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LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT AND YOUTH CAMPING: DETERMINING A RELATIONSHIP

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The terminology may have changed, but the concepts of "leaders" and "leadership" have been a part of human thought for thousands of years. Similarly, so has leadership education. Leadership is one of the core skills employers expect of their employees at every level (Scheneman, 1991) and leadership development has emerged as a goal of outdoor education (Frisse, Hendee, & Kinziger, 1998). Debate continues concerning the most effective methods for developing leadership as in recent years leadership education has been brought to the forefront. This is borne out in leisure literature as well, where in the last decade scholars have begun to demand research related to leadership development in wilderness programming (Easley, 1991). In light of this demand, the purpose of this study was to explore the possibility that leadership skills can be developed through participation in summer youth camping programs as a result of the interplay between the process of learning, environment, and social interaction.

The consensus of leadership academics is that leadership can be taught in a variety of environments (Conger, 1992). The question still under exploration, however, is how best to teach it. Conger (1992) states that experience is key to successful leadership skill development, yet experience is often ignored by leadership educators. The vast majority of leaders maintain that little formal training helped them to achieve their positions as leaders, rather it was their experiences that proved to be their best teachers (Conger, 1992). Learning by doing is an integral and indispensable part of any educational process, and this is recognized in outdoor education (Gabrielsen & Holtzer, 1965). In its broadest sense, outdoor education refers to any education that takes place in the out-of-doors, and many youth camping programs qualify as outdoor education experiences. While leadership development is not always necessarily a result of a

wilderness experience offered by many youth camping programs, the wilderness experience invariably possesses the potential to enhance leadership development. The fact that wilderness environments are typically profoundly different from the day to day world of most individuals increases the potential for self-discovery and the acquisition of new skills (Kielsmeier, 1988).

Outdoor education, "transcends all learning, all subject matter, all disciplines, helping to make the learning process more vital and meaningful to the individual," (Gabrielsen & Holtzer, 1965, p. 3). According to Gair (1997) outdoor education produces a variety of potential learning outcomes including leadership, teamwork, trust, problem solving, and communication (Gair, 1997.) The American Camping Association, the preeminent professional organization for camps in the United States, maintains that camping allows youths to become more aware of themselves, learn to work cooperatively in a team, develop creativity, and improve social skills such as communication (American Camping Association, 1998; Hartwig and Myers, 1976). Bruck's research has demonstrated that these skills are integral components of leadership (1997).

Camps provide not only the setting for experiences of self-discovery and development, but the context as well. There is no need for an educator to construct an artificial experience with which to engage the learner, because the experiences are numerous and real. These authentic learning and living experiences are much more likely to produce lasting and fundamental changes than are experiences a learner knows to be artificial (Gabrielsen & Holtzer, 1965).

The social aspects of youth camps provide valuable and singular experiences that contribute in a significant fashion to leadership skill development. The youth camp has the unique ability

to engage children absolutely, immersing them in a new and different environment which is significantly different from anything they are likely to have experienced at home, not only in terms of the physical backdrop of wilderness, but also in the social conditions experienced. This creates opportunities for learning about themselves and others that are unlikely to ever be encountered in other settings (Mitchell & Meier, 1983).

All young people possess the capability to learn about leadership, though most do not have the opportunity to do so in their home settings (van Linden & Fertman, 1998). Camps have for decades served as outdoor learning laboratories for leadership development. Camps provide adolescents the opportunity to practice leadership skills through activities that youth generally perceive to be worthwhile (Kielsmeier, 1988). Lessons learned in this context are much more likely to be assimilated by an adolescent, particularly since such concrete, practical experiences are not associated with their traditional modes of learning such as classroom lectures (Gabrielsen & Holtzer, 1965).

Today, the primary purpose of camps goes beyond providing a set of activities for a group of adolescents. The emphasis is now on providing opportunities for education in the out-of-doors (Gabrielsen & Holtzer, 1965). Camps have the unique ability to get young people to interact with their environment in a positive way, which typically leads to increased concepts of self-worth and leadership (Mitchell & Meier, 1983). Camps place youth in situations where their exposure to both the natural world and human activity is profound by comparison to their experience at home. This exposure is both positive and supportive, which contributes significantly to the potential for growth and development of leadership skills (Warder, 1973).

Finally, it is believed that the leadership skills that are acquired at youth camps can be transferred beyond an outdoor setting, though little empirical evidence exists to support this claim (Kielsmeier, 1988). As previously noted, the educational results of camping have profound and lasting impacts (Gabrielsen & Holtzer, 1965), and these fundamental changes in children's self-perception and development of leadership skills are carried forward to their homes and schools. Skills such as communication, working

with others, and problem solving have a wide applicability.

