Enhancing Youth Outcomes and Organizational Practices Through a Camp-Based Reading Program

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Abstract

Many children experience summer learning loss during the summer as measured by grade-level equivalents on standardized tests. Camp-based reading programs are a promising strategy to reduce summer learning loss. Situated within a positive youth development (PYD) theoretical approach, this study explored the efficacy of a U.S. camp-based reading program called Explore 30 and examined promising practices for reading interventions in camps as a mechanism for enhancing youth reading outcomes. Youth and director surveys were used to collect quantitative and qualitative data about program impacts. Approximately 70% of participants read for at least 30 min each day. A paired-samples t test found a significant difference (in the positive direction) in feelings about reading from pretest (M = 2.09, SD = 1.20) to posttest (M = 1.89, SD = 1.08), $t(590)$ = 5.96, p < .001. Findings suggest that the program was an appropriate model for enhancing camp organizational capacity for summer reading. Implications for practice and recommendations for research are addressed.

Keywords

reading, positive youth development, summer learning, enjoyment, camp

Introduction

Many children experience summer learning loss, which means they lose academic skills as measured by grade-level equivalents on standardized tests. Because of

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summer learning loss, children's test scores are lower when they return to school in the fall than when they left school in the spring (Cooper, Nye, Charlton, Lindsay, & Greathouse, 1996; Downey, von Hippel, & Broh, 2004; Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson, 2000). Summer learning loss impacts all youth, regardless of gender, ethnicity, or IQ.

Reading books is the best predictor of reading achievement, reading comprehension, vocabulary, and reading speed (Anderson, Fielding, & Wilson, 1988; Stanovich & Cunningham, 1993). Unfortunately, reading is declining in America, and this decline has civic, social, cultural, and economic implications (National Endowment for the Arts, 2010). Reading skills are important for youth in a variety of ways. As Arend and Rogers (2013) noted, "In an age where children are categorized based on their performance on reading and writing measures, there are high stakes for literacy development. Imagine the difference in self-concept for a child labeled 'struggling' and one labeled as 'above grade-level'" (p. 41). Camp-based reading programs may provide an opportunity to reduce summer learning loss by exposing youth to academic enrichment in an experiential setting (Dewey, 1938). Although summer reading programs in U.S. camps are common, few studies of camp-based reading programs have been conducted. This study examined the impact of a camp-based reading program on youth reading outcomes.

Developmental Outcomes of Camp Experiences

For more than 150 years, American summer camps have thrived as sites for both recreational and educational enrichment. Defined as "organized experiences in group living in the outdoors that use trained leaders to accomplish intentional goals" (Henderson, Bialeschki, & James, 2007, p. 755), camp has evolved over time through four distinct stages, including the Recreational Stage (1860-1920), the Educational Stage (1920-1950), the Social Orientation and Responsibility Stage (1950-1970), and the New Directions Stage (1970-present; James, 2009). Yet despite evolving priorities, even the earliest camp directors recognized the educational value of the summer camp experience (Paris, 2008).

The developmental outcomes of the camp experience for young people are well documented (Bialeschki, Henderson, & James, 2007; Garst & Bruce, 2003; Thurber, Scanlin, Scheuler, & Henderson, 2007). The first large-scale study of U.S. camps was the American Camp Association's (ACA; 2005) National Youth Development Outcomes study, through which 5,000 youth, staff, and parents from a representative national sample of camps were asked about the ways youth benefited from the camp experience. Results from this study indicated that campers experienced growth in a variety of areas, including self-esteem, peer relationships, independence, adventure and exploration, leadership, environmental awareness, friendship skills, values and decisions, social comfort, and spirituality.

