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Media constructions of risk: a case study of the Stainforth Beck incident

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Abstract

In October 2000 two schoolgirls were swept away from their party whilst ‘river walking’ in Stainforth Beck near Settle in North Yorkshire. The paper examines this incident with reference to media coverage of the events at the time and the subsequent reportage. The discussion contributes to the debate concerning the appropriateness of an agenda of broadening education. We argue from a position that supports the principle of breadth, particularly when such activities are part of adventure education with its propensity to engage with outdoor risk settings. Whilst lessons must be learnt from such a tragic incident, it is important that outdoor professionals continue to disseminate the positive potential of adventure in order to offset the negative messages concerning risk promoted by the media in general.

KEY WORDS: outdoor education; adventure pursuits; newspaper reporting; media constructions

1. Introduction

Adams (1995, endpiece) captures a paradox of the modern world with his observation that:

No one wants an accident, but everyone wants to be free to take risks. We live in a culture that both glorifies risk and employs an army of bureaucrats to reduce it.

Whilst there is considerable evidence to support his contention that bureaucracy has an ambition to reduce risk, a critical reading of the above might challenge the suggestion that everyone wants to be free to take risks. The social circumstance of people’s lives has a significant role to play in an understanding of what risk is; schools, for example, inasmuch as they provide educational experiences, are extremely influential in shaping social norms and values. Equally influential are contemporary media which saturate society with images and stories that discursively promote selected agendas. It is our purpose in this paper to contribute to an increasingly polarized debate within education that is presented through a number of media, although our primary sources will draw upon newspaper reportage. The focus of the debate is the extent to which education should be broadened beyond a restrictive national curriculum which favours cognitive learning, predominantly classroom

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based, into broader interpretations of education which may take place outside the classroom. Mortlock (1984) has promoted outdoor education, as this latter area has been called, as 'holistic' in the way it offers the potential for physical, emotional and even spiritual learning to occur alongside that of the more readily accepted cognitive dimension. Mortlock's adventure pursuit methodology for achieving such broader educational aims engages directly with risk and it is the relationship between risk pursuits in a natural environment and 'broadening education' that exacerbates the emotional component of the debate.

Our contribution to this debate will be built around a case study of the Stainforth Beck incident of October 2000. Through our analysis we aim to draw out a number of points which illuminate the debate concerning 'value added' elements of conventional education and the forms that these might take. First we contextualize the debate concerning risk activities and education. Second, we endeavour to explore discursive themes in media constructions of risk which we then apply to reportage surrounding the Stainforth Beck incident. Finally we bring the discussion back to the central issue of a 'broad' or 'narrow' education and draw conclusions from our analysis.

2. Risk in education

The momentum of risk reduction in the modern world has fuelled the debate concerning broadening education, particularly when the value added activities contain elements of risk. In the UK a number of high profile tragedies have been catalogued in recent years. In 1985 four children were drowned at Lands End and a further four died of hypothermia in Lyme Bay in 1993. These and other incidents led directly to the legislation responsible for setting up the Adventure Activities Licensing Agency (AALA), the body that now issues licences to adventure centres who provide activity programmes for children under 16. It is noted that the jurisdiction of this authority does not extend to schools but only the adventure centres that schools might use. This has not, however, stopped the National Association of Schoolmaster & Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT) recommending that its members should:

Carefully consider whether they should be involved in educational visits at all. When something goes wrong on a visit the leader bears a legal responsibility and so the finger of blame will almost certainly point at the teachers (www.education.guardian.co.uk).

The protective union position promoted here both reflects the litigious world that we live in and fuels the flames of the broadening education debate by providing a practical response to the jail sentence for a teacher convicted of negligence following an accident during an outdoor education excursion in September 2003 (www.education.guardian.co.uk/schooltrips). The counter-argument, also reported by the Guardian newspaper, has been championed by Lord Puttnam the film producer and educational adviser. He refers to exaggerated fears limiting the broadening of children's education and famously suggested these were 'barking'. He blames 'excessive safety concerns' as being 'whipped up by the media'. The informed analysis presented by Revell (2001, 2002) acknowledges recent tragic deaths of school children, notably an 11 year old 'paddling' on a French beach and a 15 year old tobogganing in Austria. We note at this juncture the overseas location of the 'broadening' educational programmes but do not wish to detract from the central thrust of Revell's (2002, p. 5) conclusion:

Seven children killed in 2001, 21 in five years, 47 deaths since 1985...[but]...Before parents start demanding that their children forgo their Easter trips, it must be pointed out that a child on a school trip has a statistically insignificant chance of a fatal accident. The most conservative estimates suggest that Britain's ten million school-age children will spend at least two days out of school each year. An average of three deaths a year gives a fatality rate of one in eight million. Children are slightly less likely to be struck by lightning.

