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Contextual learning at summer camp

What is this research about?

This research explores how contexts linked to residential outdoor experiences (ROE) contribute to significant learning. It addresses the need for the reconsideration and restoration of routine outdoor programs in Ontario schools and teacher training in this area. Contextual learning interconnects learner and teacher. ROE provides contexts on personal, socio-cultural and environmental levels. Contextual learning breaks down classroom hegemonies and encompasses cognitive, emotive, communal, tactile and spiritual domains. A residential summer camp serves as the lab. Outdoor education is recognized as promoting the development of leadership, self-concept, cognitive function, interpersonal skills, motivation and self regulation. Residential camp programs

What you need to know:

Outdoor education builds a strong foundation of educational development in students. Residential camp programs are part of this outdoor education. The social and natural settings of these camps develop self regulation, motivation, interpersonal skills, cognitive function, self-concept and leadership skills.

have been shown to promote positive youth development and build strong links between youth and community. Residing in a natural setting can make for a greater appreciation and understanding of the natural world and natural processes.



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What did the researchers do?

The research is both qualitative and quantitative. The approach is sequential and exploratory by design with three phases of data collection 1) camp director as participant observer, 2) personal interviews with alumni, 3) survey of current campers. The process follows the pragmatic paradigm and case study approach. Data is triangulated using mixed-methods.

Participant observer's primary proposition is that significant learning takes place particular to ROE and continues in future learning.

Qualitative strategy - responses of alumni will support or refute participant observer and primary proposition.

Quantitative strategy- responses of current campers support or refute alumni's position.

Convergence of data serves to refute or validate the primary proposition.

Informed consent was obtained from 17 alumni, 113 campers (and their parents).

Alumni reviewed their transcripts and were interviewed twice.

Phase 1: Interview guideline designed based on prior knowledge of the camp director. Alumni further informed and supported director's knowledge in interview responses. This lends trustworthiness to the - director's praxis - the cycle of action and reflection through participant observation, further supported by personal journals, minutes, photographs, and writings that chronicled camp. Alumni responses lend credence to the knowledge claims of the director.

Phase 2: The responses of the alumni inform the survey design for current campers. Survey gauges opinion and/or attitude of current campers through 20 questions. Seventeen of the questions are 5 point Likert scales. The percentage frequency of individual positive or



negative responses was noted. This identifies agreement or disagreement between present and past experience.

The question: are learning experiences at camp the same or different over a time span of 20 years? Findings support the primary position if responses to camper survey are in agreement with responses of alumni.

Phase 3: Allows surveyed responses of current campers to support or refute the primary proposition. In this way current camper data along with alumni data converge to support or refute knowledge claims of the camp director as participant observer. Convergence of present day data with retrospective data is significant as it identifies attitudes within the researched community as expressed over a spread of approximately 25 years.

What did the researchers find?

- Learning was remembered with clarity.
- Experiences were considered important and life shaping.

- Participants developed intrinsic motivation which transferred to later life.
- Specific skills proved valuable in later life.
- Community promoted positive social networking skills and ethic.
- Participants developed acceptance and respect for others.
- Often assisted in resolving personal challenges.

How can you use this research?

- Lobby government and school boards for inclusion of ROE in curriculum.
- Promote ROE to further education for cosmopolitan/global citizenship.
- Methodology can be used to determine effectiveness of a variety of missions.
- Promote ROE for science field trips and eco-literacy.
- Contribution to literature on youth development.
- Contribution to the literature on narrative inquiry.



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About the researchers

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References

Fine, Stephen Michael. (2005). Contextual learning within the residential outdoor experience: A case study of a summer camp community in Ontario. Toronto: OISE/University of Toronto.

Keywords

Camp, Contextual learning, Residential outdoor experience, Summer camp, Community, Ontario

About this summary

The Ontario Education Research Exchange (OERE) is a project of the *Knowledge Network for Applied Education Research*, an Ontario network promoting the use of research in education. The OERE's clear language summaries of academic research aim to support this mandate.

This summary reflects findings from this study *only* and is not necessarily representative of the broader body of literature on this subject. Please consult the original document for complete details about this research. In case of any disagreement, the original document should be understood as authoritative.

This summary has been adapted from the *ResearchSnapshot* series developed by York University and ResearchImpact and has been developed according to writing and design principles unique to OERE. For more information about this summary or the OERE network please contact oere.knaer.oise@utoronto.ca.