

Chapter 3:

A Review of Outdoor Education Research

Introduction

One of the aims of this study is to contribute to the growing body of knowledge concerning the practice of outdoor education. This field has, until recently, been little studied academically in any context. This chapter reviews three meta-studies of outdoor education research work. Relevant research left out or published since the last of these studies is also reviewed.

The term ‘outdoor learning’ is widely used in this thesis. This phrase has been adopted recently by the UK professional body for the field, ‘The Institute for Outdoor Learning’; the UK academic journal ‘Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning’ and is increasingly used by providers (Greenaway, 2006). The change of term is intended to broaden the scope of these services to embrace informal and non-formal learning as well as formal education. The emphasis on learning is appealing to outdoor youth work with its person centred practice, hence its use in this thesis. In this chapter the term ‘outdoor education’ is more commonly used as this is the phrase found in research, especially that which pre-dates these changes. When relevant, the context for the outdoor education/learning is clearly identified.

Youth transition has been a focus of research interest for many years. The part played by informal education in this process has also been widely studied. Most recently a major study conducted by the Economic and Social Research Council’s Youth Research Programme under the title ‘Youth, Citizenship and Social Change’ (ESRC Youth Research Programme, 2002) has relevance to this thesis. An analysis of this literature will be found in Chapter 4. However, few of these studies have considered the approaches taken by outdoor education within the context of informal education.

Outdoor Education: Early Claims

Outdoor education is an emerging profession seeking to explain and justify itself within a variety of wider political, educational, legal and funding frameworks (Barnes and Sharp, 2004). In order to support this lobbying the field has conducted three meta-studies of a growing body of literature over the last 15 years. Whilst the earliest study was able to base itself in very little rigorous research the latter studies have been able to draw on an increasing number of academic texts. Work since the last of these studies has also added to the growing body of understanding in this area. This chapter begins by focusing on the findings of these meta-studies and comments on their thoughts regarding methods of research. Their ideas on the gaps in knowledge that might usefully be addressed and the directions that research in this field might take will also be discussed. The relevant literature published more recently is also reviewed. Finally, this section will indicate in what ways this thesis will address these possibilities and concerns.

Meaning and value are accorded a high status in the field of outdoor education. For example, the earliest meta-study, The Hunt Report, 'In Search of Adventure', (Hunt, 1989) that claimed to be the only major survey of outdoor adventure provision in the UK, prefaced its conclusions by

... drawing attention to the remarkable strength of conviction we have found ... as to the value to young people of Outdoor Adventure experiences. We have been impressed by the widespread and strongly-held belief in the importance of such opportunities; the belief that they may be the key to releasing the constructive energies and initiative of the young, ...

This conviction, expressed so widely, is the most impressive outcome of the study.

(p. 235)

However, this conviction, whilst based on considerable evidence collected by practising professional outdoor leaders, is anecdotal and unsupported in the report by reference to any rigorous research.

Emerging Research Findings Criticised

Six years later, in the second meta-study, Barrett and Greenaway (1995) found little UK research relating to outdoor adventure. The authors claimed that what there was tended to be ‘isolated, inconclusive, over-ambitious, uncritical, not of a high standard and difficult to locate’ (p. 53). They found little or no empirical research concerning the processes of outdoor adventure or group work in the outdoors. They did find some insights into the role and significance of the facilitator when personal and social development was the desired outcomes of the experiences. This research indicated that this role can enhance or detract from the experience and the desired learning but, yet again, it failed to identify the specific processes of facilitation that are consequential in causing these effects. One interesting finding for this study on which Barrett and Greenaway report is that ‘for many young people, experiences in the outdoors involve a ‘spiritual dimension’ (p. 31).

They were also critical of research from outside of the UK. This they found to have the following weaknesses:

little attention given to *young people’s own accounts* and perspectives

... of a one off nature ...