Other research, influenced by the Community Action Framework for Positive Youth Development proposed by Gambone, Klem, and Connell (2002) and the work of Eccles and Gootman (2002), has revealed that camp experiences provide many of the supports and opportunities necessary for positive youth development (PYD; ACA,

2006), including *supportive relationships, safety, youth involvement*, and *skill building*. The provision of these developmental benefits and contextual supports and opportunities suggests that camp experiences provide young people with the proper setting for learning, which could be called *learning readiness*. In other words, through camp experiences (and other experiences that provide the supports and opportunities for PYD), young people experience a readiness for learning because they are surrounded by caring adults, they feel emotionally and physically safe, are involved in hands-on activities that facilitate adventure, exploration, and leadership, and thus are prepared for impactful learning engagement. As Garst, Browne, and Bialeschki (2011) posited, "Opportunities foster positive development by offering novel, challenging, and engaging experiences that effectively open the learning pathways of young people" (p. 74). In fact, in a comprehensive review of learning outside the classroom titled *Supplementary Education: The Hidden Curriculum of High Academic Achievement*, Gordon, Bridglall, and Meroe (2005) suggested that out-of-school time, experiences such as those provided by camps, create a number of positive social and psychological conditions that prepare young people for academic learning when youth return to school after summer vacation.

Summer Learning Loss

Education researchers for over a century have been interested in a seasonal approach to learning that seeks to determine whether or not there are months during the year when children are more likely to make greater academic gains and progress (White, 1906). Across much of the nation, excluding those on a "year-round calendar," school systems follow a traditional agrarian calendar, originally created to allow for farming and labor rather than modern vacation and leisure. Thus, the potential for summer months as a period during which overall academic achievement is either enhanced or reduced has received increasing scrutiny.

Research suggests that many children experience summer learning loss during the summer months, which means they forget the equivalent of up to 2 months of academic content as measured by grade-level equivalents on standardized tests. Because of this "summer slide," children's test scores are lower when they return to school in the fall than when they left school in the spring (Downey et al., 2004; Entwisle et al., 2000). The cumulative effect of summer learning loss is striking. On average, students generally lose more than 2½ months of grade-level equivalency in mathematical computation skills and almost 2 months of reading achievement for low-income students. In addition, studies reveal that the greatest areas of summer loss for all students, regardless of socioeconomic status, are in factual or procedural knowledge (Cooper et al., 1996). Therefore, summer learning loss impacts all youth, regardless of gender, ethnicity, or IQ.

Summer Reading Programs

Providing youth with summer reading opportunities can help them develop a range of reading skills. For example, reading practice improves word recognition, builds

vocabulary, and improves reading fluency and comprehension. Reading can also be an impactful source of world knowledge and a way for youth to develop an understanding of complex language syntax and grammar (Locke, 1988). The number of minutes spent reading during out-of-school time, even if only a small amount, correlates positively with reading achievement (Anderson et al., 1988).

Summer reading programs (SRPs), a staple for most public libraries and some museums since the turn of the century, are commonplace. A 2001 survey of Pennsylvania public libraries found that children who attended SRPs read on a higher level than those who did not attend, and participants also spent more time reading than nonparticipants. Furthermore, teachers of SRP participants reported that 31% maintained or improved their reading skills compared with 5% of nonparticipants (Celano & Neuman, 2001).

One of the most highly regarded SRPs is the California Reading Outcomes Initiative (California Library Association, 2013), cited by the American Library Association as a summer reading best practice. Based on California Library Association survey data collected during the summer of 2013 from 9,996 children, teens, and adults in 15 library jurisdictions found that the majority of youth program participants enjoyed the summer reading program (90%), shared books and talked about books they read (61%), and planned to come back to the library after the summer (86%).

Camp-Based Reading Programs

For over a century, reading has been a common activity in U.S. summer camps (Coale, 1914). In 2011, the ACA conducted an environmental scan of camp-based reading programs and found that approximately 220 ACA camps were providing camp reading programs reaching more than 360,000 youth across 36 states (Garst, Morgan, & Bialeschki, 2011). Because camp experiences are an experiential youth development setting that supports learning to engage a large number of youth during the summer months, camp-based reading programs (CRPs) may be an effective strategy to provide youth with academic and reading engagement. As previously noted, reading books is an excellent predictor of reading achievement, and a number of CRPs have targeted time spent reading and attitudes toward reading as primary program goals (Arend & Rogers, 2013; Garst, Morgan, & Bialeschki, 2011).

