

AN EVALUATION OF A YOUTH CAMP PROGRAM'S IMPACT ON PARENTS'
PERCEPTIONS OF SUSTAINABILITY AND FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

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Need for Research

Education concerning agriculture and the environment is an important component in building and sustaining healthy communities and is critical in addressing increasing food security and natural resources issues (Stern, 2000). Research has shown there are many positive outcomes from building youth and adult partnerships, and collaboration among these groups should be a primary focus for camps and organizations who wish to have an impact on agriculture and the environment now and for future generations (Camino, 2000). In consideration of the impact parental involvement has on positive youth development (Cheung & Pomerantz, 2011; SimonsMorton & Crump, 2003; Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014), educational programs should encourage the active support and engagement of parental involvement with youth (Simons-Morton & Crump, 2003) and invest time and resources in activities and strategies which will foster stronger connections to environment-based participatory programs (Monroe, 2003). According to priority four of the American Association for Agricultural Education's National Research Agenda, "learners in all agricultural education learning environments will be actively and emotionally engaged in learning, leading to high levels of achievement, life and career readiness, and professional success" (Doerfert, 2011, p.9).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework used to guide this study was Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), which posits that learning is best accomplished through developing social interactions within a conducive learning environment related to the content learned (Bandura, 1986). This theory emphasizes the learning process as being a result of the constant reciprocal interactions of cognitive, environmental, and behavioral variables which include personal factors of the individual, the environment in which the individual is situated, and the behaviors of others within the environment (Schunk, 2012). The environment for which the study took place was influential in providing opportunities that supported the experiential learning process (Kolb, 1984).

Methodology

This qualitative research was conducted as a single case study. Direct observations were made in the field during the implementation of the sustainable-living curriculum at a summer youth camp. The curriculum was delivered to campers in the form of a scrapbook that contained information and suggested activities related to sustainable agricultural practices and the environment. A focused group interview was conducted with two camp counselors concerning the delivery of the curriculum and counselors' perceptions of the experiential learning process. A pilot focus group with parents of campers served as a guide for designing the interview protocol for the parent interviews. Focused interviews were conducted with four parents of campers who received the scrapbooks, and three focused interviews with parents of campers who did not receive the scrapbooks. The interviews were transcribed and returned to participants for member checking. The transcriptions were then coded based on emergent themes. Measures of trustworthiness and rigor were taken through persistent observation, triangulation, peer debriefing, and member-checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Findings

Four themes arose from the counselor interviews. The first theme, benefits of Experiential Learning, was exemplified in the following statement, “cooking with the herbs, they loved just eating and having those things so I think having those good hands on activities really made it, even if that was something that they hadn't experienced before, it made it more relatable to them.” The second theme, depth of conversations/interactions were improved with use of scrapbooks, emerged through comments like “with this group of kids, I became so much more involved than any other group and I do believe it has to do with the garden and the scrapbook building.” The third theme, kids like taking ownership of learning, was evident in comments like, “they had created their own challenge items and I think having that space where they could create their own and it was in there was helpful.” The last theme, counselor’s learning and self-efficacy improved and increased engagement with campers, was supported by the comment, “this has been really helpful and really empowering for me and I've noticed that this two-week session, I feel like I've really hit my stride with interacting and teaching the kids and I really think it has to do with having this as a tool.”

Three themes emerged from the parent interviews. The first theme, benefits of learning with children, emerged as several parents made comments like “if she came home saying that you shouldn't be using these chemicals in the garden because it's harmful we would listen to that. I mean, we already try not to, but, it would still make an impact and kind of remind you that your kids are going to be on the Earth longer than you are and you need to take care of it.” The second theme, methods of engaging families, was observed from comments like “I think the best transfer for that, because the children would be the most excited about it, would be hands-on activities during camp. Then that's created into some kind of hands-on activity that they make. They can then transfer that information over to the parents.” The last theme, values and knowledge parents want children to have, emerged from comments like “I think it's important they really understand where their food comes from and I love my kids to understand, to visit a farm where we get the grapes, to go see where our water comes from because we have well water.”

Conclusions

Monroe (2003) suggested that the very act of seeking out information is itself a behavior; therefore, when evaluating behavior changes it is also important to include the desire of individuals to gain information. Parents reported interest for enrolling their children in the camp program in order to receive specific information on sustainable agricultural practices. They also reported an assumption that the camp experience would inspire motivation for the child to share what they learned and provide opportunities at home in which the family could be involved. The camp counselors reported the benefits of having the curriculum to provide the necessary information and activity suggestions for which they felt confident to provide more experiential learning opportunities in the garden and develop deeper, more meaningful educational experiences with the campers.

Recommendations

The values and beliefs of parents are important in designing programs for children because they will help inspire prolonged behavior and literacy changes at home and in the future. The triadic reciprocity of SCT helps to illustrate the benefit and importance of understanding parent’s desires and needs when designing future educational programs for youth.

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