... outcomes are *assumed to be caused* by the adventure ingredient of outdoor adventure ...

much of the research *cannot be generalised* to other situations ...

there is an absence of research examining *the failure* of particular outdoor adventure experiences

there is a gap between practice and research ...

many studies are flawed by low questionnaire return rates ...

(p. 53, original emphasis)

The Meta-Studies Reviewed

In 2004 Rickinson, Dillon, Teamey, Morris, Choi, Sanders and Benefield, reviewing research worldwide published in the English language, noted a change finding a ‘... substantial amount and range of research that has been carried out in outdoor learning in

the 1990s and 2000s' (p. 55). They believe that this research 'highlights demonstrable benefits' and 'gives a clear endorsement for certain kinds of ... provision' (p. 52). Whilst being able to identify certain outcomes and criteria of quality they claim that there remains little research evidence that helps with the understanding of the processes involved in conducting effective outdoor learning events. In addition some of the elements that the Hunt Report claimed are highly valued by outdoor educators are, Rickinson *et al.* believe, challenged by the research findings. These include questions around the value of novel experiences and unfamiliar settings, whether any benefits are sustained over time and a concern that, whilst some claims made by outdoor programmes are achieved, many claims are apparently unsupported by the research so far.

The authors concluded with key messages including some for research. They identify 'blank spots' and 'blind spots' (Wagner, 1993) highlighting two issues, first 'how to improve the methodological rigour of outdoor learning research...' and second 'how to improve and deepen the research-based understandings of the outdoor learning *process*.' (p. 56).

The 'blind spots' identified by Rickinson *et al.* were:

The nature of the 'learning' in outdoor education.

The relationship between indoor learning and outdoor learning.

The historical and political aspects of outdoor education policy and curricula.

(p. 57)

The research on which Barrett and Greenaway (1995) and Rickinson *et al.* (2004) report consists largely of attempts to identify affective, cognitive or behavioural outcomes in order to provide an empirical justification for the projects under review. These studies set out looking for something rather than wondering what they might find. The focus on predetermined outcomes desired by administrators and funding organisations could leave much of the learning that is perceived as of benefit by the participants unnoticed. Another reason why some outcomes are largely unsupported maybe because they are hard to

measure or simply do not feature explicitly in the aims of the user organisations. Rickinson *et al.*'s comments about the rhetoric to practice gap may indicate that they believe it is the former rather than the latter. The aims may be articulated but they are perhaps not demonstrated by the commonly employed approaches to data collection and interpretation. In addition they suspect that there may still be an influence from the tendency for evaluation and research to measure what can be measured. This they suggest can lead to an inclination to include these 'measurables' as aims, as it is known that they can be demonstrated. This may be at the expense of desirable, achievable but unnoticed benefits. It may even lead to the inclusion of undesirable aims on the grounds that they can be tested and have entered popular myth as a 'good thing' (for example see Richards, 2003).

In addition, survey and questionnaire methods have tended to generalise across a group or several groups. This approach, as Barrett and Greenaway indicate, tends to '...devalue the diversity of starting points, experiences and outcomes, as they are felt and valued by the participants'. It is possible that the research conducted so far has not found evidence to support many of the values placed on outdoor education by practitioners, participants and user groups because, as Rickinson *et al.* (2004) suggest, 'it has either looked in the wrong place or looked in the wrong way'. These same approaches would also leave the process of outdoor education largely unnoticed, left within the 'black box' of the outdoor programme.

Barrett and Greenaway (1995) commented that 'effective research requires *a new paradigm.*' (p. 53, original emphasis). They suggested that

the scientific research paradigm employed in most of the research reviewed has been shown to be ill suited to the task of studying the complex phenomena, which constitute the experience of outdoor adventure. It is the conclusion of this Review that the humanistic and qualitative approaches employed recently by researchers in other fields of UK research offer a more promising way forward.

