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QUALITY YOUTH DEVELOPMENT AND THE CAMP EXPERIENCE: RESULTS FROM A PROGRAM IMPROVEMENT PROCESS

M. Deborah Bialeschki, American Camp Association

Introduction

Many camp professionals find themselves challenged by their funders, boards, and parents to address the issue of quality of the experiences they offer to youth. Within the larger youth development community, this issue is receiving critical attention with more evaluations including an assessment of program quality and incorporating setting-level measures in their designs. At the practice level, organizations are looking for tools to help document effective practice and allow practitioners to assess, reflect on, and improve their programs (Yohalem, Wilson-Ahlstrom, Fischer, & Shinn, 2007). The purpose of this paper is to describe the results of a program improvement process the American Camp Association (ACA) and Youth Development Strategies, Inc. (YDSI) implemented to increase the quality at the setting level of the camp of developmental opportunities through the camp experience. The specific research questions were: 1) does the process result in change in campers' perceptions of the supports and opportunities needed for positive youth development? and 2) what camp characteristics seemed most aligned with positive change?

Background

The study was situated within a positive youth development framework. Youth development encompasses efforts to create organizations and communities for youth that supply supports and opportunities necessary to go beyond problem prevention and move youth toward healthy adulthood (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Witt, 2002). Youth development specialists (e.g., Gambone, Klem, Connell, 2002; Witt, 2002) have indicated that in addition to academic competence, youth need to have opportunities to grow toward physical, emotional, civic, and social competence through supports from family, community, and other institutions including organized camp programs. Nicholson, Collins, and Holmer (2004) noted that youth development organizations have a common commitment to young people's physical, emotional, and educational growth. Evidence is mounting that well-designed, well-implemented youth centered programs that consciously use a youth development model have positive outcomes for both young people and their communities (National Collaboration for Youth, 2006).

The positive youth development framework integrates several theories that examine the dimensions that result in growth and development. The rationale for positive youth development, according to Lerner, Lerner, Almerigi, and Theokas (2005) emanates from contemporary developmental systems theories that suggest change is a consequence of mutually influential relationships between the developing person and such aspects as biology, psychological characteristics, family, community, and culture.

The Community Action Framework for Youth Development (Gambone, Klem, & Connell, 2002) served as the specific model for the project. In their original work, Gambone et al. analyzed the

outcomes identified in other studies and concluded that the common outcome areas were physical and cognitive learning, social relationships, positive values, and positive identity. Gambone et al. categorized the outcomes as either developmental supports (e.g., guidance, adult and peer interaction, a sense of physical and emotional safety) or opportunities (e.g., involvement in meaningful roles, input in decision-making, leadership involvement, sense of belonging, challenging and interesting experiences to build an array of skills). They argued these supports and opportunities provided the best operational definitions for youth development outcomes. This Community Action Framework For Youth Development (CAFYD) model (see Figure 1) asserts that increasing supports and opportunities for youth will result in improvements in developmental outcomes that ultimately help move a young person into a healthy adulthood. The CAFYD describes how strategies such as relationships, activities, and program structure become the tools for reaching the intended outcomes. Other research efforts by such organizations as 4-H (Garst & Bruce, 2003) supported Gambone et al.'s findings that stress the importance of the setting (e.g., camps) in which outcomes related to positive youth development occur.

