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The impact of a capstone farm management course on critical thinking abilities

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Abstract

While many studies about the 4-H camping experience focus on youth who are campers, few studies examine the outcomes of the experience for counselors. This study examines the extent to which 4-H camp results in transformative learning for 4-H members who serve as camp counselors, examines the perceived changes that occur within counselors, and describes the factors and characteristics of camp that result in personal transformation. The population for this study was 2012 Minnesota 4-H camp counselors. Using the Transformative Learning and the Camp Experience Staff Member Survey, the results indicated that camp counselors experienced transformative learning. Major personal changes involved developing skills for working with children and exposure to new people, activities, and experiences. Factors leading to personal transformation included the opportunity to be role models and positively impact children, opportunities for leadership and challenge, and camp traditions. This study provides support for strong and intentional camp counseling experiences that can positively impact the individual, 4-H campers, and later, the communities in which these camp counselors reside.

Keywords

4-H, camp, camp counselors, positive youth development, transformative learning

Disciplines

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Transformative Learning and the 4-H Camp Counselor Experience in Minnesota

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While many studies about the 4-H camping experience focus on youth who are campers, few studies examine the outcomes of the experience for counselors. This study examines the extent to which 4-H camp results in transformative learning for 4-H members who serve as camp counselors, examines the perceived changes that occur within counselors, and describes the factors and characteristics of camp that result in personal transformation. The population for this study was 2012 Minnesota 4-H camp counselors. Using the Transformative Learning and the Camp Experience Staff Member Survey, the results indicated that camp counselors experienced transformative learning. Major personal changes involved developing skills for working with children and exposure to new people, activities, and experiences. Factors leading to personal transformation included the opportunity to be role models and positively impact children, opportunities for leadership and challenge, and camp traditions. This study provides support for strong and intentional camp counseling experiences that can positively impact the individual, 4-H campers, and later, the communities in which these camp counselors reside.

Keywords: 4-H, camp, camp counselors, positive youth development, transformative learning

Introduction

Camping within 4-H has a long history and has been recognized as an important element of the 4-H experience. Like many other states, camping is a popular and important component of the Minnesota 4-H program. It is designed not only to provide a positive experience for the campers, but it also serves as a personal development opportunity for the teenage camp counselors. According to the Minnesota 4-H Camp Counselor Handbook, “The 4-H Camping program develops leadership and responsibility skills for teen counselors, while providing a safe

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and fun opportunity for the campers through activities, which allow them to gain knowledge and develop social skills while meeting new friends” (Cavett, 2003, p. 2).

The Minnesota 4-H camping program strives to develop leadership and responsibility skills for teen counselors. Camp counselors provide leadership to all aspects of the camp program, which includes identifying the needs of campers, finding the resources for planning camp, and implementing all camp activities. Camp counselors in Minnesota enhance their life skill development through participation in training and residential camp (Meyer, 2013). One of the benefits of the 4-H camping experience for camp counselors, according to the Minnesota 4-H Camp Counselor Handbook, is for participants to acquire skills that will be valuable to them throughout their life (Cavett, 2003).

Such a focus aligns with the American Camp Association (ACA) emphasis on youth development outcomes in every phase of the camp experience (ACA, 2005), including the development of the camp counselor. Not only does research suggest that serving as a 4-H camp counselor is a positive experience for youth (Carter & Kotrlik, 2008), it also suggests that it can be a transformational experience where young adults experience deep personal change and development (Garst, Franz, Baughman, Smith, & Peters, 2009).

In recent years, federal, state, and local budget constraints have challenged Minnesota 4-H leaders to document the impact of the organization’s programs in an effort to cull those elements that are not high impact. These constraints make it increasingly important for 4-H staff to demonstrate the positive effects of programming and identify those programs that are responsive to youth needs. As a result, there was a need to examine the impact of the camp counseling experience upon the transformation of camp counselors in Minnesota.

Purpose and Research Questions

The study sought to examine the extent to which counselors attribute personal transformational change to the camp counselor experience and to identify camp characteristics that caused the deep personal change. The objectives that guided this research study were to:

1. Determine the extent to which camp counseling caused deep personal change;
2. Identify the camp conditions that promoted or influenced personal transformation; and
3. Determine which characteristics of camp were important for personal transformation.

