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Using Single-Case Participatory Action Research as a Methodology to Explore Staff Experiences in Appalachian Summer Camp Communities

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Community educators have long known the value of direct experience in the learning process. Participatory Action Research (PAR) extends this philosophy to the realm of research. This article examines the value of using Single-Case PAR involving a member of an Appalachian camp staff community as a practitioner researcher working alongside university scientists in studying the type and conditions of transformative learning in young adult camp staff. The involvement of the practitioner researcher in the methodology, data analysis, data interpretation, and dissemination of findings resulted in a more accurate, richer, and thicker description of the camp staff members' transformative learning experiences. The benefits of involving practitioner researchers are examined, as well as promising practices for using Single-Case PAR in community-based educational environments.

Introduction

Community educators have long known the value of direct experience in the learning process (Percy, 2005). Participatory Action Research (PAR)—a common model for community engagement—extends this philosophy to the realm of research. PAR involves researchers and participants in the collaborative design and implementation of community development projects with the goal of enhancing understanding and, ultimately, promoting individual and collective empowerment and/or social change (McIntyre, 2008).

PAR, which has roots in social psychology, builds on research and group dynamics models developed by psychologist Kurt Lewin in the early-to-mid 1900s. Lewin (1946) coined the term “action research” in his work to reorient the social sciences towards research that would help practitioners and researchers to jointly address the social, political, and economic problems of the day. As Torbert (1991) suggests, action research challenges traditional social science by moving beyond knowledge developed by outside experts who sample a range of variables, to an active moment-to-moment theorizing, data collecting, and inquiry occurring in the midst of a living, emergent community. PAR promotes the use of strategies in which participants are actively involved in research decisions as co-researchers (Reason & Bradbury, 1991).

Camp is an important setting for community-based summer learning and youth engagement. Summer camp experiences provide youth with a range of developmental outcomes (American Camp Association, 2005; Bialeschki, Henderson, & James, 2007) and

frontline staff receive a diverse set of leadership and workforce development benefits through camp experiences that contribute to staff members' growth into fully functioning adults and community members (Garst, Browne, & Bialeschki, 2011; Johnson, Goldman, Garey, Britner, & Weaver, 2011). Although interest in research about camp communities has increased over the past decade, PAR has been used infrequently in the camp environment even though camp community members and stakeholders have a vested interest in research related to camp issues and conditions. A paucity of research has explored community member involvement as practitioner researchers and related promising practices for this work (Hanson, 2011).

The context for this research was Appalachian summer camp communities. Appalachia is an approximately 200,000 square mile geographic and cultural region in the eastern United States stretching from the southern tip of New York State to the northern portions of Alabama, Mississippi, and Georgia (Appalachian Regional Commission, 2012). In the 1960s and 1970s Appalachia emerged as an area of academic interest when issues of power, class conflict, social inequality, and environmental justice emerged. The people of Appalachia possess a strong work ethic and a rich cultural heritage consisting of many values and traditions which are often misunderstood by outsiders (Ambrose & Hicks, 2006). Appalachian socio-cultural values stress the importance of independence, a love of place, self-reliance, pride, humility, patriotism, and religion (Jones, 1994). Camp communities are regularly found in Appalachia. In fact, the Mid-Atlantic and Southern areas of the United States, which include Appalachia, contain approximately 38% of all U.S. accredited camps (American Camp Association, 2011).

This article examines the value of involving a frontline staff member from a camp community in Appalachia as a practitioner researcher working with university scientists in studying transformative learning in young adult camp staff. This model, labeled Single-Case PAR, was believed to be a potentially effective strategy for engaging staff from Appalachian camp communities. This strategy recognized what Jones (1994) described as "work in Appalachia must be based on the genuine needs as expressed by mountain people themselves" (p. 10). Promising practices for conducting PAR and the use of Single-Case PAR in camp communities and the benefits of this work are explored.

