ONTARIO OUTDOOR INTEGRATED CURRICULUM PROGRAMS:
MORE THAN “JUST A FUN SEMESTER”

by

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ABSTRACT

Integrated curriculum programs (ICPs) in Ontario consist of two to four secondary course credits taught by a single instructor to a cohort of students for a semester. ICPs often have a focus on outdoor and environmental education, and emphasize experiential and integrated learning. Despite challenges that such programs face (such as instructor burnout and limited administrative support), their prevalence has grown, with about 100 programs as of 2015 compared to 30 in 2000.

While research provides evidence to suggest positive outcomes of outdoor ICPs with regard to the student experience, it has primarily focused on current students. Research investigating the long-term impacts of ICP experiences, and across multiple programs, is limited. Thus the purpose of this study is to explore further the long-term influence of a variety of outdoor ICPs on students’ lives. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight former Ontario ICP students (4 to 13 years post-program) representing six different programs. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed thematically using an inductive approach.

The findings suggest that former students representing a variety of outdoor ICPs recall their experiences positively, even years later. During their programs, former students valued the sense of community they experienced, the educational approach, their personal growth throughout the semester, and the instructor. Outdoor ICPs also resonated with participants beyond their respective semesters, leaving them with a lasting connection to the program, influencing their academic and career goals, and driving them to enact environmental consciousness.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

My interest in outdoor integrated curriculum programs (ICPs) is rooted in three dimensions: (1) my personal experience with education, (2) an appreciation for interdisciplinary learning, and (3) a love for encouraging others to have meaningful moments in nature.

I had a fixed mindset as a young student. While I enjoyed school and loved to learn, I struggled with facing academic challenges. Rather than seeing difficulties as an opportunity to grow, I saw them as a reflection of my failure as a student and as a person. This mindset was especially detrimental to my well-being when I got to secondary school and I began facing more challenges, as academic concepts grew in complexity. Becoming more growth-oriented has been a lengthy process for me. This process is still ongoing, but I have taken great strides in the years since grade school. One contributing factor to my healthier relationship with school was enrolling as a student at the Ontario Science Centre Science School – a specialized program offering science and math courses. I was able to spend a semester away from my regular high school surrounded by a cohort of students equally interested in sciences, where the Ontario Science Centre and surrounding community was our classroom. Over the course of the semester, I developed meaningful relationships with my peers and teachers, learned a great deal, and came away from the program refreshed and ready to take on the challenges of university the following year.

When it came time for me to select a post-secondary education path, I struggled to choose among the sciences (having taken courses such as Biology, Chemistry, and
Calculus) and the arts and humanities (having also taken courses such as Dance, Philosophy, and French). I was relieved to discover that interdisciplinary university programs exist: programs that provide a platform for students to engage in multiple fields in which they are interested. I completed a *Bachelor of Arts and Sciences* degree at the University of Guelph, specializing in Ecology and Psychology. By engaging in both fields in parallel, I discovered that I have an interest in outdoor education: an intersection between my knowledge in the natural world and the application of psychology to a teaching practice.

Interdisciplinary education pushed me to make connections across various fields and come up with a new product with emerging properties. Similarly, outdoor ICPs encompass the three components of education that interest me: (1) personal growth and the development of a love for learning, (2) application of knowledge across disciplines and through experience, and (3) outdoor education about and in the natural world. Based on my personal experience in a specialized program in secondary school and my interest in both interdisciplinary and outdoor education, I am invested in further research of outdoor ICPs. While the specialized program I attended was not an outdoor ICP, my experiences put me in a position where I appreciate the value of specialized programs and their potential to foster resonating impact throughout the lifespan. I continue to enact outdoor education in my professional endeavours.

**Introduction to the Research**

Integrated curriculum programs (ICPs) in Ontario are semester-long programs consisting of two to four secondary course credits, taught to a cohort of students by (typically) one instructor (Linney, 2014). ICPs often have a focus on outdoor and
environmental education, and feature projects that incorporate content from all credits, block scheduling (timing based on projects rather than subjects), and the application of theoretical learning in the community (Linney, 2014). Outdoor ICPs draw their elements from outdoor, environmental, experiential, and integrated education by connecting content across all courses within the context of the outdoors and opportunities to learn through experience.

The ICP model was introduced to Ontario in the early 1980s (Horwood, 1995). Interest in running ICPs increased dramatically in the early 2000s among teachers passionate about outdoor and environmental education because the provincial government enacted a “back-to-basics” initiative that cut (among other courses) the Environmental Science course from the secondary school curriculum, along with trips to outdoor education facilities (Russell & Burton, 2000). Despite various challenges related to ICPs’ maintenance (e.g., teacher burnout from high workload, low support from administration for insurance purposes), the outdoor ICP education model has been resilient and shows promise with continued growth (Comishin, Dyment, Potter, & Russell, 2004). While around 30 programs existed in Ontario in the year 2000 (Russell & Burton, 2000), approximately 100 were estimated to be operational in 2015 (Breunig, Murtell, & Russell, 2015).

With regard to how students experience outdoor ICPs, extant literature suggests that students experience: (a) a strong sense of community (Breunig, 2013a; Breunig et al., 2015; Caspell, 2007; Henderson et al., 1996; Horwood, 1994; Mehta & Henderson, 1996), (b) a unique approach to learning and evaluation (Breunig et al., 2015; Caspell, 2007; Henderson et al., 1996; Horwood, 1994; Mehta & Henderson, 1996; Russell &
Burton, 2000), (c) personal growth (Breunig et al., 2015; Caspell, 2007; Horwood, 1994; McGowan, 2016; Russell & Burton, 2000), (d) a shifting concept of teacher (Breunig, 2013a; Caspell, 2007; McGowan, 2016; Mehta & Henderson, 1996; Russell & Burton 2000), and (e) an emerging sense of environmental consciousness (Breunig, 2013a; Breunig 2013b; Breunig et al., 2014; Caspell, 2007). While initial research provides evidence to suggest positive outcomes of ICPs, most studies focus only on students currently in-program and do not study student experiences across multiple programs. Research regarding the long-term impacts of outdoor ICP experiences (i.e., years after participation in a program) and across multiple programs is limited.

**Study Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this proposed qualitative study was to explore the long-term influence of outdoor integrated curriculum programs (ICPs) on the lives of former students from a variety of programs. The primary question that this study addressed was: How do former students describe having experienced outdoor ICPs?

Two sub-questions of the primary question were:

1. What experiences from their time in an outdoor ICP do former students remember most saliently?
2. How do students find that participating in an outdoor ICP has influenced their lives since completing it?
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In this chapter, I first discuss the theoretical background necessary for a holistic understanding of Ontario outdoor ICPs (the primary focus of this study). I then discuss Ontario outdoor ICPs in terms of their history, characteristics, and extant literature pertaining to the student experience.

Theoretical Background

This section of the literature review addresses the theoretical background necessary to better understand the focus of the thesis (Ontario outdoor ICPs), covering: (a) outdoor education, (b) environmental education, (c) experiential learning, and (d) integrated curriculum.

Outdoor Education

While there is no one universally accepted and concise definition of outdoor education, there have been several foundational definitions that shaped (and continue to shape) what outdoor education means. One of the earliest recorded uses of the term “outdoor education” was in a 1943 publication by Lloyd Burgess Sharp (an influential pioneer of outdoor education) as reported by Rillo (1985). Sharp defined outdoor education as “all of that learning included in the curriculum in any subject matter area and at any grade level which can best be learned outside the classroom” (p. 7). Furthering this definition, his rationale was:

That which ought and can best be taught inside the schoolroom should there be taught, and that which can best be learned through experience, dealing directly
with native materials and life situations outside the school, should there be learned. (Sharp, as reported by Rillo, 1985, p. 7)

Understandings of outdoor education continued to develop. In 1955, Julian Smith described outdoor education as “a learning climate for the things which can be learned best outside the classroom” (Priest, 1986, p. 13). In the broadest sense, Donaldson and Donaldson (1958) defined it as “education in, about, and for the outdoors” (p. 17). Ford (1986) argued that this definition is the most appropriate because it is telling of the “place, topic, and purpose of outdoor education” (p. 3). Additionally, while outdoor education may exist in a wide variety of settings, all of these settings lend themselves to direct and first-hand experiences with the outdoors (Ford, 1986). More recently still, Priest (1986) attempted a redefinition, referring to outdoor education as an approach that encompasses six dimensions: (a) it takes place in the outdoors, (b) it is a method for learning, (c) it requires the use of all senses, (d) it is based upon personal experience, (e) it allows for interdisciplinary connections, and (f) it connects people with natural resources.

Ultimately, the search for a universal definition may be futile because of the wide variety of contexts to which outdoor education can be applied (Dyment & Potter, 2015). For the purposes of this thesis, I take inspiration from the definitions explored, but focus my conception to view outdoor education as an approach that (a) uses the outdoors as a context in which learning about any topic takes place, (b) teaches about the outdoors and how it relates to each individual, and (c) aims to foster a lasting connection with the outdoors.
While Kurt Hahn, a keystone proponent of outdoor education in the 1960s, did not publish extensively, opting instead to disseminate his ideas in the form of lectures and speeches (van Oord, 2010), his major ideas have shaped the field: the declines of modern youth, their antidotes, and the seven “laws” of outdoor education.

Hahn identified six issues plaguing youth in the modern (post-industrial) age, compared to youth of the past. He characterized these issues as “the declines of modern youth.” According to van Oord (2010), Hahn (1959, 1960, 1965a, 1965b) outlined the six declines to modern youth and their antidotes. While the declines and their respective antidotes do not appear as a cohesive group of six in any one speech, the literature has since combined them as such. The six declines were: (a) fitness due to lack of locomotion, (b) initiative and enterprise, (c) memory and imagination, (d) skill and care, (e) self-discipline, and (f) compassion. The four antidotes that Hahn proposed could aid in the reversal or retardation of the declines were: (a) fitness training, (b) expeditions, (c) projects that focus on craftsmanship, and (d) Samaritan (rescue) service.

Based upon the declines of modern youth and their antidotes, Hahn also proposed seven “laws” of outdoor education: elements that ought to be included to make the education experience valuable. The laws (in full) are as follows, as reported by Flavin (1996, van Oord, 2010, p. 259):

2. Make children meet with triumph and defeat.
4. Provide periods of silence [Hahn’s equivalent of “reflection”].
5. Train the imagination.
6. Make games important but not predominant.

7. Free the sons of the wealthy and powerful from the enervating sense of privilege.

Kurt Hahn’s principles formed a solid foundation for a definition and practice of outdoor education. Building on this foundation, Rillo (1985) provided a detailed outline of how outdoor education could be applied to various other fields (such as social studies, music, and mathematics), stating that outdoor education is “correlated with all subjects in the curriculum” (p. 16). Morag and Tal (2012) also considered outdoor education as an applicable learning methodology, aligning with Donaldson and Donaldson’s (1958) description of applying outdoor education as “learning by using the senses out where the subject matter exists” (p. 17). Based on a review of the literature, Morag and Tal (2012) categorized the benefits of outdoor education as cognitive (knowledge, understanding and thinking skills), affective (feelings and attitudes), social (interacting with others), physical (sensomotorical experiences), and behavioural. While the terminology they used is different from that of Hahn, Morag and Tal’s (2012) themes align with Hahn’s six declines of modern youth, these declines’ antidotes, and the seven laws. Cognitive benefits align with memory and imagination, affective and social benefits align with compassion, physical benefits align with fitness, skill and care, and behavioural benefits align with initiative and enterprise.

More recently still, Dyment and Potter (2015) considered outdoor education to be undervalued. They asserted that it deserves to be a discipline of its own (as opposed to a methodology or approach to learning). They argued that in order to continue developing outdoor education rigorously, considering it to be a “justifiable disciplinary field” (p.
197) will create better conditions in which to drive research, and thus understanding of its value.

**Environmental Education**

In part, environmental education has roots in outdoor education, but the two fields are not synonymous. Priest (1986), for example, used the metaphor of a tree to describe the role of environmental education. The tree itself represented outdoor education. The tree branched into two fields: adventure education, and environmental education. Through the environmental education branch individuals are exposed to the concepts of ecosystem dynamics and ekistics (human settlement dynamics) (Priest, 1986). While these are indeed components of environmental education, they are not singly sufficient for a comprehensive definition.

Through the development of environmental education as a field of study, its focus has shifted to reflect the current environmental issues of concern. For example, in the 1970s, an understanding of the natural environment and conservation efforts was emphasized (Hungerford, 2010). More recently (with the growing global population), land use, energy use, and preservation of biodiversity remain as a focus, but climate change has been included as well. Coined by William Stapp (“founder” of environmental education) in the late 1960s, one of the initial definitions explained that “environmental education is aimed at producing a citizenry that is knowledgeable concerning the biophysical environment and its associated problems, aware of how to help solve these problems, and motivated to work toward their solution” (Hungerford, Volk, Trudi, & Ramsey, 1998, p. 34). Similarly, environmental education was defined by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in a 1977
conference as “an interdisciplinary effort aimed at helping learners gain the knowledge and skills that would allow them to understand the complex environmental issues facing society as well as the ability to deal effectively and responsibly with them” (Hungerford, 2010, p. 2). Thus in its simplest form, environmental education combines (a) knowledge of natural history and elements, (b) understanding of the related issues, and (c) the tools and motivation to apply knowledge and understanding to actively address environmental problems.

One of the major critiques of environmental education concerns the role of the teacher in addressing issues, claiming educators are not necessarily equipped to facilitate such discussions because (a) they are not specialists in the content, and (b) the issues themselves are fluid rather than static (Disinger, 1998). An educator should only be involved in delivering environmental education insofar as it relates to the science of the field, in that educators could indoctrinate students by prioritizing certain issues, and endorsing particular possible solutions (Disinger, 1998). Despite the arguments against including environmental issues within the realm of environmental education, the specific role of the environmental educator is not equivalent to that of an environmentalist (Hungerford, 2010, citing Hug (1997) and Volk & McBeth (1997) as also supporting this view). Compared to the environmentalist, the educator is an advocate for critical thinking rather than a presenter of a specific viewpoint on issues (Hungerford, 2010). There is no one simple solution for environmental issues humans have faced, do face, and will face. Thus true environmental education encourages the development of knowledge and skills that contribute to an ability to make decisions and respond accordingly to environmental issues.
Experiential Learning

In his seminal work *Experience and Education*, Dewey (1938) delineated the attributes and roles of “traditional” and “progressive” education. Both traditional and progressive approaches to education have strengths and weaknesses. Combined, their characterizing elements could form an approach that is at neither extreme.

Traditional education is a system that aims to prepare its students for their future responsibilities by way of implementing rules, standards, and schedules that provide structure to both the daily routine and the education experience overall. The expectation for students is that they adjust to fit the structure provided, with teachers as a vehicle for passing on knowledge to their students. Progressive education focuses on students’ progressing individually, learning through tactile experience, and making use of opportunities available in the present day. Teachers in such an educational context are facilitators of group activities and provokers of questions. Students in a progressive educational context are encouraged to be active learners, questioning their surroundings and taking initiative to further their learning.

The traditional approach takes into consideration the future and bases what students will need to know on the past. This structure works very well for some students, especially those who are naturally curious. However, the world in which students live in is different from the one in which their teachers lived when they were students. As such, some information they choose to pass on may no longer be relevant. While some students may learn well in the traditional system, those who do not may find it difficult to thrive in a traditional setting because of teachers’ focus on maintaining a consistent manner of instruction and assessment. A progressive approach, in contrast, strives to provide
students with the tools to continue learning on their own, putting the focus on developing a lifelong sense of curiosity and resourcefulness to satiate that curiosity. However, there is a risk of teacher complacency when students are required to exhibit more responsibility. Additionally, some students may find the challenge of navigating new content overwhelming if unaccompanied by pre-existing structure.

Having described the definitions, strengths, and weaknesses of traditional and progressive education, Dewey (1938) also discussed the role of experience in both of these approaches to education, based upon two main principles: interaction and continuity. Experience, for Dewey, is the means of education because every moment is in some way an experience. It contributes to a student’s relationship with education in that moment but also in the future. The principle of interaction is that experience is not contained within a person, but is the result of the interaction between internal perceptions and the external environment in which learning takes place. The principle of continuity is that every experience an individual has influences that individual’s future experiences. It is an educator’s job to (a) facilitate a positive transaction between an individual and their environment by setting up the “environing conditions” such that they are conducive to experiences that lead to further growth, and (b) provide an adequate degree of challenge such that a student must struggle, but also experience success (Dewey, 1938).

The continuum of experience relies upon the foundation that experiences range in quality, where quality is defined as how significant the experience is in influencing future growth in an appropriate direction (Dewey, 1938). Simpson, Jackson, and Aycock (2004) unpacked Dewey’s work, discussing the components that Dewey highlighted along this spectrum: anaesthetic, non-aesthetic, experience, an experience, and aesthetic experience.
An anesthetic experience is unmemorable and does not contribute to growth. Of marginally better quality, the non-aesthetic experience provides minimal engagement but just as a means to an end rather than true growth and movement in a forward trajectory. Experience encompasses the routine; such experiences may even be enjoyable, but remain rooted in the present without looking forward to future growth. An experience is memorable, satisfying, and enjoyable. Above all, it is complete. At the highest quality end of the spectrum is the aesthetic experience: one that embodies the characteristics of an experience, but furthers it by powerfully influencing future growth in a positive direction.

While both traditional and progressive approaches to education present challenges, a strictly traditional approach is not conducive to all learners because it does not support adaptation to individual needs (interaction), and it fails to elicit consistently memorable and engaging experiences (continuity). A progressive approach is thus a step in the right direction as it has the potential to apply both principles. However, taking a progressive approach requires caution and a certain degree of structure because of the risk of teacher complacency and/or student discomfort and disequilibrium in the absence of adequate structure.

Throughout the nearly 80 years since the publication of *Experience and Education*, experiential education has continued to develop. It remains relevant today. Building upon the work of John Dewey (and also Kurt Lewin and Jean Piaget), David Kolb introduced the experiential learning cycle. Kolb (1984) described learning as a continuous cycle rather than discrete events, stressing the importance of using “experience as the teacher,” by stating that “knowledge is created through the
transformation of experience” (p. 38). Howden (2012) additionally aimed to understand the role of experiential education by applying it to the context of team building. Using an example of a cohort of doctoral students completing numerous activities, Howden (2012) explained the phenomenon of falling into natural roles. The “Helium Hoop” (an activity where all members use one finger to support a hoop without losing contact and attempt to lower it as a group), for example, is a simple but challenging activity, thus revealing participants’ natural tendencies for how they respond in such situations. The challenge, in combination with reflection, allowed for insights regarding group dynamics and additionally brought the group together as a community (Howden, 2012).

Some studies have explored a critical view of experiential education, presenting potential issues and suggestions. A major issue with experiential education is the conflict that exists between what it “should” be (a student-centered approach), and what it actually is (a teacher-centered approach) (Estes, 2004; Estes & Tomb, 1995). Other sources support this perspective (e.g. Bell, 1993; Brown 2002; Priest, 1996). Estes’ (2004) suggestion is to bring about more awareness to this concept, through encouraging educators to circumvent their instincts to over-teach. Of a different viewpoint, Breunig (2017) used journal and focus group accounts to explore undergraduate students’ experiences with an experiential learning model. While she affirmed the potential of experiential education to yield a transformative experience, Breunig (2017) also recognized the challenge of finding a balance between teacher- and student-centered approaches. Participants identified on occasion that the environment was unnecessarily controlled, but at other times, the freedom was overwhelming. Ultimately, the challenge
lies in determining the degree of structure to impose, and who (the teacher or the students) should be responsible for creating this structure (Breunig, 2017).

Researchers continue to explore the role and value of experiential education and its nuances. Experiential education has the potential to empower its participants’ interpersonal, intrapersonal, and behavioural (e.g. coping, community involvement) skills (Shellman, 2014). Empowerment across these three dimensions helps students to develop their skills (and thus competence), develop positive social relationships, and cope with adverse situations (Shellman, 2014). Similarly, an exploration of the relationship between established psychological theories and experiential education supports its value.

Mackenzie, Son, and Hollenhorst (2014) compared the theories of self-determination and flow (among others) with experiential education because of the focus in literature on the outcomes of experiential education, and less rigorous study of why such outcomes occur. Experiential education consistently aligns with these well-developed theories in psychology. In Self-Determination Theory, learning is considered to be optimal when the environment is supportive of autonomy (freedom of choice), relatedness (support), and competence (confidence that one is doing or could do well) as it thus encourages intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2011). Comparably, experiential education models place an emphasis on the ability of the instructor to provide these elements (Mackenzie et al., 2014). According to Flow Theory, optimal engagement (interest and intrinsic motivation) occurs when the level of challenge matches the competence of the learner (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009). Likewise, experiential education models (such as the Adventure Experience Paradigm) strive to present outdoor experiences that balance risk (challenge) and skill (competence) (Mackenzie et al., 2014).
**Integrated Curriculum**

In integrated curricula, unified themes that span multiple disciplines address core concepts (Drake & Reid, 2010). While differences in approaches to studying different fields exist, disciplinary knowledge does not exist in a vacuum. Dividing knowledge into subjects is a socially constructed organization mechanism (Hinchey, 2010). Language, for example, influences biology, and vice versa. While the practice of integrating curricular subjects is not new in Ontario (dating back to the 1930s), a push for incorporating integrated curricula in classrooms has resurfaced in an effort to make education relevant (and thus more engaging) for students (Drake & Reid, 2010; Vars, 1991).

While the specific terminology describing integrated curricula varies throughout the literature, curriculum integration exists along a spectrum (Applebee, Adler, & Flihan, 2007). Not all integration is equal with the spectrum of integration capturing a range from superficial to deep integration of subject matter (Applebee et al., 2007; Fogarty, 1991). In order for *deep* integrated learning to occur, an integrated curriculum must incorporate concepts from various disciplines to address a unified topic, have students appreciate the topic’s value, encourage a sense of responsibility, and challenge students to take initiative in their learning (Kozak & Elliott, 2014). For Fogarty (1991), a primary component of deeply integrated curricula is that they relate directly to the lives of students. In doing so, integrated curricula have the potential to enhance students’ understanding of concepts, improve student performance in multiple subject areas, increase engagement in subject matter, and increase motivation for students to care about what they learn (Drake & Reid, 2010). Deeply integrated curricula ideally incorporate concepts from various disciplines.
to address a unified topic (Applebee et al., 2007) that relates directly to students’ lives (Fogarty, 1991), and inspire in students a sense of responsibility and initiative (Kozak & Elliott, 2014).

As an example of a deeply integrated curriculum, MacMath, Roberts, Wallace, and Chi (2010) reported results from a study that examined a grade 5 classroom for students at risk of not graduating. Curricular content encompassed a theme that students played a role in deciding; the class selected the theme of renovating their school building because it was in poor condition, and they worked toward solving this very real problem. Students used math to generate statistics about the poor quality of the school while learning about decimals, and used their language skills to write letters to city officials that incorporated the results of their math study. The implementation of an integrated curriculum was relevant to the students’ lives, engaged and motivated students, and helped students successfully advocate for the renovation of their school.