Review of Literature

Positive youth development involves looking at youth as necessary assets to society, not as problems (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Lerner, Almerigi, Theokas, & Lerner, 2005). Not only do

youth need to progress academically, they should also experience changes to progress emotionally, physically, socially, and civically. Organized camp and recreational programs, family, community, and other organizations also contribute to positive youth development (Witt & Caldwell, 2005).

There is a strong interest among youth development researchers and practitioners about how youth occupy their time. Youth who take part in structured activities experience more positive outcomes academically, mentally, emotionally, and socially than those youth who participate in unstructured activities (Bartko & Eccles, 2003; Mahoney, Larson, Eccles, & Lord, 2005). There is a clear link between contributing positively to society and taking part in structured activities (Hansen, Larson, & Dworkin, 2003; Mahoney et al., 2005). Structured activities favor the growth of initiative because they require focus and effort, while also being internally satisfying and voluntary (Larson, 2000).

The features of a program, which can be aligned with a quality youth development model, are directly tied to youth development outcomes. A number of necessary components must be included in a program for positive youth development outcomes to occur (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Some of those elements include opportunities to belong and make a difference; the chance for skill-building to occur; physical and psychological safety; the integration of family, school, and community efforts; supportive relationships; a developmental framework; commitment to evaluation; appropriate structure; and positive social norms (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Research also indicates the high value of an open and welcoming environment for youth programs (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). It is important for youth to feel involved and at ease to have a positive experience when they take part in programs.

The 4-H program is a widely-recognized component of the Cooperative Extension Service and is known to have positive youth development as its focus. 4-H is a leadership and educational program open to school-aged youth throughout the United States. Camping has played an instrumental role in 4-H historically. The camping movement in 4-H is popular for several reasons. Two of the most commonly listed reasons are the informality of the experience and the relationships that are cultivated at camp. Camp also gives youth the chance to work outside of their community clubs to build leadership skills and address motivation, relationship building, and team building with a new set of peers (Van Horn, Flanagan, & Thomson, 1998).

4-H camp provides a unique experience for youth campers and counselors, enabling both to undergo personal growth, especially the higher the degree of breadth, duration, and intensity. The goal of all 4-H programs is to aid in the expansion of the life skills of participants (Hendricks, 1996). Camp provides this opportunity in a community-oriented, organic environment with numerous chances to practice and grow independence, self-esteem, knowledge, responsibility, teamwork, and self-efficacy (Garst & Bruce, 2003).

As an important tenet of the 4-H experience, camp is often the focus of research. Galloway, Bourdeau, Arnold, and Nott (2013) describe a dichotomy of research related to 4-H camping – camper outcomes or the training and impact of camp counselors. While most research has focused on camper outcomes, recently, camp counseling research has garnered more attention from researchers (Ferrari & McNeely, 2007). In fact, Ferrari and McNeely (2007) offer a conceptual framework of the 4-H camp counseling experience that describes it in terms of its intensity, duration, and breadth and suggests that as each increases, participants gain more from the experience. In addition, there are differences between new and returning camp counselors when it comes to knowledge and skill development (Powell, Bixler, & Switzer, 2003).

Camp counseling provides a rich context for positive youth development and workforce preparation including various interesting and challenging activities as well as a balance of structure, responsibility, and ownership (Ferrari & McNeely, 2007). Informal and formal learning occurs as a camp counselor (Powell et al., 2003) and begins at training. According to Galloway et al. (2013), a comprehensive staff training program focused on camper outcomes that intentionally identifies and provides training pertaining to desired staff skills and behaviors is important to achieving camper outcomes.

Staff continually gain skills through practice and additional training throughout the course of camp (Galloway et al., 2013). Time spent practicing skills at camp is a primary factor in changing leadership skills for counselors (Duda, 2009) and is important because, as Ferrari and Risch (2013) espouse, teen counselors understand the consequences – positive and negative – of acting responsibly. However, what they know does not always translate into practice.

