



Teacher Talk: Theory to Practice
Revisiting the Six Declines of Contemporary Youth: Considering Adventurous Outdoor Learning as an Intervention

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Abstract

This article discusses six declines of youth patterned after Kurt Hahn's similar declines from a century ago. Outlined as a theoretical construct, the author describes the role of adventurous outdoor learning experiences as positively influencing youths' emerging sense of "self." After describing an underlying theoretical framework for the six declines, the background and rationale are discussed for each separate decline. A summary of the various "selves" is presented for the declines, progressing from empty, through social, to healthy self. Finally, adventurous outdoor learning is identified as a potential intervention for youth with the potential to remedy some of these declines.

Background

In order to target the problems of German and British youth, almost 100 years ago, Kurt Hahn (1924, 1928) suggested the use of physical training, expeditions, project work and rescue services (James, 1990). He identified youthful declines in fitness, initiative/enterprise, memory/imagination, skill/care, self-discipline and compassion (Hahn, 1960). Based on these identified problems and recommended solutions, Hahn founded (with others): Schule Schloss Salem in 1920, Gordonstoun School in 1934, Outward Bound in 1941, Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme in 1956, United World Colleges in 1962, Round Square Schools in 1967 and the International Baccalaureate program in 1968 (Veevers & Allison, 2011). Each school or program was revolutionary in its time, meeting the needs of society and remain highly relevant through today. The recent global COVID-19 crisis may highlight an opportunity and necessity to re-examine contemporary declines in youth (ages 13-19 and living in wealthy, well industrialized and/or economically advanced countries). The following points represent population generalizations and do not purport to assume all youth may exhibit these declines. Additionally, many of these declines may also be present in a significant portion of elders and other adults.

1. Worship of **Celebrity/Wealth**
2. Addiction to **Social Media/Technology**
3. Lack of **Critical Thinking**
4. Preference for **Consumption**, rather than contribution
5. Stuck in **Hopelessness and Self-centeredness**
6. Absence of **Compassion/Empathy**

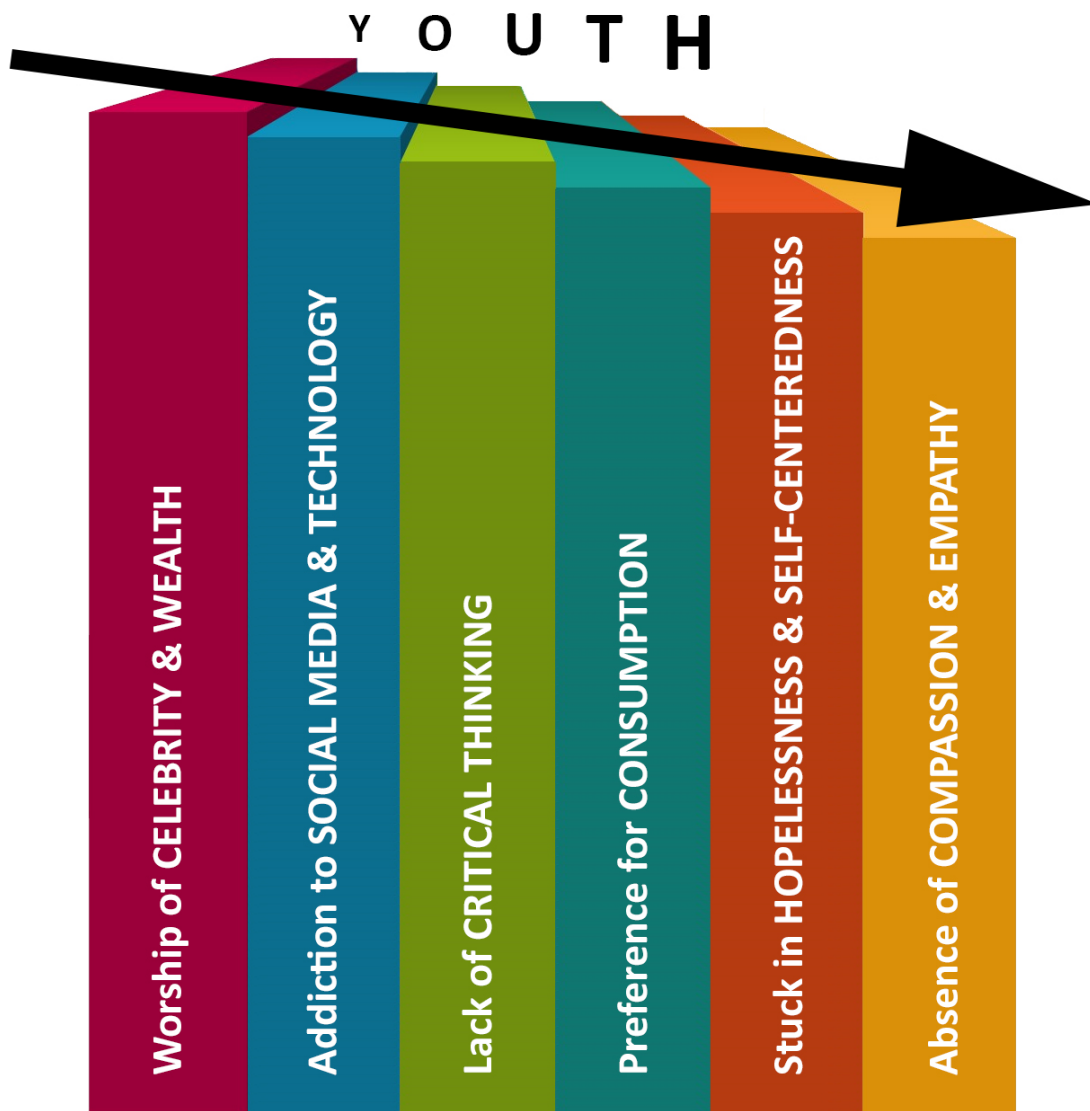


Figure 1: The six declines of contemporary youth (author).