Methods

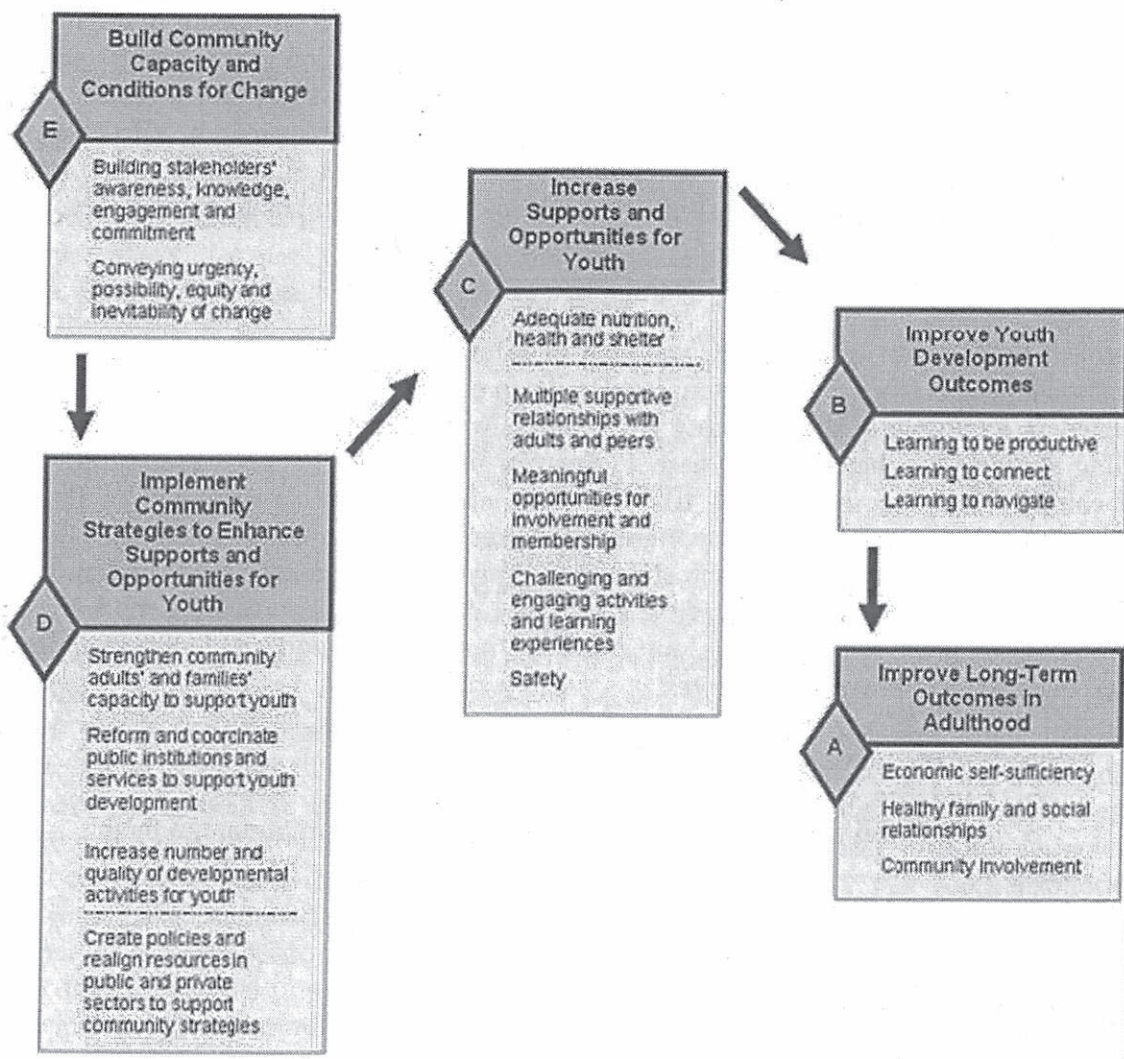
The project reported on in this paper was part of a larger national study undertaken by ACA. This national project, focused on setting-level ways to enhance positive youth development, was conducted as a two-phase study. Eighty ACA camps were recruited from a multistage, random sampling strategy for inclusion in Phase 1. Surveys designed by YDSI were administered to 7,645 campers between the ages of 10-17 at these eighty camps. By the end of Phase 1, a benchmark for the supports and opportunities offered through a camp experience had been generated. Phase 2 focused on the actual program improvement process (PIP) undertaken by a sub-set of twenty-three camps from Phase 1 to develop strategies to provide a more supportive environment for positive youth development. Four areas of supports and opportunities were targeted during the improvement process:

- Supportive relationships
 - Guidance, emotional and practical support
 - Adults and peers knowing who they are and what is important to them
- Safety
 - Physical
 - Emotional
- Youth Involvement
 - Leadership
 - Decision-making
 - Belonging
- Skill-Building
 - Challenging and interesting experiences that build a wide array of skills
 - Experience sense of growth and progress

FIGURE 1

Community Action Framework (Connell & Gambone, 1998)

