69) by comparison.
To Dewey, educational experiences were not ends in themselves, as education was
growth, and growth, life. In other words, Dewey was by no means a perennialist.

When we hold the two in comparison, the perennialist perspective that
experiences find worth in teaching virtue (means to ends), with the Deweyan ideal that
educational experience is not solely a means to alternative ends but is, in fact, an end in
itself, we are left to consider the philosophy of adventure education anew. It is not
necessarily that we must choose one over the other, however, we must acknowledge this
inconsistency amidst our shared genealogy, and honor that the AE experience is
amenable to varied forms of educational value. This schizophrenia amidst AE philosophy
ultimately drives the rationale to rethink the adventure education experience; to shift our
thinking.

A Shift in Thinking

The majority of programs today have accepted the perennialist intentions outlined
above, and justify the AE experience on the grounds that it produces positive outcomes in
participants; “… increasing numbers of outdoor education programs base the justification
of their activities on their ability to increase elements of self-concept” (Davidson, 2001,
p. 1) among other outcomes (Berman & Davis-Berman, 1995; Durr, 2009; Ewert, 1983;
Kolb, 1988; Sheard & Golby, 2006). Brookes (2003b) has also recently articulated the
continuation of this “Neo-Hahnian” perspective of adventure education. These aims, of
developing specific outcomes in participants are ultimately reflective of a preparatory
rationale to educational experience. In other words, the philosophy of adventure

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64 We may recall Davidson’s (2001) study, which presented the AE experience as satisfying both peak
adventure (Priest & Martin, 1985) and educative experience (Dewey, 1938).
education rests on the idea that these experiences have worth outside themselves; that they are a means to greater ends in life and are thus, educational.

Conversely, the findings in this study construct an antonymic rationale for the AE experience: the argument can be made that the value of the AE experience is not in ends beyond experience, but is found within the live experiences per se. This, then, is the crux of the matter: If the philosophy of adventure education rests on the ideal that these experiences have worth to external ends, and participants profess that these experiences have intrinsic worth, then whose perspective are we to honor?

I ask this question rhetorically, as both rationales are surely defensible in and of themselves (Schwab, 1978). My hope is that rather than inspire a response to this provocative question, we may reinvigorate discourse concerning the purpose of the AE experience, and ultimately articulate a comprehensive rationale for adventure in educational life. To rethink adventure education on such educational grounds is to reunite it with its seemingly long forgotten roots in progressive education (Bode, 1927; Dewey, 1916; Whitehead, 1929). Further, if we are willing to entertain a pluralistic conception of educational virtue in AE, as I think we should, we may well consider the AE experience as both a means to ends, and an end in itself.

Others in the field may identify this as the primary difference between adventure for educational and recreational purposes. As Berry (2011) offered, “In many ways, this intentional rather than incidental focus upon affective outcomes is the way in which adventure education differs from adventure recreation” (p. 40). And as Bailey (1999) agrees:
… a clear distinction must be made between adventure recreation and adventure education, with the emphasis in the former being on the enjoyment and satisfaction derived from an activity, while in the latter the social and personal learning is the key value. (p. 39)

This, unsurprisingly, is a contention with which I may proffer some reservation. To say that education is synonymous with learning is to purport one orientation to education as adequately representative of the broader concept.

If we consider adventure education as the use of adventure toward educative ends, as I do, then we see how our varied conceptions of education inform our considerations of the form and function of AE. This reinvigorates a point explained at the inception of this study: the educational values we identify within an experience reflect both what we perceive in experience, and what we consider to be educationally virtuous. The more ground we cover in our hunt for educational significance, the more value we may well find along the way.

**A Way Forward in Adventure Education**

Many in the field of adventure education will disagree with this assessment of the AE experience, and this is a criticism I welcome. It is through discourse that we can remedy practices and applications of our varied educational methods, not through hegemonic power struggles. To jettison one rationale for another leaves us no better positioned to present the educational quality of adventure. I offer here a different perspective in the hopes that adventure education can honor the innumerable meanings of the AE experience.

Surely, adventure education is those things we have come to argue it is: it does have a tendency to lead to the various outcomes we have identified, and these outcomes
can be the meaning of this experience for many. But that is not where our story ends. In fact, this study is suggestive of a new beginning. As I have attempted to elucidate, adventure education is many things to many people. It is an escape for Ivan and Tom, who seek respite from the daily grind; it is a chance to be engaged aesthetically for Kyle and Becky; it is an opportunity to be challenged for Rick and Joe; it is a way to experience new places and be opened up to new insights for Sarah and Christy; it is a chance to meet new people for Kate; and for George, it is a chance to be happy, “even for just that moment.”

It is on these grounds that I argue for a degree of rethinking in the adventure education experience. If we insist that the value of these experiences is that they reliably increase our scores with respect to psychological aftereffects, then we truncate the richness expressed through the varied meanings within this study, and potentially obfuscate the significance of the experience for the participant. I contend that adventure education may be well served to honor the idiosyncrasy of meaning in its facilitation of these experiences, and consider an alternative raison d’être: that adventure education may hold value not only because of the outcomes they produce, but also the experiences they provide.

**Significance for Adventure Education In Closing**

In this section I have illustrated the potential significance of the findings in this study for adventure education. I have reviewed how the qualities of the AE experience presented in this study may serve to enrich our understanding of AE as it is experienced, and provided general suggestions for cultural coalescence and the constructions of meaning in AE. Finally, I have encouraged a rethinking of our common rationales to
adventure education by presenting an additional purpose for the adventure education experience. With the significance for adventure education articulated through this discursive account, I move to the further abstract implications of this study by outlining its significance for schooling.

**SIGNIFICANCE FOR SCHOOLING**

This penultimate segment is an exploratory discussion of the fourth, and final question of this study: “What is the significance of the adventure education experience for schooling, if any?” As I have explained elsewhere, questions of educational significance are value-laden discussions that reflect both what we interpret in the subject (in this case, experience) and what we consider as categorically belonging to education. Accordingly, I divulge that this discussion stems from my own artistic interpretations and values with respect to education and adventure education; this account is further discursive than preceding sections.

This discussion is facilitated through a confluence of two perspectives in the construction of a third. The adventure education experience, when considered alongside the participant perceptions of schooling, incites a natural discussion of the significance of the AE experience for schooling. Though this argument embodies a slight departure from the data in this study, these inferences stem from this set of data, and are thus grounded empirically, albeit transitively. Further, given that this inquiry was one of experience, the implications for schooling are largely communicated on the plane of educational experience.

Though mainstream application was among the original aims of adventure education (Mortlock, 1978; 1984; Wood & Gillis, 1979), and adventure education
continues to grow in America and abroad (Attarian, 2001), to date, adventure remains on the periphery of schooling. However, as Eisner (1985) offered, “Virtually every set of educational events … has certain virtues and certain liabilities. The more that educational criticism can raise the level of discussion on these matters, the better” (Eisner, 1985, p. 237). As such, it is my intention to raise these issues regarding the AE experience and our current modes of schooling in the hopes that this presentation inspires further deliberation and productive discourse (Schwab, 1983).

In this section, I review the current modes of experience in schooling, as supported with the participant perceptions of schooling, before considering the educational utility of the qualities of the AE experience, such as idiosyncrasy, freedom, and togetherness. I also present a discussion of the character of challenge in schooling, continuity and novelty in schooling, and articulate a rationale for living education through aesthetic vitality and great experience. Finally, I present the educational experience as one of rhythm and tension, pose a challenge to contemporary educational paradigms, and finally conclude this section through questions of education.

