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Empowerment in outdoor environmental education: who shapes the programs?

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ABSTRACT

Empowerment is often considered to be a central goal in outdoor education and environmental education. To develop student empowerment, a frequent recommendation is for the leaders of outdoor environmental education programs to provide students with a high level of autonomy through an emancipatory approach, by involving them in the decision-making processes about and during the programs. The study analyzes the strategies applied in five outdoor environmental education programs to involve students in shaping the programs. Further, it discusses the concepts of the program leaders, the accompanying teachers, and the participating students regarding how and whether such student involvement should be implemented. The findings show that while student involvement is achievable, most of the leaders and teachers questioned its effectiveness and expressed concern regarding the students' ability to provide meaningful suggestions about the program. As a result, most of the leaders preferred instrumental programs, with few opportunities for students to shape the program. Instead, the leaders focused on enjoyable and attractive learning activities prepared by external program designers. The study argues for an adoption of an open and pluralistic approach to the practice, one that would accept both instrumental and emancipatory strategies as relevant for program design and implementation.

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Introduction

Empowerment is considered to be a central goal of outdoor environmental education programs (OEEPs) (Sibthorp and Arthur-Banning 2004; Shellman 2014; Daniel et al. 2014). Empowerment is usually defined as a sense of personal control, one's belief in having the possibility to promote desirable changes in one's life situation. It is associated with psychological concepts like self-efficacy, self-determination, sense of ownership or locus of control (Kohn 1991; Sibthorp and Arthur-Banning 2004; Shellman 2014; Broom 2015).

These concepts play an important role also in the discourse of environmental education. Tilbury (1995) emphasized the importance of 'empowerment' for the transition of environmental education from an 'awareness-based' to an 'action-oriented' approach. Student locus of control has been repeatedly identified as one of the main preconditions of responsible environmental

behavior or an ecocentric worldview (Cottrell and Graefe 1997; Allen and Ferrand 1999; Hsu 2004; Marcinkowski 2009; Boeve-de Pauw, Donche, and Van Petegem 2011; Chiang et al. 2019).

In light of this, promoting empowerment is repeatedly mentioned as a positive feature of OEEPs (Kendall and Rodger 2015; Menzies, Bowen-Viner, and Shaw 2017; Real World Learning Model 2019). To promote student empowerment, many authors recommend providing students with an opportunity to have some control over their own learning, i.e. involving them in the decision-making about the program goals and activities or offering them activities that assume a high level of student autonomy (Kohn 1991; Sibthorp and Arthur-Banning 2004; Sibthorp et al. 2008; Thomas 2010; Daniel et al. 2014; Povilaitis et al. 2019). Nevertheless, according to Tengland (2008), autonomy itself should not be seen as a synonym for empowerment but rather as one of the key components of empowerment. An increase in autonomy leads to an increase in empowerment.

According to Kendall and Rodger (2015), OEEPs involving students in decision-making are more effective in achieving their goals, and students tend to be more engaged in their learning. Similarly, Thomas (2010) argues that a leadership style based on controlling and managing student learning may have negative consequences, e.g. it may lead to misunderstanding, limited learning, lack of trust or student dissatisfaction. This perspective has been reflected in the field of environmental education. Wals (2012) differentiates between an 'emancipatory approach' in which students participate in the decision-making about the learning goals and activities, and an 'instrumental approach' in which the goals and the activities are designed by teachers or education experts. While the effects of both of these approaches are still a matter of debate, some researchers have found that student autonomy corresponds with all of the following: student action competence; student satisfaction with their involvement in the OEEP; and student empowerment (Cincera and Krajhanzl 2013; Cincera and Kovacikova 2014; Cincera et al. 2017; Cincera et al. 2019).

Other authors provide examples of specific strategies used to promote student autonomy and decision-making. In the context of environmental education, such strategies are often used in long-term programs, such as community-based projects or various environmentally oriented learning communities. They highlight a gradual development of student competence to cooperate and participate in decision-making, and they focus on shifting the role of teachers toward the roles of facilitators and moderators (Lousley 1999; Johnson, Duffin, and Murphy 2012; Winklerova et al. 2018; Simonova et al. 2019).

Usually, OEEPs that last several days and are situated in informal settings call for a variety of strategies. Daniel et al. (2014) mention particular activities assuming a high level of student independence, such as solo expeditions and personal challenges. Others suggest encouraging students to set their own goals or take up a leadership role during the program (Kohn 1991; Daniel et al. 2014). To achieve this, a democratic leadership style is recommended (Priest and Gass 2005; Thomas 2010).

However, student involvement in planning the program is often limited, and most OEEPs are designed by outdoor centers (Menzies, Bowen-Viner, and Shaw 2017). Student participation in the decision-making is often perceived as inappropriate because the school or the outdoor center wants to achieve certain predetermined goals and so designs the activities to accomplish these goals. In other cases, safety concerns or lack of time limit student involvement in the decision-making about the program (Thomas 2010; Daniel et al. 2014; Menzies, Bowen-Viner, and Shaw 2017).

