

# Adolescents' perceptions of an adventure-based programme

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*A qualitative study was undertaken to explore the perceptions of youth regarding their wilderness rites of passage experience and its value for their lives. The researchers operated in an interpretive/constructivist paradigm and employed a qualitative research methodology. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, and individual interviews, documents, records, observations and reflections were used to collect data. Data were analysed by means of content analysis. We argue that participation in a wilderness rites of passage programme can contribute to the personal growth and development of youth at risk of experiencing or manifesting emotional or behavioural difficulties in schools. The research findings indicate that wilderness rites of passage programmes can contribute significantly towards school support for young people. The findings also highlight the fact that young people in the South African context are in need of caring school communities and adult mentorship. Young people are in need of support, discipline and guidance, as well as experiences of trust, love and care. School environments should change from being places of disappointment to being places of safety and growth. Such a culture of care could possibly curb the anger, resentment and distrust of the youth and support learners who are experiencing or manifesting emotional or behavioural difficulties in schools.*

**Keywords:** adolescents; adult mentorship; adventure based education; caring school communities; emotional and behavioural difficulties; wilderness rites of passage

## Introduction

A qualitative study was undertaken to explore the perceptions of adolescents regarding an adventure based education programme, or more specifically, a wilderness rites of passage encounter, and the perceived long term impact on their lives in terms of outcomes.

Relevant background information with regard to exploring the need for supportive strategies and various alternative modes of intervention related to young people, such as adventure based mediums, is provided in this section. The shift in paradigms in the philosophy of science, from the positivist to the social constructivist perspective, has led to a related shift in education and psychology. Within the new paradigm, emotional and behavioural difficulties in youth are no longer defined from a medical deficit perspective, which emphasises the control and punishment of inappropriate behaviour (Steyn, 2005). The emphasis has shifted towards a human rights and developmental, strength based and restorative perspective, which aims at educating and reclaiming youth at risk of manifesting challenging behaviour (Steyn, 2005; WCED, 2005a).

South Africa consequently ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 1990) in 1995 (Allsopp & Thumbadoo, 2002), as expressed in the Bill of Rights in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Act, 1996 (Act 108/1996). In adherence to the rights recognised in the Convention, South African policy and legislation emphasise that children must be protected from any form of psychological or physical violence, injury or abuse (DoE, 2000). Corporal punishment was duly abolished by the National Education Policy Act, 1996 (Act 27/1996) and the South African Schools Act, 1996 (Act 84/1996). The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1990) supported this move (Porteus, Vally & Ruth, 2001; Steyn, 2005).

The move away from the traditional use of control and punishment in South Africa strengthens the transformation process in education, which supports the nurturing of a culture of respect, tolerance and care, and encourages the building of self discipline, self confidence and self esteem of individuals (DoE, 2000; Porteus *et al.*, 2001). However, the impact of HIV&AIDS, poverty, violence and crime places many children at immense risk of experiencing emotional difficulties and manifesting challenging behaviour (Coetzee, 2005; Prinsloo, 2005; Zins, Elias & Greenberg, 2003).

Challenging behaviour in schools is one of the major problems that South African teachers have to face (Prinsloo, 2005). The abolition of corporal punishment has left many school teachers without alternatives to deal effectively with unacceptable learner behaviour. Violence, vandalism, bullying and disruptive classroom behaviour undermine instruction, create environments that are not conducive to learning and pose a threat to the school population (Luiselli, Putnam, Handler & Feinberg, 2005). This situation calls for the implementation of alternative disciplinary practices and procedures to educate and reclaim vulnerable learners (WCED, 2004).

In striving towards improving the situation, the Western Cape Education Department (WCED) aims “to combat the root causes of crime and violence by assisting schools in their efforts to become centres of excellence with strong community links to promote youth development” (WCED, 2005b: 1). Such efforts will contribute to a positive culture of learning and teaching in schools and a safe and orderly school environment promoting “academic excellence, positive socialisation, responsible citizenship, and healthy lifestyles” (Coetzee, 2005:185). Strong community links and intersectoral collaboration are essential to support schools in their efforts to become reclaiming environments in order to promote the well being of children (WCED, 2005a). Therefore, supportive strategies and various alternative modes of intervention should be explored in order to assist schools and ensure the sustained impact of the school’s reclaiming environment.

