

**The Qualitative Impact of Adventure Based Counseling on  
Sixth Grade General Education Students**

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## Abstract

General education, middle school students' experience and outcomes related to their participation in adventure based counseling (ABC) were investigated through the use of qualitative research case study design. Research questions examine what students expect, experience, and perceive as the impact of an adventure based intervention. Analysis of interviews, researcher observations, field notes, and journaling provide key insights into ABC programming. Students' expectations were such that they expected to have fun, but were fearful, yet confident. An examination of their immediate reactions to the intervention revealed that the students experienced physical challenge and success, social challenge and success, emotional challenge and success, as well as cognitive challenge and success. A key finding from an interview session with students completed well after the activities took place revealed that students believed that the intervention had a positive impact socially for themselves as well as their classmates. These insights into ABC provide facilitators, school counselors, teachers, and administrators valuable information on the constructs through which participant growth occurs and recommendations for planning and facilitating such programming.

Keywords: adventure based counseling, ropes course, adolescent self-concept

## **The Qualitative Impact of Adventure Based Counseling on Sixth Grade General Education Students**

Adventure based counseling (ABC) interventions are group-oriented programs that help participants learn to share responsibility, develop cooperative problem-solving skills, and increase self-confidence (Glass & Myers, 2001). Fletcher and Hinkle (2002) describe ABC as a mixture of experiential learning, outdoor education, intrapersonal exploration, and group counseling. They point out that ABC programming enjoys a rich and continuing history supporting children and adolescents.

A review of twenty-five years of research and practice points to ABC as an effective intervention with groups of young people or students, depending upon the group origination. Researchers continue to note the need for more empirical research on the effectiveness of ABC (Carns, Carns, & Holland, 2001), but an increasingly strong research base now exists which examines the impact of adventure-based experiences on groups of youth. ABC interventions have been used in many settings ranging from residential treatment facilities and juvenile detention centers, to summer camps and the public school systems. ABC has flourished in these venues as counseling professionals help youth, youth-at-risk, and their families deal with behavioral, psychological, sociological, economic, cultural, academic, and family problems (Moote & Wodarski, 1997). For these reasons, student populations continue to dominate both the use of adventure-based programming and research done in the field.

### **Existing Research**

Researchers have recognized the many weaknesses regarding research in the field of adventure-based programming. Research in the field is characterized by quasi-

experimental design (Hill, 2007). Quantitative research in the field has long been characterized by in-house evaluations, use of nonequivalent control groups, lack of randomization, and inadequate follow-up (Gillis, 1992). Moote and Wodarski (1997) posed similar concerns in their review of the literature, noting that many of the existing research studies were found lacking in their research design. While some of the instrumentation utilized does lack reliability and validity, a solid base of research does exist (particularly in studies published in peer-reviewed journals) that utilizes high quality instrumentation to measure salient constructs (McGarvey, 2004). Researchers (Neill, 2003; Tucker & Rheingold, 2010) consistently point to specific limitations such as nonequivalent control groups, nonexistent control groups, insufficient, and unclear sample size as just a few research design concerns that characterize research in the field of ABC programming. While somewhat limited in regards to research design, such research, coupled with rich testimonial and anecdotal evidence, provides facilitators, researchers, and potential participants with a better understanding of the potential benefits for those engaging of ABC programming.

Additionally, the literature base detailing ABC with students seems to utilize mostly at-risk adolescent populations (Combs, 2001; Russell, 2008). Research has frequently examined the use of ABC with at-risk youth to enhance self-concept and interpersonal skills (Combs, 2001; Faubel, 1998). Certainly, the high-risk nature inherent in this population provide a solid rationale for continuing to explore the efficacy of this and other interventions aimed at providing needed support. Such research does well to examine outcomes relevant to this highly visible and critical student population. This research, however, does little to support the use of ABC programming by general

population students and a variety of other school groups (Glass & Shoffner, 2001). If ABC is being used by schools in support of general student populations, it is essential that researchers take up the task of exploring the nature of this programming (Horak, 2003; Goldenberg, McAvoy, & Klenosky, 2005; Glass & Shoffner, 2001). Given school counselor's emphasis on nurturing growth of all students in their schools, the answers to the following questions are of particular importance to professional school counselors and the school counseling profession.

