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Summary of Group Development/ Group Dynamics Discussion

Leo McAvoy and Andy Young

The identification of specific research topics that need to be addressed in groups and outdoor education was discussed at the 1992 Coalition for Education in the Outdoors Research Symposium. At the Symposium, a working group of 15 outdoor education researchers participated in an abbreviated focus group exercise to identify priority research topics from the research dimensions and topics listed in Tables 1-4 in this paper. Seven primary topics were identified as needing research. They included, in priority order: leadership models, problem solving ability of groups, diversity within groups, multicultural considerations, gender, class, and relationships.

The first three topics (leadership models, problem solving, and diversity) were discussed and more specific research issues were identified for each. The focus group deemed that leadership models needed to be studied to determine the influence of specific models on group dynamics and development. For example, does a particular model apply, and is it effective in facilitating effective group development in multicultural situations and in regard to gender issues? Assessment protocols need to be established and validated that will assess leaders and groups regarding these issues. The focus group members viewed problem solving as an indicator of a well functioning group. The challenge for the researcher includes how one measures the problem solving growth and ability level of a group, what components of training are effective in improving problem solving abilities, how one incorporates the speed of problem solving and the quality of the solution into the measurement, and how group members feel during the problem solving process. The focus group members also saw a necessity for moving beyond the participant survey methodology and moving toward group observation techniques and sociometry techniques of research.

The diversity topic was viewed by the focus group members as an important overriding topic that needs to be addressed through research to enable this field to better serve a more diverse population and to move beyond differences to creating social structures of inclusiveness. This diversity topic included the issues of culture, gender, and class. The focus group members believed diversity has been a neglected area in outdoor education research and field practitioners are realizing more and more that there is not one correct way to manage groups.