In this article we present a wilderness rites of passage programme, as an adventure based education medium, to illustrate that it may be considered as an intervention strategy to support schools. An explanation of the concept ‘wilderness rites of passage’ and a short explication of the theoretical underpinnings are given, followed by an outline of the research design, the consolidated data themes with salient extracts from the raw data and a discussion of the findings.

## Theoretical framework

According to the literature, the overall emphasis of wilderness rites of passage programmes falls on strengths, the discovery of potential, development of competence and nurturing resilience (Davis, 2003; Neill & Dias, 2001; Russell, 1999; Steyn, 2005). Jordan (2006) argues that resilience resides in the capability to significantly and meaningfully connect with others. All people have a need to be appreciated and to contribute to the well being of others. Therefore, mutually growth fostering connection is the key to resilience. Miller and Striver (in Jordan, 2006:82) emphasise that “[g]rowth fostering connections are characterised by mutual empathy and mutual empowerment”. This is congruent with the aims of positive psychology which seeks to foster personal development and growth, psychological wellness and optimal functioning (Linley & Joseph in Sheard & Golby, 2006). Sheard and Golby (2006:5) define positive psychology as “a constellation of personality styles (e.g. mental toughness, hardiness, dispositional optimism), positive self concept (e.g. self esteem, self efficacy) and positive emotions and moods (e.g. positive affectivity)”. Wilderness rites of passage programmes are discussed below to illustrate how they adhere to the abovementioned outcomes of positive psychology.

A wilderness rites of passage programme as an adventure based education medium conducts a variety of physically or psychologically demanding outdoor activities in a remote and unfamiliar natural setting (Human, 2006; Priest & Gass, 1997). The process engages experiential learning in a group setting and employs real and/or perceived physical or psychological risk (Human, 2006; Kimball & Bacon in Russell, 2001; Priest & Gass, 1997).

As the group provides emotional safety and support for all members through reciprocal inter

action and the sharing of strengths and weaknesses, participants' interpersonal skills, capacity to trust, social responsibility and pleasure in their physical selves and in being with others increase (Alvarez & Welsh in Moote & Wodarski, 1997; Kimball & Bacon in Russell, 2001). Furthermore, by overcoming personal challenges, where competence is tested against various mental, social and physical risks, participants' sense of self confidence and independence improve (Moote & Wodarski, 1997; Priest & Gass, 1997). In addition to self discovery and intrapersonal and social development, wilderness rites of passage programmes also aim at developing awareness and the enjoyment of nature. Thus the wilderness becomes a setting that builds a stronger sense of self and of community, while a connection is fostered with the natural environment (Andrews, 1999).

Besides the aspect of adventure in the wilderness, the focus also falls on rites of passage. Van Gennep (in Bell, 2003) defines the term 'rite of passage' as a rite accompanying any kind of change in "social state, age, place, or life cycle stage, such as birth, puberty, marriage, or death" (Bell, 2003:41). Through the ages, in many cultures, societies have used rites of passage to facilitate the transition from childhood into adulthood (Eliade in Gavazzi, Alford & McKenry, 1996), thus forming a foundation of social learning within the community. The rites of passage were intended to prepare the youth for future membership within a society, and for accepting responsibility to participate actively towards maintaining and developing the society (Nyerere in Pinnock & Douglas Hamilton, 1998).

Gavazzi *et al.* (1996) argue that the rites of passage of the pre modern era hold clear implications for the post modern era. Many difficulties concerning adolescence in contemporary society are linked to society's underutilisation of rites of passage. Adolescents who are left on their own to find transitional markers from childhood into adulthood, tend to fill the void with informal indicators of adult like behaviours, such as drug taking, alcohol consumption and sexual intercourse (Gavazzi *et al.*, 1996; Northcote, 2006; Weibel & Grimes in Bell, 2003). Such alternative rites of passage behaviours are misguided attempts to mark their transition into adulthood (Davis, 2003). Therefore, rites of passage are incorporated in the wilderness programme as an educational experience utilising the participation of trusted adults.

