

***a“The Experience of a Lifetime”*: Alumni Perceptions of the Development and Transfer of Life and Workforce Skills in the Ohio 4-H Camp Counselor Program**

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Presentation at the American Camp Association Camp Research Symposium

February 8, 2006 -- Chicago, IL

Purpose

Ohio 4-H invests significant resources in its camping program. Most research, however, has examined camper outcomes rather than those for camp counselors. 4-H camp counselors are teens who are highly engaged in their camp counseling roles (McNeely, 2004) and it is expected that the skills they are learning in their camp counseling roles are applied to other contexts of their lives. Thus, this study was designed to examine alumni perceptions about the skills gained and transfer of these skills to other settings as a result their participation. The goals of the research were to examine the following areas from the alumni perspective: (a) their experiences as a 4-H camp counselor, (b) the life and workforce skills gained through their experience, (c) the impact the camp counselor experience had on their career choice, and (d) the unique aspects of being a 4-H camp counselor as compared to the rest of the 4-H experience.

Theoretical Framework

Consistent with research that shows that camp counselors benefit from the experience (DeGraff & Glover, 2003; Dworken, 2004; James, 2003), recent studies suggest that 4-H camp counselors develop important life skills (Brandt, 2005; Forsythe, Matysik, & Nelson, 2004; Garst & Johnson, 2003, 2005; McNeely, 2004; Purcell, 1996; Weese, 2002). Preparing youth for the workforce is a major concern in U.S. society (Ferrari, 2003). However, many jobs available to youth offer little opportunity for the development of autonomy and initiative as well as little interaction with adults (Bryant, Zvonkovic, Raskauskas, & Peters, 2004). Therefore, it is important that the 4-H camp counseling experience provide such positive developmental benefits. Findings related to whether camp counselors made career and workforce connections from their experience are mixed. Results indicate that camp counselors believed they developed skills for the workforce (Forsythe et al., 2004), that camp counselors had a moderate understanding of workforce connections (McNeely, 2004), or that the majority of camp counselors believed they have not developed workforce skills (Brandt, 2005). Thus, additional study of workforce connections made by camp counselors appears to be warranted.

This study examines camp counseling from the perspective of Bronfenbrenner’s ecology of human development (1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). That is, camp represents a *microsystem* that, in addition to a physical place, is comprised of activities, roles, and interpersonal relationships. The activities that occur within this system are growth inducing when they occur over time and become consistently more complex. This study also examines camp counseling from the perspective of *transfer of learning*. The transfer of skills from camp to the workforce is an example of *far transfer*, that is, it involves learning skills and knowledge in one context and applying it to another (Haskell, 2001). In this case, the context is different from the one in which the skills were learned. Transfer of learning and experiential learning literature supports that the best way to learn is through actual experience (Cafarella, 2002; Carlson & Maxa, 1998). However, learning transfer does not always take place.

Methods

Four focus groups were held in three geographic locations using procedures recommended by Krueger (1994; Morgan & Krueger, 1993). Questions asked about unique aspects of being a 4-H camp counselor as well as the skills gained and how those skills have transferred to other life contexts (Digby, 2005). Thirty alumni were available to participate in the focus groups. The average age was 22 years (ranging from 18 to 26), and the average number of years the alumni were counselors at Ohio 4-H camps was 4 years. The sample was two-thirds female. Initially, open coding was used to analyze the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Then, two frameworks were used to assist with categorizing the data: workforce skills (SCANS, 1991) and developmental experiences in organized youth activities (Dworkin, Hansen, & Larson, 2003; Hansen & Larson, 2002).

Findings

Overall, alumni of the 4-H camp counselor program thought their experience was fun and enjoyable, yet challenging. They believed they developed important life and workforce skills needed for the 21st century. More specifically, leadership, decision making, planning and organizing, communication, interpersonal skills, and teamwork were skills most mentioned. These skills are consistent with other studies examining camp counselors' skill development (Brandt, 2005; DeGraff & Edginton, 1992; DeGraff & Glover, 2003; Dworkin, 2004; Forsythe et al., 2004; Garst & Johnson, 2003, 2005; James, 2003; McNeely, 2004; Purcell, 1996; Toupen & Townsend, 2000; Weese, 2002) as well as for youth in other organized activities (Dworkin et al., 2003).

Not only did alumni learn these skills, but they also were transferred from one setting to another, such as a student, employee, or community member. Leadership was observed as the most prominent skill that had been applied to other contexts. Other skills mentioned included communication, teamwork, organization, interpersonal, time management, flexibility/adaptability, and responsibility. The skills mentioned were skills reflective of those needed in the workforce according to the SCANS Report (1991) or those gained through developmental experiences (Dworkin et al., 2003).

Alumni believed they learned these skills by being actively engaged in their roles. Being trusted with the responsibility as a teenager for leading and teaching activities for younger campers was important to them. Several felt that reflection activities at the conclusion of camp helped them think about the skills learned as a camp counselor. However, it did not appear that these were included in all camp experiences.

Being a camp counselor was the first time many alumni were able to try out new roles and learn more about themselves. Alumni believed that their counseling experience had both indirect and direct impacts on their choice of a career. Indirect impacts included that alumni considered what type of job or work environment they would like in their future. Direct impacts were that alumni decided that they enjoyed working with children and looked for a career that would enable them to do so (e.g., teacher).

Unique aspects of being a camp counselor compared to other experiences in 4-H were that camp takes place in a different environment where there is little competition. Teens also have the opportunity to be role models and develop a sense of identity.