**Reviewing Educational Experience**

Experience is at the center of education; it is by and through experience that all learning, development, and living occurs. As such, conceptions of educational experience reach back as far as our philosophies of education, as it has always been with experience in mind that we organize and implement curricula (Wraga, forthcoming). Pragmatic philosophers, in turn, have taken great efforts to characterize the educational experience to serve the broader aims of education.
To review a few seminal perspectives of educational experience: Dewey (1938) highlighted the need for continuity and interaction as criteria for the educative experience in the hopes that we might avoid non or miseducative experiences. Eisner (1985; 1994; 1998) has continued in this vein, applying and elaborating upon Dewey’s perspectives of experience as they may inform an educational experience amenable to cognitive pluralism. Whitehead (1929) offered the educational experience as one of rhythm between stages of romance, precision, and generalisation. Oliver and Gershman (1989) have continued in this tradition, critiquing the modernist approach to educational experience and articulating a process philosophy of education. Tyler (1949) offered that experiences be organized with intention toward objectives. He presented that experiences must provide opportunities for students to practice intended outcomes, and that experiences should be satisfying, feasible, and honor the multiplicity of relations between experiences and the outcomes they produce. Duckworth (2006) purports that we revel in uncertainty and aim for breadth (variance) and depth (connections) in educational experiences. Noddings (1992) contends that the educational experience be organized around fostering centers of care, and so forth.

Given the centrality of experience to education and the substantive theories developed with respect to educational experience, it seems this is a conversation resolved long ago. However, much as Noddings (2003) articulated the necessity to reinvigorate discussions of aims in education, I similarly perceive a need to enliven discourse of educational experience as current paradigms of American schooling have seemingly circumvented this discussion altogether.
A commitment to nationally standardized curricula (Common Core, 2013) accountability (Race to the Top, S. 844, 2010) and a continued dedication to the scientific approach to curriculum-making (Bobbit, 1918; 1924) alongside industrialist rationales (Taylor, 1911; Thorndike, 1913), and an academic rationalist orientation to educational aims (Adler, 1982; Hirsch, 1988; 2006) has rendered the student experience somewhat of an afterthought in discourse of education. Surely, experiences are still had in schools, however, “the trouble is not the absence of experiences, but their defective and wrong character” (Dewey, 1938, p. 27).

This inattention to experience in schooling can result in stagnant, monotonous, anesthetic (Dewey, 1934) or meaningless (Phenix, 1964) experiences, as evidenced in the participant perceptions of schooling in this study. To review, participants characterized the school experience a variety of ways, but predominantly reported the school experience as lackluster, and identified the value of these experiences as serving a means to ends in life. Conversely, they frequently reported that the AE experience was of intrinsic value, and commonly identified more difference than similarity between the two types of experiences. Their critiques of schooling were synthesized through three suggestions: 1.) More opportunities for interaction in school, 2.) More opportunities to be challenged in school, and 3.) More opportunities for new and enjoyable experiences in school. To these three suggestions I transitively inferred another: 4.) Fewer experiences that lack interaction or challenge, and are redundant or otherwise not enjoyable.

To be sure, this is not to argue that contemporary school experiences are void of educational virtue. In spite of the dismal portrayal I have presented here, many children still enjoy school and find value in the experiences they undergo in the daily life of
traditional education. However, as evidenced through the perceptions of participants in this study, these experiences may be educationally sterilized for many students. It is from this position, with the participant perceptions of schooling, and the adventure education experience in mind, that we may reconsider educational experiences in schooling. First, through reiterating the idiosyncrasy of educational experience.

Educational Experience as Idiosyncratic

As I have taken great efforts to explain to this point, experience is an idiosyncratic phenomenon, and the meanings, significance, and outcomes of each experience—regardless of our attempts to standardize or regulate the experience—are ultimately unique to the student. As this is a point that has been duly noted by other curriculum scholars (see Dewey, 1916; 1938; Eisner, 1988/2005; Noddings, 2003), I will forego a robust explanation of educational significance. The findings of this study stand as another point of experiential referral to corroborate rationales surrounding educational experience; “it is dead wrong to expect the same performance from each child” (Noddings, 2003, p. 90). Specifically, to conceive of the school experience as universal, and to expect reflectively universal outcomes from our diverse student body (Common Core, 2013), is to undermine the idiosyncrasy of educational experience, and contrive the potential rich eccentricity in educational outcomes.

Freedom in Schooling

Freedom in the AE experience was characterized by autonomy and escape, and participants in this study noted freedom as an intrinsic suggestion for schooling (see Kate’s desire for choice in school, or Tom’s fatigue from monotony and repetitive routines). Regarding educational experience, Dewey (1938) spoke at length about the
nature of freedom as a key element of the experience, arguing that children need both times of physical and mental freedom cycled with times of reflection. Including freedom in education, for Dewey, allows for the development of self-control; “The ideal aim of education is creation of power of self-control. But the mere removal of external control is no guarantee for the production of self-control” (p. 64). Freedom is not to let impulse run rampant without discipline but is, conversely, the key ingredient for children to learn to control impulse.65

Whitehead (1929) similarly articulated the importance of freedom in an educational program, particularly in the development of interest, which he associates with the romantic stage of education:

In no part of education can you do without discipline or can you do without freedom; but in the stage of romance the emphasis must always be on freedom, to allow the child to see for itself and to act for itself. (p. 33)

Whitehead (1929) also reflects Dewey’s sentiment toward freedom, “I hold that the only discipline, important for its own sake, is self-discipline, and that this can only be acquired by a wide use of freedom” (p. 35). Further, with the help of Whitehead, we may consider the ties between freedom and novelty, as he identified both freedom and novelty as key aspects of his stage of romance. Indeed, it may well be that the AE experience can be likened to one of romance, as both freedom and novelty were common across these experiences. To these perspectives, Holt (1972) adds that understanding the tensions which surround the concept of freedom will allow us to hold these opposing perspectives in productive opposition to one another and allow for more freedom in schools and society.

65 Durkheim (1961/2011) similarly argued that discipline was fundamental to moral adherence.
Though freedom has long been a point of discussion in education by these scholars and others (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994; Rousseau, 1762/1979), other aspects of freedom in the AE experience are yet to enjoy such attention. For example, the opportunity for escape as an educational maxim has received little consideration in popular discourse, and is likely worthy of further exploration.

That students considered the freedom granted through AE as noteworthy raises questions regarding the contemporary prevalence of freedom in schools. We may deliberate whether students are granted the freedom they need to learn to control their impulses (Dewey, 1938), or learn the spirit of discipline (Durkheim, 1961/2011), or if there is room in contemporary schools for the stage of romance (Whitehead, 1929). To address these issues is to consider the character of educational experience anew, and though I do not present a guide for freedom in schooling, raising these issues may be provocative in discourse of contemporary educational experience.

**Togetherness in Schooling**

Alongside freedom was the notion of togetherness in the AE experience. To reiterate, togetherness represents the ways in which participants grew together as supportive and cohesive groups through the AE experience by virtue of sharing experiences and challenges. As several participants noted in the participant perceptions of schooling, the AE experience allowed participants to work together in ways more authentic than much of the group work in schools.

Like freedom, togetherness has also received significant attention in discourse of education, though under different monikers. The development of groups, cliques, and social circles has long been of interest in education (Coleman, 1960/2011), as has the
relationship between teachers and students (Brophy & Good, 1974), and the occasionally destructive relationships amongst students (Rigby, 2007). Other works provide recommendations for schools, such as organizing schools as centers of care (Noddings, 1992), consciousness of students’ selfhood (Bonnett, 2009) and intentionally developing a sense of community in the classroom (Ayers, 2001; Gay, 2000; hooks, 2003).

To me, however, togetherness, and the ways it was characterized in the AE experience speaks most directly to the Deweyan ideal of cultural communication toward democratic ends (Dewey, 1916) and Locke’s (1936/1989) conception of cultural reciprocity. In sharing experiences, and embracing challenges as a group, a form of togetherness was cultivated in these AE experiences, which has implications for education, democracy, and society. As such, this study raises issues for what schools may do to allow children to experience the sense of community that we commonly consider reserved for out of school contexts.