From the above it should be clear that the wilderness rites of passage experience fosters personal development and growth, psychological wellness and optimal functioning, all in line with the aims of positive psychology. Research supports the role of nature in mental health there is healing power when deep contact is made with nature (Davis, 2003). Goldenburg, McAvoy and Klenoaky (2005) found that outdoor adventure experiences contribute to the development and strengthening of important personal values. These values have a positive effect on the lives of participants: the transference of skills to everyday life, fostering awareness, the fulfilment of the self, providing opportunities to achieve personal goals, gaining self confidence, and building warm relationships with others. Research by Cross (2002) in this regard confirmed the nurturing of a sense of community and a sense of belonging. Adolescents also gained a stronger sense of self control as they were trusted and supported to make important choices requiring personal accountability. Adolescents also became more resilient, confident and socially responsible (Clark, Marmol, Cooley & Gathercoal, 2004). In the light of the above it is understandable that contemporary wilderness rites of passage programmes are gaining favour as a potential approach with which to develop healthy and well adjusted individuals and to foster responsible adult behaviour (Brendtro, Bockern, Clementson & Delaney in Bell, 2003; Eliade in Gavazzi *et al.*, 1996).

## Research design

We undertook this enquiry in the form of a basic qualitative study which was embedded in an interpretive/constructivist paradigm. The aim of the study was to investigate the potential value of wilderness rites of passage programmes as a contributing factor towards support for young people in schools. We were interested in the perceptions of adolescents in the Western Cape concerning their wilderness rites of passage encounter and how they perceived the encounter to have influenced

their lives. The fieldwork for this study was conducted in the context of Educo Africa that focuses on youth development and provides leadership, developmental and intervention programmes through outdoor and wilderness based experiential learning (Steyn, 2005). Educo Africa's programmes are rooted in a belief in the "therapeutic power of wilderness, the rich value of dialogue, deep reflection, and rites of passage methodology" (Educo, 2006:1). An environment is created where a meaningful wilderness experience has the potential to promote the perception of self and of the self in relation to others, and to strengthen learning and pro social behaviour, which can be implemented at home and in the community (Roberts in Steyn, 2005; Steyn, 2005).

Educo Africa's programmes are flexible and planned in collaboration with client agencies in order to meet the needs of young people. The programmes usually offer opportunities for action learning (experiential education through rock climbing, abseiling, hiking, and trust and team building challenges) and the development of emotional and spiritual awareness. Programmes also include time for group discussions and personal reflection (Steyn, 2005).

For this study we used a purposive sampling strategy to select participants. The predetermined criteria for selecting participants were young males who had previously participated in the Educo Africa wilderness rites of passage programmes within the 24 months preceding the interviews. The participants were originally referred to Educo Africa by child and youth care agencies. It was felt that these young people, who had experienced various psychosocial difficulties, could benefit from outdoor based capacity building interventions. The young people had to be younger than 23, as this is recognised as the end of adolescence (Kroger, 2007). Since wilderness rites of passage encounters for males and females can differ, we decided to focus on encounters featuring males only. Male participants were more accessible, as an analysis of profiles showed that Educo Africa's wilderness rites of passage programmes for vulnerable youth received more male participants than females.

Qualitative data collection methods included a review of literature, in depth interviews with past participants, a review of documents, such as background information on the organisation and various activities, as well as a training guide and systems handbook and observation and reflection notes taken during the research process. Educo Africa provided us with the 50 minute Vision to Dream TV documentary which was broadcasted by SABC TV on Freedom Day in April 2006. The documentary, based on the life of Coleridge Daniels and his and Educo Africa's wilderness rites of passage work with vulnerable youth, provided a step by step description of such an encounter at the Groot Winterhoek Outdoor Leadership Centre. Five participants who formed part of the documentary were available to be interviewed. Three participants of other encounters that did not form part of the documentary were also interviewed in order to get a variety of views. The preferred language of each participant was used during the interview. In the case where Xhosa was the participant's first language, English as the second language was used. Since all the participants, who were Xhosa first language users, had a full command of English, a translator was not used.

Content analysis was used to reveal themes that were constructed from the data. According to Patton (2002:453), content analysis refers "to any qualitative data reduction and sense making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings". The themes constructed from the data were evidence with which to substantiate the arguments about our emerging knowledge claims (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit, 2004; Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

The Ethical Code of Professional Conduct of the Professional Board for Psychology (in Babbie & Mouton, 2001) has been the guiding principle for this study. Informed consent was gained from Educo Africa and the participants individually; voluntary participation was ensured; by showing the participants respect and protecting their identities, care was taken not to harm them in any way. Finally, the research report was compiled in an accurate, objective and clear way in order for the reading public to understand and gain benefit from the research findings.

