

YOUTHS' PERSPECTIVES ON CAMP OUTCOMES: INTENTIONALITY AND POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

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Introduction

The camp community has long declared that the camp experience is good for children. However, empirical evidence to support this assertion is limited. One particular camp in New York City has partnered with a research team on a four year longitudinal study concerning the outcomes from the camp experience. The intentionality that the camp uses to address its goals has been of particular interest in this study. Over the past four years, quantitative and qualitative data have been collected to ascertain the outcomes from the experience for the children and the degree to which they match the desired goals and objectives of the camp program. The purpose of this presentation is to discuss the perceptions of the youth in this study on the outcomes from this camp experience. A secondary purpose is to discuss the Q sort methodology used to analyze the outcomes generated from procedures that produced extensive qualitative data.

Background

The context for this study is situated in the theoretical literature related to youth development. A positive youth development approach emphasizes the recognition and affirmation of the strengths and positive future of youth as opposed to prevention of negative behaviors (Caldwell, 2000). Of particular interest to this study is the literature focused on resiliency. Lifton (1994) defined resilience as the human capacity of all individuals to transform and change, no matter what their risks. Researchers found that children who developed resiliency skills based them on deeper level relationships with peers and mentors, personal beliefs, expectations and a willingness to share power (Benard, 1997).

A youth development approach to programming highlights the child's assets, is age appropriate, and outcome focused. Camps are ideal settings for promoting positive youth development by custom-tailoring the programs and camp design to target key camper outcomes. The camp under study is a youth development organization that provides children from at-risk urban communities with an ongoing year-round commitment anchored in a four week residential summer camp experience. The program begins for each child upon entrance into the fifth grade, and the child can remain a participant for the next four years at no cost to them if they maintain school performance, stay out of trouble with law enforcement, and maintain the support of their parent(s) or guardian. The campers benefit from a network of support that is focused on the main goals of the camp: social skills, enhanced self-esteem, positive core values, and a greater sense of personal responsibility. The administration and staff of the camp combined a programmatic youth development approach with the use of positive role models to potentially create resilient youth through camp activities.

Methodology

Over the past four years, a mixed-methods approach to data collection has been employed. Qualitative means of collection have included camper, staff, and parent interviews, camper journals, focus groups, photography, and open-ended evaluation surveys. (Note: Quantitative data have been collected but are not considered in this presentation.) These data have been analyzed for emergent themes over the four years and previously presented. However, a cumulative analysis of the major themes generated in the multiple analyses had not been conducted. A major challenge was how to pull together multiple sources of qualitative data and find a way to explore the subjectivities underlying the data.

This past summer data were collected using the Q method. Q methodology is best used when a need exists to understand or articulate the points of view of others or describe similarities and differences in perceptions; Q methodology is suited for the communication of subjective responses with self-referent meaning (Brown, 1996). This method combines the philosophical approaches from quantitative and qualitative methods as a way to study the self, meaning, and its communication (Stephenson, 1978). The technique allows for the study of human subjectivity and offers appealing options when analyzing qualitative data (Brown 1993). The Q-sort technique begins with the development of a concourse that consists of statements often taken from interviews or written narratives from the participants. These statements are selected to represent the opinions relevant to the topic investigated and are grounded in concrete existence. Each participant ranks each statement along a continuum according to their beliefs concerning the importance of each statement (Brown, 1993).

For this study the concourse was developed to focus on the campers' perceived outcomes of this particular camp experience. Each specific statement came directly from the 33 campers' descriptions in their interviews or journals over the four years. Thirty-six statements were constructed that reflected the youth's views on the values and benefits they felt they had received as a participant in this camp experience. During the last week of their final summer camp session, each camper was asked to rank 36 statements from "most like me" to "not like me". Each camper was given a score template that was a diagram with an empty cell for each of the 36 statements. The columns of the cells were in the form of a platykurtic normal distribution. The center column was represented by 0, the columns to the left received negative numbers, and columns to the right were positive numbers. The positive numbers corresponded to statement views most like the campers' own, the negative numbers represented unlike views, and the zero column in the middle represented neutral, ambivalent, or uncertain views.

Each camper was given both verbal and written sorting instructions along with the array template. The conditions of instructions and sort directions were "What are you like as a young person as a result of being involved with MC?". The campers took between 30-45 minutes to sort the 36 statements into the initial three piles ("like me", "not like me", and neutral or undecided), then placed each statement on a ranking space on the template. They were encouraged to look carefully at the final ranked statements on their template. Once they were satisfied, the researchers recorded their placement and assigned numeric values for data entry and analysis. Data entry and statistical analyses were conducted with the PQMethod software. Analyses included inter-correlations among the Q-sort statements that were factor analyzed with Centroid rotations, followed by a

varimax rotation for optimal factor selection. Q-sort produces an extensive report with a variety of tables on factor loadings, statement factor scores, discriminating statements for each factor as well as consensus statements across statements. The factors that emerge represent functional categories of the subjectivities at issue, i.e. operant subjectivity, so are interpreted differently from traditional factor or cluster analyses.

Analyses

Data interpretation is ongoing but preliminary results can be provided. Upon completing the analyses, a three factor solution emerged that explained 31% of the variance. The loadings included 24 of the 33 campers with the remaining nine either loading equally on two or more factors or not loading at all. The correlation between factor scores were very low (.0099- .2952), which indicated the factors were independent of each other. The defining sort on the three factors suggested three camper “personalities” based on their views of the outcomes from this camp experience.

The first view suggests a camper who sees himself/herself as “hangin’ with my buddies.” This child is strong on social connections. They believe they work well with other kids, are liked by other people, respectful of people different from themselves, and can get along with many people. However, they tend to live in the present, are independent of guidelines, and don’t like anything that interferes with their social flow. They do not necessarily spend their free time in positive ways, especially if that choice contradicts their friends. Being outside is OK so long as they are with their friends.

The second personality has initially been called the “self-regulated leader”. This young person is internally motivated, proud of themselves, feels in control, and will do what’s right for them. They are good at taking care of themselves. They can be strong-willed and are polite and get along as long as it doesn’t take away from them. They are not particularly comfortable in the outdoors, but they do know how to use their free-time in positive ways.

The third factor could be termed the “hesitant leader.” This camper is self-satisfied, mature in their interactions with other people, and responsible. They view themselves as a leader but without the firm conviction of the “self-regulated leader.” They lack confidence in their skills and abilities and are hesitant to speak up for their views.

These three factors are currently still under interpretation. The exact statements are being examined for consensus and difference for a more definitive portrayal of each factor. The arrays of the three factors will be further examined, and member checks conducted.

Discussion

This study was undertaken to explore the outcomes from a camp experiencing examined for consensus and difference for a more definitive portrayal. Outcomes selected for investigation were directly from previous research techniques that resulted in qualitative data. The statements seemed to support the positive youth development model with a focus on resiliency. The Q-sort process provided insights into the way these outcomes were actually internalized by the youth in this study. The theoretical profiles from the factor process provided a new perspective on these potential outcomes. The factors seemed to indicate that the outcomes tend to cluster in certain patterns for

different types of campers. While intentionality of outcomes were addressed in the camp programs, the way these outcomes were interpreted varied by self-referent meanings of the individual campers. However, patterns among the outcomes indicated the need for programmers to consider possible positive and negative combinations of inter-relationships among the outcomes. Additional theoretical developments and interpretations will be discussed in the paper.

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