Helping Youth Transition into an Alternative Residential School Setting: Exploring the Effects of a Wilderness Orientation Program on Youth Purpose and Identity Complexity

**Christine Lynn Norton · Betsy L. Wisner ·
Matthew Krugh · Aleah Penn**

Abstract   This mixed-methods study examines the relationship between adolescent identity complexity (Clin Social Work J 21(1):11–24 1991) and youth purpose related to participation in a wilderness experience program at an alternative, residential boarding school in Colorado. Students in this study ($N = 55$) completed an adapted version of the Self-Worth Index (Ment Health Relig Cult 4(2):103–108 2001) before and after participation in a wilderness experience program. Youth in the study also completed a pre- and post-test eight-item index measuring identity complexity, with each item assessed on a five-point Likert scale. Likewise, qualitative, face-to-face interviews with each student were conducted to triangulate findings and further explore the impact of the wilderness program on identity complexity and youth purpose for youth labeled "high risk." Data analysis revealed that the wilderness program contributed to students' positive sense of identity and purpose in their lives, and helped them transition into the residential school culture successfully.

Keywords   Adolescence · Wilderness orientation program · Alternative school · Youth purpose · Identity complexity

C. L. Norton (✉) · B. L. Wisner · M. Krugh · A. Penn
Texas State University-San Marcos School of Social Work, 601 University Dr., San Marcos, TX 78666, USA
e-mail: cn19@txstate.edu

B. L. Wisner
e-mail: bw30@txstate.edu

M. Krugh
e-mail: mek55@txstate.edu

A. Penn
e-mail: ap1411@txstate.edu

Adolescence is a time period in human development rife with both opportunities and challenges. For most adolescents in America, school is the primary context in which they experience success or failure. Unfortunately, educational success for adolescents facing multiple risk factors is often unattainable. Students with academic, social and emotional challenges are at risk of dropping out of school due to disengagement from the school system and extracurricular activities (Neild and Balfanz 2006; Rumberger and Lim 2008). Many of these students are sent to alternative schools in order to better address some of these multiple risk factors, and are referred by their home school for teen pregnancy and academic, social-emotional, and behavioral issues, including physical violence, truancy, drug and alcohol abuse, and possession of a weapon (Kleiner et al. 2002; Pang and Foley 2006).

When compared to traditional school students, students at alternative schools are at higher risk for a number of health-related problems such as substance use, suicidal thoughts and feelings, involvement in risky sexual behaviors, and violence-related behaviors (Grunbaum et al. 2001; Weller et al. 1999). Furthermore, youth at alternative schools may experience family problems, academic underachievement, teen pregnancy, and mental health problems (Kasen et al. 1998; Kleiner et al. 2002). According to a study by Pang and Foley (2006), youth with disabilities appear to comprise a large portion of student populations served by alternative education programs. Thus, alternative school students are likely to experience multiple psychosocial, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral challenges. These youth are often identified as "at-risk" and are unlikely to succeed without intervention.

Though many therapeutic educational interventions for adolescents begin in a community-based setting, it is sometimes beneficial for a young person to have a 'meaningful separation' from his/her family and peer group and receive the specialized services, structure and supervision of an alternative, residential program (Harper and Russell 2008). While this type of milieu can be highly effective (Dejong and Hall 2006), it can be difficult for adolescents to transition directly from their home environments to the residential setting due to the differing norms of each environment. For this reason, wilderness experiences are often utilized as a bridge between these two environments to help orient youth to what is expected in the new setting, as well as to help them develop attributes and skills needed to be successful in the new environment and in life (Russell 2001).

This study explores the impact of a wilderness experience program used to engage new students at an alternative residential school in Colorado that provides full scholarships to youth who have not experienced success in traditional academic settings and do not expect to graduate from high school due to multiple risk factors. In particular, this study examines the ways in which the wilderness experience (1) promotes youth purpose and identity complexity—protective factors that can lead to positive developmental and educational outcomes in the future and (2) prepares students for the alternative, residential school environment.

Alternative Residential Schools

While there is great variety among these types of programs, many alternative residential schools fall under the category of either therapeutic boarding schools or

Emotional Growth Schools. A therapeutic boarding school (TBS) is an alternative, residential school environment that is jointly geared towards emotional growth and educational success. According to the National Youth Network (2013), TBS's "offer social, emotional, physical, and spiritual guidance, in addition to educational enrichment for troubled teens…{and} are designed for the student with a history of underperformance, both personal and academic, whose acting out behavior is compounded by issues including poor self-esteem and a negative self-concept" (p. 1). The National Association of Therapeutic Schools and Programs (NATSAP 2013), lists over 140 programs in the United States, many of which are therapeutic boarding schools. These programs serve adolescents with multiple risk factors and work to address emotional, psychological and academic challenges. Though TBSs work with youth-at-risk in a therapeutic manner, they are different from residential treatment programs, which are more clinically focused and primarily address serious mental health issues (NATSAP). The average length of stay at an alternative residential school is usually one to 2 years, allowing time for personal and education growth and development; however, this can be problematic for families that cannot afford these types of schools, most of which are private pay. However, some schools, such as the alternative, residential school in this study, offer scholarships or tuition/fee waivers to low-income students who demonstrate commitment to attending the school and follow school policies and expectations.