In addition, the leaders in the environmental education centers usually do not know the students who come to participate in the program. The absence of such knowledge may be an obstacle to the achievement of the intended objectives (Loewenberg Ball, Thames, and Phelps 2008; Hill and Chin 2018).

Furthermore, the concepts of empowerment and student autonomy in OEEPs are not problem-free. The critique of empowerment focuses on the social and political aspects of this concept

Table 1. Description of the analyzed programs.

Program code	Characteristics
Yellow	A 5-day residential program in a rural environment. Focuses on developing outdoor skills (orientation in nature, starting a fire, cooking at a campfire, etc.) and affinity toward nature.
Green	A 5-day residential program in a wetland area. Focuses on developing environmental attitudes and ecological understanding.
Orange	A 3-day residential program in a sandstone rock area, with follow-up activities. Focuses on developing environmental attitudes, ecological understanding, and behavior change.
Blue	A 3-day residential program in a mountainous area. Focuses on interpretation of the natural heritage of, and developing a relationship to, a protected locality in the mountainous area.
White	A 5-day residential program in a karst area. Focuses on developing outdoor skills and encouraging spending time in nature.

(McLaughlin 2016; Weidenstedt 2016). Jacob (1996) argues that empowerment cannot be divorced from socio-economic and political factors and that both personal and social issues need to be addressed if empowerment is to be achieved. The danger of individualism is also mentioned by Riger (1993) who draws attention to the potential of competition and conflict among those who are empowered.

It is clear that the opportunity for student decisions is always limited by the decisions of the adults who are responsible for the program and the students. According to Kendall and Rodger (2015), effective OEEPs should involve the accompanying teachers in the process of planning the program, while in many cases the programs are designed by an external outdoor organization only (Menzies, Bowen-Viner, and Shaw 2017).

The instrumental approach to OEEPs may be simply the result of an attempt to apply the recommendations formulated by Rickinson (2001) to design well-planned and interlinked programs as a precondition of their effectiveness. Kirschner, Sweller, and Clark (2006) argue that too much autonomy provided to students who have little prior knowledge results in greater 'misconceptions or incomplete or disorganized knowledge' (p. 84) and, consequently, compromises the effectiveness of the program. Similarly, De Loof et al. (2019) argue for a mixed approach in which student autonomy is developed with some level of guidance and structure. Finally, yet crucially, regardless of the importance of empowerment, some OEEPs may highlight other goals associated with environmental education and, as a result, they may apply strategies perceived as effective for the achievement of these other goals. OEEPs designed in more instrumental ways have been shown to have positive impact on changing environmental attitudes, knowledge, or behavior in many studies (e.g. Emmons 1997; Bogner 1998; Dettmann-Easler and Pease 1999; Bogner and Wiseman 2004; Ferreira 2012; Manoli et al. 2014).

To sum up, while providing students with autonomy and encouraging their participation in shaping their OEEP seem to be desirable strategies, they are not free of potential problems. In addition, the aforementioned studies suggest that the dynamic in the relationship among the program leaders, program designers, and school teachers is quite complex. In light of this, it is not clear whether and how student autonomy should be promoted in OEEPs, particularly those focusing on shaping the environmental attitudes and behavior of students. Furthermore, it is not clear how students and adults perceive the advantages and disadvantages of the emancipatory approach in OEEPs or what are the underlying assumptions for the strategies they apply.

Methodology

This study is one of several sets of studies analyzing different aspects of the intervention strategies applied in five OEEPs that focus on shaping the environmental values and behavior of

elementary school students in the Czech Republic. The study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- What is the distribution of power among the students and the adults in these programs? Particularly, what is the role of the program leaders, the accompanying teachers, and the participating students in the decision-making about the program goals and activities? How does this decision-making work? What dynamics emerge from such a distribution of power?
- What do the students and the adults think about providing the students with opportunities for decision-making about the program goals and activities? What are the adults' assumptions that frame their approach to student participation? What are the students' perceptions of their own autonomy?

For the analysis, five different OEEPs were selected. Each of them was provided by a different environmental education center. All of them focused on shaping environmental values and behavior and targeted younger students from the 3rd to 7th grades of elementary schools. As one of the centers did not agree to have its name disclosed, the names of the programs were anonymized and coded with different colors. [Table 1](#) offers a basic description of the programs.

Of the programs, two had been previously evaluated. For the Orange program, the previous evaluations found a high level of student satisfaction and a significant effect on their environmental values and behavior (Činčera and Johnson 2013; Manoli et al. 2014; Johnson and Činčera 2015). For the Blue program, an effect on student place attachment was found (Cincera, Johnson, and Kovacikova 2015).