Few CRP-related studies have been published, and those that have been published examined different camp models serving different camp populations. Van Westervelt, Johnson, Westervelt, and Murrill (1998) examined the impact of a 6-week summer camp on self-concept and reading/writing skills of dyslexic students aged 9 to 14 years from public, private, and specialized private schools. Youth attending camp improved significantly in phonetic reading skills but not reading speed. Schacter and Jo (2005) used an experimental design to examine the outcomes of the Read to Achieve program, a 7-week literacy promotion day camp for first-grade students from low-income families. In this program, 2 hr of camp time each day were devoted to reading activities, and the remainder of each day was devoted to typical camp activities. Reading comprehension scores for program participants were 41% higher 3 months following

the program than the scores for the control group. Program participants also reported increased time spent reading books. A randomized field trial approach was used by Borman, Goetz, and Dowling (2009) to examine the impact of a 6-week summer day camp on summer learning outcomes of 93 treatment and 35 control students from high-poverty schools in Baltimore, Maryland, using the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA). Practical and significant treatment effects were found.

Arend and Rogers (2013) developed a CRP as part of a 26-day resident camp targeting sixth-grade youth and used the Elementary Reading Attitude Scale (ERAS) by McKenna and Kear (1990) to measure attitudes toward reading. In that program, youth were engaged in a combination of reading and writing activities for 75 min on most days. The researchers found significant differences in participants' attitudes toward recreational and academic reading for both male and female youth. Male youth experienced the greatest amount of attitude change toward reading ($p < .001$) from pretest and posttest.

Theoretical Context

This study was situated within a PYD theoretical approach and informed by experiential education practices. Across two decades of research, the field of youth development has experienced a shift in practice from single issue programs that sought to ameliorate problem behaviors to more comprehensive strategies that recognize and emphasize the needs and competencies inherent in all youth (Barcelona & Quinn, 2011). A PYD approach acknowledges that all youth have strengths and that youth will develop in positive ways when their strengths are aligned with appropriate supports and opportunities (Benson, Scales, Hamilton, & Semsa, 2006). Lerner (2004) identified the "Big Three" characteristics of PYD programs as (a) positive and sustained adult-youth relations, (b) life-skill-building activities, and (c) opportunities for youth participation in and leadership of valued family, school, and community activities. In this study, skill-building experiences provided to youth through camp-based reading along with the support of caring adult staff were viewed to be one such opportunity to build PYD. Situating this camp-based reading study within a PYD approach was supported by the previously mentioned research on camp experiences that suggested that such experiences provide many of the supports and opportunities necessary for PYD (ACA, 2006), including supportive relationships, safety, youth involvement, and skill building.

Reading in the camp setting corresponds with Conrad and Hedin's (1982) definition of experiential education as that which is

> offered as an integral part of the general school curriculum, but taking place outside of the conventional classroom, where students are in new roles featuring significant tasks with real consequences, and where the emphasis is on learning by doing with associated reflection. (p. 58)

The results from the formal measures used in their study demonstrated that experiential programs do have a positive impact on the psychological, social, and intellectual

development of the student participants consistent with the findings of this study. Furthermore, Gass, Gillis, and Russell (2012) described several principles of experiential education practice that inform a theoretical framework for CRPs, including the following:

- Experiences are structured to require the learner to take initiative, make decisions, and be accountable for results.
- Learners are engaged intellectually, emotionally, socially, soulfully, and/or physically. This involvement produces a perception that the learning task is authentic.
- The results of the learning are personal and form the basis for future experience and learning.

Reading was also recognized as a common leisure activity for children (Nippold, Duthie, & Larsen, 2005). Leisure activities, settings, and experiences have need-satisfying properties that impact a person's interest in, and satisfaction with, the leisure activity (Mannell, 1999). Attitudes and feelings toward reading can cause a young person to approach or avoid reading situations, so understanding specific motivations for reading is important. Motivations for leisure reading vary, and may include enjoyment or learning (Gibson & Levin, 1975), but the most important predictor of the amount one reads is enjoyment (Stokmans, 1999), even when sociodemographic variables and the amount of spare time are controlled for.

Purpose

This study explored the efficacy of a U.S. camp-based reading program called Explore 30 and examined promising practices for reading interventions in camps as a mechanism for enhancing youth reading outcomes. Specifically, it was hypothesized as follows:

Hypothesis 1: Participating youth would show gains in reading enjoyment.
Hypothesis 2: Participating organizations would learn effective practices for delivering a camp reading program.