Along with academic achievement, the goal of an alternative residential school is to foster emotional growth and ultimately a sense of purpose and meaning in a young person's life. A cross site evaluation study by Dejong and Hall (2006) that evaluated best practices of TBS's found that retention is the largest indicator for success in such settings. The schools that had high levels of retention had key components that increased success rates of the youth that participated. These components include programs that address past and present life stressors, staff that believed in the student's ability to succeed if provided with a positive environment, the ability to acknowledge and improve upon failures, and the use of evaluation and feedback to guide effective problem solving DeJong and Hall (2006). All of these components promote the development of assets or protective factors in a young person's life. The approach used in the TBS's in Dejong and Hall's study is aligned with the positive youth development (PYD) framework, which seeks to foster internal and external assets for the healthy development of young people (Catalano et al. 2004; Lerner et al. 2005). Developing strong bonds with healthy adults and maintaining regular involvement in positive activities prevent the occurrence of problems, but also help to create positive developmental pathways through the development of internal and external assets (Catalano et al. 2004; Lerner et al. 2005).

Youth Purpose

One of the most important internal assets needed to help an adolescent move from one environment to the next, whether from his home environment to an alternative residential school, or even developmentally from childhood to adulthood, is a sense

of purpose (Bronk et al. 2010; Bundick 2011; Burrow et al. 2010). Youth purpose has been identified as an important protective factor that aids in positive youth development (Scales et al. 2004). Although there are varying definitions of youth purpose there is a growing consensus that purpose refers to a broad goal-directedness. Damon et al. (2003)suggest that it develops and is sustained within, while connecting deeply to the person's "moral and spiritual self" (as cited in Mariano and Savage 2009). Purpose involves thinking about the future, forming intentions, acquiring complex skills over time, following through with intentions, and persisting even when faced with challenges. Another aspect not to be overlooked when engaging in the development of youth purpose is how well a youth is able to manage relationships and the social world in general. All of these factors can in turn affect and be manifested through one's behavior (Mariano and Savage 2009).

Having purpose is associated with many positive developmental outcomes including long-term motivation (Bronk et al. 2010). By engaging youth in guided discussions about values, goals, and purpose they may be directly benefitted in terms of goal-directedness and life purpose which have been shown to help move individuals beyond difficulties toward productive coping strategies (Bundick, 2011). Findings from Burrow et al. (2010) also suggest that there may be a correlation between youth engagement and the development of youth purpose. They further state that a developed sense of purpose can contribute to identity resolution and increase overall feelings of well-being as well as the ability to discern between purpose, meaning in life, and well being (Burrow et al. 2010). Interventions designed to promote the development of purpose and internal control in regards to academic success are also effective (Pizzolato et al. 2011). Bronk (2012) further implies that having a supportive environment from mentors as well as like-minded peers helps create a context in which positive youth development, including not only purpose but overall healthy development, can occur. If we look at schools as a setting for youth success and/or failure, especially when referring to a residential therapeutic school setting, focusing on developing youth purpose can be an important factor for youth success.

Adolescent Identity Complexity

Developmental theorists have acknowledged that we have multiple selves, determined by various roles we play and the environment we are in (Mead 2009; Saari 1991; Winnicott 1956). Mead even went so far as to assert that we have a different self for every environment in which we participate. This is not problematic in and of itself so long as the individual develops identity complexity. Saari (1991) defines identity complexity as "a highly developed capacity to create meaning with the sense of self being highly differentiated, articulated and integrated" (as cited in Anderson 2003, p. 45). Without identity complexity, a person may feel fragmented and unable to bring together various aspects of their identity, leaving them with the feeling of having a foot in two different worlds.

Given the difficulties of transitioning from childhood to adulthood, this is especially true for adolescents. Helene Deutsch (1944) refers to adolescence as the "emotional vacuum between a world that is disappearing and another that has not yet come into being" (p. 95). The developmental construct of adolescence as a concrete period between childhood and adulthood has always resulted in adolescents having a foot in two worlds. Not only do adolescents have to bridge the gap between childhood and adulthood, they also have to deal with multiple, complex social and interpersonal identities related to their peer group, cultural group, neighborhood, family and school. In her research, Anderson explored the "nature of identity complexity for individuals who are part of two or more environments that are dissimilar in nature, alien to their sense of self, and difficult to bridge" (p. 45). While Anderson's article is about adult women of color, this situation is also a common occurrence for youth in residential settings. Youth need a bridge between these two worlds in order to feel safe and fully engage in a residential, therapeutic educational milieu. They need to feel a sense of connection between the various "worlds" they inhabit.