Theoretical Framework

These six inter-related declines, as illustrated in Figure 1, can be explained by Cushman's (1990) psychological theory of "the Empty Self" that builds on the "self psychology" work of Kohut (1971). Cushman (1990) defines "self" as an individual's concept of what it means to be human in the context of their own society or culture. Briefly, Cushman believes the self historically shifted from being restricted in Victorian times to becoming empty after World War II. He argues advertising and marketing to all age groups inappropriately advocate for a lifestyle solution to their emptiness and thus, force consumer products to quickly and easily become the solution to all of life's minor problems.

Cushman (1990) notes people with an empty self are "soothed and made cohesive by becoming filled up with food, consumer products, and celebrities" (p.599). Further, he describes the opportunity exists for their abuse "by covertly filling the empty self with the accoutrements, values, and mannerisms of idealized figures" (p.599). He sees the empty self as "a self that experiences a significant absence of community, tradition, and shared meaning [with] a lack of personal conviction and worth, and...absences as a chronic, undifferentiated emotional hunger. The post-World War II [empty] self thus yearns to acquire and consume as an unconscious way of compensating for what has been lost" (p.600).

Background and Rationale

Three decades after Cushman, we can view the "empty self" as even more prevalent than just after the Second World War. Today, this manifests as: addictions to food, technology and substances (AACES, 2021); materialistic, convenient and compulsive buying (Reeves et al., 2012); unjustified enthrallment with celebrity (McCutcheon et al., 2004) and chronic loneliness (Whitley, 2020). The empty self is driven by wealth and evolves into isolated narcissism (Twenge et al., 2014) as well as chronic depression (Mojtabai et al., 2016); an absence of shared communal values or relationship-based social skills exists (Ungar, 2020). Framed by an understanding of the empty self, the following discussion describes each of the six declines for contemporary youth.

1. Worship of **Celebrity/Wealth**

Worship is a second nature to humans as evidenced by our historic devotion to deities and idols, as well as our prehistoric reverence of seasons and nature. Today, some young people appear to worship the rich and famous among us. These musicians, actors and athletes make millions of dollars annually and allegedly exemplify the American Dream. No wonder some youth aspire toward such fame and fortune (Greenwood, 2013). Unfortunately, in many instances, celebrities tend to represent inappropriate behavioral role models and may have adverse impacts on youth. For example, in striving to attain the perfection that celebrities appear to embody, young people suffer eating disorders, in an effort to mimic celebrity body images and, as well, steal to pay for high-end fashion and elective cosmetic surgery (Maltby et al., 2005; Maltby & Day, 2011).

Celebrity worship exists on a spectrum from interest, through fascination, to obsession. Interest is characterized by a healthy curiosity for information. Examples include searching out: the song

lyrics of a musician, the other movie performances of an actor or the sports statistics of an athlete. Fascination is a reflection of the “social self” and often motivated by the need to form connections and establish role models or future aspirations. These parasocial relationships represent normal behavior in youth and examples include: hanging bedroom posters, talking about celebrities with friends and learning all they can from the press releases of public relations agents and the social media posts of the celebrity’s assistants (Bond, 2016).

As the empty self grows, this can evolve into celebrity worship syndrome: a recognized psychological disorder where a fan is obsessively preoccupied with the details of a famous person’s professional or private life. This leads into abnormal erotomania (a false belief that they both share a special friendship or loving relationship), causing the fan to stalk the celebrity (Maltby et al., 2003).

2. Addiction to **Social Media/Technology**

The advent of social media accelerated and accentuated youthful worship of celebrities (Zsila et al., 2018). However, today’s youth are known to be more influenced on social media by peers than others, resulting in a new celebrity group, referred to as peer social media influencers. Social media refer to computer websites and applications that enable users to share ideas and information online within interactive communities or networks (Miriam-Webster, 2021). With a typically large number of followers, influencers are those users who promote products or services and advertise for a particular brand (Cambridge, 2021). Various content areas shared on social media include: peer opinions (Facebook & Reddit), blogging (Twitter & Tumblr), photos (Instagram & Pinterest), videos (YouTube & TikTok) and more.

Gaming is an additional concern overlapping and extending beyond social media. Bloom (2010) identifies the most common leisure activity, with the most time and money spent, among North American and European youth, as immersion in the imaginary worlds delivered by gaming and entertainment technologies (Internet, TV, movies, books, etc.). Youth seek parasocial relationships with fantasy figures and other participants in these imaginary worlds.

