


“I love being in the outdoors”: A qualitative descriptive study of outdoor adventure education program components for adolescent wellbeing

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Abstract

Background: This qualitative descriptive study gauged the perceptions of adolescent focus group participants and outdoor adventure education teachers on their preferred program components to improve adolescent wellbeing during a secondary school outdoor adventure education program.

Methods: Five student focus groups ($N = 29$) and four key informant interviews were conducted. Manual clustering of transcripts and template thematic analysis involving the development of a priori codes from interview questions resulted in an initial deductive code frame, followed by an inductive coding process.

Findings: Six themes were developed, namely perceptions of the outdoors, motivators for participation, barriers to participation, staff traits, and ideal program components. The main findings were that self-efficacy, resilience, and individual empowerment opportunities were highly valued. Students also valued autonomy and independence, which presented a challenge for teachers managing the risks of their programs. Social connections and relationships were also held in high regard.

Contribution: Whilst adrenalin-fuelled adventurous activities such as white water canoeing or rock climbing were popular with students and staff, the most valued aspects of outdoor adventure education were the opportunities to develop relationships, build social connections, self-efficacy, resilience, and a sense of individual empowerment. Greater access to this style of education for adolescent students from lower socio-economic areas would be beneficial due to the extant “opportunity gap” for this population.

KEYWORDS

adolescent, engagement, outdoor adventure education, wellbeing

1 | INTRODUCTION

Outdoor adventure education (OAE) programs encompass practical outdoor activities, such as hiking or canoeing, and activities promoting interpersonal and intrapersonal development. This educational medium encourages problem-solving and social connectedness, presenting participants with physical and mental challenges with tangible consequences, often in novel settings (Deane & Harré, 2014; Sibthorp & Morgan, 2011; Whittington & Aspelmeier, 2018). Further, participants are challenged in a manner that appeals to typical risk-taking behaviors common in adolescents, resulting in benefits such as resilience development, personal growth, individual empowerment, and self-efficacy (Cincera et al., 2020; D'Amato & Krasny, 2011; Overholt & Ewert, 2015). These challenges are attributed to the direct experiences during the program. OAE is

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commonly used with adolescents to support and develop physical, emotional, and psychological changes in this age range (Allen & Waterman, 2019).

The impacts of OAE on adolescents may result in several psychological domain benefits, namely wellbeing, self-efficacy, individual empowerment, resilience, and social connectedness (Down et al., 2021; Rose et al., 2018; Williams et al., 2018). “Wellbeing” is defined as the experience of happiness, prosperity, and health exemplified through stable psychological functioning and mental health, high life satisfaction, the ability to develop and maintain mutually beneficial relationships, the ability to manage stress, and a sense of purpose (Patton et al., 2016; White et al., 2019). Self-efficacy refers to an individual's personal beliefs surrounding their abilities to achieve certain task-specific goals (Bandura, 1977). High self-efficacy is exemplified by articulate personal goal-setting, perseverance, confidence, and a belief that personal goals can be achieved (Fang et al., 2021). These characteristics empower individuals to implement strategies to achieve their goals (Sibthorp & Arthur-Banning, 2004; Sibthorp et al., 2015). This self-regulatory process allows individuals to utilize different coping strategies when faced with challenges, resulting in feelings of resilience (a combination of traits that impact the ability to cope with stress, adversity, or challenge) (Whittington & Aspelmeier, 2018) and individual empowerment (the level of influence, control, and choice that individuals exercise over events in their lives) (Acuña Mora et al., 2022; World Health Organization, 2010). Finally, OAE is purported to impact feelings of participant social connectedness, sense of belonging, and group cohesion, which affects wellbeing (Jostad et al., 2015, 2019; van Lange & Columbus, 2021). However, it should be noted that several research limitations have been reported for OAE research, such as issues with sample size, generalizability of findings, the use of validated questionnaires, and the management of confounding variables (Rose et al., 2018; Scrutton & Beames, 2015). To our knowledge, only a small number of studies have explored OAE program components as they relate to wellbeing (e.g., Ewert & McAvoy, 2000; Hattie et al., 1997) and, more specifically, utilizing qualitative methodology (Gargano & Harper, 2022; Russell & Phillips-Miller, 2002; Russell et al., 1999). As such, we aimed to gather evidence via adolescent student and OAE industry expert opinions to guide the development of key components of an OAE program that would impact adolescent wellbeing. Further, we aimed to utilize current best practices in terms of rigour for qualitative research (e.g., Braun & Clarke, 2021a; 2021b) to create a trustworthy and rigorous body of evidence to inform future evidence-based OAE interventions.