### **Research Questions**

A review of the literature and limitations of the existing research reveals several key issues addressed in this study. To better understand general education student-participants' perspectives on ABC programming, the research questions were as follows:

- What do students anticipate or expect from participation in an adventure-based program?
- What are students' perceptions of the experience of an adventure based intervention?
- What do students perceive as the impact of an adventure based intervention?

As a qualitative study, the construction of research questions also relies on the concept of *emergent design*, which emphasizes the importance of flexibility within the study design.

### **Methodology**

This section serves to examine the qualitative methodology that was utilized to construct and analyze this case study. A justification for a case study approach is presented first and followed by sampling method and data collection procedures. An

autobiographical section is then presented. Finally, a description of the data analysis procedures, validation and verification methods is reviewed. Exploration and rationale for the use of case study design is examined first.

### **Case Study Design**

Case study methodology is an approach that focuses on a particular phenomenon, provides rich descriptions, and offers new understandings (Merriam, 1998). Donmoyer (2000) contends that the rich, descriptive, case study approach provides an important means for addressing the complexity of applications in counseling, social work, and education. This provides powerful support for the use of case study design to investigate general education, sixth-grade students' experiences.

This case-study is grounded in the phenomenological tradition, where priority is given to the lived experience and the production of in-depth descriptions of those experiences (Creswell, 1998; Holstein & Gubrium, 1998). This study is *primarily* concerned with exploring the nature of the students' experiences participating in the adventure-based program. The primary purpose is theory generation through the identification of themes, which involves drawing connections from the ground up rather than searching for data to prove or disprove a hypothesis as in the positivist quantitative tradition (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). The methodology used draws upon a constructivist-interpretivist framework (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). Such a framework acknowledges that meaning or understanding is developed through the analysis of participants' experiences in social contexts base in the rich descriptions of such experiences. For this study, the researcher focused on an issue or concern and then selected one bounded case to demonstrate this phenomenon (Stake, 1995). This

single instrumental case study focused on the case itself, which Stake (1995) details as a particularly effective approach for evaluating a program or understudied phenomenon.

This study sought to examine an existing group of middle school, general population students participating in an ABC intervention. The cases were also bound by time (one or two day program one time per school year), by space (high and low ropes course), and by season (fall/beginning of the school year) so that interviews could be conducted both before and after the program. Through contact with schools and ABC provider facilities in Pennsylvania, several schools and their corresponding providers were identified as potential cases. From there, school administrators were contacted for more information on their program and to ascertain their interest in cooperating on this research project.

**Case selection.** A meeting with the administrator and three sixth-grade teachers at a rural, north-central Pennsylvania, K-6 elementary school revealed a group of teachers and administrators who were particularly interested in finding out more about their students' experiences at the ropes course program. Their two-day program, in existence for many years, had been funded by the state through a program designed for drug prevention. This funding had been discontinued, however, several years earlier. The teachers and school principal, however, having witnessed the positive impact of the experience on their students many times over, continued to request and receive over \$3,000.00 per year to pay for the program for their students from their district school board. The teachers' and principal's observations and anecdotal evidence persuaded the school board to fund the increasingly expensive program despite the absence of strong evidence providing verification for the positive impact of the program.

The school and administrators of this small (350 students) K-6 elementary school were interested in securing some additional evidence regarding the benefits of the program their students were receiving and eagerly agreed to participate in the study. The school fit all the criteria for the bounded system and, with common goals and in a spirit of cooperation, the process of recruiting students participants began.

### **Sampling**

All sixth-grade students were recruited for the study via an informational meeting with the primary researcher and teachers in a private room. Students were provided information about the research study, given an opportunity to ask questions, and were each issued a parental informed consent form to take home and bring back to school the next day if they were interested in participating in the study.

Students who returned the signed parental informed consent form constituted the pool of potential participants. Out of fifty-four sixth graders, twenty-four returned parental informed consent form. This pool of participants was then narrowed to eight with regard to maximum variation sampling (Creswell, 2007). The initial goal for this study was to interview approximately five to eight student participants. Eight students, the higher end of this range, were selected from this initial pool to account for potential absences from either school or the program. These numbers are consistent with recommendations of Polkinghorne (1989), and Patton (2002) for similar studies.

