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## Summer Camp and Experiential Learning – A Qualitative Study Exploring the Perspectives of Selected Participants, Living in Poverty, While Attending a Sleep-Away Summer Camp in Northern Minnesota

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**SUMMER CAMP AND EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING –  
A QUALITATIVE STUDY EXPLORING THE PERSPECTIVES OF SELECTED  
PARTICIPANTS, LIVING IN POVERTY, WHILE ATTENDING A SLEEP-  
AWAY SUMMER CAMP IN NORTHERN MINNESOTA**

By

Mary Hill Achelpohl

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Education

Major: Educational Leadership

Under the Supervision of Dr. Jeanne L. Surface

Omaha, Nebraska

October 2018

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SUMMER CAMP AND EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING - A QUALITATIVE STUDY  
EXPLORING THE PERSPECTIVES OF SELECTED PARTICIPANTS, LIVING IN  
POVERTY, WHILE ATTENDING A SLEEP-AWAY SUMMER CAMP IN  
NORTHERN MINNESOTA

Mary Hill Achelpohl, Ed.D.

University of Nebraska, 2018

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Summer breaks vary in length and depth of experiences for many children and families. The summer learning gap has been widely researched as problematic to the cognitive, social, and emotional development for many children, especially children living in poverty. At the same time, best practices in summer learning initiatives have a narrow research scope. This qualitative phenomenological research study explores participants' perceptions of their time at a sleep-away summer camp in Northern Minnesota. All participants were living in poverty during their time at summer camp. A major focus will examine summer learning opportunities and the importance of creating experiences for every child to learn, grow, and flourish during these long breaks.

*Keywords:* informal learning environments, experiential learning, sleep-away summer camp, summer learning, summer learning gap, play, brain development, executive functioning skills

### **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to all those who have influenced my life in countless, experiential ways. Especially my husband, Sam, and our three children, Colin, Charlotte, and Louisa, who are consistently game for all of the experiential learning shenanigans we dream-up together as a family. This dissertation is also dedicated to my dad and our fishing adventures with Alice and Boris and to my mom for nurturing every second of it. Finally, this dissertation is dedicated to my camp family and all of my students, their families, and my educational colleagues. You continue to inspire and motivate me in ways you will never truly realize. I am grateful for the impact you have all had within the context of my own experiential learning cycle.

## Acknowledgements

When I started to think about what I wanted to research for my dissertation, I knew I wanted it to be a meaningful endeavor - honoring my experiences and those who have impacted my life in countless ways. Much like my research participant, Camper 3, and her “love letter” to camp – this dissertation has become my “love letter” to the experiences that have shaped me as an educator, a counselor, a daughter, a mom, a wife, a sister, and a friend. I have loved writing every word, analyzing every interview, and reflecting on every lived experience.

Writing this dissertation would not have been possible without the unwavering support of my dissertation committee. To Dr. Surface, my dissertation chair, thank you for all of your encouragement, your coffee shop chats, your insightful feedback, and your advocacy for qualitative research. You helped me realize the potential and power of qualitative research and collecting data with a soul. You encouraged me to think about my research creatively and honored the art of story-telling within the context of my dissertation. To Dr. Keiser, your perspective on authentic leadership has stayed with me during many important moments in both my personal and professional career. I have come to appreciate my authentic self, and I think your words ultimately validated my decision to pursue a dissertation topic that was perhaps a little off the beaten path. To Dr. Ostler, thank you for the “aha” moment during one of our office visits when you prompted me to interpret my research interests through a more qualitative lens. Our conversation opened a new door for me that I may not have explored without your perspective. I also have a newfound appreciation for the Central Limit Theorem. ☺

Thanks for making the scary world of statistics a lot more accessible to the mind of a

qualitative researcher. Finally, thank you to Dr. Adcock for not only a professional committee relationship, but also for being one of the most supportive faculty members during my time as a Graduate Assistant in the College of Education. I have loved our time together supporting practicum students and am wondering how I got so lucky to also have your support on my dissertation committee? And to everyone in the UNO Educational Leadership Department, I have learned so much from all of you. Thank you for your support in my growth not only as an educational leader, but as a person too.

The Experiential Learning Cycle became an important way for me to reflect on my life experiences and the powerful influence they have had on my own personal development. If I had written my dissertation ten years ago, my research interests and methodologies would have been vastly different. And I suppose the same would be true if I embarked on this dissertation adventure 10 years from now. Amidst all of these things, there are many things that remain constant in my life. Most notably, the profound impact my own family, my camp family, and my school family have had on my life. I would not be where I am today and who I am today without their support, their unconditional love, and the many lessons they have taught me over the years.

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## Chapter 1 Introduction

*Sunsets. Year-after-year, summer-after-summer, they never get old. Our cameras never do them justice, yet we are always trying to capture the quintessential portrait. And even though you have seen them a million times before, sunsets never elicit exactly the same experience. Sunset memories are often contingent on the moment in time and the people by your side. They provide a pause, almost a reset. Allowing you to completely immerse yourself in that split-second you make the conscious or unconscious decision to stop and experience nature's canvas in the sky. Sunsets evoke both individual and collective interpretations of something that happens every single day, yet never seems to lose its magic.*

*If you asked a camper to articulate imagery associated with the camp experience, I imagine sunsets would be widely recounted. On this particular evening, the sunset was exceptionally vivid. Campers were lining up along the edge of the forest to try to snap pictures through the trees, over the lake. A warm, calm breeze rustled through the leaves as the wooden benches began to fill-up, anticipating the final campfire. These campfires were always bittersweet. For some, it would be their last time experiencing the glow of the fire, the traditional camp songs, and the folksy guitar accompaniment provided by the beloved girls' camp director. Again, every final campfire seemed vaguely familiar, yet remarkably different depending on the people by your side, the moment in time.*

*Counselors-in-training [CIT's] had an especially difficult task during this evening. They had spent their summer developing as strong, female leaders - learning from one another, partaking in privileges only permissible during their CIT summer, and building relationships as they reached the penultimate goal in girls' camp. On this*

*evening, during this moment in time, these girls had to say goodbye to a camp that had become their second home. In an experience that is hard to put into words, each girl took to the podium, under the night sky, in front of the roaring campfire and all of their friends, to tell their stories. Every story was different, but themes of newfound self-confidence, friendships, a connectedness to nature, perseverance, strength, and belonging were prevalent. They would never return to the same place as campers again, but their connections to the people, this place, would be a part of them forever.*

*After the campfire, we went down to the lake. The pathway glowed with paper bag luminaries, flickering in the night sky while insuring we did not stray from the trail. I thought that was breathtaking until I made my way down to the dock. Each camper and counselor received a small, handmade, wooden sailboat. In each wooden sailboat, a candle. The dock was U-shaped, allowing for each arm to be utilized to set the wishing boats out to sea. I gathered my cabin group and we ventured to the far arm of the dock. I knew this experience was really more for my cabin group, but I was selfishly so enamored by the glowing sailboat fleet, I couldn't help feeling like it was for me too. As you launched your boat into the lake, you were supposed to make a wish. I still remember mine. And what I witnessed on that final campfire evening remains eternally engrained in my mind. All of our sailboats, floating, drifting, enveloping the lake we swam in every day. I imagined how the CIT's felt, releasing their final wishing boat, making their final wish. I imagined how hard it must be, saying goodbye to a place you had called your summer home for many years. It was more than just something you did, it became much more about who you were; who you wanted to become. And so goes the story of my first, final campfire. I knew I would return to this place again. I knew it was*

*a place I wanted my own children to experience. And when the opportunity arose to send some of my students, I could only hope their own experiences would be as powerful.*

### **Introduction to the Problem**

Conjuring up images of summer break might include long, sunny days of neighborhood play, pool days, family vacations, team sports, and summer camps. Brushing up on academic skills might include summer school programs, academic tutoring, or a trip to the local library or bookstore. Summer vacations vary in length all over the country. Some students attend year-round schools with shorter breaks, while others might be on a break for as long as three months. For many, the anticipation of summer is met with pure joy at the thought of being free from traditional schooling for months at a time. For many others, the summer months might invoke more anxiety due to lack of programming and missing the safety and security the school day can provide. For those families living in poverty, the opportunities and access to activities during the summer months can be limited at best.