Youth often describe their private adolescent world as one of experimentation, risk-taking and bold self-expression. While these are normative developmental functions, youth labeled "at-risk" can become disconnected from the pro-social world of adults by engaging in negative behaviors that minimize their opportunities for healthy growth and development, particularly in school. Sometimes, the disconnection between the world of adolescence and the world of adulthood is so great that youth are at risk of separating themselves from the world of adults altogether. When this happens, they often construct their identities based on risk factors such as gang involvement, substance abuse, family conflict, involvement with the law, and histories of trauma, abuse and neglect. These risk factors can contribute to a "chameleon-like false self" (Anderson) or what people often call "fronting." Because of these acting out behaviors and emotional challenges, many of these youth are involved in therapeutic residential programs such as treatment centers and alternative schools. However, to take these youth from their worlds and cast them immediately into a therapeutic or personal growth oriented milieu does not allow for a bridge to be created between these two worlds.

In order to integrate their "differentiated and articulated" selves, youth need a transitional space between the two worlds in which they can develop new and authentic aspects of their identity while still holding on to earlier representations of themselves and others. If this does not happen, youth may perceive that they cannot be themselves, and feel that "like all of [their] other environments, the therapeutic space [is] hostile and inhospitable" (Anderson 2003, p. 50). If this occurs, both emotional growth and academic achievement will remain elusive for the youth, as he/she will be more focused on the real or perceived threats in the new environment. The alternative, residential boarding school in this study understands the need for this "transitional space," and has built in a 30-day wilderness orientation program for all new students before they enter the school community. This wilderness program is an introduction to the norms and expectations of the school, but it is also a bridge between the world of the adolescent and the world beyond the adolescent–what the authors refer to as the "world of purpose."

Wilderness as Transitional Space

Transitional Space is a psychoanalytic term introduced by Donald W. Winnicott to signify a place for play and creativity in which one can experience the 'true self,' originally seen in early infant and mother interaction that may provide the conditions for innovative shifts in human-beings (Davis 2012). Several authors have framed wilderness in a similar light—as a space in which restoration and healing can occur (Kaplan and Talbot 1983; Miles 1987). Norton (2010a, p. 230) stated that "the wilderness itself may act as a holding environment for the adolescent, one that involves both illusion and disillusion, and helps the adolescent balance her internal mood with the external reality". Based on these ideas of wilderness as a transitional space, it is easy to see why wilderness programs are more commonly being used as a bridge prior to further intervention with youth facing multiple risk factors (Russell 2001).

From an intervention perspective, wilderness programs can have a therapeutic effect, targeting personal and psychological growth and changes, as well as positive behavioral outcomes in the areas of substance abuse and mental health (Russell 2003, 2005). Therapeutic wilderness programs have been shown to increase psychosocial development in adolescence, as well as positively impact adolescent depression, school failure, and family functioning (Norton 2010b). According to Bettmann et al. (2012), a therapeutic wilderness experience can foster motivation to change negative behaviors. Wilderness experiences have also been shown to foster self-efficacy for new students in higher education (Jones and Hinton, 2007).

Wilderness experiences have long been used in higher education to facilitate positive transitions from high school to college (Gass et al. 2003). While these wilderness programs have focused on retention and engagement, they have also targeted social and emotional development as well as success in fostering positive developmental outcomes in young adulthood (Gass et al. 2003). While research has been done on these important psychosocial outcomes of wilderness orientation programs for college students, very few studies have considered how wilderness experiences prepare adolescent youth for an alternative, residential school setting.

One study evaluated youth outcomes two years after the conclusion of outdoor behavioral healthcare (OBH), a type of wilderness experience used as a mental health intervention. When paired with aftercare treatment, including TBS's, findings showed that 80 % of parents and 95 % of youth reported positive outcomes (Russell 2005). Russell reported that OBH had an impact on clients doing better in school, as well as increased improvement in family communication. OBH was also seen as a key component in facilitating the transition from a wilderness experience to a family, peer, or school setting. This wilderness-based treatment not only was seen as a positive transitional experience but also as an effective step to help youth address and work to overcome emotional and psychological issues that drive negative behavior (Russell 2005). These findings support the use of a wilderness program for helping youth transition from one environment to another; however, these programs are often open enrollment and are not directly connected to aftercare services. This study seeks to build on Russell's research in this area by examining a wilderness program that is directly connected to the youths' educational experiences in this residential milieu.