The teachers helped to select a diverse group from the pool on the following factors: gender, physical ability, cognitive ability, and social ability. All of the potential participants were Caucasian. The only student in the class with a visible physical



disability had already decided not to attend the ropes course program prior to the first recruitment meeting.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

**Interviews.** A series of three interviews were conducted with eight of the student participants in this study. These in-depth interviews with program participants took place one week before, immediately after (the day after the students returned to school), and then one week later. Interviews with students were semi-structured, open-ended, fifteen to thirty minute sessions in which interview notes were taken, in addition to the audio-taping of interviews with eventual transcription as recommended by Seidman (1991) and Yin (2003). Parental informed consent and student verbal assent was obtained from all informants prior to interviews and audio-taping. Full names were not utilized during audio-taped interviews to conceal the identity of participants.

Sixth-grade teachers identified and secured a quiet, private room adjoining the library for the recruitment session, all three interview days, and the member-checking session. The room offered the kind of comfort, security, and privacy recommended by Wolcott (1990).

Seidman's (1991) three-interview series approach provides a model of in-depth phenomenological interviewing which involves conducting a series of three separate interviews with each participant. The first interview with students sought to accomplish two main goals. The first goal was to explore the students' expectations regarding their participation in the ropes course program. Questions that were asked to explore these students expectations included "Have you ever been to a ropes course before?" and "What do you think that it is going to be like?" The second, yet equally as important goal

for this session, was to establish rapport with each student participant in order to lay a foundation for the next two interviews sessions.

The students arrived at the school at 7:30 AM on a Tuesday morning and loaded buses to travel the 45 minutes to the location of the ropes course. The ropes course was located at a kids' summer camp in a rural part of north-central Pennsylvania. The students' teachers accompanied them on this trip along with several support service teachers (school counselor, vice-principal, etc.). Upon arrival, the students were separated into two groups. Group A would spend the day completing low-ropes course challenges, while Group B headed to the high ropes elements. This would be the pattern for Wednesday as well, with Group A spending the day at the high ropes elements and Group B transitioning to the low-ropes challenges. I spent time with each group each day, making notes regarding my observations in a journal.

The second interview with students took place in the early morning the day after students returned to school (Thursday) from their two school-day field trip to the ropes course. The primary purpose of this second interview was to explore students' perceptions of their ropes course experience. During this interview, each participant was prompted to identify five words that described their experience. The researcher and each student then engaged in a discussion exploring the student's experiences at the ropes course that led to their selection of each word. Prior to the second and third interviews, customized research questions were generated in response to information from previous interview sessions as well as from researcher observations of the students' participation at the ropes course itself.

One week after the second interview, the third and final interviews were held, again in the early morning. The primary purpose of this interview was to explore each student's perception of the impact of the ropes course intervention on themselves, their peers, teachers, their class, and/or their school. Students were asked how things were different than before going on the ropes course trip and/or what they had learned by going on the trip.

### **Role of the Researcher**

**Observations and journaling.** Field notes were gathered by researcher observations of the adventure based facility, the students' school, and observations of program participants engaging in the intervention as recommended by qualitative researchers (Trochim & Donnelly, 2007; Marshall & Rossman, 1980). Throughout the process that began with my initial meeting with the sixth-grade teachers, I kept a journal of personal perceptions and observations of the process. This journal, reflecting my thoughts and perceptions was analyzed, compared, and contrasted with transcriptions from program informants.

Observations provided an opportunity to provide rich, detailed descriptions of the facility, participants, and experiences. Additionally, observations helped to guide the specific interview questions with particular students and also with the cohort of eight student participants. This step in data collection also provided an opportunity to self-reflect on how my prior experiences, thoughts, and impressions of ABC could potentially impact the study.

