

An Investigative Approach to Future Environmental Education Studies at Bradford Woods Outdoor Center



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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION

The Bradford Woods Research Team at Indiana University has been steadily gaining momentum regarding their collaborative efforts with practitioners and research-based institutions. The team has recently finished the first phase of a multi-phased outcome study pertaining to the Environmental Education programs at Bradford Woods. This exploratory study captured the perceived outcomes of a diverse group of individuals whom are invested, interested, or directly involved in the experiential learning programs at Bradford Woods. In addition, this phase of the three-part study discovered the information needed for the development of a working instrument and provided valuable data for future research.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the benefits and outcomes of the outdoor environmental education programs administered through Bradford Woods, Indiana University's Outdoor Center from multiple stakeholders' perspectives. Many previous studies of environmental education programs have focused on knowledge acquisition of participants only. This study is unique in that it includes the perspectives of diverse groups of stakeholders who were either directly involved in the camp program or indirectly invested in the experience. Five themes were found consistently in stakeholder interviews. These themes provide suggestions for further investigation of outdoor residential programs. The development of an effective Bradford Woods survey instrument will reveal significant findings concerning Environmental Education outcomes and will prove valuable when utilized in other similar camp settings.



METHODS

This is an exploratory case study (Yin, 2003) that plays an instrumental role by gathering information from a purposefully selected group of stakeholders, parents/chaperones, participants, teachers, school administrators, and programmers. Once identified, three researchers separately interviewed two individuals from each stakeholder category. The participants were asked to complete an approximate 30 minute interview. Throughout the interview process, each stakeholder had the opportunity to share her/his ideas, views, opinions, and aspirations concerning their personal experience with the program. The semi-structured interview process was of an emergent design between the stakeholder and the researcher which allowed for rich, qualitative data to manifest (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Interviewing individuals who are directly invested in programming at Bradford Woods provided data needed to discover the participant benefits which were perceived to have been promoted from the environmental education experience. In addition, these data provided valuable information pertaining to the overall outcomes.



RESULTS

This study involved a unique and diverse group of stakeholders who were either directly involved in the Environmental Education programs at Bradford Woods or indirectly invested in the experience (5th grade participants, parents/chaperones, teachers, principals/administrators, Bradford Woods instructors). After a thorough analysis of the collected data, the team has discovered the essential information needed for the next phase of the study as well as interesting findings that may spur potential studies in the future. The primary findings for Phase I include:

- **Differences in Stakeholders**
Significant differences in perceived outcomes from invested stakeholders in regards to program value and retention
- **Social Interactions**
Effects of varying degrees of social interaction and peer dynamics on perceived outcome of the experience
- **Environmental Stewardship**
Collective importance on environmental responsibility and stewardship emphasized by all stakeholders
- **Learning Processes**
Reflections and effectiveness on learning/instruction processes within structured and unstructured program activities
- **Influence of Weather Conditions**
Contingency of both perceived and actual outcomes when extraneous variables were involved, such as outside temperature or weather conditions.



Findings uncovered information that was new as well as information that brings validity to pre-existing outcome study research. This phase of the study was conducted specifically with the intent to discover the outcomes for Bradford Woods. However, the second phase not only will provide a solid research instrument to gauge what is happening in this Environmental Education environment, but also can be used for other camp programs that are similar to what Bradford Woods has to offer.

HOW THIS RESEARCH CAN HELP ME

- Investigation of specific activities and educational strategies provide a holistic understanding of camp programs similar to Bradford Woods.
- The value of stakeholder experiences provides a complete picture of the evaluation of the program.
- The development of a thematic instrument that can be replicated to fit programs with similar goals.