## Findings

Consolidated data themes derived from the analysis of the research data were the following: 'The

wilderness experience', 'The journey inward and outward' and 'Schools as havens in challenging contexts'.

## The wilderness experience

According to the participants, the following factors had the greatest impact on their lives: being in the wilderness, participating in team building initiatives, keeping a daily journal, attending circle time, going on a solo and participating in adventure challenge activities.

The young people reported that there were very few distractions in the wilderness, which enabled them to focus on essential things. They mentioned that the communities where they came from did not allow for time to become still and listen to oneself, as emphasised by one of the young people:

*In the wilderness you can think normally. You realise things. Here you hear lot of noise, music, here you do, you don't think. Wilderness is fine when you want to think. One can do your own thing. You relax there. Nothing is disturbing you, it is special. (P 6)*

The natural environment was experienced as a source of inspiration and freedom. One participant mentioned that he could almost hear the trees talking and in that encounter he found new ideas. Another shared the following:

*... on the last day at base camp, early in the morning, I was sitting there and was watching the sun coming up. I said to myself ... this thing was beautiful. It was the beautiness of the place that set me free. (P 5)*

The young people often talked about the cold and rainy weather. The exposure to the elements and unfamiliar surroundings increased their sense of vulnerability and forced them to participate and cooperate. They felt that they had to rely on one another in order to survive. The following response highlights one participant's perception of the importance of teamwork when facing the natural elements:

*In the wilderness I enjoyed seeing us struggling in the rain, how nice it was to be together and working together ... how nice it was to see how we worked together when it was raining and how we were looking after one another. (P 2)*

Different team building activities, such as low ropes courses and icebreaker games, were used to enhance the building of team spirit. One participant described these activities and remarked that success depended on mutual trust and the ability to work together as a team and stay focused:

*The ropes was for building trust. You need to put the person through the rope to the other side ... it's about trust and teamwork and focus. We did it in groups not one by one ... It's all about teamwork. (P 7)*

Coming from different backgrounds and cultures did not stop the young men from achieving a sense of brotherhood. Getting to know one another and becoming friends turned their lives around. They looked out for one another, motivating each other not to give up, but to press on and draw on the strength of the group. Together they had the power to complete the course. One of the participants summarised it thus:

*We did not know each other and now coming together and bonding like that. It was like we all had the power. There were no one of us who was giving up, we were all committing ourselves to finishing the camp that was nice because if one of us said no, I'm going home now because the camp is hard, we will motivate him to do the right thing and we did. It was very hard but we did it together, we worked as a group, as a team. (P 8)*

A growing sense of trust in one another and in the instructors helped participants to share their stories. The majority highlighted the importance of receiving and also giving love and empathy. These trusting relationships created a platform of understanding and empathy where they could share their experiences with others and grow within themselves, as demonstrated by the following response:

*What helped me was to communicate with other people. That is the main thing. Every time in*

*the wilderness we talked and talked and shared our experiences. It was like being in another world ... just us. (P 5)*

During the course, the young men were encouraged to keep a journal of what they were feeling and experiencing. Journaling gave them the opportunity to reflect upon their lives, to gain understanding and learn from their experiences. One participant indicated that these times of reflection helped him to grow as he allowed himself to write, or even talk, about matters that were on his mind:

*When you walk you think about that thing. It is a time to grow for me ... If you do activities like writing on a piece of paper all your pain, to read your pain, sometimes if you don't want to read it you can take your paper and say it, you can feel it. Every time you talk, something is coming off your shoulders, every time you talk. (P 5)*

During the solo, participants had to spend time alone in the wilderness. This forced them to face their fears. The young people said that they had an incredible sense of risk as they were exposed to the elements and to animals like snakes, wild cats and baboons. Being left on their own, they had to rely on themselves and had to find solace on their own. Whereas they experienced the solo as terrifying at first, they gradually managed to find peace as the hours went by. They could then allow thoughts and feelings of the past to emerge to be meditated upon. As they left the past behind they were able to focus on the present and the future. The young men reported that this brought relief. One participant shared the following:

*My position was under the big rocks. I was hungry and told myself do not think about food. Before I go to sleep in the evening, I was sitting with the, what do you call it, things on the mountains, I was sitting and they were around me. It shows me that nature welcomed us, the wild cats, they were around us, they were doing nothing, not attacking us. I was alone. I could relieve my mind from what was pressing on it and I think where I was at and on what I had to focus and what will happen in the future. (P 4)*