COMMUNITY ACTION FRAMEWORK FOR YOUTH DEVELOPMENT



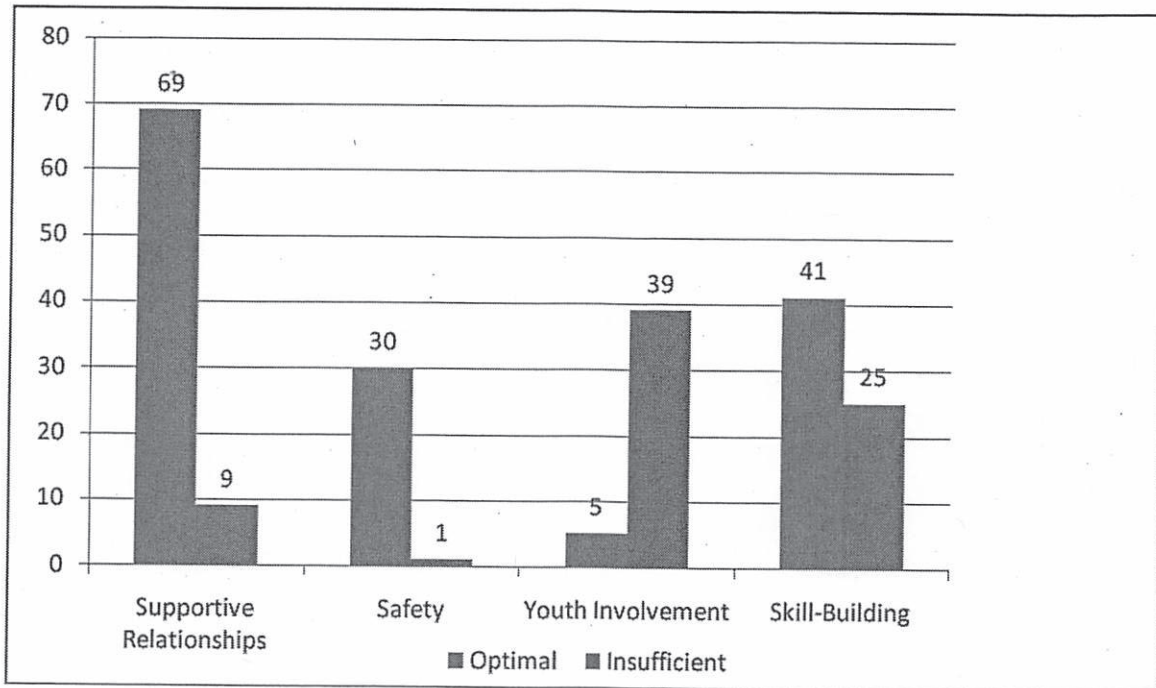
The program improvement phase of the study (Phase 2) enabled twenty-three of the eighty benchmark camps from Phase 1 to complete a year-long process of planning and action that led to the development and analysis of the effects of camp-determined program improvement strategies. Over 2200 campers between the ages of 10-17 completed the YDSI survey during the summers of 2004 and 2005 at these twenty-three camps. The improvement process began with a weekend training during the Fall of 2004. During that weekend, camp administrators received

their benchmarking scores from the summer and were introduced to the program improvement process to be undertaken in preparation for Summer 2005 when campers would be re-assessed. The improvement process was a step-by-step approach that included an organizational assessment, action planning, and implementation of change strategies designed by each camp (see ACA, 2006 for additional details). The camp administrators continued to design their strategies over the winter as well and conducted an organizational assessment and gathered detailed input from their campers and staff related to their initial scores on the survey. The directors then came together for another three hour training held in conjunction with the 2005 ACA National Conference. At this time their strategies for change were reviewed by YDSI staff as were their targeted rates of improvement. After re-surveying in Summer 2005, these camp administrators came together for one more weekend in the Fall of 2005 to process their second round of scores from campers' surveys and discuss strategies that resulted in positive changes in the supports and opportunities for youth development in their camps.

The survey data were analyzed with multivariate statistics to determine the effectiveness of the change strategies to improve the camp setting as a quality site for positive youth development. While traditional statistical analyses were initially conducted, a YDSI method of analysis was used that did not focus on averages. Instead the results were expressed in terms of youths' experiences measured against a standard based on prior youth development threshold research (Gambone, Klem, & Connell, 2002). These combined responses fit into one of three categories: optimal, insufficient, or mixed. This scoring method is designed to measure the extent to which young people experience the supports and opportunities at camp that are the necessary *prerequisites* to achieving the developmental outcomes central to positive youth development (Gambone, et al., 2002). Statistical significance was measured by >10% change in score.