**Reflexivity.** Researchers (Creswell, 2007; Seidman, 1991) recommend that qualitative researchers bracket their preconceptions so as not to inject hypotheses,

questions, or personal experiences into the study by providing an autobiographical foundation to their work. With this in mind, it was necessary from the very start of the study for me to set aside my many years of experiences facilitating and observing adventure based programming. My preconceived notions of this programming as beneficial and helpful to program participants had the potential to create a barrier to my seeing and hearing about the lived experience of program participants accurately. My bias, if left unchecked, could also emerge and influence the manner in which data was collected from program participants as well as how the data was analyzed.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

The next step in the process involved systematically examining and rearranging the interview transcripts, field notes, and other materials to increase understanding of them as recommended by Bogan and Biklen (1982). This analysis involved working with data by organization, breaking them into manageable units, synthesizing, searching for patterns, discovering what is important (in answering the research questions), and what was to be learned.

**Emergent design.** To explore valuable aspects of ABC, this study was designed so that objective impressions from both the observation and interviewing of participants could guide the nature of questions and observations throughout the data collection and data analysis in a process known as emergent design (Davis, 1995). This allowed for an opportunity to follow-up on observations of the students at the ropes course in subsequent interviews. Data analysis procedures necessitated a series of *steps* to make certain that the experiences of the participants were reflected accurately. That process began with open coding.

**Open coding.** Open coding was utilized by reducing the text by reading it and marking with brackets those passages that stood out as interesting as recommended by Strauss and Corbin (1990). It was during this initial coding that I wondered *what statements or phrases seem particularly essential or revealing about the nature of the impact of the adventure-based program on the participants?* This is a common coding procedure recommended by Van Manene (1990). The raw data obtained from breaking the data down into manageable chunks was then coded to establish an *audit trail* as recommended by Hoepfl (1997).

**Axial coding.** The chunked codes that resulted from the open coding procedure were then examined to determine how they were linked in the process of axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). It is during this phase that specific themes emerged that provided the material for the building of a conceptual model of the intervention. One example of a theme that emerged in this study as one example was *social challenge and success*. Chunked categories, or codes, that were grouped in this theme included *teamwork, peer trust, and peer support*.

**Extracting themes.** Extracting themes served as the final, interpretive phase of data analysis in this study. Themes that were identified in axial coding were integrated to construct a conceptual model for understanding students' ABC experience. This conceptual model is presented and explored in the upcoming results and discussion sections.

## **Trustworthiness**

**Triangulation.** Trustworthiness was established, in this study, through triangulation as recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Triangulation was secured

by comparing the three interviews with individual informants. The process of comparing and contrasting participants' interviews revealed consistency over time when comparing and contrasting individual participants' thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Comparing and contrasting students' experiences against one another provided an additional layer of trustworthiness as participants talked about similar experiences and similar reactions. Triangulation was also achieved by comparing and contrasting student responses with my own observations in the field.

**Member checking.** A member check (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was conducted with each of the participating students four weeks following the intervention. At these final meetings with the individual students, verbal descriptions and summaries of the thematic findings from transcripts were provided to participants. The participants were then asked questions such as: *What about that doesn't seem right?* and *How does that sound?* Students responded unanimously to affirm each of the summaries with comments such as: "Yeah, that's it.", "That sounds good.", and "Perfect." Trustworthiness was solidly established as a result of member checking.

**Multiple coders.** The researcher(s) bias and life experience invariably influence the findings of any qualitative study. This particular case study which set out to explore the impact of adventure based programming on program participants has undoubtedly been influenced by the research that I have on ABC and the thoughts and feelings that I have gained through life experience. Utilizing multiple coders, however, provides some assurance that I was able to approach this research project with an open mind to the students' unique experiences.

In the analysis of the interview transcripts, two other coders voluntarily coded several of the transcripts. Both coders were Ph.D. students in counselor education who had received training (doctoral level course) in qualitative methodology. Their coded transcripts were then compared and contrasted with the primary researcher's work to look for discrepancies. Any differences and/or discrepancies were then discussed between the coders and consensus was reached on the final coding. While much of the coding overlapped so as to provide an additional layer of trustworthiness to the analysis, one particular aspect stood out as unexpected. In a discussion with one of the volunteer coders, an overarching and embedded theme of *success* and *enhanced self-concept* was identified. As a researcher well-versed in the literature base, the natural inclination should have been for me to immediately pick out this theme (self-concept) in my analysis that cuts through and across the vast majority of research in ABC. However, only collaboration with an alternate coder helped to illuminate the presence of this theme for me. I consider this as further evidence that I entered into this data collection and analysis with an open mind and held my own presuppositions in check throughout the process.

