Brad’s Story: Exploration of an Inclusive Adventure Education Experience

Sue Sutherland and Sandra A. Stroot

Abstract

Adventure education programs impact the interpersonal and intrapersonal development of participants through experiences within the natural environment that provide emotional, physical, and social challenge (Ewert, 1989; Priest & Gass, 1997). The premise of such programs is that there is an increased level of self-awareness brought about by the positive change experienced through participation. The purpose of this ethnographic case study was to explore opportunities for interpersonal and intrapersonal experiences for a 13-year-old boy with high functioning autism (HFA) who participated in an inclusive adventure education program. Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986), particularly social self-efficacy, was used as a lens to guide the design and data analysis of the study. Two themes emerged from the data: a) letting down his guard, and b) Brad as helper. The findings suggest that participation in the 3-day trip provided positive interpersonal and intrapersonal experiences for Brad.

KEYWORDS: Adventure education, Inclusion, High functioning autism, Interpersonal, Intrapersonal
The prevalence of autism, once considered a relatively rare condition, has recently been estimated at 1 in 150 births within the USA (CDC, 2007). Among the many implications of living with this disability, is the significant impairment of social interaction, which can lead to the social isolation of individuals with autism. At this time knowledge pertaining to both the cause and treatment of autism is limited; however, the need for developments in this area is greater than ever.

One potential approach to facilitating social interaction among individuals with autism is through adventure education (AE) programs. The literature suggests that AE programs can impact the interpersonal and intrapersonal development of the participants through experiences within the natural environment that provide emotional, physical, and social challenge (Ewert, 1989; Priest & Gass, 1997). Interpersonal relationships are concerned with how individuals function in a group situation and include elements such as communication, cooperation, trust, problem-solving, leadership, and conflict resolution. Whereas, intrapersonal relationships are concerned with how the individual functions within himself or herself, and includes constructs such as self-concept, self-efficacy and spirituality among others.

The field of inclusive AE can still be considered to be in its infancy. Although the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990 spurred more inclusive AE programs, the research on such programs is somewhat limited. The research that has been conducted in this area has indicated positive outcomes in: self-concept (Robinson, 1994), acceptance of and attitude toward individuals with disabilities (McAvoy, Schatz, Stutz, Schleien, & Lais, 1989; Sable, 1995), decrease in levels of trait anxiety and positive effect upon interpersonal relationships (McAvoy et al., 1989), positive change in relationships/social integration (Anderson, Schleien, McAvoy, Lais, & Seligman, 1997), personal growth/challenge, self awareness, relationships with others and valuing personal or spiritual connection with others (McAvoy, Holman, Goldenberg, & Klenosky, 2006), and outdoor skills, level of satisfaction and social/socialization abilities (McAvoy, Smith, & Rynders, 2006). Although social interaction and socialization abilities were found to be positively impacted for participants in the studies, there was no specific research that explored these areas for individuals with high functioning autism (HFA).

While inclusion is increasing in all aspects of society, there has been limited research exploring the experience of participation in inclusive AE on the interpersonal and intrapersonal development of individuals with disabilities. Therefore, the purpose of this ethnographic case study was to explore opportunities for interpersonal and intrapersonal experiences for a 13-year-old boy with HFA who participated in an inclusive adventure education program. Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986), particularly social self-efficacy, was used as a lens to guide the design and data analysis of the study.

Social Cognitive Theory

One premise of the Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986) is that individuals possess a self-system which allows them to exercise a measure of control over their thoughts, feelings, motivation, and actions. This system enables individuals to perceive, regulate, and evaluate their own behavior that results from the interaction of the system with environmental influences. In doing this, the system acts in a self-regulatory manner allowing individuals to influence their cognitive processes and actions thereby altering their environment (Pajares, 1997). Self-efficacy beliefs play a major role in this system. Self-efficacy is an individual's own belief(s) regarding accomplishment of a task (Bandura, 1997). Self-efficacy judgments are used in relation to a goal and are task and situation specific (Pajares, 1997). Efficacy expectations, given appropriate skills and incentives, determine what activities people choose, the amount of effort they exert, and how long this effort is sustained in stressful situations (Bandura, 1997). In general, individuals participate in activities in which they feel confident about their abilities, and avoid those about which they do not feel confident. Bandura (1986) postulated four sources of efficacy information available to individuals: mastery experience, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and physiological states. Within these four sources, mastery experiences are posited to provide the strongest information related to self-efficacy. In general, success in an activity raises an individual's efficacy expectations whereas failure lowers them.
Social self-efficacy can be defined as an individual’s confidence related to his or her ability to engage in the tasks necessary to initiate and maintain interpersonal relationships (Smith & Betz, 2002). According to Connolly (1989), social self-efficacy includes skills such as getting and giving help, participation in a social group or activity, friendly behaviors, and social boldness. Social self-efficacy is a determining factor in an adolescent’s social relationships and interactions (Gresham, 1984). It has been argued that a strong sense of social self-efficacy helps to foster positive social relationships, whereas weak social self-efficacy can lead to socially inappropriate behaviors (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996).