ADDICTION SIGN or SYMPTOM (I have...)	COUNTERACTIVE STRATEGY (I will...)
Craved technology use and/or time spent online, so much so that I often plan how to get more	Monitor and limit my time spent online; strive to control and decrease my usage rather than abstain
Felt extremely good inside when using technology to the point of being unable to stop or cut back	Enroll in a twelve-step or twelve-step related program that also addresses my underlying issues
Spent increasing amounts of time with technology and constantly thought about it when not online	Learn why I prefer technology (read about it) and begin to slowly reduce my time using technology
Found myself restless, irritable, moody, anxious, angry, or sad when away from technology	Substitute other activities and new hobbies that feel just as good or better than technology use
Lied about my particular use of technology, video games, apps, Internet access, programming code, computers, smart phones, and/or other devices	Not hide my use from others by being honest about my patterns of connection (time of day, location, duration, etc.)
Lost the ability to control my online behaviors	Get cognitive-behavior therapy from a professional
Neglected my job or studies due to technology	Regain wise technology use in my work or school
Ignored my friends or family due to technology	Find support group or group therapy opportunities
Lost interest in non-Internet activities or hobbies	Revisit one of my favorite non-Internet activities
Been called shy, reserved, introverted, or remote	Force myself to get out and meet people in person
Noticed a lack of support from friends or family	Re-engage with friends and family (without using)
Defied a parent or teacher; who demanded a "technology-free" zone for a specific time or place	Take a break from technology by leaving it behind for certain periods of time and places of restraint
Undergone recent changes in my sleep patterns, body weight, head/backaches, or general wellness	Exercise daily (walk, hike, bike, swim, run, lift weights, yoga, or similar activity)
Experienced serious problems in my life: issues of anxiety, depression, disability, or relationships	Acknowledge my addiction, determine triggers, resolve real problem (cognitive-behavior therapy)
Gotten bored with some technologies and go out of my way to find more exciting technologies	Practice a short period of time when I am away from technology (take a wilderness adventure trip)
Used technology to escape responsibilities and problems or to relieve my uncomfortable feelings	Recognize that the appeal stems from a sense of unlimited indulgence or absence of accountability

Figure 2: Technology Addiction and Countermeasures (author).

Youth demonstrate a strong affinity for social media and the technologies or devices used to access their social networks: laptops, tablets, smart phones, etc. A social self can readily develop behavioral dependence on social media. For the empty self, this connection can easily become addictive (Sharif & Khanekharab, 2017). In particular, some applications are designed to create habituation, dependence and addiction. The apps utilize a trigger-action-reward sequence. Trigger: users receive notifications that someone has positively commented on their postings for a social media site. Action: users immediately open the app for that site and read the comment. Reward: a Dopamine release in the brain causes a good feeling. This cycle repeats and becomes reinforced by receiving as many comments or likes as possible; this becomes the goal for an addict. The need for social approval encourages them to expand their network of friends. Figure

2 shows signs of possible digital (social media/technology) addiction and counteractive strategies.

As a result of dependence (social self) or addiction (empty self), some youth become unable to communicate without technology. They avoid interpersonal social situations by staring incessantly at their devices. Some even pretend to do so in order to escape public interaction. While these Weapons of Mass Distraction (WMDs) improved education, business and entertainment lives, they also created an iGeneration who evidence: difficulty applying language correctly, using online anonymity as a shield to offensive postings and drawing easily into destructive and divisive online debates. They remain unaware as to how these WMDs continue to transform their social, emotional and psychological lives.

3. Lack of **Critical Thinking**

Social media undermine critical thinking skills in youth by shortening attention spans and emphasizing sensationalism. Social media reduces empathy, disrupts identity and trains acceptance of false information, because of insufficient time to reflect, analyze, or imagine alternative ideas (Greenfield, 2014). The more time spent on social media, the less likely youth are to think critically (Ku et al., 2019). Critical thinking is essential in order to identify fact and avoid mistakenly accepting false disinformation in media.

Critical thinking is more about critiquing and less about criticism. Critical thinking critiques one's own thinking and the thoughts of others by subjecting those ideas to skepticism and scrutiny. For the purposes of this current discussion, critical thinking refers to the deep questioning, analysis and evaluation of thought structures, processes, evidence, conclusions and assumptions in a fair-minded manner that improves overall cognition and determines the precision and fallacy of thought (FCT, 2021). In the empty self, critical thinking makes the difference between standing for solid scientific truths in contrast with believing in ungrounded and/or speculative theories.

Critical thinking is not necessarily about reasoning for better problem solving or decision making. It is more about judging whether or not information is accurate or false and if evaluations are being made based on accurate data or personal biases. Reflection and humility become important elements of critical thinking. Reflection allows one to identify bias in thought, while humility supports change in personal opinions in the face of contrary evidence. Is news fake? Are politicians lying? Do scientists lack evidence? Are celebrities or athletes being paid for their endorsements? Figure 3 shows eight thinking components and a host of skeptical scrutiny questions, which become important elements when executing critical thinking processes.