How the current academic school calendar came to embrace long summer breaks in the United States is an interesting, often misrepresented story. Much of the current research attributes summer breaks to the early, dominant agrarian lifestyle and the need for children to help families with farm chores. Ironically, agrarian populations needed more help planting in the fall and harvesting in the spring. As a result of the farming schedule, a school calendar emerged that included shorter winter and summer terms, with more time off during the fall and spring. Within American educational history, many school calendars were developed based on regional needs, which resulted in disjointed academic schedules across the United States. For example, in 1842, schools in New

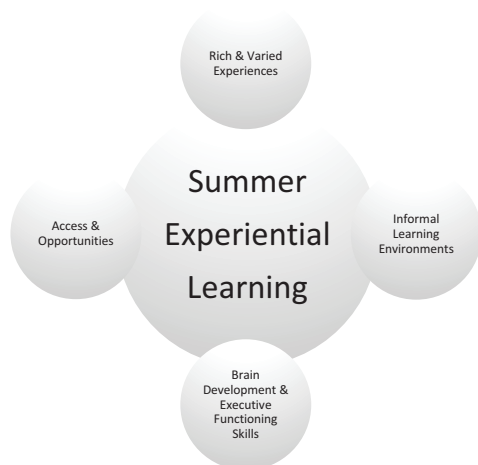
York City were essentially open year-round without mandated attendance. Because the school calendar varied so much across the country, school reformers advocated to conceive a more standardized school calendar year in the early nineteenth century. The thinking behind the long summer stretch was to give children a break, while giving teachers time to regroup, develop curriculum, and return reinvigorated at the start of a new academic year (de Melker & Weber, 2014). Curiously, while societies evolved and changed, along with the needs of students, families, and communities, the school calendar has almost universally remained the same.

Fast-forward two centuries, when current educational research has well-documented the effects of the academic summer slide. Regardless of socioeconomic status, students are progressing nearly at the same rate during the academic school year. When summer arrives, most students are losing ground, with the loss further magnified among children living in poverty. There are powerful indicators illustrating that the school-year calendar systemically perpetuates the academic gap to grow larger between diverse socioeconomic groups. Yet, the research on the most effective ways to address the summer learning gap remains relatively sparse and unfocused. What strategies work best? Could extending the school year bridge the gap? Are community partnerships offering rich summer programming the answer? There are studies asserting a combination of academic and experiential learning opportunities contributed to the most growth in diverse student populations (Alexander & Entwisle, 1992; Alexander, Entwisle, & Olson, 2001; Alexander, Entwisle, & Olson, 2007; Borman, Goetz, & Dowling, 2009; Fairchild & Smink, 2010; Howard, 2013; Leefatt, 2015; Miller, 2007).

Would summer camp experiences impact children's academic and social/emotional growth as cogently?

Which leads to the power of experiences. Could experiences, intertwined with the academic year and throughout the summer, be one answer to bridging the summer learning gap? Learning from experiences is a vital part of human development. Even as infants, their earliest experiences shape brain development, their sense of safety and security, and their response to the world around them. Experiences are complex. Each experience resonates with people both individually and collectively, depending on the time, the place, and the people sharing the experiences. Experiences continue to impact people's choices, perceptions, understanding, motivations, and inner-monologue throughout the continuum of a lifespan. The kinds of experiences fostered for children have a significant influence on their holistic development (Brown & Vaughan, 2009; Dierking & Falk, 2003; Gray, 2013; Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2009; Kolb & Yeganeh, 2009; Ozar, 2015; Peterson, DeCato, & Kolb, 2015). If the school calendar is to remain the same, could summer breaks actually begin to address the summer learning gap through offering vital learning experiences for *every* child?

### Conceptual Framework Concept Map





This conceptual framework concept map for summer experiential learning illustrates the critical learning that can occur during the summer months. Learning during the summer is often more organic, informal, learner-driven, and exploratory. Families who have the financial means to sign their children up for summer camps, academic programs, athletic teams, and take family vacations might benefit from the long summer break. These experiential learning opportunities often support positive attributes in character and brain development, along with being a powerful vessel for personal growth and reflection (Burkhardt et al., 2005; Dewey, 1899; Dierking & Falk, 2003; Gray, 2013; Henderson et al., 2007; Howard, 2013; Miller, 2007).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore if summer experiences at a residential sleep-away summer camp in Northern Minnesota, influenced future life decisions and beliefs for a select group of children living in poverty during their time at camp.

### **Research Questions**

- What were the perceptions of children living in poverty after attending a Northern Minnesota sleep-away summer camp?

### **Sub-questions**

- What were the pinnacle experiences that resonated with each participant during their time at summer camp?
- Did these summer camp experiences influence the participant's perceived beliefs about future hopes and dreams?

## **Operational Definitions**

### **Sleep-away Summer Camp**

Any summer camp that offers overnight experiences. Many sleep-away summer camps include programs that support extended stays with leadership development opportunities (Burkhardt et al., 2005; Henderson et al.; 2007; Paris, 2008; Van Slyck, 2006).

### **Summer Learning**

Summer learning is any learning that occurs during the summer months. Many school districts have developed summer learning programs that provide a range of academic and experiential opportunities for students in a variety of settings (Alexander et al., 2007; Borman et al., 2009; Heyns, 1989; Leefatt, 2015; Miller, 2007).

### **Summer Learning Gap**

The summer learning gap addresses a concern that the greatest loss of ground for students appears to be occurring during the summer months. For families living in poverty, this summer learning loss is further magnified (Alexander et al., 2007; Borman et al., 2009; Heyns, 1989; Leefatt, 2015; Miller, 2007).

Leefatt (2015) confirms:

It is the summer that determines children's academic achievement, and it is the cumulative effect of summer learning loss, more than any other factor, that creates such an extraordinary disparity between kids with means and poor kids – a disparity so large that school-year education reforms, remedial learning programs and brilliant teachers combined cannot remedy (p.551-552).

## **Opportunity Gap**

The opportunity gap articulates systemic disparities many children living in poverty experience in the access to both academic and experiential opportunities vital to personal growth and lifelong learning (Alexander et al., 2007; Borman et al., 2009; Heckman, 2011; Leefatt, 2015).

## **Experiential Learning**

John Dewey (1899), an early advocate for experiential learning within the traditional schooling model, believed schools could offer many more opportunities for children to connect and engage with the real world; as opposed to treating learning as an abstract, isolated endeavor.

## **Informal Learning Environments**

Informal learning environments are often in direct contrast with the traditional view of teacher-centered learning in knowledge acquisition. Often intrinsically driven, informal learning environments can offer rich and varied experiences. Museums, libraries, zoos, nature centers, and summer camps are a few examples that provide vital infrastructure for informal learning environments (Dierking & Falk, 2003; Frost, Reifel, & Wortham, 2012; Gray, 2013; Howard, 2013).

## **Executive Functioning Skills**

Executive functioning skills are critical in children's early social-emotional and brain development. These skills are important in developing problem solving skills, making connections, and strengthening communication (Brown & Vaughan, 2009; Burkhardt et al., 2005; Heckman, 2011; Henderson et al., 2007; Howard, 2013).

**Assumptions**

The inclusion criteria of the research sample are appropriate because all participants experienced a similar phenomenon at the same sleep-away summer camp in Northern Minnesota. During interview sessions, research participants were candid and honest when answering questions and sharing personal background information. Finally, research participants were invested in sharing their perceptions and personal experiences, as reflected within the study.

**Limitations**

The research sample is limited to five interview participants, who attended the same sleep-away camp in Northern Minnesota at various times, beginning in the summer of 2006 and culminating in the summer of 2015. All participants attended the same public elementary school and were living in the same urban, inner-city neighborhood, which may affect the generalizability of the study. Additionally, the researcher and the participants had a strong relationship foundation, which hopefully enriched discussion, but may have influenced interview conversations. The specific summer could also have impacted the experiences of each research participant, with factors including but not limited to camp staff, cabin groups, weather, and individual participant's social-emotional development during their time at camp. In addition to these limitations, the years removed from the camp experience may impact some individual participant's recollection of experiences or memories.