(p. 53)

The research paradigm being proposed as a ‘way forward’ is closely associated with the ‘complex phenomena’ that they are recommending as the focus of future research. The authors highlight the subjectivity of outdoor adventure experiences commenting:

Many research designs do not seem to recognise that adventure is a subjective experience that differs widely from one individual to another. What is experienced, perceived and learned is dependent not only on an individual’s psychological makeup but also on the social and community context in which that person lives. Research design and methods must take account of the *actual experience* of learners if they are to contribute to the real understanding of the *processes* at work.

(p. 53, original emphasis)

Barrett and Greenaway comment on the lack of research into the full range of outdoor programmes taking place. They highlight a concentration on programmes aimed at ‘at risk’ and ‘in trouble’ groups; populations for which a justification is a necessity if funding streams and public and political support is to be maintained. Rickinson *et al.* (2004) set out to report on research conducted into outdoor education and schools. Their meta-analysis does draw on sources that do not relate to schools; for example Reddrop (1997) conducted a study of outdoor programmes for young offenders. However, these studies still refer, in part, to school-aged children. This may mean that they found little research conducted into the field of informal education outdoors with young people not at school or not of school age. Alternatively they may have excluded these studies from their analysis in order to focus on school related provision. However, like Barrett and Greenaway’s (1995) work, these authors found little research concerning informal education outdoors for young people.

Recent research reviewed

In 2001 Davidson (2001) was already responding to the same concerns expressed by Barrett and Greenaway (1995) and Rickinson *et al.* (2004) by conducting qualitative research that examined the outdoor experiences of schoolboys. She states ‘a need has been recognised to develop research that explores the “process variables” of adventure experiences ...’ (p. 12, original emphasis). She understood the experiences as subjective

and meaningful claiming that '(m)eaning is the "essential concern" of qualitative research' (p. 12. Original emphasis) and that 'qualitative data allow for the illumination of individual processes of meaning making ...' (p. 12). She claims that the results obtained from this perspective reveal benefits that exceed those identified by conventional research methods.

Davidson's conclusions are that the outdoor experiences are more about encouraging a process than about achieving particular outcomes. Specifically she claims that the freedom to choose and the enhancement of making choices that increase the chances of feeling good were highly valued by the boys. Drawing on Dewey's (1997a) educational philosophy Davidson suggests that outdoor experiences support a holistic and lifelong learning that enable participants to enjoy and engage with life. In her view young people need to develop 'the capacity to enjoy life ... something which is often antagonistic to a work ethic' (p. 18). Yet without it, she claims, young people will not develop the intrinsic motivation 'to make their lives freely inspired adventures' (p. 18) or, as the Stoneleigh Group (Loynes, 2004b) described it, 'agents of change overcoming their marginalised circumstances and realising their potential' (p. 2).

Davidson (2001) is suggesting a political role for outdoor education, one that is founded on the liberal educational notions of increased agency leading to the individual realising their own potential and becoming a good and fulfilled citizen. Davidson comments that all her study group 'had challenging ambitions in mind for the future' (p. 18). Her views are echoed by the beliefs of the Stoneleigh Group as summarised in Chapter 2. The Stoneleigh Group believed that the outdoor experience had the power to promote agency and that this transferred into their attitudes and the trajectories that the participants took towards their lives after the outdoor experiences.

Neill and Dias (2001), studying 18–24 year old young people on Outward Bound courses, also found that the outdoor experience enhanced a process, namely the resilience of the participants. This can arguably be thought of as similar or related to Davidson's (2001) findings that an outdoor experience increases the chances of making choices that promote feeling good. Davidson does highlight overcoming challenge, building confidence and mental strength as significant benefits reported by her study group.