Despite the potential benefits of employing an integrated curriculum, doing so is not without challenges. Creating and sustaining an integrated curriculum requires time, resources, and commitment on the part of the instructor, and additionally cooperation if led by a teaching team (Applebee et al., 2007; Drake & Reid, 2010). The curriculum may be distorted or miss important concepts if educators do not pay adequate attention to curriculum requirements in the process of integrating them (Applebee et al., 2007). Distinct subjects and their varied approaches should be used to guide the creation of integrated curricula rather than eliminating categorization of disciplines altogether (Fogarty, 1991). Established curricula are building blocks with which to design integrated curricula. Ultimately, the integrated curriculum is “neither a problem nor a panacea,” but
rather a tool with which to approach education and try to influence students’ learning in a positive manner (Applebee et al., 2007)

Summary

Adkins and Simmons (2002) considered if the concepts of outdoor, environmental, and experiential education are converging or diverging approaches. Ultimately, they concluded that, because these approaches have both convergent and divergent qualities, they are instead mutually supportive, suggesting a multi-directional relationship. Additionally, an inherent quality of each approach is that of a context for learning other subject matter. Thus integrated curriculum naturally follows as another related component. One context with strong potential to support a deeply integrated curriculum is a program with outdoor, environmental, and experiential foci. The Ontario outdoor ICP model represents such a context. Recognizing the contribution of the four theoretical components of outdoor education, environmental education, experiential learning, and integrated curriculum to the Ontario outdoor ICP structure enhances exploration of the long-term influence of outdoor ICPs on the lives of former students.

Outdoor ICPs in Ontario

In this section of the literature review, I discuss Ontario outdoor ICPs, addressing: (a) their history, (b) characteristics of a typical program, and (c) the student experience.

History of Ontario Outdoor ICPs

The outdoor ICP model was first introduced in Ontario in 1981 when the *Bronte Creek Project* (which Bert Horwood, a keystone figure in ICP research and development, refers to as “the grand-daddy of ICPs”) was founded, although non-integrated alternative program predecessors were already in place in the 1970s (Horwood, 1995; Russell &
Burton, 2000). Outdoor ICPs embody the principles of outdoor education, environmental education, experiential learning, and integrated curriculum by dissolving disciplinary boundaries and striving to provide students with authentic learning experiences that require them to think critically and work collaboratively within the context of outdoor and environmental education (Breunig et al., 2015). ICPs originated from outdoor education roots, but through a modified model that could address any topic (Breunig et al., 2015; Kozak, 2011). Outdoor ICPs encourage the formation of supportive learning communities through engaging projects applied to the surrounding local area (Kozak, 2011).

Ontario secondary schools implemented the semester system in the 1970s, permitting outdoor ICPs to exist in affiliation with school boards because students were able to attend an ICP without disrupting their accumulation of course credits. In a non-semestered system, students had to commit to eight courses that they took for the duration of the year. However, with the introduction of the semester system, courses were concentrated within semesters, with the result that students had more flexibility in their schedule with regard to when they took their courses, and could potentially commit one semester toward an ICP. As a result, outdoor ICPs began to steadily grow in popularity (Kozak, 2011), with the first province-wide gathering of interested Ontario educators held at Bark Lake in August 1994 (Horwood, 1995).

Due to financial constraints imposed by the provincial government, the late 1990s saw a reorganization of the Ontario curriculum to reflect a greater focus on priority subjects, such as mathematics, traditional sciences, and English (Borland, 2014; Bondar, 2007). This “back-to-basics” approach resulted in the elimination of courses identified as
non-essential, including the Environmental Science course (Environmental Education Ontario, 2016; Russell & Burton, 2000). Fewer excursions to school board-funded outdoor education facilities followed, with some facilities forced to close because of insufficient support and funding (Borland, 2014). In addition, pre-service teacher education did not include mandatory environmental education. Thus educators were not necessarily equipped to address the topic in their classrooms. Because of this combination of factors, students in the public school system had increasingly limited access to environmental education (Bondar, 2007). With progressively declining opportunities for their students to access outdoor and environmental education, dedicated educators in the early 2000s offered programs of their own. Around this time, approximately 30 outdoor ICPs were operational in Ontario (Russell & Burton, 2000).

While evidence suggests many benefits to outdoor ICPs, such programs are by no means perfect in their design. First, outdoor ICPs require a tremendous amount of commitment on the part of the teacher. The workload includes trips (sometimes up to 16 days in length): time that teachers spend working and away from their families (Russell & Burton, 2000). Teachers also often take on the monumental task of fundraising as much of the program cost as possible in order to offset student fees (Sharpe & Breunig, 2009). The workload and commitment required can lead to teacher burnout and ultimately to program closure (Comishin et al., 2004). In addition, as there is typically a single instructor running an outdoor ICP, the curricular content tends to be limited based on the instructor’s expertise and comfort teaching various subjects (Russell & Burton, 2000). Outdoor ICPs tend to put more focus on sciences and geography, and less on the
arts, possibly limiting the range of students enrolling (McGowan, 2016; Russell & Burton, 2000).

External factors limit outdoor ICPs as well. The change from a five-year to four-year high school system in Ontario in 2003, for example, made it challenging for students to fit in all their required courses for graduation as they had one year less in which to complete their credits (Linney, 2014). Enrolling in an ICP meant adhering to further limits regarding credit accumulation, which led to declining enrolment in programs at the time of the change (Linney, 2014). Certain components of outdoor ICPs are also inherently risky (such as canoeing), and require support from administrators to include them in school board insurance policies (Comishin et al., 2004). While some school boards support outdoor ICPs, other boards are not as willing to provide this support (Comishin et al., 2004). Risks aside, programs may be cut to allocate resources to other initiatives if there is a lack of interest from prospective students (Wilson, 2011).

Despite the challenges that outdoor ICPs have faced, the model has ultimately proven to be resilient. Outdoor ICPs continue to survive due to the dedication of select qualified educators and word-of-mouth recommendations from satisfied students and their parents (Kozak, 2011; Russell & Burton, 2000). Breunig et al. (2015) estimate that there are currently about 100 outdoor ICPs in Ontario, compared to an estimate of 30 programs in the year 2000 (Russell & Burton, 2000), indicating the growth and promise of this educational approach.

**Characteristics of Ontario ICPs**

Inconsistent nomenclature and lack of a comprehensive list of programs pose a challenge for identifying and tracking ICPs (Kozak, 2011). References to ICPs include,
but are not limited to: integrated programs, environmental leadership programs, and package programs (Kozak, 2011). Kozak’s (2011) attempt to create a comprehensive list of ICPs found that the vast majority of respondents described outdoor ICPs, suggesting that the ICP model remains a particularly popular format for outdoor and environmental education.

A recent publication by Linney (2014) presented educators’ stories from 18 Ontario-based outdoor ICPs and catalogued each ICP’s characteristics. While the specific curricular components differ across ICPs based on their location, funding, and seasonal timing, there are a number of typically existing elements:

- **One or two teachers**: A limited number of instructors teaching all courses allows course content to be integrated cohesively and adapted to each cohort of students.
- **2-4 credits**: A variety of subjects are offered, dependent on the program’s grade level and focus. A Grade 10 ICP, for example, would likely require civics and careers as they are mandatory Grade 10 courses in Ontario. Almost all outdoor ICPs include physical education as a course.
- **Small class size**: Between 15 and 30 students attend an outdoor ICP in any given semester.
- **Block scheduling**: Flexible learning time is uninterrupted by bells, as opposed to a rigid timetable of discrete subjects that students are likely used to.
- **Alternative locations**: Programs provide students with a “home base” in which to collaborate as an integrated class. Some programs take place within a traditional school with a designated classroom, while others take their students “off-campus” to an outdoor learning centre or other location for the semester.
- **Outdoor experiences**: Outdoor components are planned dependent on weather. Common outdoor experiences include canoeing, hiking, biking, camping, skiing, and snowshoeing.

- **Teaching experiences**: Students are expected to take on the role of a teacher for younger students or other members of their community.

- **Community partners**: Programs often expect their students to interact with the community within which their program is situated. For example, students might partner with the local city hall, YMCA, or post-secondary institution to complete a project or have an experience.

- **Certifications**: Standard certifications that reflect the nature of program activities might include First Aid, canoe tripping, and Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System. Obtaining certification is sometimes part of a Specialist High Skills Major. A Specialist High Skills Major is defined by the Ontario Ministry of Education (2015) as a “ministry-approved specialized program that allows students to focus their learning on a specific economic sector while meeting the requirements to graduate from secondary school” (p. 1).

- **Environmental stewardship**: An environmental emphasis is common, with students exploring topics such as conservation, participating in environmental initiatives like Earth Day, and practicing ecological techniques such as identification or sampling.

- **Leadership opportunities**: Students are encouraged to practice their leadership skills in formally assessed and informal contexts. Students might be expected to
become “experts” on a topic before teaching one another or leading components of trips as they gain experience.

- **Course fees**: Some programs are free of charge, but most require a course fee of $250-$750. Many programs with course fees offer bursaries for accessibility.

- **Fundraising**: Course instructors strive to secure external funding in order to keep course fees as low as possible. Some programs include a student fundraising component to offset fees further.

**Outdoor ICPs and the Student Experience**

The present study focuses on how students experience outdoor ICPs. This section of the literature review will explore (a) specific Ontario outdoor ICP outcomes (with regard to students’ experiences), (b) the value of conducting long-term studies (c) summary and critique of existing literature, and (d) how I build upon the literature for the present study.

**Ontario outdoor ICP outcomes.** Extant studies in the literature collectively focus on the outcomes of Ontario ICPs regarding the student experience, encapsulating the following themes: (a) sense of community, (b) unique experiences with learning and evaluation, (c) personal growth, (d) shifting concept of teacher, and (e) emerging environmental consciousness.

**Sense of community.** A strong sense of community is a nearly universal theme regarding students’ experiences in outdoor ICPs, presented in most studies of the student experience as a major finding (Breunig, 2013a; Breunig et al., 2015; Caspell, 2007; Henderson et al., 1996; Horwood, 1994; Mehta & Henderson, 1996). The concept of “community” revolved around feeling closely bonded to peers in an ICP because of the
teamwork required of them and the extended time they spent together. Individual studies, however, contributed additional perspectives and information regarding the sense of community.

In Horwood (1994), study participants equated community with friendship, relating community more closely to concepts of respect, tolerance, and courtesy: aspects of social behaviour that apply to any relationship (not limited to friendship). Additionally, the sense of community for participants in Horwood’s (1994) study was purposefully curated by the teacher before the ICP semester even began (students were required to fundraise for the program). Mehta and Henderson (1996) found that concept maps created by students attending CELP (Community Environmental Leadership Program) shifted to include their teachers within the concepts of “community” and “friends,” compared to the view of teachers as a separate entity in pre-CELP maps. Participants in Breunig’s (2013a) study who felt that they did not “fit” within the traditional school system especially benefitted from the community. Students tended to connect pro-social behaviours with pro-environmental behaviours. Breunig et al. (2015) discussed how, given the extended time ICP students spent together, conflicts inevitably arose. Responses to such conflicts were polarized: while some students appreciated the social challenges as an opportunity, others expressed frustration. From a long-term perspective, however, Caspell (2007) noted that participants felt more comfortable working in groups in new contexts beyond the scope of the semester, particularly with regard to navigating conflicts.

**Unique experiences with learning and evaluation.** Another highly characteristic theme concerning students’ experience in outdoor ICPs is that students perceived their
learning to be different from how they had previously experienced it (Breunig et al., 2015; Caspell, 2007; Henderson et al., 1996; Horwood, 1994; Mehta & Henderson, 1996; Russell & Burton, 2000). Participants in Horwood’s (1994) study identified the unique (and enjoyable) experience of moving through a complete process (seeing projects through from start to finish rather than a truncated portion) and making authentic real-world connections with course content. Students had a sense of satisfaction and holistic understanding of the complete process necessary in a project, such as producing an issue of a magazine. The “real-world” application was equated with actually accomplishing a task as opposed to simulating one. This form of application instilled in students a sense of responsibility for completing the work, and for one another. Similarly, Russell and Burton (2000), Caspell (2007) and Breunig et al. (2015) found that the experiential education approach was memorable because of the clear relevance of knowledge beyond the classroom. Caspell (2007) also found that former students reported being able to apply their learning more effectively after leaving the program as a result of having been introduced to possible applications.

For Mehta and Henderson (1996), student evaluation was a prominent topic on participants’ pre-CELP and CELP concept maps. However, evaluation was perceived more favourably in CELP concept maps, no longer associated with negative terms such as “failing” and “due dates,” instead representing a variety of types of evaluation positively (e.g., journal, portfolio, interview). Similarly, in Henderson et al.’s (1996) study, students framed their post-CELP stories more positively.

**Personal growth.** While not one of the themes he discussed, Horwood (1994) came to the conclusion that students’ experiences transcended the disciplines they were
taught. Their personal development superseded specific knowledge gained. Several more recent studies have discussed the role of students’ personal growth as a result of participating in an ICP in greater depth (Breunig et al., 2015; Caspell, 2007; McGowan, 2016; Russell & Burton, 2000). Caspell’s (2007) participants indicated that outdoor ICPs provided a significant opportunity for personal growth, intertwining intra and interpersonal growth (foundational elements needed to build healthy relationships). Their responses regarding intrapersonal growth aligned with the definition, “new confidence in oneself, increased willingness to take risks, improved self-concept, enhanced leadership skills, increased logical reasoning skills, and greater reflective thinking skills” (p. 23). Responses regarding interpersonal growth aligned with the definition, “enhanced cooperation, more effective communication skills, greater trust in others, increased sharing of decision making, new ways to resolve conflicts, improved problem-solving skills, and enhanced leadership skills” (p. 24). Participants specifically emphasized journaling as a contributing factor to their personal growth.

Aligning with the definitions presented by Caspell (2007), Russell and Burton (2000) identified that personal growth through intra and interpersonal skills development was valuable to students. Participants in the study by Breunig et al. (2015) attributed their development of critical thinking and reflection to the ICP’s open and supportive environment. Breunig et al. (2015) further noted that the open and supportive environment was more evident in ICPs that were longer established, suggesting the teacher had had more time to figure out which approaches worked best.

For McGowan (2016), personal growth in ICP students came about in the form of enhanced situational coping, leadership skills, and self-efficacy. These traits were traced
back to challenges with which students were faced. Challenges lend themselves to creating the opportunity for “provocative moments”: moments wherein students’ “way of knowing” is uprooted, and they must work through the challenge to resolve the cognitive dissonance they experience (Pizzolato, 2005). Working through provocative moments can have a profound influence on self-authorship (one’s beliefs, goals, and sense of self; Pizzolato, 2005), and, in turn, have an enduring influence on interpersonal relationships (Baxter Magolda, 2008).

**Shifting concept of teacher.** Outdoor ICP students have a shifting concept of what “teacher” represents. Mehta and Henderson (1996), for example, noted a decrease in the number of instances of the term “teacher” between participants’ concept maps pre-CELP and during CELP, respectively. Additionally, pre-CELP concept maps identified the teacher as separate or distant, whereas CELP concept maps integrated the teacher with concepts of “community” and “friends.” Similarly, Henderson et al. (1996) found many negative references to the concept of “teacher” in pre-CELP stories, and none in post-CELP stories. Caspell (2007) discovered that participants appreciated their instructor’s teaching style and philosophy, and that the teacher played an integral role in students’ personal growth. Participants in Breunig’s (2013a) study discussed that their teacher adapted her teaching strategy over the years in order to “get it right” (participants discovered this shift in the teacher through conversations with former students). Breunig (2013a) argued that students might be particularly responsive to the new student-instructor relationship because the teachers also undergo transformation, and can thus relate to their students’ experiences with challenge. McGowan (2016) found that nearly all participants perceived the instructor as influential in their self-authorship development
because of the trust they developed with the instructor. Henderson et al. (1996) and Russell and Burton (2000) suggested that the teaching experience their participants gained (teaching elementary school students about the environment) contributed to the strong bond between students and their teacher as, by acting as teachers themselves, they were better able to appreciate their ICP teacher’s work.

**Emerging environmental consciousness.** While not a predominant theme in the literature, some more recent studies found the theme of emerging environmental consciousness among the ICP students they studied (Breunig, 2013a; Breunig 2013b; Breunig et al., 2014; Caspell, 2007). Caspell (2007) found that the distinction between human and ecological communities was unclear; that is to say, participants developed a stronger connection to the natural world and a stronger sense of environmental awareness. However, while participants mentioned connectedness and awareness, they typically did not indicate whether or not they were using this knowledge to actually act in an environmentally responsible manner. Breunig (2013a) similarly found that ICPs instilled in students a sense of environmental responsibility, especially prompted by guest lecturers and the teacher’s personal values. She also argued that, in addition to knowledge about the environment, pro-social interactions might encourage students to engage in environmental action. Breunig (2013b) and Breunig et al. (2014) revisited the role of environmental responsibility by specifically interviewing ICP students about their knowledge and beliefs surrounding food sustainability and environmental consciousness, respectively. Breunig (2013b) and Breunig et al. (2014) found that students’ views changed over the course of the semester and that they intended to enact environmental
change. Breunig et al. (2014), however, added that participants struggled with enacting changes given real-world constraints.

**Long-term influences of outdoor ICPs.** ICPs have a positive influence on students’ lives even years after their completion. Christine, a former student of the *Bronte Creek Project*, described her time spent in an ICP as a “highlight of [her] teenage years” that “literally changed [her] forever” (Integrated Programs, 2013). Olivia (a former student of the *Integrated Canadian Experience* (ICE) in Toronto) reflected upon her Grade 9 ICP when she was in Grade 12, having developed new insight into the resounding effects of the ICP years later (Linney, 2014). She was able to gain an appreciation for the strength she gained during and since ICE, but this insight only came to her after having had time to process the experience (Linney, 2014). Parents also play a role in providing insight into the influence of outdoor ICPs, frequently referring to them with terms such as “transformative,” “life-altering,” and “life-changing,” with regard to their children’s experiences in the program (Linney, 2011).

In the literature, there is evidence to support that outdoor ICPs have the potential to influence students beyond the scope of the program itself. Outdoor education programs that are of a duration longer than 30 days have a greater likelihood of a lasting impact on their participants (McGowan, 2016). The typical ICP spans 20 weeks (far exceeding the 30-day threshold). With regard to changes occurring between time points, Horwood (1994) found that the concept of unity within the curriculum required more time for students to process it, as unity did not come up in observations and interviews before and during the program, but it did four months after. Students did not fully grasp the effects of the program on their personal development and understanding of how integrated
curriculum is applicable to other contexts until they had time to reflect on the ICP experience. Studies that use participants who are currently involved in (or were recently involved in) ICPs capture students’ “in-the-moment” experiences. Long-term impacts of ICPs can only be uncovered through longitudinal or retrospective research. For example, Caspell’s (2007) study (the only study with a focus on impacts years beyond the scope of an outdoor ICP) found the theme of influence in selecting post-secondary education and career paths.

**Conclusions about ICPs and the student experience.** Overall, key themes in the literature focusing on student experiences in ICPs were a sense of community, a unique approach to learning and evaluation, personal growth, and a shifting concept of teachers’ role. A sense of community is a nearly universal theme, characterized by a strong bond between students and their peers that was developed through extended periods together and teamwork activities. The unique experiences with learning – combining elements of outdoor, environmental, experiential, and integrated education – were typically reported as more stimulating than that of the typical classroom, particularly regarding the application of knowledge into a “real-world” context. Evaluation was noted as a distinguishing factor of ICPs, with students appreciating the diminished focus on marks and increased focus on the process of learning.

Personal growth, closely related to sense of community, is the development of intra- and interpersonal skills that permit students to better understand themselves and group dynamics. Journal writing (or otherwise practicing reflection) was a common practice in ICPs that was reported as enhancing these skills, as was the opportunity to navigate challenges in a process-oriented environment.
Students noted the shifting concept of what a teacher was supposed to be, acknowledging the work that their teachers put into the program, their student-centered teaching philosophy, and their willingness to adapt their teaching to reflect the needs of the class. Related to the sense of community, outdoor ICP students often developed closer relationships with their teacher, considering them more as a “friend” than a strictly authoritative figure.

The bulk of student experiences thus revolve around soft skills (transferable intra- and interpersonal skills) as opposed to hard skills and specific academic content. To a lesser extent, emerging environmental consciousness was discussed as an outcome for ICP students, characterized by students’ improved understanding of dimensions of environmental consciousness and intent to enact them. However, this theme primarily came up in studies where the intent of the research was to find out about environmental consciousness, and the degree to which environmental consciousness was actually significant has yet to be determined.

With regard to the methods used, studies tended to examine the experiences of students from one (or very few) ICPs at once (Breunig, 2013a; Breunig et al., 2014; Breunig et al., 2015; Caspell, 2007; Henderson et al., 1996; Horwood, 1994; McGowan, 2016; Mehta & Henderson, 1996; Russell & Burton, 2000). Although each ICP provides a unique experience, similar themes exist across studies of various ICPs, suggesting that there may be outcomes that are common among programs. Additionally, studies often focus on students’ experiences in close temporal proximity to their participation in an ICP (Breunig, 2013; Breunig et al., 2014; Breunig et al. 2015; Henderson et al., 1996; Horwood, 1994; McGowan, 2016; Mehta & Henderson, 1996; Russell & Burton, 2000).
Long-term studies allow participants the opportunity to reflect on the ICP experience and contribute different conclusions made possible only with the passage of time. For example, the study by Caspell (2007) contributed a theme not present in other studies: selecting an academic and professional path. A gap in the literature that still requires further investigation is research that considers both: (a) participants removed from their ICP for an extended period of time (more than several months) and (b) participants from various ICPs (spanning more than three different programs).

**Building upon extant literature.** In the present study, I build upon extant literature by framing it with different parameters than those within the extant literature, including: (a) participants for whom years have passed since their enrolment in an ICP (between 4 and 13 years), and (b) participants representing a variety of programs (six). This structure should contribute additional research on participants further removed from their ICP (i.e., a number of years) in order to report on long-term influences, and focus on capturing themes that are common across ICPs, as opposed to within just one ICP.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

Case study methodology, rooted in the constructivist paradigm, is an approach taken by those who believe that personal experience shapes perceptions of the world (Baxter & Jack, 2008). An intact unit (a “case”) or series of units that serve as a source of data characterize case studies (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Johansson, 2003). Boundaries for cases can be created by time (when), and activity (what) or place (where) (Baxter & Jack, 2008). The presence of a defined case is most central to the case study approach, rather than the specific methods used to collect data (Stake, 2006). This particular study is conducive to the case study approach on the basis of time and activity, as I investigated a number of participants (a series of units) who had a comparable experience in attending an outdoor ICP (activity) during secondary school (time).

The case study, when conducted qualitatively, aims to capture the nuances that represent the unique experiences of participants (Stake, 1995). This approach allows themes to emerge through the collection of data without knowledge of the outcome prior to completion of the study (Baxter & Jack, 2008). I conducted the present study qualitatively, capturing nuances of participants’ unique experiences, thereby contributing to a rich and detailed understanding of their experiences of outdoor ICPs. The outcome of the research was unknown prior to data collection.

The type of data produced by case studies differentiates their ability to address the study purpose. While the intrinsic case study focuses on the cases themselves, the instrumental type (used in the present study) aims to use case study research to accomplish something else; the case study is instrumental in accomplishing a goal.
beyond just understanding the case (Stake, 1995). I identified an instrumental case study approach as appropriate to address the purpose of this study because, while I examined participants’ accounts of their experiences individually, I also compiled data from all cases to find common themes and elucidate what might characterize outdoor ICP influences beyond individual programs.