Researchers have identified and measured many outcomes associated with the benefits of camp counseling, including growth in communication, problem solving, self-responsibility, coping with stress, teamwork, leadership, and citizenship (Brandt & Arnold, 2006; Forsythe, Matysik, & Nelson, 2004; Garst & Johnson, 2005). Ohio 4-H camp counselor alumni also listed improved planning and organizing, decision making, and interpersonal skills as significant outcomes of the camp counseling experience (Digby & Ferrari, 2007).

Camp has a special place in the 4-H environment, and unlike many other 4-H activities, the camp atmosphere has little competition (Digby & Ferrari, 2007), allowing the focus to be placed on personal skill development. Counselors in a Wisconsin 4-H camp study said camp was unique because it allowed counselors to develop a stronger understanding of working with children, the chance to practice responsibility, and an opportunity to be a role model (Forsythe et al., 2004).

Slowly emerging from the camp research is an understanding of “structural and programmatic factors that result in intentional short, medium, and even long-term outcomes” (Garst et al., 2009, p. 13). Among these factors is deeper personal change – called transformative learning.

Transformative learning is the “process by which previously uncritically assimilated assumptions, beliefs, values, and perspectives are questioned and thereby become more open, permeable, and better justified” (Cranton, 2006, p. vi). It takes place when teams, individuals, or other entities develop behaviors and perspectives vastly different from their previous behaviors and perspectives (Mezirow, 2000). Transformational education recognizes the importance of building the capacity of individuals to engage in problem solving or taking actions with the “creative implementation of a purpose” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 12). A desired outcome of transformative learning is helping individuals become more self-determined (Mezirow, 2000). In other words, the ultimate goal of transformative learning is for learners to examine their current perspectives and practices and then to provide an opportunity to change those behaviors and perspectives through education (Taylor, 1997).

Transformative learning is believed to happen when individuals are unable to understand their current situations as viewed from the lens of their old beliefs and assumptions. As they acquire knowledge, individuals look for new ways to organize their thoughts and beliefs that make their new conditions and situations understandable. Because a disjunction occurs between experience and constructs, “living systems adapt by transforming themselves, and learning occurs” (O’Sullivan, 2002, p. 3).

The process of transformative learning occurs in three steps. In the first step, learners acutely realize how and why their assumptions have come to limit the way they perceive, understand, and feel about their world (Taylor, 1997). A modification of belief systems happens during the second step; during this time, learners alter their current expectations to adopt a perspective that is more unifying, refined, and inclusive. Behavioral adaptation that represents their renewed perspective happens in the third and final step.

According to the Minnesota 4-H Camp Counselor Handbook, “The 4-H Camping program develops leadership and responsibility skills for teen counselors, while providing a safe and fun opportunity for the campers through activities, which allows them to gain knowledge and develop social skills while meeting new friends” (Cavett, 2003, p. 2). Although studies to determine the effect of the camp counseling experience upon the life skills development of camp counselors have been conducted, fewer studies have been done about transformative learning among 4-H camp counselors, and no studies about either topic have been found that are specific to Minnesota.

Methods

To assess the extent to which the 4-H camp counseling experience elicited transformative learning among counselors, a descriptive survey research design was used. The “Transformative Learning and the Camp Experience Staff Member Survey” instrument that was originally used

by Garst et al. (2009) to assess the camp counselor experience was adopted and modified to fit the Minnesota camp setting. Slight changes were made to the instrument to address the differences in the duration of the camp experience and the length of camp counselor service. In addition, the instrument was further refined for online data collection using Qualtrics.

The instrument was organized to measure three constructs and collect demographic information. Prior to the first construct, an open-ended introductory question about the 4-H camp counselor's favorite experience was asked to prompt participants to begin thinking about their camp counseling experience. The first construct consisted of 39 statements and focused on personal change that resulted from camp involvement. The second construct centered on the conditions that promoted transformative (deep) change in camp staff and consisted of 34 statements. The final construct consisted of 18 statements focused on camp characteristics important for change to occur. A five-point summated scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *neutral*, 4 = *agree*, 5 = *strongly agree*) was used to measure the constructs. Because the instrument was used and validated by Garst et al. (2009), no further validity or piloting measures were completed.