Research Questions

This research project explored transformative learning in young adults who were members of camp communities in Appalachia. Four research questions guided this inquiry. The first two questions, which explored camp experiences as transformative, were: "How does involvement in the camp experience promote transformative learning in young adults?" and "What conditions does a camp environment provide that promotes personal change?" The results and discussion for these questions are summarized in this article. For a more detailed discussion of camp as a transformative experience and conditions of camp environments that promote transformation see Garst, Franz, Baughman, Smith, & Peters (2009). The third and fourth questions, which examined one dimension of the research methodology, were: "What benefits accrue to a community member serving as a practitioner researcher?" and "What promising practices can be learned from the use of Single-Case PAR for the study of camp communities?"

Review of the Literature

Community engagement research has been guided by a variety of models, including (but not limited to) the Social Ecological Model of Health, the Active Community Engagement Continuum, Diffusion of Innovation, the Translational Model, and Community-Based Participatory Research. This study was grounded in a participatory model of community engagement. Scholars have discovered the benefits of participatory approaches as a social science research method to overcome perceived failures of top down, one-size-fits-all research (Greenwood, 1993; Ison & Russell, 1999). Although action research is widely recognized as a valuable research framework, there exists no single widely accepted definition of action research or a single set of guiding assumptions (Havercamp, Christiansen, & Mitchell, 2003). However, central to many descriptions of action research is the concept of a participative, collaborative approach to problem solving, change, and learning (Coghlan & Brannick, 2009; Reason & Bradbury, 2001).

Participatory Action Research has been defined as "a participatory, democratic, practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory worldview" (Reason & Bradbury, 2001, p. 1). Participatory research attempts to reduce barriers between outside researchers and community members—a method that works best for research and programs that use holistic approaches to condition changes (Roling & Wagemakers, 1998), and for studies that seek to go beyond individual learning to lay a foundation for new program development (Fortune, Brown, Burwell, & Conlon, 2012).

PAR differs from conventional research in three important ways (Baum, MacDougall, & Smith, 2006). First, it focuses on research whose purpose is to enable action through reflection. Second, PAR emphasizes relationships, advocating for power to be deliberately shared between the researcher and the researched. Third, PAR is sensitive to the research context. With participatory action research, researchers and community members collaborate on exploring mutual interests and issues (Gaventa, 1988; Chambers, 1999) in an exchange that is more democratic and collaborative (Wing, 1998; Percy, 2005). Gillespie and Gillespie (2006) also found that participatory research increases the validity and value of research and increases community application of research results. The present study integrated a type of PAR labeled Single-Case PAR to understand the impact of camp experiences on camp community members. Single-Case PAR is explained in greater detail in the methods section.

Although an impressive body of knowledge supports the benefits of the camp experience (Bialeschki et al., 2007; Garst et al., 2011), researchers have recognized that there is much to be learned about how intentional camp programming may result in specific individual, organizational, and community outcomes (Garst, 2010). Camp trends research has highlighted the changes that camps are experiencing, influenced by forces including the economic slowdown of the past few years, shifting parent expectations and attitudes towards away-from-home experiences, and technology influences from social media (Henderson & Bialeschki, 2011). The value of action research, which often provides a gateway to fresh ideas and new ways of thinking and behaving, lies in its ability to build capacity in organizations to effectively respond to change (Havercamp et al., 2003; Marquardt, 2004). Because participatory programs like camp experiences demand significant organizational resources, it is important to understand what motivates participants, how they benefit, and the challenges they face (Krasny & Doyle, 2002). In the only published research on PAR in camps, Hanson (2012) found that participatory research was highly effective in camp settings and provided important benefits to youth participants.

Methods

Camp Communities

Camp is an important educational delivery mode for 4-H, the youth development component of the Extension system administered through the land-grant universities in each state. Virginia Tech is the land-grant university through which Virginia Cooperative Extension provides 4-H camp experiences to youth. Virginia 4-H provides one of the largest camping programs in the nation (Meadows, 1995), serving more than 25,000 youth ages 9-13 annually through programs offered at six regional camps called “4-H educational centers.” These camps—located in the Virginia towns of Jamestown, Wakefield, Front Royal, Appomattox, Wirtz, and Abingdon—are independent non-profit organizations operated by Boards of Directors and associated with Virginia Tech through a memorandum of understanding which identifies specific ways that the camps and the University collaborate and share resources. These Virginia camp communities were appropriate for the present study for two reasons. One, Virginia is one of the Appalachian states. Two, these camps have developed an organizational capacity for research and evaluation. Over the past decade a number of research projects were conducted with these camps which have resulted in a readiness for research engagement (Baughman, Garst, & Fuhrman, 2009; Garst & Bruce, 2003; Garst & Johnson, 2005).