Multiple case studies (or collective case studies as Stake (1995) describes them) identify differences and similarities among several cases when a common characteristic unifies all cases (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Stake (2006) names this commonality across cases as the “quintain,” distinguishing the unifying attributes from the unique characteristics of each case. In my study, the quintain is that all participants attended an ICP a number of years ago. A limited number of cases (between 4 and 10) are typically studied to allow for a rich understanding and exploration of specific complexities of each one, while still situating each in the context of the quintain (Stake, 2006). I consider each individual participant as a case among multiple cases because, while participants all experienced a comparable event at a similar time in their lives, they experienced different ICPs and have had a multitude of personal experiences since completing them. However, similarity among programs permits the formation of transferable conclusions, highlighting the importance of examining all cases together in addition to each case on its own.

**Participants**

In searching for participants, I laid out specific criteria prior to recruitment, and then followed rigorous steps to carry out recruitment. The study was approved by the
General Research Ethics Board (GREB) at Queen’s University prior to recruitment (Appendix A).

**Participant Criteria**

In that a multiple case study typically investigates between 4 and 10 cases (Stake, 2006), in the present study, I interviewed nine participants from seven ICPs (no more than three participants from one program). I selected this range and distribution of participants to obtain a rich source of data for cross-case analysis of participants and programs while still being able to analyze each individual case thoroughly.

Selected participants met the following criteria: (1) completed an outdoor ICP in Ontario during secondary school, (2) graduated from the ICP between 5 and 10 years prior to recruitment, and (3) was available to be interviewed either in person or by video/phone call for one hour. Upon beginning recruitment, I expanded the range of 5 to 10 years to 4 years at the lower end, and 13 years at the upper end, as the time range was a flexible guideline rather than a rigid criterion. These modifications enabled me to recruit additional information-rich participants.

Several Ontario outdoor ICPs are prominently represented in the literature, as I discovered through personal communication with ICP instructors of such programs and ICP researchers. Researchers often select these programs for their longevity (operating for approximately 10 years or more) and because the instructors associated with them are familiar with participating in research. However, I aimed to include a diversity of programs in my sample of participants. As each program provides a unique experience, I identified value in exploring commonalities amongst students’ experiences of these unique but comparable programs to learn what they commonly provide for students in
terms of long-term influences. A recent study by McGowan (2016) recommended the inclusion of more than two ICPs for future research. This study involved participants from seven different ICPs.

**Participant Recruitment**

To recruit former ICP students, I used two techniques: online posts and snowball sampling through word-of-mouth. To complete my online recruitment, I posted a notice in relevant Facebook groups, such as the Council of Outdoor Educators of Ontario (a group whose members include Ontario ICP instructors; Appendix B).

Snowball sampling (a form of purposive sampling) is used to locate difficult-to-access populations; it involves recruitment of participants based on the recommendations of others (Patton, 2002). I communicated with personal contacts who had access to potential participants for the study. I requested that they contact potential participants by passing along my contact information and an email message (Appendix B). In some cases, potential participants directly contacted me. In others, my initial contacts responded with the contact information of individuals who had shown interest, and I then reached out to them using the contact information provided.

I informed potential participants of the criteria for the study and invited them to participate if they fit the criteria. I accepted those individuals who showed interest in the study and fit the criteria on a first-come, first-serve basis, capping the number of participants representing a particular program at three. Once I had recruited nine participants representing seven different programs, I suspended my recruitment efforts.
Data Collection

Interviews are a data collection method by which participants provide responses to questions that are expected to offer insight into the purpose of the study. They are a commonly utilized method for multiple case studies (Fontana & Frey, 2005; Stake, 2006). Semi-structured interviews are formatted such that the researcher prepares a list of questions prior to conducting the interview, while allowing room for variation across interviews through the use of prompts (Fontana & Frey, 2005). To answer the proposed research questions and obtain a rich understanding of each participant’s story, I used a semi-structured interview approach.

Retrospective interviews rely upon real-life experience accounts that occurred in the past, and are used when a longitudinal study is not possible, feasible, or necessary (Cohen, Kasen, Bifulco, Andrews, & Gordon, 2005). In this particular study, a retrospective interview was inherently necessary because time (in years) needed to have elapsed between participants completing their ICP and being interviewed for this study to allow them to comment on the long-term influences of the program. A longitudinal study was neither feasible (due to the one-year study duration) nor was it needed because my research questions focused on participants’ current memories of past experiences, and on their current perceptions of the influences of those past experiences. Liddicoat and Krasny (2013), who explored significant life experiences in environmental education (including outdoor ICPs), argue that even short-term programs have the potential to remain salient throughout students’ lives, with the strength of impact tending to increase with the duration of a program. Given that the outdoor ICPs experienced by the participants spanned an entire secondary school semester, I anticipated that participants
would not have trouble producing an adequate amount of information regarding salient ICP experiences.

I aimed to conduct interviews in person at a quiet and private location, agreed upon in consultation with each participant, to cause the least inconvenience possible (Mears, 2009). However, due to distance and time limitations, I also offered the option to conduct the interview via video call, or if need be, phone call. In the case of a video or phone interview, I emailed a Letter of Information (Appendix C) and Consent Form (Appendix D) to potential participants. If they were still interested in the interview, they sent back the signed documents digitally. I completed four of the interviews in person (Pam, Molly, Julia, and Kirk), four by video call (Claire, Brian, Tamara, and Jocelyn), and one over the phone (Jeannie).

Once participants confirmed their interview, I requested that they bring along to the interview a memento from their ICP, if possible. The purpose of the memento was to act as an elicitation tool: a stimulus that acts as a prompt for participants to discuss their experiences in greater depth (Mears, 2009). Participants were thus encouraged to reflect on their experiences prior to the interview, allowing them more time to recall experiences and encourage their recollection of additional memories. Two participants (Molly and Tamara) brought a physical memento, while the remaining seven (Pam, Claire, Julia, Brian, Kirk, Jeannie, and Jocelyn) described what they might have brought had their memento been accessible. However, even just the act of thinking about what they might have brought yielded effective responses, assisting participants with recalling more experiences than they might have otherwise. For example, Claire told a specific story about her love of taking on challenges based on a photo she recalled from her program,
where she had fallen over on a trip having overexerted herself. Nonetheless, she found the experience to be rewarding.

At the beginning of each interview, I informed the participants how I would conduct the interview, that they could withdraw from the study at any time, and that they were welcome to ask questions if anything was unclear. Then I had them read and sign the appropriate consent documents if they had not done so already. I audio-recorded interviews using the free app SuperNote on an iPad. Once recording, I began with a statement describing the nature of the interview for record-keeping purposes: the participant’s name, location of the interview, and the date (Mears, 2009). I then proceeded with the interview, asking my prepared questions and prompts (Appendix E) for the span of approximately one hour. When necessary, I included new prompts based on the direction of the conversation; I used these prompts either to delve more deeply into a topic the participant broached, or to steer the conversation back to my intended purpose.

The interview questions followed a chronological order of events, such that the participants might reflect upon and recall their experiences in the ICP first, and then discuss how their life had been influenced since the ICP. Cumulatively, the responses to the sub-questions answer the primary research question: How do former students describe having experienced outdoor ICPs? The final question gave participants the opportunity to add any relevant information they had not yet discussed, and clarify any points they made throughout the interview after having time to consider their previous responses. Participants found that the interview questions captured most of their experiences, but four (Molly, Julia, Brian, and Tamara) added a memorable story or additional experience
about which they had not yet found the opportunity to share. Three participants (Brian, Claire, and Jeannie) provided a brief summary of their experience.

**Data Analysis**

I transcribed audio-recordings of each interview session verbatim, replacing any references to the names of participants, other people, and programs with pseudonyms. I experienced technical difficulties with Jocelyn’s interview recording, rendering the data unusable because I was unable to produce a complete transcript. Thus, my analyses are based upon the experiences of the other eight participants spanning a range of six different programs. I applied a member-checking protocol iteratively throughout the data analysis process to ensure that each participant’s intended message was accurately portrayed (Creswell & Miller, 2000). At the transcription phase of the data collection process, I emailed participants the transcript from their interview along with a request to review it and confirm that their responses to the questions accurately represented their experiences. Participants did not express major concerns with the transcripts. Minor changes were managed via email.

I first analysed transcripts individually and used these analyses to inform a cross-case analysis. Individual analysis provided insight into personal experiences, while the cross-case analysis addressed commonalities among cases (Stake, 2006). I used an inductive approach to analyze the data by reading through the transcripts to identify and code segments of text relevant to the study purpose, grouping codes to create categories, and finally grouping categories to form emergent themes to report as findings (Thomas, 2006). I began by analyzing individual interviews by hand on a printed copy (highlighting, underlining, and taking notes). Using Microsoft Excel, I then produced a
list of codes for each participant based on segments I identified as important when analyzing the interviews by hand. Participants were each assigned a colour for their set of codes. I printed and cut out the codes as strips of paper, arranging them into categories, and using these categories to inform my initial themes. By assigning participants a colour for their codes, I was able to see at a glance how many and which participants discussed that theme.

As part of my data analysis, I created a narrative of each participant’s interview. The narratives provided me with a better understanding of how the themes I already identified pertained to them as individuals. To form a narrative, I cut, pasted, and rearranged segments of an interview in Microsoft Word to create a cohesive piece representative of that participant’s experiences. This process was particularly significant in the data analysis process because it allowed me to understand further what components I considered most important to include. It helped me to refine the themes I had already identified and to develop a list of topics I would discuss as part of each theme. Known in narrative inquiry as restorying, the process is a form of “mutual storytelling” – a representation of data through both participants’ words and the researcher’s analysis (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). In my role as the researcher, I selected components of the interviews that answered the research questions to highlight in a story-like format. However, the message still came directly from the participants as the narratives were composed using their own words. In addition to using the narratives as a data analysis tool, I have included them in Appendix F as a reference to each individual’s experience. I did not include narratives within the main text because the focus of the findings was on the common experience across all participants. In the case of Kirk’s narrative, I included
his narrative within the main text in the findings chapter because his experience separated him from those of the other participants. As Kirk was an outlier with a powerful response to his ICP, including his narrative in the main text ensured that his voice came through independently to highlight his unique experience.

Just as with member checking in the transcription phase, I requested via email that participants verify their individual narratives and the general findings to ensure that I was able to capture the essence of their experiences. Again, participants did not identify the need for any significant changes, with minor changes again managed via email communication. Participants felt accurately portrayed, as they replied to the member-checking confirmation with responses, such as, “I feel like you have absolutely represented me,” “This looks great,” and “Everything looks good.”
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

In this chapter, I unpack my analysis of the data by (a) presenting the themes regarding all participants as a group and (b) presenting the narrative of the outlier participant, Kirk. Table 1 summarizes basic information about each participant. Where Grade 13 is cited, students took an extra year of high school (none of the participants were required to do Grade 13 as part of the Ontario Academic Credit – a formerly extant fifth year in high school). Where two grades are listed, participants enrolled into their program for the “second level” (an option available to Encounters with Wilderness students, with more responsibilities as a returning student). In these cases, years since enrollment are counted from the initial ICP enrollment. The cross-case analysis elucidates the thematic findings discovered when considering all participants as a group.

Table 1

Summary of participant details

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Outdoor ICP name</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Years since enrollment in ICP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Molly</td>
<td>Project Wild</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julia</td>
<td>Eco Experience</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pam</td>
<td>Enviro Explorers</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tamara</td>
<td>Encounters with Wilderness</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kirk</td>
<td>Beleaf in Yourself</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brian</td>
<td>Encounters with Wilderness</td>
<td>11/13</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claire</td>
<td>Outdoor Adventures</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeannie</td>
<td>Encounters with Wilderness</td>
<td>11/12</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Thematic Cross-Case Analysis

Based on the research questions guiding the study, themes were clustered around two groups: significant memories and long-term program influences. Within significant memories were four themes: (1) thriving, (2) personal growth, (3) sense of community, and (4) teacher’s role, each with sub-themes that inform how the themes were enacted. Within long-term program influences were three themes: (1) applying program learning to new contexts, (2) enacting environmental consciousness, and (3) lifelong connection to the program, each with sub-themes providing examples of how the themes were manifested. For a visual representation of the themes and sub-themes, see Figures 1 and 2. While some data are applicable to multiple themes, I made decisions about where to categorize data based on which theme they best represented.

Thriving

Several dimensions of the outdoor ICP experience contributed toward participants’ thriving: (a) novel experiences, (b) learning beyond the traditional classroom, (c) educational approach, and (d) autonomy.

Novel experiences. All participants found that their ICP semester was an experience unlike any they had ever had before. It was “refreshing” and “different” from the more “boring” and “routine” nature of school as they knew it. They typically knew few (if any) other students in their ICP class well at first, creating an opportunity for the development of new friendships. ICPs represented in the study each had a designated classroom space. ICP teachers approached education differently right from the beginning of the semester, and the students were excited for what was to come. Whatever their experiences had been in the regular classroom, this program was clearly going to be an adventure!
Figure 1 – Thematic organization of Theme Cluster 1 (significant memories)
Throughout the semester, ICPs exposed all participants to a wide variety of outdoor-oriented experiences that they would not have otherwise had in a traditional classroom, and maybe not even at all. Claire, for example, explained that her program was “very outdoor and adventure-based,” and that “outdoor physical activities played a large role” daily. Outdoor experiences came in the form of physical activities and focused on traditional outdoor skills, and were present at school, and on local and remote trips. Physical activities included hiking, rock climbing, canoeing, portaging, snowshoeing, skiing, cycling, swimming, running, and surfing. Outdoor skills incorporated into the
physical activities included summer and winter camping, knot tying, building quinzhees (hollowed-out snow shelters), making maple syrup, and orienteering.

Participants’ involvement with the outdoors and their development of related skills entering the program varied. However, students of all skill levels were welcome and had the opportunity to learn many new things, regardless of the level of knowledge with which they came in. Molly, for example, had not been to summer camp or obtained her NLS (National Lifeguard Service) certification like many of her classmates, but was skilled at camping with her family. She noted that, with varied levels of experience, “you got to see people shine at different things they were good at.”

**Learning beyond the traditional classroom.** The ICP learning environment was not limited to the indoor classroom space. All participants reported using the school grounds, the city, and the wilderness as a classroom too. By learning in numerous environments, Julia came to an insightful conclusion about how she could learn anywhere:

I always defined learning as the things my teacher teaches me in the classroom when I’m listening. I think the biggest thing was realizing that learning doesn’t have to be four walls around you. That learning and education can happen anywhere. Like talking to people, just looking around you, or investigating yourself. (Julia)

Pam came to a similar conclusion when she discovered that her class would be doing just as much work on trips as in the classroom: “The fact that we would actually do those projects while we were on our trips was very surprising to me. I expected that while
you’re gone you do nothing. But we [actually did] assignments while we were on our
trips.”

Although the learning environment changed regularly, accessible outdoor learning
remained as a consistent element. Additionally, most components of the ICPs represented
actually took place locally on outdoor school property or within city limits, making
outdoor learning accessible on a daily basis. Brian (in addition to Tamara and Jeannie)
explained how *Encounters with Wilderness* made use of the natural space near the school:

A lot of the activities we did were behind the school, because of the setup of our
school grounds. We had this huge natural environment [of wetlands, forests, and
rivers] that we could use to learn, to teach, and to explore. It was a great resource
to have. Students [from the high school] were always free to go back there but we
were the only class that specifically made use of it for school purposes. (Brian)

**Educational approach.** Most participants (Molly, Julia, Pam, Kirk, Claire, and
Jeannie) explicitly identified their ICP as more engaging compared to experiences before
and after as a point of reference. They found the new scholastic setting to be “more
conducive” to their learning as they were more interested in course content, were more
intrinsically motivated to learn, and looked forward to furthering their learning. Pam, an
International Baccalaureate student, explained how, although she was typically an
engaged student already, her ICP helped to get her interested in content even when it
would not ordinarily be exciting for her:

For some of the more boring classes like civics, *Enviro Explorers* helped me
stay on it. When I started getting bored, just when I was about to give up, they did
something fun. And I was more interested. [Back in the regular classroom the next semester], class definitely seemed more boring. (Pam)

Various ICP components were linked directly to how integrated and experiential curricula are intended to be implemented, contributing to students’ engagement with learning in a number of ways. The integration of course content was obvious to all participants, who described their coursework as “blended” and “taught together.” All participants referred to their program as “a course” at times, treating multiple credits like a cohesive entity. All participants appreciated this clear integration of material from all subjects, and considered it to be an attribute that contributed to “learning constantly,” even “when you don’t realize it.” Molly, for example, stated: “It was nice that it didn’t feel like three different credits. You could spend a whole day focusing on nutrition, but you’d be outside actually cooking, and you would forget that you were learning about proteins. It was very integrated.”

Not having her courses as clearly defined entities allowed Molly to focus less on the grades she would receive, and more on the process of learning: “The reason that [the separate courses are] not really clear in my mind is because, at the time, you weren’t worried about your grades [or] how [the teacher] was marking you. You were just yourself all the time.”

How participants remembered learning in an ICP was distinguished from traditional classroom experiences, largely in that they were learning in a “hands-on” or “applied” format with clear connections to the “real world.” All participants described being engaged through a “balance” between traditional classroom characteristics (such as taking notes and writing tests, and a bell to end class) and more “project-based” learning.
By “project-based,” participants were referring to the block scheduling that many ICPs turn to for daily structure: dividing the day by what needed to be done rather than by subject. Having exposure to both theoretical and practical learning was perceived as a benefit to the ICP structure: “I really liked the theory and the practical components. Putting them side-by-side was really good, because sometimes we don’t really make the connection between what we are learning and how to actually apply it. Putting them side-by-side emphasized that” (Julia).

All participants recalled the opportunity to apply their theoretical knowledge more saliently than just the theory. They discussed experiences of applying knowledge at greater length and in more detail. Molly, for example, discussed specific connections she made beyond memorized theory:

We were able to [make maple syrup] in a forest right by our school. We got to learn a lot about the steps, like how to set up a bucket: the facts. But at the same time we got to learn about our own community. About the trees, and a whole cultural aspect. People in northern Canada do this every year. Then we got to visit a place with millions of trees and mass-scale production and saw how much work went into just having a couple of trees and boiling it down. Being able to do one task thinking, “Ok, I’m going to learn how to make syrup,” you were also learning about Canadian incomes, and how people were using that in other ways, and how that has an effect on the globe, and how we export. There’s a lot of little lessons in the main idea. (Molly)

Trips (e.g., canoeing, cycling, camping) were a central topic that all participants revisited when discussing their ICP experiences. Trips contributed to their sense of
engagement because smaller assignments, tests, and trips were used to build toward a final trip: a goal that the class worked towards together. Throughout the semester, all participants developed hard outdoors skills, knowledge, and sense of community to complete the final trip:

The biggest thing that stands out in my mind is canoe tripping. We built up to it. Physically trying to get our bodies ready for something like that, being out in the wilderness. But there’s other components. You learn your leadership roles. And the impact stuff had on the environment was incorporated when we went on our canoe trips. We had to make sure we were “no trace.” (Jeannie)

The final trip was the primary context that integrated all academic content. For example, Jeannie discussed how, while some days would be structured around work for specific courses, when a trip (especially the final one) was approaching, class would be “hands down pretty much every course,” for the days leading up to it.

When not directly related to skills for the final trip, schoolwork was still engaging because it had a clear purpose. It was there for students to try to do something “real.” Jeannie discussed how the “hands-on” experience of recycling for the whole high school allowed her to understand more deeply the process and why it matters: “We were learning about [recycling], but we got to leave the classroom, and do the hands-on part. When we were physically doing the recycling, I was more aware of it rather than just saying, ‘Yeah, you should recycle.’”

Class discussions and activities were considered engaging because they contributed to student learning with a clear purpose: they provided new perspectives to consider. Julia’s class, for example, did a trading simulation activity in the first week of
the program that changed her perspective on poverty at a global scale: “Depending on how rich your country was and what your government was like, you could or couldn’t trade. We talked about disparities between different countries. [It was a] small scale for comparison but it gets you thinking about [global issues].”

**Autonomy.** Molly, Brian, Kirk, and Claire recalled having a great deal of autonomy in their ICP, contributing further to their interaction with the learning environment. Brian likened his ICP experience to how he later learned in university, in that it was much more self-driven and required students to be actively engaged:

> Very much in high school it is a strict division of power. You have teachers that tell students what to do. *Encounters with Wilderness* is something that forces and encourages students to engage and bring forth their own ideas in discussions. I found that [the program] really resembled more university or college courses [than high school] in the scope of the work. (Brian)

Claire highlighted an instance when autonomy fostered her engagement with coursework. Being able to choose a topic in which she was interested helped her to stay focused, as is true of many people. It was especially important for her, however, because of her ADHD: even a small element of choice went a long way in helping her to succeed. She had noticed this characteristic about herself before enrolling in *Outdoor Adventures*:

> What I struggled with as a student was always lack of autonomy. I would always go to a teacher and say, “I don’t want to do this project. I have a different idea.” Some teachers were really receptive to that. But some weren’t, and those were the classes that I got worse grades in, because I was like, “Well, forget you. I don’t really care about your class anymore.” (Claire)
Claire recalled caring about an end-of-unit project in *Outdoor Adventures* for which she was able to propose her own idea. She decided to map the trails behind the school to “leave her mark” on the ICP (the goal of the project). She was successful, as her teacher went on to make use of the trail map in future years. For Molly, she felt in control over her final product when she prepared presentations: “[We did] a lot of presentations [in *Project Wild*] and were often given a lot of creativity as to how we would want to present. [For one presentation], you had to pick an outdoor sport and research everything about it.” She went on to explain that her engagement didn’t end in the classroom; the presentation inspired her to actually give her chosen sport – paddle boarding – a try.

**Summary.** Participants thrived in the novel and engaging learning experience provided by their outdoor ICP. The new environment and variety of experiences to which they were exposed permitted them to see different places and ways in which learning could occur (i.e., learning was not limited to the four walls of a classroom). The experience engaged participants academically through integrated and experiential learning strategies: integrating course content, bridging the gap between theory and application with meaningful assignments, working toward an authentic final goal (a trip), being exposed to new perspectives on environmental and social issues, and valuing the process of learning as much as (if not more than) the final product. The learning environment went beyond the confines of the classroom, changing as necessary to have students learn most effectively. Participants were encouraged to be active learners by making learning accessible (i.e., locally focused), and allowing them autonomy.
Personal growth

Personal growth during the ICP semester was attributed to: (a) identity development, (b) reflection, (c) overcoming challenges, and (d) leadership.

Identity development. Adolescence is a period accompanied by the development of an identity. Multifaceted and complex, a personal identity cannot be reduced down to just a handful of interests, but interests can be a place to begin. The outdoor element of the ICPs was one such interest that drew most participants (all but Kirk) to apply for their program in the first place:

I like the outdoors, and it was just something that interested me when I came across it, and just looking for something different. Especially when in high school you want to explore a little bit, and do something other than just sitting in a classroom all the time. (Jeannie)

While Claire planned to become a teacher even before Outdoor Adventures, the program helped her to understand how being a teacher was actually a facet of her personal identity:

It helped me clarify my own personal beliefs, values, and identity. What I didn’t really realize is how much my participation in the program would inform who I would be as a teacher. It was such a part of my identity: who I am and how I conduct myself every day with people. It’s not just a teaching philosophy. It shaped my life philosophy. When I write any teaching statement, it’s very easy for me because it’s who I am. Like I don’t separate teacher as part of my identity that I only am in the classroom. (Claire)
Reflection. Reflection on academic and personal growth was a practice in which participants from most programs engaged. Five of the eight participants (Molly, Pam, Brian, Claire, and Jeannie) kept a journal that served a purpose beyond a grade for a final assignment to tie together the various courses. The purpose of the journal was to encourage students to think actively about what they were learning, not just accept it superficially. As such, they were encouraged to engage in critical thinking by developing and unpacking insights, deciding why what they were learning pertained to them, and how they could further their knowledge or skills in the future. This process was another way by which a sense of autonomy was upheld, empowering students and bolstering their sense of agency. Practicing reflection on a nearly daily basis, participants remembered the exercise as valuable to their learning because it enhanced the experience.