## Results

Each of the study's three main research questions were addressed by examining the themes that emerged from the data analysis. Because the study participant is the expert in a phenomenological case study (Creswell, 2007), direct excerpts from the interview transcriptions with the eight student participants were used to illustrate each of the themes that emerged. Saturation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was noticeable after the analysis of approximately five complete interview transcripts when no new or surprising

information emerged in interviews as stories told and examples given had been described previously by another informant. Additionally, the interview structure seemed to be successful in both helping students better understand their experiences as Seidman (1991) suggests, in addition to helping me to better understand their lived experiences.

Students' names have been changed to Mike, Sandy, Tanner, Mandy, Kristy, Justin, Maggie, and Mary throughout this chapter to protect their anonymity and also to provide gender accurate context for the reader. In the process of reporting findings, quotes and concrete examples are provided to support the emergence of relevant themes. These quotes and concrete examples also serve to enhance the level of trustworthiness of the study as the reader is able to read and interpret the participants' words for his or herself. Researcher observation and journaling is utilized to complement participants' verbal responses. An additional analysis serves to provide additional key insight into distinct differences between the high and low ropes experiences.

### **What Do Students Anticipate or Expect from Participation in an Adventure-Based Program?**

Only one of the eight students interviewed had participated in any type of high or low ropes course prior to this two school-day intervention. Half of the participants, however, had siblings or close friends who had prior experience with ropes course participation. Student expectations, then, seemed to be formulated by word of mouth from friends, relatives, and teachers whose descriptions set the stage for emotional and



cognitive anticipation and expectation. An analysis of the narratives yields two key themes that emerged. Those three themes are: (a) fun, (b) fear, and (c) confidence.

**Fun and Fear.** In almost every case, the student's consistent expectation of *fun* or enjoyment was tempered with worry and/or anxiety. This second theme of *fear* emerged during axial coding with initial chunking revealing open codes such as *doubt*, *fear*, *heights*, *scared*, *worry*, and *questioning to diminish fear and anxiety*. The following excerpt from the first interview with Mandy serves as an example for the *fear* theme.

Mandy stated:

"I'm afraid of heights, but like, I can't go on a Ferris wheel because it moves back and forth, but I think, there's a zip line right? How high does the highest zip line go?"

**Confidence.** In each case, the students' fear of heights seemed to be assuaged by anticipation that they would be safe at the ropes course. This overarching optimism and seemed to provide even the most fearful students with a strong sense of security and confidence. Each student was optimistic that they would have an enjoyable, safe experience, mostly despite the fears and/or anxiety that they were experiencing. Justin stated:

"I know I'm going to be safe on the harness and stuff, so I know I'll do it. I'm not going to get scared, because I know I'm not going to fall."

A week after the first interview which explored students' expectations, the sixth grade went on their field trip. The next section details researcher observations of the ABC program.

## What are Students' Perceptions of the Experience of an Adventure-Based Intervention?

An analysis of the transcripts from this interview yielded the four themes of physical challenge, emotional challenge, cognitive challenge, and social challenge. A prevailing theme of success was intertwined throughout each of these four themes. A presentation of the four themes with respective transcript excerpts follows.

**Physical challenge and success.** Students detailed the many physical challenges that they experienced over the two day program. Here, as with the other three themes, students talked about the physical challenges. They detailed needing to use their balance and their strength to lift and climb in order to successfully complete the challenges. Nearly all students talked about the physical difficulty of the experiences with an overriding theme of success woven throughout their recollections. A secondary analysis revealed that the physical challenge and success that the students faced was connected to their participation in the high ropes and low ropes challenges fairly equally.

**Cognitive challenge and success.** Most of the students participating in the interviews talked in depth about the mental or cognitive challenges at the ropes course. Once again, the students overwhelmingly detail challenges in which they, often with the help of their peers, were successful in solving the difficult challenges. Interestingly, a secondary analysis revealed that all of the students' responses coded under as cognitive challenge and success were drawn from their recollections of experiences in the low ropes course as opposed to the high ropes challenges.