Autism

Autism is characterized by severe impairments in the areas of social interaction, communication, and a restricted repertoire of activities and interests (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Individuals with autism fall along a continuum from high functioning to low functioning ability relative to behaviors associated the areas of social interaction, communication, activity and interests. When compared to their typically developing peers, children with autism have been found to spend less time interacting, experienced lower quality interactions, spend more time in purposeless or no activity than their typically developing peers (Lord & Magill-Evans, 1995), spend less time in proximity to peers, received less social initiations from peers, focused less on other children, and produced fewer verbalizations to others than their typically developing peers (McGee, Feldman, & Morrier, 1997). The impact of the deficits in behavior on social isolation for a child with autism is primarily the result of their own behavior rather than avoidance by others (Sigman & Ruskins, 1999).

Within the population of individuals who have been identified with autism, those who have average or above average IQ are determined to have HFA. When compared to individuals with low functioning autism, individuals with HFA use their higher level cognitive abilities to overcome deficits in social behaviors and can reach higher levels of social relationships (Kasari, Chamberlain, & Bauminger, 2001). Despite obtaining higher levels of social relationships than other individuals with autism, the social deficits of individuals with HFA can lead to social isolation, which can further develop as the individual matures (Webb, Miller, Pierce, Strawser, & Jones, 2004). Bauminger, Shulman, and Agam (2004) argue that, to help children with HFA compensate or overcome this social isolation, the development of self and the development of social relationships should be of foremost concern for this population. Because AE impacts both the interpersonal and intrapersonal development of participants (Priest & Gass, 1997), it appears to be a viable method of fostering the development of self and social relationships for individuals with HFA. Previous research has shown that individuals with disabilities experience positive outcomes through participation in adventure education programs; however, this body of literature has not explored the adventure education experience specifically with individuals with autism. Filling this gap in the research will clearly add to the growing body of knowledge in adventure education and individuals with disabilities. Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore opportunities for interpersonal and intrapersonal experiences for a 13-year-old boy with HFA who participated in an inclusive adventure education program.

Method

Ethnography was utilized both as a way of looking and a way of seeing (Wolcott, 2008), meaning that ethnographic techniques were used to both collect the data and in the subsequent analysis and interpretation of the data. The focus in ethnography is on understanding the culture of a particular culture-sharing group or sub-group (Cresswell, 2007). In this particular study, the culture-sharing group consisted of 7 individuals, ages 10-14 years, who were participating in a 3-day inclusive rock climbing trip. This study was conducted from an educational ethnography standpoint which focuses on educational processes and provides “rich, descriptive data about the contexts, activities, and beliefs of participants in educational settings” (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984, p.17). In this study, the process was an inclusive adventure education trip and the focus was to provide an understanding of the experience from the point of view of one participant. As such, an intrinsic case study (Stake, 2008)
was employed. This approach allows insight into participation in an inclusive adventure education experience on a teenage boy with HFA. In this study, an ethnographic case study is defined as the researcher observing, engaging in, and attempting to understand the lives of the participants during the inclusive adventure education experience. The study was framed within Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986), which provided a basis to compare and contrast findings rather than providing a priori categories in which to force the findings (Morse, 1994).

**Context**

The intrinsic case for this study was a 3-day inclusive rock climbing trip organized by No Limits (pseudonym). No Limits, a private non-profit organization located in Northwest USA, is an inclusive outdoor education/recreation organization. No Limits uses the natural environment to provide hands-on learning experiences to participants with and without disabilities in Nordic skiing, backpacking, hiking, rock climbing, canoeing, sea-kayaking and rafting. The overall goals of the program are to foster empowerment of all participants, to develop new skills, and to facilitate growth in social and emotional development.