2 | MATERIALS AND METHODS

A qualitative descriptive (QD) approach involving deductive and inductive template thematic analysis was implemented in this study for both focus groups and key informant interviews (Colorafi & Evans, 2016; Neergaard et al., 2009). The QD approach allows the researcher to stay “closer to the surface of the data” rather than engaging in their own interpretation of the data, which has the potential to impart researcher biases into the analysis (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 336). Our study gathered data from adolescent focus groups and OAE teachers in their capacity as key informant experts. Recordings and transcriptions were made to accurately retain and report the richness of the information gathered during the focus group stage (Flick, 2014). Finally, to enhance the richness of the data collected, a combination of quotations from both adolescents and teachers is presented (Lambert & Loiselle, 2008).

2.1 | Focus groups

2.1.1 | Participant recruitment

Purposive sampling targeted focus group participants aged 15–16 from five Independent schools in Perth (Western Australia). The purposive sampling technique is a nonprobability sampling approach whereby the participants are selected who have the greatest amount of information and experience about the topic and who are relevant to the research topic or question (Bryman, 2016). Sampling is based on the researcher's knowledge of the target population and the study's purpose (Walter, 2006).

This age group was chosen to reflect the increased potential for reflection from previous experiences in OAE during their school years. We aimed to gather in-depth, high-quality responses from participants and recruit an appropriate sample to do so (Braun & Clarke, 2021c). As such, six schools that conduct OAE programming were invited, of which five agreed to participate. One school was single-gender (female), two schools were single-gender (male), and two were co-educational (mixed-gender) ($N = 29$). The research team contacted a member of the OAE teaching staff from each school to explain the study's aims and objectives and gauge interest in the project, after which permission was sought from the Principal. Once Principal permission was granted, an information sheet and consent form were forwarded electronically to potential participants and their parents. These documents explained the nature and scope of the focus groups, and a signed consent form needed to be returned before participation in the focus group.

2.1.2 | Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with students using various open-ended questions and prompts (Supporting Information Material SA). The interview schedule was developed in consultation with an expert in qualitative research, was based on a review of the literature and formative work by the researchers, and followed the guidelines set out in the literature (Kallio et al., 2016; Morgan, 2019). All focus groups were conducted by the primary researcher with experience conducting focus groups in prior qualitative studies. The researcher endeavoured to create a comfortable atmosphere for participants, with the setting being mutually accessible and convenient (such as a classroom on each school campus) (Morgan, 2019). The same interview schedule and prompts were used for all groups, and a second researcher acted as scribe to record interactions, to take note of interview schedule items that may have been overlooked, if there was a particularly dominant participant opinion that overshadowed other participants, or if all participants had been encouraged and were able to share their experiences. Session durations ranged from 35 to 50 min. Institutional ethics approval was granted for this study by the University of Notre Dame Australia Human Research Ethics Committee (approval number 2020-197F), with all participants providing written consent. The study was conducted as per the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki.

2.1.3 | Data analysis

Template thematic analysis was implemented in this study, involving the development of a priori codes derived from interview questions that led to an initial deductive code frame (Brooks et al., 2015). Following this, an inductive coding process occurred throughout the key informant interviews or focus groups. This method of coding is an acceptable way of initially organizing data, as a priori codes are often derived from a focus group or interview question (Arnold-Reed et al., 2023).

An inductive content analysis approach was used with the data, resulting in data clustered based on their characteristics (Miles et al., 2014). Clustering required code and category generation and recording the frequency of each code or cluster (Adu, 2019; Miles et al., 2014). The benefit of clustering data was summarizing the main themes and a better understanding of how the information was related (Adu, 2019; Braun & Clarke, 2021b). Initially, clustering into themes was done manually to ensure the trustworthiness of data interpretations, after which QSR NVivo Version 12 was utilized to validate the findings (QSR International, 2020). Recordings were de-identified, and individual responses were identified by gender. A codebook was generated as an analytic output (Braun & Clarke, 2006), allowing coding of illustrative quotes that progressed to theme development as a means of maximizing trustworthiness and rigour (Polit & Beck, 2009), as well as representing current best practices in thematic analysis research (Braun & Clarke, 2021a). Topic areas included questions on backgrounds and experience in the outdoors, thoughts on staff traits and characteristics, and what would constitute an ideal outdoor education program to improve wellbeing in the target population (types of activities, duration, the background and gender split of staff, level of supervision).

2.2 | Key informants

2.2.1 | Participant recruitment

Key informants were recruited from existing networks of health practitioners and educators working with adolescents in the OAE industry in Western Australia. Before data collection, the study information sheet and a participation consent form were emailed to key informants. Key informant inclusion criteria required potential participants to have been involved with adolescent OAE for a minimum period of 10 years.

