

Sabbatical Report.

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**To investigate risk analysis and management in
outdoor pursuits.**

“Risk is at the heart of all education”

Willi Unsoeld.

In preparing this report I have visited and interviewed a number of organisations. Their main function is the provision of outdoor pursuit experiences in the Desert Plateau. Without exception each has a high level of Risk Analysis and Management (RAMs). These organisations are commercial entities, they depend upon their reputation as quality providers to attract clientele.

On the 14th April 2008 six students and their teacher died in a canyoning tragedy at Sir Edmund Hillary Outdoor Pursuits Centre. Here we had New Zealand’s leading outdoor pursuit organisation, against who other providers measured their risk analysis and management systems, dealing with a disaster. Three years later this organisation is as busy as it ever was. The implication of this is that - *in embarking on an outdoor education experience there will always be an element of risk.* As educators we can manage this risk.

The only way to eliminate it completely would be not to take part in any outdoor pursuit activity.

My research involved looking at practices in schools involving education outside the classroom experiences. These findings were rather disturbing. For a number of reasons, which I will investigate in this report, New Zealand teachers and schools are often reluctant to use EOTC as the powerful learning tool it is.

All involved in the field of education recognise that the most effective learning practice is learning by physically doing. For example a student will learn and retain knowledge when physically constructing an electric circuit. No amount of teacher talk or use of clever technological tools can ever replace the power of this “hands on learning”. Good teachers know this, and implement hands on experiences in their classroom pedagogy.

To prepare our students to meet with success in the wider world they need to step outside the classroom and physically experience the environment; to see, hear, smell and touch it. This concept is universally accepted by educationalists.

However accepting this concept does not mean we as teachers apply it in our pedagogy. There is great security in teaching inside the four walls of a classroom. Moving outside this environment tests our control, planning and management. It is a brave teacher who is prepared to move away from this teaching security.

In recent years teachers have had external factors pressuring them into confining learning to the security of the classroom. The EOTC survey completed by Cathye Haddock in 2007 for the Ministry of education identified “fear of liability” as one of the main barriers to effective EOTC. This is in many ways a justifiable fear.

The BOT and Principal are legally responsible for the safety of all students and others involved in EOTC programmes as outlined in the Education Act 1989 and the Health and safety in Education Act 1992. If there is an incident during an EOTC event a Board of Trustees may be held accountable.

“Where staff plan well and follow accepted best practice guidelines the possibility of legal liability will be greatly diminished – “EOTC Guidelines MOE 2009.

Education and the Law consultants Patrick Walsh and John Hannan present seminars around New Zealand. Having attended one such seminar it was interesting that they stated “that a large unidentified number of cases of liability against schools have been settled out of court”. Thus we have no concept of how big an issue this is. Schools wishing to protect their good name prefer to settle out of court rather than fight (what would become a very public and damaging) case of litigation.

As society becomes more sophisticated and technology based our youth is becoming further removed from experiencing the environment outside the home or classroom. Our youth are less active and expect immediate gratification without risk. As educators we have a responsibility to prepare youth for life after schooling. It has been identified that school leavers will have more hours for leisure than their parents. We need to provide them with knowledge of their environment and experiences in outdoor activities which they can pursue in later life.

On the 14th April 2008 six students and a teacher died in a canyoning tragedy at the Sir Edmund Hillary Outdoor Pursuits Centre. OPC is the leading outdoor pursuit provider in New Zealand. It sets the standards in risk management that other institutions measure themselves against. In this situation half a million dollars in compensation has been paid out. The court identified that the risks involved were not managed. In this case failure to view updated weather warnings was seen as the cause of the tragedy.

A process of risk management is an essential element to running a successful EOTC experience. This brings us to the critical document -the RAMs matrix.

A large number of templates are available for teachers to download when planning events. These can be modified to meet specific needs. Refer to - TKI Education Outside the Classroom Appendix 4 Toolkit for EOTC Management. (32 forms)

In planning an EOTC event, your responsibility is to have a plan that manages the risks involved. If an incident occurs which ends up in front of the court identifying liability, the court's judgement will be on whether you managed the risk and followed the RAMs matrix accordingly. Your RAMs matrix will be compared to those of local institutions to identify whether your RAMs is up to the common standard. If not, you or your institution will be deemed liable.

The Desert Plateau where I live is a mecca for outdoor pursuits. It provides mountain, river and native bush experiences. The following are key providers. Each has its own recognised RAMs matrix. If you are using these organisations you are still responsible for being familiar with and adhering to their RAMs matrix.

Ruapehu Alpine Lifts

Sir Edmund Hillary Outdoor Pursuits Centre

Department of Conservation

Tongariro River Rafting

Today it takes bold professional passion, independent thinking and creative action to organise authentic EOTC experiences.

“Avoiding danger is no safer in the long run than outright exposure. Life is either a daring adventure or nothing”

-Helen Keller