**Delimitations**

Delimitations within this study include the participants selected for qualitative research purposes. Capturing the voices of diverse populations, who have been impacted

by poverty, were important decisions in selecting research participants. While the research sample is small and from one region of the United States, the participants are from populations who are often underrepresented in academic research. Another important consideration in participant selection included the variation in the span of years they attended this summer sleep-away camp. This specific study did not look at before-and-after school programs or day camp experiences, which are often mentioned as critical infrastructure within informal learning environments.

### **Significance of Study**

#### **Research Contributions and Best Practices**

Enriching current research on the American summer camp is important for many reasons. Presently, the research base for summer camp studies have a narrow scope, with existing studies often neglecting the voices of diverse populations. While the summer learning gap is well-documented in educational academic research, studies analyzing best practices to address the summer learning gap lack depth and breadth. Simply stated, when children are not in school they are losing ground academically. The longer the summer break, the more dramatic the learning loss. Access and opportunities to summer learning experiences are often linked to socioeconomic status (Alexander et al., 2007). However, when children have opportunities to experience supplemental activities during the summer months, the summer learning loss is not as dramatic. Additionally, there is evidence that African Americans experience a summer learning loss at an even greater rate than their peers in other ethnic groups (Miller, 2007). Gaining a better understanding of how summer camp experiences impact more diverse populations will create a more inclusive picture when developing best practices in summer learning for all children.

**Informing Educational Policy**

The first step in promoting summer learning is bringing an awareness to a problem not necessarily on the forefront of educational research or policy initiatives. Efforts to close the achievement gap are often directed during the traditional school year, ignoring the overwhelming documentation of learning loss occurring during the summer months. Developing community partnerships with enriching opportunities for children to engage in summer experiential learning, along with providing professional development and proper training, would be integral factors in creating responsive summer learning programs. Initiating dialog surrounding the school calendar would also be a pertinent school policy consideration. Further research could inform and influence crucial policy and impact funding for future summer learning initiatives.

**Outline of Dissertation**

Along with an introductory chapter one, chapter two will include a review of relevant literature, and chapter three will articulate the research methodology. Chapter four will document data collection, along with an exploration of identified themes and subsequent analysis. In addition to thematic analysis, chapter four will also include participant artifacts including letters, essays, poetry, photographs, and journal entries. The study will culminate with conclusions and future recommendations related to research findings.

## **Chapter 2 Review of Literature**

A major focus of this literature review will examine summer learning and the importance of creating experiences for every child to learn, grow, and flourish during these long breaks. Defining informal learning environments and experiential learning will be important to understand in order to make connections to the powerful learning that can occur, but is often lost, during the summer months for families living in poverty. In addition to this, acknowledging the positive developmental outcomes that have been linked to the summer camp experience are important factors to explore when considering ways to bridge the summer learning gap. Finally, understanding the origin of summer camps, with an awareness of historical and ethical implications, contributes to a more complete picture of the current context of summer learning and summer camps within the United States.

There are several common themes found within research exploring the summer camp experience. One theme highlights the importance of summer camp experiential learning as it relates to positive attributes in character and brain development. Experiential learning is often associated with summer camp and can be a powerful vessel for personal growth and reflection (Dewey, 1899; Dierking & Falk, 2003; Burkhardt et al., 2005; Gray, 2013; Henderson, Bialeschki, Scanlin, Thurber, & Whitaker, 2007; Howard, 2013; Miller, 2007). While research suggests summer learning experiences are a vital component in childhood development; barriers, including funding, disproportionate socio-economic opportunities, and school and community support, are pervasive (Alexander & Entwisle, 1992; Alexander, Entwisle, & Olson, 2001; Alexander, Entwisle, & Olson, 2007; Borman, Goetz, & Dowling, 2009; Fairchild & Smink, 2010;

Howard, 2013; Leefatt, 2015; Miller, 2007). Many advocates for summer learning opportunities are taking a closer look at how to promote and partner with community institutions to enrich every learners' school and summer experience (Borman et al., 2009; Burkhardt, et al., 2005; Buskirk-Cohen, 2015; Dahl, 2009; Dierking & Falk, 2003; Henderson et al., 2007; Howard, 2013; Miller, 2007; Readdick & Schaller, 2005). Intermixed with these themes, there is a large body of research addressing the consequences a lack of summer experiences can have on child development (Alexander & Entwisle, 1992; Alexander et al., 2001; Alexander et al., 2007; Bell & Carrillo, 2007; Borman et al., 2009; Brown & Vaughan, 2009; Heyns, 1989; Howard, 2013; Leefatt, 2015; Miller, 2007). The educational community would benefit from taking a closer look at the impact of inequitable opportunities during the summer months, while exploring how a summer camp experience might influence both social/emotional and academic development in children.

### **Experiential Learning**

As with any educational issue, the balance between traditional schooling and experiential learning is often acknowledged as important, but can be difficult to facilitate due to rigorous academic assessment standards and varying district philosophies. John Dewey, a longtime advocate for creating opportunities for experiential learning within the traditional schooling model, believed schools could offer many more opportunities for children to connect and engage with the real world, as opposed to treating learning as an abstract, isolated endeavor. Dewey (1899) wrote:

That we learn from experience, and from books or the sayings of others only as they are related to experience, and not mere phrases. But the



school has been so set apart, so isolated from the ordinary conditions and motives of life, that the place where children are sent for discipline is the one place in the world where it is most difficult to get experience – the mother of all discipline worth the name (p.31).

Dewey's perspective supported the notion that schools could be integral in connecting learners to real world problem solving and life skills essential to character development. These experiences might occur through recess and play, extracurricular activities, or during the summer months; fostered by a child's innate curiosity to learn through exploration (Brown & Vaughan, 2009; Dierking & Falk, 2003; Gray, 2013; Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2009; Kolb & Yeganeh, 2009; Ozar, 2015; Peterson, DeCato, & Kolb, 2015). Gray (2013) asserts, "When they [children] are provided with the freedom and means to pursue their own interests, in safe settings, they bloom and develop along diverse and unpredictable paths, and they acquire skills and confidence required to meet life's challenges" (p.6). So often, the school day eliminates opportunities for experiential learning in favor of more regimented, academically rigorous activities. The question becomes, at what cost? In taking away experiential learning opportunities, what skills are systemically hindered within the classroom; and how are these decisions impeding a teacher's creativity to connect classroom context to real-life experiences?

While experiential learning gained a foundational base from scholars like William James, John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, Carl Rogers, and Paulo Freire, it was David Kolb who coined Experiential Learning Theory [ELT] in 1969. ELT defines learning as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience"

(Kolb, 1984, p.41). Kolb began to look at experiential learning through a heuristic cycle of experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting. Peterson et al. (2015) assert, “When individuals use all four modes of the Learning Cycle, they are able to experience an ideal, well-balanced learning process that keeps their subjective experience at the center of the learning” (p.230).

Summertime naturally swings toward more flexibility and freedom for children and families to explore interests. Children innately seek out experiential learning opportunities and many families seek to enhance these experiences through extracurricular activities, family vacations, and summer camps. The sense of adventure and independence gained from a summer camp experience often brings personal reflection, a key element in ELT. Kola-Olusanya (2005) believes, “Creative, spontaneous and unregulated play in neighborhood places and traditional play environments such as streets, wild places and gardens, enables children to discover, explore and develop a personal understanding of the environment around them” (p.299). While the summer camp experience often has a schedule and sense of routine, there are many opportunities to engage in this kind of natural world discovery – fostering a sense of interconnectedness that is often lost within the classroom walls (Dierking & Falk, 2003; Kola-Olusanya, 2005; Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2009; Kolb & Yeganeh, 2009; Ozar, 2015; Peterson et al., 2015).

### **Summer Camps as Informal Learning Environments**

During the summer months, the opportunities for experiential learning to occur within the context of informal learning environments should be plentiful. In its broadest context, informal learning includes experiential learning that is often spontaneous,

difficult to quantify, but essential to an adult's lifelong learning. Enriching partnerships with informal learning institutions can be a formidable factor in both the academic and social/emotional development of children (Borman et al., 2009; Burkhardt et al., 2005; Buskirk-Cohen, 2015; Dahl, 2009; Dierking & Falk, 2003; Henderson et al., 2007; Howard, 2013; Miller, 2007; Readdick & Schaller, 2005). Informal learning environments are often in direct contrast with the traditional view of teacher-centered learning in knowledge acquisition. Howard (2013) includes the following as the critical infrastructure of informal learning:

Libraries-public and school-and museums of all types-art, history, and children's museums; science centers; nature centers and gardens; aquaria; and zoos-form an extensive, diverse infrastructure that is equipped to deliver critical early learning resources to young children and families, especially those most in need (p.5).