Youth who attend these camps live in counties and cities in the same geographic region as the camps that serve those regions. Each camp serves approximately 200-400 youth per week for an average of ten weeks each summer. Youth generally matriculate through the Virginia 4-H camping program, from camper to counselor-in-training to counselors and eventually to seasonal summer camp staff.

Single-Case PAR

Through Single-Case Par an individual from one Virginia 4-H camp community was recruited to join a team of professional university researchers as a practitioner researcher. This practitioner researcher was a Virginia 4-H camp staff member at the time of the research and he assisted the researchers with methodology, data analysis, data interpretation, and dissemination of findings.

Single-Case PAR is similar to traditional PAR in that it is based on collaboration and equality with the goal of shared understanding, and differs from traditional PAR because only one individual is involved in conducting the inquiry as opposed to a greater number of community members. Although Single-Case PAR may have limitations in terms of broadly representing members of a given community, it was believed to be an appropriate exploratory methodology that would still provide face validity and practical significance common to traditional PAR approaches. Through the use of Single-Case PAR, the practitioner researcher was engaged in a process of exploration, reflection and planned action with regard to the research process.

Focus Groups

Data were collected from thirty-three seasonal summer camp staff across the six Virginia camps through four focus groups. All focus groups were conducted at one of the centrally-located Virginia camps in May during a statewide camp staff training event. Participation was voluntary and all seasonal camp staff who met identified criteria were eligible to participate, which included an age of 18-28 years old and at least five years of

camp experience. Focus groups were scheduled during staff members’ time off and were facilitated by University members of the research team and the practitioner researcher.

A semi-structured approach guided the focus groups, which lasted approximately one hour. Focus group questions included:

- How are you different than before you came to camp?
- How does the camp experience change how you see/act in the world/who you are?
- How does camp provide an environment that supports you as a changed person/who you are?
- How does camp push and stretch you that results in change?
- Who are the key people at camp who change you and how do they do it? (Give examples of how working at camp with someone different than you changed who you are.)
- Are there critical events that take place at camp that changed who you are/how you see/act in the world?

All focus group data were transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were then read by each research team member to identify coding categories that were used to code the transcribed data into appropriate categories. Themes based on the coding categories were identified by individual researchers and then discussed as a group using content analysis. Common themes found across all four focus groups were organized into two theoretical models. The first model addressed individual transformation associated with experiences in camp communities and the second addressed conditions of change.

Practitioner Researcher Experience

The practitioner researcher brought important perspectives, connections, and skills to the research team, and his involvement resulted in a more accurate, richer, and thicker description of the camp staff members’ learning experiences. As a member of the camp community, the practitioner researcher had a greater rapport with community members because his language—what has been referred to as indigenous terms or specialized vocabulary (Patton, 1990)—and behaviors were reflective of the current camp culture. His role in the research included participating in the pilot focus group, helping finalize the focus group protocol based on the pilot results, recruiting camp staff members to participate in focus groups, participating in one focus group, facilitating three focus groups of peers, transcribing focus group responses, and assisting with disseminating research results through conference presentations, reports, and journal articles. The practitioner researcher also wrote a case study about his experiences with the team and the research process. This researcher gained valuable personal development from this experience detailed later in this article.

Results

Camp Communities as Transformative

The first research question was “How does involvement in the camp experience promote transformative learning in young adults?” Camp staff indicated that camp changed them through exposure to novel and challenging experiences with high norms, standards, and expectations. This exposure to camp caused a change in identity, relationships, and life skills through “just in time” problem solving that in turn resulted in personal growth from increased reflection, responsibility, maturity, and thought about career options (Garst et al., 2009).

In camp communities new friendships are created, and some eventually become what participants described as “true” or deep friendships. One focus group respondent explained, “Camp has helped me create a second family...that I know I can depend on whenever and wherever.”

