

Equipping with Excellence:

Evaluating Effectiveness of Staff Training on Counselors' Experience at Summer Camp

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Abstract

This research study seeks to evaluate the effectiveness of staff training on the competency of counselors at summer camp. The study addresses the question, "How does the counselor training program provided by a camp affect the experience and effectiveness of the counselor throughout the summer?" The participant population includes 8 college age (18-22) camp counselors employed by Cru Kids Camp for summer 2019 as part of its elementary (K-5th) program. Through qualitative interview research, analyzed by thematic network coding, the researcher identifies the strengths and weaknesses of the particular training program. The goal of this study is to provide professional development research on how camp organizations can better support their counselors to serve the campers in the best capacity possible.

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Introduction

The Importance of Camp

Few would deny that the summer camp experience is an incredible opportunity for personal growth, friendships, and unforgettable adventures. Many can recall their own experiences at camp that served as an important milestone in their childhood or adolescent years. Recently, quantitative research studies have been conducted to demonstrate the impact of camp ministry upon youth development. One study used a pre-camp/post camp survey to explore the developmental outcomes that the summer camp experience had upon youth. With almost 2,300 campers and their parents at more than 90 American Camp Association (ACA) accredited camps across the country participating in the study, the researchers concluded with strong measurable data that there is a positive relationship between summer camp experiences and a youth's growth in areas of confidence, commitment, and relational skills.¹ Camp is unique when compared with other youth development settings because of the intensity, duration, and the low ratio of staffers to campers.² Because of these factors, the experience of summer camp has a particularly strong potential to influence the development of the youth of today's culture.

¹ Henderson, Karla A. "Summer Camp Experiences." *Journal of Family Issues* 28, no. 8, 2007, 987.

² Garst, Barry A., Nancy K. Franz, Sarah Baughman, Chris Smith, and Brian Peters. "Growing without Limitations:" Transformation among Young Adult Camp Staff." *Journal of Youth Development; Vol 4, No 1*, 2009, 22.

The Impact of Counselors

There are many factors in the power of camp and its impact on young people. From team-building recreational activities, to an opportunity to disconnect from the pressures of home life, to the chance to examine spiritual concepts in an encouraging environment – these are just a few examples that begin to explain some of the reasons underlying the strength of the camp ministry model and its ability to change lives. However, few aspects of the camp experience have as much impact on the campers as the ministry of the camp counselors. Camp counselors have a unique position to influence the lives of these young people in ways that few other types of relationships can. Campers look up to the example of their counselors. In fact, researcher Stacy Taniguchi conducted a study aimed at discovering the character traits the campers admired in their leaders.³ The study identified three key characteristics that the youth most admired. The first was service-orientation. Campers are impacted by witnessing their leaders put the needs of others before their own. The second trait identified was that of intentional interest in others. According to the study, campers admired the way their counselors demonstrated genuine care and interest in them as individuals. One final trait that the campers perceived was a sense of freedom in their leaders. The fun-loving, adventurous spirit displayed by many camp counselors was found to be particularly attractive to the youth. The study demonstrated the role model impact that camp counselors have upon youth and the character traits that influence youth perspective.⁴

³ Taniguchi, Stacy T. "The Attributes of Effective Camp Counselors: Changing Youths' Perspectives of Being "Cool"." *The Journal of Experiential Education* 29, no. 3, 2007, 378.

⁴Ibid.

Yet in a different study, it was also recognized that poor leadership in youth recreation can actually have a negative effect on youth development: “A strong argument can be made that poorly framed and delivered activities may not have much, if any beneficial effect and can even undermine positive outcomes. To put it simply, the context and setting where recreation activities happen matter, and the adults who plan and lead these activities often have a significant impact on whether participation yields positive developmental outcomes.”⁵

The Importance of Counselor Development and Training

Because this role is so critical to the summer camp experience and the potential for positive youth development, it is vital that camps select, train, and equip their counselors with attention and high-quality programs. Due to the facts that camp counselors face demanding schedules, physical and emotional exhaustion, and constant time spent in social settings, the probability of becoming burned out before the end of the summer is a real problem for many in this vocation. This study desired to build upon previous research as well as original data gathered from a focus group of counselors to explore the relationship between the camp’s training program and the counselor’s perception of its effectiveness, especially in the area of combating burnout.

Literature Review

Competency Models

One of the most crucial terms to define when discussing any type of professional development is competency. Competency models ask the question “what skills are needed to be

⁵ Barcelona, Robert J. "A Competency-Based Approach to Preparing Staff as Recreation and Youth Development Leaders." *New Directions for Youth Development*, no. 130, 2011, 121.

effective in this profession?” Knowing these desired competency outcomes is key in creating an effective training program. Previous research in this field has narrowed what traits are necessary for a competent camp counselor. One recent study conducted at an Ohio 4-H camp led to the development of a competency model for quality camp counselors. After many rounds of reviews, the researchers concluded 16 key points, grouped into the categories of caregiving, programming, and teaching, that are vital for a competent camp counselor. ⁶ Ranking in order of importance, these competencies included health, wellness, and risk management, supportive relationships, professionalism, role model, teamwork and leadership, child and adolescent development knowledge, thinking and problem solving, and cultural awareness. These areas of competency should ideally be the outcome of any effective training program for camp counselors.