In the present study, a qualitative methodological approach combining data collected from different perspectives was used. Specifically, the following data were collected:

- Field observation. Each of the programs was independently observed by two observers. The observers focused on the strategies applied for the decision-making in the program, i.e. who made the decisions about the program goals and activities, and what decision-making strategies the program leaders used. The total number of hours of program observations varied according to the particular program's length, ranging between 40 (Blue) to 90 (White, Green) hours. All of the observations were recorded in field notes and regularly analyzed.
- Focus groups with the students who participated in the programs. The groups were selected by the teachers of the students who recently participated in the observed programs. Altogether, 19 students provided their answers in 8 focus groups organized after the completion of the programs. The interviews were conducted without the teachers or any other adults present except for the interviewer, and they took place in the schools approximately two weeks after the students' participation in the programs.
- Interviews with the accompanying teachers (N=10). All the accompanying teachers in the observed programs were interviewed. The interviews were approximately 20 minutes long. While they covered a variety of topics, only the parts related to the research questions were used for the analyses.
- Interviews with the program leaders. Altogether, 15 program leaders and 2 directors of environmental education centers provided their answers. As the number of employees in the centers varied, at some of the centers all the program leaders were interviewed (e.g. 2 program leaders for the Blue program and 3 program leaders for the White programs), while at other centers only the leaders actively engaged in leading the observed program were interviewed.

For the interview with the leaders, directors, and accompanying teachers, the interviewers started with general questions about the strengths and the possible weaknesses of the observed program. This was followed by a question framed in a neutral way to avoid social desirability bias:

There is a big discussion in the field of environmental education. According to some groups, the students should get a chance to be involved in the decision-making about the goals and activities of the program they participate in. According to other groups, the adults, i.e. the program leaders and the accompanying teachers, are responsible for the programs and they should design them on their own. What is your opinion about this?

Table 2. Overview of the applied categories defining the distribution of power in the programs.

Category	Definition	Examples of codes
Locus of power (central category)	The specific constellation of the distribution of power to shape the program.	
Range of influence	Direct and indirect methods applied by or prescribed to particular stakeholders to influence the program.	Designing instructions for the leaders (designers), control over students' free time (teachers), direct instructions (leader), setting individual goals (students).
Perceived effects	Assumed positive or negative consequences of particular strategies or methods applied by various stakeholders to influence the program.	Student satisfaction, program flexibility, effectiveness, group dynamics, empowerment, authenticity.
Assumptions (identified for the leaders only)	Declared reasons of the program leaders for choosing either an emancipatory or an instrumental approach in the program.	Students' age, group maturity, leaders' experience, leaders' personal preference.
Intentions	Declared reasons for using a higher level of influence in the program.	Higher flexibility (leaders), free time activities (students).

The issue was then framed as a continuum rather than a dichotomy, with more possible solutions and no clear or expected answer. In the next step, the interviewees were asked to assess the observed program from this perspective and say whether they think the applied strategy is good or not.

Some of the respondents identified further dimensions of the issue as they elaborated on the differences between the role of an accompanying teacher and a program leader, or a program designer and a program leader. As new ideas emerged, they were included in the following interviews.

In the focus groups, the students were asked what they liked and disliked and what would they change in the program they participated in. While the full focus groups were approximately 40 min long, only the responses describing the students' reflections connected with decision-making (regarding decisions made either by the program leaders or by the students) were used for the analysis.

All of the interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed. The data answers were then coded. The procedure followed most of the recommendations for open coding, i.e. the categories were not predefined but emerged from the data (Saldana 2015). At the same time, the central category emerged relatively early in the coding process and was helpful in identifying the other categories.

The central focus of the coding was the main category 'locus of power', identifying the specific constellation of the distribution of power to shape the program among four types of stakeholder: program designers, program leaders, accompanying teachers, and students. For each of them, further subcategories (range of influence, perceived effects, intentions, or underlying assumptions) and associated codes were defined. For an overview of the applied categories, see Table 2. In addition, we tried to identify the 'scope of power' for each type of stakeholder. While this identification remained rather qualitative, we used a simple classification in which 'high' was when the stakeholders could make most of the crucial decisions about the program aims and activities on their own; 'medium' was when the stakeholders had some level of autonomy in decision-making about the program activities or aims or when they were supposed to negotiate with the other stakeholders; and 'low' was when the stakeholders had no power over the program or their power was limited to some level of autonomy in the predetermined activities (see Table 3).

The structure of the categories was inspired by some of the principles of grounded theory. The identified subcategories are consistent with the model of theoretical codes recommended

Table 3. Scope of power in the observed programs.