HYPOTHESES

Four hypotheses were tested in this study. They include:

- H₀₁ There is no difference in the self-perception of leadership skills of campers before and after their wilderness youth camping experience.
- H₀₂ There is no difference in the self-perception of leadership skills of counselors-in-training before and after their wilderness youth camping experience.
- H₀₃ There is no difference in the self-perception of leadership skills of counselors before and after their wilderness youth camping experience.
- H₀₄ The gender and age of an individual in a wilderness youth camp setting does not affect their self-perception of leadership skills.

METHODOLOGY

The population for this study was approximately 3500 male and female campers ages 10 to 15 from the United States, 40 male and female counselors-in-training, and 134 male and female counselors who attended or were employed by Camp Ondessonk, wilderness-based youth camp, during the summer of 1999. Camp Ondessonk is located in southern Illinois and is surrounded by the Shawnee National Forest. Leadership development is not an explicitly stated goal of the camp for campers, counselors-in-training, or staff. The camp is operated under the Catholic Diocese of Belleville and has been in operation since 1959. A session at Camp Ondessonk is one week in length, and campers engage in a variety of traditional youth camp activities including swimming, canoeing, horseback riding, archery, handicrafts, nature hikes, overnight trips, and more. The camp has the capacity to host approximately 400 campers a week in ten units. Camper accommodations are typically three-sided cabins without electricity. Cabins contain six to eight bunks. A spigot and an outhouse are located within each unit. Both

counselors-in-training and staff undergo a formal training process, however leadership skills as defined in the context of this paper are not part of their formal training.

The camp was accessible to any camper who wished to come and acceptance was limited only by space restrictions. Scholarships were available on a limited basis for some campers based on financial need. The camp selected staff members based on their own hiring criteria. Four hundred campers were selected to participate in the study through a simple random sample. A census was taken of counselors-in-training and staff members.

The instrument used in this study to assess the self-perceived leadership skills of the students was the Leadership Skills Inventory (LSI). The original instrument measured ten internal scales through 99 statements. The LSI was refined by Townsend in 1983 and now consists of 21 statements describing various leadership and life scales. Examples of statements from the LSI include: "I can cooperate and work in a group," "I feel responsible for my actions," and "I understand myself." These correspond to the five internal scales for analysis: communication, positional leadership, making decisions, working with groups and understanding self. Responses were measured on a five point Likert scale ranging from A-strongly agree to E-strongly disagree. Several researchers have recently refined the instrument. The dependent variables for this study were the five self-perceived leadership scales consisting of communication, leadership, making decisions, working with groups, and understanding self. The independent variables were position at a youth wilderness camp, age, and gender.

A post-then test (Howard & Dailey, 1979) was used to avoid response-shift bias (Rohs, 1999). A post-then test involves the administration of an instrument, in this case the LSI, one time to participants. Participants are asked to reflect on their self-perceptions prior to the treatment (then) for the first instrument and to reflect on their self-perceptions after the treat-

ment (post) for the second instrument. Previous research has demonstrated a tendency for respondents to underreport changes in self-perception of leadership skills when using pre-test/posttest approaches. The LSI was administered to all subjects one time through a mail survey after the conclusion of their youth wilderness camping experience. Participants were sent a reminder postcard, a second copy of the instrument, and a second reminder postcard. Of the original 400 camper surveys distributed, 137 were returned. Counselors-in-training returned 22 of the original 40 surveys, and staff returned 72 of the original 134 surveys. An alpha level of .10 was set a priori because little research has been done in this area of leadership research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The instrument's reliability coefficient was a .9063, and the reliability coefficients for each of the scales ranged from .6426 to .8995. The coefficient for each scale can be seen in Table 1. These reliability coefficients are consistent with previous uses of the instrument (Bruck, 1997; Thorp, 1997; Dobson, 1995).

Following their attendance at summer camp, campers had a statistically significant increase in their self-perceptions of leadership skills at the .10 level. Table 2 shows a comparison of campers' self-perceptions in each of the five leadership sub-scales. The five sub-scales were created by combining the scores of individual questions from the LSI. The communication scale consists of four items, the making decisions scale consists of three items, the working with groups scale consists of five items, the understanding self scale consists of five items and the positional leadership scale consists of six items.

After completing their summer training program, counselors-in-training exhibited a statistically significant increase in their self-perceptions of leadership skills. This increase occurred in each of the five leadership sub-scales. A comparison of their means before and after their experience can be seen in Table 3.