Neill and Dias (2001) identify some of the processes within the programme that were thought to provide the context in which enhanced resilience could occur. They highlight the role of social support from both peers and adults as of equal significance in encouraging development as were the challenging activities of the course. This, they claim, supports the construction of a greater resilience in a way unique to each individual. The diversity of participants, they point out, was an important factor in the dynamics that led to the kind of support that was perceived as constructive. However, they also draw attention to the potential for the differences within the group to create a negative social environment and they highlight the importance of the role of the facilitator in tackling negative social dynamics early if the potential benefits are to be achieved for the widest number. The nature of what constitutes a negative social environment is not defined by the authors other than that it stems from unsupportive actions by members of the group.

The 'double-edged sword' in the title of Neill and Dias's (2001) paper is a reference to a quotation from Kurt Hahn, the founder of Outward Bound, which they summarise as meaning that the Outward Bound process both cuts a person and then heals that individual so that they are stronger than before (p. 36). The authors conclude with a statement of support for this concept. This is a challenging result for the Stoneleigh Project. Its retreat approach to outdoor education set out to offer an environment that was deliberately not challenging in the classical outdoor sense. It could be argued that the values of Camas or the novelty of new people and an unusual way of life were themselves challenging. Alternatively, it could be claimed that the young people involved in the Stoneleigh Project have already encountered sufficient challenges in life. What was missing, it could be said, was the social support during their transitions to adulthood that the retreat programme set out to initiate. With this interpretation Neill and Dias's findings could help explain the results that the Stoneleigh Project evaluation reported (Loynes, 2004b). The findings that the social networks of the participants were enhanced, leading to more constructive trajectories towards adult identities, can arguably be understood as related to Neill and Dias's (2001) increased resilience and Davidson's (2001) better chances for feeling good. The reported impact of the Stoneleigh Project retreats on the lives of the participants after the retreats could also help to answer Neill and Dias's uncertainty about the transferability of the resilience developed on the courses they studied.

Neill and Dias's other findings are also supported by some of the evaluative results from the Stoneleigh Project (Loynes, 2004b). The diversity represented by the mix of the host community, the young people, and the adults on retreat was identified as a significant element of the programme as was the importance of the facilitator's role in addressing conflict as part of the process of the retreat.

Sibthorp (2003), studying teenage adolescents on a three week adventure course, highlights the processes within the programme that support the transfer of learning. He, like Davidson, thinks that a qualitative approach to understanding outdoor experiences is more likely to provide evidence of the processes that are at work. Like Neill and Dias, Sibthorp also identifies the importance of social support as essential for the learning that outdoor courses encourage. In particular he claims that the intergenerational nature of the group, encountering new and different people, and feedback, discussion and analysis with peers are all significant elements. Again, the evaluation of the Stoneleigh Project supports these findings. The report (Loynes, 2004b) places a strong emphasis on the intergenerational elements of the groups on retreat suggesting that the variety of the power relations this creates were of special significance. In addition the formal and informal social encounters such as 'the room of the nets', co-constructed rituals, the dining room table, collaborative cooking, camping, and the evenings round the fire were also highlighted.

Sibthorp (2003) adds a number of other factors that were also important. The explicit intention to construct the experience as meaningful to the lives of the participants prior to the course is identified as significant. In the same way the evaluation of the Stoneleigh Project identified the purposes of 'who am I?, what do I believe in? and where am I going?' as important to creating the right approach to the potential for learning from the retreats.

Sibthorp (2003) also claims that conscious reflection is an important element. Several other authors mention the significance of a reflective space. Rea (2006) notes that the process of reflection can be unstructured; precipitated by the structural elements of the place, the group, and the activities rather than a facilitated event in the programme. Taniguchi, Freeman and LeGrand-Richards (2005) expand on the role of reflection in a model of

transformative learning derived from what they term meaningful outdoor experiences. They understand it as a critical element in association with social learning opportunities. I will return to a discussion of their model below.

Lastly, Sibthorp (2003) states that the doing of skills in context, that is in an authentic way, is also significant to endorsing the value of the experience. Whilst he implies that he is referring here to the doing of outdoor activities the Stoneleigh Project evaluation (Loynes, 2004b) would suggest that this authentic doing applies to a wider range of activities such as bread making or the serving of meals.