**The Character of Challenge in Schooling**

The central role challenge plays in the AE experience, when considered alongside the participant suggestions for more challenges in school, inspires consideration of the role challenge may play in contemporary schooling. Though schools in their current form present no shortage of difficulty, to say that constructive challenges exist as a common quality of the school experience contradicts the perceptions and suggestions of the participants in this study. Thus, we may consider challenge as it is modeled in adventure as a guide to evaluate the difficulties students encounter in schools. This subtle distinction may have significant implications for education, as difficulty is not synonymous with challenge, and it seems we would do well in schools to offer the latter
over the former. In other words, our consideration is with the character of challenge in schooling.

Difficulty is something “Not easy; requiring effort or labour; … [something] troublesome, hard” (Difficult, n.d.), and, as Becky offered, “You have to really, like, get up there and try your best for it to be a challenge.” Schools, it would seem, are already sufficiently difficult for many students, as evidenced through several participants in this study “hating” or dropping out of school. As one participant, James, explained, “I like challenges, except for school.” As such, it seems making schools more difficult would not satisfy the participant suggestion for more challenges.

If we look to the AE experience as a guide, we see that a challenge is a concrete task that is embraced by the individual as an intrinsic test of ability. A challenge is not a list of tasks of undefined duration and magnitude, but something embarked on with an achievement in mind from the outset. It presents disequilibrium through suffering, and its completion is marked by a sense of afterglow and celebration. It is not something that takes our energy, but something that we willfully invest our energy into on our own accord. It is reflective of the distinction Dewey (1934) articulated between the anesthetic and the aesthetic, as the aesthetic was characterized by the very “disequilibrium” and “reconstruction” we find common to such challenging, or “vital” experiences (pp. 42-43).

With this form of challenge in mind, we may look back on the difficulties prone to schooling and see that they are decidedly lacking in challenging character. For example, that challenges draw to a close with celebration, and that participants are encouraged to revel in completing them, is clearly a marked difference from what many students experience in schools (Eisner, 1998b). Further, that the AE challenges were
presented as optional and engaged with willfully, is dissimilar from the commonly externally mandated activities in schooling (Holt, 1972).

I reiterate that participant suggestions for schooling did not request higher standards, more work, or harder tests, but to be challenged: to trust children to be, “able to keep on going when you can’t” (Joe); to acknowledge “how much strength [students] have” (Pedro); to be allowed to demonstrate their full capacity, rather than mandated to perform at a minimum level. There is a marked difference between presenting students with challenges and setting a standard for them to reach. I present this characterization of challenge merely to substantiate the suggestion already provided by participants of this study. From celebratory challenge, and the participant critiques of schooling, then, let schools receive this message, as summarized by one participant, Robin: “Kids need to be faced with challenges, and know what it feels like to overcome them.”

**Continuity and Novelty in Schooling**

Novelty—a degree of newness, unfamiliarity, or serendipity—was presented as among the main qualities of the AE experience in this study. This quality has been characterized in depth, exemplified through descriptions of the AE experience, and supported with the perceptions of participants. Further, the participants of this study also offered opportunities for new experiences among their primary suggestions for schooling.

Whereas perceiving the educational benefits of other qualities of the AE experience may require little stretch of the imagination, the educational virtue of novelty may be less obvious. To say that novelty is educationally virtuous, in fact, highlights a tension in the field of curriculum as it stands in contrast to a popularly championed quality (or criterion) of the educative experience: continuity. Though many have
addressed the need for continuity, these ideas were perhaps best articulated by Ralph Tyler (1949), Nel Noddings (1992) and John Dewey (1938). Following, I appraise each of these perspectives in turn, while explicating the educational value of novelty as it stands in contrast to these types of continuity.

**An Appraisal of Noddings and Tyler on Continuity**

To Noddings (1992), continuity related to place, people, purpose and curriculum; continuity ensured that aspects of the student experience remain constant and become familiar. It was in keeping the conditions of the experience continuous or consistent across the hours, days, and years of schooling that she believed the school could cultivate a center of care emulative of the home life. Tyler (1949) similarly argued for continuity across educational experiences, allowing for “recurring and continuing opportunity for these skills to be practiced and developed” (pp. 84-85). For Tyler, it was necessary that desired skills be repeated, and through attention to the vertical (temporal) orientation of curriculum planning that we facilitate this brand of continuity in experience. Noddings’ and Tyler’s arguments are convincing, as each highlight the benefits of keeping aspects of experience consistent for students in schools, and to date, our schools still stand to benefit through attention to both Tyler’s and Noddings’ continuity.

Though novelty is not antithetical to these conceptions of continuity, it certainly presents a contradictory argument for the educational experience. To work toward the quality of novelty, in contrast to Noddings’ (1992) or Tyler’s (1949) continuity, would be to purport precisely the opposite rationale of educational experience: to travel to unfamiliar places; to experience new activities; to interact with different people; to practice unfamiliar skills; and so forth. The difference between the two is substantial as
they seemingly present alternative perspectives of what may be considered educationally virtuous. Though both Noddings’ and Tyler’s arguments of continuity are congruent with Dewey’s conception of continuity, Dewey discussed the concept on a different plane. While Noddings discussed the conditions of experience, and Tyler of the skills practiced, Dewey’s argument of continuity related to the experiences themselves. I turn now to a more thorough review of this third realm of continuity.

An Appraisal of Dewey on Continuity

Dewey (1938) placed continuity alongside interaction as a criterion to educative experience. While interaction addresses the interplay of the subjective conditions of the individual and the content, continuity attends to the connection of the experience with past and future experiences in a direction of growth. Direction, to Dewey, was necessary because, “The natural or native impulses of the young do not agree with the life-customs of the group into which they are born. Consequently they have to be directed or guided” (Dewey, 1916, p. 39). Growth was the means and aims of education for Dewey, the “cumulative movement of action toward a later result” (p. 41); it is not the result that is the aim, but the very movement, which is of value. Dewey (1938) further explains the criteria of continuity as follows:

It is a mistake to suppose that the principle of the leading on of experience to something different is adequately satisfied simply by giving pupils some new experiences any more than it is by seeing to it that they have greater skill and ease in dealing with things with which they are already familiar. It is also essential that the new objects and events be related intellectually to those of earlier experiences, and this means that there be some advance made in conscious articulation of facts and ideas. (p. 75)

We see here that Dewey’s critique is not of new experiences—indeed he was critical of repetitive, mechanical, or otherwise anesthetic experiences that lacked this very
degree of novelty. His focus was on the *relationship* of the experience to other lived experiences; that they contribute to the *advancement* of life in *direction*. To him, the experience was only educative if it built upon past experience, and embodied a given trajectory or direction—ultimately a reflection of Dewey’s understanding of growth. This may be considered similar to Tyler’s (1949) conception of intentionally sequencing experiences in a productive direction. Further, this rationale assumes that these connections can (and should) be articulated by those involved in the experience, and is not necessarily an organization of experience amenable to serendipity.

Indeed, life is continuous, and each experience has some degree of continuity with past and future experiences through their shared ontological domain. Similarly, each experience has a moving force and influences the life trajectory of the student (Dewey, 1938). But to ensure that experiences connect with past and future living in *a* direction is reflective of a linear understanding of life trajectory. It is to organize experiences as building toward a destination in particular, rather than honoring the unpredictable and circuitous paths our lives may take. It is this point that novelty may critique: Education with direction is not necessarily as the crow flies.