The target population was camp counselors at 4-H youth camps in the state of Minnesota. The population consisted of high school and college students who served as camp counselors during the summer of 2012. The duration of service for 4-H camp counselors in Minnesota is one week or less. A census was conducted because of the small population size. Each counselor identified for this study was at least 14 years of age, was a current or former 4-H member, and had served as a 4-H camp counselor in Minnesota for at least one year. The total accessible population for this study was 75 camp counselors. IRB approval was obtained to conduct the study.

The recommendations of Ary, Jacobs, and Sorensen (2010) and Dillman, Smyth, and Christian (2008) guided the data collection process, which consisted of four electronic contacts. The first email introduced the study, asked for consent, and provided a link to the survey instrument. The second and third emails served as reminders, and the final contact was a thank-you to those who responded and a final request to participate to those who had not responded. A total of 37 participants responded, resulting in a 49% response rate. Of those who responded, 31 participants (including five respondents who were contacted by phone to address nonresponse error) completed the entire survey for a usable response rate of 41%.

Nonresponse error was addressed by interviewing a sample of nonrespondents. According to Ary et al. (2010), statistics garnered from nonrespondents can be compared to respondents to determine whether or not there are major differences between the two groups. Five people who did not respond to the web-based survey were telephoned and asked if they would respond by either the web or telephone. Each respondent was willing to answer the survey questions over the telephone. Data from these five respondents were used as late-response data. There were no significant differences between the initial respondents and telephone respondents, indicating no

significant differences between respondents and nonrespondents. Therefore, their data were included in the analysis.

Descriptive statistics were used to address all three objectives. Characteristics of 4-H camp counselors were measured in terms of age, number of years as a counselor, gender, ethnicity, years of camp experience (in any role), and camp location. Percentages and frequencies by category were calculated. Means and standard deviations were calculated for age, number of summers as a counselor, and years of camp experience in any role. Because of the number of items in the first two constructs, only the most and least agreed upon statements were reported.

Findings

Demographics

Of the 31 respondents who completed the survey in its entirety, 20 (65%) identified themselves as female, and 10 (32%) identified themselves as male. One person who responded to the rest of the demographic questions did not respond to the question about gender. Most of the respondents were 18 years of age or older ($n = 22$). The average age of participants in the study was 17.9 years of age. The average age for males was 18 years of age, and the average age for females was 17.9 years of age. In terms of ethnicity, participants in the study were a very homogenous group and were similar to the population being studied. Thirty participants (96%) identified themselves as white. One participant self-identified as black or African American.

Participants in the study had a wide array of experience as camp counselors (Table 1). Six respondents (19%) were first-year counselors, and 25 participants (81%) had been camp counselors before. The average counselor who participated in the study had 2.8 years of experience as a camp counselor.

Table 1. Respondents' Years of Experience as Camp Counselor ($n = 31$)

Years	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
One Year	6	19		
Multiple years	25	81		
Two years			6	24
Three years			9	36
Four years			5	20
Five years			5	20

Counselors were asked to describe their favorite part of camp as a counselor (Table 2). Over half of the counselors reported that working with campers was their most favorite part of camp.

Table 2. Camp Counselors' Favorite Part of Camp (n = 31)

Camp Activity	f
Working with campers	16
Recreational activities	5
Skits	5
Fellow counselors	3
Camp fires	1
Lake time	1

Degree of Perceived Transformative Learning

Participants were asked to identify the extent to which they agreed with the statement, *Participating in Minnesota 4-H camp as a counselor has caused deep personal change*. Twenty-four (78%) participants *agreed* or *strongly agreed* the camp counseling experience caused deep personal change. Six participants (19%) were *neutral* about this statement, and one participant (3%) *strongly disagreed* with this statement. The mean value associated with this statement was 4.04 (on a 5-point scale) and the standard deviation was 0.88.

Counselors were also asked the extent to which their experience as a camp counselor changed them. The highest ranking way counselors changed was by developing skills for working with children (*M* = 4.81). Other top five ways camp counseling changed counselors included being exposed to new people, being exposed to new activities, an improved ability to work with children, and being exposed to new experiences (Table 3). All of these statements were rated as *strongly agree* by participants.

