

Session II: Experiential Education and Youth Development in Diverse Settings

SEER 2008 ABSTRACT

Adventure-Based Programming and Social Skill Development in the Lives of Diverse Youth: Perspectives From Two Research Projects

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Social skill development is emerging as an important issue for educators and practitioners in their work with adolescent youth. This presentation will use the results from two ongoing research projects to examine the relationship between adventure-based programming and social skill development in the lives of diverse youth. The first project is the Project Adventure, Inc. RESPECT program, a 3-year comprehensive school reform initiative utilizing adventure-based programming as the core methodology. This project is being implemented in four urban Boston public middle schools. The second project is an evaluation of the University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension's 4-H Bear Hill summer camp programming over the past two summers. The 4-H Bear Hill camp is located outside of Manchester, New Hampshire, and serves a variety of youth from the greater Manchester and Seacoast areas of New Hampshire.

Review of Literature

Social skills have been shown to be a fundamental asset for healthy psychosocial development and are critical to the educational process of adolescent students (Moote Jr. & Wodarski, 1997; Scales, Benson, Leffert, & Blyth, 2000). In addition, social skills are also thought to serve as a preventative tool for several future problematic behaviors such as school and criminal behavior, dropping out of school, unhealthy stress, and violent behavior (Mahoney, Stattin, & Magnusson, 2001; Marsh & Kleitman, 2002). While acting as a deterrent, social skill development also has been shown to be a significant factor in current as well as future academic functioning and achievement (Malecki & Elliot, 2002).

Given the influence of social skills in positive youth development, researchers within the fields of outdoor experiential education have called for a more intentional focus on promoting social skill acquisition in their respective programming (Jordan, 1994; Nicholson, Collins, & Holmer, 2004). While some research on camp and adventure programs has not shown significant change in social skill development (Dickey, 1996; Michalski, Mishna, Worthington, & Cummings, 2003), other research has shown the effectiveness of such programming to promote prosocial development among adolescent participants (Boyle, 2002; Guettal & Potter, 2000; Reefe, 2005; Thurber, Scanlin, Scheuler, & Henderson, 2007).

Methods

The Project Adventure, Inc. RESPECT program was initiated in the 2005–2006 academic year and was phased into the four participating schools by grade, beginning with the sixth grade, during the following two years. Two neighboring schools that did not receive the RESPECT program acted as control schools. Consenting students in both the experimental and control schools completed the Social Skills Rating System (SSRS) (Gresham & Elliott, 1990) at the beginning and end of each academic year. For the sake of this presentation, data from the 2006–2007 seventh-grade students will be utilized, since these students received the RESPECT program for the two academic years preceding this analysis.

For the 4-H Bear Hill summer camp evaluation, consenting participants in the eight one-week sessions of camp during the 2006 and 2007 seasons completed the Social Skills Checklist (SSC) (Gass, 2005) at the beginning and end of their week of camp. For the 2007 evaluation, a follow-up SSC administered by mail in October was completed by approximately 20% of the participants.

Results

Results for the RESPECT program examine change in SSRS scores for 2006–2007 seventh graders over two academic years. Paired samples *t*-tests show significant declines in SSRS sum scores for both experimental ($t_{149} = 3.84, p < .001, ES (d) = .31$) and control ($t_{55} = 4.02, p < .001, ES (d) = .54$) students, however, experimental students declined less than control students over this time span. A one-way ANOVA comparing SSRS change scores between the two groups approached significance at the $p < .05$ level ($F_{1, 204} = 1.46, p = .22$).

For the 4-H Bear Hill summer camp, paired samples *t*-tests were used to compare mean pre and post differences in SSC scores in both the 2006 and 2007 data. Results from the 2006 analysis show that there was a statistically significant increase in campers' overall SSC score ($t_{137} = 3.38, p < .001$) as well as in their Intrapersonal subscale scores ($t_{137} = 4.19, p < .001$). Effect size values for these two results were $d = .29$ and $d = .37$ respectively, indicating small-to-medium effects. Interpersonal subscale differences, however, were not statistically significant ($t_{137} = .92, p > .05$).

Results for the 2007 data showed similar trends to the 2006 data. Campers' showed a statistically significant increase in overall SSC score ($t_{455} = -3.78, p < .001$) as well as in their Intrapersonal subscale scores ($t_{455} = -5.36, p < .001$). Effect size values for these two results were $d = .18$ and $d = .25$ respectively, indicating small effects. Interpersonal subscale differences, however, were again not statistically significant ($t_{455} = -.76, p > .05$). Participants completing the follow-up measure, however, showed significant declines from posttest SSC scores ($t_{86} = 3.08, p < .01, ES (d) = .33$).

Discussion

The results from these two separate studies examining the impact of adventure-based programming on the social skill development of diverse youth show somewhat contrasting outcomes. In the school-based Project Adventure, Inc. RESPECT program, the declines observed by both experimental and control students exemplify the transitional nature of middle school years, with urban youth often facing additional challenges such as increased levels of violence and poverty (Eccles et al., 1993). While the difference between the two groups was not statistically significant, the RESPECT program does seem to be an attenuating influence in the social skill declines for experimental students.

Results from the 2006 and 2007 4-H Bear Hill summer camp evaluations suggest that camp programming had a positive impact on the overall social skill development of its participants, primarily in the development of intrapersonal skills. The follow-up declines in the 2007

data highlight an interesting dilemma for camp programming as participants return to their everyday lives, which are often devoid of any programming specifically aimed at enhancing social skill ability.

As social skill development becomes a more recognized component in the education of today's youth, these two research projects shed light on the impact of adventure-based programming in this domain among youth in diverse settings. While results are not overly positive, this research provides an opportunity to discuss this important topic within the context of adventure-based programming research.

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