Seven individuals who attended the Smith Rock trip and the three trip leaders participated in the study. Consistent with the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB), parental consent was obtained for each minor and the trip leaders gave their consent to participate in the study. In addition, the 7 participants understood the purpose of and agreed to be included in the study. The first author explained her role in the study to each of the participants prior to them giving consent. The participants understood that the first author was interested in learning more about their experience on the 3-day trip and this would entail her taking observation notes (written and verbal) and interviewing all participants both formally and informally. The participants also understood that they could refuse to continue participating in the study or aspects of the study at any time without retribution. To protect the identity of all participants in this study, pseudonyms chosen by each participant were used in reporting the data. The trip participants ranged in age from 10-14 years and included 3 girls (Bee, CB, & Lathie) and 4 boys (Brad, HH, Linc, & M). Three trip leaders (Jane, Kevin, and Bill) also participated in the study.

Due to the nature of the trip, in the pre-interview the participants were asked their opinion regarding the inclusion of individuals with disabilities on the trip. At this point in time the participants were not aware of who else would be on the trip. Six of the 7 participants responded positively to the inclusion nature of the trip. Most had experience with inclusion through their school district or other No Limits trips. Brad was the only participant to voice concern about including individuals with disabilities on the trip. He stated that he would be concerned about how much they could participate in the activities. As Brad is the focus of this paper, a more detailed description is provided.

At the time of the trip, Brad was 13 years old and diagnosed with HFA. He had previously participated in many trips with No Limits and had participated in previous trips with HH, Linc, and M. He considered himself a veteran of No Limits and had developed what he described as close relationships with the staff at the organization. In particular, Brad considered the Executive Director of the organization, who was also his Adapted Physical Education teacher, to be a good friend. Despite being on many trips with No Limits, Brad did not believe that he had made friends with the participants on previous trips. According to Brad, his parents seemed to disagree on his diagnosis of HFA. Brad's father told him that he did have autism, whereas his mother told him that he did not. This difference in opinion seemed to cause some frustration for Brad as he mentioned it on a number of different occasions on the trip. Brad's parents were divorced and he lived with his father. One of the trip leaders, Jane, explained that when Brad was out of his comfort zone he would start talking about a fantasy world that includes aliens and bombs. She explained that on previous trips this behavior was common from Brad.

**Role of the Researcher**

Qualitative research is often reliant upon the viewpoint of one researcher who can be considered his or her own “research instrument” (Punch, 1994), and as such it is impor-
tant to provide more information about the first author in this study. I have been involved in adventure education as both a participant and facilitator for the past 15 years. This involvement leads me to believe in the power of such programs on the interpersonal and intrapersonal growth of participants. I have been involved in programming for individuals with disabilities for over 17 years in the fields of physical education, recreation, and adventure education. I consider myself to be a strong advocate for the rights of individuals with disabilities to participate equally in all areas of society.

Within this study I was a non-participant observer during the entire 3-day trip. I had both a working relationship and friendship with the program director at No Limits, which allowed me ease of access into the organization. In order to become more familiar with the organization and the participants, and to decrease reactivity during the study, I visited No Limits for a week long trip in the months leading up to the 3-day trip. During this visit, I participated in a 1-day indoor climbing trip and met and interacted with the No Limits staff, briefly met five of the participants (Bee, CB, M, HH, and Brad) on different occasions, built rapport with the three trip leaders, and began to understand the No Limits organization. In the days leading up to the inclusive rock climbing trip, I also spent 4 days at No Limits building rapport with the trip leaders. After the 3-day trip was completed, I stayed at the organization for an additional 3 days to follow-up with the trip leaders on their perceptions of the trip.

My role as an outsider was evident at the start of the 3-day trip. Due in part to the prior relationships I had built with five of the participants and two of the trip leaders, my many years of experience with working with children and in adventure education, and especially my friendship with Jane (trip leader) who was viewed by the participants as being a credible authority figure, I was quickly accepted into the experience by the participants. Thus the possible reactivity of my presence, while not extinguished altogether, was diminished.

Data Collection

Data were collected using two primary sources: direct observations (field notes) and interviews (face-to-face and phone; semi-structured and open-ended). The data collection occurred throughout the 3-day trip and continued after the completion of the trip.

Direct Observation

Field notes were taken throughout the course of the 3-day trip. The field notes contained sections denoting observation notes, theoretical notes, methodological notes, and reflexive notes. Included in the field notes were the data collected through informal conversations with the participants and leaders that occurred throughout the 3-day trip. The three trip leaders (Jane, Bill and Kevin) were informally interviewed on their perceptions of the participants’ engagement in the AE experience. These informal conversations occurred at various times throughout the 3-day experience and occurred as part of conversations with the trip leaders.