EVALUATION CRITERIA	Are the ideas (+ components)...	THINKING COMPONENTS	REASON: What is the intent to be accomplished by this idea?	SKEPTICAL SCRUTINY QUESTIONS	WHO?	
	...clear?		ISSUE: What is the crux of the problem or question in this idea?		Famous (authority/celebrity)	Known & unknown players
	...accurate?		EVIDENCE: What data, facts, or "proofs" support this idea?		Biased & conflicted interests	Helpful consultants & experts
	...relevant?		ASSUMPTIONS: What conjectures are justified with this idea?		Gains benefits & gets harmed	Warrant recognition (praise)
	...logical?		OUTCOMES: What implications follow logically from this idea?		Decides & resolves issues	Hidden detractors & liars
	...precise?		INFERENCES: What conclusions are interpreted via this idea?		WHAT?	
	...significant?		THEORIES: What hypotheses and principles underlie this idea?		Fact & opinion (missing)	Foundation of evidence
	...complete?		PERSPECTIVES: What are viewpoint limitations for this idea?		Sources (primary/secondary)	Pros & cons (strong/weak)
	...reasonable?				Mistakes & inconsistencies	Logically connected elements
					Alternative explanations	Underlying emotional tone
					WHERE?	
					Declared (in public/private)	Obtain further information
					Relevant & necessary	Go for assistance & rebuttal
					Problematic content	Will this lead (prediction)
					Assumptions held	Barriers to action & thought
					WHEN?	
					Acceptable & unacceptable	Will success be achieved
					Beneficial & harmful	Has this occurred in history
					Cause additional difficulties	Ask for help from others
					Best time to act on this	Best time to reflect & process
					WHY?	
					Stated (to help/hinder/hurt)	Happening in this way
					Important to know this	Occurring now
					Influential & impactful	Currently needed
					Concerning & challenging	Consider all perspectives
					HOW?	
					Similar to & different from	Contributes to society
					Disruptive & disturbing	Can be evaluated & improved
					Is this truth known (reality)	Transformed for the better
					Maintain safety & peace	Adjusted for the greater good

Figure 3: Critical thinking evaluation criteria, components and skeptical scrutiny questions (author).

Critical thinking is in short supply for all age groups, but is particularly absent in children, who take the word of adults as absolute. They are unable to understand the persuasion of advertising or infomercials. Teenagers without critical thinking begin to become more cynical and sarcastic than skeptical or dubious regarding the mixed messages they receive in the world. Even experienced elders without critical thinking become susceptible to conspiracy theories, con artists and charismatic cults.

Shortcomings can carry over through life, but may be eradicated through time with training (Ricketts, 2003). College students are frequently criticized for not gaining critical thinking skills during their four years of undergraduate school (Camarata, 2017). Millennials (born 1981-1996) perform poorly regarding critical thinking as compared with Boomers (born 1946-1964) across three years of study (MindEdge, 2019).

While college-educated Americans express a high level of confidence in their critical thinking skills, most could not pass a nine-question quiz designed to gauge their ability to detect fake news. Overall, 69 percent of survey respondents earned a failing grade on the quiz, correctly answering just five or fewer questions. The failure rate among Millennials – digital natives who've grown up with the Internet – was even higher, at 74 percent. Baby Boomers fared somewhat better on the quiz, but a clear majority (58 percent) still received a failing grade. On the positive side, 13 percent of Boomers received an "A" or "B" by answering eight or nine questions correctly – but only 5 percent of Millennials did likewise (MindEdge, 2019, p. 1).

Finally, teaching critical thinking is difficult, but possible to limited extents (Abrami et al., 2015). This difficulty is partly due to the confusion of critical thinking definitions in contrast to solving problems or making decisions. The remaining difficulties associate with issues of

transferability: learners simply cannot connect the situations they face in life with the scenarios they learned. They are unable to apply the critical thinking skills they were taught (Belkin, 2017). A decade ago, critical thinking was one of the most desired skills in demand by employers and one of the least attained skills for pre-employment youth interviewing for North American jobs (Pace, 2012).

4. Preference for **Consumption**, rather than Contribution

North “Americans in the post-World War II era seem to have become a people who have a deeply felt need to spend money and indulge their impulses” (Cushman, 1990, p. 600). Again, the empty self is Cushman’s explanation for consumer desire as evidenced by the common public statements: “we must have the latest trend” and it “must be delivered immediately!” We appear to want to fill our emptiness by collecting stuff and we must keep up with our neighbors, friends or peers, but only if doing so is as convenient as possible (Wilska, 2017).

Marketing, in the past and present, still remains aimed at filling the empty self and much of this is directed toward children. Not only do children provide their own unique target market, but they also influence future family choices and provide decades of customer loyalty. However, the vulnerability of children suggests the long-term effects of advertising contribute to a growing consumerism and consumptive compulsion for youth later in life (Lapierre et al., 2017).

Consumptive compulsion is acknowledged to contribute to a formative role in youth identity, self-definition and societal profile building (Deutsch & Theodorou, 2009). However, youthful consumption of goods (such as fashion, music and technology) or services (like entertainment, nightclubs and restaurants) are not only viewed as modes of self-expression or escape, but as well become experiential agents for social change (Miles, 2003). Some youth are known for supporting social justice issues and environmental causes through ethical and thoughtful spending (Reis et al., 2018). This improvement shows a hopeful shift from the empty self to the social self.

Aside from this ethical consumerism, what is the duty of young citizens in today’s society? Do they have a responsibility to be producers instead of consumers? How can youth best contribute to a new world? These questions are at the heart of shifting further from social to the healthy self (Henley, 2002).