If we are willing to entertain this prospective maxim—that educational experience may well reflect the winding directions of life—then we may more fully perceive the educational value of experiences that do not constitute a linear building upon of previous experience. It is from this perspective that novelty may stand to complement Dewey’s conception of continuity: to broaden the horizons with respect to what we consider educational. This is certainly not an argument *against* growth or development, nor is it an
argument against Dewey’s philosophy of educative experience.\textsuperscript{66} It is, however, a reminder that a utilitarian conception of growth is not all we mean to accomplish in education (Oliver & Gershman, 1989). It seems to me, if we view education through a broad theoretical lens, we may see the educational virtues of qualities currently marginalized in the educational experience, such as novelty.

**Novelty as Educational Virtue**

In traditional iterations of schooling, the unexpected and new are commonly viewed in negative terms: a break in continuity is an interruption from the business of schooling, and unexpected occurrences are unfortunate distractions, rather than welcomed surprises (Uhrmacher et al., 2009). An alternative perspective brought to this discussion of continuity is the suggestion of novelty, which seems a contradictory quality of experience. Novelty does not necessarily build on past experiences, and may not lead us in a utilitarian productive direction because it is characterized exclusively by its newness. This is not to say the experience cannot lead in a direction of growth, linear or otherwise, or that it is void of continuity, but it is to say that firm allegiance to Tyler’s, Dewey’s or Noddings’ rationales of continuity, without attending to the opposing quality, may inhibit experiencing the educational virtue demonstrated through novelty.

Though time carries on with duration, life seldom follows the linear trajectory schools chart out for students—that of steady and predictable educational improvement to arrive at vocational capacity. As Oliver and Gershman (1989) explain, the process is more complex and unpredictable, “A living organism is constantly making, reproducing, growing, aging, constantly changing. Some of the changes are more or less predictable.

\textsuperscript{66} Though Oliver and Gershman (1989) critique this “deficiency” conception of growth.
… Other changes are novel” (p. 115). We move from experience to experience as our interests develop, diversify, and evolve. Some experiences exhibit continuity and move us in a particular direction, others are unpredictable occasions that embody a change in direction, and others still are disconnected entirely from what we may consider life trajectory. To label those experiences contributing to prefigured trajectory as educational, and the other experiences as merely extraneous, is a value statement reflective of our contemporary practices of schooling.

While this argument for novelty in education may seem more imaginative than practical, novelty finds referent in the popular philosophies of educational experience. As we recall, Dewey’s (1938) critique was not of new experiences, but of new experiences that lacked connection to life. He further noted how a degree of unfamiliarity was necessary for engaging in disequilibrium—a key element to an educational experience. Similarly, given the happiness often associated to these new experiences in AE, we may infer that Noddings’ (2003) pragmatic views of educational experience would be amenable to novelty. We can also see how the novel experience may well be included within Tyler’s (1949) framework, depending on the objectives we seek to cultivate.

Duckworth (2006) also championed new experiences (breadth in experience) as critical to the organization of educational experience.

Perhaps most notably, Whitehead (1929) also explained novelty as an aspect of his *stage of romance*, vital to the educational experience. Novelty is also embedded in the Whitheadian conception of creativity—“repatterning the known world, within the realm of the unpredictable. … a seeking of new configurations” (Oliver & Gershman, p. 129)—and concrescence—“having something novel as a result of a unifying of diverse
While Whitehead’s argument stems from his perspective of cosmology, the tactile lesson he contributes to this conversation is that both creativity and concrescence exemplify the novel occasion, which lies at the heart of the educational process.

The utility of the novel was also well articulated by Oliver and Gershman (1989), who, like Whitehead, placed the novel occasions at the center of the process theory of education. To paraphrase, Oliver and Gershman argue that learning occurs through significant novel occasions. In keeping with Whitehead’s metaphysical creativity, they argue that the student “experiences the novel for its own sake” (p. 165). The aim of this process theory was to transcend modernistic conceptions of knowledge, and instead toward deep knowing. This deep (or creative) “knowing requires that the learner advance to novelty and confront it” (p. 176). In accord, they conceive of growth not as “an improvement process” (p. 166) but, similar to Dewey (1938) as a movement—as an “advance into novelty” (Whitehead, 1929/1978, p. 349).

Novelty also has implications for Dewey’s (1934) conception of perception and recognition. To review:

Recognition is perception arrested before it has a chance to develop freely. In recognition there is a beginning of an act of perception. But this beginning is not allowed to serve the development of a full perception of the thing recognized. It is arrested at the point where it will order to serve some other purpose, … In recognition we fall back, as upon a stereotype, upon some previously formed scheme. (p. 54).

For Dewey, as soon as an object is recognized and so associated with a scheme it ceases to be perceived. As such, novelty has potential in encouraging perception, and thus live experience. Novel settings, experiences, and feelings invite the attention and investment
on the part of participants, while experiencing familiar things, places, and activities, invokes recognition, and we slip through the experience incognizant of the subtleties of its conditions. In sum, when an experience lacks a degree of novelty, as I have characterized it, it may also lack the potential to be lived in an aesthetic sense and be deficient in numerous qualities we may consider of educational worth.

Novelty and Continuity in Conclusion

That educational experiences include a degree of continuity is a reasonable and accepted point. However, when we consider these arguments of continuity in opposition to novelty, we are left with contradictory rationales for educational experience. One side argues to maintain a level of consistency, predictability, or repetition (Noddings, 1992; Tyler, 1949) and ensure a productive connection from one experience to the next (Dewey, 1938), while the other side argues for interrupting that very consistency through experience marked by distinction. Both arguments of continuity and novelty are reasonable within themselves, as each reflect disparate principles of the educational experience (Schwab, 1983); certainly novelty is not wrong any more than continuity is right, and vice versa.

If our interest is primarily in continuity, we naturally abhor the new, just as if our interest is in novelty we likely disdain the routine. In sum, with respect to the tension between continuity and novelty, the answer is not one over the other, but opportunities to experience varying degrees of both. Indeed, I agree with Tyler, Noddings and Dewey, and believe their arguments have much to teach us by way of the conditions of educational experience. This agreement, however, is with the caveat that we also account
for a degree of serendipity in the educational experience, a perspective that, as the participants of this study contend, has been lacking in our current modes of schooling.

**Living Education**

This segment began with a sketch of the common schooling experience, presenting it as one dictated by rhetoric of standardization and accountability, which too often results in monotonous, routine, and otherwise educationally stagnant experiences. This assertion is further supported with the participant caricatures, comparisons and critiques of schooling, which present schools as places of learning or otherwise preparing to live, rather than places of living. The difference is one of existing rather than living, and it would seen that amongst the participants in this study, *existing* is common in school while *living* is somewhat rare.

This was a central concern for participants of this study, who offered more opportunities for interaction and for new and enjoyable experiences as two of their main suggestions for schooling. We may well correct this apparent oversight in contemporary iterations of schooling by looking to two qualities of the AE experience for guidance: aesthetic vitality and great experience. To review briefly, aesthetic vitality is a degree of living in union with the senses and immersed in the immediate aesthetic experience. Great experiences are those experiences in life that find their worth in and of themselves, and when compiled, constitute a life well lived. It may well be that when experiences fall out of step with instinctive tendencies prone to the aesthetic (Dewey, 1934), and away from experiences of intrinsic value such as the great experience, they lack this desired quality of living. I review the two qualities in turn as they both address this seldom-discussed dimension of education.
Aesthetic Vitality as Living

Aesthetic vitality is a descriptor of a subjective degree of aesthetic involvement likened to a liveliness seldom experienced in routine life. Congruent with Dewey’s (1934) aesthetic experience, and with Mortlock’s (1984) conception of the adventure experience, these experiences present opportunities to utilize our senses and live with the demands of the moment. As achieved through the integration of the senses with the immediate conditions of the environment, they are emotional and all consuming.