Conclusions

Camp counseling has been called the "experience of a lifetime" by one participant in this study; others agree. Being a role model and assuming significant roles and responsibilities are unique aspects. Camp is a positive developmental context where adolescents learn a variety of

skills and qualities. This study demonstrates that camp counseling translates into pathways to a positive future, as skills are transferred to other contexts, such as work and community life. Based on the results, a conceptual model was developed (see Figure 1).

Implications

This study suggests many practical applications for those who work with camp programs.

- To make adolescents aware of skills needed for the workforce, this topic should be included as part of camp counselor training.
- To ensure that transfer of learning is an intentional part to the camp counselor experience, strategies should be incorporated into the design of counselor training programs. Among the strategies that can be employed are having opportunities for practice, developing an action plan, and allowing time for reflection (Gardner & Korth, 1997). As well, teens indicated that actually being engaged in an activity was perhaps the most helpful.
- Asking learners to understand, apply, analyze, evaluate, and create when learning subject matter are methods used to aid in the transfer of learning (Mayer, 2002). For transfer to occur, we need to provide experiences that are real and meaningful to learners. Learning also depends on having a base of content knowledge and procedural skills, that is, the skills necessary to solve problems (Basile, 2000). Teens can gain these skills through counselor training programs.
- Adults need to give youth ownership over their roles and responsibilities in order for significant development to occur. In addition, they need to provide appropriate structure and guidance to teens (Larson, Hansen, & Walker, 2005). Adult leaders should intentionally ask youth questions that help clarify suggestions or filter out ideas. When youth are having difficulty structuring their work, adults need to intervene to some extent. They can help teens break their work into manageable steps to reach realistic goals and deadlines. Monitoring to keep youth on track requires careful intervention to ensure that they support rather than undercut youth ownership.
- Alumni indicated that having challenging activities was important. To ensure increasing levels of challenge, camp directors should consider expanding youth leadership roles to include that of *counselor trainer* (Homan, 2005). In this model, youth take on enhanced roles by training their peers and coordinating the efforts of the counselor team.
- Teens do not always have experiences that develop initiative skills, nor do they necessarily understand the importance of these skills in the workforce. Therefore, camp directors should be aware of the importance of initiative to adolescent development. Competencies related to initiative include learning to set realistic goals, exert effort, manage time, and take responsibility. Other aspects of initiative are related to learning communication skills, giving and taking feedback, and taking responsibility within a group. Furthermore, while important in its own right, initiative is thought to be connected to other components of positive development, such as creativity, leadership, altruism, and civic engagement (Larson, 2000).
- Although through their self-reports adolescents have indicated that they have developed skills, camp directors can build on this by incorporating objective assessments of their skill development to document what counselors have learned.
- Camp directors should communicate to stakeholders that camp counseling programs prepare teens with valuable workforce skills such as communication, working with others, planning, and decision making.

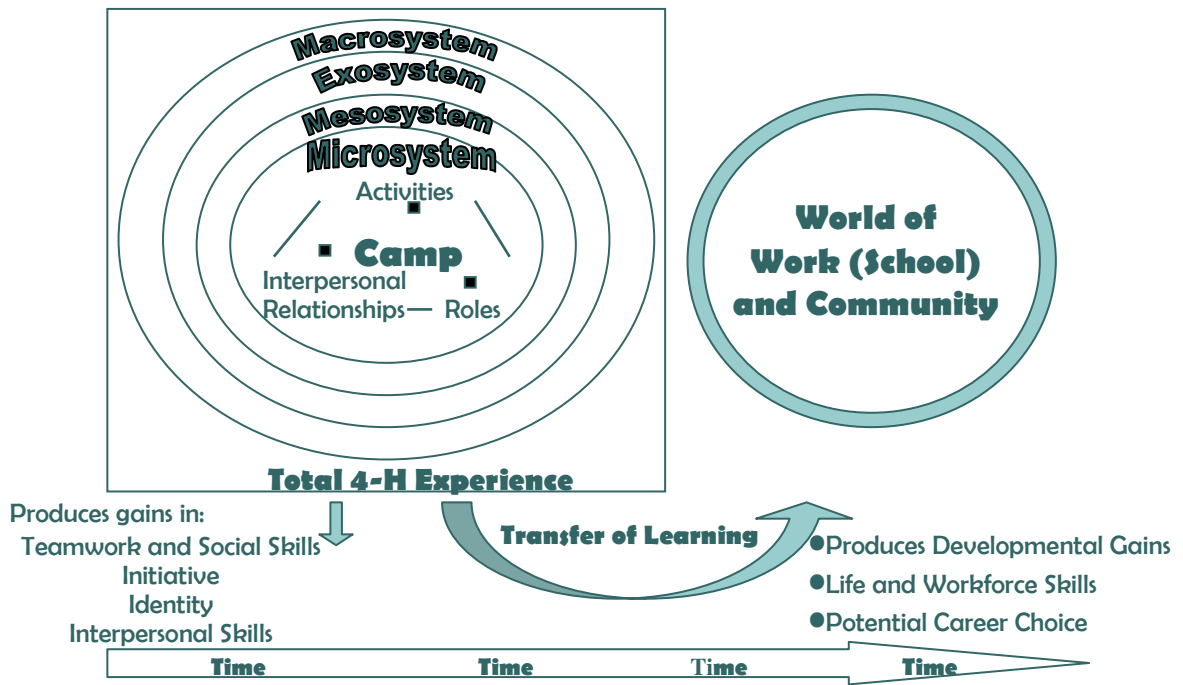


Figure 1
A Conceptual Model: The 4-H Camp Counseling Experience

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