Youth represent an unmatched potential to facilitate community and global transformation through the articulate expression and inspired creation of future societies that are inclusive, sustainable and optimistic. Now, as earlier unfettered persons, youth assume the responsibilities to solve planetary issues such as the impacts of climate change or global pandemic diseases. Empowered youth can make their greatest contributions to society beginning with a commitment to service learning and servant leadership. Service learning is an excellent example of structured youth contributions that: serve a need, identify intentional learning objectives, create opportunities for reflection, include youth voice and servant leadership, foster civic responsibility, evaluate success, build partnerships, enable positive relationships and are conducted in accessible times and places (Naughton, 2000). Servant leadership places the needs

of others before the needs of the leader and makes a top priority of developing others' skills, while building their home community and personal independence (Grothaus, 2004).

5. Stuck in **Hopelessness and Self-centeredness**

Youth empowerment, however, is difficult and uncommon. Youth are often devalued and ignored by society. A lack of action by those in power marginalizes youth, teaches them to give up and thus, they remain pervasively hopeless about their collective futures. This continued anxiety brings a number of negative impacts to the health of youth (Leonard, 2018). On the physiological side, prolonged nervousness can cause: amplified stress hormones leading to inflammation, elevated heart rate leading to increased heart disease, hyperventilation leading to dizziness, impaired immune response leading to infections and blocked digestion leading to nausea, diarrhea or loss of appetite (Leonard, 2018). Regarding psychological aspects, long-term worry can result in: fatigue, obsessive thoughts, compulsive behaviors, difficulty concentrating, insomnia, depression, loss of libido, chronic pain and overwhelming fear or panic (Leonard, 2018). Unresolved, the outcomes of anxiety may include: post-traumatic stress disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, suicide, assorted phobias and substance addictions (Leonard, 2018).

If a self-centered perspective of entitlement is coupled with this sense of hopelessness, the empty self can easily become protracted or reinforced. The most common occurrence accentuating self-centeredness is parental rescue. Rather than allowing youth to solve their own problems, caregivers step in to take control. Helicoptering, bulldozing, or lawn-mowing parents seek to protect their youth in an overindulgent manner. They fight battles for their children with educational institutions, sport officials, job interviewers and others. Perhaps these parents fear dire consequences, worry about their own life experiences, were themselves neglected as a child or want to mimic other overly protective parents (Reed et al., 2016).

Despite the best of intentions, this parental rescue results in youth unprepared for life. They come to believe that a parent doesn't trust them enough to do something for themselves. Youth fail to learn coping mechanisms, since parents will reconcile the difficulties and/or prevent mishaps from occurring. When youth do not perform to perfection, they fear further parental interference. Further, they may become entitled and their anxiety can exacerbate, when they do not get their way. Finally, full of hopelessness and self-centeredness, the empty self becomes narcissistic (**Gruba-McCallister**, 2007).

6. Absence of **Compassion/Empathy**

Empathy is a necessary first step on the road to compassion. While sympathy is a general cognitive imagining of another person's feelings or emotions, empathy is a specific emotional understanding of those feelings (from having experienced similar sensations, but perhaps in slightly different situations). Once those shared feelings are mutually embraced through mindfulness and empathy, compassionate action can be taken to alleviate some of the person's emotional distress (Well, 2017).

As noted earlier, empty selves are often narcissistic and unwilling to empathize or exhibit compassion. Since they concentrate on themselves and have a need for self-protection against vulnerability, they are blinded to the needs of others or likely limit their freedom to express empathy (Gruba-McCallister, 2007). This is commonly observed in online or in-person arguments, where adversaries fail to consider the perspectives of others and instead, choose to personally attack. Harassment, threats, cyberbullying and trolling eventually become the norm or expected behavior for some youth (Milivojević & Ercegovac, 2015).

The absence of empathy means compassion is impossible, but also that trusting in others is difficult, avoiding emotional conversations is common and coldly manipulating relationships becomes familiar. Youth without empathy can become antisocial and humiliating to others. Their behaviors can spiral down into rumor gossiping, minor crime, or subtle violence.

Youth may not reflect on how their actions can impact themselves or others. They might show difficulty expressing emotions and thus, these youth might be unable to imagine how others feel. They may tend to misinterpret vocal intonation, facial expression or body language and therefore, may miss or misinterpret how others feel and/or react to their behaviors. Most of these youth succumb easily to peer pressure and, in doing so, may justify their behaviors with the support of their friends (Santor et al., 2000). In order to avoid facing their behaviors, some refuse to take any responsibility; others may lash out their unresolved confusion toward another; and a few may simply be victims of past abuse and neglect and do not care because their perpetrator did not care (Santor et al., 2000). Finally, getting away with negative actions can reinforce the power of malevolence and may lead to repetition (Santor et al., 2000).

Summary of the Self: Progressions

As shown in Figure 4, these six declines can be viewed in the context of three selves: empty self, social self and healthy self. **Worship of celebrity and wealth** may move from obsession through fascination to interest. An **addiction to social media and technology** can improve via habitual states to being free of dependence. A **lack of critical thinking** may mature from gullible or naïve via unsure to astute or certain. A **preference for consumption** could develop from compulsive buyer through ethical consumerism to altruistic producer. Being **hopeless and self-centered** could evolve from narcissistic or selfish through pessimistic to optimistic and self-less. The **absence of compassion and empathy**, where one is apathetic or oblivious to others, should shift via sympathy or concern to empathy and compassion for others. The positive self-progression from empty self through social self to healthy self will lead to the reversal of these six declines in contemporary youth. Yet, how do we best enable these progressions?