Method

Program and Participants

The ACA is a national 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization that serves as the leading nonprofit working to enrich lives through the camp experience, providing research, educational resources, and technical assistance to camp and youth development professionals. In 2011, 218 day and resident camps enrolled to participate in the ACA's Explore 30 Camp Reading Program. Participating camps agreed to integrate Explore 30 either formally or informally into their camp program, and provide youth with at

least 30 min of reading time per day for each day of the camp session. Thirty minutes was established as the reading goal based on research findings that 30 min of daily reading was effective in producing positive outcomes in reading proficiency (Ohio Department of Education, 2000; Wright, 1992).

Explore 30 provided campers with experiential education opportunities that encouraged taking initiative, making decisions, and accountability for results. Camps were invited to adapt the Explore 30 program to accommodate the various needs of individual camps, resulting in a range of formal and informal reading practices. For instance, some camps scheduled regular library programs led by a staff member to introduce book selection techniques to campers, practice read-alouds, and encourage book discussions with peers. Other camps instituted a bedtime reading ritual during which counselors read a chapter book to a tent or cabin of campers over the course of several evenings. Many camps used the "drop everything and read" (DEAR) strategy during rest hour or free time, whereas other camps organized "education clubs" to formally link reading experiences to specific learning outcomes in nature, art, or athletics. To support the various initiatives, ACA provided a variety of resources to Explore 30 camps, including ideas for integrating reading in camp, staff checklist for reading aloud to campers, and reading scaffolding guide for staff. To encourage accountability, ACA provided camps with optional certificates of achievement, camper reading logs, and group reading logs. Table 1 shows the Explore 30 logic model, which includes the goals, inputs, outputs, and the targeted short- and long-term program outcomes.

Instrumentation

Surveys were used to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. First, camp directors were required to complete an "Organizational Profile Survey" when they enrolled in the program. Second, youth campers completed a "Camper Survey" on the first and last days of the camp session. Third, camp directors completed a web-based "Director Survey" after the end of the camp session. The Organizational Profile Survey asked questions related to camp name, camp type, number of campers expected to be served, demographics of campers served, description of reading programs currently provided at the camp (if applicable), and reading program needs of the camp. The Camper Survey, administered in a pretest and posttest design, was a one-page printed self-report survey that measured number of minutes read each day, perceptions of reading (reading interest, reading enjoyment), and components of the program that campers enjoyed the most/least. The Director Survey included both quantitative and qualitative questions related to the number of minutes read, perceptions of camper change in reading interest attributed to Explore 30, and perceptions of the organizational impact of Explore 30 involvement. Responses to questions on the Director Survey, such as those related to their perceptions of camper reading interest, were influenced by director and staff observations of campers and their interactions and conversations with campers.

Table 1. Explore 30 Program Evaluation Logic Model.

Goals	Inputs	Outputs	Short-term outcomes	Long-term outcomes
Increased organizational capacity to provide camp-based reading programs. Increased reading enjoyment and engagement among youth campers participating in Explore 30.	Camps enrolled in Explore 30 and advocating for summer reading. Access to Explore 30 Web portal reading resources. Youth involved in the program. Staff trained to support reading experiences. Books and other reading materials. Partners who provide research support materials.	Number of camps participating in Explore 30. Number of camps advocating for the importance of reading to address summer learning loss. Number of youth participating at each camp. Number of books and other reading materials available to youth. Number of partners who provided reading support materials. Promising practices learned or adopted at each camp.	Camps will experience increased capacity to deliver a camp-based reading program. Camps will learn or adopt promising practices for youth literacy and reading. Youth will report greater interest in, and enjoyment with, reading.	Camps will be positioned as youth literacy advocates. Youth will be better prepared to enter school with lower levels of summer learning loss after participating in reading through Explore 30.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data from both the director and camper surveys were analyzed with IBM SPSS descriptive statistics. Qualitative data from the surveys were coded and grouped by emergent themes. These themes were further analyzed to determine patterns and conceptual consistency in the responses (Patton, 2002).