Four OAE teachers agreed to be interviewed as key informants in this study. As with the focus group sessions, we aimed to gather meaningful responses to interview questions bolstered by an appropriate number of people to provide insight into each topic of interest (Braun & Clarke, 2021c). The number of participants was based on the key informants' level of expertise and anticipated longer discussions due to their depth of knowledge and experience, with the interview structure being more pragmatic than the focus groups due to the sampling practicalities and logistical constraints of gathering a group of OAE teachers together for a focus group (Morgan, 2019).

We endeavoured to have an even proportion of key informants based on gender, as we believed there may have been a difference in response trends after analysis (Manderson et al., 2006). As such, we invited five males and five females to participate; one female and three males agreed. The research setting was mutually accessible and convenient, with the researcher endeavouring to create an atmosphere conducive to open discussion (Morgan, 2019).

2.2.2 | Data collection

The same questions were posed for each key informant, with face-to-face sessions ranging between 40 and 60 min. Key informant sessions were guided by a semi-structured interview schedule (Supporting Information Material SB). Topic areas were the same as the focus groups to synthesize themes between the two data points.

2.3 | Trustworthiness and rigour

Methodologies that include criteria to evaluate evidence's credibility, dependability, confirmability, transferability, and authenticity are collectively known as rigour in qualitative research (Liamputtong et al., 2016; Queirós et al., 2017). These criteria are described in Supporting Information Material SC, showing how they apply to our study.

Several measures were taken to minimize bias in this study. Interview schedule questions were piloted with an equivalent population, a senior qualitative methods researcher oversaw the project, and the interviewer and study motivations were disclosed to participants throughout recruitment and data collection. Further, an interview schedule with a consistent scripted introduction, a description of the session's structure, and a confidentiality statement aimed to minimize interviewer bias (Ranney et al., 2015). Finally, reflexivity (the act of deliberately examining how one's beliefs or assumptions may influence the research process) was embedded throughout the different stages of this study as a means to address any researcher biases (Jamieson et al., 2023).

Triangulation involved integrating multiple data sources, methods, and theories to establish trustworthiness in our study (Liamputtong et al., 2016). Implementing a focus group pilot study, focus groups, and key informant interviews ensured triangulation. The QSR NVivo Version 12 program (QSR International, 2020) managed the qualitative data analysis process to aid the confirmability of the manual content analysis process (Jackson & Bazeley, 2019; Maher et al., 2018; Roberts et al., 2019).

3 | RESULTS

At the commencement of each focus group or key informant interview, participants were asked questions about their experience and background in OAE. The average focus group participant experience was 4 years, while most key informants had been teaching for 20 years, with one estimating that they participated in thousands of programs. When asked about the types of programs they had participated in, focus group responses ranged from getting to know people better, hiking, abseiling [rapelling], Aboriginal art, cooking for themselves, high and low ropes courses, caving, horse-riding, sailing, rock climbing, and surfing. Key informants said there had been a combination of programs with an expedition focus and a specific skill focus (such as teaching rock climbing), with a range of land and water-based activities.

The themes developed from the interview process were categorized, and many similarities and differences became apparent between focus group participants (adolescents) and key informants (teaching staff). Data analysis identified six themes relating to OAE program outcomes for adolescent wellbeing: *Perceptions of the outdoors*; *Motivators for participation*; *Barriers to participation*; *Perceptions of novel activities*; *Staff traits*; *Ideal program components for wellbeing*. Select illustrative quotes are detailed in Supporting Information Material SD (with the full illustrative codebook available in Supporting Information Material SE).

3.1 | Theme 1: Perceptions of the outdoors

Participants shared a wide variety of positive perceptions of the outdoors. Stress relief, freedom, and a recalibration of one's thoughts were sub-themes developed by both teachers and students. For students, the ability to spend time in the outdoors was seen as a “*really good release*” (FG1), as a chance to discover, connect with nature, “*explore, and make things in the trees...*” (FG1), and as a way for “*all my problems [to] just get washed away with the water...*” (FG5). Being in the outdoors was also seen as a way to escape from the stressors and routines of school and home life and a way to establish new social connections with people outside of their regular school friends, as “[OAE] *forces you to bond... then you become friends...*” (FG2). Another student commented:

I just like being in nature, it's the freedom, being away from people and away from the classroom. You get to know people better. In class you sit on opposite sides of the room... there is no opposite sides when you are... on camp (FG4).

For teachers, being in the outdoors presents a “*good way to disconnect from common life... [and] experience new places*” (KI3) and to be “*...clearer in my thoughts... my sense of place is heightened as a result of simply being outside*” (KI1). Working outdoors presents a unique challenge: “*you just feel good... it's a different type of challenge than sitting in the office doing admin work... I feel good*” (KI4).