DECLINE	EMPTY Self	SOCIAL Self	HEALTHY Self
1. Worship of Celebrity/Wealth	Obsession	Fascination	Interest
2. Addiction to Social Media/Technology	Addiction	Habituation	Dependence Free
3. Lack of Critical Thinking	Gullible/Naive	Unsure	Astute/Certain
4. Preference for Consumption , rather	Compulsive Buyer	Ethical Consumer	Altruistic Producer

than Contribution			
5. Stuck in Hopelessness and Self-centeredness	Narcissistic/Selfish	Pessimistic	Optimistic/Selfless
6. Absence of Compassion/Empathy	Apathetic/Oblivious	Sympathetic/Concerned	Empathetic/Compassionate

Figure 4: Table of Progressions for the Self across six declines of contemporary youth (author).

Adventurous Outdoor Learning: A Positive Intervention

Cushman (1990) identified the transformation of advertising and marketing as a solution. Instead of seeking to satisfy the cravings and fill the empty self with substances (drugs, alcohol, tobacco, food, etc.) and lifestyles (shopping, gambling, sex, crime, violence, etc.), he felt that socially acceptable advertising and marketing could change toward caring and healthy living. Since advertising and marketing evolved to profit from or perpetuate the psychopathology of needing to fill emptiness, further solutions are needed.

One recommended solution to meet the needs of societal youth in filling the empty self was suggested by Hahn (1960). Based on his six declines of past youth in Germany and Britain, he recommended the solution of Erlebnistherapie (Experiential Therapy). This was the underlying philosophy of his many schools and, most notably, Outward Bound (James, 1990; Veevers & Allison, 2011). From Hahn's original list, the robust solution included risk taking and conflict resolution with reflection. Risk taking and conflict resolution are common components in adventurous outdoor learning, where youth experience intrapersonal or interpersonal gains from reflection on these experiences. Understanding one's self (intrapersonal) and how to get along with others (interpersonal) supports youth in maturing into new and healthier ways of knowing, being and relating.

Definitions

Outdoor learning is "an experiential process ... which takes place primarily through exposure to the out-of-doors [where] the emphasis for the subject of learning is placed on ... relationships concerning people and natural resources" (Priest, 2023a, p. 2). Those relationships are:

1. Intrapersonal – participant relating to oneself (self-esteem, resilience, confidence, etc.);
2. Interpersonal – participant relating to others (prosocial skills, trust, communication, etc.);
3. Ecosystemic – elements of nature interacting with each other (food chains or web of life);
4. Ekistic – humans and nature interacting reciprocally (pollution of drinking water) and
5. Spiritual – participant knowing their place or role in the world (Priest & Gass, 2018).

Adventurous outdoor learning impacts the first and second relationships: intrapersonal and interpersonal. Environmental outdoor learning influences the third and fourth relationships: ecosystemic and ekistics. A merging of both outdoor learning approaches potentiate the development of the fifth relationship of spirituality, which leads to understanding: "our place in the world, our search for satisfaction or serenity, why we were put here, and what role we were

meant to play with others and nature, during our brief time on the planet, with or without religion or transcendence” (Priest, 2023a, p.1).

Adventurous activities range from games and group problem solving initiatives, through low and high ropes/challenge courses, to one-day excursions or multi-day expeditions (snowshoeing, skiing, bicycling, hiking, climbing, caving, canoeing, kayaking, sailing, and more). Environmental activities range from sensory immersion in nature, through mindful meditation or contemplation, to scientific or artistic ecological exercises conducted outdoors in natural surroundings (Priest, 2023a, p.3).

An example of socialization games is collaborative tag, where everyone who gets tagged remains “it” until the group has worked together to tag the last remaining individuals. An example of a group problem-solving initiative expects participants to help one another to climb over a thirteen-foot high wall barrier. Low and high ropes courses include walking across a three-rope bridge, swinging log, or suspended steps, while forty feet off the ground, suspended by safety ropes. One-day excursions might include ten hours of rock climbing on a single cliff, while multi-day expeditions might include ten days of journeying across the country by canoe (Priest & Gass, 2018). The outdoor activity alone is insufficient to provide more than recreational enjoyment. However, the addition of sophisticated facilitation techniques (with professionally trained leaders encouraging participants to examine, identify and transform their thoughts, behaviors and resistance to change by overcoming challenges and resolving group conflicts) enable adventure experiences to become educational, developmental and therapeutic (Priest & Gass, 2018).

The adventurous outdoor learning process works through seven steps (Priest, 2023b). Consider risk taking as an example with rock climbing or whitewater paddling. First, a dissonance occurs when participants hold two opposing views in their minds at the same time. With a normal human reaction to fear, they (frozen in mid-activity) believe two relatively equal possibilities to be simultaneously true: I’m safe (due to the safety gear and risk management procedures employed), but I’m also going to die (when I move forward up the cliff or into the rapid). Second, practice tries or mastery attempts are an effort by participants to resolve the unpleasant distress of their dissonance through **action**. Sometimes encouragement is necessary from peers and/or a facilitating leader. Either participants pass without incident or they fall/capsize, but quickly recover. In both outcomes, they experience feelings of pleasant eustress, a positive form of stress, since they endure and eventually succeed through repeated efforts after each setback (Priest, 2023b).