Conversely, we present the school experience as one sterilized of aesthetic interference in order to ease cognitive processes and the assimilation of information (Eisner, 1985/2005). As others have noted, the aesthetic experience is ripe with potential for learning experiences in schools (Moroye & Uhrmacher, 2009; Uhrmacher, 2009), as well as for experiences we may consider serendipitous or tangential to the formal school curriculum (Uhrmacher et al., 2009). Similarly, to consider aesthetic vitality aside the anesthetic experiences participants in this study reported as common to schooling, renders this quality an enticing prospect in improving the school experience as one in which we live rather than exist. As Rousseau (1762/1979) reminds us, “To live is not to breathe; it is to act; it is to make use of our organs, our senses, our faculties, of all the parts of ourselves which give us the sentiment of our existence” (p. 42).

Great Experience as Living

Great experience is ultimately an evaluation of an experience by the student with respect to three criteria: enjoyment, worth, and significance. When we answer in the affirmative to these implied questions, we may well consider the experience great. In great experience, the onus of educational value is ultimately directed to the student, and
as such, presents a democratic (if not postmodern) perspective of organizing educational experience. An accrual of great experiences results in a different form of educational capital with regards to experience: Rather than these experiences embodying a trajectory of preparation for future living, their worth is self-evident, and when taken as a collective, they constitute a life well lived.

Though many identified the AE experience as satisfying the criteria of great experience, the important finding for educational experience is not that these experiences are great, but that participants experienced greatness. Much as Oliver and Gershman (1989) note the “significant occasion” as central to the educational process, we may consider the great experience as similarly contributing to educational experience. Accordingly, I do not recommend the AE experience supplant the school experience, but ask that we consider the role of this quality in our broader educational schemes. This is a point of discussion I explore alongside the implications of aesthetic vitality through the following section.

**Living in Schools**

The issue that these qualities showcase in this discussion of educational significance is a perspective too often overlooked in the educational lives of children. As Whitehead (1929) reminds us, “After all, our pupils are alive, and cannot be chopped into separate bits, like the pieces of a jig-saw puzzle” (p. 38). Children in schools are living people, and the experiences they have with formal education tally alongside other life experiences. Though this point is not as much an argument to contend as it is a given, I present it here as the participant perceptions of schooling seem to suggest that contemporary iterations of schooling may be in need of a reminder.
To reiterate, participants in this study critiqued the school experience for lacking interaction, challenge, and new, enjoyable experiences. It seems reasonable that we broaden our lens of education to consider these recommendations, which requires a further consideration of the experiences we provide alongside the outcomes we produce. If we can perceive education as comprised of a series of experiences to live through, rather than simply as a set of tasks to complete, then we may well decide differently what ought be included in the school curriculum. To me, it seems reasonable that we, at minimum, consider how these experiences might accrue in a manner that allows our students to live these years of their lives in a way they may appreciate. As one participant, George, offered, “to be happy, at least for that moment. Maybe not forever but, for that moment you can be happy.”

Oliver and Gershman (1989) add support to this line of discussion, as embedded in their argument reside further ties between the AE experience, and their alternative (postmodern) purposes of education. As I reiterate, they place the significant occasion at the center of the educational process, during which, “we are caught up in it; almost as if we did not even know it was going on” (p. 165). To explicate, the intrinsically satisfying nature of confronting the all-encompassing novel experience (Oliver & Gershman, 1989), on its surface, is consistent with great experience and aesthetic vitality (among other qualities of the AE experience). Eisner (1985/2005) similarly presented the two (great and aesthetic) in relation as the aesthetic “is motivated by our need to lead a stimulating life” (p. 100).

While Oliver and Gershman (1989) position this experience as the impetus and purpose of education, this is not to say that I recommend supplanting our contemporary
purposes for schooling with an alternative postmodernist rationale; to do so would be to miss the point. I am firmly in agreement with Tyack and Cuban (1995) in that “Rather than starting from scratch in reinventing schools, it makes most sense to us to graft thoughtful reforms onto what is healthy in the present system” (p. 133). Certainly an educational program based exclusively on the whimsy of students’ desires for great or aesthetic experiences may well lack the structure required to achieving the normative purposes of education (Dewey, 1916). This is, however, to remind us of the varied aims of education. If Whitehead (1929) was right in that “There is only one subject-matter for education, and that is life in all its manifestations” (pp. 6-7), then we may well stand to benefit by presenting the educational experience as one of living with a sense of aesthetic vitality and great experience.

Surely, most working in schools are already aware of these recommendations (if only by different nomenclature), and many contemporary schools surely go to great lengths to provide opportunities for these very experiences in educational programs today. However, this is not always the case, and as the occupation of schooling grows more businesslike (Ravitch, 2000; Tyack & Cuban, 1995), we may do well to remind ourselves of the educational virtue of the aesthetic and the great experience.

In summary, educational experiences surely serve means to greater ends, but this is not where our conversation of experience and schooling should conclude. As Noddings (1992) noted, “The single-purpose view [of schooling] is practically and technically wrong” (p. 63). We must acknowledge that process (Oliver & Gershman, 1989) and living are among the varied purposes of education, and to ignore these purposes in the name of others is to provide an imbalanced educational experience. That we purport
unwavering allegiance to a preparatory model in the name of life and living contradicts the affiliation of education and life. “This ironical situation will endure till it is recognized that living has its own intrinsic quality and that the business of education is with that quality” (Dewey, 1916, p. 51).

The Tension and Rhythm of Educational Experience

To this juncture I have outlined the prospective educational virtue of the qualities of the adventure education experience, and illustrated their potential in the context of schools. This has not been to present a new comprehensive blueprint of educational experience, but merely to volunteer the educational value of the experiences in this study. Nonetheless, their presentation merits further discussion pertaining to the role of these qualities of experience in more comprehensive organizations of educational experience.

To this end, I must acknowledge that, though not stemming from empirical data within this study, the inquiry of experience, in itself, has been suggestive of a theory for educational experience. Namely, contemplating the educational virtues of varied qualities of experience has exposed the contradictory principles at the core of this discourse. If we return to the theories of educational experience with this perspective in mind, we perceive a consistent need for incongruous qualities in educational experience: Opposed to freedom is a need for control\textsuperscript{67}; opposite togetherness is a need for solitude; opposite novelty is a need for continuity; and so forth. To me, these diametrically opposed qualities should be balanced in organizations of educational experience, which can be facilitated two ways: as a tension within experience, and as a rhythm across experiences.

\textsuperscript{67} See Holt (1972) for a more thorough illustration of this tension of freedom in particular.
To conceive of educational experience as a tension is to perceive singular experiences as exhibiting contradictory qualities—opposing qualities united in single experiences. To have a degree of freedom, but to have freedom bound by a set of parameters could be considered a tension of freedom and control. To be introduced to new experiences and feelings, but that those experiences take place in a familiar context may be framed as a tension between continuity and novelty. Opposing qualities within singular lived experiences is what I mean by the tension of educational experience.

Conversely, to perceive educational experience as rhythm is to embrace the beat of disparate and distinct experiences. A rhythmic conception of educational experience encourages times of engagement and times of reflection; times of togetherness and solitude; times of freedom and control; novelty and continuity; and so forth. From this perspective it is not singular experiences that characterize the educational endeavor, but across experiences that we see their accrual as educationally virtuous. Disparate qualities encountered across distinct experiences, is what I mean by the rhythm of educational experience.

It is not that we must pick one over the other, with respect to perceiving the tension or rhythm of educational experience. In fact, Dewey (1938), Whitehead (1929), Oliver & Gershman (1989), Duckworth (2006), Noddings (1992; 2003), and Eisner (1985; 1985/2005; 1994) all reflect an appreciation for both of these perspectives in framing educational experience. Similar across both tension and rhythm is the necessity to provide for variation within and across educational experience. Accordingly, perhaps the underlying principle of educational experience embedded within this discussion of qualities, is that there must exist a balanced variance across experience that embodies
either a tension or rhythm amongst the qualities of experience. Whitehead similarly noted this need for balance, or “an alteration of dominance” (p. 28) in educational experience, which serves to satisfy what Eisner (1985/2005) called the “deep-seated need for stimulation” (p. 100).