3.2 | Theme 2: Motivators for participation

When asked if certain activities or styles of programming were preferred, the development of three sub-themes occurred: social connection, freedom and independence, and ‘The Experience’. Staff appreciated the use of outdoor programming as a means to develop intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships among their students, with a preference for activities that allowed this to occur, such as “*... going bushwalking... it's a slower way of moving through the bush. They can see the bigger picture, and they can connect with each other*” (KI3). Students valued having some autonomy within a structured program “*like when they let us do something and don't give us many rules... that's pretty fun*” (FG3), and where there is some “*freedom. The ability to not have everything planned out... [and] a bit of free time*” (FG1). Spending time in the natural environment was perceived as freedom: “*fresh air, just like the freeness and I don't know, just the serenity*” (FG2).

‘The Experience’ (the overall feeling that being in an OAE program gave participants) was an integral motivator for OAE participation. Risk, challenge, and a failure to succeed as a learning opportunity created a foundation to build upon for some staff:

... risk taking is really important... like those white knuckle activities... for some students it's different, but... being able to fail and then coming back from that to succeed is important... I think they gain a lot from that (KI4).

Building on this foundation are the inherent challenges in OAE activities, as “*you get all those results out of it, all those character traits that Outdoor Ed is so good at developing*” (KI4). Students tended to agree with this sentiment and appreciated teachers “*letting us make the mistakes... like we burn the food or something, make it like to show that we shouldn't burn food next time*” (FG3) and that “*it works better when like we actually can do it, like not like sitting in a class... when you are actually outside and being shown what to do I feel like it sticks more*” (FG4). Simplicity is also featured as a desired element for program design, exemplified through a teacher's preference for immersion in the rhythms of the natural environment: “*... my preference is definitely with the longer programs so they've got that longer time to really set themselves up... into their rhythm*” (KI4). A journey-based experience was seen as the ideal way to create a student experience:

I like having all of your stuff that you need in your backpack and journeying through a landscape... I like that journey aspect because you get to immerse yourself in that place, and it's just you, your stuff, your group in nature, travelling... (KI2).

This sentiment was echoed by a student who simply “*like[s] to look around forests and stuff like that*” (FG1) and appreciated activities that have “*a bit of adrenaline... then just sitting around the fire at night*” (FG2), followed by “*comfort... a good night's sleep and a good full stomach*” (FG1).

3.3 | Theme 3: Barriers to participation

Three sub-themes developed as barriers to participation: lack of comfort/tolerance for risk and adversity, freedom and independence, and school “value-adding” (where a school may wish to be perceived as offering a multitude of OAE activities in their programming as a means of attracting new students and associated revenue). For students, not being comfortable or having access to the creature comforts of home was daunting, with examples including: “*not showering... setting up tents... waking up early...*” (FG2) and that “[sleeping] *becomes very uncomfortable... so it wasn't a good experience*” (FG3). Adversity also created a barrier for some participants, where “*you've walked all day, like going up huge hills... with your heavy backpack on and it's raining and it's not fun*” (FG4), “*not being on the same page with everybody*” (FG5), and “*we're boarders [at boarding school], so we don't really feel homesick, we're used to it... but day girls who's always with their parents or guardians or whatever [could get homesick]*” (FG2). Key Informant Four commented that for students, being away from home for some time (e.g., “*two weeks on camp*”) can be “*a bit nerve-racking, a bit overwhelming.*”

Staff perceived the main barrier to participation as their respective schools trying to “value-add” to their program offerings. For teachers in the field, this perceived “value adding” results in programs offering an unnecessary plethora of activities. As one teacher explained, “*you're swapping from a hiking pack to a canoe barrel to mountain biking, it's just a lot of change, and then I think that kind of takes away from what we're trying to achieve*” (KI4). The transition from one activity to

the next is not popular with staff, who “*don't like the kind of half-day in and out, here's an activity, now onto the next type of stuff*” (KI1). Further, if a school has invested in permanent infrastructure at a residential OAE center (e.g., a high rope course or rock-climbing tower), teachers feel obligated to use this regardless of whether they deem the activity appropriate for the learning outcomes of the program:

I think it's the wow factor of a high ropes course, and it's a selling point. It always looks great, a kid climbing across a rope, up the trees in the video and people think it's going to be a great experience for kids to do that in their life, that's why they put these things in programs, they're easy to sell... (KI3).

Another teacher summarized this: “*So yeah, often that's where we get pushed because that's what sells, I suppose...*” (KI2).