Kirkpatrick’s Techniques for Evaluating Training Programs

When it comes to evaluating training programs, few literature studies have been as foundational as Donald L. Kirkpatrick’s articles, “Techniques for Evaluating Training Programs.” In these articles, Kirkpatrick gave four different perspectives on how to measure the success of training programs and techniques. First, one must measure the reaction, or in other words, how well the trainees liked a training program. Second, one must accurately evaluate the learning outcomes from the training. Third, one must focus on how a training will actually influence and change behavior. Lastly, one must evaluate training programs in terms of results

⁶ Epley, Hannah K. "Development of a Competency Model for a State 4-H Camp Counselor Program." *Journal of Park and Recreation Administration* 35, no. 2, 2017, 51.

desired.⁷ Kirkpatrick's guidelines were influential in the development of the research questions used in this study.

Kendellen's Study Model

While very few qualitative studies have been done relating to camp counselor development, it is not a completely uncharted field. One recent study conducted by Kelsey Kendellen used a qualitative interview-based method to discover the relationship between experiences as a camp counselors and leadership growth in an individual. The model proposed by this study consisted of a focus group of 12 counselors. A semi-structured interviewed guide comprised of three sections was composed.⁸ Each section began with a close-ended question and was followed by a set of open-ended questions. All interviews were conducted in person and were audio recorded. To analyze the data, Kendellen conducted a six-step inductive thematic analysis on the interview transcripts which included coding the transcripts, grouping the codes into overarching themes, refining the themes, and writing a final manuscript with conceptual claims regarding the research.⁹ Because Kendellen's study is one of the only qualitative research studies in camp counselor development, the methods by which she conducted and analyzed her interviews were modeled by this study.

⁷ Kirkpatrick, Donald L. "Techniques for Evaluating Training Programs." *Training & Development Journal* 33, no. 6, 1979, 78.

⁸ Kendellen, Kelsey. "Facilitators and Barriers to Leadership Development at a Canadian Residential Summer Camp." *Journal of Park and Recreation Administration* 34, no. 4, 2016, 41.

⁹Kendellen, 42.

Noted Problems in Camp Counselor Development

Previous research has demonstrated that common problems and shortcomings are prevalent in the staff training and development programs of different camps throughout the United States. Walh-Alexander's recent study discovered that the areas of conflict management, counselor expectations, and developing camper skills are aspects of competency that most counselors perceive with low levels of confidence.¹⁰ As previously stated, the issue of burnout is another serious hindrance to the effectiveness of camp counselors. Defining burnout as a "syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment,"¹¹ another study conducted by Walh-Alexander sought to understand how the levels of individual resiliency in a counselor affected the timing and severity of the burnout experience during their summer. In this study, Walh-Alexander suggested that professional development training programs that seek to empower camp counselors often play a vital role in counselors' perceptions of their personal resiliency. The study offered that the greater the sense of connectedness throughout the staff team, the greater the increase in personal resilience, and thus, a reduction of feelings of burnout throughout the camp season.¹² This is one of the primary reasons that building staff unity during staff training is vital to the overall success. Lastly, research has noted that lack of feedback and support throughout the summer is often a cause of

¹⁰ Wahl-Alexander, Zachary. "Influence of a Training Program on Camp Counselors' Perceived Competency When Accounting for Prior Camp Experience." *Journal of Outdoor Recreation, Education & Leadership* 9, no. 3, 2017, 311.

¹¹ Maslach, Christina. *Maslach Burnout Inventory - 3rd Edition.. Edition*. Palo Alto: Consulting Psychologists Press, 1996, 4.

¹² Wahl-Alexander, Zachary. "Changes in Perceived Burnout among Camp Staff across the Summer Camp Season." *Journal of Park and Recreation Administration* 35, no. 2, 2017, 83.

perceived ineffectiveness among counselors.¹³ Therefore, finding ways to remind the summer staff of the importance of their mission and encouraging them regularly must be a priority for leadership.

Research Questions

The previous research left unanswered the overarching question, “How does the counselor training program provided by a camp affect the effectiveness of the counselor throughout the summer and combat their experience with burnout?”

Method

Participants

The participants in this study were 8 camp counselors from the summer 2019 team of Cru Kids Camp in Colorado. These individuals were college students above the age of 18 who served the entire summer working with elementary age campers at this day camp.