For Claire, her experience in Outdoor Adventures was the first time she had engaged in reflection: “Reflecting, and always thinking about things, those are skills that I learned from that program. I had never been asked to reflect on anything in my education before.” Brian appreciated the journal as a reflection device, and expressed an understanding of how some students would best represent their ideas in this written form:

What I really liked that [our teacher] did was journaling - we really engaged in a lot of self-reflection. There might be a student that doesn’t participate much but later when you look at their journal, they have just incredible detail about the discussion, various thoughts that they were considering. It shows how students participate in different areas. (Brian)

Reflection was also present in other assignments and through informal learning for Tamara. She highlighted her opportunity to practice reflection through a letter-writing
assignment where she was required to “think about where [she] was going to be and what questions [she] would ask [herself].” A new experience for Tamara at the time, it was one she “truly appreciated.”

**Overcoming challenges.** The outdoor ICPs put students in situations where they experienced challenges. Many were physical (on trips), but social (conflict resolution) and academic (learning in a new way that required active input) challenges arose as well. All participants recalled thriving in the face of these hardships because they “got through” them and felt “empowered” as a result.

Challenge, or the degree of challenge, was unexpected for some participants as their perception before beginning the program was that it would be “fun” and “easy.” While challenges manifested themselves in unique ways for each participant, they all explicitly discussed facing and moving past the challenges, and being able to look back on those difficult times with a sense of accomplishment rather than defeat. For Claire, she was pleasantly surprised by the challenging nature of the trips because tripping was something with which she had already had experience: “I thought that [the trips] would be very easy, but they were actually quite challenging. We would challenge ourselves physically and mentally, and there would be growth from that. That’s how we would learn.”

Jeannie’s challenges were primarily regarding physically demanding tasks on trips. However, she looks back on those times as a period of growth rather than simply a time she was frustrated:

The biggest thing is the challenges. [On the trips] you have to push yourself. It’s not easy physically doing canoe trips, and my trip was a rainy, cold one. [Also]
working with other kinds of people for two weeks straight. But [challenges we faced on trips] were moments that [made you realize] you [could] get through anything. There was never a moment through that where I was like, “I don’t like this, I don’t want to be here.” [I really appreciate looking back on] the hardships, when things were tough. (Jeannie)

Finally, Tamara pushed her own limits through endurance training for the final trip, a skill with which she struggled due to asthma. Regardless, she persevered through the challenge. Although she might not have had the highest absolute performance of her classmates, she focused on recognizing the improvements she made instead of comparing herself to others:

The first time we did the run I couldn’t do the whole thing. I had to stop twice. But I was also thinking, “This is really hard, but I’m going to keep doing it.” I started realizing that I was able to do it without stopping [because we practiced every week]. Then one time [one of my teachers] came up to me, and she was like, “Your endurance is really increasing!” She actually pointed it out. I got a boost of confidence, and I could see how much better I was getting. And as much as I was really red in the face, and no one else was, it was still cool. (Tamara)

Leadership. In every group setting leadership is an inherent component. For study participants, leadership was emphasized as a “big” and “important” skill that they learned in their ICP. While leadership was identified as a partially interpersonal skill, it was also recognized as a highly intrapersonal skill with regard to needing to understand oneself in order to be an effective leader. For some (Pam, Kirk, and Jeannie) it was the first time they had systematically practiced these leadership skills, and, for others (Molly,
Tamara, and Claire) it was an opportunity to develop them further. Molly, Pam, and Tamara recalled every student in the class having opportunities to lead, especially on trips. Tamara described her leadership experience on the final two-week *Encounters with Wilderness* canoe trip:

> We had to learn practical skills and apply them for that final trip. On the final trip we had to be a leader for the day; to guide the group, follow the map, and make sure that you know the meals and that sort of thing. You really had to take charge, and were marked on how well you did that. (Tamara)

For Jeannie, leadership was actually an entire course credit. Although they did not mention leadership as a course, it is possible that Brian and Tamara did as well because they attended the same program as Jeannie. For every participant, however, leadership was taught and assessed in all ICPs in some manner. Participants from *Encounters with Wilderness* (Brian, Tamara, and Jeannie) specifically discussed their teaching opportunities with students from the local elementary school as a way in which they practiced leadership. Brian in particular had a positive experience working with the students, describing the experience as “incredible,” and one to which he looked forward when he enrolled in the second “level” of the program in his final year of high school.

Molly remembered practicing leadership informally, even when she was not being assessed. She came to an internal realization that she had the ability to be a good leader during a particularly gruelling winter camping trip:

> It was just a few days long, but we had to pull on sleds with all of our gear for kilometres. It was snowing, and everyone was tired and cold and hot and everything at the same time. It was just so exhausting! That was a moment where
I was like, “I could lead in difficult situations, despite not being the strongest person here.” Sometimes [our teacher] would be like, “On this trip, this is what I’m looking for [in terms of leadership].” But other times, he was just observing. Just watching how you interact with other people. (Molly)

The leadership component went beyond just learning the skill and helped to “boost confidence.” Molly’s ICP instructor emphasized leadership as a valuable skill because of its usefulness in and transferability to a variety of contexts, having said, “You may never be working in the outdoors, but you’re just going to have to be a good leader.”

**Summary.** Participants found that through spending a semester in an outdoor ICP, they got to experience personal development. Their program helped them to form or further develop a personal identity, made possible through exposure to a wide variety of new experiences within the context of the outdoors (a context with which all participants except Kirk already identified coming into the program), and the support of classmates and teachers. Engaging in reflection almost daily, often through a journal, participants were encouraged to think critically. In particular, their reflections regarded how to improve their knowledge and skills, as opposed to comparing themselves to others. Facing physical, social, and academic challenges, and getting through them, participants felt empowered. Their teachers’ high expectations and support were integral to getting through the challenges, as well as the fact that the class was in it together. Finally, participants took on leadership roles in various formal and informal settings as ICP students: a component of the program that contributed to increasing their self-confidence.
Sense of community

The outdoor ICP environment fostered a sense of community through: (a) an immersive learning setting, (b) teamwork, and (c) meaningful relationships.

**Immersive learning setting.** For participants in this study, their ICP classroom was most often a portable on the school property (Molly, Julia, Kirk, Jeannie, Brian, Tamara), but Pam had a dedicated classroom within the school, and Claire’s ICP was at an off-site location. This physical separation from the rest of the school made the classroom environment special and feel like “home,” even if it was still part of the high school. Julia described her experience, stating, “[The *Eco* classroom] was at the high school, but it was in a portable. But because we were the only ones in there, we got to make it our own little environment.” This physical separation was usually immersive, such that students were totally involved with the ICP for the duration of the school day. The immersion contributed to the development of relationships with classmates. Tamara, for example, described her class as having a collective identity: “We had our own classroom and it was cool because all semester you have the same classes with the same people. You get very close, and learn, grow, [and work] together. We all had an identity as “the [*Encounters*] students.”

There were a few exceptions. For Molly, *Project Wild* was only scheduled for three of the four class periods, but she was able to take an online course instead of physically attending a class, and thus was not required to interact with other students in the school during the day. Julia, however, discussed the challenges of having a shared lunch with the rest of the school:
I made that effort to sit with my friends who weren’t in *Eco Experience*, versus all the *Eco* kids [who] would sit together. And I would try to get my old friends to sit with this new group. It was a big balancing act. [I was] very intentional when I was with [my non-*Eco* friends]. [I made] sure I wasn’t just talking about *Eco Experience* all the time. If they asked, I would tell them, but [I also got] interested in what they were doing. [The next year] it kind of sorted itself out. (Julia)

Having a non-immersive structure for the ICP, at least as Julia described it, appeared to take away from the sense of community in the class as it created tension between new and existing friendships.

**Teamwork.** All participants discussed teamwork as an integral skill they practiced during their ICP, both in class and on trips. Teamwork occurred on two levels: as an entire class and in small groups. One of the contexts for integrating course content was working toward a final trip: a collective class goal. As ICP students, participants had opportunities to make use of the skills they learned throughout the semester as a cohesive unit with their classmates.

Teachers also strategically created small groups to encourage students to work with new classmates, as reported by all participants. This element of teamwork was described as “an emphasis,” “important,” and a “main lesson” that participants took away from the program, valuing its role in fostering enhanced “group dynamics.” Teamwork was seen as distinct from a traditional classroom in that the teacher was to a certain extent a “part of the team,” “facilitating” rather than exhibiting a “strict division of power.” Claire, for example, traced her teamwork abilities back to her time in *Outdoor Adventures*, despite the fact that she potentially had other opportunities in her childhood.
to develop that skill: “Even though I grew up as a competitive athlete, what I learned about a team and interpersonal skills I learned from that program.”

What made the teamwork process especially unique for Pam was that she was compelled to work through conflicts with classmates, rather than avoiding conflict as they might have in a typical class. Conflict resolution was possibly a result of physically being in a space together for an extended period, and considering the group to be a “family.” Pam found her own conflict resolution ability evident on a four-day canoe trip where her teacher would pair up the class anew each day:

It forces you to talk, and, if you get stuck going the wrong direction, you have to work together to turn your canoe around. If one of the partners was not cooperating, your canoe wouldn’t go anywhere. Originally, it was the teacher’s idea, but, after a while, it was nice to be stuck in a canoe with them all day. When I got stuck with someone I didn’t think I worked well with, by the end of the day we were working really well together. It took away the bitterness. You might not have been best of friends, but at least you were working well together. In the normal classroom setting, if you didn’t think you worked well together [with someone], you would just avoid them and it wouldn’t be a nice relationship. But Enviro Explorers made it so that you took that extra step. I wouldn’t even change the parts where you were stuck with your least favourite person in the class in the canoe because it really helped you see that you had to work through things. (Pam)

Effective teamwork was encouraged by making it the only option, with obvious repercussions if it was not achieved. If the students in an ICP class didn’t work together, both they personally, and the community of people with whom they built relationships
over the course of the semester, would suffer. ICP students felt indebted to their classmates, responsible for doing their part in maintaining a community. Molly, for example, said: “[The program] taught me a lot about dedication to the people around you. In high school, your classes and assignments are pretty much your responsibility. You were very isolated. Whereas when I was in that class, it was a community.”

Pam also provided an example where her class went on a challenging bike ride later into the semester. She found that, through developing self and social awareness, she and her classmates worked well together by communicating their struggles and leaning on each other for support:

It was really hard on your leg muscles, physically draining. A lot of people wanted to give up, but we leaned on each other, and pushed each other forward. We’d go in little pods of four, and, if your legs were going to give out, you could say, “Hey guys, can I go at the back of the pod?” because you’ve got less wind. But you have to ask. You know they would be willing to help you, but how are they going to know if you don’t ask? (Pam)

**Meaningful relationships.** All participants developed meaningful relationships with their classmates, to whom they often referred as a “family,” describing how students were “supportive” of one another, rather than everyone “just having their own interests in mind.” In part, these relationships could be attributed to effective teamwork, but had more to do with the personal connection built with others as opposed to necessarily getting work done. Such relationships allowed participants to experience a sense of membership and belonging in the group. Pam, for example, recognized that building relationships made her feel like she was “in the right place.”
For Julia, it was when the group was not together that the sense of community was most apparent to her, because the absence of some classmates made it obvious that the group just was not the same without them:

I remember that [it] put a really big downer on our classroom environment [when] three students didn’t end up getting to go on our big camping trip at the end of [the semester] [because of an incident earlier that year]. That was really tough because they were a part of the family, and they weren’t there. (Julia)

Meaningful relationships were attributed in large part to the fact that students came into the programs from a “variety of backgrounds,” thus representing a diverse group. “Backgrounds” referred to personalities and interests (differences you might find in any group), but also the fact that students were not segregated based on their academic track. Tamara reflected on the diversity among her classmates: “It’s funny because we’re all different. There were the people that spent all of high school in the smokers’ pit, or grew up on a farm. Or that came from the city. We were all together, and we became friends.” Brian reflected on diversity as well, emphasizing the insignificance of academic track or grade level: “You really bond with the class. People in it were from different [grade levels] backgrounds. It was a good mix-up of academic streams and interests. But it really ties together people when you’re in there."

For Jeannie, diversity came through as including students with different abilities in the class. Two of Jeannie’s Encounters with Wilderness classmates had physical limitations that prevented them from attending trips, but she was impressed when her teacher made sure that they could participate as much as possible, and was appreciative of the chance to know those students as friends: “[They] didn’t do our camping trips with
us, but were there for everything else. When we did anything at school, they were participating. It was cool because it allowed different people to participate in a program like that.”

Having a diversity of students in the class got participants to appreciate people different from themselves, and allowed them to have friendships with people with whom they might not have been friends otherwise. In that diversity, the class grew stronger as a unit. Jeannie was a particularly special case. She actually met her now husband in *Encounters with Wilderness*, friendship that if she “didn’t take the course [she] might not have ever had.”

**Summary.** The outdoor ICPs represented in this study had their students develop a sense of community as members of the class. Regardless of whether their classroom was located on or off school property, each ICP class had its own designated space, contributing to a sense of “home.” Navigating non-immersive ICP structures (ones that did not require students to be separated from the rest of their home school for the entire school day) was a challenge. However, the emphasis on teamwork and collaboration was highlighted as a valuable component of outdoor ICPs, overshadowing even the difficulties of a non-immersive structure. A pervasive element of outdoor ICPs, working together effectively, enriched the experience for both individual students and the class as a whole. Through working together with classmates, participants developed meaningful relationships on a personal level. They felt they belonged in the class and were supported by their classmates and teachers. The strong bond between classmates was in part attributed to the inclusive classroom space and diversity of students, who had various interests, personalities, academic goals, and personal struggles. This diversity was
integral to allowing participants the opportunity to appreciate others different from themselves and to form bonds with people with whom they might not have connected in any other setting.

**Teacher’s role**

All participants framed some of their responses in terms of their instructors’ role in making their program what it was, often highlighting their teachers in the stories they told about their ICP experience. Several qualities were identified in outdoor ICP teachers that were thought to be valuable: (a) knowledgeable and competent, (b) dedicated and passionate, and (c) observant and caring.

**Knowledgeable and competent.** All participants recognized their teachers as highly knowledgeable and as having a great deal of experience. They respected their teachers as mentors from whom they could learn a great deal. All participants (at some point) discussed lessons learned from their program in such a way that included a tribute to the teacher who taught them, or how the teacher had created the environment in which they could learn the lesson in question. For example, Tamara described a trip to the woods where her class did a mindfulness exercise. She made sure to recognize her teacher: “[Our teacher] was very knowledgeable, and you’d always learn something [from him]. [On one of our hikes] he taught us to just listen, take in the silence, and appreciate that moment. I remember that.”

**Dedicated and passionate.** Molly, Julia, and Claire explicitly identified their teachers as caring a great deal for the success of the program, appreciating the amount of work that goes into doing their job. These teachers were described as having traits such as “enthusiastic,” “excited,” “outgoing,” “passionate,” and “dedicated.” They were
identified as being advocates for their students, standing up for them and their program as best as they could. Julia, for example, identified several of these traits in her teacher: “He was very extroverted, very outgoing. He really had a passion for adventures, and the outdoors, and got to bring that personality [into the program].”

Molly, Julia, and Claire discussed how their ICP teachers were no longer teaching their respective programs, despite their passion. They stressed the challenges their teachers faced that led to them no longer teaching the program (such as long periods of time away from their families to take ICP classes on trips), and expressed disappointment that future students would no longer have the opportunity to learn in that ICP. Kirk conveyed similar sentiments regarding how his program had been altered since he left, specifically how the program was now “more academic” (focused on grades to enter the program), due to school board pressure.

**Observant and caring.** Most participants (Molly, Pam, Julia, Kirk, Tamara, and Claire) felt “almost as close” to their teachers as they did to their classmates, because their teachers invested in getting to know them on a more personal level (demonstrating caring). Closeness in turn allowed students to trust their teachers. For Molly, this connection was apparent when she reflected on how she trusted her teacher with her journals. She especially appreciated the effort he put into reading them and providing feedback: “He would go through and make notes so you knew he was taking the time to go through them all, and you didn’t care that he was going to read it. You would still write what’s in your heart.”

Teachers were observant of their students’ progress and aware of the support they required. As such, they would help students to see traits or signs of progress in
themselves that they might not have otherwise. Pam’s ICP instructor wrote a letter to each student at the end of the semester. In Pam’s letter, he emphasized how he observed that she did a good job at supporting her classmates. Claire had a particularly close bond with her teachers, which in turn helped her to navigate social challenges. She greatly appreciated their assistance (especially that of the primary ICP instructor):

I was an old soul in high school. I related better to adults and teachers than my peers. Almost daily I felt out of place. I thought about dropping [out of the program]. I had conversations with the teachers about that. They were like, “You need to vocalize your frustrations. Don’t bottle them up,” because I very much would. [It was] in large part the [primary] teacher [that helped me]: the relationship I had with him and how he cared about every student. (Claire)

Summary. Outdoor ICP instructors were portrayed as having several common and distinguishing characteristics. Teachers’ knowledge and competence earned their students’ respect, with many participants’ stories including their teacher as integral to their learning a particular lesson. Teachers were considered to be dedicated and passionate, advocating for their students and putting in a great deal of effort to continue teaching their program. Finally, teachers formed caring relationships with their students, getting to know them on a more personal level through observation and conversation. Participants were able to trust their teachers as a result, and acknowledged their teachers’ role in helping them see positive characteristics or improvement in themselves.
Applying program learning to new contexts

Since completing their ICPs, participants have applied their program learning to new contexts, including (a) determining an education and/or career path, (b) using interpersonal skills in daily life, and (c) resilience in the face of challenges.

**Determining an education and/or career path.** Participants’ current education and career paths represented a wide variety of fields, such as medicine, nursing, counselling, and teaching. However, regardless of the specific field in which they currently study or work, six of eight participants (Molly, Julia, Pam, Kirk, Brian, and Claire) attributed decisions they made regarding an aspect of their further education and resulting career orientation to the time they spent in their ICP. Their decisions were explicitly traced back to four ICP components: (a) learning beyond the traditional classroom, (b) integrating environmental studies into another field, (c) completing a co-op placement, and (d) being supported by their teachers.

**Learning beyond the traditional classroom.** For Molly and Julia, the realization that they could learn even when they were not in the classroom had significant implications on their education and career goals. Having the opportunity to learn in alternative settings during their ICP, both participants were inspired to include alternative settings in their respective careers.

For Molly, her enrollment in *Project Wild* began a series of events that would lead her to where she is today. Inspired to take a year off before going to university, she decided to become a teacher:

I would say [*Project Wild*] definitely affected where I am today. What I’m studying, my career choice. I always had it in my mind that I would go [to
university], but [Project Wild] pushed me to take a year off. I took that year, travelled, worked abroad, and volunteered. I did all these things that I probably wouldn’t have done if I had just been in the regular classroom [in Grade 12]. That year off really made me interested in teaching because I saw that you could teach in alternative settings. (Molly)

After her year abroad, Molly began her undergraduate degree, studying a combination of Concurrent Education, Global Development, French, and Geography. She hopes to be accepted to the outdoor education track for the final year in her teaching program, and would like to become an ICP instructor one day.

Julia became interested in global issues during her Eco Experience semester and even enrolled in a global development program in university as a result. After the first year, she redirected her academic focus to pursue a career in nursing instead. However, the switch to nursing did not stop Julia from carving a career path of her own that included her interest in global development:

[I realized] that not everything has to follow a strict plan. I want to go into nursing, and [before] I would feel pressure to do “normal” things. Like I should just work in a hospital [once I graduate]. But from Eco Experience I was [also] interested in global development, and I saw that there are so many other opportunities that we see or that we hear about. Eco really helped me pick. [Not] the career [itself], but where I want to go. I want to work up north next year on a reserve [as a nurse], and I think that stems back to the time I did in Eco Experience. (Julia)
Integrating environmental studies into another field. Brian was inspired by the focus on environmental issues in *Encounters with Wilderness* to incorporate it into his academic focus. A philosophy student in his undergraduate degree, he found that the content was “way interesting” because it built upon the “environmental base” he gained in his ICP. Continuing his education into graduate school, Brian ultimately decided upon a field at the intersection of his two academic interests when either one wasn’t sufficient to answer his questions: “I started doing a master’s in environmental studies [but] I’m thinking of changing [the topic]. I’m more interested in the philosophical side of the environmental issues we have. Knowing [about] environmental conditions adds more context that is so often neglected.”

Completing a co-op placement. For Pam, *Enviro Explorers* offered the opportunity to complete a week-long co-op placement as part of her careers course credit. While she did not go into teaching after her placement in a classroom, the experience played an integral role in her decision to pursue a medical career: “Choosing the co-op was a challenge because I didn’t know whether I wanted to do teaching or [medicine]. In the end it was [helpful] to have [hands-on] experience to choose my future path. I loved [my teaching placement]!” Doing the first co-op in *Enviro* led Pam to completing a second co-op through her regular school program the following year. Without the hands-on teaching experience to compare her hospital experience to, she might have been less confident in her ultimate choice of career: “That week of placement in a school helped me choose my career path, comparing [it to] the hospital [co-op]. I loved [the hospital co-op] even more, so that’s why I chose to [study] sciences [and apply to medical school].”
**Teacher support.** Claire formed an especially strong bond with her ICP teachers that encouraged her to redirect her academic and professional interests. She had a tendency to build stronger personal connections with adults than peers, being an “old soul” during high school. Through conversations with her teachers, she felt supported to pursue her interests rather than be concerned that she would be considered “different” from her classmates. One conversation in particular solidified her desire to become a teacher, specifically in a class like her *Outdoor Adventures* program:

[I had a conversation with one of the teachers while we were on a trip, and I was quietly reflecting]. She was like, “What do you want to do?” and I was like, “I want to teach,” and she was like, “Have you ever thought about teaching something like this?” I feel like it was yesterday having this conversation. I didn’t expect [*Outdoor Adventures*] to impact my teaching philosophy and career goals but I came out of that class like, “I’m going to teach a class like this.” (Claire)

Claire attended teachers’ college with an outdoor education specialization, and taught *Outdoor Adventures* for two years when the former teacher moved on to pursue a new opportunity. After having taught the program, she became even more interested in ICPs, pursuing a master’s degree to study former ICP students’ experiences. Claire’s graduate studies experience continued into a PhD about physical activity and the brain. She traced all of these pursuits back to her time in *Outdoor Adventures* as a student:

“[*Outdoor Adventures*] altered my trajectory. I don’t know that I would be doing my PhD [or] studying what I’m studying had I not taught the course, [and teaching it was] directly linked to having been in the course itself.”
Using interpersonal skills in daily life. Even if participants did not directly make use of outdoor education or environmental studies to guide their post-secondary education or career, the interpersonal skills they gained in their ICP assisted them in navigating future group settings in academic, professional, and personal contexts.