Table 3. Top Five Ways Camp Counseling Changed Counselors (n = 31)

Statement	n	M	SD	Min	Max
Developed skills for working with children	31	4.81	0.40	4	5
Exposed to new people	31	4.67	0.48	4	5
Exposed to new activities	31	4.59	0.57	3	5
Improved ability to work with children	31	4.56	0.58	3	5
Exposed to new experiences	31	4.52	0.64	3	5

Note: 1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *neutral*, 4 = *agree*, 5 = *strongly agree*

The statements that respondents were least likely to *agree* with were being more likely to change what they planned to do for a career and being more interested in a particular career (Table 4). Being more aware of what they wanted to do for a career, being better able to show their identity or "true self" at home and in their community, and developing career skills received the least amount of agreement but still fell within the *agree* range.

Table 4. Bottom Five Ways Camp Counseling Changed Counselors (n = 31)

Statement	n	M	SD	Min	Max
More likely to change what I plan to do for a career	31	2.67	0.88	1	5
More interested in a particular career	31	3.37	1.01	1	5
More aware of what I want to do for a career	31	3.67	1.11	1	5
Better able to show my identity - my "true self" at home / community	31	3.70	0.61	3	5
Developed career skills	31	3.70	0.72	2	5

Note: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree

Social Factors Promoting Personal Transformation

Participants were asked to indicate social factors or conditions that may have promoted or influenced their personal transformation or change as a result of 4-H camp. The highest rated social factor for promoting personal transformation was the opportunity to be a role model for children (Table 5). All six of the highest rated statements fell within the *strongly agree* range.

Table 5. Top Six Social Factors Promoting Personal Transformation Among Counselors (n = 31)

Statement	n	M	SD	Min	Max
Opportunities to be a role model for children	31	4.62	0.50	4	5
Opportunities for leadership	31	4.58	0.64	3	5
Camp traditions and rituals such as singing and song leading	31	4.54	0.58	2	5
Camp traditions and rituals like campfire programs	31	4.50	0.58	3	5
Opportunities to be challenged	31	4.46	0.76	2	5
Opportunities to impact children positively	31	4.46	0.65	3	5

Note: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree

Relationships developed with a supervisor received the lowest overall ranking on the list of social factors promoting transformative learning among counselors (Table 6). It is worth noting, however, that the five lowest ranking statements still fell within the *agree* range.

Table 6. Bottom Five Social Factors Promoting Personal Transformation Among Counselors (n = 31)

Statement	n	M	SD	Min	Max
Relationships you developed with a supervisor	31	3.54	0.90	2	5
Relationships with Extension staff	31	3.69	0.79	2	5
Opportunities to reflect	31	3.77	0.82	2	5
Support and encouragement you received from a supervisor	31	3.81	0.85	2	5
Opportunity to compare home life with camp life	31	3.85	0.97	1	5

Note: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree

Characteristics of Camp Leading to Personal Transformation

In addition to perceived changes as a result of the camp experience and factors or conditions of camp promoting personal transformation, Minnesota 4-H Youth Camp counselors were also asked about characteristics of camp that were important for the personal changes they attributed to their experience as camp counselors (Table 7). Camp being a place where counselors can be accepted ($M = 4.54$) was rated by counselors as the top overall characteristic that was important for personal change. Camp being a place to experience isolation and camp being a place to experience a rural setting were the least important characteristics for personal transformation at camp, according to camp counselors. Both of these statements fell within the *neutral* range.