Results

Camp directors from 49 ($n = 49$) of the 218 camps completed the Explore 30 Director Survey (22% response rate). The majority of directors who completed the survey were administrators/directors (59.1%), followed by program managers/directors (34.1%) and instructional staff (6.8%). A large percentage (45.6%) of camps were affiliated with an agency, followed by independent for-profit camps (24.6%), independent not-for-profit camps (14%), religious camps (8.8%), municipal or government camps (7%), and 1.6% identified as other. Directors identified that they served 13,000 youth through Explore 30 from a range of economic levels. Just over 12% of participants were reported to be at poverty level, 24% were low income, 59% were middle income, and the remaining participants were considered high income.

Youth from a convenience sample of 7 camps completed the Explore 30 Camper Survey ($N = 591$). These campers were predominantly female ($n = 313$, 53%) and their ages ranged from 3 to 18 years (M age $= 9.68$). Campers' grade level was between preschool and 12th grade. Nearly 12% were in pre-K to kindergarten, 58% of the campers were in elementary school, 18% were in middle school, and 12% were in high school.

Directors and campers reported the number of minutes that campers read each day at camp. Both directors and campers reported that just over 30% of campers read for 15 min each day. Nearly 50% of directors reported that campers read for approximately 30 min each day, whereas campers' self-report was slightly smaller at 42%. In addition, directors reported that 11% of campers read for 45 min daily, whereas campers' self-report was slightly higher at 15%. More than 7% of directors, compared with 13% from the camper survey, reported reading for 1 hr or more each day. Comparing the data across campers and directors suggests that approximately 70% of youth participating in Explore 30 read for at least 30 min or more each day of their camp session.

Directors also reported on campers' reading interest. On a scale of 1 to 5, where $1 = false$ and $5 = true$, directors indicated that campers were more likely to read during free time (3.90) and more interested in reading (3.78) because of Explore 30. In addition, campers were asked about their feelings toward reading prior to and after participating in Explore 30. A paired-samples t test was used to compare the means on campers' feelings about reading where 1 = "loved to read" and 5 = "hated reading." There was a significant difference (in the positive direction) in the mean scores of camper measures of "feelings about reading" from pretest ($M = 2.09$, $SD = 1.20$) to posttest ($M = 1.89$, $SD = 1.08$), $t(590) = 5.96$ $p < .001$. In addition, almost half of all

participants (49%) shared that what they liked best about the program was "reading by myself" followed by 33% who enjoyed "reading with counselors." These results suggest that campers' feelings about reading improved following their participation in Explore 30.

Qualitative data analysis from the director surveys identified themes related to organizational capacity building for the provision of reading in day and resident camps, including (a) increased interest in reading by campers, (b) enhanced learning opportunities, (c) increased sense of community in camp, and (d) promotion of both PYD and academic outcomes. The reading resources provided through Explore 30 were critical for capacity building. More than 91% of directors shared that books provided by Explore 30 partners were the most important resource they received through the program.

The skill-building dimension of PYD was stressed by camp directors. Skills mentioned most often by directors included life skills and reading confidence.

One idea that directors repeatedly mentioned was that Explore 30 encouraged campers to see reading as a fun activity; campers were excited about reading and would pursue opportunities to read on their own. Frontline program staff played an important role in encouraging campers to read. As one director shared,

> Children were more likely to read when they saw their peers reading. They also enjoyed the chance to read books together as partners and share the book. The main difference was that children began to choose reading as an activity when there was free time.

These free time periods offered campers a wide range of activity options, yet many chose reading. Directors also noted that Explore 30 supported other learning opportunities at camp and they were able to integrate the program into other activities and programs.

In some cases, directors specifically mentioned that the program was not successful. Challenges with regard to program implementation included failure to create buy-in from program staff, improper preprogram planning and organization, and insufficient program resources and organizational support. Camps that reported fewer program benefits commented that they lacked the resources to adequately implement the program. The most commonly cited recommendation was the need for more reading materials. A particularly salient finding was the importance of program intentionality when determining when campers read, where campers read, and how reading was integrated into other camp activities. Camp directors who failed to start their program planning early were less successful than those who allowed sufficient time for program planning.