Clearly there is a mismatch between the statistics and the discursive agenda of risk reduction evidenced through this short contextualizing discussion. The second section of our paper brings the focus to the events surrounding the Stainforth Beck case but even this brief discussion has demonstrated the complex territory within which this debate is located. Issues for further discussion include the significance or otherwise of adventure activities, the settings of outdoor education and media contributions to the social construction of risk.

3. The social construction of risk

Priest (1991, p. 115) defines risk as 'the potential to lose something of value'. The loss may lead to harm that is physical, psychological, social or financial but nevertheless acknowledges that 'risk is one of the critical components that makes adventure programming popular and successful' (Priest 1991, p. 115). Risk as a word appears to have achieved special status as an umbrella term—often with negative overtones (Lupton, 1999), and usually negative when used by the media. Risk is not the same as 'danger', 'probability' or 'uncertainty' although it can refer to similar concepts. We are all, suggests Adams (1995), experts in risk, risk analysis and risk avoidance. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine a sphere of everyday human activity that does not involve some degree of assessment about risk. But, as Adams suggests (1995, p. 45), risk is concerned with what *might* happen:

Risk is defined, by most of those who try to measure it, as the product of probability and the utility of some *future* event. The future is uncertain and inescapably subjective; it does not exist except in the minds of people attempting to anticipate it.

Furedi (1997) supports a view that lays the blame for much of the heightened sensitivity to childhood risks at the door of established professions with vested interests in doing so. Furedi also highlights the role of the mass media in terms of exaggerating the degree of risk involved in everyday life. For children and for most schools Outdoor & Adventurous Activities (OAA) are included in the Physical Education National Curriculum (PENC) where the generic term for this area is 'adventure education' (Beedie, 2000), a term that has slightly different connotations to outdoor education. The arrival of OAA in the PENC has kept the emphasis within outdoor education in the realm of risk based activities, whether pure adventure activities such as rock climbing or hybrids such as stream scrambling or 'river walking' which was the activity that led to the deaths in Stainforth Beck. Nichols (2002) supports the contention that we make here, that is, the activities may be a problematic part of outdoor education because any risk based activities which go wrong, however rare this might be, support the discursive agenda that constructs risk as the potential to lose something of value. Outdoor education practitioners argue that the positive potential of risk based activities, such as personal growth (Hopkins and Putnam, 1993), are lost as the consensus view of risk is negative.

At the same time a paradox exists. Adams (1995, p. 3) argues that risk is a defining characteristic of news. The importance of 'bad' news in terms of maintaining viewing, listening and reading figures is well established (Glasgow Media Group, 1976, 1980). People do appear to have an insatiable appetite for stories focussing on suffering and tragedy. McQuail (1994) argues that the most fervently followed 'bad news' stories are those that involve ordinary people caught up in spectacular tragedies with backgrounds and circumstances not substantially different to the viewer's/listener's/reader's. These notions of relevance and empathy are crucial in terms of understanding the appeal of bad news stories.

Furedi (1997, p. 173) suggests that the media continually portray personal tragedies as moral plays, where a victim's loss is endowed with special significance. Although not substantiated by research, the reporting of many tragedies appears to follow a discernible pattern. The starting point for most bad news stories is some spectacular event leading to a loss of some kind. This is swiftly followed by efforts to explain the incident(s) and to report on the aftermath—including the effects on other people involved. Of crucial significance to our argument is the relatively early introduction of the issue of culpability or blame into the story-line, a factor that appears to grow in importance as accurate details of the history of the tragedy emerge. Next comes an emotive statement by interested parties—whether they are grieving relatives, well-meaning politicians or safety 'experts', commenting that lessons must be learnt and 'this tragedy must never happen again'. As is so often the case when a young person is lost or dies in tragic circumstances, a member of the family invariably remarks in an emotional television interview that they hope that their loved one has not died in vain. Such a pattern generates a bureaucratic response that reinforces the negative connotations of risk. This slow, steady 'trickle' effect, it is suggested, gradually shapes people's common-sense ideas and assumptions and their everyday view of the world. In this respect structures are internalized rather blurring the territory that might otherwise exist between individual autonomy and social manipulation.