Methods

This study utilizes an exploratory mixed-methods approach to address the diversity of the theoretical concepts under scrutiny (Creswell et al. 2003), including the impact of the wilderness experience on adolescent identity complexity and youth purpose, as well as the role that the wilderness experience has in preparing students for the alternative, therapeutic/educational milieu. The main quantitative aspect of this study is a pre-test/post-test design. The qualitative aspect of the study utilized open-ended qualitative interviews with participants in the sample. This study was approved by the IRB at Texas State University, and all youth participants provided assent, but also gained parent/guardian consent to participate in the study. All data was coded anonymously so that participants' identifying data was protected.

Program

The wilderness program in this study is part of the new student orientation at an alternative residential boarding school in Colorado. The school is fully funded so that all students receive full scholarships, allowing for a more racially and socioeconomically diverse student population. Students at this school come from all over the United States, have not met success at traditional schools, and have often been in trouble with the law. After arriving at the school, students leave for the 25-30 day wilderness program, which consists of hiking, backpacking and camping in primitive areas. Students also engage in teambuilding, problem-solving and small group discussions in order to learn life skills, along with outdoor skills. Each trip also consists of a 2-3 day solo in which students camp by themselves, but are supervised and monitored by an adult instructor. Solo gives them a time to rest and reflect on their experience, and set goals for their future.

Trips are led by experienced outdoor educators trained in youth work, group facilitation, outdoor leadership, and certified in backcountry medicine. Physical and emotional safety is paramount in the program, and instructor/student interactions are based on the dignity and worth of each participant. Students are empowered to learn conflict resolution and assertive communication skills, and the curriculum is based on the idea of 'facades,' in which students are encouraged to 'take off the mask.' After completion of the wilderness program, students have to reflect on their experiences and present what they learned about themselves and others to the rest of the school community. This type of program fits well with Winnicott's (1956) ideas about true/false self, and is intended to guide youth towards a more authentic, articulated sense of self.

Sample

A convenience sample of 55 students at an alternative, residential boarding school in Colorado were selected for this study based on the following criteria: 1) they were enrolled in the school and successfully completed the wilderness experience; 2) they assented to the research study and also gained parent/guardian consent to be in the study; 3) they completed both the pre-test and post-test assessments. Due to the limitations posed by Biglan et al. (2000), a control group was not deemed feasible

Table 1 Sample Demographics

Race	Age	Gender
Latino/Hispanic 32.5 % (18)	Ages 14–16 55 % (30)	Male 69 % (38)
White 27 % (15)	Ages 17–19 45 % (25)	Female 31 % (17)
African American 16 % (9)		
Bi-racial 16 % (9)		
Native American .01 % (1)		
Asian American .01 % (1)		
Multi-racial .03 % (2)		

for this study, in part because of the lack of a wait-list for the wilderness program. Table 1 shows the demographics of the sample including race, age and gender.

Data Collection

Students who participated in this study ($N = 55$) completed an adapted version of the Self-Worth Index (Francis et al. 2001) before and after the wilderness program (see Appendix 1). This measure is an eight-item index called the Self-Worth Index-Adapted (SWI-A) that assesses personal meaning, purpose and satisfaction in life, and provides an orientation to "causes greater than the self" (Damon et al. 2003, p. 126). Each item is assessed on a five-point Likert scale. Identity complexity was measured in a similar way as Francis et al. (2001), using an eight-item index called the Identity Complexity Index (ICI) created by the lead author of this study, with each item assessed on five-point Likert scale (see Appendix 2). Both of these surveys were pilot-tested on a small group of seven students whose responses were not included in the study. School staff agreed to administer both of these pre- and post-tests to students before and after each wilderness program and mailed all pre- and post-test results to this researcher. Lastly, this study included qualitative post wilderness interviews with participants to assess the role that the wilderness played in fostering both healthy identity complexity and youth purpose. Per the suggestions of Damon et al. (2003), interviews consisted of questions aimed at better understanding how students are now oriented toward the external world as a result of their participation in the wilderness experience (see Appendix 3 for sample interview questions).