Inherently linked, leadership and teamwork were discussed as a unit. Molly, for example, explained that her ICP experience “boosted her confidence.” As a result, she felt better equipped to work in groups and share her ideas: “Going into university, it was easier to be myself around people. And speak about what I believed and thought, whereas I think I would have been a little bit more hesitant before.” Pam was “more comfortable with group work,” and noticed that since she returned to her regular classroom, some of her classmates were still in the early stages of developing their leadership abilities: “If I got paired with someone who wasn’t in the Enviro class I found I was always taking the lead. It was clear that they hadn’t had that leadership experience yet.” Claire and Jeannie also “learned about working with groups and leadership” in their respective ICPs. Claire found herself regularly “reflecting back” on how she learned these skills in Outdoor Adventures. Jeannie recognized the value of teamwork and leadership skills, because “when you do group projects there always has to be someone who takes that leadership in the group.” Encounters helped her to “be a leader in different classes [later on].”

In addition to teamwork and leadership, simply learning to carry on a meaningful conversation served Kirk and Jeannie well beyond their ICP semesters. They framed the skill of being able to communicate effectively as one that helped them to form connections with others. For Jeannie, communication came up regularly in her job: “I’m a massage therapist, so I didn’t go into [an outdoor-related] field. The thing that’s carried
over is talking to people. My job involves talking [with] clients about experiences I’ve had, places I’ve been, and things that I’ve done.” Kirk found that the listening skills he developed particularly helped him in future relationships: “It’s better to listen first, and then talk. Just because you have an opinion it doesn’t mean that your opinion is right.”

**Summary.** While participants pursued various career paths, their respective ICPs often influenced key decisions about their academic and professional goals. Some participants re-directed their learning and work in a non-traditional format, inspired by their experiences with non-traditional learning settings in their ICP. Others had their teachers’ support inspire them, integrated environmental knowledge they gained into a different field of study, or used their experiences in a co-op position to guide decisions. In addition to making decisions about their academic and professional areas of interest, participants still make use of the teamwork, leadership, and communication skills at school, work, or in their daily lives that they developed in their ICP.

**Enacting environmental consciousness**

Through knowledge and perspective gained in their ICPs, participants continue to enact environmental consciousness by: (a) demonstrating an appreciation for the natural world, and (b) considering environmental issues.

**Appreciation for the natural world.** All participants discussed how they enjoy spending time outdoors, and attributed this enjoyment in part to the positive experiences they had with the outdoors during their ICP. Participants’ continued involvement in big trips varied, but all participants expressed an appreciation of being outside in any capacity, and a desire to do so often.
For Jeannie, camping and going on trips are still a big part of her life, especially with her husband (one of her classmates in *Encounters with Wilderness*). While she already had some base knowledge of camping skills from her childhood, being in an ICP further reinforced the joy she experiences from being outside: “Growing up, [my family] always went camping. But taking that course, it’s changed me. I love to be a part of nature [and] go camping [with my husband].” Tamara also had knowledge of camping before attending her ICP. Her skills were further developed in the program, but it was through exposure to natural history that she developed an even deeper understanding and sense of closeness with nature. However, she didn’t come to fully realize her deep appreciation for nature until years later:

I actually used to be in *Girl Guides* so [my camping skills are not all] from *Encounters*, but [were] definitely reinforced by *Encounters*. We learned about geology, about the formation of all the different types of rocks. At the time I was like, “Ok cool.” But I was on a road trip this summer. I was admiring the mountains and the layers in the rocks. I was like, “Look at how beautiful that is.” I just don’t remember it impacting me [back then] the same way as it did now. I really pay attention to the formations of everything around me. In that way, I appreciate landscapes more because I understand the foundation of how they were formed. I didn’t know that before *Encounters with Wilderness*. (Tamara)

Claire had a unique perspective on being outdoors in that she actually went back to *Outdoor Adventures* as an instructor. As a person with ADHD, having the opportunity to be outside and stay active helped her to learn as a student. She drew parallels between how she appreciates being outside for her own learning, and in her role as a teacher: “The
only time I sleep well is when I’m outside and camping. Even when I was a teacher, the only time that I could finally sleep and have peace was when I was teaching outside.”

**Considering environmental issues.** Through hands-on experiences with environmental issues, most participants (Molly, Julia, Tamara, Kirk, Brian, and Jeannie) discussed having their perspective change in such a way that they could no longer ignore the issues in question. Thus they now incorporate this perspective into decisions they make on a daily basis. Tamara, for example, noticed the simple ways that environmental consciousness is still a part of her life, tracing those habits back to her time in *Encounters with Wilderness*: “Impact on the environment [still comes up in many ways], like toilet paper [and] electricity use. [Or how] we learned about where food comes from. It always makes me think when I pick my groceries.”

For Brian, graduating high school with a Specialist High Skills Major (packages of courses and certifications that grant students an additional designation coming out of high school) in environmental science meant being confronted with environmental issues everywhere he went. He appreciated the change of perspective, acknowledging the privileges he has as someone living in Canada:

It’s definitely had a big impact on me personally through a sustainable aspect. I was one of the first ones to graduate from high school with a High Skills Major in environmental science, and *Encounters* was a big chunk of that. It’s something that is constantly in the back of my mind when I look at placements within cities. What was this landscape before? You have to have an understanding of what it means to people that are affected by failing crops, by drought, by pollution. Being
in Canada it’s so hard to imagine these different lifestyles because we’re so accustomed to our own. (Brian)

Finally, Molly discussed her dedication and commitment to leading a sustainable lifestyle. She became interested in the idea of building a tiny house recently, referring back to her *Project Wild* journal for more information because she remembered writing about the topic:

> We went to see sustainable model homes as one of our field trips. Talking about our future together, [my partner and I] want to build a small home and live in it. This is something that I remember being so excited about when I was in Grade 12. It’s a lifestyle that I want, and can see for myself, [and *Project Wild*] definitely impacted that. (Molly)

**Summary.** Participants felt compelled to incorporate environmental consciousness into their lifestyle. They all gained a deeper appreciation for the outdoors, fostered by consistent exposure and the opportunity to develop a more robust understanding of natural history. Big excursions aside, participants continue to make time for the outdoors locally. Likewise, participants do not necessarily work in environmental fields, but they consider the repercussions of their actions on the environment on a daily basis (e.g., recycling, food choices).

**Lifelong connection to the program**

Overall, participant experiences of outdoor ICPs resulted in enduring memories of the program, thus encouraging: (a) continued involvement, (b) sharing experiences with others, and (c) revisiting fond memories.
**Continued involvement.** Participants felt connected to their ICP in that all have stayed in touch with some of their classmates and teachers. Brian, for example, has plans to chaperone trips for his ICP. Others, like Jeannie, have already taken advantage of that opportunity:

Although I don’t keep in contact with everybody, the friendships and the relationships that you build [stay with you]. Even with [the teacher], in terms of me going on trips after – it was awesome to still be part of the course. If I had never taken that course, I wouldn’t have taken that with me. (Jeannie)

Pam and her classmates tried to keep the spirit of *Enviro Explorers* alive by continuing to incorporate outdoor physical activities into their daily routine: “I had to commute into town for high school. So when *Enviro* was over, me and my friends would bike home instead of taking the bus, trying to keep more active.” Tamara got to leave her mark on and feel connected to *Encounters with Wilderness* in a very literal way when the school turned a small drawing she created for the classroom door into a mural.

**Sharing experiences with others.** Participants couldn’t wait to share their experiences in their interview, and all discussed how their desire to share their experiences was also true with people in their lives. In this way, their participation with an ICP came full circle: they found out about their program through word-of-mouth and went on to do the same for others.

Molly and Julia were both particularly passionate about passing along the message that “learning should not be limited to the classroom,” especially if they had children someday. Molly stated: “I’ve thought about homeschooling. It doesn’t mean I *have* to homeschool, but I want to encourage my [future] kids to find alternative ways to
learn and enjoy learning.” Julia had a similar outlook: “[If I have kids one day], I don’t want to shelter them too much. I want them to learn things for themselves. Seeking adventure, stepping out of their comfort zone. I want them to figure things out, explore, and investigate.”

Claire incorporated the autonomy she appreciated as a student into her teaching career. In her role as the Outdoor Adventures instructor, she encouraged her students to be active learners, and they took notice: “My students bought me a t-shirt that said ‘You’ll see,’ on the front. Every time they were like, ‘What’s the lesson for the day?’ I was like, ‘You’ll see! I don’t know! We’ll figure it out!’”

**Revisiting fond memories.** Finally, all participants shared stories that they remember fondly, looking back at time spent in their ICP as time that was enjoyable and significant. Even if they were in their ICP over a decade ago, are no longer actively part of the ICP in some way, or are not in regular contact with their former classmates, they still had many stories to share during their interviews.

For Molly, Pam, Jeannie, and Claire, t-shirts or sweaters commemorated the ICP semester, having contributed to the sense of community at the time as their respective classes decided on how to design it together. For Molly, her *Project Wild* sweater continues to have sentimental and practical value: “[My *Project Wild* sweater] has travelled with me everywhere since being in that course. It’s practical, but it’s a memory of the people that I was there with.” Pam’s t-shirt designing experience was difficult because the whole class had to decide on one design together, but it’s one of her “favourite t-shirts” because of the memories it brings back.
Additionally, at least five of the participants kept a journal as a reflection tool during the time they spent in their ICP. Of the five participants who mentioned keeping a journal (Molly, Pam, Brian, Claire, and Jeannie), four (Molly, Pam, Brian, and Claire) still have the journal as a reminder of their experience, an “all-encompassing memento.” Brian discussed his memories of *Encounters with Wilderness* using his journal and other mementos as a guide:

I still have my *Encounters with Wilderness* journal. That’s always fun to go back and read. I have some interesting artwork and notes [from classmates] that were written on birch bark, saying how we felt about each other at the time, and how our relationships had grown. It’s heartwarming to go back, and see the impact you had on various people. Even if you don’t keep in contact, it’s always a fond memory. (Brian)

Brian then summarized his entire experience in just one sentence: “When I think of high school, I think of *Encounters with Wilderness.*”

**Summary.** Participants still feel connected to their program through contact with their former classmates and teachers, and being actively involved by chaperoning trips. They also continue to welcome opportunities to share their experiences with family and friends, and, for some, even in their careers. Ultimately, even if participants had little contact with their program in the present day, they discussed how they continue to revisit fond memories of their experience in an outdoor ICP: an experience that they recall as enjoyable and significant.
Outlier Participant: Kirk

Of the eight participants, seven (Molly, Julia, Pam, Tamara, Brian, Claire, and Jeannie) had comparable experiences in their respective ICPs in that: (a) they already considered themselves to be generally “good” students, (b) they went into the program of their own volition, and (c) they came out of the ICP with some positive lessons that they still think back to and use to this day. Kirk’s experience is distinguished from the others’ in that he did not consider himself to be a “good” student prior to the ICP and did not have any desire to enroll on his own. The ICP, however, dramatically impacted his life. To thoroughly portray his experience, Kirk’s personal narrative is embedded here within the findings in his own words:

Kirk’s Narrative in his Own Words

At 16, I was suicidal-depressed, right? I had got rescued from that, and I was really, really lost. [Grade 11 was] the year after my “horrible, awful year”: when you’re depressed it takes a long time to recover from that kind of stuff. At this point in my life, I was in the position where I needed a lifeline.

[One of my teachers said to me] “Kirk, you need to take [this program], this is the next step for you.” And then a guidance counsellor, and then my brother. I was like, “I’m not going to do this, she’s a really tough [teacher].” But I did it. I myself didn’t know at the time that I needed something different, but luckily I had a strong support system around me who did. I honestly didn’t expect anything [from the program], and I didn’t like it at first. I wanted to get out. I wanted to drop it. But my dad would not let me. [He said], “No, this is exactly what you need.”
I really struggled with school. I had learning disabilities. I couldn’t read or write until I was about nine or 10. I had doctors tell me, “You’re not going to graduate high school.” As far as I viewed myself, I thought I was scum. School was just this awful thing that I just sucked at. [But my “Beleaf in Yourself” teacher said to us], “Look, there are different ways of intelligence. Every single one of you is intelligent.” I think the big whole purpose of this course was putting education in a different environment that’s allowing people to learn in a different way. That’s actually showing them that they can learn.

This was the first course where anyone ever actually challenged me. Most times people were like, “Oh this is Kirk, the nice kid who has learning disabilities.” [But my teacher] assigned me a project and she said, “This is terrible,” [when I handed it in]. She sent it back, and she said, “Unless you use your computer, I’m not going to accept another one of your assignments.” I have a computer that I dictate to [because of my learning disabilities], and I used to hate using it, so I never did. So she made me do it, and, because of that, my grades started to get better.

[How you were assessed] didn’t always have to be written. So for me, I couldn’t write things down, but I’ve always been able to talk. It was like you could fail yourself in this course. It wasn’t just knowing the right answer. Pass or fail was up to you. If you were doing a presentation, and you could have everything right, but if you had the wrong attitude, you could fail the presentation. And for me, I’ve never experienced that before. The final exam was a two-week canoe trip. Depending on how you did on the canoe trip you could fail every single one of your courses.
There was an incident with [me and another person in the class]. I just remember being so angry. [The class] didn’t know that I was just coming off of almost committing suicide so I told my story. That was for me a big pivotal moment because I had never shared that with anyone ever. And now I’m telling 20 people. I remember in that moment it was so silent. They realized, “This is a person.”

I knew I was accepted there. I remember once [visiting a nature centre]. And we were just goofing around, and I spilled hot minestrone soup all over my teacher. I just remember and we thought it was hysterical, and we just had so much fun that day. I also rub my hands together when I’m excited. When I was little, I hated that about myself because I can’t control it. This course was a big opportunity where people just built that into me, that they loved that about me. That was a huge thing. I was learning that rubbing my hands together is ok. And that’s actually what people love about me.

I think the whole purpose of [Beleaf in Yourself] was to help you find an identity. They gave you things that you could identify with. And I felt like I had no idea, and that I had no identity. Because, for my life, I had put my identity in my brothers and who they were. And that led to me almost taking my own life. I learned “What do I like?” Not just anyone else. I learned that it’s OK to just sit in the forest and study trees. Which I love! It taught me to recycle. Like, I totally have a huge love for plants. A big thing for carbon footprint. Something I never would have thought about, but now I absolutely think about it. We had to recycle our lunch every single day. That’s actually a really good life skill! So now I live with people that are always good at recycling. It’s made me love the woods, and canoeing. I actually thought it would have more of an effect on me. I thought
I would become just this crazy tripper. That effect didn’t happen. But it definitely gave me a little bit more perspective.

This [program] was the first time that my education was actually worth it. Because when you have a learning disability, it’s like moving an immovable mountain. Every day you have to tell yourself, “This is worth it, this is worth it.” This was the first time when I actually learned to like school. I actually got an A. I got an academic award. I became valedictorian when I graduated [from high school], which is something that I’d never thought I’d be able to do ever. I never saw anything that had value in an academic setting [before this program]. So that encouraged me then to pursue further education. I honestly don’t know if I would have graduated high school [or] gone to further education if I didn’t have this foundation in place.

I think about [the program] all the time. It put me in a direction where I didn’t think I would go. I totally wanted to go to film school. But I didn’t do that. I decided to become a counsellor. That was where I needed to go. [The program] was a big push for me to be a counsellor because of how fundamental it was at counselling me. As someone who has come out of that, and has helped other people walk that road, [counselling is] a journey that takes time.

[The program] has had a huge impact on me. I think with me accepting myself I wasn’t “on” all the time. I learned to accept who I was. It changed my language. Instead of saying, “Oh, this stupid kid who has a learning disability,” I went to someone who is, “No, I’m smart. I just have to find a way to show people that.” It’s also had an impact on how I listen to people’s stories. It taught me to be a better friend. Learning emotional intelligence is just as important as theoretical intelligence.
I think the biggest impact isn’t something I thought it would be. It was to actually use my adaptive technology. That’s had a huge impact on me [in my personal life and at work]. It’s a huge stigma talking into my phone every single day to type a note. It actually takes a lot of courage to do that. I have that technology readily available for me, but the biggest impact was when [my teacher] said, “You have to use this.” And I remember seeing it make a difference.

**Chapter Summary**

Participants had a set of significant memories from their time spent in an outdoor ICP. They thrived in and were engaged by their respective ICPs because the ICP provided them with new experiences in new learning settings, encouraged them to be active learners, and allowed them autonomy. Participants also experienced personal growth through the development and acceptance of a personal identity, reflection on their learning, overcoming challenges, and taking on leadership roles. The ICP classroom environment fostered a sense of community where participants developed meaningful relationships and worked through conflicts rather than ignoring them. Finally, ICP instructors were identified as the glue that held the programs together, at the forefront of many stories that participants shared.

Participants described having experienced and continuing to experience resonating influences from the time they spent in their program. While they ultimately pursued various career paths, their ICPs assisted them in making decisions about their academic and professional goals. Additionally, participants found that their teamwork, leadership, and communication skills were transferrable to new contexts. ICPs encouraged environmental consciousness: a lesson that resonated with participants such
that they continue to appreciate the outdoors and take the environmental consequences of their actions into account. Overall, participants recalled ICPs as a meaningful experience to which they continue to feel connected; thus they revisit and share the experience with others.

Of the eight participants, seven identified themselves as generally “good” students going into their ICPs, that they decided to attend their ICP themselves, and their experiences generally aligned with the themes discovered. Kirk’s experience is distinguished from the rest in that he was not thriving in the traditional school system as a result of mental health challenges, learning disabilities, and low expectations of his success from others around him. He did not choose to attend his ICP on his own, but rather his support system of family and school staff encouraged him to enroll and persist when it got tough. Kirk saw his ICP through to the end, and came out of it a new person. Ultimately, Kirk’s ICP played a huge role in his adolescence, and has had a significant influence on his life since in that it engaged him academically and counselled him personally. The opportunity to see himself as a successful student in a new light, and as a person with an identity, encouraged him to pursue post-secondary education. He is now a counsellor, helping others see themselves in a positive light too.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The primary research question guided the emergence of themes: “How do former students describe having experienced outdoor ICPs?” Two sub-questions bridge the temporal gap between participants’ experiences during and since their ICP semester(s):

1. What experiences from their time in the program do former outdoor ICP students remember most saliently?

2. How do students find that participating in an outdoor ICP has influenced their lives since completing it?

Summary of Major Findings

The summary of major findings aims to answer the two sub-questions with key findings from each theme cluster. Collectively, these two answers address the primary research question. I connect the findings to literature where applicable.

Significant Memories

Horwood (1994) emphasized the value of students’ experiences beyond the specific disciplines they were taught: soft skills (transferable intra- and interpersonal skills) and personal development stood out as more valuable than the knowledge they retained. Based on the participants’ experiences described in the present study, integrated curricula helped former outdoor ICP students to recognize connections between various disciplines, and allowed them to identify how the learning was relevant to them. However, while this element of the ICP was discussed as a new and beneficial component to their learning, the integrated curriculum was more significant as a catalyst
for other positive benefits. What former ICP students took away from their programs went beyond the integrated curriculum structure and what they learned academically.

**Sense of community.** The former outdoor ICP students represented in this study recalled developing a sense of community as a major distinction from their traditional classroom experiences. Each ICP class had a space of its own, contributing to a sense of “home.” By extension, participants’ classmates and teachers were their “family.” Being in this separate space with just their ICP class, former students were immersed in the ICP environment, further cultivating a sense of closeness. Similarly, a sense of community was regarded in the literature as a strong bond among peers in an ICP as a result of collaboration for school work and the extended time students spent together. Horwood (1994) specifically highlighted respect, tolerance, and courtesy as elements of such relationships. A sense of responsibility to one another permeated these experiences. This description appears to be applicable to participants of the present study. Although they did not remain close friends with all of their classmates, they were able to develop relationships with most classmates for the duration of the program.

While extended time together encouraged a sense of closeness, conflicts also arose between students. Breunig et al. (2015) found student responses to conflicts to be polarized, with some students acknowledging social challenges as an opportunity to deepen relationships, with others expressing frustration. However, Breunig et al. (2015) collected data from students just finishing their time in the program. Caspell (2007), in contrast, having interviewed participants years after their enrollment in an ICP, found that they were more comfortable working in groups in new situations. In the present study, conflicts that arose were reported as learning opportunities, typically addressed directly
(rather than being ignored) for the preservation of relationships and the cohesiveness of the class as a whole. Having an extended period of time to reflect upon social and teamwork challenges might have changed students’ perceptions of situations, even if at the time of the program they were frustrated.

The demographic of participants’ ICP classes were diverse along a number of dimensions: personality and interests, academic goals, abilities, and personal challenges. According to Russell and Burton (2000), outdoor ICPs have traditionally attracted “an outdoorsy crowd” (a student comment from 1993), but have since become more diverse in the types of students who attend. With teamwork as an essential component of ICPs, peers of participants in the present study were in a situation where embracing one another’s differences was necessary for the class to operate smoothly. This skill was practiced in a number of ways, from paddling a canoe with a partner to everyone planning a trip together. The necessity for and regular practice of working together appear to have contributed to students actualizing effective teamwork skills.

**Thriving.** Former outdoor ICP students remembered their ICP as having contributed to their academic thriving through exposure to a variety of new experiences that translated into an excitement for learning. Many of these experiences involved the outdoors and physical activity: an element of the program that was the primary draw for participants to enrol. Likewise, Russell and Burton (2000) found that the reasons for enrollment included the outdoors and physical activity, breaking down the focus more specifically into components such as a desire to learn about environmental advocacy, and helping with personal goals (such as developing leadership skills or becoming more physically fit).
Participants in this study considered the ICP environment to be more conducive to their learning when comparing it to their experiences in the traditional classroom. This sense of academic thriving came about because they were engaged with what and how they were learning. They were genuinely interested in class and took initiative to further their learning actively. Engagement was directly linked to projects that offered an opportunity for authentic and meaningful learning because of their relevance to students through application of theoretical knowledge to the world around them. Authentic learning was a theme represented in the literature regarding students’ experiences of ICPs, specifically the clear relevance of learning beyond the classroom (Breunig et al., 2015; Caspell, 2007; Horwood, 1994; Russell & Burton, 2000). Horwood (1994) also noted the role of responsibility in the educational approach of the ICPs that he examined. Students felt accountable for their work because they genuinely cared about it, and knew that their actions would influence others in the class. Due to applied learning experiences and students’ sense of responsibility, participants in the present study were able to more strongly identify with their role as learners because their ICP introduced them to or reinforced the understanding that learning can take place anywhere and in many forms. Additionally, the autonomy students experienced contributed to a positive learning environment, further reinforcing their sense of control over their own learning. Likewise, in Breunig’s (2013a) study, the ICP instructor commented that allowing her students more freedom to make choices was effective at getting students to experience a sense of agency as learners.

With less emphasis on performance in discrete subject areas, the process of learning and developing a holistic understanding of concepts (through project-based
learning and block scheduling) were more heavily weighted. Evaluation varied from the traditional classroom to reflect a greater focus on process, including elements such as journaling and semester-long research projects. Mehta and Henderson (1996) and Henderson et al. (1996) similarly found that evaluation was a significant part of the student experience for their participants, noting that students made a point of discussing the new types of evaluation they encountered, and did not associate evaluation with negative attributes during their ICP semester. In the present study, the elements of the integrated curriculum created an environment in which students were encouraged to think more critically about their role as a learner, feel comfortable taking risks, and take a mastery rather than performance orientation to their learning.

