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Adolescent Leadership Skill Development Through Residential 4-H Camp Counseling

Abstract

Camping is a 4-H delivery mode and context for positive youth development. Research suggests that 4-H camping may enhance the life skills outcomes of adolescents who serve in leadership roles. The study reported here was to explore the lived experience of 4-H camp teen counselors and to better understand the leadership and life skill outcomes of 4-H camp participation. Eleven focus groups (n=68) were conducted with 4-H camp teen counselors from across Virginia's six 4-H educational centers. The results indicated that 4-H camp participation positively affected teen counselors by helping them to develop leadership-related knowledge, skills, and behaviors.

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Introduction

Camping is more than a location or a program, it includes *what happens to youth* during and after the camping experience; the affective, cognitive, behavioral, physical, social, and spiritual outcomes of 4-H camp participation (Garst & Bruce, 2003). Within Extension, camping is a 4-H delivery mode and can also be an important context for positive youth development (Garst, 2003). Indeed, 4-H camping may provide many of the essential elements of positive youth development (National 4-H Headquarters, 2001) including:

- a. The presence of caring adults,
- b. Physical and emotional safety,
- c. Age-appropriate structure and limits,
- d. Sense of belonging, and
- e. Opportunities to build and master content and life skills.

In addition to affecting youth participants, 4-H camping participation also benefits the leaders and volunteers who work with youth (Purcell, 1998; Forsythe, Matysik, & Nelson, 2004). These volunteers are often teen counselors or teen leaders--youth who have accepted the responsibility for teaching, supervising, and caring for younger campers. With increasing emphasis on responsible youth program management, camp directors are expected to document the benefits or outcomes of their camping programs, which includes the benefits or outcomes of teen counseling programs. Research suggests that camping participation helps teenagers to develop leadership and life skills (Thomas, 1996; Purcell, 1998). In addition, residential youth camping provides an

excellent context for the development of leadership, communication, and interpersonal skills (Thomas, 1996).

The camp context is also important. Research suggests that the residential nature of camp may have implications for adolescent development (Garst, Scheider, & Baker, 2001). Because residential camping occurs in a novel, equalizing context, many of the socio-economic and cultural barriers that identify teenagers in home or community settings may not be as prevalent in residential camp settings. Thus, teen counselors may be able to explore or demonstrate aspects of their personality that they might not demonstrate outside of camp due to the social influences of peers.

Although collecting evaluation data from teen counselors is important, an equally important consideration is to target the method of data collection to teens' development level. Teen counselors want and expect the opportunity to verbalize their opinions, feelings, and attitudes (Chester, 2002). It is important, therefore, for camp directors to take the time to learn about the "lived experience" as it is created, described, and expressed by teen counselors at camp.

The purpose of the study reported here was to explore how participation in residential camping, in a teen leadership role, affected the development of leadership and other life skills. The secondary purpose was to identify how camp teen counselors positively affected the youth they supervised and with whom they interacted.

Sample

During the summer of 2002, Virginia 4-H conducted 10-12 weeks of residential youth camp at six separate camping facilities. Approximately 12,000 youth ages 9-13 participated as campers. Teen leadership opportunities were provided for youth ages 14-18. The population for this study (n=1,126) was comprised of all adolescent teen counselors (ages 14-18) who attended residential camp in a leadership capacity at one of the six camping facilities.

To select a sample of participants for this study, one week of camp was randomly selected for each of the facilities. All of the adolescent teen counselors who participated in camp during the selected week at the respective sites received parental and participant consent forms prior to camp (n=131). The teen counselors (n=68) who returned their consent forms comprised the sample used in this study. They were asked to participate in a group discussion about their camp experiences as a teen counselor.

Methods

We used focus groups to provide the teen counselors with the opportunity to discuss, explore, and describe their camping experiences. Krueger (1994) recommended focus groups because they place participants in natural, real-life situations and allow for the dynamics of group interaction, which often reduce inhibitions that might be present during an interview. The focus groups were conducted on-site while the camping program was in session, in meeting rooms that were quiet and located away from camp activities. A total of 11 focus group discussions were conducted (approximately two per site), with group size ranging from 4 to 8 participants.

The primary researcher served as the "facilitator," and a camp staff member served as the "recorder." Recorders received training in focus groups and recording responses prior to the focus groups. The facilitator used an open-ended interview script as guiding questions to provide general structure for the discussion, and responses were recorded by hand.

The primary purpose of the focus group discussions was to understand the camp counselor leadership experience as it was described and interpreted by teen participants. Focus group questions explored how teens became involved with camp, memorable experiences, development of skills, how teens might or might not be important for camp, and how the teen counselor leadership experience might be improved.

Data from the focus groups were transcribed, and then open and axial coding procedures were performed (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Open coding consisted of fracturing transcribed data according to phrases that represented one thought. Axial coding was then used to identify relationships between the categories. Using the axial coding process, a preliminary list of categorical relationships emerged through a semantic comparison of coded categories.

Qualitative methods for assuring confirmability and trustworthiness were used. These methods included informed readers and a participant review. Informed readers, who were familiar with the camping program yet were not involved directly with this study, performed an audit of the data analysis process and results (Huberman & Miles, 1994). In addition, informed readers coded the data to assess the dependability of the analysis. A participant review process was used to provide study participants with the opportunity to examine and confirm both the results and conclusions.