The young people experienced the abseiling activity as very scary. They indicated that once they surmounted this fear, they felt proud of who they were and what they had achieved. The participants mentioned that their success freed them from past failures and the hesitancy to face new challenges because of the fear of failure. Abseiling became their symbol of success. It made them determined to transfer what they had learned in this situation to other difficult situations that they might have to face in the future. In relation to the abseiling activity, one participant emphasised that believing in oneself played a major role in achieving something:

*I will always remember that thing, you was [sic] on top of the mountain and then you come down. Abseiling, it was nice to see I can do it. Yoh, it was scary. The courage edge teached [sic] me you must believe in yourself. When you tell yourself to do something then nothing can stop you. I was scared. I think I cannot do it, I'm going to fall but then I do it, I go, I go, I was scared but when I'm down I see nothing was to be scared for. (P 6)*

## The journey inward and outward

The participants indicated that the course supported them to develop within themselves, to gain life skills, to change their outlook and improve their relationships. Having had the opportunity to leave the past behind, the participants felt that they had gained awareness and greater understanding of life. One participant mentioned that many things changed because he had the opportunity to let go of past things that were hampering him. Letting go increased his awareness and ability to start anew:

*A lot of stuff was different afterwards. Before I went I was short tempered. When I came back I was more aware, I understand more. There was a lot of stuff that I was carrying around with me but I left it there. These things were left behind. It is done with. (P 1)*

The opportunity to let go of troublesome thoughts and feelings in the wilderness also changed the young people's attitudes towards other people. They realised that they were not the only ones who suffered but learned that other people also experience difficulties. Their awareness of their own suffering and the realisation that others might also suffer, evoked empathy and care for other people.

The participants reported that they had gained decision making skills. They became aware that impulsive decisions could have unexpected consequences. The one participant responded wisely by comparing decision making to a key:

*... decision making is the key of the box. That I will never forget, you cannot open a box if you haven't made a decision and that I will always carry with me. It is key, you have to decide what the wrong thing will be. That's why I will always carry it with me. I will not make a decision and then I do not know where it will take me. (P 2)*

Other participants felt that having to trust and rely on one another in the wilderness increased their social skills and taught them how to manage their anger and develop their leadership and communication abilities. The response of one participant was:

*It was really good to be away from the city. I got to learn about myself, my inner self, and how to control myself, my anger, everything. I learned how to trust, it was all about trust. Teamwork and trust. (P 8)*

The young people stated that they had learnt to focus on the positive. They realised that their existence was not meaningless but that they did have a purpose in life and that it was not too late to make a turn in a positive direction to pursue their goals and fulfil their purpose. They realised that instead of waiting for opportunities to come their way, they had to stand on their own two feet and make their own dreams come true:

*I changed. I couldn't see things that was right for me, only smoking the dagga and stealing. There I said to myself try to stick with the right not the wrong. After I stick with the right, things changed. I changed inside. I don't want to do any drugs anymore. I stopped smoking. You need to listen to yourself and need to think very well. The camp changed my life, so many things changed. Like the person I'm now, was because of the camp. (P 7)*

Participants reported that they had learnt to respect and appreciate people for who they are. They mentioned that, upon returning to their neighbourhoods, their relationships with family and friends, and people in general, changed. After a while, people sensed the respect they showed them and started asking about their attitude change. One participant shared the following:

*... at first me and my family never communicated. When they sit together, maybe they are talking, it was boring, I just go. When I came back it was nice. It did help to sit with them, stay at home, watching TV together, eating together and other normal things to do, not like before, before I never did that. (P 6)*

## The need for schools as havens in challenging contexts

The participants mentioned that schools should be more aware of the impact of systemic factors on the lives of young people. Young people also identified the need for the fostering of emotional connections to the self and others, as well as an increasing need for mentorship.