**Personal growth.** Former outdoor ICP students participating in this study recalled the significance of their personal growth as students in the program, in the form of intra and interpersonal skill development, and their sense of identity. Intra- and interpersonal development was also a contributing factor to personal growth for participants in Caspell’s (2007) study, as was sense of identity in McGowan’s (2016) study.

Despite so many new experiences to take part in, some elements stood out as especially interesting and contributing to participants’ sense of identity. By facing and overcoming a variety of physical, social, and academic challenges throughout their semester, former students described feeling empowered. The experience of having navigated difficult situations successfully encouraged their continued perseverance because they were reassured from their past successes. McGowan (2016), who specifically focused her study on students’ self-authorship, similarly attributed personal
growth in the form of situational coping, leadership skills, and self-efficacy to the challenges students faced. Participants in the present study recalled taking on leadership positions both formally (assessed) and informally (not assessed), through which they further developed confidence regarding their abilities and self-identity. Participants described their ICP classes as providing an environment that made it possible to realize self-acceptance regarding identity because of the ongoing support from teachers and peers.

Embedded into the outdoor ICP structure that participants experienced was the encouragement of reflection – a component implemented in a variety of formats (written, spoken, and unspoken) such that it was accessible to all students and useful for the development and acceptance of self-identity. Reflection was identified in numerous other studies in the literature as an activity that enhanced personal growth (Breunig et al. 2015; Caspell, 2007; Russell & Burton, 2000). Breunig et al. (2015) attributed students’ ability to reflect deeply to the open and supportive community provided by the ICP.

The definitions of intra- and interpersonal development outlined by Caspell (2007) are equally pertinent to the present study, providing a summary of the personal growth that ICP students experienced. Terms relevant to the present study are italicized. Intrapersonal development was defined as “new confidence in oneself, increased willingness to take risks, improved self-concept, enhanced leadership skills, increased logical reasoning skills, and greater reflective thinking skills” (Caspell, 2007, p. 23). Interpersonal development was defined as, “enhanced cooperation, more effective communication skills, greater trust in others, increased sharing of decision making, new
ways to resolve conflicts, improved problem-solving skills, and enhanced leadership skills” (Caspell, 2007, p. 24).

**Teachers’ role.** Finally, participants in this study recognized their teachers’ essential role in making the program what it was. Teachers were often identified in their stories as a key player to lessons they learned or experiences they had. In the present study, three characteristics were consistent across participants’ descriptions of their ICP teachers: knowledgeable and competent, dedicated and passionate, and observant and caring. The teachers’ high level of knowledge and competence earned students’ respect. Students felt that they learned a great deal from their teachers. The teachers’ dedication and passion for the program were also evident. Students recognized the effort that their teachers put into the ICP to make it what it was.

Teachers were identified as observant and caring, developing relationships with their students that went beyond just a distant teacher-student interaction. Teachers’ investment in ICP students’ personal well-being thus allowed students to trust their teachers. When teachers drew attention to positive qualities in their students, their role as a person students respected bore weight, being meaningful to how students then saw themselves. In the outdoor ICP literature, the relationship between teachers and students was likewise the primary focus of the teacher’s role. For Mehta and Henderson (1996), for example, the concept of “teacher” blended together with the concepts of “community” and “friends” when former students created concept maps comparing their experiences with learning before and after attending an ICP. Other studies suggested possible contributing factors to this close bond. Breunig (2013a) noted the transformation that teachers themselves experience in teaching ICPs, allowing them to relate to their
students’ transformations. Paralleling this transformation of teachers, Henderson et al. (1996) and Russell and Burton (2000) considered the teaching opportunities that students had in their ICPs, proposing that students gained a deeper appreciation for their instructors after having first-hand experience with teaching themselves.

**Conclusion.** The enduring significant memories reported by participants in this study were about the self, and the self’s relationship with classmates, the teacher, and the learning environment. Participants most saliently recalled having developed a sense of community with their peers and instructors: the binding agent holding together all other themes. Participants formed deep, meaningful relationships with the diverse group of people with whom they spent an extended period of time, better understanding the nature of the group dynamic and, in turn, themselves. While conflicts did arise between students during ICP semesters, participants described how conflicts were actively addressed (rather than ignored), and were actually a valuable learning opportunity (even if they created tension or caused frustration at the time).

The structure of the program created an environment conducive to students’ academic thriving. Participants recalled being more engaged with their learning than they were used to and being motivated as active learners. The most valuable lesson learned from the outdoor ICP experience that participants took away was that learning does not only happen in school. The focus on dissolving disciplinary boundaries, taking learning outside the classroom, and making authentic real-world connections got that message across. Due to the collaborative and autonomous nature of many projects, participants felt a sense of agency over their work, seeing themselves as active learners. The varying and
often novel forms of evaluation similarly encouraged a greater focus on the process of learning as opposed to the grade achieved.

In addition to developing as students, participants recalled the personal growth they experienced during their ICP semester. Experiencing many new things and facing a variety of challenges pushed them to delve deeper into understanding themselves, discovering their identities and exercising their resilience. Reflection through journaling, the close relationships they developed, and the leadership skills they practiced over the course of the semester contributed to a safe environment in which to take risks, learn more about themselves in the process, and feel more confident as a result.

Finally, former outdoor ICP students in this study recognized the value of their teachers in making the program what it was through their passion and dedication. Through the stories they shared about their experiences participants clearly respected and learned a great deal from their instructors, considering them to be knowledgeable and competent. The teachers’ observant and caring qualities were highlight. Participants appreciated the time that their teachers put into getting to know every member of the class, making sure to highlight students’ progress and positive traits. This relationship, while not exactly a friendship, went beyond what students typically experienced with teachers because students saw their instructors not as authoritarian, but as individuals who were also learning and with whom they could learn.

**Long-Term Program Influences**

**Applying program learning to new contexts.** Based on the participants’ experiences in this study, former outdoor ICP students were influenced by the semester they spent in their program. While participants have chosen various academic fields of
study and careers to pursue, their ICPs appear to have left a lasting impression nonetheless. Caspell (2007), who also used retrospective interviews to collect data, came to a similar conclusion. Most participants considered their ICP influential (either introducing or reinforcing their choice) in selecting academic and professional paths, a number of whom specifically noted their choices as leading them toward an outdoor or environmental field. Caspell (2007) did not specifically ask participants about post-secondary education or career choices, but rather their lives in general. In the present study, career and post-secondary education were on occasion used as example prompts (among others) to get participants thinking about what areas of their lives might have been influenced, but did not constitute a direct question.

Components of an outdoor ICP semester that participants considered most robustly influential in the selection of future paths were: learning beyond the traditional classroom, integrating environmental studies into various fields, applying theoretical learning to hands-on contexts, and receiving support from teachers. These components contributed to participants’ decisions regarding their academic and professional path, or an element of how they approached it. Learning beyond the traditional classroom (in various environments and in various ways) demonstrated to former students that they could take their learning anywhere. This concept inspired some participants to tailor their path to fit their true academic and professional aspirations rather than trying to fit a mould. Hands-on components (especially co-op or teaching placements) gave participants the opportunity to apply their theoretical knowledge to new contexts and explore their interests in greater depth. By integrating an environmental perspective into various fields during their ICP, some participants were inspired to make an active effort to continue to
incorporate an environmental perspective into their studies or career. Support throughout the semester from their teachers encouraged participants to recognize positive qualities and improvements in themselves and how they could use those qualities in the future.

In addition to making decisions about their academic and professional path based on ICP experiences, participants reported making use of interpersonal skills they developed during their ICPs in a variety of contexts, including school and work, but extending to their personal lives as well. Working with others in a team and as a leader assisted in developing confidence, allowing participants to feel more comfortable with group dynamics in academic or professional settings. Closely linked to teamwork and leadership, their communication skills transferred to relationships with family and friends in former outdoor ICP students’ daily lives. In the present study, the ICP experience brought into perspective the value of such relationships because of the community and “family” atmosphere of the class. Participants from Caspell’s (2007) study likewise noted the value of developing intra- and interpersonal skills that have endured beyond the scope of the program in their careers or other group settings. Finally, although all former students in the present study faced challenges during their ICP semester(s), through having overcome difficult situations, some participants embodied a growth mindset beyond the duration of their ICP.

**Enacting environmental consciousness.** Having had the opportunity to learn about and interact with facets of the natural world, participants gained a deeper appreciation for the outdoors that permeated into their lives. Even if they no longer go on big excursions, participants in this study described making time for the outdoors regularly. Similarly, environmental issues discussed during their ICP taught using a
hands-on and applied approach continued to influence their thinking. In the literature, Caspell (2007), Breunig (2013a), and Breunig et al. (2014) found that participants in their studies also felt strongly connected to the natural world. Breunig (2013a) and Breunig et al. (2014), who studied participants still in an ICP, noted participants’ intentions to enact environmental change.

Breunig et al. (2014) discussed how ICP students felt overwhelmed by real-world constraints and the magnitude of environmental issues, appearing to struggle with “action paralysis”: difficulty actually enacting their intentions. Caspell (2007), studying participants years removed from their ICPs, found that they did not indicate if they were actually using their environmental knowledge in their daily lives. In the present study, former students did discuss an awareness of the consequences of their actions and discussed ways in which they make an active effort to conserve energy or otherwise live a more sustainable lifestyle. This finding suggests that perhaps a longer period needs to elapse in order for some ICP students to enact environmentally conscious intentions. Additionally, they may have experienced other events in their lives since the ICP that inspired them to be environmentally conscious.

**Lifelong connection to the program.** According to participants in this study, after their experience as an outdoor ICP student ended, they carried on their connection to the program through friendships, continued involvement, and fond memories. ICPs fostered a meaningful set of experiences that happened at a time in participants’ lives when many were in the midst of discovering their own self-identities. Connecting the ICP semester back to the work of John Dewey (1938), not all moments can be aesthetic experiences because of their inherently memorable and special nature (otherwise no
moments are aesthetic experiences). The fact that participants had such rich stories to share, and indicated continued growth from their ICP semester, suggests that they had some aesthetic experiences during that time. Participants from the present study indicated that they enjoyed sharing their knowledge and stories of the ICP with others, thus continuing the cycle of encouraging students to enrol by word-of-mouth. Word-of-mouth is particularly valuable for ICPs’ success. In Russell and Burton’s (2000) study, for example, 94% of students sought former students’ opinions before enrolling in the Environmental Studies Program.

**Conclusion.** While an ICP semester represents only a small portion of a student’s past, participants in the present study indicated that there were resonating impacts in their lives from their ICP experiences. In applying their program learning to new contexts, the most notable influence was on participants’ academic and professional career choices. While the eight participants whose stories I reported on span various fields (e.g., counselling, nursing, teaching), most noted that their ICP (in some way) affected their decisions: if not what their field of study or profession is, then an aspect of how they chose to go about it (e.g., where to work geographically). Elements emphasized as especially influential were: learning beyond the traditional classroom, integrating environmental education into various fields, applying theoretical learning to hands-on contexts, and receiving support from their teachers.

A secondary, more general, application of learning was the use of intra- and interpersonal skills in participants’ daily lives. Intrapersonally, a growth mindset translated from having faced challenging situations in their ICP. Interpersonally, having worked in teams, become more confident leaders, and navigated social conflicts, ICP
students found themselves better able to communicate with other people in their lives (whether at school, at work, or in personal relationships). More content-specific to ICPs, students developed (or had further reinforced) an appreciation for the natural world and the accompanying drive to enact their environmental consciousness in their daily lives.

Finally, the sense of community in an outdoor ICP as experienced by participants in this study extended beyond the scope of the program. Participants typically continued their involvement by staying in touch with peers and their teachers, and coming back to chaperone future trips. They carried with them fond memories of their program and looked forward to sharing their experiences with others.

**Unique Contributions of the Study**

Four of the seven major themes discussed in the present study align closely with findings in previous studies, further substantiating the themes’ significance in outdoor ICP students’ lives. As the majority of studies have focused on current ICP students experiences, the present study has contributed that similar elements of outdoor ICPs remain memorable when the research method employed consisted of a retrospective study representing a variety of programs. Additionally, some findings were unique to the present study. I note them here to emphasize their distinction from findings in the extant literature.

The retrospective nature of the interviews permitted participants an extended period to reflect upon their experiences in their respective ICPs. All eight participants identified a variety of challenges they faced (including physical, academic, mental, and social challenges), but recalled them as opportunities for learning and growth. It is possible that they always held this belief about the challenges they faced in their ICPs.
However, while not a direct conclusion of the study, it is also possible that these perceptions of challenges changed over time, as a result of subsequent experiences that allowed the participants to appreciate even the difficult aspects of their ICPs.

For six participants (Molly, Julia, Pam, Kirk, Brian, and Claire), their ICP experiences influenced their academic or professional trajectory in some way. Caspell’s (2007) retrospective study similarly did find that former outdoor ICP students chose to discuss ICPs’ impact on their career choices. However, participants in the present study also highlighted four specific elements of the outdoor ICP experience as especially influential: learning beyond the traditional classroom, integrating environmental studies into various fields, applying theoretical learning to hands-on contexts, and receiving support from teachers.

With regard to the development of environmental appreciation and enacting their consciousness, all participants in the present study provided tangible examples of how they continue doing so (e.g., recycling at home, leaving “no trace” on camping trips, expressing a desire to build a sustainable tiny house). While extant research does suggest that outdoor ICPs bolster students’ awareness of environmental issues, there is no evidence to support that they actually take action to make use of this knowledge beyond the program.

Finally, a simple but common theme among all participants was that they continued to feel connected to their outdoor ICPs even years later. The rich stories that participants shared (and were overwhelmingly willing to share) indicate the specialness that encompassed this time in their lives, as does their desire to remain in contact with their teachers and some of their classmates.
Study Implications

In addition to contributing to the wider body of research regarding the impact of ICPs on the student experience, a number of different stakeholders stand to benefit from this study and others like it: (a) participants and other former outdoor ICP students, (b) outdoor ICP instructors, (c) education administrators and policy-makers, and (d) educators in general.

Participants and Other Former Outdoor ICP Students

First, the individuals who took part in this study as participants had the opportunity to reflect upon their personal ICP experiences. A number of participants noted that they had taken the time to revisit ICP memories prior to the interview, both on their own and with their parents or former classmates. The interview gave participants the opportunity to gain new insights about their experiences. Claire, for example, had not realized before our interview that her ICP played an integral role in her development of a personal teaching philosophy. The implications of developing new insights such as this one are a better understanding of how their ICP experiences have shaped who they are, and an opportunity to use this information in similar situations in the future. Given that participants in this study found the opportunity to reflect valuable, other former ICP students might consider reflecting on their own experiences, which may potentially lead to their developing insights that they can use moving forward.

Present and Future Outdoor ICP Students

Given that the present study, in addition to studies in the extant literature, has explored ICPs in depth, students looking for a new experience in their education may find this research helpful to inform their decision regarding whether or not an ICP might be
the right environment for their learning. Students currently in an ICP could use this research to inform their approach to learning. For example, they may find reassurance that the challenges they are facing are temporary (as former students may have faced comparable challenges) and can be used as a learning experience that they can take with them even beyond the program.

Outdoor ICP Instructors

I am hopeful that outdoor ICP instructors read this study and feel reassured that the work they do has the potential to be meaningful to their students during and far beyond the duration of the program. Given that the present study upholds much of the extant research, present outdoor ICP instructors can use the findings from this study (and others in the literature) to inform their teaching practice with regard to which elements of an ICP are particularly valuable. Elements that stood out in the present study were the value of the teacher striking a balance between actively teaching and allowing students the space to grow on their own, challenging students while also allowing them to feel competent, and encouraging students to partake in reflection for their personal growth (even when it is not graded).

For aspiring ICP instructors, the findings of this study provide a glimpse into the impact they could have on students’ lives and what types of components they could anticipate including in their program. This study serves as a reminder that, just as results of participation in an outdoor ICP may not be immediately apparent for students, they likewise take time to realize as a teacher, but can certainly be worth the wait.
Education Administrators and Policy-Makers

While many outdoor ICPs strive to be self-sufficient in terms of funding (due to the instructor’s effort), they still require support from administration in other ways, such as insurance. In order to garner this assistance and perhaps additional funding that could help programs be more accessible to students with lower fees, administrators and policy-makers whose decisions affect the livelihood of ICPs should be informed of the positive influence that such programs can have. Given that this study provides substantiating evidence that outdoor ICPs have the potential to impact students whose needs are not met by the traditional school system, administrators and policy-makers should take into consideration effects of outdoor ICPs beyond the scope of the program duration when making decisions regarding ICP support.

Any Educator

While this study suggests outdoor ICPs do appear to influence students positively in a number of ways, ICP instructors comprise a small portion of all teachers in Ontario. Although the immersive ICP experience (with a segregated classroom and group of students) may not be entirely recreated, ICP techniques can be adapted to a typical classroom. It would require commitment on the part of the teacher, and likely coordination with other teachers, especially at the secondary level because of subject specialization. However, with some creativity, experiential learning through hands-on, meaningful, “real” assignments and a sense of community are possible in any classroom.

Even though lengthy and expensive outdoor trips may not be feasible for a typical class, the school grounds and nearby green space can easily become a classroom (just as the majority of an outdoor ICP semester takes place locally). The lesson that learning can
happen anywhere would accordingly follow. With regard to integrating curriculum, secondary school Ontario teachers may use the Ministry-approved *Interdisciplinary Studies* course to guide integration across subjects for interested students.

**Study Limitations**

A limitation of the present study is the small number of participants. While the findings do provide rich insight into the lives of the eight participants in the present study, their experiences may not be representative of other outdoor ICP students’ experiences and should not be generalized. Breunig et al. (2015) noted that approximately 100 outdoor ICPs exist in Ontario currently. Only six were represented in the present study. While the experiences of participants from various programs was generally comparable, there is not sufficient evidence to claim that conclusions are applicable to all outdoor ICPs.

Second, all participants generally portrayed their experiences very positively. Given the snowball sampling technique used for recruitment – in addition to the voluntary nature of participant recruitment – the individuals who volunteered to discuss their experiences with me were those who had primarily positive experiences to share. Thus this particular sample of individuals may be more homogenized in their positive opinions than is representative of all outdoor ICP students.

Finally, due to the time limits of the study (one year), I was unable to use a longitudinal research design to obtain participants’ perspectives on ICPs during their ICP and again years later. The findings indicate how participants recall their experiences currently, rather than how they may have described their experiences at the time. The
possibility remains that participants’ perceptions of their ICPs changed, but the change was unreported because their new mindset superseded any past mindset.

**Future Research Needs**

Based on the findings of the present study and its limitations, I recommend that future studies represent a larger number of outdoor ICPs, especially ICPs that have yet to be represented in the literature, and a larger number of participants per ICP. Representing a greater number and variety of programs and participants would contribute to a more robust and comprehensive understanding of outdoor ICP students’ experiences, and how students’ experiences compare and contrast among programs.

Coming into this research, I carry my own personal biases as well. My experience in a specialized program in secondary school, while not an integrated program, puts me in a position where I value specialized education because I have personally benefitted from such a learning environment. As such, I suggest that future studies of outdoor ICPs be conducted by researchers further removed from similar experiences from those of their participants. This distance would allow for a more objective perspective on participant experiences.

As research in this field develops, findings regarding students’ experiences with outdoor ICPs generally will be more representative of the population. Future studies should also look, however, to unpack specific areas of the ICP experience in greater depth. McGowan (2016), for example, examined ICP students’ experiences with the development of their self-authorship (related closely to personal growth), while Breunig (2013a), Breunig (2013b), and Breunig et al. (2014) studied students’ environmental consciousness. Future studies could further explore any of the major themes in the
literature: sense of community, educational approach, personal growth, the role of the teacher, and environmental consciousness.

Finally, future studies should aim to capture outdoor ICP students’ experiences longitudinally. While evidence from this study supports that long-term influences do indeed exist, longitudinally studying students’ perceptions of their experiences should provide a clearer view of how their perceptions change (or remain steady) over time.

Conclusion

The students in this study who attended an outdoor ICP between four and 13 years ago had generally positive memories to share of their time in the program and of the resonating impacts on their lives since. Participants recalled that they felt closely bonded as a community with their peers, thrived in the new learning environment academically, and experienced significant personal growth through challenges they faced and soft skills (e.g., leadership, emotional intelligence) they gained. A key insight that resonated with participants was that learning could happen anywhere and was not limited by the four walls of a classroom. Participants attributed the quality of their experiences to the program instructor.

Participants reported that their ICP influenced their decisions regarding post-secondary education and their careers, their ability to use intra- and interpersonal skills effectively in daily life, and their environmental consciousness and desire to act upon it. Ultimately, they have maintained a lifelong connection to their program by continuing their involvement, sharing their experiences with others, and revisiting their fond memories. One participant in the study, Kirk, had an especially positive experience with his ICP after having many years of negative experiences with school in the traditional
classroom. Kirk thrived in the outdoor ICP setting, developed a sense of identity, and was inspired to pursue post-secondary education. While Kirk’s experience was not typical of the participants in the present study, it provided a different and valuable perspective.

Based on the findings of this study, outdoor-focused ICPs in Ontario appear to foster a positive experience for students, and leave a lasting impression that extends for years beyond the program itself. For some future students, it may have the potential to influence their life trajectory significantly. Further research regarding outcomes of ICPs and their impact on the student experience will likely contribute to a greater breadth and depth of understanding of this initiative. While there is still research to be done, evidence from this study indicates that outdoor ICPs have the potential to be much more than “just a fun semester.”
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APPENDIX A: GENERAL RESEARCH ETHICS BOARD CLEARANCE LETTER

October 03, 2016

Miss Kamelia Valkova
Master’s Student
Faculty of Education
Queen’s University
Duncan McArthurl Hall
511 Union Street West
Kingston, ON, K7M 5R7

GREB Ref #: GEDUC-829-16; TRAQ # 6019259
Title: "GEDUC-829-16 Exploring the Long-Term Influence of Ontario Outdoor and Environmental Secondary School Integrated Curriculum Programs on Students’ Lives"

Dear Miss Valkova:

The General Research Ethics Board (GREB), by means of a delegated board review, has cleared your proposal entitled "GEDUC-829-16 Exploring the Long-Term Influence of Ontario Outdoor and Environmental Secondary School Integrated Curriculum Programs on Students’ Lives" for ethical compliance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (TCPS 2 (2014)) and Queen's ethics policies. In accordance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (Article 6.14) and Standard Operating Procedures (405.001), your project has been cleared for one year. You are reminded of your obligation to submit an annual renewal form prior to the annual renewal due date (access this form at http://www.queensu.ca/trac/signon.html; click on "Events"; under "Create New Event" click on "General Research Ethics Board Annual Renewal/Closure Form for Cleared Studies"). Please note that when your research project is completed, you need to submit an Annual Renewal/Closure Form in Romeo/traq indicating that the project is 'completed' so that the file can be closed. This should be submitted at the time of completion; there is no need to wait until the annual renewal due date.

You are reminded of your obligation to advise the GREB of any adverse event(s) that occur during this one year period (access this form at http://www.queensu.ca/trac/signon.html; click on "Events"; under "Create New Event" click on "General Research Ethics Board Adverse Event Form"). An adverse event includes, but is not limited to, a complaint, a change or unexpected event that alters the level of risk for the researcher or participants or situation that requires a substantial change in approach to a participant(s). You are also advised that all adverse events must be reported to the GREB within 48 hours.