These findings of Sibthorp, building on the conclusions of Davidson (2001) and Neill and Dias (2001), contradict the critique of 'neo-Hahnian outdoor education' by Brookes (2003). He claims that it is a fallacy that learning transfers from outdoor experiences to everyday life. In his view this belief is founded on the needs of the field to validate its worth in an educational environment that values instrumental outcomes. However, his analysis is based on research that, at that time, had focussed on attempts to discover instrumental outcomes from outdoor experiences. The later work of Sibthorp, Davidson, and Neill and Dias, focussing on the processes and meanings of experience, offers a different interpretation of the benefits of outdoor experiences to everyday life.

Tucker (2003), studying the work of one provider of personal development outdoors for young people, adds further to the understanding of the processes that support learning within a programme. The term used by the provider that she researched is that of a 'safe learning environment'. Yet again the perceived importance of a 'warm and friendly' social context is highlighted. Her findings confirm much of Sibthorp's (2003) and Neill and Dias's (2001) conclusions about the processes that contribute to this social environment. In addition she identifies trust, support and encouragement between peers and by facilitators as critical elements of success. Like Neill and Dias, Tucker (2003) also remarks that these attributes have to be worked at by the facilitators and the participants in the courses. Friendliness, calmness, peacefulness and a warm welcome are suggested as characteristics contributing to this environment. Tucker states that this atmosphere then supports what she identifies as a learner-centred approach that can respond to the needs and pace of each

individual even when the programme, from the perspective of the activities, may seem very structured and repetitive.

Williamson and Taylor (2005) develop the understanding of the relationship between structured experiential learning and the process of integrating the meaning this experience has with everyday life or, as they refer to it, 'different settings of experience' (p. 133). These ideas emerged from an international project called Madzinga to develop non-formal educational approaches in Belgium and Lithuania in partnership with Outward Bound Belgium. Taking a narrative approach to the construction of meaning, they postulate four stages of development from awareness to responsibility to experimentation and generalisation. The stage of 'responsibility' is an unusual suggestion amongst theories of learning. They describe this as 'the 'acceptance of one's strengths and weaknesses' (p. 134). Williamson and Tucker imply that, for this process to unfold, several iterations of structured learning are necessary giving some value to Tucker's 'repetitive' programme. Like Tucker, Williamson and Taylor emphasise the importance of a facilitated learning claiming that 'processing ... helps young people to bring the (two forms of experience) closer together and optimally they become interwoven so that the awareness and growth that occurs during the experiential learning programme produces gains for use in other settings and situations' (p. 133).

Tucker's (2003) emphasis on a learner-centred approach facilitated by trust, support and encouragement implies power relations that give the young person more of the responsibility for constructing the meaning of their experiences. Trust, support and encouragement were recognised by the partners in the Stoneleigh Group as critical contributors to building successful relationships and achieving constructive outcomes within their own youth work and they were identified as essential ingredients in the perceived success of the Stoneleigh Project.

Tucker, like Sibthorp (2003), also identifies explicit intention as an important element that supports learning and, especially, the transfer of learning to everyday life. She highlights the important role of staff from the home context participating in the course and being

available back in the community in the support of the transfer of learning. Like the mentors in the Stoneleigh Project, they can be understood as beginning and sustaining a conversation with the young person before, during, and after the outdoor intervention. This, the Stoneleigh Project evaluation claimed, is a significant contributor to the construction of new meanings and a sense of empowerment (Loynes, 2004b).