Table 7. Characteristics of Camp Attributing to Transformative Learning ($n = 31$)

Statement	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Min	Max
Camp is a place where I can be accepted	31	4.54	0.65	3	5
Camp is a place where I feel like I belong	31	4.50	0.58	3	5
Camp is a safe place	31	4.46	0.58	3	5
Camp is a place where I can trust others	31	4.46	0.51	4	5
Camp is a place where I can be open	31	4.35	0.75	3	5
Camp allows me to develop new skills over time	31	4.23	0.65	3	5
Camp is where I practice independence	31	4.23	0.76	2	5
Camp allows me to learn new skills	31	4.19	0.63	3	5
Camp allows me to get away from technology	31	4.08	0.93	1	5
Camp allows me to experience nature	31	4.00	0.75	2	5
Camp allows me to master new skills	31	4.00	0.69	3	5
Camp is a place without stereotypical groups	31	3.88	0.95	2	5
Camp is a place where people don't judge me	31	3.81	0.80	2	5
Camp is seasonal	31	3.69	1.05	1	5
Camp allows me to escape home life	31	3.69	1.05	1	5
Camp is a place where I can be emotional	31	3.54	0.90	1	5
Camp allows me to experience a rural setting	31	3.38	0.98	1	5
Camp allows me to experience isolation	31	3.27	1.08	1	5

Note: 1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *neutral*, 4 = *agree*, 5 = *strongly agree*

Discussion and Conclusions

In general, 4-H youth camp counselors in Minnesota experience transformative learning as a result of their experience as camp counselors. Most 4-H youth camp counselors agreed that transformative learning had occurred as a result of their counselor experiences. Serving as a role model for children, being challenged, having opportunities to impact children positively, having opportunities for leadership development, and leading camp traditions such as singing and campfire programs were the primary factors that promoted personal transformation. Major personal changes experienced by camp counselors included developing skills for working with

children and being exposed to new people, new activities, and new experiences. The characteristics of camp that were most important for personal transformation included acceptance, sense of belonging, and feeling safe in an environment where openness and trustworthiness existed. Relationships with supervisors and Extension staff and support and encouragement from supervisors were not leading factors for promoting transformative learning, which could also be said of opportunities to reflect at camp.

A promising finding is that the four characteristics of camp which counselors most strongly attributed to transformative learning describe a safe emotional and physical environment. This is one of the eight essential elements of the 4-H youth development program (National 4-H Council, 2015). 4-H programming should occur in a location where the risk of physical harm is low. Likewise, the emotional environment should be one in which participants will not be threatened or insulted (Ferrari, 2003). The fact that counselors strongly recognize the presence of one of the eight essential elements of 4-H programming at camp is positive.

Developing a positive relationship with caring adults is another one of the eight essential elements of the 4-H program. It is interesting to note statements that measured this element ranked lowest when counselors were asked to rate social factors that promoted personal transformation. While these statements still fell within the *agree* range, which might mean that the positive relationships were present, they were not a significant factor leading to personal transformation for camp counselors in Minnesota. Because of the busy and active nature of the programming, counselors spend more time around campers and fellow counselors during camp, so it might be more difficult for counselors to reflect upon their relationships with adults. Additionally, because camp programming is focused on the campers, it is highly likely that little to no effort or emphasis is placed on the professional development of the camp counselors. If the experience is to be transformative for the counselors, a more formal process is recommended to both identify the learning outcomes for camp counselors and components necessary for positive youth development outcomes as recommended by Eccles and Gootman (2002) which would ensure both the experiences and time for self-reflection leading to transformational learning.

The findings in this study are consistent with Brandt and Arnold's (2006) study that found 4-H camp counselors did not feel their camp counseling experience led them toward a career that involved working with children. Studies about 4-H camp counselors in other states found that counselors could identify at least one skill that was developed as a result of camp counseling that would help them in a job they desired in the future (Forsythe et al., 2004), the camp counseling experience provides an opportunity to learn about potential future careers (Digby & Ferrari, 2007), and camp counseling can highly influence career choice of counselors (Genson, 2010).

Similar to developing relationships with caring adults, statements measuring the perceived future career value of the camp counseling experience still fell within the *agree* range. One possible

reason could be that some of the counselors have already selected a career path. Participants in the survey were never asked why they wanted to serve as counselors, but three of the top five statements in this construct had a social dimension; counselors enjoyed working with children, meeting new people, and improving their ability to work with children. Furthermore, because more than three-quarters of counselors had been both counselors before and had five or more years of experience at 4-H camp as a camper or counselor, there is an element of tradition with the camp experience. Tradition and the social aspect of camp counseling might be more major factors leading teenage 4-H members to want to be camp counselors than career exploration. Further research is needed to determine if individuals continue to serve as camp counselors as a means of professional development or because of the ritualistic nature of the experience.