Data Analysis

Given that this is an exploratory, non-experimental study, it is not possible to fully generalize our findings. Neil (2008, p. 7) stated, "When there is no interest in generalizing (e.g., we are only interested in the results for the sample), there is no need for significance testing. In these situations, effect sizes are sufficient and suitable". According to Thompson (2000), statistical reporting now includes effect sizes as a standard and expected method, and need to be more fully reported and understood. Therefore, quantitative data analysis consisted of calculating standardized mean difference effect sizes. Qualitative data from these interviews was

Table 2 Standardized mean difference effect sizes for sense of purpose based on overall mean scores on the self-worth index-adapted (SWI-A)

SWI-adapted (pretest)	SWI-adapted (post test)	Cohen's d	Effect-size
Mean = 3.04	Mean = 4.37	−1.67	−0.64 Moderate
SD = 0.90	SD = 0.68		

Table 3 Standardized mean difference effect sizes for identity complexity based on overall mean scores on the identity complexity index (ICI)

ICI (pretest)	ICI (post-test)	Cohen's d	Effect-size
Mean = 3.31	Mean = 2.0	1.30	0.55 Moderate
SD = 1.08	SD = 0.93		

digitally recorded, transcribed, and coded to analyze the emerging themes and to triangulate the findings from the quantitative data.

Results

Quantitative Data Findings

By identifying the pretest and posttest mean scores and standardized deviation on the self-worth index-adapted, we were able to calculate the standardized mean difference effect sizes for sense of purpose based on overall mean scores. Table 2 shows a moderate effect size of −0.64. It is important to note that a *negative* effect size in this analysis indicates that the wilderness experience had *positive* consequences in relation to the examined outcome of sense of purpose.

Based on pretest and posttest mean scores and standard deviation, we also calculated the standardized mean difference effect sizes for identity complexity based on overall mean scores. Table 3 shows a moderate effect size of 0.55, which indicates that the wilderness experience had *positive* consequences in relation to the examined outcome of identity complexity.

Qualitative Findings

Qualitative analysis of the interview responses post-wilderness experience revealed common themes that emerged among participants. The most prominent of these themes was the profound impact of the wilderness experience across multiple domains. Whether fostering a greater sense of purpose and identity or helping students transition into the residential school milieu, the wilderness experience played a key, developmental role. The commonality in perspective as well as revelations expressed by a vast portion of the participants, points to the consistent tone and poignant message being imparted via the wilderness component at the

onset of each student's enrollment, laying the foundation for their success at the school. These revelations have been coded into prominent themes, and are explored in the context of three critical categories of examination: multiple selves, identity complexity, and world of purpose.

Multiple Selves: Into the Wilderness

Identified as youth who are "at-risk," these participants shared a similar set of experiences and difficulties in their backgrounds, as they initially described who they were and what they were like before arriving at the school. Participants reported coming from broken or tough family lives, where times were hard for the families economically or there was little structure provided, or abuse even took place. Additionally, participants expressed feelings of anger and depression. Many saw themselves in a negative light, describing being stubborn, disrespectful, violent, irresponsible, misguided, or bad, and spoke to involvement in activities related to drug and alcohol abuse, gangs, fighting, and stealing. Along with potential troubles with the law, poor school performance, dropping out, failing out, being expelled, or being removed, these students also acknowledged problems their behaviors caused in their families. Participants reported:

- "I was going down a dangerous path that was affecting my family".
- "I know that I have done stuff that is bad, wrong. I wish I had never done anything. I wish I had never got in trouble or on probation and I feel bad for putting my mom and dad through a lot of stress".

As this study was looking to gain further insight into these participants' development surrounding identity complexity, one of the interview questions asked whether these youth had ever felt like they had a foot in two different worlds. Some participants readily understood this idea, while others needed clarification. Once the concept was explained further, many confirmed they felt this way, often expounding upon the distinct variance in which they conducted themselves around their family and other adults, versus how they acted with friends. For others, their responses seemed to reveal some raw identification with this feeling, while the expression of it remained vague and elusive to them, as though they felt it, but had never thought much about it, or tried to put words to the idea. Regardless, most participants acknowledged it was a lot of pressure, and the resulting feeling was stressful, confusing, and hard to manage:

- "I used to think that I was somebody else. Like I used to think that I was a person that did not really care".
- "I had to act certain ways around certain people".
- "I had to be tough, I had to be hard. I kept it up so long, that is just how I act now … I wanted to be a graphic designer, but I knew I could not do that if I'm doing what I'm doing now".
- "I'm a gangster and a gentleman. Up here, I have to work on being a gentleman, but when I go home, I'm still a gangster".

These participants put into their own words the sentiment of their felt necessity of having multiple selves. In a sense these youth feel obligated to conform to and maintain several vastly different roles at once. Essentially feeling as though they have little choice in the matter, and it is a dirty business which must be cleverly navigated in order to survive their social worlds as adolescents. At-risk and apparently feeling helplessly unarmed with the proper tools and skills, they are left vacillating between intimidating advances into the dubious grown-up world, and retreats into their more familiar territory of the teen culture—one which likely feels significantly more "real" at the time. Such discordant behavior certainly does not go unfelt by these youth, nor is it without repercussions on their psyche. Most expressed knowing the difference between right and wrong, but often for reasons unbeknownst to even themselves, simply chose the lesser path anyway. These youth acknowledge the division with themselves. They feel split, some torn, and others still, broken. Unmotivated, they feel confused, lost, and scared. The fear of course is masked in their rebellion. Distracted and enticed by materialistic longings, they indulge in the more immediately satisfying escapades into drugs and gang life. Many acknowledge the discrepancy in their multiple selves and endeavor to hide the duality from their families. Most however, remain unaware of the developmental implications of continuing with such non-integrated selves. For in today's fast-paced, saturated society these youth reported that they typically do not slow down to think much.