Tucker concludes that the case study she examined understands learning as a process although she recognises contradictions in its practice. She suggests that the informal outdoor youth work she studied uses both experiential and social constructions of meaning and, most significantly in her view, values the meaning that is developed by the young person; ‘young people first’ (p. 282) as she reports the provider putting it. The experiential and social dimensions of the outdoors as a context for learning and a basis for practice are echoed by the claims of the Stoneleigh Project report (Loynes, 2004b). Tucker’s case study would also seem to hold similar philosophical views about a person-centred approach to experiential education. However, she does not identify what the benefits of these approaches might be. She does stress the importance, if this approach to outdoor informal education is to be coherent, of negotiating the purpose as well as the meaning of the courses with young people and not establishing pre-determined outcomes driven by the institution providing the funding or sending the young people. This is an approach the Stoneleigh Group would claim to have followed. This thesis considers what degree of agency and transformation such approaches achieve and what forms of expression they take. To put it another way, one aim of the research is to examine what form the conversation with the young people took and what differences this made to the meaning and power the young people had in their lives.

Taniguchi, Freeman and LeGrand-Richards (2005) offer a model for the processes at work within an outdoor programme that lead to personal and social development. Their study, conducted with adults, focuses on the role of perceived risk prior to participation in an activity. They claim that it is critical to initiating a learning process. The next stage, they claim, is that of feeling awkward or uncomfortable, reminiscent of the concepts of stretch (Luckner and Nadler, 1992) or peak adventure (Mortlock, 1984; Priest and Gass, 1997), often used to explain the educational value of adventure experiences. They claim that

facing the reality of an identity that cannot respond to the situation without developing new skills and knowledge reduces self-esteem and leads to what they call 'fractional sublimation'. This they define as the process of shedding façades that have been adopted by the individual on the basis of what they believe society expects them to be like. They call it 'fractional' because they state that it can only ever be a partial sublimation. The authors emphasise that this indicates that learning out of doors, especially at this stage, is not always comfortable or pleasant.

Taniguchi *et al.* (2005) claim that, at this stage, there is a special role for the environment as a location for projections and a source of metaphors that can help conceptualise and articulate this process and the new sense of self that emerges from it. This supports the claims made by Loynes (2002a) for the symbolic, semiotic, and metaphorical role of the environment in personal development. Authors, like Neill and Dias (2001), Sibthorp (2003) and Tucker (2003), highlight the role of social learning and especially feedback from peers at this stage.

The stage of fractional sublimation, Taniguchi *et al.* (2005) claim, then leads to a reconstruction of identity and, finally, growth based on an authentic sense of the self. Reflection, reflective spaces, and solitude are reported as essential to the success of this phase of the process. Like Sibthorp (2003) and the findings of the Stoneleigh Project evaluation (Loynes, 2004b), the importance of a reflective space following on from social learning opportunities is emphasised.

Taniguchi *et al.* (2005) enlarge on Dewey's (1997b) philosophy of experiential education by claiming that their findings indicate that experience alone is not sufficient to cause personal growth but that the experience of perceived risk provides a meaningful experience that is, they believe, causal in initiating development. They propose the concept of 'meaningful experiential learning' as a better term.

Taniguchi *et al.* (2005) do not define risk and, in their paper, apply it specifically to adventure activities. If perceived risk as a concept can be applied to new experiences of a

wider nature, as authors such as Priest and Gass (1997) and Hopkins and Putnam (1993) claim, then this model offers an interesting way to interpret the experiences of the Stoneleigh Project retreat. It builds on the discussion above concerning Neill and Dias's (2001) reference to Hahn's 'double-edged sword' of challenge and social support. Indeed, as I suggest above, it could be applied to the process of youth transition. Learning, then, would be understood as initiated by the perception of the risks of finding a trajectory towards adulthood or of living within the youth world. This model has much in common with the model proposed by Loynes (2003) based on the Kubler-Ross change curve (1997) and Campbell's model of the Hero's Journey (Campbell, 1968). Used as a diagnostic tool it would be possible to suggest that participants have already embarked on a learning process and that the outdoor intervention should be congruent with the stage they have reached at the time of the programme; a retreat paralleling a time of reconstruction for example.

