INTENTIONALITY AND YOUTH DEVELOPMENT THROUGH CAMP EXPERIENCES

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Introduction

Youth development encompasses efforts to create organizations and communities that enable youth to move toward adulthood by supplying supports and opportunities necessary to go beyond problem prevention (Witt, 2002). Youth development specialists (e.g. Gambone, Klem, & Connell, 2002; Leffert, Benson, Scales, Sharma, Drake, & Blyth, 1998; Pittman, Irby, & Ferber, n.d.) have indicated that in addition to academic competence, youth need to have opportunities to grow toward physical, emotional, civic, and social competence. Supports from family, community, and other institutions, such as organized recreation and camping programs are critical for positive youth development. Organizations such as park and recreation departments, not-for-profit youth groups, churches, and resident and day camps offer valuable opportunities to promote positive youth development. Summer camps for young people have been offering developmental opportunities to children for over 100 years. The American Camp Association (ACA) recognized the potential for positive growth at camp as evidence by their maxim “camp gives kids a world of good.” Research studies (e.g., Bialeschki, Younger, Henderson, Ewing, & Casey, 2002; Brannan, Arick, Fullerton, & Harris, 2000; Chenery, 1991; Dworkin, 1999; Marsh, 1999; Sekine, 1994) documented the value of organized camp experiences and a good deal of anecdotal evidence supports the “good” that camps provide. Yet, little is known about how positive change occurs at camp. Are camp programs inherently good or are there factors that can be identified to explain why camp might result in a positive developmental experience?

The conceptual framework of intentionality has been discussed in the youth development, recreation, and camp literature. Marsh (1999) conducted a meta-analysis of 22 studies addressing self-constructs (e.g., self-esteem, self-confidence, and other aspects of self). The results showed that camp had a positive influence on self in relatively short periods of time across all age groups. An important conclusion from Marsh’s analyses was that camps that focused on enhancing self-constructs were more likely to show positive change. Therefore, the intentionality and deliberate programming done in camps to enhance self-constructs more often resulted in camper growth. Other literature has also shown that basic goals need to be identified so directors can articulate and train staff for what they would like to accomplish at camp beyond providing a safe and fun environment (Lishner & Myers, 1997).

The purpose of the larger study from which this paper was taken was to measure what, if any, positive change occurred in young people as a result of their involvement in a summer camp experience offered for the duration of at least one week. Assuming that positive changes occurred, an important focus of this paper was to specifically explore
the relationship between intentionality and positive youth development by determining whether the goals set by camp directors and staff led to positive outcomes.

**Methods**

Data for this study were collected in 2002 and 2003 from a national sample of almost 5000 families representing 92 camps across the United States. The participating camps were selected from a stratified random sample of ACA accredited camps in different parts of the country, represented different sponsorships, and included both day and resident camps. Each camp director that agreed to participate in the study was asked to select one session of camp for the study and to provide a list of campers and their parents’ addresses for the selected session.

The study design included pre, post, and follow-up questionnaires given to campers and parents, a pre and post observation checklist completed by staff of their campers participating in the study, and two questionnaires to camp directors regarding the characteristics and operations of their camps.

The development and validation of the camper and parent questionnaires are discussed elsewhere (American Camping Association, 2004). They were field tested to determine construct validity and reliability and pilot tested the summer before data collection began. Ten outcomes were measured by 40 questions using a 4-point Likert scale with 4=strongly agree to 1=strongly disagree. The 10 outcomes were further collapsed into four domains: Positive Identity--Positive Identity, Independence; Social Skills--Leadership, Making Friends, Social Anxiety, Peer Relationships; Positive Values and Spiritual Growth--Positive Values/Decision Making, Spirituality; and Thinking and Physical Skills--Adventure/Exploration, Environmental Awareness.

**Results**

A summary of the demographic characteristics of the campers and the camps provides some context for interpreting the results. In all, 5,281 campers and their parents completed Pre-camp Surveys up to four weeks before camp sessions began. For the post test conducted within the last two days of camp, 3,400 campers completed Post-camp Surveys (response rate of 64%). Sixty-eight percent of the campers were female, 89% were white, and the average age was 11 years old with 38% under the age of 11 and 62% age 11 and older.

The 92 camps included agency (39%), religiously affiliated (18%), independent for profit (25%), and independent not-for-profit (18%) camps. Nearly 60% of the camps were one week camps. The sample included 86% from resident camps and 14% from resident camps. Camp directors reported that the overall staff-to-camper ration was either 1 to 3-4.