The young people indicated the impact that the environment at home and at school had on their school careers. One participant shared that his home and neighbourhood became a place of disappointment where he lost his dreams and sense of purpose:

*When I ran away from home I was six years old. I went to the street asking money to people and also lying, saying all families are dead so they would feel ashamed of us. I had a dream, now I have ghosts, my dream was to go out there, to be the first black man here in Africa who is an astronaut, but it didn't happen. The youth, lot of them doesn't go to school; they are just here around. (P 8)*

Another participant gave a beautiful descriptive image of the impact of the home context on young people. He explained that conditions at home can place young people in tight situations, which cause "knots" inside them. Once they move away into other contexts, such as the community or school environment, youth tend to manifest challenging behaviour patterns at inappropriate times and places. People will then brand these young people as problem children, unaware of the fact that their challenging behaviour is only a way of releasing the home related stress inside of them. The effect

of the stress is thus transferred from home to different environments:

*it makes a knot and once you get out of the tight situation then you want to spread it to others at a difficult time and in the wrong place and when it comes out people will say they are problem kids but when they are at home they are normal kids but at home they are forced into a knot. (P 2)*

It can thus be gathered that young people in schools can benefit if teachers and other significant people realise that youth do not necessarily demonstrate emotional and behavioural difficulties without a reason. Teachers and caregivers need to understand that challenging behaviour can be an attempt to release the pent up stress and negative emotions and thoughts. It may be the language they use in asking for support from adults. If their plea is ignored, disillusionment may lead to young people dropping out of school. However, participants reported that leaving school is not a good option, for life outside school is difficult, especially when living on the streets. One of the participants explained it as follows:

*I don't want to live on the street because you are only in trouble and the police catches you, you don't have a pozzie, you don't know where to go. It changes you inside. There is drugs everywhere. Youth need to listen to them and need to think very well because being on the street brings you nowhere, you get sick and smoke too much you don't wash and don't have clothes to wear, no warm blankets, nothing. (P 4)*

The young people expressed their concern for youth in schools and felt that they need opportunities to establish trusting relationships. They acknowledged that some young people do not allow others to come too close to them or to talk about their feelings and the things that trouble them. They could relate to this from their own past but said that connections with other young people and opportunities to share their stories enabled them to let go of the pain that was keeping them bound to the past. Therefore, connection to others can result in positive change and encouragement in youth:

*When you're bonding with other people your life can turn around, it is not bad influence, it is good influences. (P 5)*

*... it is very important to be in contact with someone close to your heart that will lift you every time. (P 2)*

Furthermore, it was felt that youth in schools need to feel supported by adults. The young people mentioned that the people who encouraged them and displayed confidence in their potential, inspired and motivated them. Youth in school, therefore, need supportive and nurturing adults who have faith in them, who are willing to reach out to them and to spread hope, show love, earn trust and have compassion. However, the stories shared regarding their experiences at school revealed that the young people perceived teachers in general as unsympathetic, lacking understanding, having low expectations of learners, focusing on negative rather than on positive aspects of learners, having inflexible attitudes towards learners with learning problems and demonstrating unwillingness to provide appropriate learning support. The youth stated that learners showed a lack of interest in schoolwork partly because they experienced the schoolwork as irrelevant to their circumstances but also because of the lack of motivation with which teachers presented the subject content. They said that teachers ridiculed learners in front of classmates and that learners teased and bullied peers. However, the participants could also remember a few teachers who had faith in them and who made life easier in school with their caring and supportive attitudes.

Another concern of the young people in this study was that the youth have negated their true selves and their life's purpose. Young people are in search of answers to questions such as "Who am I?" and "Where am I going?" Youth, therefore, need guidance in this matter. Reflection can be a very rewarding tool for young people when they start exploring their intimate thoughts. One of the participants had this to say:

*Am I a person who likes to judge what other people do, who like to say you will never be better than me, who like to say you'll never make it? Do I believe in myself? Do I trust myself in what I do in my life? Do I love myself? Do I pretend myself that I am a good person? Am I a learner or a destroyer? (P 8)*



With the help of adult mentors, youth can gain self knowledge and become more aware of their purpose in life. Finding a purpose can give meaning to their lives and help youth in schools to be set free from their unhappy past. The participants agreed that youth in schools can benefit greatly by having a mentor who can guide them towards a new beginning, which can break the patterns of challenging behaviour. It can also support emotional difficulties in youth, because of the inner transformation and the focus on powerfully living with a purpose.

## Discussion of the findings

The Children's Amendment Bill of the Republic of South Africa 2006 states that prevention and early intervention programmes must focus on promoting the well being of children and the realisation of their full potential. It focuses on strengthening and building children's capacity and self reliance with respect to addressing problems that may occur or are bound to occur. Resilience increases the capacity of children and youth to alleviate the negative influence of environmental stressors and, therefore, plays an essential role in the support of learners who are manifesting experiencing, emotional or behavioural difficulties or are at risk of doing so. Since South African policy and legislation require that school communities respond to challenging behaviour in a developmental and restorative way, schools can benefit by employing interventions that guide youth towards pro social and responsible behaviour, whilst fostering resilience.