Upon taking a closer look at these informal learning environments, with a specific interest in how summer experiences might enhance executive functioning skills, develop lifelong learners who contribute to the global society, and impact the summer learning gap, the research potential is vast. Studies have shown that children who participate in summer programs with both academic and informal learning opportunities show more growth than children who are in summer programs that solely focus on academics. At the same time, research on the impact of summer informal learning, as related to academic performance and social-emotional growth during the traditional school year, needs further exploration (Alexander & Entwisle, 1992; Alexander et al., 2001; Alexander et

al., 2007; Bell & Carrillo, 2007; Borman et al., 2009; Dierking & Falk, 2003; Howard, 2013; Leefatt, 2015; Miller, 2007).

Borman et al. (2009) incorporated a hybrid summer learning program that implemented both academic and informal learning opportunities for kindergarten students called KindergARTen. Through their research they discovered, “The out-of-school summer learning rates of disadvantaged students tend to be markedly slower than the growth rates of their more advantaged counterparts” (p.133). The study specifically looked at a randomized field trial of a six-week long summer enrichment program in literacy and the fine arts called KindergARTen Camp. Participants included 93 treatment and 35 control kindergarten students from high-poverty schools in Baltimore, Maryland. This experience included both formal and informal learning opportunities. While the morning was dedicated to reading interventions, the afternoon was designed as an arts and science block with opportunities to work with a local community artist and attend weekly field trips. Kindergarten students visited the Baltimore Zoo, Air and Space Museum, Museum of Natural History, Carrie Murray Nature Center, and the National Aquarium.

Participating students had significant gains on the Developmental Reading Assessment [DRA] and the Word List A assessments. Student, parent, and teacher surveys also indicated a strong satisfaction with KindergARTen Camp. The surveys were intended to measure student and parent perceptions of how the program affected their children’s attitudes toward reading and their reading achievement (Borman et al., 2009, p.138). This is one example that analyzes how a quality summer program can

positively impact student achievement and bridge the summer learning gap, in a high poverty area, through both academic and informal learning opportunities.

Dahl, Senthre-Hofstad, and Saloman (2010), conducted a study at Concordia Language Camp in Moorhead, Minnesota, examining how young people experience camp, with the hopes of understanding the possibilities within an informal learning environment. This specific summer camp was a language immersion experience in a simulated Norwegian village. Campers spent up to four weeks in the village, immersed in the Norwegian language, while participating in activities designed to foster a community feel within the village. One of the goals of the camp was to allow campers to have a more organic experience in language acquisition, rather than periods of the day dedicated to academic, classroom lessons. This kind of informal learning environment not only allowed for practical application, but created a communal bond among camp participants immersed in the experience. Through camp participant interviews, researchers noted themes delineating the summer camp environment as both a thinking space and an experience space. Other notable themes included the importance of feeling safe, taking risks, making friends, and learning from others with diverse perspectives within the camp community. While physical space played an important role in the sense of safety each camp participant experienced, it was the informal learning, occurring amidst daily activities, that ultimately resonated with campers as the most powerful. Through this research, Dahl et al., (2010), assessed, “The camp learning environment seems to create a thinking and experience space where participants can safely experiment with and possibly commit to new ways of thinking, feeling, and being” (p.110).

Utilizing an ELT lens, new ways of thinking, feeling, and being are certainly prominent factors in experiencing growth and personal development.

### **Play and Brain Development**

Play and experiential learning often go hand-in-hand. The summer camp experience affords children the opportunity to explore new interests, take risks, problem solve, make new connections – all contributing factors in the personal growth and brain development of children. Howard (2013) addresses the importance of informal learning experiences and the impact they have on brain development:

Contributing to this expanded view of where, when, and how learning takes place is a growing body of research that draw attention to an important set of foundation skills, anchored in children's early social-emotional development. Known as executive function, these skills are key to a child's earliest brain development, building focus and self-control, perspective taking, communication, and making connections (p.9).

Best practices in teaching include addressing a variety of learning modalities to meet the needs of varied learners (Dierking & Falk, 2003; Howard, 2013; Kolb & Yeganeh, 2009; Miller, 2007). Some successful summer learning models call for a combination of both academic and experiential learning experiences to best meet the needs of learners (Bell & Carrillo, 2007; Borman et al., 2009; Heyns, 1987). Informal learning opportunities enhance school curriculum by literally bringing subjects to life - whether through books, museum exhibits, or hands-on learning activities. Neuroscientists believe self-directed, experiential, and content-rich learning opportunities are important building blocks to a successful future (Brown & Vaughan, 2009; Dierking

& Falk, 2003; Howard, 2013). Yet there is often a disconnect in educational policies and school district initiatives when testing preparation, budget cuts, and funding inequities come into play.

Brown and Vaughan (2009) cited an example in Cal Tech's Jet Propulsion Laboratory [JPL], a premier aerospace research facility in the United States. In the 1990's, JPL was having a difficult time replacing engineers and scientists who started working in the 1960's. While they were hiring candidates from top engineering schools, many were missing problem-solving skills vital to the job. JPL deduced that while these new engineers were proficient in theoretical knowledge, they struggled with practical applications like "taking a complex project from theory to practice" (p.10). As JPL began to take a closer look at their own employees, they found that many of their older employees had built, fixed, or taken apart things to see how they worked as children. According to JPL, the younger engineers who had engaged in these kinds of activities had better problem-solving skills than their colleagues who had not. Because of this, JPL began to include questions about projects and play as a standard part of their interview process. This example further emphasizes the importance of play, or in this case how an absence of play, can impact brain development (Brown & Vaughan, 2009, p.11).

In an analysis of results from the Torrance Test of Creative Thinking, Kim (2011) found that American children's scores have declined steadily over the last decade. Results indicated children have lost ground in emotional and verbal expression, imagination, enthusiasm, perspective, making real-world connections, and elaboration [taking a new idea and expanding on it in a novel way] (p.288-289). Part of this decline, is believed to be correlated with a lack of "play" within the traditional school setting.

The trend in some schools to eliminate recess, certain electives, and general opportunities for students to think creatively and engage in problem solving skills might have had some impact over the years. Kim (2011) recommends, “Free, uninterrupted time for children should be restored on school and home schedules, so children can engage in reflective abstraction” (p.293). In thinking about a summer camp’s influence on character development and executive functioning skills, along with Brown and Vaughan’s (2009) example of JPL engineers, integrating opportunities for more experiential play may reverse the decline in creative thinking. Utilizing the summer months could be a powerful mechanism to integrate these experiences.

Pressures to perform on state mandated tests, along with funding inequities and district priorities, continue to limit experiential learning for children in schools - even though there are strong correlational studies supporting the positive effect these experiences can have on brain development. These are the types of questions so important to consider as researchers further examine how play and experiential learning, within informal learning environments, impact the brain development of young children and adolescents.

### **Positive Youth Development**

Summer camp studies often focus on how the experience can contribute to character development in children. In a 2003 American Camping Association [ACA] study of over 5000 families, representing 80 residential summer camps, results showed that parents, camp staff, and children reported significant growth in self-esteem, independence, leadership, friendship skills, social comfort, peer relationships, adventure and exploration, environmental awareness, problem-solving, and spirituality (Henderson



et al., 2007, p.993). This specific study was one of the first studies that attempted to measure youth development outcomes associated with a summer camp experience of at least one week or longer (Burkhardt et al., 2005, p.19).

Henderson (2007) stated, “Although many people believe that parents are responsible for positive youth development, many parents also realize that other caring adults in communities can assist them in guiding and nurturing their children in both school and non-school experiences such as camp” (p.988). For many children, a summer camp experience is an opportunity for children to build relationships with what Shirley Brice Heath (2012) terms “intimate strangers” (p.47). Heath (2012) described “intimate strangers” as those individuals who may stretch “language, interests, values, and context” far beyond those that might be available during family time alone (p.49). Fostering those relationships are an essential part of the social and emotional growth for not only young children, but for all ages. These experiences often occur during unstructured, organic interactions with other individuals – a setting that can easily be nurtured within a summer camp setting.