Materials

This study was closely modeled from Kendellen’s methods in her research. The format for qualitative interviewing, such as using a semi-structured interview guide was used in this study. Also, methods for data analysis, such as utilizing inductive thematic analysis recommended by Kendellen’s study was considered and employed. The data was organized using the tool of thematic networks. This six-step process, developed by Jennifer Attride-Stirling, provided a structure for coding the data collected through the interview.¹⁴ First, a coding framework was developed that helped identify recurring topics and words in the data.

¹³ Kendellen, Kelsey. "Facilitators and Barriers to Leadership Development at a Canadian Residential Summer Camp." *Journal of Park and Recreation Administration* 34, no. 4, 2016, 42.

¹⁴ Attride-Stirling, Jennifer. "Thematic Networks: An Analytic Tool for Qualitative Research." *Qualitative Research* 1, no. 3, 2001, 387–405.

Second, themes were identified and refined. Third, thematic networks were constructed by the process of arranging themes, selecting basic themes, rearranging these basic themes into organizing themes, and finally, deducing global themes. Fourth, the thematic networks were explored, and the data was interpreted in the context of the networks. Fifth, the thematic network was summarized, bringing conclusion to the research. Finally, the significant themes and patterns in the data were interpreted, demonstrating how the data answered the original research question.

Using Kirkpatrick's guidelines, interview questions in this study were focused on the counselors' experiences in three areas: 1) What they liked/disliked and found helpful/non-helpful about the staff training week. 2) How staff training and staff support equipped and prepared them for competency in the responsibilities of their role. 3) The factors contributing to their experience with burnout. See Appendix A for the working model of the interview questions asked in the study.

Procedures

This study examined its previously stated research question through an interview with this focus group of camp counselors. This study utilized phenomenological qualitative methods to better understand the perspectives of counselors on the training and support they received by Cru Kids Camp, to hear related stories of their unique summer experiences, and to explore their perceptions of their competency as equipped leaders.

Results

Much information was deduced from the focus group interview, providing key themes to be explored in relation to the research question. Following Attride-Stirling's 6 steps of thematic networking, the data was analyzed. Through coding, it was identified that the counselors

responded to the interview questions in primarily three different categories: 1) What in their training/experience was helpful/good. 2) What in their training/experience was hard/frustrating 3) Suggestions relevant to how training/staff support could have been conducted differently. For purposes of this project, each of these categories were further explored before conclusions were drawn.

Although the interview questions were specifically targeted to reveal shortcomings in the training program, several good aspects of training were noted by the counselors throughout the interview. First, several of the counselors mentioned that they found the Cru 2019 Camp Policies and Procedures Manual very helpful in their acclimation to camp culture and education in their roles. They mentioned that the manual was helpful because it was relevant and specific to that particular camp and year of camp curriculum. One counselor stated that “The training manual really helped my confidence because I knew all the procedures were in there and I could always go back to it if I forgot what to do.”

The second major positive theme highlighted through the interview feedback was that the counselors appreciated how the staff training overall was motivational and Christ-centered. “They gave us the WHY behind everything,” noted one counselor. Several counselors mentioned how the training program helped them understand how their role as counselors was vital in the mission of the camp: “It showed us the big picture of why we do what we do at camp.” Almost every counselor noted how staff training made them feel loved and appreciated by the senior leadership. They noted how the sessions in the training regarding Christian topics such as the importance of communicating the gospel to young children, grace despite mistakes, and relying on Christian community were encouraging and confidence-building. Later in the interview, when discussing experiences with burnout, a few of the counselors referenced how

reminders of remembering the big picture and relying on their staff community were helpful to them during the hard days of camp.

The third positive element of staff training that was identified by the counselors was the session that focused on cultural awareness at camp. In fact, this was one of the first things discussed in the interview by the counselors. This particular presentation was a new addition in the training program and this was the first year it was implemented. The goal of this training session was to present a biblical perspective on diversity and culture as well as provide practical ways to prevent racist bullying. The training went through several points on common miscommunications between the majority and minority cultures, especially in relation to youth ministry. Because Cru Kids Camp serves a wide spectrum of ethnicities and cultural heritages, the counselors found that this training session helped them better understand how to interact with their campers. In addition, one counselor mentioned how this session was extremely eye-opening in shaping her own perspective on diversity through a Christian worldview.

While these were the key positive elements of the training that were highlighted in the interview, negative elements were also noted. Through coding, the researcher was able to identify four areas where the counselors felt like the training they received was insufficient in aiding them in certain areas of competency. In addition, the researcher discovered two major themes in response to the most difficult/frustrating aspects of the staff experience during the summer.