Interviews

Face-to-face and telephone interviews were used to collect data. All interviews lasted between 30-60 minutes, were audio-taped with the permission of the participants, and transcribed for analysis. In addition to this, notes were taken during the interview. Immediately after the interview, time was spent listening to the tape, elaborating upon the interview notes and reflecting upon the interview. Semi-structured interviews were conducted at the beginning of the trip (prior to the trip or immediately upon arrival at Smith Rock State Park), the end of the trip (prior to leaving Smith Rock State Park), and during a follow-up phone interview 1 month after the trip with each of the participants. The same questions and interview protocol were used for all 7 participants during the study. The pre trip interviews focused on gathering background information about the participants relative to their experience with No Limits, rock climbing, why they chose this particular trip, attitude toward and experience with inclusion, working in groups, and making new friends. The post trip interview explored what occurred during the trip relative to likes and dislikes, what they had learned about themselves and others, what they had learned that might help them in other areas of their lives, friendship, and trust of others. The purpose of the follow-up interview was to understand if there were any longer lasting
outcomes from participation in the 3-day trip. Open-ended interviews were conducted during the trip to clarify and elaborate upon situations occurring during, or themes emerging from, the observation periods.

Analysis

The interview and observation data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using line by line coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and constant comparison method (Patton, 2002). The transcripts were read a minimum of two separate times by the first author who then conducted line by line coding of the data. This process resulted in a list of codes and the emergence of initial themes. These codes and themes were then constantly compared and contrasted through several re-readings of the data. In this process, the emerging themes were considered within the data and then old and new data were compared to these themes and combined with the theoretical background framing the study. The second author was utilized as a peer debriefer during this process to challenge and/or confirm the themes and the first author’s interpretations of these themes. The analysis process resulted in two themes related to Brad’s experience during the 3-day trip.

Trustworthiness of the data was established through four strategies. Although the inclusive climbing trip was only 3 days in length, the first author had over 45 hours of contact with the participants. Thus the intense nature of the study provided an opportunity for prolonged engagement albeit over a short duration of time. Triangulation of the data was ascertained through using two different sources of data collection: interviews and observations. Emerging themes were cross checked against all data sources and were accepted or rejected based on this evidence and interpretation. Peer debriefing was utilized to help the researchers maintain objectivity in the methodological procedures chosen and the interpretations of the data. Three colleagues who each had experience in qualitative research, adventure education, or inclusion were used periodically throughout this process. Negative case analysis was used to refine or revise tentative themes in the data (Patton, 1990). This process helped to ensure that all aspects of the data were taken into consideration not just those that strengthened the emerging themes.

Findings

Two themes emerged for Brad from the data: letting his guard down, and Brad as helper. These themes embodied both the interpersonal and intrapersonal dynamics of Brad during the experience.

Letting His Guard Down

Brad explained in his pre trip interview that he had a lot of adult friends “that I met through Bob [Executive Director] at No Limits”, but that it was really hard for him to make new friends. He attributed his difficulty in making friends to being different and “not the same as other people. I’m not a talker, I like to listen to others and see what is going on” (Brad, pre trip interview). He also stated that it would be hard for him to work with a group of kids his own age and that he just likes to be alone.

The feelings that Brad expressed during his interview were very evident in his behavior at the beginning of the trip. There were numerous occasions when Brad chose to exclude himself from interactions with his peers and only interacted with the trip leaders as the following example illustrates.

As Brad entered the van he did not say “Hi” to any of the other group members, but tried to engage me in a conversation immediately. He was talking about aliens and bombs, but Jane had already told me a little about his behavior so I was expecting this as it indicated that Brad was very much out of his comfort zone. (Field notes, day 1)

During the first afternoon Brad did not seem to want to interact with the other group members and indeed seemed to avoid interaction where possible. Even when prompted by the trip leaders to join in activities with other group members, Brad moved to a closer proximity but still did not interact with his peers. M just called to Brad to come and help with the tent. As of yet Brad hasn’t moved to help the rest of his tent mates. Jane is now going over to Brad to try to get him over to help with the tent. He’s heading over to the tent now but had to be directed
by Jane. The boys are working on the tent but Brad is actually just sitting in the vicinity and not helping.
(Field notes, day 1)

The campfire on the first evening provided Brad with the opportunity to interact with the whole group and indicated that he had become a little more comfortable with the group. Initially Brad positioned himself in a chair on the edge of the group but moved closer to the group once they began to make s’mores. After the s’mores, Brad helped to lead songs with the group and interacted with Linc and M in particular. Brad began telling stories and this interaction was further encouraged by the rest of the group members who were asking him questions about his story.