Economist James Heckman (2011) also speaks to the importance of personality traits and character, in conjunction with cognitive abilities, as powerful predictors for success in many facets of life. While school assessments often solely measure cognitive abilities, measuring the character development commonly associated with informal learning experiences, is more challenging to quantify. As Heckman (2011) asserts:

Given this fact, it is alarming that our education system primarily values cognitive achievement. Important character traits that promote personal achievement are largely ignored or maligned as “soft” and nonmeasurable

skills. Evidence suggests that efforts that focus mainly on closing disparities in cognitive achievement are not as successful as they could be because they neglect the need to close gaps in character development (p. 34).

Understanding the magnitude of building these skills speaks to the importance of access and opportunities for all children to experience activities beyond the academic classroom. If character development is a powerful predictor for success, as Heckman (2011) believes, an equal emphasis on character and cognitive development might be enhanced through summer learning experiences. Dahl (2009) addresses the powerful transformative and reflective aspects of life at summer camp, also a vital ingredient in experiential learning. Children flourish in a supportive and safe environment. When they feel comfortable enough to take risks, both physically and mentally, they gain an experiential reference that can be invaluable to future character development.

If these conditions occur during a summer camp experience, the possibilities for increased confidence in these character development areas to translate to the school experience are promising. Bell and Carrillo (2007) assert, “Although there often appears to be a division between the education and youth development fields, logic and research indicate the two practices are integrally linked” (p.46). Defining summer learning best practices in holistic terms further indicates how empowering it can be for young people to not only gain increased academic confidence, but also build meaningful relationships and strengthen character development during the summer months.

## **Summer Learning Gap and Inequities in Opportunities**

Much of the research surrounding summer learning includes numerous examples of systemic inequities in opportunities for low-income children. These gaps are especially evident during the early elementary years, suggesting early intervention as a critical support (Alexander & Entwisle, 1992; Alexander et al., 2001; Alexander et al., 2007; Borman et al., 2009; Fairchild & Smink, 2010; Heyns, 1988; Howard, 2013; Leefatt, 2015; Miller, 2007). Even though there is a strong research base that documents the academic and social/emotional slide that occurs for many children during the summer months, policymakers and educational reformers often ignore the educational implications (Fairchild & Smink, 2010). There is evidence in seasonal comparison studies indicating schools are making strides in bridging the gap while students are in session (Alexander & Entwisle, 1992; Alexander et al., 2001; Alexander et al., 2007; Fairchild & Smink, 2010; Heyns, 1987; Leefatt, 2015; Miller, 2007). The greatest loss of ground appears to be occurring during the summer months. For families living in poverty, this summer learning loss is further magnified.

Barbara Heyns was one of the first researchers to articulate the equity implications of seasonal learning. Through her research on students and schools in Atlanta, Georgia, Heyns (1987) concluded that schools had an equalization effect for children, and deemed seasonal breaks as the greatest contributing factor for academic loss. She advocated for year-round schooling and recommended reading programs, supported by public libraries, for children and families during the summer months. Heyns (1988) found a strong, positive correlation in reading achievement for children

who participated in summer reading programs, which directly impacted the establishment of many current public library and school summer reading partnerships (p.1159).

Perhaps one of the most influential studies examining the effects of the summer learning gap was The Beginning Schools Study [BSS] in Baltimore, Maryland. This longitudinal study analyzed the seasonal effects of “schooled” versus “unschooled” time; specifically examining family and school factors that contributed in math performance. The study followed first grade students in the Baltimore Public Schools beginning in the fall of 1982 and ending in the third grade during the fall of 1985. According to Alexander and Entwisle (1992), “When they started school, the two groups’ standardized test averages were only a few points apart. Over the ensuing 24 months, however, this gap increased to half a standard deviation when compared to the fall 1982 distribution” (p.73). Alexander and Entwisle collaborated with Linda Olson (2007) and continued to monitor the progress of BSS participants utilizing testing data from the Baltimore City Public School System, along with family questionnaires and student interview data, until initial participants reached the age of 22 and 23-years-old.

The study showed that for families living in poverty, children lost ground during the summer months, but remained about the same, or in some cases gained more academic ground than their more affluent classmates during the school year. Alexander and Entwisle (1992) believed the power of the school setting made up for “unschooled” time during the winter months because school was fresh and breaks were not as lengthy. The losses were greater magnified for children depending on socioeconomic status, family educational background, and opportunities available to them during long seasonal breaks. The study also concluded that while the summer months often contributed to

summer learning gains for children not living in poverty, every summer meant a loss for children living in poverty; thus, asserting that economic status was the greatest determining factor in summer learning loss and gains (Alexander, et.al., 1992).

Unfortunately, many families living in poverty do not have the same opportunities or exposure to these enriching summer experiences, further contributing to the summer learning divide. Attending summer camps, going on family vacations, or even attending high-quality childcare programs are far more prevalent for families who can financially justify these investments (Alexander & Entwisle, 1992; Alexander et al., 2001; Alexander et al., 2007; Fairchild & Smink, 2010; Heyns, 1987; Leefatt, 2015). For a family with financial means, it is also easy to take these experiences for granted. For a family without the financial means to invest in summer learning, the impact on child development only contributes to inequities in opportunities that may influence the school experience. Alexander et al. (2007) take this a step further to make the case:

The U.S. school-year calendar in this way approximates a natural experiment: with summer learning dependent on family and neighborhood conditions only, differences between school-year and summer learning *for the same children* isolate the role of schooling, with family and neighborhood conditions effectively held constant (p.14).

Entwisle's (2001) explanation of the Faucet Theory provides context when visualizing the disparities. The Faucet Theory essentially means that during the school year, the faucet of learning resources are turned on and during the summer months, that faucet is turned off. One approach, to make up for the deficit in learning that can occur during the summer months, is to extend the school year. However, research also suggests

that other types of programs might be more beneficial at developing skills in teamwork, critical thinking, and creativity (Alexander & Entwisle, 1992; Alexander et al., 2007; Borman, 2000; Dierking & Falk, 2003; Howard, 2013; Miller, 2007). Other programs that encourage the faucet to stay on during the summer months include: summer reading interventions, summer school, summer camps, and hybrid youth development-academic enrichment programs (Miller, 2007, p.8). This is particularly insightful when examining some of the long-term character development effects summer experiential learning opportunities can have on students.

High poverty areas also often struggle with neighborhood violence, which further limits young children's opportunities – even if that means just the ability to play outside during summer months. Many middle-class families have the ability to travel, enroll in summer camps, play sports, or buy summer activity memberships for their children. It is worth noting these non-academic experiences, often commonplace for middle-income families, actually support learning (Borman, 2000; Borman et al., 2009; Dahl, 2009; Dierking & Falk, 2003; Howard, 2013; Miller, 2007). This research is particularly compelling when examining the effect of lengthy summer vacations on the academic and social/emotional development of low-income students, who may not have the same opportunities as their middle-class peers. These discrepancies in experiences begin long before children walk through the elementary school doors. Family background, economic circumstances, neighborhood safety, and educational opportunities are just some of the factors that contribute to the generational family advantages or disadvantages children bring to the table (Alexander et al., 2007).

Additionally, regardless of socioeconomic status, studies have found that children are generally learning at the same rate within the traditional academic school year. Reflecting on that data, what impact could research-based, summer experiential learning opportunities, grounded in best practices, mean for children's continued growth during the summer months (Alexander et al., 2007; Borman et al., 2009; Fairchild & Smink, 2010; Heyns, 1987; Leefatt, 2015; Miller, 2007)? While these barriers might initially seem daunting, there is a great potential to provide support and opportunities for all learners, especially during the often underutilized summer months (Alexander et al., 2007; Borman et al., 2009; Fairchild & Smink, 2010; Heyns, 1987; Howard, 2009; Leefatt, 2015; Miller, 2007).

### **Historical Implications of Summer Camps in the United States**

The history of summer camps in the United States is vast, specific to region, and diverse in the kind of experiences offered and populations served. This abbreviated overview looks at holistic themes within the emergence of summer camps in the United States, and how these camps ultimately developed into the modern day rich-and-varied summer camp experiences offered across the country. While much of the summer camp history is rooted in urban social and class divisions, the initiation of these summer camp experiences can be interpreted very differently for various groups within the United States. The collective and individual histories of each camp institution are as diverse as the participants, but the shared experiences of friendship, the outdoors, reflection, and personal growth, in many of these summer camps, impacted the lives of participants in ways they could have never imagined (Dahl, 2010; Paris, 2008; Van Slyck, 2006).