3.4 | Theme 4: Perceptions of novel activities

Participants were asked about novel OAE activities they had not participated in or facilitated. The resulting sub-themes were accomplishment, desired outcomes of the program design, and repetition/routine/boredom. The sense of accomplishment and pride that comes from attempting a novel activity made students feel:

... excited and nervous at the same time... even getting the opportunity to do something like that [abseiling] is just exciting... taking the opportunity presented to you and you're just happy to go and do it and just try it... you feel really accomplished and proud of yourself once you've done it (FG2).

Novel activities acted as a welcome variety to activities that students had participated in previously, such as “*being able to canoe to a place instead of having to walk like it was nice to do something different*” (FG1). Some students appreciated the practical or tangible element of novel activities, exemplified when this group had “*made ponchos... we all got to keep the ponchos afterwards and everything. An activity that we learn something like that, that's cool, you're making something that's for you that you get to keep*” (FG5).

A teacher elucidated their perspective on novel activities and the importance of group cohesion, support, and positive feedback to try new activities amongst participating students by saying:

... there's so many students that may not want to give something a go... but having that group around them going, yeah, yeah, come on, come on, it will be all good... abseiling is a perfect example, whether that's just walking to the edge and looking over, for them, that's an achievement if they're terrified of heights, so that's something new for them... they've got a sense of accomplishment (KI4).

Another key informant echoed this concept of peer encouragement and students supporting each other to attempt new tasks by stating that:

... for the majority, they are out of their comfort zone and that's where you grow as a person. So I think at first some of them are nervous, scared, excited, overwhelmed, but then afterwards, yeah, most of the time they have that sense of achievement. Yeah, they feel good about themselves. You're boosting that self-confidence and all those good things (KI2).

3.5 | Theme 5: Staff traits

Similar responses were recorded between students and teachers regarding staff traits. Students desired staff that are “*inclusive... fun... funny... you just want to talk to them, like they're your friend kind of thing... relatable... chill... not strict... far from being a teacher in a classroom... not super structured... can have a joke with*” (FG2), and that “*actually took like an interest in what you know, that the students did OK*” (FG1). Further, a staff member should be a person that can “*keep you in guidelines and the structure of the camp... you need someone who can be serious when they need to be serious, and people can be able to respect that person too*” (FG5). Staff thought that it was important to be transparent and open and to have “*integrity and honesty*” (KI1) as “*kids can read BS [bullshit]*” (KI1), and to be able to “*deal with kids with mental health issues and just the conversation with kids about whatever it might be but be able to connect with them on a personal level... personable... good people skills*” (KI3). Conversely, reported deleterious qualities for staff included arrogance: “*they're in the outdoor game to show people how good they are... I can carry a big backpack or watch me kayak with all my stuff on*” (KI3) and “*I don't like*

people who talk about themselves or about the things they've done" (KI2) or being unwilling to change: "I think people who have one way of doing things and aren't willing to change as a hazard" (KI3). Students wanted staff to behave differently than if they were in a classroom setting and have a more approachable manner, lamenting that "when teachers are just there being strict or... their usual teacher selves, it just ruins it in a way" (FG5). Students wanted their teachers to be seen as part of the group rather than in a position of power where "we're all working together and then like you get interrupted by a teacher" (FG4), and where "you get those leaders and instructors who think they're above you and when they give you instructions it's just annoying because... they think they're above you because they're the teacher" (FG5). A lack of student autonomy and flexibility in student leadership was also noted as a negative trait:

... [the teacher] would also just dig into us... I was doing navigation that day...he was like, so how [long do] you reckon it's going to take us? And I just like, I don't know, maybe 3 hours... And he's like, well, the teams got to know exact times mate. I'm like, no they don't, we can just play it by ear (FG5).

3.6 | Theme 6: Ideal program components for wellbeing

The adolescent focus group participants suggested a range of program durations varying from a weekend to an entire year; however, the program consistently offered over that time was "five days," or "leave on Monday, come back like Friday". Conversely, most staff suggested longer durations: "10 days... five days is not long enough because you can just go along with the program until you go home, whereas ten days you've kind of got to commit to it", "for me, two weeks has been really good", and "minimum 14-day program".