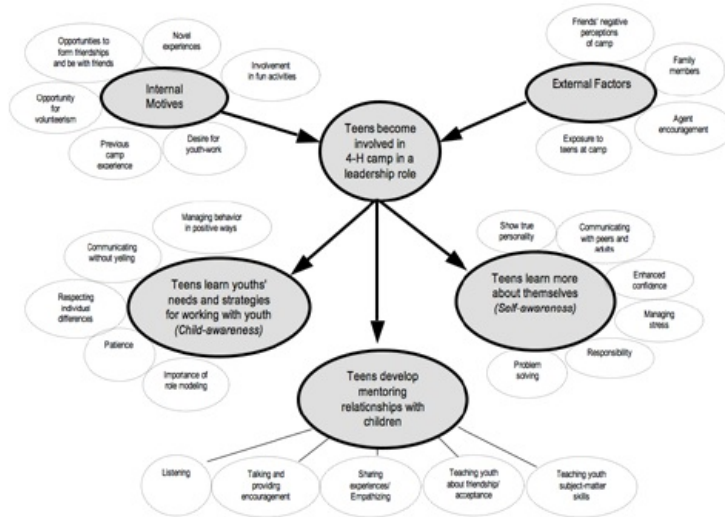
Results

A total of 68 teen counselors participated in the focus group discussions. A majority of participants were female (65%), and the primary ethnic groups represented were White (80%) and African

American (16%). The mean age for a participant was 15 years old. Previous experience as a teen leader in camp ranged from 1-4 years, and participants had an average of 2 years of previous experience as a teen counselor in camp. Participants represented 16 different counties/cities across six regions of Virginia, ranging from urban areas in Northern Virginia, Richmond, and Hampton Roads, to rural areas in central and southwest Virginia.

Data analysis of focus group responses revealed major themes related to (a) internal motives and external factors that impacted teen camp counselor participation, (b) increased understanding of children, (c) increased understanding of self, and (d) development of mentoring relationships with children. In addition, participants described how camp was very important in their lives (Figure 1).

Figure 1.
Conceptual Model of Adolescent Leadership Skill Development Associated with 4-H Camp Counseling



Many participants struggled with talking to their friends about the camp experience. Camp is not viewed as a "cool" thing to do by most participants' friends. Participants stated that friends viewed camp as stupid, childish, for nerds, corny, lame, cheesy, and boring. Furthermore, participants shared that these negative perceptions of camp are created by the fact that their friends do not understand the context, purpose, or value of camp.

Participants described how being a teen counselor at camp helped them to understand children. Specifically, participating in camp as a teen counselor helps teens to learn the developmental differences of youth, how to respect children as individuals, and the importance of recognizing how strategies that work with one child may not work with another child. Teen counselors also reported that they learned how to be patient and how to communicate with kids without yelling or abusing their authority.

Participants discussed a number of ways that being a teen counselor at 4-H camp helped them to learn more about themselves. Specifically, 4-H camp leadership helped teens to:

- become more responsible for themselves and the youth under their supervision,
- overcome shyness and become more confident talking in front of large groups,
- communicate effectively to campers and to adults in camp, and how to manage and problem-solve stressful situations, and
- manage and problem-solve stressful situations.

Participants identified a number of specific ways that they helped youth at camp. Helping youth campers typically involved talking, listening, sharing, and empathizing, as well as teaching campers specific skills during camp classes. In this way, teen counselors developed a mentoring relationship with youth campers.

Conclusions and Applications

The results of the study suggest that 4-H camp participation positively affected teen counselors by helping them to develop leadership-related knowledge, skills, and behaviors. The study supports the results of other studies of the impacts of the 4-H camp counseling experiences (Purcell, 1998; Forsythe, Matysik, & Nelson, 2004).

Teen counselors became more aware of the developmental needs and individual differences of youth campers and became more aware of themselves as leaders who were responsible for the welfare of children. Furthermore, teen counselors developed a mentoring relationship with young people. Based upon the results of this study, the following applications are suggested for camp

directors who are responsible for developing and managing camp counselor recruitment and training.

- Recruitment materials for 4-H camp teen counselors should highlight the benefits of volunteerism and should describe how camp teen counselors can use camp volunteerism to develop their resumes and to make themselves more competitive for future employment. It would be appropriate to use the teens' self-descriptions of the camp experience as promotional materials.
- Recognizing that potential 4-H camp teen counselors may face peer pressure not to participate in camp, recruitment materials should be engaging and modern, and should describe the nature of camp volunteerism. Camp directors should candidly talk with their camp teen counselors about their friends' perceptions of camp and engage the teen counselors in a discussion regarding changes that could be made to make 4-H camp volunteerism more appealing to reluctant teenagers.
- One of the critical elements of positive youth development settings is the presence of caring adults. Although adolescents are developmentally classified as youth themselves, the results of this study suggest that at 4-H camp, teen counselors can function in the role of "caring adults" for youth ages 9-13, in that teen counselors listen, talk, encourage, support, and empathize with campers. Thus, teen counselors not only gain valuable leadership skills at camp, but also have the opportunity to use those skills to help youth campers, which creates a mentoring relationship.
- The process whereby teen counselors were involved in focus group discussions about their 4-H camp experience was important. Teen counselors learned that their opinions, feelings, and attitudes were important to camp administrators. The importance that teen counselors placed on being involved in the evaluation process and in being "listened to" is a reminder that teen counselors should be engaged and involved (e.g., partners) in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of camp programs and the training that they receive.
- It is important that teen counselors' contribution of care and mentoring to the 4-H camp community is recognized both publicly and privately, and that camp counselors are valued and honored for their contributions that help to make camp a positive youth development experience. Any steps that teen counselors take in their leadership development, every small step towards mastery, should be recognized, especially if it contributes toward their development.

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