Overall, these authors suggest that an outdoor experience provides an authentic experience that helps override earlier constructions of the self and build a new and more realistic version with enhanced agency to engage with the world.

Other authors provide a different analysis of the outdoor experience that indicates that authenticity is not all that is encountered out of doors. They also suggest that qualitative approaches that explore 'the "process variables" of adventure experience instead of measuring outcomes' (Davidson, 2001) can be enhanced by a more critical perspective.

McCulloch (2004), studying the ideological and historical roots of two sail training schools from a critical sociological perspective, identifies the ways in which values from the sailing traditions on which these two approaches are founded persist. He claims that the choices made by educators to provide sailing experiences of a particular kind are not 'value neutral' but that the choice is made with an awareness, albeit tacit, of the values that are represented by the vessel and its traditions. In this way for example, he suggests, hierarchical, patriarchal and masculine values associated historically with naval and mercantile sailing vessels can and are maintained by the 'tall ships' of sailing schools. This

will be different, he proposes, from the values maintained by the ‘fore and aft’ vessels with their historical roots in an upper class leisure tradition.

McCulloch further proposes that many, if not all, outdoor activities have their own histories and traditions that represent specific sets of values and that, when they are disembedded from their original context for pedagogical reasons, they should be chosen with an awareness of this background. This concurs with Loynes (2004a) who discusses the military values of control in space and time and hostile terrain associated with navigating with map and compass. As an example of the tenacity of values and purposes in the field of outdoor education Nicol (2002), describing the growth in outdoor education provision between 1945 and the 1960s, states

This growth is characterised by diversity where common themes such as “fitness for war”, “character building”, “social education”, “recuperative holiday for socially disadvantaged young people” and “progressive education” emerge as competing and contrasting claims.

(p. 29. Original emphasis)

I will return to Nicol’s claims and their relevance to the historical development of the practices of informal education out of doors in Chapter 5.

Such warnings resonate with the notion of retreat and its religious overtones. This was a strong feature of concern for the participants and the organisations involved in the Stoneleigh Project. This is discussed further in Chapter 13.

Humberstone (2001) proposes that many outdoor adventure activities, and the concepts and processes that support them, were constructed within a masculine hegemony. As a result they are readily able to reproduce the hegemonic power relations embedded within them. Her view is supported by Cook (2001) who claims that, when girls began to participate in outdoor education, the experiences ‘reflected wider social assumptions about

gender rather than challenged them' (p. 50). This is of particular concern to the Stoneleigh Group in the light of its aspirations to confront the established order by creating young people who act as agents of social change. It is this critical sociological approach that defines this research as distinct from my qualitative inquiries that inform the evaluation of the Stoneleigh Project (Loynes, 2004b).

Zink and Burrows (2006) discuss how the critical sociological perspective of Michel Foucault can help with an understanding of outdoor education as a social phenomenon. They claim that

in effect this approach turns many of the questions that have been asked in outdoor education research on their heads. The starting point shifts from understanding what happens in outdoor education to considering how outdoor education is formed and the processes at work that constitute and support the particular practices that are occurring.

(p. 42)

To illustrate this point Zink and Burrows describe how the concept of challenge is legitimised by a series of historical references that are traced back to Plato. Rather than asking whether this confirms challenge as a natural part of human development they would ask who benefits from challenge being maintained as a core concept in outdoor education. Power is a central tool in Foucault's analysis of modern society. Zink and Burrows use this tool to ask of outdoor education what 'particular ways of doing and knowing ... are privileged and (what) other ways of doing and knowing ... are foreclosed' (p. 43)? This, they claim, leads to a consideration of 'what is possible in outdoor education, given the relations of power at work' (p. 43). Foucault's approach to power and knowledge suggests, Zink and Burrows claim, that outdoor education research should consider the particulars of each programme's and each individual's discursive relationships rather than seek for unifying principles of cause and effect that can be applied universally as good practice.

