



## An outcome evaluation of the implementation of the Outward Bound Singapore five-day “intercept” program



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### A B S T R A C T

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The present study evaluated an Outward Bound Singapore five-day “intercept” program for 136 adolescent participants, aimed at addressing frequent deliberate truancy and absenteeism from school and within-school extracurricular activities using a quasi-experimental design with a matched no-treatment comparison group. Findings suggested that there is some preliminary evidence that such a program could yield positive outcomes in terms of adolescents being more behaviorally engaged in school as demonstrated by improved attendance of both academic and non-academic activities up to 3 months after the conclusion of the intervention program. Goal setting had a short-term positive effect with intervention participants improving significantly more so than comparison participants at 1-month post intervention but not at 3-month follow up. For problem solving, although the intervention group participants improved more than comparison participants at both 1-month post intervention and at 3-month follow up, these effects were not statistically significant. Research and practice implications were discussed.

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School disengagement has potentially serious consequences because prior research has shown that it is linked to school dropout, substance use and criminal activity (e.g., Archambault, Janosz, Fallu, & Pagani, 2009; Vaughn et al., 2011). Conversely, students who are more engaged in school have higher grades and show better psychological adjustment (Li & Lerner, 2011). Therefore, it comes as no surprise that school disengagement and eventual dropout is a universal problem that affects society negatively in a variety of ways. Students who dropout from school early likely lack appropriate academic and social skills, and have a far more difficult task in integrating as a competent member of society (Eccles & Wang, 2012).

Besides formal schooling and classes, scholars and youth advocates have argued that student participation and engagement in extracurricular activities such as sports and school clubs is a productive use of adolescents' leisure time and provide unique opportunities for growth and development (Larson, 2000). There is a growing body of evidence showing that extracurricular involvement is associated with lower dropout rates, higher likelihood of college attendance, more favorable mental health and is linked to reduced problem behaviors such as delinquency and substance use (Mahoney & Cairns, 1997; Mahoney, Cairns, & Farmer, 2003).

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Increasingly, educators, researchers and policy makers are focusing their attention on school engagement (formal schooling and extracurricular participation) as a means for addressing problems associated with youth disaffection, alienation, and school dropout. Different components of engagement have been differentially associated with a variety of outcomes. For example, students with positive behavioral engagement such as good attendance are more likely to succeed and remain in school while those who are frequently absent or truant from school are at greater risk of academic failure and dropout (e.g., [Simons-Morton & Chen, 2009](#)). Students who are emotionally engaged in school appear to be less vulnerable to emotional distress, substance use, and depressive symptoms (e.g., [Li & Lerner, 2011](#)). And cognitive engagement is positively associated with students who are willing to exert the necessary cognitive effort to use more efficient and effective self-regulated strategies for comprehending complex academic ideas and issues (e.g., [Miller & Byrnes, 2001](#)). While the conceptualization of engagement has multiple facets such as behavioral, emotional and cognitive domains, our emphasis was on behavioral school engagement because the program evaluated in this study specifically targeted issues of truancy from academic classes and absenteeism from extracurricular activities.

Outdoor adventure education programs have long been identified as having the potential to be effective in enhancing both educational (e.g., [Sandford, Duncombe, & Armour, 2008](#)) and social-emotional (e.g., [Sandford, Armour, & Warmington, 2006](#)) outcomes ([Hattie, Marsh, Neill, & Richards, 1997](#); [Lubans, Plotnikoff, & Lubans, 2012](#)). Most researchers would trace the origin of modern outdoor adventure education to German educator, Kurt Hahn, who created the first Outward Bound program in 1941 ([Outward Bound, 2014](#)). There are a variety of different types of outdoor adventure education programs and Outward Bound is probably the most widespread and common. Today, Outward Bound International operates in 33 countries with over 250 wilderness and urban locations ([Outward Bound International, 2014](#)). The most common feature of Outward Bound outdoor adventure education programs is that they involve mastering mentally and/or physically challenging objectives such as hiking or kayaking to a specific point and these activities are conducted away from the person's typical environment. These programs are also typically conducted in small groups requiring interaction and cooperation, setting of group and personal goals, problem-solving and decision making ([Hattie et al., 1997](#)). For example, [Borman, Hewes, Overman, and Brown \(2003\)](#) in their review of experimental research on comprehensive school reform models for whole school engagement and dropout prevention, found Outward Bound programs to show highly promising evidence of effectiveness.