Program/Locus of power	Program designers	Program leaders	Accompanying teachers	Participating students
Yellow	High	Medium	Low	Low
Green	High	Low	Low	Low
Orange	High	Low	Medium	Low
Blue	High	Medium	Medium	Low
White	Medium	Medium	Medium	Medium

by Corbin and Strauss (2008): they identify the reasons (assumptions, intentions), strategies (range of influence), and impacts (perceived effects). However, the structure also follows Glasser's (1998) call for flexibility. The main category (locus of power) was interpreted as a source of dynamic social processes emerging in the program; this again corresponds with the goal of grounded theory to uncover the social processes in the particular investigated field (Glasser 1998).

While the study includes data collected from several different perspectives (that of the program leaders, school teachers, students, and observers), the small number of respondents is a potential limitation. Particularly, the non-random selection of the students could skew the data obtained from this group towards a more favorable evaluation of the programs. Similarly, the teachers' responses cannot be regarded as a sample of responses of 'typical teachers' but rather of teachers who were motivated to take their students outdoors. Further, the findings are based on evaluating only five OEEPs and should not be overgeneralized.

Last but not least, the study is situated in the socio-cultural context of the Czech Republic. The Czech Republic is still dealing with the effects of the post-socialist transformation and many problems persist in the educational system, such as the low social status of schools and their teaching staff, and strict administrative control and bureaucratic organization (Müller 1994). Despite numerous reforms, including curriculum reform, the learning outcomes of students are average, declining and uneven, but at the same time, parents and teachers are satisfied with the current situation and tired of constant changes (McKinsey & Co 2010). The low degree of student autonomy and the reluctance of schools to conduct further reforms are especially important in the context of the investigated subject (empowerment). While the changes in 1990 came mainly from the bottom, the later reforms came from the top and were introduced ineffectively, without strategic management and proper implementation. Therefore, the respondents' opinions have been formed in this socio-cultural context and may not represent the situation in other countries.

Findings

Locus of power

In contrast to our original assumption, the locus of power in the observed programs could not be easily defined by locating its position on a one-dimensional instrumental-emancipatory continuum. As became obvious, the programs were shaped by an interplay of four different stakeholders (program designers, program leaders, accompanying teachers, participating students) with various ranges of influence that each of these groups had over the program (see Table 3).

As the power was unevenly distributed among the stakeholders, various types of reactions emerged in the observed programs:

- The program leaders of an externally designed program regretted that the program did not allow them to be more flexible;
- The accompanying teachers wanted more control over the students' free time;

- The participating students would have appreciated less control from the accompanying teachers and more free time from the program leaders;
- The program designers questioned the ability of the leaders to achieve the program goals without the externally provided guidance.

Moreover, the locus of power shifted in reference to different activities. The differences in the approaches of the leaders in the same center were obvious. For example, the White program applied an instrumental approach for some of the activities and an emancipatory one for others. However, an instrumental approach was used by one of the leaders and an emancipatory approach was used by another leader for the same activity. As a result, when the students did their group challenges (making a fire, cooking a dinner), the instrumental group got help from one of the accompanying teachers while the emancipatory group's leader did not interfere, even if their group seemed to be unable to do the task. In some of the activities, the students had a chance to organize themselves, while in others, they were organized by the leaders.

Range of influence

In four of the observed programs, the level of student control over the program was rather low. The students had no opportunity to participate in the decision-making about the goals of the program, and limited to no opportunity to decide about their activities. In the Orange program, the students got a chance to choose the follow-up tasks, which involved changing something in the way they use materials and energy, and it was up to them to decide what to do. They could also opt not to do these tasks at all. In the original version of the Blue program, the students were encouraged to implement a community-based interpretative program designed according to their choice when they come back to school. However, this activity was abandoned due to lack of the teachers' interest, and so the Blue program consisted of the residential part only.

The largest range of influence in the Yellow, Green, Orange, and Blue programs was the right of the students to solve the tasks assigned by the program leaders following their own strategy or to interpret the meaning of the activities on their own. However, the students could not modify the activities or suggest any other changes in the programs. In the Yellow program, the students sometimes had the right not to participate in an activity they did not like, but that was not the rule in the whole program:

They had a chance to influence it because they were assigned an activity that had to be done but they could decide who in the group did it or how they distributed the work in their group (u5, teacher, 21 yrs of practice, Green program).

We could often choose what we wanted to do and what we would do, and we did not have to do what the others were doing (z 19, girl, 6th grade, Yellow program).

(...) the children have freedom in how they feel and experience it (leader 8, female, 8 yrs of practice, Orange program).

In the White program, the students had significantly more opportunities for exercising their autonomy and control over their learning, but it was still limited. The students were not involved in the decision-making about the program goals or the main activities. However, the students could decide whether to accept personal challenges (e.g. caving), designed the plan for their final expedition (while they were indirectly guided by one of the program leaders), and planned and organized their group challenges (cooking and sleeping in the open air).

I think the program is strong in providing students with a considerably high level of autonomy and shared responsibility for the program. And this is what builds their feeling that they manage something or that they accomplished it (...) And they do not have a feeling that someone prepared something for them,

something that they are supposed to do (...) and they feel that they experience it on their own, that this experiencing is their own business (leader 4, male, 22 yrs of practice, White program).