In this excerpt, a participant talks about the cognitive aspects of the physical challenges at several of the low ropes elements, including the 12-foot wall element. The

combination of challenge and success resulting in enhanced cognitive self-concept and possibly enhanced social self-concept comes through very clearly towards the end of this excerpt as Maggie details her success:

“Over the wall was hard. You had to decide who to go first, and second and then someone else heard it (my idea), and then someone was like, “Shouldn't we do that? And someone said, “Oh, that's what Maggie said.” And then they're like, “Yeah, yeah, let's do that. That's OK.” It felt pretty good when someone recognized that I said it first, (I felt) proud!”

**Emotional challenge and success:** This section details the internal, emotional challenges that the students faced during their time at the ropes course. Again, the overwhelming theme that accompanies their recollections details successfully overcoming their internal emotional challenges, most often fear. Interestingly, the vast majority of emotional challenge and success that the students talked about was in connection to the high ropes course as opposed to the low ropes challenges. Tanner talks about the significant fear that he faced at the high ropes course:

“And then I saw it, and it kind of got me a little more scared. But after I got up there and looked around, it kind of spooked me. And a hint for everybody that's scared of heights, when you're up there, don't look down!”

**Social challenge and success.** The social domain was perhaps the most diverse of all the themes that emerged in the study. Many different codes were grouped into this domain, such as: teamwork, trust, new friends, physical and verbal support, among others. For each and every student, the ABC program seemed to be a strong social experience in one way or another as the following excerpts from the second interview would indicate. A secondary analysis of the social domain finds that the social experiences were fairly evenly spread in response to both the high and low ropes parts of the program. In this second interview with Mike, he first mentions some of the social

difficulties of working together to solve the low ropes challenges and then some of the social rewards of the activities:

“You have to work together as a team on the low ropes courses, and it's kind of hard when everyone's talking, and giving their opinion of things. (I liked) getting to be with your friends all day, doing stuff together, stuff that you couldn't have done at home that you wanted to do. I think everybody made more friends, because everybody was cheering everybody on, saying, Come on, you can do it. Just try your hardest.”

### **What Do Students Perceive as the Impact of an Adventure Based Intervention?**

One month after the ropes course experience, the researcher visited with each of the students once again for a second interview to ask what, if any, impact the two-day, adventure intervention had had on their lives. Students were asked what was different now than before in their lives or in school. The following reviews the nature of their responses.

**Social growth.** Students' responses focused almost solely on improved social relationships. At times, this impact was connected to improved trust and other times connected to improved social skills. It is important to note here that none of the students verbalized on their own, or when asked, that anything had gotten worse due to their participation in the ropes course program. The following excerpts highlight some of the aforementioned social growth, including new friends and improved social relationships that Tanner noticed:

“People I don't normally talk to, I talk to more and, I can talk to them easier. I've actually been able to talk to girls easier. I've talked to more people, some people that I disliked in the past, I've actually come to know them better and they're actually kind of cool to hang out with.”

Mike, like Tanner, talks in the following excerpt about his noticing positive social change in his class as a result of attending the low ropes course:

“Everyone's pretty more comfortable with people, you know, because they can trust them. I think I made more friends. I talk to more people now. I think that trip really showed more character because everybody had to work together, and everyone listened to each other's comments and ideas. I think because everybody got more comfortable, they're more respective (sic) now, because they know what they like and now they can't really make comments about each other because they know what they're like now.”

Justin provides additional support for the positive social growth due the experience. Justin names enhanced trust as a key component to this process. Justin also details changes in how his peers are relating to one another, which reinforces Tanner and Mike's observations:

“I'm a lot more trustworthy with some of the people. With a lot of the people in my class, I learned to trust other people and, like, get to know them before you, like, don't want to be their friends or something because you might actually want to be their friends. You just don't know because you haven't got to know them.”

## Discussion

### The Results and Connections to Previous Research

The research questions and ensuing results of this study are multifaceted. Themes that emerged from the exploration of participants' expectations, experiences, and impacts of ABC have led to a better understanding of the ABC experience.

**Students' expectations.** General education, sixth-grade participants' anticipation and expectations of the program centered upon the themes of fear and confidence. These straightforward results most likely intuitively make sense to anyone familiar with ABC. These findings, however simple, serve to add a new layer of grounded, theoretical understanding of ABC, as participants' expectations of ABC

programming had not been addressed to any great extent in previous research efforts as evidenced by a current review of the literature.