The sub-theme 'group composition' prompted thought-provoking comments, namely regarding mutual peer respect: "I didn't know him before, but he's actually really great at this, and then they go back to school, and they have got a different respect for each other" (KI4), and "on camp we all just get along so well with each other and all that, their strengths and weaknesses and stuff" (FG4). Further, the program facilitates new relationships and builds social connections, with one teacher commenting that "they come down quite often, and kids will say it's been really nice to get to know these guys that I've known their name but not known who they are for so long" (KI4), echoed by a student who mused that "we don't all sit together at recess and lunch but when we go on camp we all just become these cute little groups that just get along" (FG2), and another that said that "it's really nice to get to know people who you wouldn't normally" (FG4). Conversely, some students stated that "it's better to know who you're going with" (FG2) and "mates from inside of school" (FG3) would be their preferred choice of people to be placed in a group with, thus establishing the sub-theme of continuity and familiarity in the group composition. Further, one teacher stressed that the ideal group size would be "14-15 kids", though other participants did not mention group size.

A disjunction between students and teachers was noted relating to activities. Student participants enjoyed the thrill that resulted from so-called "adrenaline [activities]" due to their ability to get "a lot of people out of their comfort zone". Examples of activities that students would like to see in their ideal program included "abseiling... mountain biking... rock climbing... water activities... surfing... go to the beach... snorkelling" (FG2), with one student noting that "white water rafting is pretty sick [sic]" (FG1). One staff member shared these sentiments, explaining that physical activities are popular with students but that there are various levels of comfort between individual students:

I think the white knuckle activities are super important... getting that nervousness up and that excitement up... I think you gain a lot out of it because some activities... they might be a bit physically challenging, but you're not really sort of pushing into that next level... one student might be sort of terrified at doing a wet exit [exiting a kayak that is upside down] ... and for another, going down a rapid... freaks them out (KI4).

However, the remaining three teaching staff preferred slower, less risky activities that allowed students to connect, converse, and appreciate the natural environment. One noted that they "really like the journey-based stuff, so a nice canoe journey or bushwalk or spending time in the place and getting to know it" (KI3). Another noted that journeying was "a rite of passage [and] a way to return back to where your community is" (KI2) and that "that's what outdoor education is about rather than jumping off the high ropes tower or doing the adrenaline stuff" (KI3). Another suggestion involved:

... an awesome sea kayak adventure where there was no distance that you had to make in the day, and you could take it easy in the morning, you could go and explore things that the kids want to look at, or you could just sit and talk shit if that's what it's about or you've got to time to fumble your way through I guess and spend time in the environment with other people (KI3).

Some students commented that they also enjoyed these so-called slower activities, as “*hanging out, playing cards or something means everyone's together*” (FG5). Activities such as “*being able to shower in the rain*” (FG2) meant that “*you just are immersed into it [the environment]*” (FG2). Further, these activities encouraged reflection on the experience that was being had, exemplified by comments such as the “*meditation thing*” (FG5), writing “*a letter to your parents to say thank you*” (FG4), or writing in a journal so that “*we get to look back on it and see what we've done*” (FG2).

In common with the theme of motivation for participation, a student commented that “*having some freedoms, flexibility, being responsible for most of the day*” was highly valued. A vignette shared by another student provides a concise summary:

We would be running along the beaches, catching all the crabs. There were crabs on the beach, and we were just like picking them up and looking at them and stuff. And we're like chasing them. That was really, really fun. Everyone was out. It was dark (FG1).

As a means of providing some independence and autonomy within a supervised program, a teacher stated that they would facilitate some quiet travel time or time by themselves (a ‘solo’), where “*they just canoed sort of by themselves... and didn't talk to another boat and we would do solo which some kids love, some kids hate... it's a good experience for them to be with themselves for a while*” (KI3). However, the other teaching staff interviewed reported no other comments regarding student autonomy.

Finally, participants were asked about the composition of the staff that would facilitate this ideal program. Students desired someone that is “*friendly,*” that “*you can have a chat with them while you are walking that isn't related really to the activities*” (FG5), “*you feel safe with them*” (FG2), is “*relatable, and you get along really well with*” (FG3), and is “*fun, and they're chilled, and all that sort of stuff*” (FG4). Teachers would “*prefer to choose an outdoor instructor... that I'm familiar with rather than a teacher from the school*” (KI2). When asked about the gender of potential staff, a teacher commented that “*one of each is important... it's nice to see different gender role models*” (KI4).

4 | DISCUSSION

This QD study involved four key informant teachers and 29 adolescent students across five focus groups, all with varying amounts of experience in OAE, representing a good range of diverse backgrounds to comment on program components that may impact wellbeing. Despite many differences and distinctive characteristics, these backgrounds resulted in shared philosophies and beliefs, leading to the development of six main themes: perceptions of the outdoors, motivators for participation, barriers to participation, staff traits, and ideal program components, resulting in three main discussion points.