Thus, staff described that personal change at camp was related to the developmental outcomes they experienced around the dimensions of identity, skills development, and trust-based relationships that led to significant impacts on maturity, responsibility, and independence. As another focus group participant shared, “...my life at camp was like a microcosm of the world. I grew as a leader and developed other skills that will carry me through life.” Another focus group member described, “Camp has helped me develop into my adult self. I can better make decisions for myself as well as for a group. I have a better sense of self.”

Conditions in Camp Communities that Promote Transformation

The second research question was, “What conditions does a camp environment provide that promotes personal change?” Several conditions in camp communities promoted personal change. These conditions included supportive relationships, common group goals, traditions and rituals such as campfire, singing, and reflective ceremonies, and the camp setting that focused on nature, a simple lifestyle, and is low tech (Garst et al., 2009).

In camp communities staff members learned and adopted the prevailing camp culture, including its norms, standards, goals, and traditions. Characteristics of camp communities that come to be valued are welcoming others, respecting others, and supporting others’ ideas (Franz, Garst, Baughman, Smith, Peters, 2009). Feelings of connectedness to the camp community are enhanced through ceremonies like campfire programs that enhance personal reflection and recognition. Camp staff expressed that camp community traditions and rituals such as camp fire programs, singing and song leading, and meeting campers’ needs promotes personal change. One focus group participant said, “I wish the rest of the world was like camp so I could be the person I am at camp everyday: very high energy, always singing, and always laughing.”

The low-tech, nature-based, and comparatively simple environment at camp provided a place where camp staff focus on relationships with peers and children. One focus group participant shared, “I [learned] a lot from the experience by having to live a simple life at camp. That is something I have brought with me to college.” In this simplified context, staff often come to consider the needs of the camp community over their own needs.

Benefits of Community-Based Practitioner Research

The third research question was, “What benefits accrue to a community member serving as a practitioner researcher?” The practitioner researcher was asked to critically critique his experience with the project so that the research team could appropriately honor the voice and experience of the practitioner researcher in evaluating our work together and to make any necessary adjustments in our future approaches to participatory research. As the practitioner-researcher reflected,

Through my critique I tried to synthesize how my experiences had given me the research skills needed to do the study and to get into graduate school. Through that lens, I was also very grateful for the opportunity to do research on an area of my life that had an impact on my

life. Doing the research was going to help others see how the experiences at working at 4-H camp are beneficial not only for campers but also for college age students.

Over the duration of this project, a number of promising practices for community-based practitioner research became evident. The research team’s main observations included 1) the need to involve camp staff members from the beginning of the project if possible, 2) the importance of treating the practitioner researcher as an equal research partner, 3) the benefits of using the peer connections of the practitioner researcher to recruit research subjects and disseminate results, 4) taking time to honor the practitioner researcher’s interpretation of situations and results, and 5) providing recognition for the hard and complex work carried out by the practitioner researcher on the team.

The practitioner researcher on this project expressed a number of benefits of being involved in the research project. He was initially motivated to participate in the project by conducting research with his peers and learning about the research process. He said, “As a current employee and past volunteer of 4-H camp, I had a natural interest in the research and was excited about doing research about my peers while increasing my overall experiences with camping.”

The development of research skills was also important to the practitioner researcher. In particular, the practitioner researcher gained skills related to research methodology. He shared,

The skills learned from participating in this study are numerous. Before working on the study, I did not have any experiences with how qualitative research was conducted. I was a participant in the study in the first focus group and then facilitated the remaining focus groups. This was a valuable skill to learn...

He also expressed a greater understanding of data analysis techniques when he stated, “I gained valuable skills in how qualitative research themes are formed and pulled together in easy to read charts.” Finally, he learned about focus group methodology in particular and the importance of having good rapport with participants in the study to enhance participant recruitment for focus groups and data dissemination once results are gathered and analyzed. He said, “I was able to get participants to feel comfortable and be more open to our study to get better results.”