**Students' experiences.** Participants' experience of ABC was characterized by a prevailing theme of challenge and success emerging in four distinct areas, which included physical, cognitive, emotional, and social. This combination of challenge and success might very well indicate that students' experiences served to enhance their self-concept in each of these four areas, which, perhaps by no accident, represent domains of multidimensional self-concept (Marsh, 1990). Previous research has led to an understanding that ABC programming successfully improves participants' global self-concept and/or self-esteem (White, 1998; Combs, 2001). By and large, however, the impact of ABC on the distinct dimensions within these measures of self has not yielded credible results (McGarvey, 2004) or, as most often has been the case, has been neglected.

An additional analysis of students' experiences of ABC revealed differences regarding the two distinctive aspects of the ABC program. The low ropes elements of the ABC program seemed to activate the cognitive challenge and success. For example, Maggie talked about feeling very proud that she was the one who figured out how to get her entire group over the wall. The high ropes challenges, on the other hand, seemed to activate emotional challenge and success. Justin and Mandy, for example, both talked about overcoming their fear of doing the zip line so high above the ground. Students' responses suggest that both low and high ropes sections seemed to activate social as well as physical challenge and success. These distinctions are important for

school counselors, teachers, and administrators to take into account when considering an adventure program and establishing their goals.

**Impacts on students.** Outcomes from this exploration yielded an overriding theme of positive social growth. Tanner, for example, exclaims “We all have more fun together and we don't yell at each as much as we used to. It's kind of exhilarating!” This outcome matches well with previous research that shows ABC as having positive social impacts on program participants (Carlson & Cook, 2007). It is also interesting to note here that the physical, emotional, and cognitive domains that emerged as students detailed the significant aspects of the programming immediately following their participation did not translate into a conscious awareness of growth in each these areas. One possible explanation for this result drawn from observations is that debriefing was limited to the social aspects of the challenges throughout the program.

A lack of debriefing to address physical, cognitive, and emotional domains was noted by the researcher in this case study. This lack of attention may have contributed to students' conscious responses indicating that the experience impacted their social lives, but without a significant physical, cognitive, and/or emotional impact. Whether this discrepancy is indicative of an actual lack of impact in these areas or whether this is indicative of a students' lack of awareness of the impact they actually experienced is a just one of a number of pertinent questions for researchers to explore in future studies. It would be helpful for school counselors, in particular, to emphasize the importance of debriefing these areas when they are key elements of their goals for the intervention.

## **Implications for the field of school counseling and ABC**

The core themes that emerged from the thorough analysis and meticulous synthesis of the interview transcripts could serve as foundational for future explorations of ABC. One of the objectives of this research was that results from the in-depth qualitative research would allow researchers a better understanding of how participant development occurs through ABC. The themes that have emerged here provide a roadmap for understanding the multifaceted nature of the impact of ABC. The emergence of the physical, mental, emotional, and social themes of challenge and success has provided a model for understanding the constructs through which participant development occurs.

These findings have the potential to educate and impact school counselors, school administration, teachers, and as they could, potentially, better understand the benefits of using ABC interventions in support of their students. One key implication for those in education is the need to be intentional when establishing program goals. These goals should then be shared with ropes course facilitators so that processing and debriefing can more intentionally focus on educators' goals and objectives. Additionally, the key insight into the impacts of this dynamic intervention could benefit students and other ABC participants by subsequent improvements on methodology.

## **Strengths of the Study**

Strengths of this study begin with the original aspects of the study design. First, this study examined general population, sixth grade students, which is an understudied population regarding research in the field of ABC. Secondly, the qualitative case-study approach has provided key insights into the dynamic nature of the interaction, allowing



the relevant variables to emerge from practice as opposed to studying variables that are theoretically connected. Furthermore, the use of Seidman's (1991) three interview design approach is unique to research in the field of ABC and has provided opportunities for comparing and contrasting participant responses at different points in time.

The study results are also particularly meaningful due to the fact that the results have been drawn directly from students' direct articulations of their experience. Furthermore, the study examines a pre-existing, naturally occurring program. The researcher's experience, connection to the school, and interpersonal connection to the students promotes *insider status* which has been helpful for collecting information that is both accurate and organic. The results also break new ground by providing insight into students' expectations of participation in ABC.