4.1 | Self-efficacy, resilience, and individual empowerment

Self-efficacy refers to people's beliefs, as opposed to outside influences, about their competence in achieving certain goals and coping with new situations or tasks (Bandura, 1977, 2001). By engaging in the challenges that OAE programs provide and doing so in a social setting with peer support, individuals are more likely to develop their self-efficacy beliefs positively (Burke et al., 2019; Fang et al., 2021). Students in each focus group commented about the positive impact that receiving words of encouragement and positive feedback from their peers when attempting a novel challenging task had on their sense of individual empowerment, comments that were echoed by staff. Further, this direct positive feedback from peers, combined with positive teacher feedback, increased student self-efficacy by shaping their beliefs in their ability to succeed in the task. This increase is supported by the literature, where due to reciprocal relationships between program participants, if a student completes a given task, they will receive positive peer feedback that boosts their self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977, 2001; Fang et al., 2021).

A tolerance for adversity and a sense of resilience is a means of combatting “*learned helplessness,*” whereby an individual has become conditioned to believe that a negative situation is inescapable or unchangeable (Dweck & Goetz, 2018; Seligman, 1972). Resilience, the ability to manage and recover from challenging life events, is a protective factor against the challenges in the OAE programs that students participate in and is a mechanism to combat this “*learned helplessness*” (Dweck & Goetz, 2018; Fried et al., 2021; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004). This resilience led to individual students in our study feeling empowered to attempt future challenging situations, with pride and a sense of accomplishment being stated as outcome traits after attempting such situations. Opportunities to attempt multiple challenging tasks also lead to improved task-specific empowerment, defined as the process an individual undertakes to achieve proficiency in events of concern (Burke et al., 2019; Rappaport, 1995). Tolerance for adversity is necessary to overcome the challenges within OAE programs that can be facilitated through enhanced resilience, self-efficacy, and a sense of individual empowerment.

4.2 | Student autonomy and independence

Overall, students in our study appreciated feeling a sense of autonomy and independence from staff when participating in their programs. However, this desire for autonomy presented a challenge for staff who are obligated to balance program outcomes and student desires with managing the risks of their programs. At certain times, this risk management required close student supervision, resulting in students feeling almost no autonomy or “freedom” to make their own decisions in some circumstances (Dallat et al., 2015; Leemon & Schimelpfenig, 2019). While students appreciated the need for teachers to manage the risks of their programs and maintain a legal duty of care, students did not appreciate the restricted feeling that this close supervision risk management created. Staff countered this perceived lack of freedom by providing opportunities for students to take on leadership roles and be responsible for certain aspects of their programs (e.g., deciding what time to wake up in the morning, when to take breaks, or where to place their tents once arriving at a campsite). Staff commented that as students progressed through their schooling and had more opportunities to participate in OAE each year, their experience and competencies increased in the OAE setting, resulting in an increased capability in student judgment and a reduced need for such close supervision (Leemon & Schimelpfenig, 2019; Radford et al., 1997). A follow-on effect is that as students are given more opportunities to take responsibility, they consequently develop autonomy and independence. It is surmised that the notion of challenge by choice was a factor for the adolescents in this study, whereby students are free to decide the level of risk, challenge, or fear that they are comfortable with engaging in, as opposed to being forced into certain activities as a consequence of OAE program design (Reed & Smith, 2021). The scaffolding of student autonomy and independence allows them to learn from each other and creates a student-centered learning environment that builds on the previous knowledge gained in earlier years (Gilbertson et al., 2022).

4.3 | Social connectedness and relationship building

Social connectedness and the opportunity to build new or strengthen existing relationships were important motivators for study participants. These motivators are supported by existing literature first established by Priest (1986), who propounded four types of relationships (interpersonal, intrapersonal, ecosystemic, and ekistic) that result from participation in this style of education. Interpersonal relationships (those between people, exemplified through how they trust one another in social group interactions, communicate, and cooperate) are particularly important from resilience, self-efficacy, and individual empowerment perspectives, with perceived social support acting as an important source of these domains for individuals facing the challenges that are present in OAE (Layous & Nelson-Coffey, 2021). Students intimated the importance of interpersonal relationship development gained through the shared experiences of an OAE program, commenting that living and working with new people resulted in the sense of comfort and familiarity. The shared experiences OAE creates for students, in either standalone or sequential programs, enable these relationships to form and develop (Quay et al., 2000, 2002; Quay, 2005).