Two defining moments occurred on the 2nd day of the trip that helped to facilitate Brad “letting his guard down” in relation to interactions with his peers. Bill led the group through a debrief session where each person thanked someone for something that happened during the day. When it came to M he stated “Who do I want to thank? [Pause] I’d like to thank Brad, because he was very helpful being a back up belayer. And though he didn’t really climb, he just really helped a lot” (Field notes, day 2). Brad’s reaction to this recognition showed that he was completely taken by surprise, Brad just lit up at this. His face was first one of complete surprise as though he was not expecting this at all. Then he rocked back on his seat and came up beaming from ear to ear. He raised his arms as though he had just finished the New York marathon. (Field notes, day 2)

After M thanked him Brad responded by saying, “All I can say is A+ for you! You got more than just one A+, you got a hundred and fifty A+’s” (Field notes, day 2). Kevin also commented that he felt being thanked by M allowed Brad to move from being on the ‘outside group’ to feeling more accepted.

The teambuilding session on the second evening also appeared to be an important experience for Brad. The activities used in this session (Touch My Can and Human Knot) were chosen with the purpose of providing opportunities for the group to work cooperatively to solve problems. The activities were presented, facilitated, and debriefed by Jane. During both his post-trip and follow-up interviews, Brad referred to the teambuilding session in a very positive way. When asked to talk about what he had learned on the trip, Brad responded “Talk to people more” as it would help him “make new friends” (Brad, post trip interview). In the course of this interview Brad was asked why he increased his level of trust and play toward other group members after the teambuilding session and he responded that “we got close”. Brad did not seem to be able to gauge how the other group members felt toward him, but when told that they had indicated that they liked him he responded “They do? I try my best to be the best person I can be…I’m still wondering if that will last…‘I’d like it to last” (Brad, post trip interview). Brad seemed surprised that his peers liked him and wanted it to last but did not know how accomplish that. During the follow-up interview when he was asked to reflect back on the trip and what he had learned from the 3-day experience, Brad again referred back to the teambuilding session,

Remember the game that we had our hands crossed and tried to make it into a perfect circle. Well that changed my idea about people…I’d never played games like that before with other people, I’d never had as much fun with anybody else. (Brad, follow-up interview)

Despite his positive experience on the trip and the realization that it could help him to make new friends Brad also stated that he did not feel that he could talk with people better now. He elaborated that he had trouble speaking and “Sometimes I put the wrong words in the sentence. That’s my problem… when I am saying really big sentences I don’t know I act kind of weird and I speak a different language” (Brad, post trip interview).

The relationships that Brad had begun to form with his peers on the trip seemed to have a lasting impression on Brad. During the follow-up interview Brad stated that he would go on another trip and join in the activities with the same group but not with a different one. He elaborated that:

If I wasn’t there on the trip not that many people would have this much fun you know. When I was there
they had a lot of fun. They really had a lot of fun with me. I can be one of the most coolest people in the world. (Brad, Follow-up interview)

Brad also explained that he had allowed the other participants to get to know him through the stories that he had told them and that he only shares these with people that he really knows. This would indicate that Brad had formed a relationship with the other group members that allowed him to interact on a deeper, more personal level.

The most dramatic change in Brad's behavior toward his peers was observed during the van ride back from Smith Rock. This behavior was in stark contrast to the van ride to Smith Rock where Brad chose to exclude himself from interactions with other participants.

We are on the trip home and for the last two hours Brad has been talking non-stop to everyone that is sitting around him. He is actually completely engrossed in the conversation back there...It appears as though the kids are not worrying about his little quirkiness. He started talking about the aliens again and bombing and they are just joining in with that rather than completely excluding him. Brad struck up the conversation initially. (Field notes, day 3)

Jane commented upon the contrast in Brad's behavior between the two van trips in depth. In particular, she noticed the change in how Brad interacted with the group and in turn how they reacted to him.

You know what I liked was the fact that Brad wasn't bonding with the adults but with the kids. Because he is usually with the adults. Generally on rock climbing trips what he does is kind of hangs out on his own. He really viewed himself as an intermediate between the adults and the kids, and at the end of this trip he was a kid. He had been accepted into the group. It wasn't just that they accepted him, because he could be accepted and still exclude himself. But he actually wanted to interact. (Field notes, day 3)

This change in Brad's behavior was evident for Jane as she referred to it again in a follow-up interview.