In all of the observed programs, the students had a chance to influence their free time activities (in-between and after the organized activities), and they organized various games and social interactions on their own. However, the decisions about this time period were negotiated with the accompanying teachers.

The level of the accompanying teachers' control over most of the programs was low. The teachers were mainly in the role of observers of the program activities and they did not interfere with the program leaders' work. They were also supposed to be prepared to solve possible problems emerging in the program:

When they participate or when there are more teachers, they should not disturb the program by chatting and not being interested in what is going on. So it should not be a completely active but also not a completely passive participation. Not to interrupt the leaders' leadership, leave it to them, but to be there, and, when I can see there are unexpected situations, to be at hand (leader 8, female, 8 yrs of practice, Orange program).

In the Orange program, the accompanying teachers were supposed to prepare the students for the program and then to facilitate the process of the follow-up activities. In the Blue program, the accompanying teachers could choose some of the program activities (field trips), while they played an observation role during the program. In the White program, the teachers were encouraged to participate in the program activities and to lead some of them:

The teachers are seen as being on the same level as the leaders, they lead activities, they motivate the children (leader 4, male, 22 yrs of practice, White program).

The accompanying teachers had a high level of influence over the students' free time during the programs. Particularly in the Green program (and partly also in the Yellow program), when the program activities finished at about 4 p.m., the teachers were supposed to organize various activities for the students. In some cases, they prepared a mix of activities loosely consistent with the program goals (e.g. an excursion to the natural area). In other cases, they prepared activities not corresponding with the program and with a possible negative impact on the program goals (a disco, night trail of courage, watching movies). The teachers' efforts sometimes received negative reactions from the students who disliked that their teachers did not allow the games they wanted to play in their free time (Blue program) or that they forced them to clean their rooms (Yellow program).

The leaders played a dominant role in all of the programs. However, while some of the interviewed leaders also participated in designing the program (particularly in the White program), in other cases the program had been designed by someone else and the leaders' opportunity to shape it was limited. For the Orange program, designed by an international organization, the leaders reflected on both the positive (high effectiveness, easy implementation) and the negative (lack of flexibility) effects of this strategy:

That the program is so ready, prepared, is a big advantage for the leaders, that they do not need to invent anything, they just learn to lead it (...). Of course, the disadvantage is that it is not possible to improvise in the activities, that it must be conducted as it is prepared (...) it does not allow one to flexibly react to the weather, to the situation that emerges in the group, etc. (leader 7, female, 14 yrs of practice, Orange program).

Generally, in all of the programs, the leaders influenced the program to a large degree, including by regular decision-making, leading activities, direct instruction, or motivating the students through attractive framing of the activities. In addition to the guidelines given by the program designers, the choice of these strategies was based on the leaders' assumptions and the perceived effects of those strategies.

Assumptions and intentions

The program leaders' approach to involving students in the decision-making was underpinned by their assumptions regarding their own expertise and regarding the students' capacity to engage in emancipation-oriented programs. As some of the program leaders admitted, their preference for the instrumental approach was due to their lack of experience with alternative (emancipatory) approaches or simply due to their personal preference for a teacher-directed leadership style. The program leaders also had some concerns about the direction of the program without their guidance because they could not imagine how the activities led by the students would turn out in the end. As can be seen from the following reflections, the program leaders often believed that while the students were capable of suggesting useful and important learning goals and activities, they would not choose such goals and activities – the students preferred having more free time and did not want to put much effort into outdoor activities:

It would go somewhere I do not want it to go and (...) I still have some goals, (I want to) lead students somewhere, whether to (get new) knowledge or skill, and I worry that if the young ones could decide, they would decide for something I do not want (leader 12, male, 3 years of practice, Green program).

I cannot imagine designing this program according to children, I do not know how to do this. They usually want to do nothing, just to play ball, and they are satisfied. I do not think they would primarily choose the things we want to show them. Or that they would voluntarily say they want to go on a full-day expedition with a backpack. And then in the end, they are happy they have had such an experience (leader 14, female, 5 years of practice, Yellow program).

In other comments, the program leaders perceived the students as passive and inexperienced in taking control of their learning:

(...) if they had to decide how to go on, they would not know what to do with this, they are passive, inexperienced. I am not sure if it is OK to rely on this or to work with it, and leave them in their passivity as this is what they are used to. But from my experience, I know that most of the children do not know what to do with this space and just a small section of the participants in the program is capable of saying how to move the program forward, of saying what they are interested in (...) I feel, nowadays children are very passive (leader 7, female, 14 yrs of practice, Orange program).

Other respondents argued that while they believed that the emancipatory approach was manageable for some students and some programs, it did not work for the observed program due to the lack of maturity of the group, the age of the students, or safety concerns. Some of them also said that the applied instrumental strategy was more effective for achieving the goals of the program.