Third, carefully facilitated **reflection** (in group discussion and/or solo isolation) has participants examine and compare their feelings, thoughts and behaviors. Fourth, they identify new ways of being that led to their success. Fifth, this results in learning and, if properly facilitated (often through the use of metaphoric connections), these lessons are **integrated** by participants into their daily lives. Sixth, change comes, when they act differently in the next activity or in the same activity with a different effort. This reinforces their transformation and **continues** their journey. Seventh, they pledge to practice these new ways of being and acting back at home and school (Priest, 2023b). This cycle of **action – reflection – integration – continuation** repeats

many times during an adventurous outdoor learning program, across a myriad of activities and for other elements: conflict resolution, adversity endurance and more (Priest & Gass, 2018).

The Benefits

Individual practice at overcoming seemingly insurmountable challenges, followed by mindful reflection, develops self-efficacy, confidence and resilience. Self-efficacy is the certainty of internal belief that one can accomplish a task by knowing the limits of one's personal abilities under the precise circumstances faced (Bandura, 1977). Confidence generally involves a feeling of assurance that a chosen course of action will succeed due to correctly perceiving one's personal competence (Needham, 1890). Resilience is the ability to recover and bounce back undamaged from the stress of losing something of value and therefore, demonstrate the ability to shield against future adversities (Werner, 1971). Taken together, these three (and other benefits arising from challenge – self-esteem, locus of control, persistence, self-discipline, etc.), are likely indicators of the same construct: the personal self or intrapersonal aptitude (Judge et al., 2002). These seemingly insurmountable challenges include common elements of adventure such as taking risks (climbing to great heights, spelunking into deep dark caves, traversing/descending slippery slopes or passing through turbulent waters) that develop an accurate self-perception and such as enduring adversity (going further, faster or harder than initially thought possible) that develops grit and resilience (Priest & Ritchie, 2024).

Group practice at resolving conflicts without resorting to aggression, followed by mindful reflection, builds teamwork and pro-social skills. Teamwork means working together to achieve mutually acceptable goals and cooperating on a foundation of trust and communication, while maintaining healthy relationships (Cohen & Levesque, 1991). Pro-social skills, used to help others in the context of a group, family or community, are exhibited through caring behaviors of compassion, appreciation, respect, empathy and safety expressed toward others (Goldstein & McGinnis, 1997). Blended in combination, these (and other benefits from conflict resolution – learning to lead, ask for or accept help, offer help, deal with anger, negotiate, apologize, solve problems, make decisions, use judgment, etc.) indicate the same characteristics as social self or interpersonal aptitude (Allen et al., 2007). These natural conflicts arise organically from living in tight quarters and under primitive conditions. Examples include arguments related to navigation decisions, sharing pack loads and requiring chores. In learning to avoid escalation and resolve the tensions arising, participants practice their cooperative pro-social skills (Priest & Ritchie, 2024).

Literature reviews, review syntheses and meta-analyses provide clear evidence that adventurous outdoor learning improves the health related intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships of participants (Priest & Ritchie, 2024). Adventurous outdoor learning events positively impact academic attainment, confidence, self-esteem, social skills, leadership potential and environmental responsibility (Malone, 2008), as well as physical fitness, motor skills, mental health, emotional regulation, environmental knowledge and enduring pro-environmental attitudes (Gill, 2011). Critical important, the intervention has been applied to both advantaged and disadvantaged youth populations (Bowers et al., 2019; Ellison, 2013; Linver et al., 2023; Nichols, 2012).

Due to adventurous outdoor learning's potency to change feeling, thinking, behaving and resisting change, it is frequently applied in therapeutic settings for youth "at-risk" of substance abuse, impulse control and personality disorders, as well as delinquency and criminality (Gass et al., 2020). These practices are based in a solid foundation of scholarship that has clearly shown improvements for self-efficacy (Fang et al., 2021), self-concept (Bedard et al., 2003; Fleischer et al., 2017) and a locus of control shift away from externally attributed to others and toward internally attributed to self (Hans, 2000) in adventure program participants. Further research demonstrates substantial gains in self-esteem, locus of control, behavioral observations, personal effectiveness, clinical measures and pro-social measures (Bettmann et al., 2016) from program engagement. Compared to other treatment programs, outdoor participants represent lower recidivism rates (Gillis et al., 2016; Wilson & Lipsey, 2000) as well as remarkable efficacy improvements and lasting change in academics, behavior, clinical, family development, self-concept and social development with older youth showing greater gains than younger ones (Bowen & Neill, 2013).

This means, participants in adventurous outdoor learning are purposefully placed in situations that create new opportunities to overcome challenges and resolve conflicts. Competent leaders and facilitators deliberately seek out remote locations, great heights, dark caves, rough waters, steep hills and slippery snow slopes, because these settings carry high perceived risks for participants, while staff can maintain the real dangers at a minimum level (Priest & Gass, 2018). Encountering the hardships, coupled with intense living in a small group, create dynamic conflicts in the form of arguments, disagreements, struggles and, in some instances, potential violence, all of which competent leaders and facilitators mediate. However, staff remain neutral and are careful not to be drawn into the conflict. The challenges and conflicts emerge naturally by virtue of the place; forcing these episodes would be considered unethical. How individuals deal with the challenges and how groups cope with the conflicts will eventually determine their growth, from reflection on their own or as a group (Priest & Gass, 2018).