This study contributes to the body of literature about camp counselors by measuring and documenting the experiences of 4-H camp counselors in Minnesota, which had not formally been done. The study is also unique because the length of the camp counseling experience is relatively short (i.e., typically one week or less) compared to the duration of the experience in many other states. Despite the short amount of time counselors are at camp with campers, counselors still believe the experience was transformative, and with more years of experience, the number of counselors who agreed that their experience as a counselor was transformative continued to increase, which is supported by Powell and colleagues (2003).

Recommendations and Implications

While this study serves as a baseline for studying the 4-H camp counseling experience of Minnesota 4-H Youth Camp counselors, there are a few recommendations for the staff who work with camp counselors. One recommendation is to be intentional about the inclusion of introspective reflection for camp counselors. Reflection is a major component of the transformative learning process (Kerton & Sinclair, 2010; Robertson, 1996), but it was not a major factor for promoting transformative learning among camp counselors who participated in the survey. Reflective activity might be in the form of required journaling or sharing reflections verbally in counselor meetings during camp, which would add a professional development component to counselor meetings. This sort of reflection is often included in the camper experience, but not all camp counselors are given this same opportunity.

Applying the experiential learning model to the camp counseling experience would be one way to assure reflection occurs. The experiential learning cycle is a model for using an activity to teach life skills and learning to apply those life skills to other situations that has five steps: experience, share, process, generalize, and apply (Norman & Jordan, 2006). While the first two steps generally occur for camp counselors throughout the day and during daily counselor meetings, the last three steps tend to happen much less frequently and should be developed more intentionally for camp counselors.

A second recommendation would be to develop a performance evaluation for camp counselors. A single uniform evaluation could be used for all counselors, or 4-H Extension Educators could work with State 4-H Evaluation Specialists to develop a performance appraisal for each camp, based upon the uniqueness of each camp. Relationships developed with a supervisor, relationships developed with Extension staff, and support and encouragement received from a supervisor all received low ratings as factors for promoting personal transformation. Structured feedback from supervisors and 4-H Extension Educators and staff might provide a meaningful basis to improve these relationships. If performance reviews are conducted, job descriptions for camp counselors should be written and shared when applications are distributed. This would ensure applicants are aware of expectations before they accept the position. It would also provide a meaningful basis for the performance review as another form of transformative professional development.

A third recommendation would be to develop a system for resource sharing. A community of practice repository would assist camp leaders who are intentional about building and improving the camping experience for both campers and counselors. This repository would provide a venue to share best practices and scholarly camping methods and tools among camp leaders throughout the state and nation. This information would be beneficial to camps where introspective reflection does not happen and to camps that are looking for new ideas about how to incorporate this sort of reflection into the camp counselor experience.

This study has implications for both Minnesota and other state 4-H programs that offer camping experiences to their members. Transformative learning is relevant for positive youth development because it augments the personal development of camp counselors. Erik Erikson developed a chart of the psychosocial development of individuals throughout their lifespans (Slater, 2003). Camp counselors – mostly being between the ages of 12 and 18 – fall in Erikson's adolescent stage of development (Slater, 2003). Identity and social relationships are important events for individuals at this life stage. According to Erikson, it is imperative for individuals in the adolescent stage to establish a personal identity (Slater, 2003). Doing so helps individuals stay true to themselves, but failure creates a weak sense of self.

Staff members associated with camp can examine a variety of factors and characteristics of camp to maximize the potential for transformative learning to occur for counselors. Even if several factors and characteristics of camp are improved upon, there is still no guarantee counselors will experience transformative learning. To have a transformational experience would require counselors to have a change of beliefs based upon their experiences at camp. If counselors enter the camp counseling experience with a healthy worldview, they might not have a transformative learning experience at camp, even if every aspect of camp is outstanding.

A strong and intentional camp counseling experience can benefit 4-H camp counselors, 4-H campers, and the communities beyond 4-H in which 4-H camp counselors exist. The results of this study and future studies provide support for and describe changes that occur in older 4-H youth as a result of the camp counselor experience in Minnesota.

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