In the context of risk and the dangers that young people face taking part in school trips, the steady stream of alarming reports about accidents involving children can have little effect other than to reinforce the notion that children are constantly being unnecessarily exposed to risky situations. This is likely to be the case when taking part in activities with peers, on school excursions and/or activity trips (especially OAA) and when being supervised by adults acting in *loco parentis*. In the circumstances of risk activities it is difficult to foresee a situation in which the death of two children while on a school trip would not be seen as important news. It is also difficult to argue that any modern ideologies are not generally supportive of efforts to safeguard the wellbeing of children. Tragedies, then, may be perceived as interesting and worthwhile stories whatever the perspective of the owner, editor or individual journalist. However, due to commercial pressures there may be a tendency to over-dramatize, exaggerate and sensationalize events in order to boost viewing/reading figures or sales. This effect is known as 'social amplification' (Kasperon *et al.* cited in Lofstedt and Frewer 1998, pp. 152–161) and can occur at two levels, at the transmission stage and at the reception stage. One amplification factor at the transmission stage is the incident's dramatic or spectacular context. Many adventurous activities involving risk are particularly prone to dramatic coverage and exaggeration—if not misleading reporting.

An amplification effect at the reception stage is likely to relate to the infrequent and unusual nature of accidents involving adventurous activities. These accidents often have

high 'signal value' (Kasperson *et al.* cited in Loftstedt and Frewer 1998, pp. 152–153) just because they are so rare. There are, however, positions that can be taken which, whilst perhaps considered heartless in the immediate aftermath of a tragedy, might take a more enlightened and philosophical view of children being exposed to risk. One such position is that the occasional accident is 'acceptable' if the greater good is served by continuing to offer young people opportunities to develop physically and emotionally—and, in some instances, be exposed to risks. This holds true only if some lessons are learnt from those accidents that involve errors of judgement or poor practices.

4. Stainforth Beck

An analysis of the reports of the Stainforth Beck tragedy of October 2000 was conducted using archive newspaper material. Revell (2001) presents data about school trips that have ended in disaster in the period May 1985 to July 2001. This shows that of the 39 young people who died in a total of 16 serious 'accidents', 17 (44%) lost their lives in water-related incidents. If deaths due to travelling (mainly by minibus or coach) are excluded then this percentage rises to 74%, making water by far the most dangerous environment in recent years. Two young schoolgirls, Rachel Cauvet, aged 14, and Hannah Black, aged 13, were swept away from their party whilst 'river-walking' in Stainforth Beck near Settle in North Yorkshire. The girls drowned in a stream that is usually benign and only ankle-deep in mid-summer, but after heavy rain the stream had swollen and was described as being in spate. To experienced outdoors practitioners the risks involved in travelling on or near swollen rivers are extreme and best avoided.

The story of how the girls came to lose their lives made national headlines for a few days—both on television and in the press. In the two days immediately after the fateful 'river walking' trip, sketchy details of the circumstances of the accident, some basic background information and reports of the searches for the two girls were the focus of newspaper articles. Few photographs appeared. Even as early as the day after the accident, when the body of one of the girls was found, *The Guardian* newspaper had posed the question of 'who had been responsible?' and sought clarification as to whether or not the police intended making any prosecutions. Two days later a significant article in *The Times* (12 October 2000) outlined growing anger about the circumstances of the accident. Information about the dangerous nature of the 'river walking' activity was coming to light via numerous 'experts'. Crucially, some of these experts gave conflicting comment about the inherent dangers in any such activity—but all agreed on the especially risky nature of river walking when streams were in spate or flood conditions. Police confirmed that the teachers involved on the day might be charged with criminal negligence. Parents of children involved in the river-walking trip are quoted as demanding a public enquiry and one parent asks, 'What the hell were the teachers doing?' A photograph published with *The Times* article shows a wet-suited diver wading chest deep in a swollen stream beneath a small waterfall. The body of the second girl was found a week later, some 15 miles from the incident site, by which time any hope of finding the girl alive had been abandoned and national interest in the case appeared to have waned.