Identity Complexity: Wilderness as a Bridge

For at-risk youth, a change of scenery may just be the solution, literally. While originally not the likely first choice for most students who find themselves at this alternative, residential school, they soon come to greatly appreciate its non-traditional setting and program format, but generally not until after they survive their time in the wilderness. The effects of 25-30 days spent in a group, on the trail in the wilderness on these youth's sense of self is remarkable. As a transitional space, between the adolescent's world back home, and the adolescent's upcoming school life, and future beyond, the wilderness may very well be the bridge, upon which the adolescent reconciles her multiple selves.

When asked if they had a better sense of who they were after participating in the wilderness program, most participants affirmed this. These students expressed an empowered belief-in-self they acknowledged was not there before. They were willing to speak to their accomplishments and new sense of pride, and were capable of highlighting their strengths. They were quick as well to admit having taken a close look at the behaviors and mistakes which resulted in them getting themselves into trouble. In light of all this, participants reported coming to terms with their past, and coming to accept themselves for who they really are—capable, and deserving of more. Out in the wilderness, epiphanies abound:

- "I have a much better sense of who I am since completing wilderness. I used to think I was alone, but wilderness made me realize that I can let people in."

- "I learned that I should never underestimate my ability, that everything is possible. It really does open your eyes to the fact that there's more to life than what I've been doing."
- "Before the wilderness program, I couldn't see the future. All I cared about was myself and having a good time. Wilderness helped me realize how my actions affect others, especially my family."

The element of wilderness, and especially the solo experience, turns out, for the youth, to be an unexpected, but much needed time of contemplative separation for them. In fact, it is the stepping away from the hectic timing of the modern day world, to the seeming timelessness of the natural world, where perspective, awareness, and clarity are acquired:

- "The wilderness got me back in touch with who I really am."
- "Being in the wilderness made me figure out who I am, and you need to know who you are back here."

Often the first opportunity many of these youth have ever experienced something like this, they are touched with an empathy, which inspires a desire to make significant changes in their life. The students naturally begin to express goals for themselves, and fashion a new plan for their way forward. They begin to see a bigger picture, they see the world is a big place, and there is often more going on than what meets the eye:

"Seeing so many different things in the environment. Just living there, it really does open your eyes. There is more to life than I have right now. It really opens your eyes, it really does."

Part of the potency of wilderness, especially to newcomers, can be how naturally challenging it can be. Some of the youth articulated how it broke them down and exposed their vulnerability, which was a reality check for them. While it disarmed them, they questioned their desire to continue, and found their motivation:

- "We had this one point where we had three days of solo, and I felt like I was incarcerated again, just thinking. I really wanted to go home, but then I was like, no, I can't let people down. I kept thinking about it, and if went home, I'd just go home to the same thing. So I decided to stay here, 'cuz I got a future to think about."
- "I pushed myself to my limit and I figured out what my limit was to do what I was capable of doing. I didn't give up."

As they reconnected with their true selves (Winnicott 1956) and began to find purpose, students persevered through their wilderness experience by learning to adhere to the necessary structure for a group on trail. Following a routine, meeting daily objectives, and working together as a group—all of these things eventually enabled completion of the wilderness trip in the end, and a well-deserved sense of accomplishment. Participants discovered positive, personal power, realized untapped, inner potential, and experienced a certain maturation made possible only through survival in the wilderness:

- "That whole trip, I felt challenged, and I hated the hiking, but I liked how it made me feel to complete it".
- "I learned a lot on wilderness. I learned a lot about myself, what I am capable of doing, how far I can push myself, those kind of things".
- "Wilderness is a gift, but wilderness is suffering. It was tough, but it was like a cleansing".