The research findings arrived at in this study revealed that the completion of the wilderness rites of passage process fostered personal development and growth in terms of individual characteristics and the building of caring and supportive relationships with peers and adults. This is consistent with the literature that states that participation in wilderness rites of passage programmes triggers the development of the individual through activities aiming to increase self knowledge, to foster intra and interpersonal growth, and to strengthen self esteem, self efficacy and self actualisation (Meyer & Wenger in Shread & Golby, 2006). In addition to this, the wilderness experience improves participants' psychosocial functioning by enhancing self esteem. It also enhances life skills in areas such as conflict resolution, problem solving, decision making and communication, and fosters a sense of autonomy, identity and meaning in life (Bloemhoff, 2006; Moote & Wodarski, 1997; Neill & Richards in Shread & Golby, 2006; Priest & Gass, 1997).

All the above outcomes are in line with positive psychology and its sub disciplines with the focus falling on "building positive qualities" (Strümpfer, 2005:23) and ways of enhancing psychological well being (Strümpfer, 2005). Ryff and Keyes (in Ryan & Deci, 2001) present the concept of psychological well being as a multidimensional approach that "taps six distinct aspects of human actualisation" (Ryan & Deci, 2001:142). Ryff (1989) indicates that the core dimensions of psychological well being are self acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life and personal growth. These constructs have been identified as outcomes upon completion of the wilderness rites of passage process. Completion of the programme resulted in enhanced resilience and psychological well being for the participants. This is in line with South African policy and legislation which clearly state that prevention and early intervention programmes must focus on promoting the well being of children and the realisation of their full potential. Therefore, wilderness rites of passage programmes as a culture fair medium could be considered as a major contributing factor towards school support for young people of all cultures at risk of experiencing, or manifesting, emotional and behavioural difficulties.

In line with Cohen and Sandy's (2003) findings, the findings from this study further suggest that a protective and supportive learning environment can foster characteristics that build resilience and enhance psychological well being in young people. According to the literature schools can present a setting and offer a unique opportunity where children who face many environmental risks can find structure and shelter (Doll in Taub & Pearrow, 2006). Noddings (in Doyle & Doyle, 2003) argues that there is a need to create a school culture of care. She states that schools that operate as caring communities shape caring relationships among individuals, engage children in values such

as respect and responsibility, and encourage children to care for others (Noddings in Baker & Bridger, 1997). Joseph and Efron (2005) argue that a caring community focuses on nurturing relationships and allows emotional attachment, mutual respect and support. Individuals immersed in a sense of community are more likely to act altruistically, develop social and emotional competencies and be academically motivated.

The research findings also show that youth can benefit greatly when engaged in relationships with adults that provide emotional connection, personal involvement and trust, acceptance and guidance. As such relationships are often not available or are not formed in the home environment, and since young people spend a significant amount of time in schools, Portwood, Ayers, Kinnison, Waris and Wise (2005) argue that schools provide an obvious setting where youth mentoring can be promoted.

The literature emphasises that mentors are essential in the lives of young people. Youth in search of answers to questions such as “Who am I?” and “Where am I going?” need the guidance of adults (Davis, 2003). In describing the psycho social crisis of identity versus role confusion, Erikson (in Kroger, 2007) claims that interaction with others leads to the development of self awareness or personal identity (see also Newman in Carr, 2006). Erikson (in Moote & Wodarski, 1997:147) describes identity as “having a clear sense of who one is and where one is going”. Kroger (2007) argues that the stage of forming identity lays the groundwork for entry into adult life. Davis (2003) believes that adolescents need support, structure and guidance to successfully complete the transition from childhood to adulthood and to gain specific knowledge, specialised skills and positive character traits. The development of a relationship that provides emotional safety and protection, personal involvement, trust and acceptance may promote a sense of being important to a significant other, thereby strengthening self esteem and other aspects of psychological well being (Harter; Short, Sandler & Roosa in DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005, Visser, 2006).