To be further discursive, when schooling takes an absolute response to questions of education, we are left with severe experiences, which may lack the variation necessary for what we might consider educationally meaningful. A step further still, contemporary dedication to the modernist perspective of educational experience is a “fragmentation of experience that is one of the sources of meaninglessness” (Phenix, 1964 p. 9) or fractured meaning (Oliver & Gershman, 1989). Indeed, the participant caricatures, comparisons, and critiques of schooling in this study further expose this lack of variation in the school experience; where the strings are no longer taut across experience, or where the metronome of experiential variance is stuck to one side. Ergo, it may well be that when experience lacks rhythm or tension, it falls out of sync with what we might consider educational.

Answering the question of education, then, through but one mode of experience may be considered our primary cause for concern. As the participant perceptions of schooling may suggest, the school experience is commonly one of order over chaos, predictability over serendipity, continuity over novelty, objectivity over subjectivity, anesthetic over aesthetic, mind over body, and so on. The school experience is one of allegiance to one side of experience and may be critiqued, perhaps more than anything else, for its lack of diversity in educational qualities.
I do not present this discussion in the hopes of developing guidelines, rules, or a blueprint for constructing the conditions of educational experience, but to reinvigorate historical principles, and bring into the fold a few fresh perspectives of educational experience. This is not a guide to educational experience, though it is a provocative step in the direction of reconsidering educational paradigms.

**Reconsidering Educational Paradigms**

Conversation of the significance of this study for schooling has been grounded to this juncture by the participant perceptions of schooling and the qualities of the AE experience. However, in this final discussion, I depart more fully from the data and exercise a more liberal degree of artistic interpretation in an attempt to articulate the full weight of significance for schooling—prospective though it may be. Given the role of educational experience as the means of education, the discussions of educational experience to this point are indicative of implications for educational paradigms. Accordingly, I begin this segment with a definition of education to ground discussion before reviewing popular modes and ideologies of education at present. I then critique the contemporary rationale of education as preparation and discuss the potential of reconsidering educational paradigms in American schooling.

**Defining Education through Provocative Positionality**

Though I presented a working definition for education early in this study, we may best ground this discussion of education by resurrecting deliberation of what, exactly, is meant by “education.” As defined, education is, “The process of bringing up a child, with reference to forming character, shaping manners and behaviour; the manner in which a person has been brought up” (Education, n.d.). If we adopt a broad
definition for education, as I do in this discussion, we can perceive education as many things, and as such, we need not let our current iterations of schooling dictate what we are willing to consider educational.

Education, then, is essentially two things: a practice and a theory; normative and imaginative. Education is what we know in practicality and through our own experiences of things we consider categorically belonging; school buildings with principals, teachers, classrooms, desks and so forth (Schwab, 1983). But education is also what we profess it to be in books, literature, and theoretical discourse; it is an idea (Pinar, 1979). From this perspective, we see that schools in their current form are a particular answer to the question of education.

An inability to disassociate one from the other—idea from practice—may act as somewhat of a constraint on discourse, as our collective histories with schooling dictate our understandings of education.⁶⁸ As Holt (1972) put it, “It is certainly foolish to learn nothing from experience. But we can learn too much from it” (p. 45). Surely, there is a need for the practical perspective to schooling (Schwab, 1983), yet we need not let normalcy confine the course of the conversation. In keeping with the pragmatic tradition, though we are grounded to the normative dimensions of education, we may entertain new visions (Dewey, 1931; James, 1907/1948; Locke, 1936/1989; West, 1989). The resulting positionality in this final discussion is congruent with the provocative pragmatist; it is the creatively radical yet useful perspective of Bode (1927), Counts (1932/1978), Eisner (1985; 1994), Dewey, (1916; 1938), Noddings (1992; 2003), Oliver and Gershman (1989), Freire (1970) and others: We need not let what we have done dictate what we will

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⁶⁸ One reason, among many, that schools remain robust institutions resistant to change (Eisner, 1992).
do. With this definitional discretion in mind, and provocative positionality clarified, we may reexamine our current educational paradigms in a new creatively pragmatic light.

**A Criticism of Contemporary Paradigms**

Education in America has made a recent move toward a diversity of educational modes with a simultaneous stroke of standardization (Common Core, 2013; Race to the Top, S. 844, 2010). This has resulted in varied practices in the field, which are similarly reflective of varying orientations (Eisner, 1985) or ideologies (Eisner, 1994) to curriculum. As Eisner (1994) explains, “Ideologies in general are belief systems that provide the value premises from which decisions about practical educational matters are made” (p. 47).

This is not to say that but one ideology of curriculum is present in a given school, indeed schools are versatile institutions that serve many purposes simultaneously (Eisner, 1994). But perhaps the unifying principle of schools today is that they serve to prepare youth for future living. This contemporary approach to education is reflected through recent national curriculum (Common Core, 2013), policy developments (Race to the Top, S. 844, 2010), and statements by our President:

[F]our years ago, we started Race to the Top—a competition that convinced almost every state to develop smarter curricula and higher standards … Tonight, I’m announcing a new challenge to redesign America’s high schools so they better equip graduates for the demands of a high-tech economy. And we’ll reward schools that develop new partnerships with colleges and employers, and create classes that focus on science, technology, engineering and math—the skills today’s employers are looking for to fill the jobs that are there right now and will be there in the future. (Obama, Feb. 12, 2013, para. 44)

At present, we see not only that preparation is the purpose of schooling, but that a particular set of skills and knowledge will actualize this preparation. As Noddings (2003)
argued, this “current goal in the United States is even narrower than Plato’s because it concentrates almost entirely on the economic status of the country” (p. 80). And as Ravitch (2000) similarly critiqued, “It should be remembered that there are many more reasons to get a good education than preparing for gainful employment” (p. 462).

As such, I mean to raise the issue that placing schooling behind this hegemonic curtain limits what education is able to do and become. In this current mode of education, we would likely consider an experience that does not serve an end beyond itself as non-educational; as recreational, leisure, or otherwise extracurricular. Only once we entertain the eclectic of educational aims, such as for self-actualization (Rousseau, 1762/1979), growth (Dewey, 1916), happiness (Noddings, 2003), and so on, can we begin to perceive the full educational virtue of experiences akin to the adventure education experience.

I bring this point into the fold not in protest of preparation, but in the interest of balancing the scales of educational reason. As Dewey (1916) notes, our current rhetoric of schooling as solely preparatory may be unfounded:

It is not of course a question whether education should prepare for the future. If education is growth, it must progressively realize present possibilities, and thus make individuals better fitted to cope with later requirements. … The mistake is not in attaching importance to preparation for future need, but in making it the mainspring of present effort. Because the need of preparation for a continually developing life is great, it is imperative that every energy should be bent to making the present experience as rich and significant as possible. Then as the present merges insensibly into the future, the future is taken care of. (p. 56)

To argue that our experiences with schooling are merely serving some greater purpose is to surrender to the modernist perspective alone (see Oliver & Gershman, 1989; Slattery, 1995) and marginalize the lives of students as they are presently lived in schools by voiding their intrinsic value. However, if we can entertain diverse and simultaneous
aims in education, as I believe we should, we can attend to qualities of experience beyond those that relate to an accrual of knowledge or skill. The relationship between current education and future living is thus a balancing act. As Epicurus (n.d./1993) explained, “We must keep in mind that the future is neither completely ours nor not ours, so that we should not fully expect it to come, nor lose hope, as if it were not coming at all” (p. 64).

In sum, education as preparation, though a valid aim, is but one orientation to schooling. When we consider the diverse purposes of schooling beyond this utilitarian aim, we may better position ourselves to identify underrepresented educational virtues.