Promising Practices for Single-Case PAR

The fourth research question was “What promising practices can be learned from the use of Single-Case PAR for the study of camp communities?” To provide maximum benefit of the research experience for the practitioner researcher, others on the research team need to provide supportive structure and guidance for the practitioner researcher as a newcomer to the research process. Assembling a team of researchers with complimentary personalities and values helps support this promising practice. The research team members need to believe in personal development as a potential outcome for research and be dedicated to the practitioner researcher seeing direct benefit from their hard work. The research team needs to be sure the practitioner researcher has meaningful roles that go beyond menial tasks to allow the practitioner researcher to be fully engaged in the research. In our case, the practitioner researcher took full responsibility for presenting a poster on our research at a national conference and an oral presentation at an undergraduate research conference while other research team members were present to support him. The practitioner-researcher shared,

My work with the focus groups, transcribing, and then data analysis are going to be skills I will be able to use in graduate study... it has helped me gain two ten hour assistantships. I am sure that this research work has helped me not only gain admittance to graduate school but is now helping me financially!

Engaging a practitioner researcher through Single-Case PAR required a research team that was committed to creating and maintaining a positive research environment. It was also critical to garner enough resources to allow the practitioner researcher to fully participate. In our case, a small grant was secured to provide travel expenses for our practitioner researcher to present at conferences and a small stipend to cover other costs for his involvement in the research process. These efforts appear to have enhanced our practitioner researcher's experience. He reflected,

The entire experience has been a pro for me in developing my ideas about research, how to conduct research, and how to help me prepare for my future goals in life. As everything in the study was new to me, every task had its own challenge level but with great leadership and guidance from the team I was able to complete tasks and gain confidence in all tasks. Looking back now, I feel like everything was overwhelming but now seems relatively easy! The most beneficial part of my whole experience working in our group has been making great personal relationships.

Finally, a promising practice for research teams should be for all members to learn more about the phenomena being studied. It appears the research experience for our practitioner helped him learn more about the subject matter of the research. He said,

This study has also emphasized the benefits of camp to me more than I had realized as a [camp] staff member...seeing the personal growth of my peers has truly opened my eyes to the benefits of camping for young adults. By participating in the study and knowing our findings will be used to improve trainings and camps across the country makes me feel even better.

Through the exploration of the benefits and promising practices associated with Single-Case PAR, some challenges were also identified by the practitioner-researcher. For example, the practitioner researcher recognized the hurdles associated with balancing his roles as both a camp staff member in the camp community and a member of the research team. He reflected,

I was always worried that I would do something wrong that might damage the data. As a co-worker of fellow participants in the study/ focus groups, I thought my personal relationships with the participants might either influence their answers or effect the answers the participants gave with me present in the room.

The practitioner-researcher also wondered how his involvement in the project would impact his relationships within the camp community. Would he be perceived as an outsider because of his inclusion as a research team member? He posited,

My last summer working at [camp] I was disassociated with the rest of my peers compared to the two summers I had worked previously...by serving as a member of the research team I may have separated myself from the group during a time of team bonding. I may have been seen as a possible "other" because other camp staff saw me as a research official doing research base focus on camp experience versus "being" in the moment as a camp community member. This may have caused a disconnect.

Discussion

This article examined the benefits of involving a frontline staff member from a camp community in Appalachia as a practitioner researcher working with university scientists in studying transformative learning in young adult camp staff. Camp as a transformative experience for camp staff community members was explored as well as the use of Single-Case PAR through the involvement of the practitioner researcher.

The results of this study suggest that camp communities transform young adults who serve as camp staff and identified characteristics such as camp rituals and supportive relationships that catalyze this change. This study supports the large body of knowledge that has developed around the outcomes of camp experiences for camp staff. The similarity of these findings for young adult camp staff ages 18-24 with the research on the development outcomes of camp experiences for adolescent camp staff may reflect the expansion of the definition of adolescence into the mid-to-late twenties (Bynner, 2005). Considering that camp communities provide the opportunity for young adult staff to develop deep friendships with peers and other adults, support a focused and positive self-identity, provide multi-faceted skill development, stimulate career exploration and reflection, and provide the opportunity for young adults to be a contributing part of a community (Garst et al., 2009), it appears that camp communities may support young people in their transition towards becoming fully functioning adults (Furstenburg, 1999).

Single-Case PAR, as an embedded methodology, strengthened the research process in this study and revealed a number of considerations for practice and research. Single-Case PAR was effective as part of the methodology for the study of camp experiences, which supports Hanson's (2012) reflection on the effectiveness of PAR in camp settings. Single-Case PAR, as implemented in this study, had much in common with Torbert's (2004) concept of developmental action inquiry in which action and inquiry helps individuals, teams, and organizations become more aware, sustainable, and capable of self-transformation.