These opinions were mostly expressed by the accompanying teachers:

I think when it is strictly set, so then everyone is prepared for it, everyone knows what will happen. If they (the students) had to decide on their own, I think it would cause conflicts, so that one group would be angry with the other that they decided it like that or that they were voted down, so it would bring a discord into their cooperation (teacher u7, male, 5 yrs of practice, Green program).

Those children would not be able to move it forward alone, they would need to be from extraordinary schools experienced in the project method, but I do not think (it is) a common school product ... (teacher u1, female, 15 yrs of practice, Blue program).

The accompanying teachers who came to these outdoor programs with their classes often expected to have a well-prepared program. They could rest from all the pedagogical duties they usually have at school and leave the work to the program leaders.

When asked, the participating students said that they would have appreciated more opportunities to make their own decisions in the program. However, this feeling was almost always focused on the level of control over their free time in the residential center. They reported that they would have liked to spend more time playing games with their classmates or relaxing.

Perceived effects

The most frequently mentioned positive effect of the adult control over the program was higher student satisfaction and higher effectiveness in achieving the program goals. As some of the program leaders explained, the instrumental approach can work well to prevent conflicts among the students. Well-prepared and repeatedly evaluated activities are, according to the leaders, attractive for students and effective for teaching new concepts or shaping the students' attitudes.

We can see they enjoy it, and so we do not need to give them a choice (leader 6, female, 8 years of practice, Orange program).

On the other hand, some of the respondents also reflected on the risks of this approach, that it could lead to applying manipulative strategies to change the students' attitudes or to overwhelming the students by unbearable amounts of information.

These concerns are partly supported by the students' reflections and by our observation of their behavior during the program activities. In most of the cases, the students appreciated the activities prepared for them by the program leaders, found them fun, interesting, and enjoyable. Some of them even appreciated that the program leaders had the program under control and did not allow the students to disturb it:

I liked they (the leaders) could shout out at us, they were able to manage us. (boy z5, 5th grade, Blue program).

It was on the way to X that we did not go only where we wanted to but we made stops and we got tasks to do or to create something, and it was not only walking (boy z2, 6th grade, Blue program).

And X (a leader) (...) showed us which plants are edible and which are not, and it was interesting (boy z7, 10 yrs, White program).

... they devoted so much attention to what they did for us, they prepared such nice activities, it was so very wonderful (girl z9, 4th grade, Green program).

In some cases, the students also reported their dissatisfaction, particularly related to not having enough free time. While most of the students seemed to be motivated to participate, in some of the activities (in most of the observed programs) their motivation clearly dropped, and the leaders had to use a rather directive approach to keep the students involved. These patterns emerged in all of the observed programs, regardless of the level of student autonomy.

I did not like that (...) the leaders told us what we were supposed to do and you could not do this on your own (girl z8, 4th grade, Green program).

Some of the children from our group (...) were not interested at all and did not want to do this, which I did not find nice because everything was perfect and they ignored the program (...) We had a lot of freedom, this is what I liked. And there were not many rules (boy, z7, 11 yrs, White program).

However, most of the respondents from the White program appreciated the autonomy they perceived they had in the program activities:

The best for me was (...) the full-day expedition, that we could plan it on our own (z7, boy, 11 yrs, White program).

I liked the cooking, that we had to prepare everything on our own ... (z8, boy, 11 yrs, White program).

Summary of the findings

What is the distribution of power between the students and the adults in these programs?

Although the analyzed programs differed somewhat, we found that in most of them power was concentrated in the hands of the adults rather than the students. At the same time, the adults

were not a monolithic group and the roles of the program designers, program leaders, and school teachers varied among the programs. Further, as our analyses showed, the distribution of power was not static. In fact, it was a source of many kinds of dynamics and tensions among the groups.

What do the students and the adults think about providing the students with opportunities for decision-making about the program goals and activities?

Based on our findings, most of the adults questioned the ability of the students to participate in decision-making about the programs and had a tendency to limit the students' involvement to allowing them autonomy in dealing with the prescribed activities rather than letting them choose what activities should be done. At the same time, the students were mostly satisfied with this model and appreciated their programs. However, the students also appreciated their autonomy when it was granted, and they regretted not having more free time for their social activities.

Discussion

Our comparison of the five analyzed programs revealed both similarities and differences. Some of the programs (e.g. White and Yellow) highlighted similar goals but applied different approaches to the distribution of power among the stakeholders. Other programs (e.g. Orange and Green) used a similar approach but aimed at different goals. While we focused on identifying an emerging pattern across the programs, it is reasonable to conclude that each of the programs was unique, shaped by its own constellation of external and internal factors. In light of this, we should interpret the findings carefully, keeping in mind a certain amount of necessary simplification caused by our effort to 'compare the incomparable'.