School based mentoring programmes will not only effect change in the individual but will also impact the school as a whole as it contributes to a sense of community. A sense of community will foster a sense of belonging and connectedness to the school. This will serve as a factor that protects against adverse behaviours (Simons Morton, Crum, Haynie & Saylor in Portwood *et al.*, 2005). Young people who form positive bonds with their school will most likely choose to engage in various pro social behaviours. They will turn away from challenging behaviours such as fighting, bullying and truancy and improve in their attitudes towards self, others and school (Simons Morton *et al.* in Portwood *et al.*, 2005).

## Limitations

This study had certain limitations that need to be addressed in future research. The first limitation relates to the transformation of the participants’ experiences on the course to their everyday lives once they are back in their communities. In this study, the researcher focused mainly on the effect of the experience. The manner in which participants transferred their wilderness experiences to their everyday lives was not the focus of this study. More follow up interviews with the participants might have determined how the transference took place. The quality of the research could have been enhanced by doing this.

The second limitation is related to the fact that the research population in this study consisted exclusively of young males. Educo Africa’s wilderness rites of passage programmes for vulnerable youths also cater for young females. It is important to note that since the programmes can differ, males and females attend separate courses. In general, Educo Africa’s programmes receive more male than female participants. Male participants are therefore more accessible. It is interesting to note that in the past, Educo Africa presented programmes for wilderness rites of passage for females in provinces other than the Western Cape. The researchers focused on young males in this study because there was great emphasis on documents of the Western Cape Education Department and the researchers felt that participants should thus be resident in this region. Therefore, in future, the

research could be extended to include young females as well as young males in other regions of South Africa.

## Conclusion

As schools have to cope with increasing numbers of students with emotional and behavioural difficulties, the benefits offered by complementary programmes call for consideration. Education needs to embrace a variety of approaches in guiding youth to find constructive ways of expressing their needs and finding purpose in life. Modern day rites of passage and youth mentoring programmes can contribute positively to the psychological development and the social functioning of youth. Therefore, wilderness rites of passage may be considered as a potential strategy to support school communities in developing healthy and well adjusted individuals and fostering responsible behaviour in young people.

Collaborative partnerships between schools and programme managers could assist in the planning of wilderness based experiential programmes to bring about prevention or early intervention strategies on a larger scale for a wider range of young people. Awareness raising regarding the beneficial contribution in the lives of programme participants could promote the involvement of prospective funders and make the programme more accessible to vulnerable groups of society in particular. Increased school involvement in these programmes can lend appropriate support to ensure sustainability after the completion of the programmes.

It is recommended that South African schools start to focus on adopting the notion of caring school communities. This transformation will require the raising of teacher awareness, departing from punitive measures to regulate learner behaviour, implementing wellness promoting strategies, and establishing an educator support system for learners. Teachers need to be made aware of the benefits of displaying caring and supportive, non judgmental and non threatening attitudes towards learners with emotional and behavioural difficulties. Rigid approaches to control or punish challenging behaviour need to be replaced by flexible approaches that allow for interaction and support, and for building self esteem by nurturing a sense of belonging, mastery, independence and generosity in learners. Since teachers will play an essential role in establishing a culture of care in schools, programmes must be implemented to enhance and support their wellness and efforts (Freedman, 2003).

Individuals seek to satisfy their physical and psychological needs (Van Niekerk, Van Eeden & Botha, 2001). Ignoring these needs in schools can result in learners manifesting disruptive and challenging behaviour. Schools as communities of care can proactively prevent challenging behaviours by fostering the development of physical and psychological capacities in learners to cope successfully amidst intense adversity. Schools, therefore, must consider becoming providers of social and emotional reciprocal support by promoting social acceptance and interaction, and positive peer assistance.

Both pre service and in service teacher training requires an awareness of the rights of all children and the lived experience of orphans and vulnerable children. In the professional development of teachers consideration could be given to focusing on strategies by which to establish positive relationships with youth, and to manage irresponsibility and rebellion by mobilising positive youth involvement. Teachers could also be trained as counsellors to enable them to arrange counselling interventions when needed. This will ensure that all learners will have someone to talk to or someone who can support them when necessary. School counselling support groups could collaborate with circles of support in communities. A basic counselling background would equip teachers to create a growth promoting climate in which learners can become what they are capable of becoming. If teachers reflect the attitudes of congruence (genuineness), unconditional positive regard (acceptance and unconditional caring) and empathic understanding, learners will be less defensive and more open to themselves and their world, and will start behaving in pro social and constructive ways (Corey, 2005). This will enhance the community of care at school.

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