Foucault's concept of discourse is also relevant, Zink and Burrows suggest, to the construction of the self. They state that 'the same relations of power that produce selves are used by the self in fashioning themselves as an individual' (p. 44). In other words, as they illustrate with challenge as their example, the established discourse about challenge may constitute an individual in relation to it but, at the same time, the idea of challenge may be transformed by the individual's discourse about the experience. The individual may not necessarily reproduce the dominant discourse of outdoor education. Foucault supports the possibility of agency on the part of the individual.

A key point of the Foucauldian approach for Zink and Burrows is that it allows for the messiness of human existence. By bringing to the foreground the experience of the individual, research can avoid interpreting events in relation to rational, unified and linear models of experience and development.

Zink and Burrows' (2006) account of how a discourse may be transformed seems related to Taniguchi *et al*'s (2005) concept of fractional sublimation. Taniguchi *et al*'s model suggests that the outdoor experience is particularly well suited, under certain conditions, to supporting people to challenge dominant discourses, a view shared by the findings from the Stoneleigh Project (Loynes, 2004b). The approaches inspired by Foucault that Zink and Burrows propose will help as a context that can provide a critical perspective on the discourses constructed about each individual and about the Stoneleigh Project programme. A critical perspective will help in the analysis of the way these may have empowered the young people or constrained them. Likewise Zink and Burrows' work suggests ways of approaching the discourses about the programme, and about the lives of the young people, that were held between the partners in the Stoneleigh Group and between the Stoneleigh Group and the wider world of youth work institutions. In particular this critical perspective will help place the findings of the Stoneleigh Project evaluation report (Loynes, 2004b) in a critical light that can inform the questions asked by this thesis.

Locating this Study within the Wider Research on Outdoor Education

Trends in research on outdoor education have diversified from the early studies summarised by Barrett and Greenaway (1995) and Rickinson *et al.* (2004) that sought to

confirm or reject the claims for the benefits of outdoor experiences recorded by Hunt (1989). Much of this later research has set out to address questions about the process of outdoor education and about young people's experiences of outdoor education. This work has found a complex and rich subject that can usefully be understood as a process in which each individual constructs, through discourse, the meaning the experience has for them. It is not always appropriate, these later authors claim, to generalise from person to person or programme to programme.

Other studies have alerted the field of outdoor education to the historical and cultural influences that lead outdoor practice to be a certain way and invite practitioners and researchers to ask questions about who is privileged by these constructions of power and knowledge in this field. Such questions can help both individual participants and the designers of outdoor programmes gain some agency in the educational process and so to become agents of change rather than simply uncritical reproducers of established narratives and practices. This thesis seeks to contribute to the understanding of an approach to practice that was claimed as critical on the lives of the young people participating in the programme and on the pedagogic practices of informal education out of doors. This will help address some of the 'gaps and blind spots' identified by Rickinson *et al.* (2004) and discussed above.

In addition, following the suggestions of Barrett and Greenaway (1995) and Rickinson *et al.* (2004) this study will contribute to the knowledge of this field and also seek to enhance the rigour of qualitative studies by:

- accepting the subjective nature of outdoor experiences and adopting questions, interpretative methodologies, and research methods that allow for this;
- including the wider context in which the outdoor education experience is located, in this case the lives of young people and the practice of youth work;
- developing an understanding of the processes of learning and the nature of the curricula within this case study of outdoor education;
- taking a critical approach especially with regard to the historical and political influences upon the field;

- adopting a research design that gives a voice to the participants of the retreats and respects the diversity of experiences;
- critically reviewing the rigour of its method and the value of its findings in a wider context.

As Barrett and Greenaway (1995) and Rickinson *et al.* (2004) advocated, I worked with the intention of ensuring that the research benefited the subjects of the research. It is also part of the research plan that the findings are disseminated within the outdoor and youth work professional fields as well as used to support theoretical understanding.