You are also reminded that all changes that might affect human participants must be cleared by the GREB. For example, you must report changes to the level of risk, applicant characteristics, and implementation of new procedures. To submit an amendment form, access the application by at http://www.queensu.ca/trac/signon.html; click on "Events"; under "Create New Event" click on "General Research Ethics Board Request for the Amendment of Approved Studies". Once submitted, these changes will automatically be sent to the Ethics Coordinator, Ms. Gail Irving, at the Office of Research Services for further review and clearance by the GREB or GREB Chair.

On behalf of the General Research Ethics Board, I wish you continued success in your research.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Dean Tripp, Ph.D.
Acting Vice Chair
General Research Ethics Board
APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT MATERIALS

Recruitment Email Template Sent to Personal Contacts

Attachment: Recruitment letter sent to potential participants

Dear [personal contact’s name],

As you know, I am conducting research for my thesis as part of the Master of Education program at Queen’s University. I am particularly interested in interviewing individuals who attended an outdoor integrated program between five and ten years ago to find out about how their experiences in the program have influenced their lives thereafter.

As an individual who may have knowledge of people who fit this criteria, could you please forward the attached message to people who you believe would be interested in participating, or may have further knowledge of potential participants? I plan to invite participants to join me in an hour-long interview regarding their experiences in and following their time in an outdoor integrated program.

To clarify, passing this email along does not involve you in any way for data collection. For your information: This study has been approved by the General Research Ethics Board at Queen’s University, and I am happy to answer any questions you may have. If you wish to communicate directly with my supervisor, Benjamin Bolden, you may do so at ben.bolden@queensu.ca or 613-533-6000 x 77762. Any ethical concerns about the study may be directed to the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board at chair.GREB@queensu.ca, 613-533-6000, ext. 78281, or (toll-free) 1-844-535-2988.

Thank you for your help!

Kami
Recruitment Email Template Sent to Participants by Personal Contacts

Attachment: Letter of information

Dear [recommended participant’s name],

My name is Kami and I am a Master of Education student at Queen’s University studying the long-term influence of outdoor integrated programs in Ontario. I am particularly interested in interviewing individuals who attended an outdoor integrated program between five and ten years ago to find out about how their experiences in the program have influenced their lives thereafter. If you are receiving this message, you may fit the criteria to be a participant for the study or know others who may be interested.

If you are interested in potentially becoming a participant in the study, you can email me at 15kv1@queensu.ca and I will provide you with further information. Responding to this email does not necessitate your participation in the study. Should you choose to be a participant in this study, you will be invited to participate in an hour-long interview regarding your experiences in and following your time in your integrated program. Please do not feel pressured to participate, however, as this recruitment is based on voluntary participation.

For your information: This study has been approved by the General Research Ethics Board at Queen’s University, and I am happy to answer any questions you may have regarding the ethics of the study. If you wish to communicate directly with my supervisor, Benjamin Bolden, you may do so at ben.bolden@queensu.ca or 613-533-6000 x 77762. Any ethical concerns about the study may be directed to the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board at chair.GREB@queensu.ca, 613-533-6000, ext. 78281, or (toll-free) 1-844-535-2988.
I look forward to hearing back soon!

Kami

**Recruitment Post on Relevant Facebook Groups**

**CALL FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS**

Dear [group’s name] members:

My name is Kamelia Valkova and I am a Master of Education student at Queen’s University. I am looking to explore the long-term influence of outdoor and environmental integrated programs on the lives of former students. To explore this topic, I would like to interview individuals who attended an outdoor integrated program in Ontario between 5 and 10 years ago.

The study will require participation in one interview lasting approximately 1 hour at a location convenient for the participant. Additional involvement will be only to confirm that data is accurate, and time taken will depend on how long participants choose to spend looking over the data.

The interview will be audio-recorded and transcribed, using pseudonyms for both participants and respective programs to protect their anonymity in all written or oral presentations of the data and findings. I will use data from the interviews to complete my thesis, and may present findings from the study at conferences or in future papers to advance the knowledge of this topic in the outdoor education community.

Participants may also benefit from an opportunity to reflect upon their experiences in an outdoor integrated curriculum program and potentially gain new insights about the effects of the program on their subsequent life experiences.
Participation is voluntary, and participants may choose to withdraw from the study, in part or in full, up to 14 days after you receive the initial analysis of your data for review. If you are interested in participating, please email me at 15kv1@queensu.ca for further information. If you know anyone else who may be interested, please share this post or otherwise communicate the information with them.

Thank you!

Kamelia
APPENDIX C: LETTER OF INFORMATION

LETTER OF INFORMATION

Exploring the Long-Term Influence of Ontario Outdoor and Environmental Secondary School Integrated Curriculum Programs on Students’ Lives

You are invited to participate in research for a Master of Education thesis. This research is being conducted by Kamelia Valkova under the supervision of Dr. Benjamin Bolden, in the Faculty of Education at Queen’s University in Kingston, Ontario. This study has been granted clearance by the General Research Ethics Board according to Canadian research ethics principles (http://www.ethics.gc.ca/default.aspx) and Queen’s University policies (http://www.queensu.ca/urs/research-ethics).

What is this study about? The purpose of this research is to explore the long-term influence of outdoor and environmental integrated programs on the lives of former students. In this particular study, my population of interest consists of former students of outdoor integrated programs in Ontario who completed them between five and ten years ago.

What is involved to participate in this study? The study will require participation in one interview lasting approximately one hour at a convenient location mutually agreed-upon by you and me (the researcher). Additional involvement will be only to confirm that your data is accurate, and time taken will depend on how long you choose to spend looking over the data.

Your contribution will be recorded via an audio-recording device. There are no known physical, psychological, economic, or social risks associated with this study. The benefits to this study for you are an opportunity to reflect upon your experiences in an outdoor integrated curriculum program and potentially gain new insights about the effects of the program on your subsequent life experiences. The study will also benefit future students and their parents in making decisions about attending integrated programs, integrated program instructors in structuring their programs, and education policy-makers in evaluating integrated programs.

Is participation voluntary? Yes. You should not feel obliged to answer any questions that you find objectionable or that make you feel uncomfortable. You may choose to withdraw from the study, either in part or in full, up to 14 days after you receive the initial analysis of your data for review. If you wish to withdraw some or all of your data, contact me (Kamelia Valkova) at 15kv1@queensu.ca. Once confirmed, data requested to be withdrawn will be destroyed.

What will happen to your responses? Your responses will be kept confidential. Only I and my supervisor (Benjamin Bolden) will have access to this information. Your confidentiality will be maintained to the extent possible by replacing your name with a pseudonym, and password or lock protecting all data. You are entitled to a copy of the findings, if you are interested. Results from this study may be published in professional journals or presented at scientific conferences, but any such presentations will also maintain individual confidentiality. In accordance with the General Research Ethics Board Standard Operating Procedures, data will be securely/password protected for a minimum of five years. If data are used for secondary analysis they will contain no identifying information.

What if you have concerns? Any questions about study participation may be directed to me, Kamelia Valkova, at 15kv1@queensu.ca, or my supervisor Benjamin Bolden, at ben.bolden@queensu.ca or 613-533-6000 x 77762. Any ethical concerns about the study may be directed to the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board at chair.GREB@queensu.ca, 613-533-6000, ext. 78281, or (toll-free) 1-844-535-2988.
APPENDIX D: CONSENT FORM

CONSENT FORM

Exploring the Long-Term Influence of Ontario Outdoor and Environmental Secondary School Integrated Curriculum Programs on Students’ Lives

Name (please print clearly): ____________________________

Please sign one copy of this Consent Form and return to Kamelia Valkova. Retain the second copy for your records.

1. I have read the Letter of Information and have had any questions answered to my satisfaction.

2. I understand that I will be participating in the study called “Exploring the Long-Term Influence of Ontario Outdoor and Environmental Secondary School Integrated Curriculum Programs on Students’ Lives”. I understand that this means that I will be asked to participate in an audio-recorded interview lasting approximately one hour, and that my name will be replaced with a pseudonym in the data analysis phase. I understand that additional involvement will be only to confirm that my data is accurate, and time taken will depend on how long I choose to spend looking over the data.

3. I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary, that I may withdraw either in part or in full, up to 14 days after I receive the initial analysis of my data for review, and should I wish to withdraw my data will be destroyed. I understand that in order to withdraw part or all of my data I may contact Kamelia Valkova at 15kv1@queensu.ca.

4. I understand that every effort will be made to maintain the confidentiality of the data now and in the future. Only researchers affiliated with this study will have access to my data, and data will be retained for a minimum of five years. The data may also be published in professional journals or presented at scientific conferences, but any such presentations will be of general findings and will never breach individual confidentiality. I understand that I am entitled to a copy of the findings, if I am interested.

5. I am aware that if I have any questions, concerns, or complaints, I may contact Kamelia Valkova at 15kv1@queensu.ca and Benjamin Bolden at ben.bolden@queensu.ca or 613-533-6000 x 77762. I understand that any ethical concerns about the study may be directed to the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board at chair.GREB@queensu.ca, 613-533-6000, ext. 78281, or (toll-free) 1-844-535-2988.

I have read the above statements and freely consent to participate in this research:

Signature: ____________________________ Date: ____________________________

Indicate below if you are interested in being provided with a copy of the study findings by checking the appropriate box:

☐ Yes      ☐ No

Contact Information

Email: ____________________________

Phone: ____________________________
APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

In instances where [the ICP] is in brackets, the name of the particular participant’s ICP was inserted.

Demographic Questions

1. How long ago/when did you attend [the ICP]?

2. Briefly describe the structure of [the ICP].
   a. Grade level
   b. Courses taken
   c. Location
   d. Class size
   e. Number of instructors/what they taught
   f. Theme
   g. Types of assessment/how integration occurred

3. What education and/or career paths have you explored since attending [the ICP], and what are you doing at the moment?

4. Is there any other information that you think is important for me to know before we begin?

Introductory Question

5. Tell me about your experience applying for [the ICP].
   a. How did you find out about [the ICP]?
   b. How did you make the decision to apply for [the ICP]?
   c. What was required to apply?
   d. What did you expect to get out of [the ICP] during that time?
Research question 1: What experiences from during their time in the ICP do participants consider to have been influential?

6. How did [the ICP] meet your expectations, and in what ways did the program surprise you?

7. Tell me about a time when you knew that [the ICP] was the right place for you at that moment.
   a. What was happening?
   b. Who were you with?
   c. What did you learn from the experience?

8. What about a time when you weren’t so sure that [the ICP] was the right place for you?
   a. What was happening?
   b. Who were you with?
   c. What did you learn from the experience?

9. How did your time in [the ICP] compare to your experiences with school until that semester?
   a. What was different, and what was maintained?
   b. What was it like returning to your home school/life beyond the program after attending [the ICP]?

Research Question 2: How do students find that participating in the ICP has influenced their lives since completing it?
10. From your personal experience in the last x years (since [the ICP]), tell me about a time (or times) when you thought back to your experiences in or lessons learned from [the ICP].
   a. Examples: when deciding on a career path, when deciding on furthering your post-secondary education, when making decisions about your lifestyle, when interacting with friends and family, when bringing up your children

11. Tell me about a part (or parts) of your ICP experience that was a “planted seed.”
   a. A “planted seed” is a lesson that you have learned as a result of your time spent in [the ICP], but the lesson did not become apparent until later on.

12. If you were to be an instructor of [the ICP], what would you want your students to get out of the program?
   a. What would you emphasize?
   b. What would you change?
   c. How would you structure your ICP to achieve this goal?
   d. What advice would you give to other students graduating from the ICP?

**Elicitation Tool**

13. (If they have brought an elicitation tool) What have you brought as a memento from your time at [the ICP]?
   a. How does it represent your time in [the ICP]?
   b. Why did you end up keeping this memento?

14. (If they have not brought an elicitation tool) If you could have brought a memento, what would it have been? (may also show at a later time via email)
a. How would it represent your time in [the ICP]?

**Conclusion Questions**

15. Do you have anything you wish to elaborate on?

16. Do you have any questions?
APPENDIX F: PARTICIPANT NARRATIVES

Molly

Going into high school I was excited because there would be more freedom. And then I was definitely bored of [the routine] by Grade 10. I was so excited [when I got into Project Wild] - that I would have a whole semester of not just sitting in the classroom. You got to leave the school building and be in your own [space]. It was kind of like your home.

You got to taste a bit of everything. Whether it’s outdoor sports, or cooking outside, and maple syrup making. Learning knots for rock climbing, or how to change a tire. It was all very different. We were often [given freedom in our assignments], no matter what subject it was. It was nice that it didn’t feel like three different credits, so divided. Like, you could spend a whole day focusing on nutrition, but you’d be outside actually cooking, and then you would forget that you were learning about proteins. So it was very, very integrated. I think the reason that it’s not really clear in my mind [is] because at the time you weren’t worried about your grades. And you weren’t worried about how [the teacher] was marking you at that moment. You were just yourself all the time.

We had all these mini-trips, and then we had a final week-long trip in the mountains. Having that to work towards [as a class], we had this common goal. It wasn’t just learning all these different tasks, but we were doing [them] to accomplish something that’s really hard for all of us. I journaled about every single trip we went on, and I wish I had [my journals at university]! [Our teacher] would go through and make notes so you
knew he was taking the time to go through them all, and you didn’t care that he was going to read it. You would still write what’s in your heart.

[When I think of a time I felt like the program was the right place for me], I think of our winter camping trip. It was just a few days long, but we had to go and pull on sleds with all of our gear for kilometres. It was snowing, and everyone was tired and cold and hot and everything at the same time. It was just so exhausting! I think that was a moment where I was like, “I could lead in difficult situations, and I can help despite [not being] the strongest person here. And I’m not the most intelligent, or I don’t have all of the skills, but I can just be an encourager in this situation, and this is my role in this class.”

I think [the program] taught me a lot about dedication to the people around you. I felt like in high school your classes and assignments are pretty much your responsibility. You were very isolated in that. Whereas when I was in that class, it was like a community. The friendships that have lasted from the course was something that surprised me. Having been in that place with people of all different backgrounds and areas and now I’m friends with some of [them]. It just makes me aware that people around you may not seem similar to you, but you can still be so compatible.

There were a few times when I questioned, “If I’m going to university, how is me on a bike ride or in a canoe going to help me?” It was such a closed-minded perspective. But it was totally the opposite of that. It was gaining all of these different skills, and now I see that they were more valuable.

I would say [Project Wild] definitely affected where I am today. What I’m studying, my career choice, and vision I have for how I want to live. I always had it in my mind that I would go [to university], but [Project Wild] really pushed me to take a year
off. So I took that year, travelled, worked abroad, and volunteered. I did all these things that I probably wouldn’t have done if I had just been in the regular classroom. I would say that it’s really that year off [that] really made me interested in teaching because I saw that you could teach in alternative settings, and you didn’t have to be in the classroom.

In the [regular] school setting I felt pressured that I had to go to university. Being in that program and taking the year off, I was like, “This is my choice to go to university.” The leadership component definitely boosted my confidence. Going into university, it was easier to be myself around people. And speak about what I believed and thought, whereas I think I would have been a little bit more hesitant before. I’d want to encourage [Project Wild students] to realize that there are so many applicable skills that they learned in that class that they could bring into every field.

[But] going into lecture halls and sitting for three hours, it was like, “Really?” I thought back to that Grade 12 year, and went, “Ok, I can go to class every day, and not really enjoy it. Or I can look for things that excite me outside of class.” I definitely had a mindset change. Knowing that there was an alternative to being bored, I could choose to make the most of it. For example, the running and reading program I’m part of right now. I need to promote that, because these kids need to know that learning isn’t all about being in the classroom, and sitting and listening at a desk.

I would talk about [Project Wild] all the time. I remember thinking, “Everyone must be so sick of hearing me talking about my [program]!” But it was something I wanted to promote. So definitely it has not left me! I’ve also often thought about homeschooling. I definitely would want to encourage my [future] kids to find alternative
ways to learn and enjoy learning. It doesn’t mean I have to homeschool them, but I would like to [encourage them] to find alternative ways to learn, and enjoy learning.

[My partner] is an electrician and he’s super into sustainable homes. So talking about our future together, we want to build these small homes and live in them. This is something that I remember being so excited about when I was in Grade 12. And to have found someone who also wants that is exciting. I know that that [Project Wild] definitely impacted that. It’s a lifestyle that I want, and can see for myself.

**Julia**

I have three older siblings so that’s how I heard about [Eco Experience]. All three of them [did it], so I got to hear about all of the trips they went on, and see pictures and hear their stories. I’ve always liked school, but I’ve never loved school. I had a lot of energy, so I think that was harder for me [to sit still and learn]. I think that, as I got older, I learned how to deal with that, but I just got a bit bored. I wasn’t really sure how I felt about the traditional setting. It just wasn’t the type of learning that I was best at, so I was excited to see if that kind of learning [in Eco Experience] was more [conducive to me].

My teacher was very extroverted, very outgoing. He really had a passion for adventures, and the outdoors. So him teaching that course, he really got to bring that personality. So whenever we were doing things, he just really brought a passion into it. He really encouraged us.

We did a variety of different activities. Things you’ve never done. If it was wintertime, we would build quinzhees. Then when it started to get warmer, we [went] camping, and did a big trip to Costa Rica [at the end]. I really liked the theory and the practical components. I think putting them side-by-side was really good, because
sometimes we don’t really make the connection between what we are learning and how to actually apply it. [For example], in our first week of classes, our teacher did this activity where he split us into countries. We were doing this trading activity, and it was based on your GDP. Depending on how rich your country was and what your government was like, you could or you couldn’t trade. And then we talked about the disparities between different countries. [It was a] small scale for comparison but it at least gets you really thinking about [global issues].

It was mostly project-based. I don’t think I ever thought too much about, “How am I earning this credit, or this credit, or this credit?” It wasn’t very segmented at all. [Like when] we did résumés and cover letters, we had to apply to work at some kind of camp for three weeks. The idea was that we took the skills that we learned [in Eco Experience], and actually used them to apply to [and work at] the camp.

[The Eco classroom] was at the high school, but it was in a portable. But because we were the only ones in there, we got to make it our own little environment. I was really surprised by how close you really did get with your classmates. The things you did together, and the experiences you shared. The scary, and the exciting. I remember that [it] put a really big downer on our classroom environment [when] three students didn’t end up getting to go on our big camping trip at the end of [the semester] [because of an incident earlier that year]. That was really tough because they were a part of the family, and they weren’t there.

But as much as I think it was a tight-knit family community, there were times that people wouldn’t get along. Sometimes that held me back because I was kind of stuck in that middle ground between I need to keep these old friendships, but I need to put that
effort into this new group. It felt like a very big balancing act. One conflict that comes to mind is that I had a really good friend that I came into the program with, and we kind of did everything in Grade 10 together. I think we had different expectations about like meeting other people and things like that.

I also remember the *hardest* thing we did. We were supposed to build quinzhees, but there was no snow. It got cancelled. So we went the following week, and it was the *coldest* day of the year. There was *so* much snow and it was *freezing*. And it was *so hard*. It was the hardest thing ever. It was really tough. But I’m glad to say that I did that.

[On our big trip to Costa Rica] our teacher actually gave each of us this little piece of surfboard wax. He told us, “I don’t want your learning to end here. I want you to explore and write me a postcard. And when you come back [to Costa Rica someday] I want you to use the surf wax on your surf board.” I still have it, I haven’t gone back or anything, but I loved that. He really taught us to take risks, and go outside of your comfort zone. I think it’s less about the postcard [for us] and more about the surf wax, but I think that [the postcard] means a lot to him, especially now that he’s not teaching [the program anymore].

[I realized] that not everything has to follow a strict plan. I feel like in education it was like you go home and then you go to university, and you’re going to learn in these walls. I want to go into nursing, and [before] I would feel pressure to do “normal” things. Like I should just work in a hospital [once I graduate]. But from *Eco Experience* I was [also] interested in global development, and I saw that there are so many other opportunities that we see or that we hear about. In your future career you can do things that involve the environment, involve a new place, involve going outside of your comfort
zone. That experience has really helped me pick. I don’t know so much the career [itself],
but more so where I want to go. It helped instill different values and passions in me that I
know are a part of that. So I want to work up north next year on a reserve [as a nurse],
and I think that stems back to the time I did in Eco Experience.

[And if I have kids one day], I don’t want to shelter them too much. There are
certain values that I would want to instill in them, but I want them to go out and to learn
those things for themselves. Seeking adventure, stepping out of their comfort zone. I want
to not only give them a national focus but I want to give them that global focus. I want
them to figure things out on their own, and I want them to explore and investigate. Some
wiggle room is very important.

[Overall] the biggest thing was realizing that learning doesn’t have to be four
walls around you. [Before] I always defined learning as the things my teacher teaches me
in the classroom when I’m listening. [But] learning and education can happen anywhere.
Like striking up a conversation, just looking around you, or investigating yourself.

**Pam**

I was in [the International Baccalaureate program] and they didn’t offer [Enviro
Explorers] for us, but we heard about it. We expressed enough interest that [the teachers]
started [a stream for us]. The reason I wanted to do it was because my family always does
outdoorsy things. I figured if I can go camping and get credit for it, might as well! It
seemed really fun to get to know a small group of people and get to go outside and do
things.

Enviro Explorers was big on leadership and cooperating with others. We had a
saying that was, “Work smarter, not harder.” We said that throughout, and I kind of just
said it because everyone else was saying it. It was our motto. But by the end of it I realized I was [working smarter], and it was showing through actions as opposed to just saying this motto.

[We did a 4-day canoe trip where] each day you would have a different canoe partner. It really forces you to talk, and, if you get stuck going the wrong direction, you have to work together to turn your canoe around. If one of the two partners was not cooperating, your canoe wouldn’t go anywhere. Originally it was the teachers’ idea, but after a while, it was nice to be stuck in a canoe with them all day. I know that when I got stuck with someone I didn’t think I worked well with, by the end of the day we were working really well together. It took away the bitterness of everything. Like you might not have been best of friends, but at least you were working well together. In the normal classroom setting, if you didn’t think you worked well together [with someone], you would just avoid them and it wouldn’t be a nice relationship. But Enviro Explorers made it so that you took that extra step. I wouldn’t even change the parts where you were stuck with your least favourite person in the class in the canoe because it really helped you see that you had to work through things.

I expected just to have a few fun trips, but, by the end of it, I met some of my closest friends. We really watched out for one another. We did a trip through the county, and it was really hard on your leg muscles. Like physically draining. A lot of people wanted to give up, but we would help push them through. We leaned on each other, and pushed each other forward. Building on those relationships made me feel like I was in the right place. And once you push through all the muscle pain the whole bike trip, you get through it and you feel really accomplished.
What surprised me was that the [two] teachers weren’t separate in what they taught. They were really good at knowing answers to every course. It was still the same order of class every day. But they all seemed to meld together because you’re with the same people all the time and it was more project-based. Say you are in English and you had a question about science, you could still come up and ask the teacher about this project in your other class, which was really nice. And we got almost as close to our teachers as we did to the students. Like they were just as close of friends to us by the end of it.

The fact that we would actually do projects while we were on our trips was very surprising to me too. I expected it to be, you’re in class and you have to work hard and then while you’re gone [on a trip], you do nothing. But instead it was throughout the whole thing you were doing little pieces of schoolwork. Like, we would get soil samples [for science], [but we would also] be writing in our journals for English. It all kind of connected.

I do remember kind of struggling in [civics class]. But I think *Enviro Explorers* was probably the best place for that course because if I was just in a regular classroom setting I would have gotten bored. When I started getting bored and I was about to give up, we did something fun and I was more interested. I remember sometimes we would have debates, or we would do projects where we would choose a specific historical figure and do a project. And do games and activities in class, and presentations. More interactive things. I’ve always been engaged [in school]. But it definitely for some of the more boring classes, like civics, it helped me stay on it. My least favourite things at the
time were really helpful, and I see the value to them now. So I wouldn’t even change those parts.