World of Purpose: Out of the Wilderness

To make the most of the transformational wilderness experience for these youth, the program ensures wilderness provides a context where expeditionary behavior is introduced and the inevitable processes of group development take place. Students acknowledge they learned how important communication, cooperation, taking responsibility, and contributing was on the trail as a group. Towards preparing them for school life back at school, the wilderness offered them innumerable opportunities to identify with each other, practice acceptance, and establish connections with one another, increasing the spirit of community. Students also speak to acquired leadership skills, as well as those of conflict resolution:

- "Wilderness taught you self discipline and how to respect people and communicate things like that. If I had just come here without doing the wilderness program, I would probably be myself still. I know have changed, people have seen me as a different person than when I first got here".
- "The wilderness program prepared me to learn how to talk to other people and how to solve problems without screaming and violence".
- "Something I really learned is that you get better results when you are more respectful of people, you got to give respect to get it, and you are not gonna get respect, by disrespecting people".
- "I probably wouldn't know how to deal with living with other people if we hadn't been in the woods together. You *have* to work together and not give up".
- "Without wilderness, there's no way we could be at school together. We're all too different with too much to prove. People would just front and give each other shit. Wilderness gave us a chance to get that bullshit out of our system. I mean, the drama isn't gone, but we learned how to deal with it".
- "Without wilderness, I'd be the same old person that didn't care, that just wanted to come here and have fun and all that stuff. I wouldn't have grown like I have grown, I wouldn't have learned to pay more attention or listen more, to learn how to communicate better with other people of different races, backgrounds, man and women. Without that I would have been the same old person, instead of a whole new person that I am now".

Having fortified stronger senses of self and having experiences successes, both individually and in the group setting on the trail, these participants capitalized on their time in the wilderness to begin to synthesize ideas for their future. Students articulated how they felt they had been gifted a real opportunity, were moved by how staff truly seemed to care about the students, and were very inspired to make the most of this second chance they had been given:

- "It is a once in a life chance, or opportunity, to come up here to start over, to clean the slate, to start a new life to work towards the goal that you have, it's worth it".
- "My future feels strong up here. They support you for anything. Your future is more open up here. I like it up here better."

Participants also spoke of vocational goals, which further gelled for them, resulting from their wilderness experience, as well as helping others, and wanting to give back to the communities they are from:

- "I want to help people in the community, people like me, that did not get the hint, that you cannot do this your whole life. Like take them off the streets. And I know what I have done and what other people have done, and its not great, but try to give them hope to—I want to help my community, want to pay them back".
- "Being there made me realize that I actually had something to live for, because back then I just thought I am just going live and eventually I am just going to die, and I did not really care. But being there made me realize that it's not like that. I mean your time is going to come, but while it comes you have to do all that you can to learn and be who you are and stuff. It made me just think more about life and less about not caring about life. It made me think about my future and what I want to do and my goals and all that".
- "I want to hold onto the good people that I know, and have good conversations with people."

Discussion

Based on both the quantitative and qualitative data in this study, it seems that the wilderness experience has a definite impact on identity complexity and sense of purpose. Wilderness revealed the multiple selves that participants were experiencing in their lives and provided them with the transitional space necessary to develop a more integrated, differentiated and articulated sense of self. Though this study did not look specifically at which components of the wilderness program had the biggest impact, numerous participants reflected on the impact that solo had on them. Solo seemed to be a time of reflection and contemplation in which they were able to really think about their lives back home, in particular how their actions had affected others. This newfound empathy seemed to come from both the time alone and the lack of creature comforts when camping in the wilderness. Building on this idea, the qualitative data in particular seems to reveal that time spent in the wilderness was a 'detox' experience of sorts, not necessarily from drugs and alcohol (though in some cases that was literally true), but more a detox or separation from the physical, mental/emotional, and social toxicity of modern American society (Garbarino 1998).

In its entirety, the wilderness experience seems to be an important vehicle for teaching life skills and fostering resilience, empathy and self-awareness. The challenge and adventure components of the wilderness experience seemed to foster new evidence of self for the participants. Norton's (2010b) research affirmed the importance of challenge and adventure in wilderness programming as well, as it helps participants become aware of their strengths and were encouraged to focus on what they are capable of versus what they

cannot do. This strengths-based approach is an essential ingredient in therapeutic wilderness programs, and can lead to a safer, more accepting space in which young people can take off their facades and develop their authentic selves. As such, wilderness equips students who are about to enter the alternative, residential milieu the skills they need to live in community and form and maintain healthy relationships. Following the wilderness experience, as a group, youth felt safer and more connected, and as individuals, they developed a greater sense of identity complexity and purpose in their lives.

Limitations

This study demonstrates positive findings, yet it has several important limitations worth noting. It utilizes a non-experimental design limiting our ability to fully determine if it was the wilderness program alone that was responsible for changes in identity complexity and youth purpose, as well as limiting our ability to fully generalize our findings. Furthermore, though pilot tested, the quantitative measures used were not previously normed on an adolescent population and therefore may be lacking in validity and reliability. Though this study showed moderate effect sizes, there are limitations to adolescent self-report, which may include a ceiling effect that leads to inflated scores and unrealistic self-appraisal. By the time students have arrived at the alternative, residential school, they may already be moving through the change process and developing awareness of who they are and what they want from life. This study also lacked follow up data on student retention. In other words, did the students in this study remain and/or successfully graduate from the school? This would be important data to gather for future studies. Though this study did not officially track this data, the school reports that 88 % of all entering students ultimately earned a diploma from the school, a diploma from another high school or a GED (ERS 2013), evidence that the wilderness program may have some lasting impact on students' future academic achievement. Lastly, though the sample in the study was a demographically diverse sample, this study did not analyze the data based on these variables to determine if they had a moderating effect on the outcomes. However, we recognize that this is an important area for future research.