Adolescents who reported higher social connectedness levels also reported higher wellbeing, manifested through positive affect, aspirations, life satisfaction, and confidence (Jose et al., 2012). As adolescence is a period where individuals develop social skills and learn to interact with their peers, OAE is strategically placed to provide a platform for positive social outcomes for this population (Jostad et al., 2015, 2019). These social outcomes and the associated connections developed between peers are fundamental elements of positive development for adolescents (Jostad et al., 2019). Some students in focus groups commented that they would rarely speak to people outside of their small circle of friends on the school grounds but that an OAE program forced them to bond with people they do not know well, resulting in new friendships being formed. The concept of the social clique in school students, where individuals make friends with those who have similar backgrounds and attitudes to themselves, is widely represented in the literature (e.g., Ellis & Zarbatany, 2017; Ennett & Bauman, 1996; Nash, 1973). The structure of outdoor programming, where individuals are often randomly assigned to their OAE group by the school, results in an organic breaking up of school-based social cliques and encourages new social connections and relationships.

Moreover, the influence of staff should not be underestimated. Our student participants reported that they enjoyed spending time with their teachers in an informal setting such as an OAE program. Further, they developed a bond with staff through casual interactions and the staff member sharing personal anecdotes from life outside the school setting. These student comments point to teachers as the people responsible for facilitating the overall experience and how staff take on the responsibility of group cohesion (Jostad et al., 2013). The bonds between OAE teachers and students can be referred to as relational learning, whereby all involved learn from each other through shared experiences, resulting in a mutually beneficial learning environment (Coates & Pimlott-Wilson, 2019). In turn, the hierarchical nature of classroom learning is deconstructed and creates increased opportunities for collaborative experiences (Morrison & Chorba, 2015). While the literature notes one example of the negative influence of staff on overall student experience due to setting unrealistic expectations (McKenzie & University, 2003), several examples exist for the positive influence of staff on the social connection

and relationship development aspect of this type of educational programming (Shooter et al., 2009, 2010, 2012; Vernon & Seaman, 2012). Our study participants consistently reported these positive influences and appreciated staff treating them with dignity and respect, being personable and relatable, and behaving differently than if they were in a classroom.

4.4 | Limitations and future research

The strengths of this study were the richness of information obtained through the qualitative data and adherence to a rigorous methodological process. The process revealed a rich seam of data that explored the underlying dimensions of OAE program outcomes. However, our study is not without limitations. Students and teachers were recruited from Independent schools in Western Australia for convenience. Based on the location of each school, they come from high socio-economic backgrounds, which results in participants not being broadly representative of the wider adolescent population.

Further, the participating schools are well-resourced and can provide funding for high-quality staff, equipment, and access to ideal locations to conduct OAE programs, resulting in anecdotally high-quality student outcomes. Thus, caution should be applied when considering the generalizability of findings to other populations. However, while study participants did not represent a broad cross-section of the adolescent population due to this limited number and range of schools, developed themes and findings provide a thorough and rich depth to the experiences of these adolescents in OAE programs in a Western Australian context. Future research should examine the psychosocial outcomes that OAE programs can provide for this population, particularly considering one of the main findings of our study that centered around developing and maintaining a social connection.

4.5 | Practical implications

Our findings suggest that the design of OAE programs should be centered around opportunities for stress relief, social connection, and feelings of autonomy and freedom for students if wellbeing is the overarching program outcome goal. It is recommended that activities involving immersion in the natural environment where adolescent students work together to achieve common goals will increase feelings of wellbeing (Rose et al., 2018). Furthermore, students would respond well to program staff that are open and relatable, engage with students personally, and are patient and calm.

Moreover, the potential benefits that OAE can provide to a wider student demographic, including adolescents from lower socio-economic areas who may have lower levels of resilience, individual empowerment, and self-efficacy, is worth exploring. Greater access to OAE opportunities could be provided for public school students in lower socio-economic areas who otherwise would not have access given the “opportunity gap” resulting from disparities in access to educational programming and family income (Richmond & Sibthorp, 2019). The potential benefits that OAE can provide for this demographic are particularly important.

5 | CONCLUSION

In summary, student participants enjoyed their experiences in OAE, and the teaching staff appreciated the personal development they witnessed in students. While the experience that adventurous activities provided were valued, the development of relationships and the opportunities to build social connections, individual empowerment, self-efficacy, and resilience were the most valued outcomes of OAE programs for the adolescents and teachers involved in this study. With thoughtful planning and execution, OAE is well-placed to impact wellbeing and could be considered a ‘best buy’ solution for decision-makers working with adolescents in a programming capacity.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

Michael Down, Duncan Picknoll, Ben Piggott, Gerard Hoyne, and Caroline Bulsara are directly employed by the University of Notre Dame Australia but declare no other conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in Figshare at <https://figshare.com/>. The datasets generated and analysed during the current study are freely available from Figshare. Links are provided throughout our manuscript.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Institutional ethical approval was granted for the study by the University of Notre Dame Australia Human Research Ethics Committee (approval number 2020-197F).

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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