Because this study appears to be the first to explore PAR with young adult camp staff, and the first to use Single-Case PAR, there were no existing promising practices for involving camp staff in research projects and processes. However, the practitioner researcher's positive experience in the research process as someone who was actively and meaningfully involved and engaged is consistent with the larger literature around community youth development, in which youth involvement and decision-making is a central tenant (Gambone, Connell, Klem, Sipe, & Bridges, 2002).

This participatory action research project revealed benefits of involving a practitioner researcher including increased validity and reliability, enhanced findings dissemination, high peer interest in results, and immediate use of research results. The influence of PAR on increased methodological credibility has been found by other researchers using PAR (Fortune et al., 2012). Furthermore, we discovered that having a practitioner researcher on the team helped researchers clarify their thinking and speaking about the research and the research process. Researchers had to refrain from using jargon and other expert research norms so the practitioner researcher did not feel left out or get frustrated.

The participatory process also made researchers more accountable to the research subjects for using respectful research processes and producing valid, reliable, and useful results. The practitioner researcher helped keep the research process grounded in accuracy and respect through personal experience. In addition, this sensitivity also helped the research team be more knowledgeable and sensitive about the cultural context of the

phenomena being researched.

For some researchers, participatory action research can be trying because it may require giving up some control of the research process. The practitioner researcher, if respected by the research team and given equal status, can shape the research methodology, data interpretation, results dissemination methods, and even the personal and professional development of the team members.

In this research we found that young adult camp staff are ideal practitioner researchers. They have a strong passion for the camp context and are trying to figure out their role in the world personally and professionally. The research process and team members give these young adults an opportunity to explore personal and professional development at an impressionable time in their lives. Indeed, in this study, the practitioner researcher gained valuable real-world skills related to teamwork, research methods, and even data analysis, a finding consistent with other studies of PAR (Hanson, 2012) in which real-world skill development was a result.

Authenticity was an important dimension of the research that was enhanced by the practitioner researcher in this study. Research results garnered through a participatory process can be more accurate and authentic (Gillespie & Gillespie, 2006). The practitioner researcher brings an “insider” view of the research phenomena being studied often lacking in the academic researcher’s experience. This insider view also helps build interest in the research results by the practitioner researcher’s peers and their interest in future research projects in the camp environment.

Research shows that participatory action research is a transforming process for researchers so it is an appropriate method for studying transformative learning in others (Percy, 2005; Franz, 2005.) This particular study on the transforming effects of the camp context on young adults was especially well suited to participatory research methods. We found the research not only revealed transformation in the camp staff members but also the researchers who worked with the practitioner researcher as we pushed, stretched, and challenged each other’s perspectives through discussion, debate, and other dialectic processes. Through this study, the research team, the practitioner researcher, and the camp community became more aware of camp as a transformative experience and better understood how to conduct collaborative action research. Single-Case PAR may serve as a foundation for broader use of PAR in the future.

The results of this study did not clearly indicate an inherent uniqueness of Appalachian camp experiences. However, characteristics of place and the beauty of nature were central to camp staff member’s conversations about camp as a transformative experience which may reflect Appalachian values. In fact, camp staff members seemed to express a high degree of emotional attachment [referred to as place attachment by Tuan (1974)] to their camp communities. Being familiar with the Appalachian values and how these values play a role into community members’ thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors is recommended for future research into Appalachian camp communities.

Further research is needed to better understand the benefits and challenges of using practitioner researchers in the camp community. For example, it would be interesting to know if research findings are used more deeply and widely with a peer research process than an expert researcher process. It would also be interesting to explore how research team dynamics change as more practitioner researchers are added to the team beyond the Single-Case PAR model. Finally, it would be helpful to know the basic skills needed for

practitioner research success for those who teach about and engage in participatory action research.

Camp community experiences transform young adults who serve as camp staff and characteristics such as camp rituals and supportive relationships catalyze this change. Research methodology and results can be enhanced by involving practitioner researchers in the research team. Involving a practitioner researcher helped ensure more accurate and authentic results and enhanced accountability to research subjects. The research team also experienced personal and professional development by working together.

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