In mid-August 2001, almost a year after the incident, Yorkshire Police confirmed that after a full investigation, the Crown Prosecution Service would not be pressing charges. There would be no criminal prosecutions owing to lack of evidence. This news was greeted with some surprise by a number of national newspapers, but with an inquest planned for

the following spring, the prospect of a full investigation into the tragedy, perhaps with some apportioning of blame, seems to have satisfied most parties involved. The coroner's inquest into the deaths of the two schoolgirls was held in Harrogate over 11 days in late February and early March 2002, and attracted considerable media attention with the quality broadsheet newspapers reporting on a daily basis. Many reports from the inquest focussed on the procedures for risk assessment that the teachers involved had (or had not) completed, and, significantly, considerable emphasis was placed on the actions of the teachers involved once the fatal errors had been made. These reports make harrowing reading for anyone with any experience of spate conditions in a mountain stream. A story of poor judgement, inadequate communication and confused lines of responsibility unfolded with the emotional distress of the teachers involved providing what might be described as 'human interest' value to the reports.

An article appeared in *The Times* on Tuesday 19 February 2002 which typifies the reporting of the inquest. A description of the page is warranted. The headline title of the piece reads, 'Girls drowned on "safe" school adventure trip'. Although this was only the second day of the enquiry there already seems to be an assumption that the 'river walking' activity was sold to participants and their parents as intrinsically 'safe', even though all water environments pose some risk. The sense of irony becomes clear as one reads the article as the river on that particular day could not be described as 'safe' with heavy rainfall having turned the stream into the proverbial 'raging torrent'.

The text of the article outlines the history of events and is generally worded to present the school and its teachers as incompetent and dismissive of parents' prior concerns. One section, for instance, outlines how parents had asked for specific reassurance that activities would be properly supervised by trained leaders. A parent wrote to the school as she was worried about the amount of rain that had fallen in the month prior to the trip. Sadly, these concerns appear not to have been heeded. Already there is an underlining atmosphere of blame and an expectation that someone, most likely the teachers involved, should 'pay' in one way or another for the deaths. The notion of a genuine accident having occurred already seems to have been rejected.

The photographs that accompanied the article seem to fit an established pattern for enquiries in recent years. With so few photographs of the actual incident available, editors present key information through photographs of the victims and grieving relatives. This approach 'works' in the sense that photographs of victims, especially if those victims are young and photogenic, emphasize the profound sense of loss and waste of human potential. The accompanying (larger) photograph of one of the sets of parents looking sternly into the camera's lens shows their grief and sorrow clearly etched onto their faces, and carries a strong message to parents and adults generally. The message of the photograph is 'avoid this grief at all costs'. The article reinforces the notion that school trips are not safe, even when the activities are generally considered 'safe'. These messages reinforce Furedi's (1997) precautionary principle and a sense that even professionals such as teachers, youth workers, social workers and doctors cannot really be fully trusted to take care of other people's children.

When the coroner's enquiry concluded, there was almost unanimous surprise at the outcome—that the children suffered accidental deaths. *The Daily Mail* (10 March 2002) published, under the headline: 'Is no one to be blamed?' This is an attack on the regulatory and legislative system, which was apparently failing to find fault with any of the individuals or groups involved in the Stainforth Beck incident. From almost the very day

of the incident, there were undertones of a blame culture clearly discernible in the printed media. In support of the theoretical patterns outlined above, the groundswell of public opinion appears to be moving inexorably towards creating a society in which a genuine blame-free accident does not occur and any sort of risk is rejected as intrinsically 'bad'. Anyone who knowingly takes risks themselves or encourages others to do so is criticized as irresponsible, and perhaps undeserving of sympathy or support if things do go wrong. Here is some indication that a litigious attitude to accidents is fuelling a general trend towards increased risk assessment and aversion.