First, possibly one of the most prominent of the four areas was that of handling conflict. Another counselor contributed to the discussion that there were not enough training resources on how to properly handle conflict, not just between campers but also between staff as well. They noted that conflict was inevitable in the type of day to day ministry they were doing. However,

they wished that staff training would have better prepared them to manage conflict between their campers in a healthy manner. This led into a discussion regarding a need for clear protocol to be established in relation to camper discipline. (This discussion will be further explored below.) A couple of the counselors also expressed experiencing conflict with other staff members, especially their co-counselors. They stated that having specific training on how to work through conflict with other staff would have been very helpful. In relation to this, they mentioned that being warned of potential conflict during training might have better set their expectations for the reality.

Second, on multiple occasions during the interview, certain counselors noted that the structure and schedule of the training could have been paced more appropriately. The main cause of concern was one particular day in the schedule where all of the health and safety protocol was covered. All of the counselors agreed that it was very difficult and overwhelming to be presented with this critical material in such a short time span. One counselor noted that it felt like an “info dump without time to practice or process.” This counselor also mentioned that because this day occurred later in the training structure, all of the counselors were already tired and mentally maxed out. Because of this, he said that he felt like they were unable to retain as much of this important information as they otherwise would have been capable of processing.

Third, the interview responses revealed that the training offered the staff very little in the area of being spiritual leaders for their campers, particularly in preparing and leading Bible studies and having intentional spiritual conversations. One counselor even stated: “If I didn’t already have skills in this area, I would have been totally unprepared.” Many of the counselors were frustrated by the fact that there was no time in the training schedule to prepare and plan for their daily Bible study times that they would be responsible for leading. “I think the directors

need to realize that not everyone here is an education major,” one counselor remarked. It was noted that several counselors struggled to lead in this context simply because time was not spent giving clear guidelines for how to structure these Bible studies.

Fourth, although perhaps quite not as crucial as the previous three points, insufficient instruction was also indicated in the area of recreation training. It was stated that minimal training given on how to facilitate and lead games. Instructions for the games were found in the counselor manual, however, time was not allotted to read over or practice these activities. In the words of one counselor, “The training was focused more on using sunscreen than how to actually do the games.”

Through all of these responses, the researcher was able to ask further questions and delve into what the counselors perceived as the most difficult part of their experience as a staff member with Cru Kids Camp. As mentioned above, two major themes were discovered. These were the areas of camper discipline and lack of clear communication.

First of all, when all of the data from the interview was analyzed, it was clear that a large portion of the discussion was centered around the issue of camper discipline. Each counselor affirmed that unclear expectations and policies regarding camper discipline was to be enforced was a large source of stress and frustration during their experience. In addition, each counselor agreed that this was an area that they desired for more training. As they discussed among themselves, the counselors debated the official policy for camper discipline: “There is no official rule for disciplining!” “It feels confusing... like there are unspoken rules of discipline that we are supposed to know.” “Positive reinforcement is pretty much the only encouraged rule.” A couple of the counselors shared stories of how they were unequipped to handle certain camper situations requiring disciplinary action because this was an area that they had not received clear training.

They also noted how these unclear policies made it difficult for them to discern how to interact with the campers' parents regarding these incidents. It became evident that this was a major shortcoming in the Cru Kids Camp training program.

Secondly, it was deduced that another key issue that led to difficulty in the counselors feeling competent and successful in their roles was a lack of clear and consistent communication between staff. The counselors explained how although there was an evident structure of leadership in the camp, the proper lines of communication within leadership were not established. The counselors discussed a few situations in which they were unsure on direction because they received different instructions from different leaders. They noted that because only the top leaders and senior counselors had walkie talkies, it was sometimes difficult for important information and announcements to get relayed across camp during the day. Because most information was passed along through word of mouth, the information could become misinterpreted and not always communicated in the manner in which it was intended to be given to the counselors. One of the counselors being interviewed was a senior counselor (at Cru Kids Camp, this position functions as "team captains" over certain groups of counselors). He also agreed that it was difficult from the leadership end to ensure that information was conveyed efficiently and correctly.

In addition, another one of the counselors pointed out that communication was not only problematic from the top down but also from the bottom up. The counselor stated that she felt like there was a difference in feeling supported by the staff versus being heard. She explained by saying that she felt supported by the leadership staff in the fact that they were always encouraging, involved, and willing to step in and serve alongside the counselors. However, she went on to describe how there were points in the summer when she did not feel like she had a

good way to communicate with the leadership staff. She pointed out that it often felt like there was a barrier between the counselors and the leadership because there was not a consistent mode of communication. While counselors were prompted to take questions and concerns to their senior counselors, it was not made clear if or how these concerns were going to be passed along to the top leadership. One counselor noted that it was frustrating when they spoke with their senior counselors regarding certain issues but then it seemed as if the camp leadership still remained unaware of the issues. Also, this counselor shared that sometimes conflicting advice or instruction was given between different camp leaders or even different senior counselors. This miscommunication made it difficult for the counselors to know who to go to for help.