### **Limitations of the Study**

There are many limitations to this study that need to be taken into account that might potentially impact the transferability of the findings. These limitations include the nature of the research sample, potential researcher bias, and the many questions left unanswered.

**Sample.** This study served to examine the experiences of a group of middle-school, general education students participating in ABC. While the purpose of this study is not to generalize to the larger population, it is hoped that the results of the study might be transferable to other populations as those populations connect and/or identify with some of the characteristics of this sample population. The students in this study were drawn from a rural, small town, K-6 elementary school in north-central

Pennsylvania. The student body was primarily Caucasian, as were each of the study participants, who had no visible physical disabilities, and who were well acquainted with each of their classmates and teachers prior to participation in the experience despite the intervention being held at the very beginning of the school year. This sample population, obviously, leaves much to be desired in regards to its limited diversity and the limited number of potential ABC participants who might identify or connect with this sample.

**Researcher bias.** Great effort was taken to minimize and/or identify the impact that researcher bias had on the study. That said, however, the primary researcher's prior experience, optimism, personality, presence, and involvement with the school and students may have impacted the program and the students' perceptions of their experiences. It should be noted, however, that such impact may not only have served to inflate the impact of the intervention, but was, perhaps, just as likely to impair growth and/or undervalue the program's actual impact.

### **Potential Areas for Future Research with Students**

**Stakeholders' expectations.** While this study breaks new ground in the field by exploring students' expectation of ABC, it is not evident what impact, if any, student expectations have on their experiences and/or the impact of the intervention.

Additionally, school counselors', teachers', and facilitators' expectations remain an unexplored research area and what impact their unique expectations might have on the experience and/or the impact of the intervention could provide additional insight.

**Data on the extent of use and purpose.** This study does well to closely examine one specific ABC program utilized by general education students. Research, however, is needed to explore the extent to which adventure-based programming is

being utilized by general education students, school systems, the objectives of the programming, and the specific student populations utilizing said programming. In addition, an examination on the measurable impact of such programming on student achievement, as well as on student social, emotional, mental, and physical well-being is needed. Future research addressing these questions will lead to a better understanding of the specific student populations utilizing adventure-based programming and the anticipated outcomes of such interventions.

**Multicultural considerations.** This study examines the use of ABC as intervention for a group of primarily white, low SES, sixth-grade students without visible disabilities from rural, small-town Pennsylvania. There remains, however, a scarcity of research exploring the use of adventure-based programming with students from various multicultural identities (Goldenberg et al., 2005). The impact, if any, that student ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, family structure, identity development, religion, sexual preference, etc. have on the benefits of ABC is unknown. It was rather surprising that students' social networks were found to have expanded in this study of a K-6 elementary model where students were very familiar with both teachers and students prior to participation in the ABC program. It would be interesting to find out if sixth grader's experiences are different in different school models, such as 6-8 middle schools. One might hypothesize that the social domain would be impacted differently.

**Measures of self.** There is a scarcity of research that explores the differentiation among the many domains of self-concept (McGarvey, 2004). Results of this study highlight multidimensional self-concept as an area which could hold the key to a better fundamental understanding of the impact of ABC. Additionally, the current collection of

research does little to theoretically differentiate self-concept from self-esteem from self-efficacy for the purposes of study. Connections and/or distinctions are scarce and often utilized, inappropriately, interchangeably. Because so much research in the field focuses on studying these constructs, the field of adventure based programming would benefit by an exploration of the distinct impacts on the various measures of self in addition to the multidimensional nature of each.

**Long-term benefits.** What impact, if any, the intervention has on participants' lives long after the intervention remains, as of yet, unclear. Goldenberg et al. (2005) stress the importance of potential research on how participants' lives are impacted long after the adventure experiences is over. Most of the little research that exists on the long-term impact of adventure based programming seems to suggest little to no positive long-term benefit. A rapidly expanding collection of professionally trained facilitators, adventure programming facilities, and public school utilization of such programming does not seem consistent with the current understanding of adventure based programming as an intervention with a decidedly short-term benefit. Exploration of the long-term impact of participation in ABC for diverse populations is long overdue.

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