

Summer Camp as a Growth Experience: *On Place, Program and Passion*

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Camp research

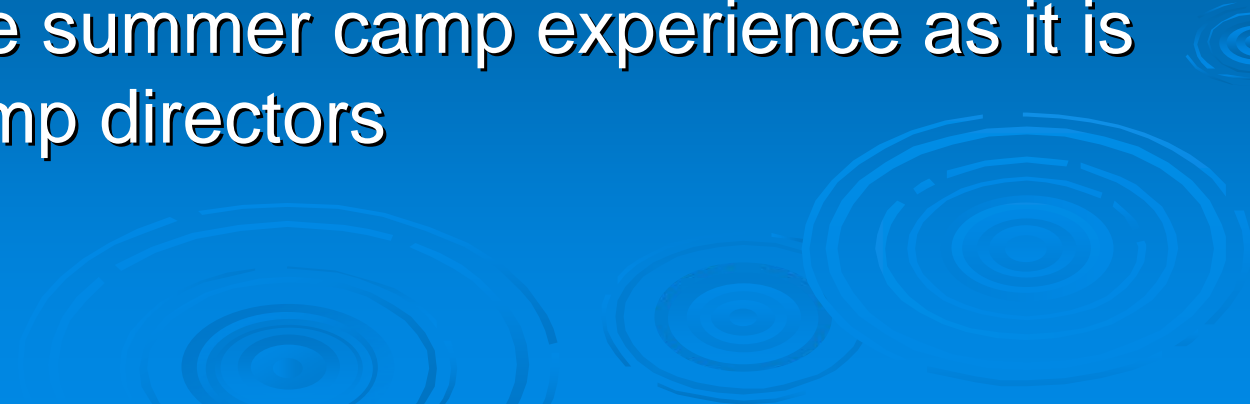
- Traditionally, camp research has focused on three areas:
 1. Specialized outcomes of specialized camps (*e.g. Hrenko, 2005; Nettina, 2006; Spirito, Forman, Ladd, & Wold, 1992; Goodwin & Staples, 2005; Hill & Sibthorp, 2006*).
 2. Examining specific individual outcomes (*e.g. Anshel, Muller, & Owens, 1986; Sherer, 1980; Vincke & van Heeringen, 2004; Smith, Gotlieb, Gurwitch, & Blotcky, 1987*).
 3. Psychological processes and topics (*e.g. Clore, Bray, Itkin, & Murphy, 1978; Moore, 2001; Thurber, 1995; Zimmerman & Bijur, 1995*).
- Recent research undertaken by the American Camping Association (ACA) has taken a more holistic approach exploring various facets of a wide range of camps.

The experience of “camp”

- The purpose of this study was to explore the experience of summer camp as described by Canadian camp directors.



Methods

- Informal Interviews:
 - 48 Canadian residential camp directors
 - Collected at provincial association conferences
 - Between 30-60 minutes in length
 - Loosely structured around interview guide addressing specific areas of outcomes
 - Thematic analysis was conducted to explore and describe the summer camp experience as it is seen by camp directors
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Findings: social interaction

- The social interactions and relationships developed at camp differ from other settings because of the type and intensity of daily contact:
 - *Think about how like, family's connect with each other, they're right up in your face. Like, they're there all the time, they know incidents about you that no one else knows and you have a stronger bond with them than anyone else. Same as the camp environment, that you're living and working and, you know, crying and laughing with all these people that you will understand them more because you're more aware of what's going on in their lives. – Amanda*
 - *...these guys have...life long friendships that go back to the time when they were eight. – Ted*

Findings: trying new things

- Camp offers children the chance to try new activities and experience new things in a fun and supportive environment:
 - *...crafts and our pottery and our woodworking and our lapidary and our programs that are considered more feminine. You get the boys who are the stars in the basketball court who also like to do stained glass...the ability to go into a new situation that they've never tried before. Because they've done it at camp, they've been exposed to it, they've mastered that ability to take a risk...*
 - Sue

Findings: skill development

- At camp, children are given the opportunity to develop physical, cognitive and social skills:
 - *... Okay well hard skills – we're a traditional camp so we have all the you know – wind surfing, sailing, canoeing, kayaking, climbing. ... And they come out with, just a lot of – just basic stuff. Just like even to be able to pack their suitcase or not put their wet bathing suit [on] their bed... just little things that little kids are – that parents are constantly having to do for them. And that's what the parents say. They come back and say "oh yeah, she can brush her hair".*

-Janis

Findings: connecting with the outdoors

- Children have direct contact with more natural settings than they experience in their day to day lives:
 - *...they go out and they see these clear cuts where...we do canoe trips in Quebec where, uh, two years from now the river they travel isn't going to exist because they're flooding it for a hydroelectric project. ...They need a hydroelectric project because uh, you know, I, quite literally, I'm not turning the lights off in my house at night, sort of thing, and they'll all, you know, they realize the cause and effect of how we as a society are living our lives against what impact we're having on nature. - Dan*
 - *...there's insects here and there's spiders here but those are good things, and why are they good things and why is it important to not squish them, and, you know, it was their home first and, but they need to be here, and if they weren't here, what would that mean...it affects the life, the life cycle and how and why and all that. And also with, um, with pollution, that, you know, sometimes people come to camp and they want to wash in the lake and we don't wash in the lake, and why don't we.— Liz*

Findings: camp is a 'different world'

- The directors described camp as distinct experience for children, that it is unlike any other recreation setting because it's "just a different type of place":
 - *You can tell when you're talking to a person, a parent, who has been to camp, because they really do, quote, get it. – Liz*
 - *I mean, it's something that, uhm you know, I felt as a camper. I remember counting down the days to go back to this magical place. - Amanda*



Discussion

- This research has begun the long neglected exploration of the experiential side of the camp phenomenon (Henderson, Bialeschki and James 2007).
- When considering the outcomes experienced by campers, the complex entirety of the experience must be examined.
- The multifaceted nature of these findings indicates that the camp offers children a range of experiences that span the areas of cognitive, social, physical and emotional development.

Future Research

➤ Further phases of this study:

- Phase II:

- piloted summer 2008, nation-wide survey 2009
- Short term changes in behaviour of campers as observed by their counsellors and parents

- Phase III:

- Interviewing adult camp alumni to explore the long term impacts of their participation

➤ Other areas to be explored:

- Camper's descriptions of experiences
- Exploration of specific types of camp programs
- Diversity in camper populations

Practical application

“Research is paramount in establishing the credibility of summer camp.” - Peg Smith, Chief Executive Officer, American Camp Association.

- Establishing position within crowded market of children’s leisure programs
- Reflexive practice
- Accountability to funding agencies