The final aspect of the research that was analyzed was the counselors' response to the questions relating to burnout. After defining burnout as "syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment,"¹⁵ five out of the eight counselors interviewed emphatically agreed that they experienced burnout during weeks four and five. It was interesting to note that these counselors were all "in-cabin" counselors, meaning that they spent all of their time with their set group of kids. The two counselors who had different responsibilities (senior counselor and recreational counselor) were experienced less burnout, although they did agree to being more physically tired during those weeks. When asked the reason behind their burnout, most of the counselors gave a story about a difficult situation that occurred during that time that brought them to their breaking point. One counselor spoke of her experience: "My kids were going crazy. I was having trouble communicating with the kids and with the leadership staff. I felt like I was not heard or valued." A majority of the explanations

¹⁵ Maslach, Christina. *Maslach Burnout Inventory - 3rd Edition.. Edition*. Palo Alto: Consulting Psychologists Press, 1996, 4.

that the counselors gave for how they reached their burnout point had to do with frustration due to miscommunication or problems handling discipline management with campers.

During the interview, it was fascinating to witness that as the counselors discussed the most difficult aspects of their experience, they began to offer and explore suggestions of how these problems could have solved or at least better handled. The researcher did not intend to lead them in this direction through the questions; however, the conversation naturally devoted a significant portion of time relating to these suggestions.

The major suggestions by the counselors relating to the improvement of their training were primarily connected to issues previously discussed. The three most prominent and emphasized ideas that the counselors brought forth were:

- 1) Specific training on how to handle conflict (both with campers and staff).
- 2) Specific training on how to prepare and lead Bible studies as well as more of an emphasis on how to be spiritual leaders.
- 3) Clear protocol for discipline and for communication with parents in relation to disciplinary situations.

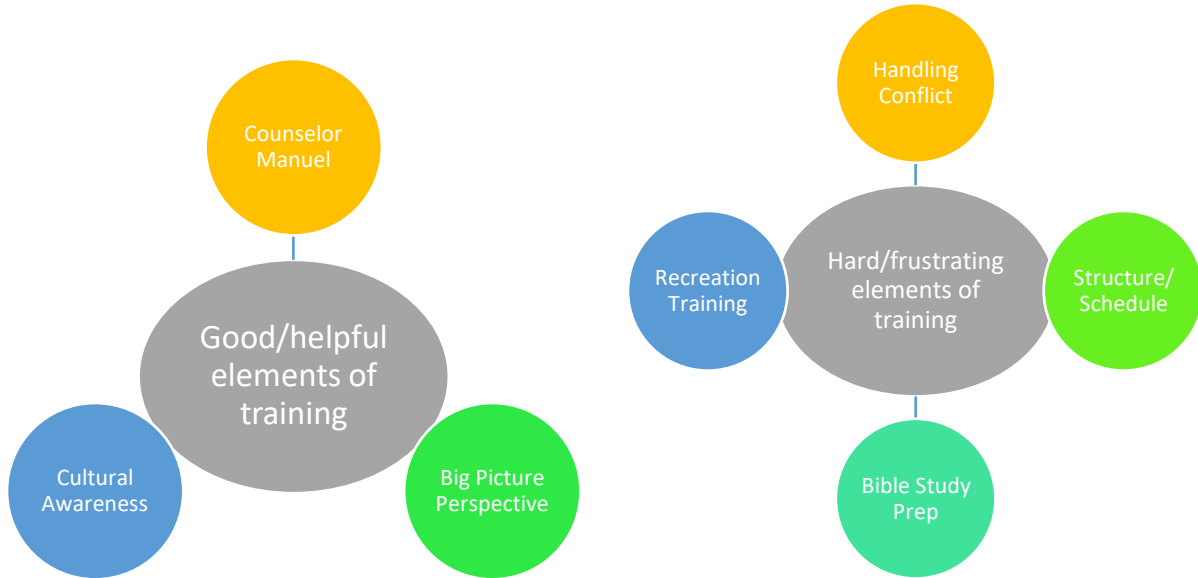
The implications of these suggestions will be further explored in the discussion.

In addition, individual counselors proposed a few more ideas of how they believed staff training could have been more efficient and beneficial. First, one counselor offered that training week should have included more time for staff bonding, especially with one's co-counselor. She stated that the counselors were not made aware of who their co-counselor was until the very end of training. This counselor mentioned how this did not allow her and her co-counselor time to get to know one another and adequately prepare for their cabin together. Second, another counselor put forth that in regard to the training in recreation, he would have liked it if there was