Conclusion

Quantitative data analysis showed moderate effect sizes, which revealed that the wilderness program in this study contributes to positive changes in identity complexity and sense of purpose for a diverse group of youth in an alternative residential school. Qualitative data from student interviews affirmed these findings. More than anything, however, the qualitative results show that without the wilderness program at this alternative, residential school, students who are coming from high-risk environments would not have the opportunity to transition into the unique school culture and residential milieu. The majority of students reported that without the wilderness program, most youth would not be able to effectively integrate into the school community in a positive way. Based on these findings, as well as past research (Russell 2005), it seems that the use of wilderness programs as a bridge between a youth's world

at home and a residential milieu is a promising practice that can lead to transformation and motivation for future growth and change. As one of the participants in this study so beautifully articulated, "*Wilderness is a path to a path*".

Appendix 1: Self-Worth Index-Adapted

Student ID number:_____

Please circle the answer that most describes how you feel about each statement below:

I feel my life has a sense of purpose.

1………………………...2…………………3……………...……4………………....……5

strongly disagree   disagree   not certain   agree   agree strongly

I care about the world I live in.

1………………………...2…………………3……………...……4………………....……5

strongly disagree   disagree   not certain   agree   agree strongly

I feel I have so much to look forward to.

1………………………...2…………………3……………...……4………………....……5

strongly disagree   disagree   not certain   agree   agree strongly

I feel I am in control of my life.

1………………………...2…………………3……………...……4………………....……5

strongly disagree   disagree   not certain   agree   agree strongly

I find life really worth living.

1………………………...2…………………3……………...……4………………....……5

strongly disagree   disagree   not certain   agree   agree strongly

I want to help others in life.

1………………………...2…………………3……………...……4………………....……5

strongly disagree   disagree   not certain   agree   agree strongly

I have an important role to play in the world.

1………………………...2…………………3……………...……4………………....……5

strongly disagree   disagree   not certain   agree   agree strongly

I know how I want to make a difference in the world.

1………………………...2…………………3……………...……4………………....……5

strongly disagree   disagree   not certain   agree   agree strongly

Appendix 2: Identity Complexity Index*

Student ID number:_____

Please circle the answer that most describes how you feel about each statement below:

I am confused about who I am.

1……………………...2…………………….3……………………………….4……………….…..5

strongly disagree   disagree   not certain   agree   agree strongly

I feel like I have a foot in two worlds.

1……………………...2…………………….3……………………………….4……………….…..5

strongly disagree   disagree   not certain   agree   agree strongly

I sometimes feel like I am two different people.

1……………………...2…………………….3……………………………….4……………….…..5

strongly disagree   disagree   not certain   agree   agree strongly

I cannot articulate who I am.

1……………………...2…………………….3……………………………….4…………………. ...5

strongly disagree   disagree   not certain   agree   agree strongly

I am not clear about who I am.

1……………………...2…………………….3……………………………….4……………….…..5

strongly disagree   disagree   not certain   agree   agree strongly

I don't know where I came from or where I am going.

1……………………...2…………………….3……………………………….4……………….…..5

strongly disagree   disagree   not certain   agree   agree strongly

I don't always know who to be in different situations.

1……………..………...2……..……………….3……………………………….4……………….…..5

strongly disagree   disagree   not certain   agree   agree strongly

I cannot express who I am.

1……………………...2…………………….3……………………………….4……………….…..5

strongly disagree   disagree   not certain   agree   agree strongly

*Reverse scored.

Appendix 3

Qualitative Interview Questions:

(1)   Can you tell me a little bit about who you were before coming to this school?

(2)   Before you came to this school did you ever feel like you had a foot in two different worlds?

(3)   Do you have a better sense of who you are after participating in the wilderness program here?

(4)   What would it have been like if there had been no wilderness program and you had just come straight to the school?

(5)   How did your wilderness experience prepare you to be a student here?

(6)   Did you have time to think about what you want out of your life while you were out on Wilderness?

(7)   How do you think differently about your future since the completion of your wilderness program?

(8)   Do you have a better idea of how you want to make a difference in the world since completing the wilderness program?

(9)   What things in your life give you a sense of purpose?

(10) Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about your participation in the wilderness program?

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