We made a scrapbook for our final project - everyone put a lot of work into it because they knew that they could keep it after. I still have it! I filled it from cover to cover [with physical items stuck to it]. So like a [twine] bracelet, leaves, a glow stick. We took tons of pictures on every trip [so I added those in]. And each of our teachers wrote us a letter [where they explained why they were proud of us], so I have the letter at the end.

The [week-long] co-op [for careers] was one of the best parts. Choosing the co-op was a challenge, because I didn’t know whether I wanted to do teaching or the medical field. But in the end it was so much of a help to be able to have [hands-on] experience doing both to choose my future path. I did my week-long placement in my old public school to test out the teaching side of things. And I loved that. [The next year] I did a co-op in the hospital and loved that almost even more, so that’s why I chose to go into sciences [and am now applying to medical school]. That one week of placement in a school really helped me compare against my experience in the hospital, and choose my career path.

Class definitely seemed more boring after [Enviro]. You missed those people that you were with, because all of a sudden you weren’t together anymore. In terms of school, it was definitely a lot more boring, the way we didn’t actually get to go and do things in the real world. I think we were all kind of bummed when it ended. But we were more comfortable with group work. If I got paired with someone who wasn’t in the Enviro class, I found I was always taking the lead. It was clear that they hadn’t had that
leadership experience yet. And me and my friends would bike home over the bridge instead of taking the bus, trying to keep more active. I always found myself to be an active person [growing up], but *Enviro* sort of solidified that. It really started my adult life, made it more of my own thing.

**Tamara**

*[Encounters with Wilderness]* was the whole reason I went to [my] high school. In Grade 2 [my class] was taught wilderness things from [students] that were in the program [at the time]. And [when I was choosing which high school to go to] I thought, “Well, *[Encounters looks like]* a really cool experience, I do really want to do that eventually.” So when the time came, I was even working [to earn money] because I knew that I really wanted to do it.

We always did an outdoor thing, whether it was winter or summer. We had ponds [and] trails at our school. We were blessed to have this amazing property. We went out snowshoeing, cross-country skiing all at school. For camping trips we did go further out in the actual forest, sort of in the middle of nowhere.

At the end of the year, our exam was a two-week portage trip in the wilderness [that] we built up to that throughout the semester. We had to learn all these practical skills and then apply them for that final trip. On the final trip, we had to be a leader for the day; to guide the group, follow the map, and make sure that you know the meals and that sort of thing. You really had to take charge, and were marked on how well you did that.

Every week we [also] did a timed run to increase our endurance [for the final trip], [but] I was a little discouraged. I remember the first time we did the run I couldn’t
do the whole thing. I had to stop twice. And then I was thinking, “This is really hard, but I’m going to keep doing it.” We had to keep doing this every week, and I started realizing that I was able to do it without stopping. And then I was just running one time, and [one of my teachers] came up next to me, and just out of nowhere she was like, “Your endurance is really increasing, Tamara!” She actually pointed it out. I got a little boost of confidence, and I could see how much better I was getting. And as much as I was really red in the face, and no one else was, it was still cool.

We had our own classroom and it was cool because all semester you have the same classes with the same people. You get very close, and learn, grow, [and work] together. We all had an identity as “the [Encounters] students.” And it’s funny because we’re all very different. There were the people [in our class] that spent all of high school going out to the smokers’ pit. Or there were the people that grew up on farms. Or that came from the city. And we were all together, and we all became friends. And we got an Encounters t-shirt, and we got to choose the colour as a class. So we all have kind of, an identity as Encounters with Wilderness students.

[Our teacher] was very knowledgeable, and you’d always learn something [from him]. [The theme] of the whole program was, “Take nothing but pictures, leave nothing but footprints.” How to minimize your impact [on the environment]. And learn to appreciate what’s around you, how it came to be, and how much joy you can get from it if you just pay attention. [One time] we were snowshoeing [on a trip]. We hiked, and there’s this one spot [where] he brought us all in, and was like, “Now just listen.” And so we all just sat there for a minute. He just taught us to just listen, and take in the silence, and appreciate that moment. I remember that.
We [also] had student teachers [who] came in and facilitated the courses. They focused a lot more on environmental awareness about our waste, and our eating habits, and how our eating habits affect the environment as well. We learned little things [that had] lessons. So whether it’s a skill like tying knots or [when] in fitness you had to show your improvement, in the end it all became useful.

I feel like I didn’t really do it justice. It was just an amazing program. It exceeded [my] expectations! I think a lot of people thought it was kind of a joke, but I think that those people learned from it too. I was really impressed with how the course was organized. And [our teacher] had everything figured out – the way that everything was worked into the course.

We were supposed to do a song, or a piece of art, or a poem on something you took away from the course. So for me I painted a picture of hands that were holding the Earth. And where the hands are touching the Earth, the land and the water is murky polluted, and drying up. But then at the top there’s still a part of the Earth that still looks healthy, uncontaminated, and thriving. It was a visual representation of our physical impact on our environment if we aren't careful. We have impacted the Earth in a many negative ways, but it’s not too late. There is still hope. Being aware of our impact and conscious of reducing our impact is what is important.

In many different ways, it’ll [still] come up, [like electricity use], or when I pick my groceries. I look at where the food comes from. Whenever I go [camping now], there are a lot of practical things that I always do. Even if there was no chance of rain, it was a good habit to put tarps over our tent, for example. I’m always prepared for that. And when I camp, I feel like there are just a lot of practical skills that I can use and teach
others. I actually used to be in Girl Guides so it’s [not all] from Encounters, but it’s definitely been reinforced by Encounters.

We also learned about geology, about the formation of all the different types of rocks. At the time, I was like, “Ok cool.” But then I was on a road trip with my fiancé this summer, and I just was admiring the mountains, and how you could see like, the layers in the rocks, and I was just pointing out these things, and I was like, “Look at how beautiful that is.” I was just amazed. I just don’t remember it impacting me the same way as it did now. I just really pay attention to the formations of everything around me. In that way, I appreciate landscapes more because I understand the foundation of how they were formed. I didn’t know that before Encounters with Wilderness.

[Before I left the program], I drew this little thing for the classroom door to label it. And then later on one of the teachers in the school messaged me, [saying that] they wanted to turn it into a mural. It was just this tiny little thing, and they [actually] turned it into a mural! [They got me] to sign it at the assembly. I was just very impacted by the course. I hope that other people got that too because it was such a nice way to end high school.

Brian

My brother was actually a graduate of the [Encounters with Wilderness] program. I remember him doing so many fun things. So through Grade 9, 10, 11, I was just waiting for my chance. I was pretty excited and really, really looking forward to diving in.

[Our teacher] kind of tossed us in a very collaborative manner with each other. Generally Encounters was a Grade 12 course, but it doesn’t really make too much of a difference for grade level because you really bond with the class. A lot of people in it
were from different backgrounds. It was a good mix-up of academic streams and interests. But it really ties together people, when you’re in there.

[Environmental awareness] was very much the overarching theme that we had. A lot of it was within the scheme of bettering ourselves as we were learning about it. Like, I wasn’t one of the best Phys. Ed. students, but totally embraced it within [the context of this program]. It gave me a very interesting perspective on [Phys. Ed.].

We went [up north for 14 days at the end], so that was what we were building up to. To get there we had a couple of shorter trips to get used to setting up a camp and cooking. One of the assignments was to have the students plan out the final trip themselves. [The trip] was incredibly hard, but it was so rewarding. It was paddling from 9am to 5pm. But there was something about the feeling when you don’t have to look at your phone, like it’s lost but there’s nothing you have to worry about. But there were definitely terrible aspects to it. Where you’d be waist-deep in mud, with your pack over your head, trudging through these terrible environments. But once you’re out of there it’s one of those things where you’re proud to have gotten through it.

[The program] was part of our high school and lot of the activities we did were behind the school - there are acres of wetland, and forest, and rivers. So we had this huge natural environment that we could use to learn, to teach, and just to explore for the different lessons, and we were the only class that made use of it. It was interesting in that it was very much focused on immediate area. We had a co-op aspect where you take children from the elementary school and educate them with a day program in this back forest. It was incredible working with all the elementary students.
In [regular] high school, it is very much a strict division of power; you have teachers that tell students what to do. In university, it’s much more of a requirement for the students to push themselves and contribute. *Encounters* is something that encourages students to engage and bring forth their own ideas in discussions. I found that it really resembled university or college courses in the scope of the work. A really good way to distinguish between high school and university is that in high school you’re presented with textbooks. When you get to your university courses, you get to say, “Ok, now *why* is this particular material in the textbooks?” And that is more the feel of *Encounters*. We’re not just learning about environmental issues, but also *why* those ones are focused on.

Very much like every other class, there are a lot of students that naturally shy away from participating too much based on their style and comfort level. Everything was geared to everyone participating in the way that they were comfortable with. What I really liked that [our teacher] did was the journaling - we really engaged in a lot of self-reflection. There might be a student that doesn’t participate much but later when you look at their journal, they have just incredible detail about the discussion, various thoughts that they were considering. It shows how students participate in different areas.

I’ve often considered going back, because [the teacher] very often brings in former students to help with the trips. I experienced that with other students coming back. I’d like to continue that on.

It’s definitely had a big impact on me personally through a sustainable aspect. I was one of the first ones to graduate from high school with a high skills major in environmental science, because I had taken enough environmental courses to qualify for the program, and *Encounters* was a big chunk of that. It’s something that is constantly in
the back of my mind when I look at placements within cities. It’s always at the back of my mind. What was this landscape before? Looking at the various streams, landscape considerations, placements of services that don’t see the kind of environmental impact they may have. So it’s just basically interesting things that always sit at the back of my mind. You have to have an understanding of what it means to people that are affected by failing crops, by drought, by pollution. Being in Canada, it’s so hard to imagine these different lifestyles because we’re so accustomed to our own.

One really interesting thing that happened because of *Encounters with Wilderness*, is that I got a summer job in a provincial park. It was so much fun, living and working up there. I had the time to explore the town, go out on the water, see a lot of the people that are coming up to camp and experience the nature. I don’t think anything dramatic came from it, but having that experience of just getting away for a little bit. No family, no friends, no high school, just a few months working way up in northern Ontario. It was engaging - I just had so much immersion in the forests up there.

When I went to university, I went into philosophy, which I found way interesting with that environmental base. And then I started doing a master’s in environmental studies. I took a break and haven’t gotten back into it because I’m actually thinking of changing my master’s. I’m much more interested in the philosophical, sociological side of the limitless environmental issues we have now. Although academically [the program] hasn’t directed my focus, it certainly influenced it. Knowing the actual environmental conditions, and taking those as factors of evaluation, it adds more context that I think is so often neglected.
It’s also definitely influenced my lifestyle. I really enjoy a lot of the outdoor physical activities that were throughout it. Canoeing, kayaking, hiking, camping…it prepares you like nothing else will. [And if I have kids someday], it’s something that I want to share. The outdoor activities, the camping, the exploring. I would love to take them out to instill that appreciation of nature. Because it’s just lovely out there. You can get so much from it.

I still have my *Encounters with Wilderness* journal. That’s always fun to go back and read. And then I have some interesting artwork and notes that were written on birch bark. These were notes from all the students. Saying how we felt about each other at the time, and how our relationships had grown. And it’s so heartwarming to go back, and seeing the kind of impact you had on the various people that you went through the program with.

I am so happy that [the teacher] is still continuing on with this program. He has developed it into something just incredible. It’s one of those things that you always go back to for funny stories. It’s just the funniest, most character-building experience that you reminisce about. And even if you don’t keep in contact with people, it’s always a fond memory. When I think of high school, I think of *Encounters with Wilderness*.

**Claire**

*[Outdoor Adventures]* had a long history among the students as being “the best semester of your life.” The way I saw it was like, “Ok, I’m going to take Phys. Ed. anyway. Why not do Phys. Ed. that I would enjoy?” I thought that [the trips] would be
very “first time” kind of really easy, but they were actually quite challenging. So that met my expectations because I wanted to be challenged. And I was really happy about that.

It was very outdoor/adventure-based. The outdoor physical activities played a large role in what we did every day, whether it was at the school or on trip. We weren’t really told that it was this integrated; that was not the terminology at the time. You don’t realize it, but you’re learning constantly. I would say participating in that program made me realize how much I care about health and fitness and things like that.

The kind of mantra that I remember from it was that we would challenge ourselves physically and mentally, and there would be growth from that. And that’s how we would learn. It’s through those physical and mental challenges that [our teacher] would present to us. It was always like, “Step outside your comfort zone.” I remember that being a large part of things we would say. And when we would do journaling, it was always, “Did I push myself today?”, “What did I learn from pushing myself today?” Our teacher scanned [the printed photos from the semester] onto a CD for us. One photo that stands out the most is one where I’ve fallen down on a portage. It’s super rainy on this canoe trip, and I have our equipment pack. This pack that was heavier than I was! One of the guys was like, “Oh, I’ll take the pack,” and I was like, “I’m a woman, I can do it!” As I was walking down the hill, it was too heavy. So I lost my balance, and just everybody saw me just tip over. I love the really hard challenge. I thrived in that environment. I like to push myself physically so much that I would [literally] keel over!

It was different than what I expected. I expected it to be more of a Phys. Ed. class where we do sports or we play activities. But in this class there was a lot of introspection, learning about yourself and learning about others. These life skills exceeded my
expectations for what I would get out of the course. Because [the credits we earned] were physical education, they were largely participation-based: how we participated on trip and in class. You couldn’t just be an excellent athlete or perform well in the class because you had to care about others, and make sure that we as a class were successful. It kind of surprised me in terms of I was in this class with complete strangers who I wouldn’t have socialized with otherwise. What I learned about a team and interpersonal skills, I learned from that program.

I was an old soul in high school. I related better to the adults and teachers than I did my peers. Almost daily I felt out of place. I thought about dropping it. I was frustrated by the juvenile pranks. And I had conversations with those teachers all the time about that. My teachers were like, “You just need to vocalize your frustrations. Don’t bottle them up,” because I very much would. In large part because of the [primary] teacher. How he conducted himself. The relationship I had with him, and how he cared about every student. He also altered my trajectory because he saw these things in me that I didn’t necessarily see and was able to give me encouragement.

Reflecting, and always thinking about things, those are also skills that I learned from that program. I had never been asked to reflect on anything in my education before. And making my choices for post-secondary was based on those experiences. [I had a conversation with one of the teachers while we were on a trip, and I was quietly reflecting]. She was like, “What do you want to do?” and I was like, “I want to teach,” and she was like, “Have you ever thought about teaching something like this? You have to think about what makes you happy.” I feel like it was yesterday having this conversation. I didn’t expect [Outdoor Adventures] all to impact my teaching philosophy
and career goals but I came out of that class like, “I’m going to teach a class like this.”
And then I actually did, which was kind of cool!

[After teachers’ college], I went to my [Outdoor Adventures] teacher because I did my teaching practicum with him. He’s been a mentor for my entire life since graduating, and I said to him, “I’m not happy doing other things, like I would love to teach a program like this.” And he was like, “Interesting, because I’m actually leaving.”

I found out later that I have ADHD. [After Outdoor Adventures] I was sick of the normal classroom because of the passive, sedentary learning. Participating in it daily for hours was very frustrating for me. When people think of people with ADHD they think of a male, boisterous. Anyhow, I was very active and would move a lot, but being female you’re not really misbehaving necessarily. When you’re getting 90s, it’s hard to be like, “Hey, maybe this girl has ADHD,” because you’re doing something right. You’re like, “Ok, these are things that I should be able to pay attention to now. I should be able to do that. What’s my problem?”

It has been a part of most decisions I’ve made! And because I’ve taught, and because I’ve had these experiences as a student, and I taught lots of students with ADHD in my program, it was like, “How come I don’t have the same classroom behaviour issues [as] when I teach kids in the regular classroom?”

It helped me clarify my own personal beliefs, values, and identity. I mean, identity development happens throughout the lifetime. I would say actually that the biggest thing [I learned from my teacher] was the outdoors is something to enjoy. He very much believed that because the outdoors is this whole…leave no trace and stuff like
that, but also to truly be present and to enjoy the outdoors. I don’t know why, but it’s always stuck with me.

What I struggled with as a student was always the lack of autonomy. I would always go to a teacher and say, “I don’t want to do this project. I have a different idea.” And some teachers were really receptive to that, and some weren’t, and those were the classes that I got worse grades in, because I was like, “Well, forget you, because I don’t really care about your class anymore.” [In Outdoor Adventures] our Independent Study Unit project was called “Leave your mark”: we had to somehow leave our mark on the program. You could propose your own idea. What I did was I created signs for each of the trails [we used behind the school] and mapped them. [Our teacher] used them for future classes. As a teacher, I was very much about choice and autonomy, and I think that stems from my experience in the classroom.

I’ve done so much reflecting on this course, but one piece that I didn’t really realize is true is how much my participation in the program would inform who I would be as a teacher. It shaped who I was as a camp counsellor, [who I was as a camp] director. It was such a part of my identity: who I am and how I conduct myself every day with people. It’s not just a teaching philosophy. It shaped my life philosophy. When I write any teaching statement, it’s very easy for me because it’s who I am. Like I don’t separate teacher as part of my identity that I only am in the classroom.

The only time I sleep well is when I’m outside and camping. Even when I was a teacher, the only time that I could finally sleep, and have peace and everything was when I was teaching outside. I’ve always been so highly active. It’s because I know that when I run, when I do these things, I’m able to perform better.
It’s that experience [in *Outdoor Adventures*] I think altered my trajectory. I honestly don’t know that I would be doing my PhD. I don’t know that I would be studying what I’m studying for my PhD (exercise and the brain) had I not taught the course. And had I not taught the course…that is directly linked to having been in the course itself. It’s an interesting situation, and being able to reflect back on how a lot of things have had roots in that program, and having been a student in that program.

**Jeannie**

I don’t know if I even remember [how I learned about the program]. I like the outdoors, and [I suppose] it was just something that interested me when I came across it. Something different. I always enjoyed school, [but] in high school you kind of want to explore a little bit, and do something other than just sitting in a classroom all the time.

There was both [structure and integration], I would say. At certain times it was, “This is your Phys. Ed. time, this is your leadership time.” But there were other days that hands down it was pretty much every course, [like when we were] getting close to going on our canoe trip. Honestly, the biggest thing that stands out in my mind is canoe tripping. We built up to it. Physically trying to get our bodies ready for something like that, being out in the wilderness. [In the days leading up to the canoe trip] every class that you had was prepping, getting food ready, getting equipment set up. Everything blended in with the projects. When we did our canoe trips, and stuff like that that would kind of incorporate Phys. Ed. It would incorporate leadership. We did a bunch of map reading, so you’re learning geography.

We [did the recycling for the high school] as part of learning about the environment. It was nice because in that kind of class we were learning about that stuff,
but we got to leave the classroom and do the hands-on part of it. That was kind of the bonus with that type of class. It was such hands-on learning, and I learn better doing hands-on stuff. When we were in the school and we were physically doing the recycling, I think after I was more aware of it rather than just saying, “Yeah you should recycle, you should separate this and this.” Some of the things we did brought [learning] more to life for you.

We had two students who were physically challenged. [They] came into the class and didn’t do our trips with us, our camping trips, but [they were] there for everything else. Basically when we did anything at the school they were participating. And it wasn’t like you had to be academic or applied. There was no separation between that. It was open to anybody. [Encounters with Wilderness] seemed to be one of the few [programs] that allowed any stream to come through. It was kind of cool because it allowed for different people in the school to participate in a program like that.

[Our class] was awesome because it was small, which I think helped because you become closer with people. I actually married one of them! Our high school wasn’t very big, but I never met [my now-husband before the program]. At the beginning of our trip, I think on our bus ride up, we made these bracelets [with flagging tape]. That was part of a friendship between the two of us. A friendship that, if I didn’t take the course, I might not have ever had.

We did days when we had kids come in from the public school, where we had to take them out, and we had to teach them about the environment, and you know. [The school] has a bunch of property in the back [with] a pond. That was a project that we did
with the students, was to take them out in the wintertime, and kind of teach them about the environment and stuff like that.

The biggest thing is just the challenges. Right? The trips we did [were very challenging]. You have to push yourself. It’s not easy physically doing canoe trips, and my trip was, in particular, a rainy cold one. [Also] working with other kinds of people. When you’re working out in the wilderness, and you’re stuck with people for two weeks straight…it’s definitely different kinds of challenges that a high school student can come across. But those [challenges] were moments that you get though anything. There was never a moment through that where I was like, “I don’t like this, I don’t want to be here, it was the wrong decision.” [I really appreciate looking back on] the hardships, when things were tough. It’s the experience that you gained from it. Those “A-ha” moments when you [think], “Oh yeah, I was able to work through that physical, emotional stress.”

Through that class, I learned about working with groups and leadership. It helps your learning more in other classes because when you do group projects there always has to be someone who takes that leadership in the group. Someone who gets people motivated. I found that came about when I was in some of those canoe trips. That helped to be a leader in different classes [later on].

It was tough [going back to the regular classroom]. [In Encounters with Wilderness] there’s your workload, but there’s also so much interesting experiences and fun times that you get with the course. Going back to the classroom, [it was a little bit dry]. [Going back to learning like that] was a little tough, a hard transition. So [after Encounters] I did a semester, and then I did another semester. In the last semester of Grade 12 I did the level two [of the program]. It was awesome because it was a nice kind
of ease out of high school for me. But the transition from doing Encounters, being back in the classroom, it was a little bit difficult not having that hands-on interaction.

I’m a massage therapist, so I didn’t really go into [an outdoor-related] field. But I love being outside. I love being on the water. And since [my semester], I have chaperoned for [my former teacher] a number of times. I’ve been on many, many trips with him since I graduated. So career-wise, I didn’t fall into that bracket, but definitely things aside from work, I kind of definitely love to do that stuff, and kind of helped out by chaperoning different trips like that. [Chaperoning, I noticed that] there were a lot of siblings. That course definitely goes through families. If the first sibling does it, it seems like the next sibling does it.

The thing that’s carried over, is just talking to people. My job involves a lot of talking. Like when I’m talking to clients. What I bring to my work, is talking about the experiences I’ve had, and the places I’ve been, and the things that I’ve done. One of my clients is [another ICP] teacher. I had mentioned that I did this course in high school, and I chaperoned the course’s big trips many years after. That’s one way that I guess it would have incorporated. Just having life experience, and just being able to chat with people.

If I hadn’t taken the course I don’t know whether I would have been where I am in terms of being outdoorsy. Growing up we always went camping [with my family]. But taking that course, it’s changed me later on. I love to be outdoors, I love to go camping, I love to be a part of nature. Now, me and my husband go on trips, so obviously skills of canoe tripping, camping, and compass and map-reading [have stayed with me]. I learned how to do those things in that course. And being conscious of the environment, of the impact that we leave behind. [Also] being conscious at home: Recycling and composting.
That would be something that I would pass along to my kids. Learning about the environment and how to protect the environment. If we went camping, that information would be passed along. I would kind of share that with them.

Although I don’t keep in contact with everybody definitely the friendships and the relationships that you build [stay with you]. I mean, even with [the teacher], in terms of me going on trips after. That was an awesome opportunity even after I graduated, to be able to still be part of the course. If I had never taken that course, I wouldn’t have taken that with me.