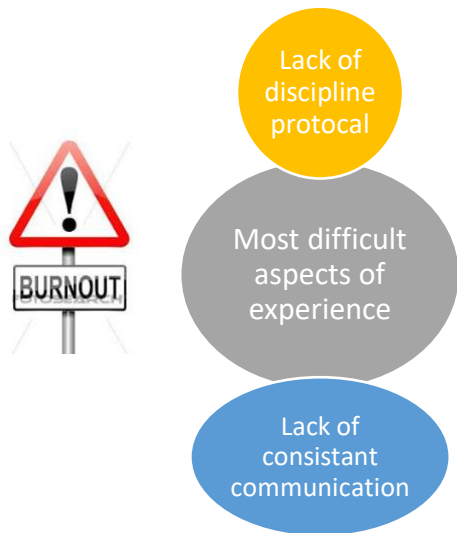
time to actually play and practice facilitating the games. He noted that it would have been very helpful if the training had included practical pointers on how to lead the games as well as time to practice instead of just reading the instructions out of the camp games manual. Third, a different counselor suggested that it could have been beneficial in order to maximize training time if the counselors had received some of their training ahead of their in-person arrival, perhaps online. She noted that even receiving the counselor's manual ahead of time would have helped her to better prepare for the summer. She also suggested completing some of the safety/First Aid training videos online before training week would have helped lighten the information overload that the counselors experienced. The researcher found all of these suggestions and input critical to the discussion of how camp training programs can be improved.

Data Analysis

Thematic network #1



Thematic Network #2



Thematic Network #3



Discussion

The results of this study prompted several themes for further exploration and discussion. While not all can be covered in the scope of this thesis, the researcher will attempt to highlight the key ideas discovered through the data that show the most potential for aiding camps in improving their staff training program. The researcher will organize this discussion by expounding upon the thematic networks of the good/helpful elements of the training and the hard/frustrating elements of the training. Next, the thematic network revealing the connection between the most difficult aspects of the counselors' experience and their awareness of burnout will be considered. Finally, the researcher will review the culminating thematic network of the counselors' suggestions for improvement and how their practical implications for any camp staff training program.

Thematic Network #1

Out of the three emphasized helpful elements of the training, two of these elements align with previous research noting areas of competency in camp counselor development. As mentioned in the literature review, the 2017 Epley study identified several areas of competency needed in order to be successful in the role of camp counselor. According Epley, cultural awareness is defined as "understanding and accepting of differences in others; relating and connecting with diverse groups of people including, but not limited to various cultures, special needs, and backgrounds."¹⁶ This competency area of cultural awareness was concluded to be essential for camp counselors. The training session on cultural sensitivity and preventing racist

¹⁶ Epley, Hannah K. "Development of a Competency Model for a State 4-H Camp Counselor Program." *Journal of Park and Recreation Administration* 35, no. 2, 2017, 62.

bullying at Cru Kids Camp was a positive aspect of the training that helped equip counselors in this area. Likewise, Epley's study also identified that "seeing the 'big picture' or goals of camp" was essential to creating teamwork and leadership skills in individual counselors.¹⁷ Cru Kids Camp counselors noted that the 'big picture' perspective communicated through their training was extremely beneficial in their role.

Although cultural awareness and big picture perspective were positive elements of training previously identified in other research, the importance of the counselor manual was not highlighted in any literature review on this subject. However, according to the data in this study, the counselor manual was identified as a crucial aspect of the counselors' perception of their training being helpful. The researcher proposes that all camp staff training programs strongly consider creating or reevaluating their training manual since it was shown to be such a key factor in aiding the counselors. Perhaps a further study could be conducted to determine the elements of an efficient and beneficial training manual for camp counselors.

In regard to the hard/frustrating aspects theme of the camp training noted in this study, it was curious to recognize that one of these shortcomings in particular was supported in previous research. As mentioned in the literature review, Wahl-Alexander's study revealed that many counselors demonstrate a low level of competency in handling conflict management. This was found to especially be true for first-time counselors.¹⁸ In Cru Kids Camp, the data also showed that this was an area in which the counselors struggled. The researcher proposes that camp

¹⁷ Epley, 63.

¹⁸ Wahl-Alexander, Zachary. "Influence of a Training Program on Camp Counselors' Perceived Competency When Accounting for Prior Camp Experience." *Journal of Outdoor Recreation, Education & Leadership* 9, no. 3, 2017, 311.

training programs need to devote time to teaching tangible methods on how to handle conflict. This could be further practiced by employing case-studies and role playing during the training week. Beyond the initial training period, it is suggested that camp leadership offers continued feedback and reviews of these methods throughout the summer.

As for the three other lacking elements – the structure and schedule of the training, Bible study preparation, and recreation training – previous research did not reveal that these things had been noted as shortcomings in other training programs. However, even if these elements were more specific to Cru Kids Camp, they should still be considered when building a training program for staff. Particularly, leadership should be careful in planning the schedule of the training, being mindful of the amount/type of content discussed each day.