Summer camps began as a response to the “softening” of American children living in urban settings (Paris, 2008). Camp proponents were concerned children were becoming too comfortable with modern conveniences, resulting in a loss of connectedness to nature and a lack of understanding regarding the hard work required to live off the land, as their ancestors did. Camp propaganda included illustrating frail, pale children prior to the summer camp experience, juxtaposed with bronzed, hearty-looking children upon the conclusion of the camp experience. Additionally, as America became more urbanized, families were moving away from camping as a way of life, to camping for recreation and vacation. Prior to the twentieth century, summer camp experiences had primarily been reserved for elite boys and their families. Students were typically off during the months of July and August. For the urban middle class, families struggled to find valuable opportunities to fill children’s time when the family vacations were over for the summer. As a reaction to this, many camp directors developed camp programs to fill this summer void with productive skills, coupled with toughening up the “city kids” (Paris, 2008).

During the first few decades of the twentieth century, camp experiences were beginning to be embraced across socioeconomic lines. New camps were emerging to serve the working class, immigrant families, and a movement for all-girls camps grew traction as well. The YMCA, Boy and Girl Scout Camps, and church camps were a few examples of more accessible summer camps striving to serve more diverse populations. Organizational day and sleep-away camps were offered as an affordable alternative to private camps and had tremendous growth in popularity at the turn of the twentieth century. This trend implied that camps were not just for the wealthy elite anymore. The



private camps in existence were often established to promote social and/or geographical exclusivity. Organizational camps were developed as a more inclusive response to better meet the needs of children and families regardless of socioeconomic status. By the 1930's, one estimate had organizational camps serving 750,000 as opposed to private camps serving 100,000 (Paris, 2008).

Race, ethnicity, and religious affiliation were also important factors within the history of summer camps. Many summer camps catered to certain groups; sometimes overtly, sometimes covertly. Camps with religious affiliations grew in popularity during the twentieth century. While Jewish campers were welcomed in organizational and private camps, religious discrimination was often tolerated. This led to the establishment of numerous Jewish boys' and girls' camps across the United States. And in a male-dominated summer camp world, Jewish camps saw a large increase in the number of girls attending summer camps in the 1940's. At the same time, camps were also responsible for wide discrimination against black children and families. According to Paris (2008), "Across the country, black children were not welcomed at private white-owned summer camps, regardless of their family income" (p.72). In the 1940's, camps were often segregated in both the Southern and Northern states within the United States; but there were movements towards more inclusive camp settings. Paris (2008) articulated, "Camps were mythic spaces, but they were also real political playing fields. Interracial camps, though still experimental, were harbingers of changes to come" (p.223). Capturing the voices of minorities, while exploring the implications of overt and covert racism within the summer camp experience, continues to have a limited narrative within current research. Additionally, understanding the racial and socioeconomic stratifications that

historically impacted summer camps in the United States allows one to gain a greater awareness regarding the inequities still prevalent within the current socioeconomic, racial, and political context (Dahl, 2010; Paris, 2008; Van Slyck, 2006).

## **Conclusion**

Upon researching summer camps within the context of experiential learning and informal learning environments, there is a need for more research examining the impact these kinds of experiences can have on school performance, bridging the summer learning gap, character development, brain development, and in shaping lifelong learners who contribute to the global society. Miller (2007) reports, “The existing studies indicate that well-implemented camp programs have the potential to support children’s social and emotional development, which may lead to increased academic performance” (p.10-11). However, there is a research gap surrounding summer camp experiences and how they might influence cognitive and character development in children.

The discrepancies in the volume of research on the summer learning gap when compared to actual research exploring best practices to address the summer learning gap, are also striking. Years of research illustrating the damaging academic and social-emotional implications a lack of summer experiences can have on children are well-documented. As illustrated within the history of the American summer camp, this economical divide has been a part of the historical discourse for centuries. Progress takes time, but real progress must be made if the traditional school schedule continues to offer lengthy summer vacations. All children need viable access and opportunities to participate in summer learning experiences. It is important these experiences are

meaningful and grounded in what is best for children and families through current research representing diverse perspectives.

Given the vast amount of research addressing the disparities in learning opportunities that occur among low and middle-income families during the summer months, it would be important to broaden research studies surrounding summer informal learning programs. A specific emphasis on residential summer camp experiences, and how those experiences impacted selected participants, would also be important to explore. One substantial consideration in looking at the American Camp Association's (2005) most current summer camp developmental outcomes study involves their research sample. While the study indicated positive effects on measured developmental outcomes, the participants in this study reflected middle-class, primarily white families. According to Henderson et al. (2007), while the children attended camps that served a variety of incomes, this specific data reflected a mid-socioeconomic status. In addition, more than 85 percent of the campers were Caucasian (p.997). Gaining a better understanding of how summer camp experiences impact more diverse populations will create a more inclusive picture when developing best practices in summer learning for all children. Further research could also influence crucial policy and impact funding for future summer learning initiatives.

## Chapter 3 Methodology

### Overview

“Shared investment in everyone’s kids was key to American growth and fairness in the past and it is key to restoring the American Dream today” (R.D. Putnam, personal communication, June 16, 2016). The summer learning slide is well-documented within current educational research, with socioeconomic status further magnifying the divide among children who can afford summer activities and children who cannot. While most children tend to lose some ground during the extended summer break, children who can engage in summer experiential learning have a better chance of making-up lost ground during the academic school year (Alexander & Entwisle, 1992; Alexander, et al., 2001; Alexander, et al., 2007). Some studies have shown a summer hybrid approach, combining both academic and experiential learning opportunities, illustrated the most academic growth among research participants (Borman, et al., 2009). However, studies in this area lack comprehensiveness and there are significant research gaps in what approaches contribute the most meaningful outcomes for children, both academically and social-emotionally. These research gaps hinder the development of best practices in summer learning; with current practices implemented without intuition or intentional strategies to best meet the needs of students. With a school calendar that perpetuates the inequities in opportunities that exist in America, a shared investment in creating opportunities for everyone’s kids to experience summer learning has merit for further exploration. Examining the kinds of experiences that have the most substantial impact would contribute to a more all-inclusive vision of summer experiential learning. Capturing the voices, perceptions, and experiences of young adults, impacted by

childhood poverty, who participated in camp, would provide a unique perspective missing in current summer experiential learning research.

### **Qualitative Research Design**

According to Creswell (2014), “Qualitative research is an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p.4). Studying summer camp perceptions of research participants through qualitative analysis allowed for the researcher to inductively make connections and enhance understanding of the human experience. Qualitative research has more flexibility within the research design which was an important consideration for the researcher. This flexibility gave the researcher and research participants the freedom to explore areas the researcher may not have anticipated in order to paint a more accurate picture of the participants’ individual and shared experiences. It also allowed for the researcher to investigate on a deeper level when analyzing pertinent themes; allowing her to tell stories that would not necessarily be captured within a quantitative approach (Creswell, 2012; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013).

### **Phenomenology**

This qualitative study is phenomenological in nature. Capturing the essence of the summer camp experience, along with the personal stories of each participant, contributed to the phenomenological assumption that knowledge is rooted in experience (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Phenomenology seeks to explore the commonalities that exist among each research participants and acknowledges how both the person and their experiences are equally intertwined. So much of the summer camp experience is shared within the context of the people, the place, and the experiential learning that occurs for

the individual. Understanding that both perspectives play a vital role in understanding the human experience played a profound role in selecting this research approach. This also aligns with the phenomenological ideal of investigating the phenomenon through outward forms (objects, actions, and others) and inward forms (thoughts, images, and feelings) (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013).

According to Savin-Baden and Major (2013), phenomenology “requires seeing what the phenomenon means to the person, just as he or she sees and experiences it” (p.221). Transcendental phenomenology places a specific emphasis on how each individual’s personal background history impacts their current context. Ignoring who research participants were prior to the camp experience, would not be an intuitive approach when investigating how personal background and experiences impact individual perceptions and worldviews. Through background stories, the researcher will gain a better understanding regarding how personal histories contributed to perceptions and ultimately to the central phenomena uncovered. In addition to personal background information, the researcher’s exploration of commonalities within individual stories will be a critical component in discovering the essence of the camp experience for these individuals. Essentially, the researcher and research participants become co-researchers in an effort to uncover the central phenomena experienced within the summer camp setting. Through exploration of the central phenomena, there is potential to guide future development of summer programming options to better meet the needs of every child.