At the conclusion of the benchmarking phase (Phase 1), the major findings for each of the four supports and opportunities areas are documented (see Table 1). These findings were based on the campers' perceptions of what they felt they had experienced while at camp. Briefly, the greatest strength of camps was in Supportive Relationships, specifically the high quality of the relationships between youth and adult staff. These findings suggested that camps represent one of the best opportunities many youth have outside of the family for experiencing these essential relationships (ACA, 2006). Camps also offered youth an opportunity to experience challenging, engaging learning experiences. In camps, almost half of all youth had optimal levels of skill building experiences, compared to about half that number in some community-based youth organizations and even lower levels in school settings. While safety was not as high in terms of optimal support as many camps had hoped, the positive side to this finding was that almost no campers perceived the camp experience as unsafe. The area for greatest potential improvement was in Youth Involvement (i.e. leadership, decision-making, belonging). Only about 5% of the campers consistently reported perceptions of opportunities in this area. This finding, while similar to other youth-serving organizations, was seen as the greatest challenge as camps begin to plan for more meaningful ways in which to engage their youth.

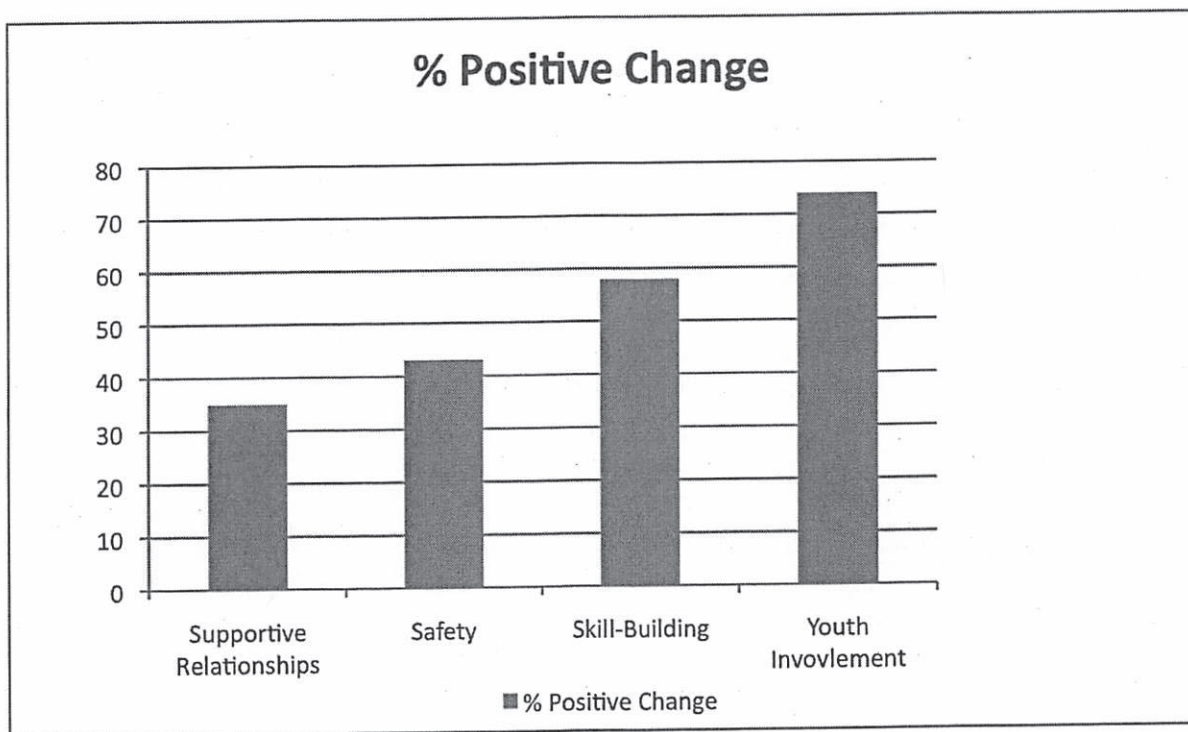
TABLE 1
Benchmarked Percentages for Supports and Opportunities in Camps (N=80)



Findings

When answering the first research question focused on change as a result of the improvement process, we found that the PIP camps did show significant improvement in the developmental dimensions (see Table 2). Most camps designed their individualized action strategies primarily to focus on Youth Involvement and Skill Building since these areas received the least acceptable benchmark scores to most camps. Eighty-three percent of the camps experienced significant improvement in one or both of these two areas. Even though camps designed fewer strategies related to Supportive Relationships and Safety, more than one third of the camps also strengthened these experiences for youth. The consistent pattern of significant improvements in the developmental quality of youths’ experience at camp showed that intentional, camper-center assessment and planning yielded a richer experience for youth.