Thematic Network #2

One of the key discoveries of this research was the connection between the themes of lack of discipline protocol and consistent communication with the counselors' experience with burnout. These themes were the two identified elements of the counselors' experience working at Cru Kids Camp that were the most difficult. The interpretation of the data in the interview responses led the researcher to establish a connection between these themes and the cause of their burnout. Because of this clear relation, the researcher believes that measures should be taken in these areas in order to combat the potential for burnout. In all camp staff training programs, clear protocol for discipline should be outlined. This should include methods for addressing camper behavior in various situations. Much research has also been conducted in the area of student discipline and promoting positive behavior. Certain methods that are currently seeing success include self-discipline, social and emotional learning approach, strategic use of praises and rewards, extrinsic rewards, and authoritative discipline in the correction of

misbehavior.¹⁹ Camps need to take time to seriously examine some of the literature regarding this issue and implement findings in order to create their own discipline philosophy and protocol for their camp. During the training program, there should be time allowed to discuss the protocol as well as participate in potential case studies in order for the counselors to gain confidence in this area. In addition, camps need to establish a direct line of leadership responsibility when it comes to handling discipline, including communication with parents. It needs to be understood which roles manage the different levels of disciplinary protocol established by the camp.

Besides creating clear structure for discipline, camps need to also have a consistent method of communication between the levels of leadership in their camp. The responses analyzed from the Cru Kids Camp counselors provided evidence that this is critical in allowing counselors to feel confident and supported in their role. Even if camp leadership is extremely caring and supportive of their staff, unless methods of communication are established, counselors will not know where to reach out for help when needed. In fact, Kendellen's study discovered that healthy communication is the number one facilitator to leadership development in staff. However, the same study also identified that lack of feedback and support is one of the largest barriers to leadership development.²⁰ The researcher acknowledges that structures of communication will look different depending on the size, policies, and type of each individual camp. For Cru Kids Camp, the strategy of senior counselors as the liaison between counselors and camp leadership did not appear to be offering a consistent form of communication. Most likely this was because the communication pathways were not clearly established during

¹⁹ Bear, George G.. *School Discipline and Self-Discipline : A Practical Guide to Promoting Prosocial Student Behavior*. New York: Guilford Publications, 2010, xi-xiv.

²⁰ Kendellen, Kelsey. "Facilitators and Barriers to Leadership Development at a Canadian Residential Summer Camp." *Journal of Park and Recreation Administration* 34, no. 4, 2016, 42.

training, leading to misunderstandings in what was expected of each role in regard to communication with the other roles. Therefore, like structure and expectations were needed for disciplinary measures, structure and expectations are also vital in communication pathways for camps. The researcher believes that amending these difficulties in the Cru Kids Camp program would greatly alleviate the potential for burnout among their counselors.

Thematic Network #3

The most practical data gleaned from this research was the final thematic network regarding the counselors' suggestions for improvement of their training program. As noted in the results, there were six distinguished suggestions identified. Three of these suggestions were focused on what they would add to the training curriculum while the other three suggestions were focused on how they would change the presentation of the training program. Relating to the first three suggestions, the counselors agreed that they believed the Cru Kids Camp staff training program needed to include more training in the areas of handling conflict, spiritual leadership, and disciplinary protocol. While methods of training for handling conflict and disciplinary protocol have already been discussed above, the area of training in the area of spiritual leadership remains to be explored. Spiritual leadership is defined as focusing on the spiritual well-being of others, including efforts to help people cultivate their interior life.²¹ In the interview, many of the counselors mentioned a desire for training on how to be better spiritual leaders, especially relating to leading Bible studies and facilitating intentional, spiritual conversations with their campers. Thankfully, several resources are available in regard to equipping leaders in spiritual formation. Arthur Canales's article "Models of Christian

²¹ Canales, Arthur David. "Models of Christian Leadership in Youth Ministry." *Religious Education* 109, no. 1, 2014, 35.

Leadership in Youth Ministry” is just one resource that provides frameworks for several different approaches to spiritual leadership in the context of youth ministry. While exploring all of them are beyond the scope of this research, camp organizations, especially those Christian in nature, should include resources for their counselors in this area.

Three other key suggestions made by the counselors included time for bonding with the other staff members, practice of the recreational activities, and online training ahead of arrival. These suggestions should be taken with serious consideration as academic research supports how each of these aspects are beneficial to the equipping process. Going back to Wallh-Alexander’s study referenced earlier, time for staff bonding builds connectedness among the team which is a vital part of the success of any staff team.²² Academic research also supports the idea of how “non-serious” talk, natural conversation, and laughter is actually highly influential in relationship-building and emergence of leadership within teams.²³ Time for team bonding is critical to the success and unity of any group working together, especially those working in close quarters as in the camp context. Team bonding can be accomplished a multitude of different ways, from recreational games to topic conversations to even “free time” where opportunities for relationship building are present. It is important for camps to include intentional time in their training programs where staff have the chance to interact with one another and practice working together with one another as a team. Camps also need to create environments during orientation week where intentional conversations among staffers are encouraged. In addition, practicing the

²² Wahl-Alexander. "Changes in Perceived Burnout among Camp Staff across the Summer Camp Season." 2017, 83.