I can't stop thinking about looking back in the van and seeing Brad with all the kids and the interaction that was taking place. Just the look on his face, he was happy and excited about actually being part of the group and playing the game. (Jane, Follow-up interview)

Indeed in his follow up interview 1 month after the trip, Brad stated that during the van ride back to Smith Rock he felt more comfortable with the group and that his interactions were different due to this fact. When asked if he thought the experience would help him to talk to his peers on other trips he stated that “I'd rather speak to the ones I've talked to before” (Brad, Follow-up interview).

Over the course of the 3-day trip Brad moved from excluding himself from interactions with his peers to joining in more group activities. In his follow-up interview Brad stated that he would participate in activities with the same group of participants again; however, this change did not transfer to individuals outside of the Smith rock climbing trip participants.

Brad as Helper

The second theme that emerged from the data was that of Brad as helper. Due to not wanting to climb or take a lead role in belaying, there was a large amount of time where there was the potential for Brad not to be actively involved in the experience. Despite this potential, Brad was able to successfully create a role for himself as a helper to the group and in some ways as a mediator between the adults and the younger group members. Through his actions, Brad clearly established himself as a valued member of the group. This role seemed more apparent when the group was actually climbing. Brad assumed the role of helper both with the trip leaders and his peers. He assisted the trip leaders with setting up and taking down the ropes for the climbing sessions on both days. On the 2nd day, he also helped CB without prompting,

CB has just left where I was sitting
and walked down the hill to get something to lie on because she is tired. Brad took off after her down the hill. At one point when CB needed to step around some equipment and down a step, Brad offered her his hand to help her and she accepted his help. (Field notes, day 2)

During the climbing session on the 3rd day, CB was getting ready to climb with M belaying and Jane and Brad on back-up belay. CB was having trouble tying the fisherman's knot, "Brad jumped right in to show her how to do it…Brad continued to help CB by showing her the good footholds. ‘See that big slab right there! Look down. There it is now pull yourself up. Good you’ve got it.’ (Field notes, day 3). The role of helper was recognized and valued by other group members. When asked what she had learned about her peers on the trip, CB responded, “Like with Brad he likes to help other people out” (CB, post trip interview). Bee also commented on Brad's role as helper, “Brad doesn’t like to rock climb but he helps on backing up [belay]” (Bee, post trip interview). In addition, Kevin noticed that Brad had taken on the role of helper within the group.

He [Brad] feels, because he's kind of a helper, a pride at being the go-between with the instructors and the students. And he’s found himself a niche even though we didn’t create it for him; he created it for himself. (Kevin, day 2)

It seemed as though Brad was eager to help the trip leaders and his peers during the climbing sessions as it gave him a definite role within the group.

Discussion

The purpose of this paper was to explore opportunities for interpersonal and intrapersonal experiences for a 13-year-old boy with HFA who participated in an inclusive adventure education program. The findings from this study would suggest that participation in the 3-day trip provided positive interpersonal and intrapersonal experiences for Brad. This is in line with previous research in adventure education for individuals with disabilities (Anderson et al., 1997; McAvoy, Holman, et al., 2006; McAvoy et al., 2006; McAvoy et al, 1989) and is particularly informative in regard to how persons with HFA may benefit from inclusive AE programs. In particular, over the course of the 3-day trip Brad engaged in more social interaction with his peers.

During his pre-trip interview, Brad stated that it was difficult for him to make friends. Initially, Brad's interactions with his peers reflected this; however, as the group went through the 'getting to know each other process', Brad became more comfortable and began to interact more with the other group members. Being thanked by M during the debriefing session and the teambuilding activities were important events for Brad and seemed to allow him to initiate and join in more interactions with the other group members. The reaction to the public recognition by M points to an increase in Brad's social self-efficacy (Smith & Betz, 2002) demonstrated through his increased social interactions with his peers and with M in particular and is in line with previous findings (Bandura et al., 1996).

The objective of the teambuilding session was to introduce activities that would involve group members utilizing communication, cooperation, trust, and problem solving skills. The activities were the vehicle the trip leaders utilized to foster growth in the interpersonal and intrapersonal development of the participants. The teambuilding experience was very powerful for Brad and seemed to be a major impetus in him “letting his guard down” with the other group members. The nature of the teambuilding activities provided the group with activities where the demand of the task necessitated joint effort to solve the problem. The Smith Rock Climbing trip was the first time that a structured teambuilding session had been included in the trip activities. On previous trips the leaders had organized some cooperative activities for trip participants, but these were not a structured part of the trip. Jane commented that the positive outcomes she observed from the teambuilding session for all trip participants were much greater than from the cooperative activities on previous trips. These positive outcomes led Jane to recommend to her Executive Director that all future overnight No Limits trips should include a structured teambuilding session. It would seem that this session allowed Brad to make a connection with the other trip
participants that he had not made on previous No Limits trips.