Even though the expressed objectives of Outward Bound adventure education programs are clearly positive, it is necessary to systematically evaluate these programs and to determine effectiveness of such interventions for the adolescents who participate in them. It is important to move beyond merely anecdotally documenting the value of such programs; rather, evidence-based program evaluation is needed ([Ewert & Sibthorp, 2009](#); [Hattie et al., 1997](#)). Thus far, there have been various piecemeal attempts at systematic evaluation to varying degrees of success. In their meta-analysis, [Hattie et al. \(1997\)](#) documented that the greatest immediate effects were found on most dimensions of leadership, academics, independence and emotional stability, among other dimensions. While the average effect size at the end of programs was .34, [Hattie et al. \(1997\)](#) noted that these effect sizes varied substantially depending on the specific type of program, and outcomes improved as length of program and age of participants increased. More critically however, the pretest-posttest study was documented to be the most often used research design, and [Hattie et al. \(1997\)](#) argued that while this was not unreasonable given the constraints of evaluating outdoor adventure education programs, they strongly advocate that alternative designs such as true-experimental, quasi-experimental, or time-series designs be considered to control against plausible rival hypotheses.

There are numerous challenges confronting evaluations of outdoor adventure education programs, especially when there are so many potential confounding variables many of which remain largely uncontrollable, but influential ([Ewert & Sibthorp, 2009](#)). [Ewert and Sibthorp \(2009\)](#) highlighted two gaps in the literature. First, they echo [Hattie et al.'s \(1997\)](#) call for the consideration and use of either true-experimental or quasi-experimental designs where possible, although they acknowledged that while “it would be valuable to design and conduct a study with ideal assignment selection, statistical controls, and timing, field-based researchers are often forced to make choices between what is ideal and what is feasible given the resources available to conduct the study” ([Ewert & Sibthorp, 2009](#), p. 386). Second, they discussed the notion of postexperience euphoria. Postexperience euphoria is a feeling of excitement, positive affect, and a sense of accomplishment following an outdoor experiential education experience ([Marsh, Richards, & Barnes, 1987](#)). This confounding variable can potentially obscure actual feelings about one's abilities and course experience. This effect is often short-term, and if measurement is taken immediately following the experience, an individual's true feelings may be hidden or unclear. Therefore, the researchers recommend that where possible, evaluation studies concerned with program effectiveness may wish to assess not just immediate postcourse outcomes but also outcomes several weeks after program completion ([Ewert & Sibthorp, 2009](#)).

The present study evaluated an Outward Bound Singapore five-day “intercept” program aimed at addressing frequent deliberate truancy and absenteeism from school and within-school extracurricular activities using a quasi-experimental design with a matched no-treatment comparison group. The “intercept” program was the name of this specific program offered by Outward Bound Singapore. Goal setting and problem solving skill were measured at three time points of pretest, 1 month post-intervention, and 3-month follow-up. Categorical behavioral data such as whether adolescents skipped academic classes and whether they skipped within-school extracurricular activities were measured at two time points, at pretest and at 3-month follow up. We hypothesized that participants in the intervention group would report significantly better goal setting and problem solving skill at 1 month post-intervention and at 3-month follow up, compared to participants in the comparison group. We also hypothesized that participants in the intervention group would show significant reductions in the skipping of academic classes and the skipping of extracurricular activities, compared with participants in the comparison group.

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