The Importance of Reflection

Experience-based learning or "learning by doing" become truly experiential, when key elements of reflection and transfer are added before, during or after the activity or action experience (Leberman & Martin, 2004). The most common approach to this reflective phase is facilitated group discussion in a sharing circle after completing the challenges or resolving the conflicts (Seaman & Rheingold, 2013). However, individual reflection during solo time or writing in journals can also be useful as a standalone reflective process or in silent preparation for the group circle (Gray & Pigott, 2018). Solo reflection time and facilitated discussion during debriefing can enable learning and change resulting from the individual challenges and group conflicts.

At the same time, challenge and conflict can also be generated through competitive team sports and other physical activities, but these often lack the reflection process. This means, without discussion or reflection, participants are obliged to sort out the learning for themselves. In addition, competitive physical activities also lack the unique restorative properties of nature. By intermittently immersing participants in nature, between episodes of challenge and conflict, their distress may be alleviated. A meta-analysis of regular time spent in nature or greenspace clearly evidence physiological health benefits such as diminished cholesterol, cortisol (stress-related

hormones), heart rate, blood pressure, heart rate variability (relaxation indicators). These benefits were linked to reduced risk of type II diabetes, stroke, general mortality, asthma, hypertension and coronary heart disease (Twohig-Bennett & Jones, 2018). In addition, two meta-analyses confirm the value of sensory nature immersion to well-being (Djernis et al., 2019) as well as support treatments of mental health disorders (Kotera et al., 2020).

Adventurous Outdoor Learning: Impacting the Six Declines

How can adventurous outdoor learning aid in stopping or even reversing the six declines of contemporary youth? The following describe individual components that have made and continue to make the difference.

1. The worship of **celebrity/wealth** can be countered by forming and developing a complete self-identity (Richards, 2003) and self-identity also helps strengthen the next five responses to the declines. Self-identity is developed through overcoming perceived risks (Bruyere, 2002; Mills & Pawson, 2012; Priest & Ritchie, 2024).
2. Addiction to **social media/technology** can be reduced in the short term, simply by diminishing screen time (Gass et al., 2020; Priest & Ritchie, 2024). Importantly, nature-based outdoor adventure and “green time” demonstrate an “antidote” to excessive screen time in preschoolers (Hinkley et al., 2018), adolescents (Mutz et al., 2019; Oswald et al., 2020) and college students (Deyo et al., 2023). Further, the pro-social skills and interpersonal relationships that develop from adventure are useful in the next four responses.
3. **Critical thinking** is developed through skepticism and problem solving. Solving problems is at the center of all group initiative activities (by definition) and most adventure activities (by default). In order to evaluate solutions, critical thinking skills remain of paramount importance and consequently, develop through full participation in these outdoor adventure activities (Ampuero et al., 2015; Priest & Ritchie, 2024; Setambah et al., 2019).
4. The human preference for making a contribution, rather than **consumption** is exploratory at best. Outdoor adventures indicate some impact on consumerism and ecological action, but more environmental education integrated with outdoor adventure is warranted. Nevertheless, outdoor learning is known to reduce consumption to sustainable levels (Hadjichambis et al., 2015; Velasco-Martínez et al., 2020) and as well as increase contributions in the form of action and conservation (Palmer, 2002; Priest & Ritchie, 2024). However, more research is needed.
5. Extrication from stuck states of **hopelessness and self-centeredness** requires a powerful shift in personal mood and perspective. Nature immersion with or without adventure is known to provide both shifts in abundance (Brooks et al., 2017; Browning et al., 2020; Neill et al., 2019; Oppen et al., 2014; Priest & Ritchie, 2024). The setting of nature is well known as a treatment for depression and anxiety in youth (Corazon et al., 2019; Coventry, 2021; Kotera et al., 2021). When nature is coupled with the aforementioned elements of adventure (such as risk, conflict and adversity), hopelessness becomes aspiration and ambition (Bacon & Kimball, 1989; Norton, 2010), while self-centeredness gives way to social cohesion and harmony (Crisp & O'Donnell, 1998; Nault, 2000).

6. Improving **compassion/empathy** is accomplished through the use of service learning. Service learning, where participants voluntarily help others and/or the environment, is an occasional element of outdoor learning, and was so important that Kurt Hahn (1960) made service learning a requirement of all his schools and programs. Service learning is known to increase reflective capacity, mediate self-examination, inculcate empathy and promote compassionate behavior (Dass & Bush, 2011; Horst et al., 2019; Priest & Ritchie, 2024; Saltmarsh, 1997).

Conclusion

Adventurous outdoor learning is a method used sparingly in schools, because of the public fear of injury and an administrative lack of awareness. In reality, correctly facilitated activities are statistically safer than driving a motor vehicle (Priest & Gass, 2018). Nevertheless, youth are missing out on one beneficial opportunity to mature and avoid the six declines mentioned here.

Just as in Hahn's times, a hundred years or so ago, adventurous outdoor learning still holds the keys to turning around the six declines of contemporary youth and moving the self from empty to healthy. Perhaps, this continuing need exists because society failed to intervene with widespread application of these methods in the past. Now, more than ever, when climate is a concern, disease spreads planet-wide and war is how some nations settle disputes, the world is ready for adventurous outdoor learning as a mainstream treatment intervention for our current youth in order to combat the six areas of possible decline. While this is obviously needed, the uncertainty becomes whether or not society can accept and provide this adventurous outdoor learning approach and whether the professions can effectively intervene with challenges in nature.

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