TABLE 2
Percent of ACA PIP Camps with Positive Change in One or More Dimensions (N=23)



While a detailed focus on the types of strategies designed and used by the camps exceeds the purpose of this paper, it was interesting to note that a consistent pattern emerged in the change scores. If a camp designed strategies that crossed all three organizational practices (i.e., structures, policies, and activities) assessed as a part of the improvement process, that camp was twice as likely to show significant positive improvement than if their strategies had focused on just one organizational practice. For example, if a camp targeted safety as an area of change and they had at least one strategy that related to a change in structure to improve safety (e.g. increased staff supervising free time), one that changed policy that affected safety (no tolerance for bullying), and a strategy that changed an activity (challenge-by-choice implemented at the ropes course), they were much more likely to show significant positive change related to safety.

The second question for this part of the study (Phase 2) focused on camp characteristics that seemed related to positive change scores. The camp characteristics that were of interest focused on camp session length, the directors' experience level (measured by years as director at that camp), staff return rates, and yearly operating budget (i.e., profit, break-even, deficit). These characteristics were then crossed with the levels of change in the PIP camps: positive change only, negative change only, mixed change, and no change at all. These analyses were used purely for descriptive purposes and were derived through pivot tables in Excel.

There were four interesting findings around camp characteristics. The first finding was that in general, shorter sessions (<12 days) had more difficulty enacting change than camps with longer sessions. However if significant change happened, it was in a positive direction. The second

finding was related to the directors' experience. Camps with only positive change had directors with 6-10 years of experience. Contrary to traditional thought, camps with more experienced directors (16-20 years) showed no change at all. The third result focused on staff return rates at the camps. Camps with >75% returning staff showed either negative or no change scores. Lastly, budgets were not good indicators of total change potential. While budgets may impact a specific change strategy (e.g. want to improve safety of site by adding additional lighting), this characteristic did not show any direct relationship to the overall changes in supports and opportunities areas.

Discussion

The program improvement process undertaken by the PIP camps resulted in significant improvements in the four dimensions of supports and opportunities important to positive youth development: supportive relationships, safety, youth involvement, and skill-building. Initially, camp personnel were not clear on the ways in which their organizational assessments when combined with change strategies might impact the final change scores. The importance of developing holistic action plans that included strategies that addressed structures, policies, and activities within any targeted improvement area was a significant contribution from this study. This finding may appear somewhat simplistic, but the complexity and time demands of an improvement process often lead organizations to prioritize certain organizational practices in which they will work in a given year. Organizations may neglect this broad view of integrated organizational practice in favor of implementing improvement strategies that address their targeted developmental dimension(s). Such a non-holistic approach focused exclusively on the dimensions appeared to be a much less effective strategy for achieving the level of success sought by organizations. Thus, camp directors and their staff may benefit from training on holistic approaches to program improvement.

While twenty-three camps do not necessarily generalize to all camps, the information gathered during this national project do provide strong suggestions for potential consideration and areas of further research. The camp characteristics information was interesting and raised additional questions about the role of other potential indicators of quality programs. Further research around some of these more descriptive results in this study could prove beneficial as the improvement process is refined in the future.

The findings supported the CAFYD theoretical framework and reinforced the importance of an intentional approach to change. It is possible that efforts to facilitate change should move beyond "best practices" to a process that emphasizes an integrated, holistic approach to the role of organizational practices. The focus of the improvement process on creating strategies for change that reflect and fit the camps' philosophies, missions, and goals seemed to resonate with the camps and created an environment in most cases for success. Rather than trying to force a particular "best practice" on a camp, this process allows flexibility and autonomy in their action plans to remain with the camp. The intentionality of the action plan with an appropriate "fit" to the camp is what seemed to create a positive "culture of change".

In a world that is constantly changing, camps continue to strive for ways to make a difference in the lives of youth. Change for the sake of change, however, is not the answer. The process of

taking an integrated, holistic approach to organizational practices may be the hallmark for any camp that wants to strive for excellence in meeting the developmental needs of young people.

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