TABLE 1

Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha for Task and Maintenance Skills and Values

Skill	Campers	CITs	Staff
Communication	.6635	.7593	.6488
Groups	.6469	.7035	.6810
Decision-making	.6426	.7005	.7062
Understanding self	.7415	.7309	.8025
Leadership	.8075	.8995	.8581

TABLE 2

Comparison of Campers' Self-Perception of Leadership Skills

Scale	n	Mean	SD	2-Tail Probability	t
Communication		(20 possible)		.000	6.79
Before camp	137	16.22	2.38		
After camp	137	17.34	2.28		
Making Decisions		(15 possible)		.000	7.87
Before camp	137	11.91	1.78		
After camp	137	12.92	1.79		
Working w/ groups		(25 possible)		.000	8.75
Before camp	137	21.14	2.22		
After camp	137	22.63	2.05		
Understanding Self		(25 possible)		.000	6.95
Before camp	137	21.46	2.52		
After camp	137	22.69	2.19		
Positional Leadership		(25 possible)		.000	7.72
Before camp	137	23.77	4.13		
After camp	137	25.57	4.07		

TABLE 3

Comparison of CITs' Self-Perception of Leadership Skills

Scale	n	Mean	SD	2-Tail Probability	t
Communication		(20 possible)		.002	3.46
Before camp	22	16.95	2.95		
After camp	22	18.59	1.68		
Making Decisions		(15 possible)		.001	4.02
Before camp	22	12.50	1.82		
After camp	22	13.77	1.27		
Working w/ groups		(25 possible)		.000	4.51
Before camp	22	21.77	2.22		
After camp	22	23.82	1.53		
Understanding Self		(25 possible)		.003	6.64
Before camp	22	21.09	2.18		
After camp	22	23.59	1.44		
Positional Leadership		(30 possible)		.000	3.38
Before camp	22	24.41	5.58		
After camp	22	27.32	3.03		

Similarly, staff members showed a statistically significant increase in their self-perceptions of each of the five leadership subscales. The before camp and after camp means for staff members can be seen in Table 4.

Additionally, there were statistically significant differences at the .10 level between male and female respondents on several scales. Female campers had higher self-perceptions in "communication" and "working with groups" scales than male campers, female counselors-in-training were higher in the "understanding self" scale than male counselors-in-training, and female staff members had higher self-perceptions in the "working with groups" scale than their

male counterparts. However, age did not appear to have a statistically significant effect on self-perceived skill-development outcomes.

Leadership self-perceptions are stronger following a youth camping experience. These results support claims made by Gair, the American Camping Association, and Hartwig and Myers. The camp can feel confident that its programs are positively affecting the leadership development of campers, counselors-in-training, and staff members. However, further investigation and programming should be directed at examining gender differences and developing leadership skills.

TABLE 4

Comparison of Staff's Self-Perception of Leadership Skills

Scale	n	Mean	SD	2-Tail Probability	t
Communication		(20 possible)		.000	10.78
Before camp	72	15.56	2.29		
After camp	72	18.26	1.73		
Making Decisions		(15 possible)		.000	8.49
Before camp	72	11.76	1.90		
After camp	72	13.56	1.33		
Working w/ groups		(25 possible)		.000	10.28
Before camp	72	20.22	2.33		
After camp	72	22.86	1.93		
Understanding Self		(25 possible)		.000	9.16
Before camp	72	18.92	3.33		
After camp	72	22.51	2.19		
Positional Leadership		(30 possible)		.000	11.32
Before camp	72	21.60	4.35		
After camp	72	27.10	2.76		

IMPLICATIONS, APPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Several recommendations for further research are suggested by the findings of this study. The researcher proposes an exploration of which activities, other than camp (such as formal education), might impact leadership skill development to better isolate the effect of camping and other outdoor education programs. A qualitative exploration of camp programming and environment would help to define the aspects of a program that contribute significantly to leadership development. A continued investigation into the gender differences in self-perception discovered by this study and others (Thorp, 1997) is warranted. Finally, a longitudinal study to track the sustainability and transferability of these skills over time is suggested for campers, counselors-in-training, and staff.

This study establishes that leadership development did occur for individuals participating in programming at one summer camp. While this lends support to many existing claims regarding camping and outdoor education more broadly, much research remains to be done. A subsequent step is to determine what in the camping environment or program leads to leadership development and then establish how programs can be manipulated to better develop desirable skills. Research establishing what causes these changes has broad implications for shaping camping and outdoor education programs in the future.

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