Finally, bracketing is a key component in transcendental phenomenology. Bracketing involves acknowledging past experiences, while insuring thoughts, ideas, and experiences are not directly influencing the phenomena being studied. In this study,

bracketing is important due to the shared summer camp experience of the researcher and the participants. To hear the diverse ways each participant experienced their own time at summer camp, the researcher must be cognizant in bracketing her own experiences.

Delving into the heart of the human experience would not be possible with projection of the researcher's experiences onto the participants' experiences (Creswell, 2012; Savin-Baden & Major, 2014).

### **Research Questions**

- What were the perceptions of children living in poverty after attending a Northern Minnesota residential summer camp?

### **Sub-questions**

- What were the pinnacle experiences that resonated with each participant during their time at summer camp?
- Did these summer camp experiences influence the participant's perceived beliefs about future hopes and dreams?

### **Research Participants**

This qualitative research study focused on five former campers who attended the same residential summer camp. These participants were initially selected by elementary school staff members to receive summer camp scholarships. All participants attended the same elementary school during at least their very first summer at this same residential summer camp. Experiences at camp ranged from two summers to six consecutive summers; from two weeks to six weeks at a time. The research sample included both females and males of mixed ages. Purposeful sampling was used to insure each participant could contribute to the overarching research questions surrounding

perceptions of their summer camp experience and the camp influence on their future hopes and dreams.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Data collection also aligned with the qualitative research design. Considering the social constructionists' view on the interplay between individual and shared experiences, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with research participants in order to explore camper perceptions with more in-depth analysis. Semi-structured interviews gave the researcher and participants an opportunity to deviate from a strict interview script. This provided an opportunity for more fluidity and authenticity for research participants within the interview process. While questions and topics discussed were intentional, the semi-structured interview approach helped to alleviate potential research bias, with individual research participants highlighting the experiences most meaningful to them. Individual interviews also gave intentional credence to the personal background story of each research participant (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Research participants met face-to-face and via FaceTime for individual interviews. Interview questions were crafted to gain perspective regarding participants' perceptions of their summer camp experience. The researcher transcribed, described, coded, and analyzed all interviews to better immerse herself in the richness of the data collected. According to Savin-Badin & Major (2013), coding "makes it easier to search data, make comparisons and identify patterns worthy of further investigation" (p.422).

In addition to interviews, the researcher utilized written letters, photographs, essays, and camp journals as artifacts, enriching thematic analysis. The individual and collective stories that resonated with each research participant contributed to a greater



understanding of the camper worldview; with a unique lens capturing the voices of campers who attended camp while experiencing poverty. Creswell (2012) believes phenomenology attempts to discover commonalities among participants. These shared experiences and common thematic elements were important components in research analysis. In addition to these commonalities, variations in participant experiences helped in understanding whether factors like longevity, camp connections, activity interest, among other variables, influenced the individual camp experience. Again, reinforcing the importance of analyzing this qualitative study through a phenomenological research lens.

### **Validity**

Due to the natural collaboration that exists within phenomenological research, validation occurred throughout the research process, within each individual interview. The researcher also implemented member checking to strengthen validity. Research participants provided feedback through frequent member checking to validate the credibility and accuracy of the researcher's interpretation of participant stories and lived experiences. The researcher also utilized individual interviews and artifacts to capture different dimensions of the summer camp phenomenon. Intentional implementation of member checking, along with interview and artifact analysis, enhanced the researcher's accuracy when retelling participant stories and strengthened validity when interpreting individual and shared themes (Creswell, 2015).

### **Confidentiality**

The researcher has an ethical obligation to insure the confidentiality of each research participant. Identifying factors were eliminated to protect the identity of research participants throughout the qualitative research design and implementation.

These factors included names, locations, and specific school and summer camp identifiers. Confidentiality insures research participants feel safe sharing intimate information, which hopefully provided richer data to interpret and analyze.

### **Personal Reflection**

To gain personal insight, the researcher created an Instagram photo journal to document the research and writing process. No identifying factors were revealed within the Instagram photo journal. The researcher's primary focus was on exploring her personal experience throughout the dissertation-writing process, along with poignant quotes and ideas found within related research literature. This reflection kept the researcher grounded, while connecting her to other doctoral candidates documenting their own dissertation journeys. This intentional approach also mirrored the qualitative research design, examining both the researcher's individual perceptions and shared experiences with other doctoral candidates. The researcher's continued reflection and growth hopefully contributed to the overall quality and integrity of the dissertation research and writing.

### **Researcher's Perspective and Context**

My personal experience at this specific summer camp, along with my school counseling connection with research participants, are pivotal factors to acknowledge within my role as the researcher. Prior to addressing my more current context, I would be remiss if I did not mention a childhood connection that has keenly influenced my appreciation for long summer days. My love for the outdoors began with my father, playing with baits in our little fishing boat at our cabin on Edward Lake. I was only two, but I was a devoted fishergirl. Perhaps this is also where I developed an affinity for

taking risks, playing with the sharp hooks my mother would have never let me touch had she known. Dads are special in that way. If we were lucky, I had a bucket full of perch, all named, ready to release when we got back to the dock. We repeated this several times a day, every day, throughout my childhood summers. It never got old. I loved the smell of boat gas, feeling the wind hitting my face as we raced across the lake, and singing songs while the motor roared, hoping no one would really hear me as I got older. Most of all, I loved spending time with my dad. I was lucky. I was safe. I was happy. In addition to my family, I also had a few loyal friends I ran with all over the woods. We were creative. We played outside. We swam every day. I have a greater appreciation now for the uniqueness of my own summer experiences.

While I never experienced life as a camper, I began my decade long journey as a camp counselor during the summer of 2000. I quickly discovered the magic of the summer camp experience. I was surprised at how much confidence I personally gained at the culmination of my first summer on staff. Being surrounded by such strong female role models, in an environment that encouraged creativity, authenticity, and risk-taking, helped me grow in ways I never expected. Life as a camp counselor continued, even as I embarked on my elementary school counseling career. So many of the silly songs, games, and relationship-building activities wove their way into the daily lessons I taught in my classroom. Getting students reengaged during an assembly was a snap thanks to the attention-getters we always had in our back-pocket as camp counselors. It was kind of the perfect marriage – camp counseling and teaching. With so many of our camp counseling staff either current educators, or future educators, the brainstorming sessions for camp activities were always cultivated with an eye for personal development

outcomes and management considerations. At the same time, we could reach our campers in ways that were creative and downright silly or quirky, with more extensive experiential opportunities to learn and grow than a traditional classroom might be able to facilitate.

My affinity for my own childhood summers, along with my background as a camp counselor, also influenced my lens as a school counselor. As an elementary counselor in inner-city Omaha, I soon realized many of my students did not have the same summer opportunities I had growing-up. In fact, over the years, I began to observe many of our students acting-out or seeking more attention during the stretch before extended school vacations. The reasons were as diverse as the families we served. Through discussions and observations with staff, students, and families, I learned many of our students appreciated the structure and consistency of the school day. Some students valued knowing where and when they would eat breakfast, lunch, and in some cases dinners if they were enrolled in the after-school program. Others longed for the sense of safety and security the set school schedule provided. Some families had concerns about neighborhood safety and lamented how it impacted outdoor play and neighborhood friendships. And the struggle to find quality, affordable childcare for families who work during the summer was a very real problem for many families. The list goes on.

I began to actively look for opportunities within the community that my students could get involved with during the summer months. I advocated for scholarships, connected with families regarding interests, and provided as much education as possible to promote summer learning opportunities within the area. And when the opportunity arose for some of my students to attend the camp I worked at on full scholarship, I

immediately reached out to staff members for recommendations. At the time, I had no idea this overture would result in multiple years of the summer camp experience for a handful of students at my school.