The results of the outcome measures for campers, parents, and staff are described in more detail elsewhere (American Camping Association, 2004). To give some sense of the data, matched t-tests for campers are portrayed in Table 1.

Of primary interest for the focus of this paper was an examination of the relationship between intentionality and outcomes. The camp directors were asked to rank order a list of nine outcomes including one outcome noted as “other.” The goal categories provided for ranking were: increased positive identity, increased social skills, increased positive values, increased spiritual growth, increased physical and cognitive skills, more
positive relationships with adults, enhanced sense of responsibility for belonging to a healthy, diverse community, and increased sense of service to others. About 77% of the campers were in camps where the camp director indicated personal identity was either the first or second ranked outcome/goal of their program. Almost 38% of the campers came from a camp that ranked social skills as the primary or secondary goal. Personal values were ranked one or two by the camp for 31% of the campers. Physical and cognitive skills were ranked first or second in camps representing 7% of the campers.

Regression analyses were conducted to ascertain if the overall total change and changes in the four domains could be predicted by intended outcomes. No relationships were found between the camp’s goals and camper outcomes for overall total change and the two domains of social skills and personal values. However, the domain of personal identity was significant for camps that rated personal values as the first or second outcome goal, but the percent of variance accounted for was less than 1%. Changes in physical and thinking skills were significant when camps had either personal identity or physical and cognitive skills as their first or second rating. Again, however, the amount of variance explained was only slightly over 1%.

Discussion
This study of youth development outcomes showed that on the pre-camp testing, most campers (as well as parents, which was not reported in this abstract) rated relatively positive on all the dimensions of the outcome scales. Statistically significant increases from pre to post testing were found in seven outcomes for campers: positive identity, independence, leadership, peer relationships, making friends, adventure and exploration, and spirituality. For almost all analyses the effect sizes were small. The effect sizes may have been small because of the ceiling effect and/or because the majority of the campers were only at camp one week, which is a short amount of time for any type of intervention.

Although these data continue to be analyzed, the regression analyses reported did not support the notion of intentionality for this camper outcome study. Data yet to be

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain/Outcome (Domain)</th>
<th>Pre X</th>
<th>Post X</th>
<th>Change</th>
<th>Effect Sizea</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive Identity</td>
<td>3.20</td>
<td>3.34***</td>
<td>+.14</td>
<td>.23</td>
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<tr>
<td>Positive Identity</td>
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<td>3.44</td>
<td>+.02</td>
<td>.08</td>
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<tr>
<td>Independence</td>
<td>3.42</td>
<td>3.44*</td>
<td>+.02</td>
<td>.04</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social Skills</td>
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<td>3.19***</td>
<td>+.16</td>
<td>.25</td>
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<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>3.13**</td>
<td>+.03</td>
<td>.04</td>
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<tr>
<td>Making Friends</td>
<td>3.37</td>
<td>3.46***</td>
<td>+.09</td>
<td>.18</td>
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<td>Social Anxiety</td>
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<td>3.21</td>
<td>-.01</td>
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<tr>
<td>Peer Relationships</td>
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<td>3.63*</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>-.04</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pos Values/Spiritual Growth</td>
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<tr>
<td>Decision Making</td>
<td>3.45</td>
<td>3.46</td>
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<td>Spirituality</td>
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<td>.04</td>
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<td>.41</td>
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<tr>
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<td>3.73***</td>
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<td>Environment Awareness</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

(*p ≤ .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001)

a Small effects = .10 to .29; moderate effects = .30 to .49; large effects = .50 and greater)
analyzed include information about how camp directors said they reinforced their goals at camp such as through staff/camper interaction, staff to camper ratios, types of activities offered, program structure (e.g., camper choice in program), the way groups were put together, and living arrangements. The minimal relationship between intended goals and outcomes might also be due to the global nature of the list of predetermined goals presented to the directors. In addition, more analyses remain to be done on the 10 outcomes relative to the goals rather than the four composite domains.

This study marked the first large scale national study undertaken by the camp industry. The conclusion that camp had positive outcomes for youth was important and could be interpreted to mean that camp is inherently good for children and youth. However, we believe that some camp experiences are better than others. We will continue to analyze these data to try to ascertain the factors that contribute to positive youth development and to determine the relationship between intended goals and camper outcomes.

References


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