

Exploring How Roles in Outward Bound Help Adolescents Learn Social-Emotional Skills

**Natalie Szot
Carolyn Orson**

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

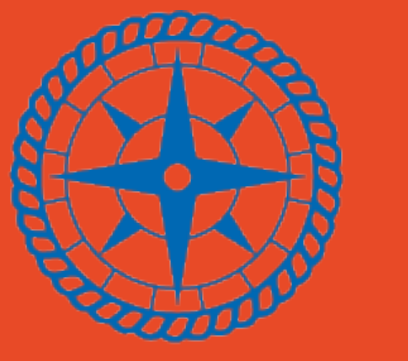
Abstract

This study examines how adolescents learned social-emotional skills from Outward Bound (OB), an outdoor adventure education program. Participants engage in activities such as backpacking and canoeing during five- to seven-day trips in the wilderness. Prior research has shown youth programs, including Outward Bound, are effective in facilitating the development of social and emotional learning skills. There is limited research, however, exploring the experiences and processes behind the development of social-emotional skills. For this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 teachers who chaperoned their students on Outward Bound courses. These teachers were able to provide insight into changes in youth participants as they interacted with the students prior to, during, and after the program. Transcribed interviews were analyzed using grounded theory methods, a set of analytic procedures involving creating codes and memo-making (Charmaz, 2014). Teachers reported that having a structured role in OB, such as a leadership role, promoted students' ability to be socially open and better able to connect with those outside their usual friend groups, even when they returned to school. Furthermore, these structured roles appeared to help students gain a sense of self-efficacy. They became more confident in their ability to take action, including trying new things and problem-solving in the classroom. These results highlight the value and potential of structured roles in supporting the development of social-emotional skills and can be used to inform staff practices in Outward Bound and other youth programs.



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**OUTWARD
BOUND**

*Character*LAB

Research Problem

Discovering what kinds of experiences facilitate social-emotional learning remains a paramount question in adolescent research. Prior research has shown that youth programs, including OB, are effective in facilitating the development of social and emotional learning skills, including improved self-concept, interpersonal skills, and resilience (Gillespie & Allen-Craig, 2009; Hattie et al., 1997; Wang et al., 2006; White, 2012). For OB, there is limited research exploring the experiences behind the development of social emotional skills.

We decided to gain insight from teachers who joined students on OB expeditions. Teacher's perspective is valuable because they know students prior to the course and can speak to any changes they see resulting from students participating in OB.

Methods

We interviewed 10 teachers from the Philadelphia area who attended OB courses with their students. Interviews focused on teachers' experiences and the impact the course had on them and their students. Teachers had 6-35 years of experience teaching and working with students. The teachers ages ranged from ages 29-57 (M = 43.9 yrs; 67% female, 89% white).

Semi-structured interviews containing open-ended question were conducted with the teachers. Teachers also completed a questionnaire to gather information about their school, experience, and basic demographics. A grounded theory approach was used to analyze the interview transcripts.



Results

What students learned

Teachers reported many of their students changed after their OB course. First, students increased their self-efficacy, seeing themselves as more capable. Second, students became more socially connected and open to each other.

- 1. Self-efficacy:** They developed an increased understanding of their abilities and recognized how much they can do. Students gained confidence in not just their self but in their ability to empower and to take action.
- 2. Social openness and connection:** Students appeared to be willing to develop new, stronger connections and interact with people who are outside friend groups.

How students learned: Roles

Teachers observed student learning as a result of having roles. Roles included assigned program roles or – more commonly – roles students created. In both cases, they were often leadership roles.

- 1. Assigned program roles:** Assigned program roles are established positions that organize an environment and social interactions in a way that provides opportunities to interact with new people in different ways (e.g. being responsible for navigating, cooking, or gathering materials for camp).
- 2. Created roles:** A student created their own role by stepping up or putting themselves in a position of leading their peers.



Example 1: Assigned roles facilitating social openness & connection

Bart described how students, Josh and Evan, were both assigned to be cooks and how it brought the two students together. Before they were cooks for the day, as Josh said, "I never knew Evan in school." Then, "Evan and I had a chance to talk, I got to know him... and that he's a pretty cool guy." The structured role provided an opportunity for Josh and Evan to spend the day working together and get to know each other.

Example 2: Created roles facilitating social openness & connection

Madeline described how Jessie went from "living inside of her hoodie and not really talking to people" to connecting with a group of friends. On the course she started "taking care of things, and quietly showing her friends, who hadn't been on course before, how to set up a tent, how to canoe." After the course Jessie was more connected and "would hang out with [friends] every day at recess." Madeline said that it was the leadership role Jessie created while on course that seemed to facilitate this change.

Example 3: Created roles facilitating self-efficacy

Camila described how Moira came to see herself as having more in her than she thought after stepping into a role she created. On the trip the students needed to build a raft. "She spent five hours working on it, and this is not this girl. She was the type that would give up after 10 minutes, so I think that that really helped her to see that, "You know what, I have a lot more in me and I need to stop giving up all the time." Moira "stepped up" and took a leadership role to "try to figure this out." Camila said she brought that self-efficacy back to the classroom in group activities.

Discussion

The development of these skills, increasing their self-efficacy and becoming more socially open and connected, appeared to be facilitated through roles, especially leadership roles, that were either assigned by instructors or created by youth.

Richmond and colleagues (2018) also found the power of roles in supporting the development of self-efficacy. However, this research also highlights the power of roles in the development of social openness and connection. Roles provided the chance for youth to interact and connect with new people in different ways. Roles may provide a scaffold for young people's relationships, allowing them to see each other in a new light.

Through their creation of roles, youth appeared to be agents of their own development (Lerner, Theokas, & Jellicic, 2005). Defying teachers' expectations of them, youth took the initiative to create roles to accomplish group goals. For both types of learning, roles were created by youth more frequently than roles were assigned. This suggests the importance of making space for youth to shape and enact roles as they see fit.

According to their teachers, many students appeared to have developed social emotional skills the teachers recognized even once students were back in school. Previous research on programs found that roles can facilitate learning into other contexts (Larson et al., 2019). Additional research is needed to better understand this transfer process and the power of roles youth create.

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