²³ Watson, Cate. “Humour and Laughter in Meetings: Influence, Decision-Making and the Emergence of Leadership.” *Discourse & Communication* 11, no. 3, 2017: 314.

recreational games and activities before camper arrival is a suggestion worth consideration. Perhaps camps would even have the staffers practice playing and facilitating certain camp recreation pastimes as part of the staff bonding experience.

As for online training ahead of arrival, this is not an original concept for camps. In fact, a whole study was conducted in 2018 that explored this idea to see if supplemental online training videos increased the preparation and competency of camp staff. By creating a curriculum of module-based training videos that supplemented an eight-day orientation program at a residential summer camp, the study discovered that participation in an online training program led to initial gains in counselor perceived competence that appeared to prepare the counselors for the on-site orientation.²⁴ Therefore, it can be suggested with confidence that camps should consider utilizing online training videos in order to reduce the amount of new information being introduced during the orientation period. Although these videos should not cover all of the training topics, they should lay foundations which can be built upon and further discussed in person.

Limitations and Future Research

Overall, this study provided great insight into the strengths and weaknesses of the training program and its relation to the counselors' experience at Cru Kids Camp. Nevertheless, because of the limited nature of the interview methods, it is safe to say that this is by no means an extensive answer to the research question posed. In fact, through the process of this study, the researcher realized there are many more ways to expand upon this research in order to achieve a

²⁴ Wahl-Alexander, Zachary, K. Andrew Richards, and Steven Howell. "The Influence of Online Training on Camp Counselor Perceived Competence." *Journal of Park and Recreation Administration* 36, no. 4, 2018, 83.

higher level of evidence with a wider sample population. The researcher proposes conducting the same interview questions with focus groups of counselors from multiple camps throughout the United States and constructing thematic networks for each of those interviews. Then, the data from each interview would be compared and contrasted. This would allow the researcher to identify the common shortcomings in staff training programs in general. The researcher would also like to explore the rate and leading factors in the experience of burnout in summer staff at a large sampling of summer camps. By comparing and contrasting the experiences of counselors at different camps with the issue of burnout, the researcher would hope to see which camps have the best success in supporting counselors with this issue. The researcher is curious to note if the two factors of lack of discipline protocol and lack of clear communication are also prevalent factors in leading to burnout in counselors from other camp programs.

Conclusion

In closing, this project accomplished its goal to provide professional development research on the relationship between camp counselor training programs and the experience and effectiveness of the counselor throughout the summer. Through the responses of the counselors surveyed, the researcher was led to insightful conclusions on how camp training programs and staff support can improve their success in equipping counselors to achieve their full potential. In realizing that the counselors' experience with burnout was largely related to the lack of discipline protocol and lack of consistent communication, the research noted two major factors regarding this issue that need to be addressed by camp leadership in order prevent burnout among their staff. Furthermore, suggestions for how the training program could be improved such as online training videos and more time designated for staff bonding revealed ideas worth considering by camp leadership. While this research was specifically designed to help improve the training

program of Cru Kids Camp, the results extend with implications for camps and youth programs in a wide spectrum of contexts. It is the researcher's sincere hope that this project will serve those wishing to improve the training programs of their own camps by learning from the strengths, weaknesses, and suggestions assessed from the staff training at this camp. The opportunity to impact lives lies in the hands of camp counselors. Leadership of camps must take seriously this charge to equip them with excellence.

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Appendix A

Group Interview Questions:

1st Section – Staff Training

1. What aspects of training week did you like?
2. How did staff training improve your confidence and your ability to be successful in your role?
3. What do you wish you had received more training on?
4. What would you have added/taken away from staff training?
5. Did you feel like the length of time for staff training was appropriate?

2nd Section - Competency

6. How did the materials provided by staff training help you in your role?
7. How did the training help you manage your campers this summer? (In relation to behavior management/discipline)
8. How well did the training prepare you for facilitating games and activities for your campers? (Adequate time to learn the games/activities before teaching?)
9. How well did the training prepare you for being a spiritual leader for your campers? (Leading small group time, sharing the gospel, connecting spiritual application to the activities, etc.)
10. How well did the training equip you in safety measures and precautions for your role? (CPR training, First Aid, etc.)
11. How did staff training excite you and motivate you to be part of fulfilling the mission of Cru Kids Camp?

3rd Section - Burnout

12. What was the most difficult aspect of your role throughout the summer?
13. How could have staff training helped to address this difficulty?
14. What did staff support beyond training week look like throughout the summer?
15. Was there ever a point in the summer when you felt completely exhausted, overwhelmed, and/or not desiring to continue in your role?
16. How did staff support encourage you and motivate you during this time?
17. How could staff support have been more beneficial to you throughout the summer?
18. What additional trainings/support sessions throughout the summer would have been helpful to you?