**The Hunt for Educational Virtue**

We have much to address in our schools today. We cite epidemics of boredom, violence, mistreatment, inequality, time wasted, tests failed and standards missed (Kozol, 2005; Silberman, 1970). But we also enjoy glimpses of beauty and hope in the contemporary school experience. We see birthday parties, smiles, relationships, hugs, learning, collaboration, games, growth and success (Noddings, 2003). We also see experiences on the margins of education, such as that of the adventure education experience, which stand as undercover manifestations of a postmodernistic approach to education (Noddings, 2007). Our aim, if we are pragmatic, is to strengthen those aspects of educational experience we appreciate and mitigate those things we consider detrimental to the educational enterprise (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). If we direct this perspective toward the experiences of students (Dewey, 1938) in conjunction with the outcomes and knowledge they demonstrate (Mager, 1962; Popham, 1972) we may, once again, consider education as a lived endeavor, rather than solely as a completion of tasks to external ends. As Dewey (1938) agreed:
The ideal of using the present simply to get ready for the future contradicts itself. … We always live at the time we live and not at some other time, and only by extracting at each present time the full meaning of each present experience are we prepared for doing the same thing in the future. This is the only preparation which in the long run amounts to anything. (p. 49)

To consider this perspective is to entertain the possibility of education as something lived, not simply had (Oliver & Gershman, 1989; Whitehead, 1929), thus stirring discussions of what we deem educational. As Eisner (1988/2005) notes, living, as an educational quality, may well be a natural consequence of attending to experience.

Like breathing, we regard experience as a condition that is ineluctably associated with being alive. To live is to experience. … But experience is more than a simple given of life. It is not only an event; it is also an achievement. The qualities of the world are there for those who have the skills to take them. (p. 112)

In sum, when we consider in full view the multiplicity of educational purposes, inclusive of the achievement of lived experience, we are better equipped in our hunt to identify and cultivate a broader range of educational virtues. This is not in the interest of reducing education to an alternative singular aim, but to enliven discourse and enrich judgment of what we consider educationally virtuous. This perspective is not alternative but provocative and additive.

Surely, we need schools to continue to do those things they already do so well. But schools might also be places where students—as requested by the participants in this study—find interaction, challenge, and new and enjoyable experiences. The point I aim to emphasize is that one must not necessarily be at the expense of the other, and that schools may seek a multiplicity of purposes simultaneously. Honoring a diversity of educational purposes encourages an interrogation of what we deem to be educationally worthwhile. Surely, an inquiry of educational virtue would find numerous ends reflective
of our unique and varied histories and philosophies of education. However, when we take into consideration the conception of living education, and the participant perceptions of schooling in this study, we find that one such purpose may be to consider education as a lived encounter.

I reiterate that education is two things: idea and practice. Accordingly, we need not let our history of education dictate our view of what it might become. Indeed if our aim is to improve education, it is puzzling that we attest to do so through tired rationales and tweaking the practices of old (Mager, 1962; Popham, 1972). Though this tendency to let our history define our present, and the robust (Eisner, 1992) nature of the educational institution weighs heavy over discourse of educational virtue, it need not have the “final” word.

Questions of Education

In this section I have drawn inference and exercised a degree of artistic freedom in illustrating the significance of the AE experience for schooling. To review, I contextualized this discussion within the current state of school experience, supported with the perspectives of participants in this study. I then revisited aspects of the AE experience with an eye toward the educational virtues they may exemplify. Though I demonstrated the educational value of the qualities of the AE experience, I ultimately present the educational experience as one of tension or rhythm. I am provocative in applying this understanding of educational experience to our current paradigms of education in America, which may inspire a reconsideration of what we deem educationally virtuous.
This line of discussion, more than proffer answers to questions, is noteworthy for the questions it raises of education. I present these questions not merely in the interest of subversion, but in the hopes that their inquiry might serve as a productive enterprise. As Whitehead (1929) reminds us, “education is a difficult problem, to be solved by no one simple formula” (p. 36). In accord, this is not a call to answer these questions, but to have the courage to ask them, and not to shy away from the practice of education in their consideration. The questions I wish to entertain, in light of this creative discussion of educational significance, are as follows:

1. Do the lived experiences of students in school hold intrinsic worth?
2. How do our contemporary purposes of education influence the school experience?
3. What qualities might we seek to cultivate in current educational experiences?
4. How might we ensure that the school experience possesses educational virtue?

It takes effort to abstain from the comfort of tradition, and bravery to question the rationales that have historically supported our practices of schooling. Though challenging educational paradigms is an intimidating task, one thing we may state with relative confidence is that without a willingness to ask these questions, it is likely they will continue to be answered for us.

**SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE INQUIRY IN ADVENTURE EDUCATION**

Much of the research that explains the adventure education experience focuses exclusively on the outcomes of these experiences, and presents the experiential process of adventure as a means to ends. Other research that addresses the process of the adventure education experience focuses on isolated and elusive moments of peak adventure or flow. These models of experience (Mortlock, 1984; Priest & Martin, 1985), while helpful and
predominantly accepted by the field (Boniface, 2000; Nichols, 2000a; Jones, Hollenhorst, & Perna, 2003), are often theoretical and seldom trace an evidentiary path to participant experiences.

This is not to say that this research to date is inappropriate or inaccurate. However, these conceptual explanations of the adventure experience, and documentation of the outcomes of experience may be at the expense of understanding the participant perspectives of these experiences as they unfold in practice. Consequently, there is much more happening in AE than our theory at present explains—as Roberts (2008) offered: “we must reject monolithic and taken-for-granted constructions of experience and experiential theory and see things as much more complex and contested than they have been heretofore” (p. 32). Much as Schwab (1978) critiqued the curriculum field for its “inveterate, unexamined, and mistaken reliance on theory” (p. 287), we may similarly critique discourse of adventure education. As such, it is my contention that we may better understand the educational value of these experiences if we are willing to look beyond the theoretically beaten path and partake in a degree of empirical bushwhacking.

In summary, in AE research, we have championed two disparate veins of scholarship, and rare is the study that connects the two. To one side, there exists a plethora of research that documents the outcomes of the experience. To the other side, there exist theoretical rationales for the AE experience based on varying degrees of conceptual abstraction. As a result, we have allowed our attempts to explain adventure education to precede qualitative explorations of AE as participants actually experience it. In light of these critiques, the basic recommendation for “more” is not necessarily appropriate. What is needed is research that works to bridge the two perspectives of the
AE experience, in order to develop theories based on experience. As such, we may look to the experiences of participants as fertile soil for the seed of theory.

**IN CLOSING**

This final segment serves to close the work, though I do not intend to present such an ending as conclusive. To the contrary, it is my contention that this study is indicative of new beginnings, both for adventure and education. To answer questions of adventure education or education definitively would preclude overlooking the idiosyncrasy of human experience and the dynamic eclectic that is contemporary educational practice. As such, the findings herein are presented as valid only as far as they may be perceived or applied in fields of education and adventure education respectively; it is “a guide, not a guarantee” (Eisner, 1998, p. 105).

This study is one of asking fundamental questions and articulating provoking connections (West, 1989). I have described, illustrated, and discussed the adventure education experience with an eye toward happenings, meanings, culture, and educational virtue. Through bringing the voices and experiences of adventure education participants to the pages of this study, I have provided both vicarious participation and provocative illustrations of the AE experience. Through these illustrations I proffer convincing suggestions and raise issues for adventure education, and schooling respectively.

I draw this study to a close with some trepidation, as we end this inquiry much where we began: with the adventure education experience on the margins of educational discourse, and the experiences of students in schools further reduced to prefigured performances of knowledge under the exclusive educational aim of preparation. From this juncture, with new perspectives of the adventure education experience in mind,
Eisner (1998c) provides a fitting conclusive recommendation: “The agenda before us is as broad as it is challenging, as promising as it is complex. There is much to be done. The practical task is to get on with it” (p. 76).