Contrary to previous findings (Schleien, McAvoy, & Rynders, 1995), there was an observable increase in the social interactions from the individual with HFA toward his typically developing peers. A dramatic increase in Brad's social interactions within the group was evident during the van ride home, as he interacted with the four other group members for the entire ride back. This increase in Brad's interpersonal development was maintained for a period of at least 1 month after the trip, but did not transfer outside of the participants of the Smith Rock climbing trip.

Due to the nature of Brad's disability, the increase in interactions with his peers can be considered a powerful outcome from his participation in the trip and is contrary to previous findings (Lord & Magill-Evans, 1995; McGee et al., 1997). Autism is characterized by deficits in social interaction and communication (American Psychiatric Association, 2000) where the development of social relationships is considered to be a major area of difficulty (Bauminger, Shulman, & Agam, 2004). Autism is often manifested in inappropriate social interactions, which can lead to the alienation of the individual with autism within a group. Brad did exhibit some behaviors that initially seemed to exclude him from the group. At the beginning of the trip when he appeared to be anxious about a situation he would begin to tell stories that involved bombs or a fantasy alien world. As his comfort level with the group seemed to increase, leading to more positive social interactions, there was a decrease in Brad's inappropriate social interactions.

In regard to social inclusion and interpersonal relationships, the increased interactions indicated that Brad's peers had achieved the milestone of looking beyond a disability and focusing on Brad as a person (Schleien, McAvoy, Lais, & Rynders, 1993). In particular it was evident that Brad was surprised to discover that the other participants on the trip liked him and wanted to interact with him. This small but crucial piece of information allowed Brad to experience a social success within this group of peers and bolstered his social self-efficacy. Past success in a given situation is one of the four primary determinants of self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1997). This small success that Brad experienced with the group may have reduced his anxiety in interacting with group members and further empowered his social inclusion.

An important aspect of adventure education activities is that the participants transfer what was learned from the experience to other areas of his or her life (Gass, 1990). In Brad's particular case, although he reflected in his interviews on the importance of transferring the lessons learned from this experience to other areas of his life, it seemed that this transfer did not occur. This lack of transfer is in contrast to previous research by McAvoy et al. (2006). Brad's reluctance to participate in activities with another group of individuals indicated that his increase in social self-efficacy was limited to interactions with the participants on the Smith Rock trip. This is in line with Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986) where self-efficacy is situation or task specific. Although Brad recognized that interacting more with his peers was important in other areas of his life, his confidence in doing this was limited to this particular group of peers. In such cases, it is important to work toward a broader transfer of improvements in social self-efficacy to other groups of peers. For this to occur, we would suggest that this experience be repeated in a variety of situations with different groups of peers. In addition, when there is a participant with a disability that involves deficits in social interaction, the trip leaders should specifically focus on ways to transfer the lessons learned from the experience to other areas of the participant's life. We would argue that through repetition of a successful experience and effective debriefing (facilitating the transfer of learning) that Brad could achieve a sufficient strength in his social self-efficacy that would allow him to interact with his peers in other situations more successfully.

It is argued within this study that the nature of Brad's disability played a prominent role in his choosing the role of helper or mediator within the group. An aspect of this role for Brad was to act as a mediator between the adults and the participants. It seemed that Brad was initially more comfortable engaging in social interactions with the adults on the trip. It is proposed that this level of comfort materialized from previous mastery experiences (Bandura, 1997) in social interactions.
with No Limits staff. The staff members, who have experience working with individuals with disabilities, had not alienated Brad when he demonstrated socially inappropriate behaviors. As a means of interacting with the other group members, Brad would relay what the trip leaders said to his peers. This type of behavior was an indication of his initial low social self-efficacy relative to interacting with peers.

During the trip Brad did not want to climb or belay and, as such, there were extended periods of time where he potentially would not be engaged with the other group members. At the start of the trip Brad assumed the role of helper to the staff but did not seem to be interested in helping the other participants. Brad had assumed this role on previous No Limits trips which indicated his comfort in interacting with the No Limits staff but not other trip members. As Brad experienced more mastery experiences in social situations with his peers on the 3-day trip, he became empowered to assume the role of helper with his peers. The increase in Brad’s social self-efficacy allowed Brad to become a functioning member of the group during the climbing sessions. Brad also engaged in more helping behavior during other aspects of the experience which, according to No Limits’ staff, had not occurred during other trips.