Contrary to the existing recommendations (Kendall and Rodger 2015; Menzies, Bowen-Viner, and Shaw 2017; Real World Learning Model 2019), four of the five observed OEEPs applied an approach that was more instrumental than participative and provided students with only limited autonomy, without offering them a real opportunity to shape the program through their own decisions. However, these findings should not be interpreted as a weakness of the analyzed programs. While the participating students in the White program mostly appreciated the level of their autonomy, the participating students in the other programs appreciated other aspects of the programs (e.g. enjoyable activities) and, as a result, they did not seem to be less engaged in or satisfied with the program than the students perceiving more autonomy. Although this finding cannot be confirmed without further investigation, it contradicts the claims asserting that there is a relationship between students' opportunity to shape the program and their satisfaction (Thomas 2010; Cincera and Kovacicova 2014; Kendall and Rodger 2015).

In light of this, it could be argued that the level of student autonomy does not automatically imply the level of student satisfaction with the program. It could be assumed that more factors are at play, and the level of the students' control over their learning is just one of them.

It is also likely that the choice of a particular strategy is highly dependent on the program leaders' assumptions regarding the advantages and disadvantages of various approaches. While some of the leaders questioned young students' ability to participate in decision-making in a meaningful way, the leaders of the White program successfully applied a mixture of instrumental and emancipation-oriented procedures. This supports the idea that the emancipatory approach in OEEPs is a possible strategy, while it is not necessarily the most effective one for the whole range of environmental education goals.

The question of goals is of special significance here. It is obvious that students' satisfaction is important, but it is mainly a precondition for a program's effectiveness. While our findings do not support the assumption that student autonomy is always correlated with their satisfaction

with or engagement in the program, the findings do not question the potentially positive impact of student autonomy on their learning, an impact suggested by Kendall and Rodger (2015). Nevertheless, this aspect needs to be interpreted from the perspective of what a program aims to achieve.

As we could see, all of the adult respondents justified their chosen instructional strategy by its assumed positive learning effects. Similarly, the program leaders' belief in the greater effectiveness of the instrumental approach emerged as one of the reasons for its implementation. However, only the program leaders of the White program mentioned student empowerment as an important goal of their program. In light of this, it could be argued that while the emancipatory approach seems to be a sound strategy when OEEPs focus on the development of student empowerment, if other goals (knowledge, attitudes) are at play, a larger scope of strategies may be successfully applied. This could be supported by the previous evaluation of the Orange program which confirmed its effectiveness for its educational goals (Činčera and Johnson 2013; Manoli et al. 2014; Johnson and Činčera 2015). That said, more analyses of programs' effects on students' knowledge, attitudes, and competences are needed.

Such a claim calls for a rather pragmatic, non-dogmatic approach towards the practice of OEEPs. While providing students with opportunities for shaping the programs is definitely possible and seems to be important for the development of student empowerment, it should be interpreted as just one of the possible approaches. In light of this, perceiving student autonomy and student control over their learning in OEEPs as a universal feature defining the programs' quality (Kendall and Rodger 2015; Menzies, Bowen-Viner, and Shaw 2017; Real World Learning Model 2019) should be reconsidered.

This conclusion may be interpreted further from a broader social perspective. Many authors have discussed the importance of promoting participatory and pluralistic approaches in the field of environmental and sustainability education to avoid the risks of students' indoctrination and to promote students' sustainability competences (Rudsberg and Öhman 2010; Lundegård and Wickman 2012; Öhman and Öhman 2013; Sund and Öhman 2014; Van Poeck 2019). In light of this, the prevailing instrumental practice observed in most of the analyzed OEEPs could be seen as controversial.

However, more aspects must be taken into consideration. Firstly, the instrumental approach itself does not necessarily imply a lack of a dialogical, pluralistic approach toward students. While in this case the students have no or only limited control over the program, they still may have the right to express their ideas and opinions on the learning content, and therefore an opportunity to develop their competence in analyzing the topic from different perspectives. Secondly, our findings should not be interpreted as 'anything goes' in the practice of OEEPs. Rather, they call for accepting pluralism in the ESE field as such. This pluralism should respect the broad scope of the field, defined by diverse contexts and a variety of teachers' beliefs. A particular context, such as the limited length of OEEPs, low level of group maturity to cooperate or to define their own learning agenda, safety issues, etc., may require using the instrumental approach and eliminating other options (Thomas 2010; Daniel et al. 2014; Menzies, Bowen-Viner, and Shaw 2017; Loewenberg Ball, Thames, and Phelps 2008; Hill and Chin 2018). In comparison with schools, the practice of outdoor environmental education centers is shaped by very different conditions and, as a result, the centers' role in the process of transformation toward sustainability is different.