In a similar vein, as Adams (1995) suggests, political organizations appear to be increasingly risk-averse, with numerous authorities, commissions and government quangos creating a massive bureaucracy around risk and danger. Ultimately this may lead to a situation in which young people are shielded from risks to the extent that they become unable to assess or deal with *any* risky situations when they inevitably come across them—either in childhood or in later life. Contrary to the apparent slide towards cosseted lifestyles in which the political and bureaucratic system attempts to reduce risk to a minimum in many areas of life, there remain some sections of society committed to the positive long-term benefits of exposure to risk. Professionals involved in outdoor education have united in some degree to object to negative media reports about adventurous outdoor activities and to point out that the vast majority of adventurous activities and school trips pass without incident (Baillie, 2003). These successful trips are commonplace and have limited news story potential.

5. Conclusions

Media representations of adventurous activities, which form a part of the broadening education debate, appear to be almost universally linked to tragedies and spectacular incidents. Disasters are news and activities and expeditions completed without mishap are not. The general public, most of whom have no direct practical experience of adventurous activities, appear to be being supplied with a negative view of these activities. One of the problems is disentangling ideas of adventure and risk from adventure pursuits and repositioning them in a context of outdoor education. One of the consequences of positioning outdoor education in a Physical Education National Curriculum is that it perpetuates the idea of activities or pursuits so that the 'broadening education' debate becomes warped by an emphasis upon the tragedies that often come from adventure activities such as kayaking (Lyme Bay) and snow sports (Austrian Alps), or their hybrids such as 'river walking' (Stainforth Beck). This is because it is the essential tension between risk and safety that media reportage understands to be the foundation of many of its news reportage stories.

In the endless round of tragedy leading to systematic risk management or risk reduction responses it is encouraging to see that the government has resisted the temptation to extend the remit of AALA. There may be political as well as ideological reasons for this but there are certainly practical ones. As schools compete via league tables to attract the best pupils (and therefore resources) the 'value added' dimension of education takes on additional significance. It has seen schools actively promote adventure holiday opportunities, many of which are abroad. European and more distant destinations require a different level of organization and teacher management skills. The government's initiative of each school having an educational visits coordinator will not necessarily

address the twin problems of an emphasis upon adventure *activity* holidays in a competitive education market where 'exotic' has social currency. Moreover, given the resource limitations of most schools, it is likely that visit coordinators will have this important responsibility added to conventional classroom teaching responsibilities whilst the professional development of teachers generally in managing pupils in educational visits will be equally subsumed to resource priorities elsewhere in the school. Time and additional research will shed light on these developments in schools. Meanwhile, teachers and educational advisers must work hard to re-position the 'broadening' debate in an educational context that prioritizes structured learning opportunities above 'educational' holidays. This may mean moving the goal-posts of the debate away from risk activities *per se* into the realm of outdoor education. This is something that would also contribute to an egalitarian approach to learning outside the classroom, with an exploration of the local environment prioritized above the exotic possibilities of adventure holidays that currently favour those who can afford to pay.

The debate, then, sees a powerful lobby of social control over risk taking set against a smaller but vociferous lobby of adventure educators determined to promote the increased human potential brought about by engaging directly with risk activities. Risk education, if such a term captures the potential schools have to shape the views of a future generation, must continue. At present in schools there exists an emphasis on OAA that narrows our understanding of risk taking to activities that, when they go wrong, disproportionately influence the debate in favour of social control. A broader approach is required by schools shaped by adventure educationists and embracing the democratic principles set out above. In this respect broadening risk education does not mean more adventure activity holidays. Rather, it requires finding ways of embedding risk education into the curriculum that circumnavigate the commonly reported limitations rolled out by school management concerning lack of resources, staff training and opportunities for practical risk educating opportunities which hitherto have, arguably, been a reaction to a 'culture of fear' of the kind that school-teacher unions appear to support. Outdoor education has a role to play in re-dressing the current imbalance by broadening constructions of risk taking beyond its present educational focus on activities. This is not to say that the activities have no value, but rather to recognize the role schools can play in promoting an informed and balanced understanding of risk in contemporary society.

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