Brad commented on the fact that he is different from other ‘kids’ and that he tries to be the best person he can be. To compensate for feeling different Brad assumed the role of helper in order to find an accepted place within the group, providing him with a purpose for being there. This is in line with social role valorization (SRV) theory (Wolfensberger, 1983) where people who assume roles that are valued by others will be rewarded more than those whose role is not valued, or devalued. In Brad’s case, taking on the role of helper allowed him to participate socially within the group during the climbing sessions without having to expose his perceived lack of ability in climbing. Brad’s decision not to climb during the trip could align with previous literature (Devine & Lashua, 2002; Devine & Wilhite, 2000) that found lower perceived acceptance of disability related to physical skills or capabilities. The role of helper allowed Brad to experience being included in his group of peers and led to an increase in social interactions. In this way, Brad’s role in the climbing sessions permitted him to be included in the AE experience and would support Devine’s (2004) contention that inclusive leisure contexts can act as a connector for social acceptance of individuals with disabilities.

Recommendations

This study provided an exploration of opportunities for interpersonal and intrapersonal experiences for a 13-year-old boy with HFA who participated in an inclusive adventure education program. The limitations of this research include: single intrinsic case study, the short 3-day duration of the trip, the inclusion of only 1 participant with a disability, and the only disability being high functioning autism. Notwithstanding the limitations of this study the findings suggest that the 3-day inclusive rock climbing trip provided Brad with positive interpersonal and intrapersonal experiences. There is a need for further research in the use of inclusive adventure education to impact interpersonal and intrapersonal development in individuals with HFA. Specifically this research should explore how interpersonal and intrapersonal development occurs, what factors in the AE program impact this development, and how this development can be transferred or generalized to other situations.

In light of the findings of this study we make the following recommendations for therapeutic recreation professionals working to deliver AE programs as a means of fostering positive interpersonal and intrapersonal experiences for individuals with HFA. It is important to provide purposeful activities designed to facilitate a sense of community within the group that are sequenced appropriately (Frank, 2004). Include these activities as early as possible in the trip and focus on building early social success and developing social comfort. Providing early social success will help to foster a more positive social self-efficacy which in turn will lead to more social interaction. If possible, start the trip with an initial icebreaker activity and then build in other activities that work on both interpersonal and intrapersonal skills.

Creating an environment that is physically and emotionally safe for individuals with HFA can help to foster more comfort in social interactions. This can include the use of a Full
Value Contract (Frank, 2004) and the Challenge by Choice or partial participation approach to participation level in activities. The Full Value Contract uses participant input to establish desirable and undesirable behavior toward each other. For this to be effective, the trip leaders need to ensure that all participants voice their opinions to foster ownership of the contract. Allowing participants to choose their level of participation in activities provides a safe environment where negotiation of roles within the group can occur.

The importance of including a staff member who has experience working with individuals with HFA cannot be stated strongly enough. This person will be able to provide knowledge and understanding of the practical and programmatic implications of working with individuals with HFA.

Providing a disability awareness session for all trip participants will allow those without disabilities to gain more knowledge and understanding of living with HFA. Where possible, the individual with HFA could share how this disability impacts their daily life, how it is manifested in their behavior, and ways that they cope with living with the disability. If this is not possible, then a trip leader could share this information, preferably with the help of the individual with HFA.

A crucial aspect of AE programs is to provide an opportunity for participants to process what has occurred during the trip and how this can impact other areas of their lives. The trip leaders must ensure to provide time to conduct purposeful debriefing sessions with the participants to help them to reflect on, understand, and apply the learning that occurred on the trip to other areas of their lives (i.e., transfer). Specifically with individuals with HFA focus in on transferring changes in social interactions or social self-efficacy to situations beyond the trip.

Conclusion

The social isolation experienced by individuals with HFA can be devastating. Finding ways to increase the social interaction of individuals with HFA is imperative if we are to help to decrease their social isolation. The inclusive AE trip in this study provided Brad with positive experiences that led to an increase in his social self-efficacy, thus increasing his social interactions with his person the trip. The power of the AE experience for Brad was evident in this study. In his own words, participating in the activities with the group helped Brad to feel part of a “big old family”. If it can do this for Brad, think about the potential for other individuals with HFA.

References


Ewert, A.W. (1989). Outdoor adventure pursuits: Foundation...