These ideas fit with the notion of experiential education as a philosophy (Itin 1999) that contrasts with the view of education as simply the transmission of knowledge. Instead, experiential education is seen as a key preparation for being an active participant in a democratic society, as John Dewey and Paulo Friere advocated. In Itin's Diamond Model for the Philosophy of Experiential Education, the teaching process, situated in the learning environment and in the relevant subject matter, '[i]ncludes establishing teaching/learning goals, tailoring materials for students, delivering the materials in a manner appropriate to the content, and understanding

how students interpreted the content and process' (Itin 1999, 95). Students and teacher learn together through concrete experience, but their roles are different, with the teacher as creator of the conditions for learning and facilitator of the experience.

Similarly, we can debate whether student empowerment should always be considered the central goal of OEEPs (Sibthorp and Arthur-Banning 2004; Shellman 2014; Daniel et al. 2014). While we strongly support the importance of this educational goal, it is possible that, given the above-mentioned contextual constraints, student empowerment remains unreachable for at least some of the OEEPs. Perhaps other program effects, such as experiencing natural beauty, feeling the joy of being in touch with nature, or gaining a better grasp of scientific concepts in real-world settings are of comparable value, particularly for younger participants. To achieve these effects, instrumental strategies may provide a reasonable framework.

From this perspective, the findings clearly show the importance of a proper match between an OEEP's goals and its learning approaches. Just as we questioned the necessity of the emancipatory approach when other goals are in play, we want to highlight the importance of the emancipatory approach when student empowerment is the focus of the program. In this case, the program designers and leaders should find a way to overcome the existing constraints and encourage students to participate in actively shaping the program.

A striking aspect of the findings is the prevailing skeptical assessment of young students' ability to participate in shaping the program in a meaningful way. Although it would be unwise to question the ability of experienced program leaders and teachers to critically assess their students, it could be argued that perhaps the expectations that the adults have may become a self-fulfilling prophecy: when students are expected to be irresponsible, they do not develop their responsibility, and vice versa. The expectations of the practitioners must be clearly communicated for an empowering interaction to be honest and meaningful (Weidenstedt 2016). Based on the data, it was obvious that the students' desire for more opportunities to shape the program was connected to more time for their free-time activities rather than to setting their learning goals. However, this opens the question of how to help students develop competence for constructive decision-making, either during the program or before it.

The findings also suggest that the process of shaping an OEEP cannot be considered as a simple two-player game. As Kendall and Rodger (2015) argued, the accompanying teachers are important stakeholders whose influence on the program should be encouraged. Despite the rather limited role of the accompanying teachers in most of the analyzed programs, it was obvious that they shaped the programs, in ways that mainly supported but sometimes also compromised the program leaders' and designers' intentions. Particularly, the role of the accompanying teachers in managing the students' free time in the residential centers seems to be an unexplored factor impacting the students' overall satisfaction with the program. In light of this, it would be reasonable to support closer involvement of the teachers in the planning and implementing of OEEPs. To achieve this, the program designers and leaders may need to consider more ways of cooperation with the teachers than just asking them to 'be here and solve any emerging problems'.

The dynamics of the relationship between the program leaders and the program designers, while only superficially tackled by this study, seems to be another unexplored factor in shaping OEEPs. Again, it could be argued that openness to different approaches seems to be important to make this area flexible and dynamic. It would be worth investigating this phenomenon in future studies.

Trust became one of the underlying themes in the research. The program designers' trust in the program leaders and the leaders' and accompanying teachers' trust in the students could be important preconditions for critically challenging the way a particular OEEP is implemented—and it may open opportunities for experimenting with new ways and approaches.

In sum, the findings do not prioritize one possible approach towards defining the power-relationships among program stakeholders. Instead, the findings indicate that each approach provides specific advantages and disadvantages, and as a result, call for specific ways of promoting

one and de-emphasizing the others. It could be argued that the important thing is not the choice of an approach but rather the way of shaping the program appropriately, i.e. whether those with power over a particular program choose and implement appropriate strategies in the given framework. To be even more specific, to provide the students with autonomy does not seem to be either good or bad in itself, but it could be well or poorly implemented by applying adequate or inadequate methods; the same could be said about the decision to shape a program by the adults only. In light of this, any attempts to define universal quality criteria, as they are for example offered by the Real World Learning Model (2019), could be considered as both inspiring and problematic.

Conclusion

The study compared the ways in which five different OEEPs provide elementary school students with an opportunity to shape the program through their own decisions and so to develop their empowerment. As we found, student autonomy was considerably low in four of the programs. According to the program leaders and the accompanying teachers, this is caused mainly by the lack of young students' ability to engage in shaping the program in a meaningful way.

The study highlighted the importance of an open, challenging, and flexible approach to OEEPs. While most sources clearly support the concept of student autonomy in these programs, practice seems to be more diverse, with the programs frequently contradicting the previously mentioned recommendation while remaining sound and effective.

The study also shed light on the attempts to define positive features for OEEPs; it supports the idea that no universal rules are applicable for the whole field and for the development of its critical assessment. Instead, openness to different approaches is necessary.

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