**EPILOGUE**

I conclude with a return to experience. Not an experience from participants in this study, but a personal journal entry that recounts an early adventure of my youth. If we look closely, we may catch glimpses of the qualities discussed in the preceding pages. And if we listen carefully, we may hear the first whispers of this study.

Dear Diary,
This morning I got up had Oatmeal for breakfast. After breakfast Jake [my brother] and I went fishing and caught tons of perch. We went 2½ ml hike to sumet peek, Boy was it high. We crossed a swamp that had a board going all the way through that you walk on. And there was another big bridge that was more than one board thick. Then we had lunch at the peek. On the way back I carried a big pack, that had our lunch in it. From there and back it was a total of 5 ml. Jake and I went fishing while Dad and [uncle] John took a nap. We went out on the boat. When Dad awoke, Jake Dad and I went on a boat ride. Ate supper, made fire went to bed. (July 17, 1991)
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Note: All online references were current as of May 15, 2013.


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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Interview Protocols

Original Interview Protocol

The purpose of this study is to better understand the adventure education (AE) experience. I am really interested in understanding what people like you think of these experiences. I would really appreciate it if you give me your honest opinions because I want to hear what is true to you, not what you think I want to hear. I am here to listen to what you think.

Personal Context
The first couple of questions will help me understand your history with Adventure Education.
1. If you are comfortable sharing this information, please state your race, gender, and age.
2. Please describe your history with adventure education.
3. How did you come to participate in this AE experience?
4. What motivates you to partake in adventure activities? Or, Why do you do this?

Culture Questions
5. Describe the behaviors and actions within adventure education as you see them.
6. Describe your interactions with these adventure education people. Was talking with others and hanging out in this setting easy or difficult for you? Why?
7. Did any of these experiences make you notice or think about yourself in different ways (such as your race, gender, religion, or something else)? If so, in what ways?
8. Have your experiences with Adventure Education caused you to notice anything or think about your personal background? What have you noticed? What caused you to notice this? Is this important to you? Why/Why not?

Details of the Experience
Now I have a few questions about the details of these experiences.
9. Describe a memorable experience you have had with adventure education.
10. When you think about your experiences as an adventurer, what types of emotions or ideas come to mind? Why?
11. People discussing experiences like these have noted things like Connections, Risk-taking, Imagination, Sensual awareness (like what you feel, hear, see, taste, etc.), Perceptivity, and Active engagement. [Show piece of paper with these written down] Do any of these have particular meaning for you? Please explain.
12. Some people have identified a few key elements of the adventure experience. These include Risk, Uncertainty, Challenge, Competence, Wilderness and Camaraderie. Do any of these things resonate with you? If so, in what ways, if not, why not?
Meaning
My next set of questions focuses on what the AE experience means to you.
When we talked about your personal background, you said... Your past experiences with
adventure seem to have been... When we discussed important aspects of the AE
experience, you said...
13. Have these experiences changed how you see yourself or have they taught you
   anything about yourself? How and why?
14. Do you think these experiences relate to your life (past and future)? If so how? If not,
   why not?
15. Do you consider these experiences significant to you? Are they meaningful? Why
   (not)?
16. What do your adventure education experiences mean to you?

Conclusions
Let’s review our interview by revisiting what we have covered to ensure I didn’t miss
anything. If you think I missed something important, or want to add anything, please
jump in!
17. We began by discussing your experiences with adventure. Some of the things I heard
   you say include....
18. We then discussed some of the themes of adventure education, including Risk,
   Uncertainty, Challenge, Togetherness, Imagination, Connectivity, Sensual awareness,
   and others. Some of the things I heard you say include...
19. Finally, we discussed your personal background and your understandings of self in
   the AE environment. Some of the things I heard you say include...
20. Is there anything else you would like to add before we end the interview?

Amended Interview Protocol

Background
1. If you are comfortable sharing, what is your race, gender and age?
2. Describe your past with adventure education.
3. Why do you do adventure education?
4. Do you think you are an adventurer?
   a. Did you think you were an adventurer at the beginning of this trip?
   b. What makes a person an adventurer?

Culture
5. Do people act the same or differently here as they do at your home or when you are
   with friends?
6. Was talking with others and hanging out here easy or hard for you? Why?
7. What do you think of the rules for being in the wilderness?
8. Do you feel like you can be yourself up here?
9. Did any of your experiences here make you notice something about yourself, like
   your race, gender, religion or something else?
10. Do you think these experiences are for all kids or just some kids?
Details of Experience
11. What makes something an adventure?
12. Describe what it was like to go climbing or rafting on this trip.
13. When you think about your experiences with adventure education, what types of emotions or ideas do you think of?

Following Hunches
14. Do you enjoy these activities? What makes them (not) enjoyable?
15. What does it feel like to be with this group after a long day of activities? (afterglow)
16. Do you like to be challenged? -- What makes something a challenge? What makes something an enjoyable challenge?
17. Is it different when you are challenged here and challenged in school?
18. What do you think about doing things you have never done before?
19. What do you think about surprises along the way?

Meaning
20. Have these experiences changed how you see yourself, or have they taught you anything about yourself?
21. Do you think these experiences connect with your life back at home, with friends, or in school?
22. Do you consider these experiences important (or meaningful) to you?
23. What does the adventure education experience mean to you?
24. If you could tell other kids who don’t get to do things like this something about this experience, what would you want to tell them?

Educational Implications
25. Describe your experiences in school.
26. Are your experiences in school important or meaningful to you?
27. What does your experience with school mean to you?
28. How do your experiences with adventure education compare to your experiences with school?
29. Do you think schools can learn something from adventure education?
30. If you could tell your principal or teacher something about your experience here, what would you want them to know?

Closing
31. Is there anything you would like to add before we end the interview?

Instructor Interview Protocol
1. Please describe your history with adventure education.
2. What are your intentions as an adventure educator?
3. What things do you do to make your intentions happen?
APPENDIX B: Preliminary Codes of the AE Experience

1. Accomplishment
2. Aesthetic confusion
3. Aesthetic stimulation
4. Afterglow
5. Autonomy
6. Awe of nature and environment
7. Camaraderie
8. Celebration
9. Challenge
10. Challenge is a good thing
11. Competition
12. Delight; Enjoyment
13. Emotions
14. Engagement
15. Escape
16. Excitement
17. Exploration
18. Family
19. Fear
20. Feel free
21. Freedom within an activity
22. Fully alive
23. Fun
24. “Good experiences” in the piggy bank “I’ll always remember this”
25. Growing together as a group
26. Growth through challenge
27. Happiness
28. Holistic engagement (physical and mental)
29. Laughter
30. Learning about self
31. Memories—and memory-worthy events (people taking photos)
32. Movement and physical activity; Physical engagement
33. Nervousness
34. New
35. New Activities
36. New Experiences
37. New Places
38. Newness as a challenge
39. Newness as exciting, engaging, uncertain and delightful
40. Physical/Mental challenge
41. Positive support for others
42. Positivity; Positive experiences
43. Pride
44. Relief from technology
45. Safety/Danger tension
46. Satisfaction at having completed
47. Self-efficacy (perceived ability) through challenge
48. Sensuous manipulation
49. Shared experience “feeling the same stuff”
50. Silence during an activity
51. Suffering and tiredness
52. Suffering as a means to ends (“good for you”; Fun when done)
53. Supportive environment for others
54. Stressful situations
55. Trying new things
56. “Thinking together”
57. Uncertainty—Sense of mystery;
58. Uncertainty is fun
59. Unstructured time
60. Unexpected along the trail; Surprises
APPENDIX C: Shavano Expeditions Route Map

(National Geographic, 2013)