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**Illuminating the Assessment Practices of
Teachers in NZ Outdoor Education
Tertiary Programmes**

**A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of
Master of Education
(Adult Education)**

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Abstract

The purpose of this research study was to illuminate the assessment practices of tertiary outdoor education teachers in the polytechnic sector. Outdoor education as a theoretical model and practice was quickly revealed as a contested space. One of the main issues in contention was the place of outdoor recreation, adventure and risk within outdoor education. There appeared a strong move by academics (M. Brown & Fraser, 2009; Irwin, 2010; Martin, 2005a) to reposition outdoor education as environmental and sustainability education.

The data was gathered through a questionnaire, observation of teachers as they assessed students, and from interviews with teachers. Using an illuminative evaluation approach, three themes were identified: teacher perceptions of assessment, the focus of assessment, and the practices used to make assessment decisions.

Teachers were generally highly skilled outdoor education practitioners, however, there were indications that there were gaps of understanding of theoretical assessment concepts. Teachers seemed to find summative assessment challenging but they routinely used formative assessment to promote learning and worked hard at providing quality opportunities for learning. Outdoor recreation in outdoor education was not contested by these teachers, although there was an over-emphasis on assessing technical outdoor pursuit skills, which resulted in a lack of assessment of other less tangible aspects of outdoor education. The use of assessment criteria was common practice although there were questions about how clearly these described the standard. The role of professional judgement in assessment decisions were treated with suspicion because it was seen as too subjective. However, it became clear that professional judgement was an essential aspect of their assessment practices. Criteria and professional judgement revealed themselves as mutually inclusive.

In conclusion, while teachers seem very skilled at providing quality-learning experiences, there appear to be opportunities to further develop teacher assessment practices, for example, through exploring approaches that assess less tangible aspects of practice such as leadership, judgement and decision-making.

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The structure of this thesis

This thesis consists of seven chapters, a list of references, and a number of appendices. The topic of each chapter is briefly delineated below.

- **Chapter 1** acts as a general introduction to this research study by discussing a historical perspective on outdoor education assessment in New Zealand. This is then followed by perceived issues in the assessment of outdoor education, leading to the clarification of the research question and sub questions.
- **Chapter 2** describes the outdoor education sector and its complexity, while placing the study in a context. This chapter also provides a literature review around issues that arise from the context.
- **Chapter 3** reviews literature on assessment.
- **Chapter 4** outlines the research methodology and design of the research study, describing the research methods used and the limitations.
- **Chapter 5** reports the findings.
- **Chapter 6** discusses the findings.
- **Chapter 7** concludes the research, makes recommendations, suggests future research, and offers several concluding thoughts, including a reflection on the research methodology.

Following the final chapter, the references are presented along with the various appendices, which are numbered sequentially in the order they are referred to in the body of the thesis.