Discussion

The results of this study suggest that the Explore 30 Camp Reading Program was an appropriate model for enhancing organizational capacity for summer reading for youth attending U.S. camps. Data from both campers and staff supported that approximately

70% of youth participating in the program read for 30 min or more each day of their camp session, providing an experiential learning opportunity for students to learn academic skills outside the school setting.

Explore 30 was also an effective approach for enhancing youth outcomes in the areas of reading enjoyment and engagement, which supports the results of similar CRP studies (Arend & Rogers, 2013). A significant positive difference was found in the mean scores of campers' self-report measures of "feelings about reading" from pretest to posttest. Furthermore, camp directors indicated that campers were more likely to read during free time and more interested in reading because of Explore 30. These results lend support to the relationship Stokmans (1999) found between enjoyment and time spent reading.

Providing youth with the opportunity to read at least 30 min each day appeared to be not only programmatically practical but also sufficient for producing the desired impacts on reading attitudes as suggested by previous research (Ohio Department of Education, 2000; Wright, 1992). Although some CRPs provide youth with longer reading periods ranging from 75 to 120 min, this study suggests that positive impacts are possible through 30 min of daily reading.

Camp directors also reported learning a number of promising practices for incorporating reading into camp programs including creating a camp library, integrating reading into other camp activities, and incorporating writing into camp activities. Youth serving organizations that offer CRPs are encouraged to provide youth with opportunities consistent with an experiential education approach, including offering a wide range of reading resources, integrating reading into existing programs, and exploring creative way to naturally include writing or journaling into camp activities. Providing books or children's magazines for each camper to take home at the end of camp, and building connections between campers, families, and local community organizations such as libraries and other summer learning providers may facilitate postcamp reading.

The challenges that some camps experienced with integrating Explore 30 in camp highlight several strategies that camps need to consider before planning a CRP. Proper planning, securing staff buy-in and engagement beforehand, and incorporating sufficient resources and support were found to be critical factors separating those camps that successfully implemented Explore 30 and those that did not. The importance of programming with intention to achieve targeted results, as identified in this study, has been a clear trend in the camp and youth development literatures (Bialeschki et al., 2007; Mainieri & Anderson, 2014; Walker, 2006).

The study findings reflected two of the "Big Three" PYD tenets found in the youth development literature (Lerner, 2004), including positive relationships with peers and adults and engagement in skill-building activities. The role of frontline camp staff as supportive adults during reading time was particularly impactful for facilitating PYD. The third PYD tenet—opportunities for youth to be involved in family, school, or community leadership—was less evident in this study; however, campers who were engaged in leadership opportunities such as reading aloud to other campers as a part of Explore 30 may have experienced a transfer of benefits to their homes, schools, or

communities. Whether or not such CRP-related leadership opportunities are sustained beyond the on-site camp experience needs further study.

The impact of CRPs on academic experiential learning outcomes also needs further examination. Although the challenges of using the experimental randomized control trial in camps have been noted (Bialeschki, Henderson, Browne, & Hickerson, 2011), an exploration of CRP impacts using a randomized, control group and a pre–post design might provide greater rigor and enhance our understanding of the efficacy of camp-based reading strategies. In some program settings, particularly where camp–school partnerships already exist, the implementation of a randomized control design may be more feasible.

Camp programs in the United States vary from those offered in other countries, and the findings of this study may therefore reflect a uniquely American approach to the implementation of a CRP. Although some researchers have found elements inherent to camp experience that transcend national and cultural boundaries (Fine & Tuvshin, 2010), the impacts associated with Explore 30 may be difficult to replicate through international camp programs due to language, custom, and value system differences (Hantrais & Mangen, 1996).

Effectively implementing new programs such as Explore 30 across camps can be a challenge because camp programming formats and foci vary considerably (Bialeschki et al., 2011). For this reason, flexible programming models are particularly valuable to practitioners (Berkel, Mauricio, Schoenfelder, & Sandler, 2011). Explore 30 provided a reading program structure that could be adapted to fit a range of informal, experiential settings. When high-quality programs intentionally designed to meet target outcomes are integrated with other characteristics of camp experiences like sustained duration and intensity, camps not only make short-term impacts on the developmental outcomes and attitudes of youth but also become transformative experiences with lasting benefits (Garst, Franz, Baughman, Smith, & Peters, 2009).

Authors' Note

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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