My camp experiences made me a stronger school counselor and my counseling experiences impacted the way I worked with my campers. Much like my research participants, my own childhood, summer camp, and school counseling experiences are intricately intertwined; impacting aspects my life in complex ways. As a researcher, it was important for me to reflect on my own connections with camp and how it might influence my perspective. Bracketing my own personal experiences within this research study are vital in maintaining research integrity and objectivity.

## **Chapter 4 Results**

### **Participant Background Stories**

Within Hermeneutic phenomenology, Martin Heidegger not only placed importance on the essence of the human experience, but on how the personal background of each individual influenced their perception of lived experiences (Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013). Failing to acknowledge the influence of individual background stories, fails to account for the uniqueness of each individual research participant. And while the participants within this research study share a similar school and summer camp experience, the ways in which they experienced them are as rich and varied as the research participants themselves.

### **Campers 1 and 2**

Campers 1 and 2 are African American, female sisters who attended camp for four consecutive summers beginning in 2008. They were born in Omaha, Nebraska, but spent their early childhood years moving back-and-forth from Minnesota to Nebraska; finally settling in Dallas, Texas during their high school years. Camper 1 was nineteen and Camper 2 was twenty-one during the time of research participation and were just one grade apart in school. Their parents were divorced, and the girls spent much of their childhood moving between their biological mom's and biological dad's residences. Their dad had a longtime girlfriend that both girls considered another "mom," as she played an integral part in raising them. They also spent some time in foster care during their time in Minnesota and Nebraska, but most of their memories embody the time they spent with their biological parents.

On their dad's side, Camper 1 and Camper 2 had three younger sisters and both described themselves as bearing a lot of responsibility in caring for their younger siblings. Camper 1 relayed more positive memories during her time with her dad. As she recalled summer memories prior to her camp experience, Camper 1 remembered spending a lot of time at the public library with her dad. "My dad was a big stickler, especially in the summer. And he always wanted us to go to the library and read so that we could continue to progress and grow as a reader." At the time, Camper 1 did not always love spending so many summer hours at the library but has come to view it as beneficial today.

Camper 2 recalled more tumultuous memories during the times she lived with her dad, describing him as mentally, physically, and verbally abusive. One of Camper 2's most vivid memories involved an incident where her dad's girlfriend stabbed her dad, and Camper 2 was asked to hide the knife afterwards. Police were called and both Camper 1 and Camper 2 were removed from their dad's house and went to live with their mom again. Camper 2 also lamented about how much she used to fight with Camper 1 throughout their childhood.

We shouldn't even have to have been going through all that stuff we went through. But we did. I remember, I kind of like had like a depression. I was depressed. And so little and I was, I was really depressed. When we were living with our dad I just fell into...I was, I was mean to Camper 1. I was so mean. And I didn't have anyone to talk to. And I just kept everything balled up, and just kept it to myself. And then all that would just

spill out to Camper 1, and I would just be so angry and upset. That was pretty hard. It was tough.

During Camper 1 and Camper 2's time with their mom, both girls described much more freedom and independence. On their mom's side, they were the youngest with two older sisters and one older brother. Camper 2 also recalled more financial challenges when they lived with their mom.

When we lived with our mom, she would work a lot, so it would really just be my brother, sister, and Camper 1, and I, all the time, by ourselves. There was always a challenge for money in the household and food. There was hardly food and my mom always needed money, so that was something.

When Camper 1 and Camper 2 were beginning high school, their mom decided to move to Dallas, Texas. At first, both girls were not keen on the idea of leaving Omaha and all of their friends and family behind. But Dallas soon grew on both of them, citing the big city feel and artistic opportunities within the community as exciting. Camper 1 enrolled in a performing arts high school, and Camper 2 attended a high school that focused on various majors, where she decided to pursue the teaching track. When Camper 2 recalled some of her happiest childhood memories, she reflected on her mom's in-home childcare center that she started when Camper 1 and Camper 2 were in middle school. She attributed a large part of her love for children and teaching to her experiences working with her mom and taking care of her younger siblings on her dad's side.

Both Camper 1 and Camper 2 also believed their time at summer camp played an important role in their future collegiate and career paths, which will be addressed in more



detail in subsequent sections. Camper 1 is currently on a full-ride scholarship at Howard University in Washington, DC and is majoring in acting with a minor in dance. Camper 2 moved back to Omaha, Nebraska and is also on scholarship, majoring in Early Childhood Education at the College of Saint Mary's. On top of her schooling, Camper 2 works multiple jobs including a work study position in her residence hall, a retail job at the mall, and spends most evenings as a food delivery driver for two companies in Omaha. She is currently getting A's in all of her classes and is on the Dean's List.

Camper 2 also recently got married to her husband, originally from Benin in Africa. They are saving up to take a honeymoon to Benin to visit his family. Camper 1 and Camper 2 remain close. Their father was recently diagnosed with cancer and is currently seeking treatment in Minnesota. Both Camper 1 and Camper 2 feel sadness about their father being sick, but neither have a very close relationship with him at this time. They remain close with their mom who still lives in Dallas, Texas. And because Camper 2 lives in Omaha, she stays very connected with her half-sisters on her dad's side and also remains close with her dad's former girlfriend. As an experiential learning aside, Camper 2 actually visited College of Saint Mary's during a fourth-grade college visit, which she attributed to one of the main reasons she decided to apply there during her senior year of high school.

### **Camper 3**

Camper 3 is a nineteen-year-old, African American female who began attending camp during the summer of 2009. She continued to return every summer except the summer of 2013; completing her Counselor-in-Training [CIT] summer in 2015. Camper 3 is an only child who was raised primarily by her mother. When she was six-years-old,

her great-grandmother fell ill, so her aunt began to take care of her great-grandmother on a consistent basis. Due to the demands of great grandmother's illness, this became a full-time commitment for Camper 3's aunt. As a result, Camper 3's mom took in her sister's four children, Camper 3's biological cousins. From age six to age eleven, Camper 3 lived with her extended family in a four-bedroom house near her neighborhood elementary school in Omaha, Nebraska. Camper 3's dad is married and has one daughter, Camper 3's half-sister. According to Camper 3, both sides are very supportive, especially her grandparents on her dad's side.

Prior to her time at summer camp, Camper 3 spent the majority of time with her mom and cousins playing outside and gearing up for her July birthday.

We always had all kinds of pool parties, my mom made sure she always...even if she couldn't afford it, or it was just really hard for her to, she always made sure every summer, we always had the most fun. So birthdays were absolutely amazing, she went all out for it all the time.

Camper 3 describes her relationship with her mom as extremely close; so close that attending summer camp was a big sacrifice for both of them.

Fourth grade is about when I got into camp and stuff. So through that it was my first experience with me being my mom's only child, and then also having that kind of sibling thing with my cousins, it was my first big adventure out on my own. It was really, really, really scary, but it brought me and my mom closer. My mom was my best friend.

Currently, Camper 3 just finished up her first year at the University of Nebraska at Omaha and is planning to major in secondary education with a minor in black studies.

Her ultimate goal is to become a high school English or theater teacher in an urban setting. She has a strong desire to give back to her community and cites her experiences with her own high school teachers as a prominent influence inspiring her passion. While she appreciated her teachers and the education she received through the Omaha Public Schools, she also feels strongly there needs to be more role models for students of color to identify with during their formative school years.

I always say that education has been a passion of mine, because I feel like my purpose is to educate and enlighten. I just feel like I have to give back, and I have to be of service to the same North Omaha community that made me who I am. Because when you look at statistics and everything in North Omaha, I'm not supposed to be where I am, so I'm glad I defy almost all stereotypes.

#### **Campers 4 and 5**

Campers 4 and 5 are African American siblings born and raised in Omaha, Nebraska. Camper 4 is a 24-year-old male, and Camper 5 is a 25-year-old female who both began attending camp during the summer of 2006. Camper 4 attended for two consecutive summers, and Camper 5 attended for five consecutive summers, completing her CIT summer in 2011. Camper 4 and Camper 5 have the same biological mother and three younger brothers on their mom's side. They have different fathers. Camper 4 intimated he did not have much of a relationship with his biological dad, and Camper 5 lost her father to gun violence when she was two-years-old. They lived with their biological mother until they entered into the foster care system when Camper 4 was six and Camper 5 was seven. Camper 4 explained:

I grew up with my mom, and then as I got older, we had, me and my mom, a misunderstanding. We went to a park and then she went a different way, and I thought she went a certain way, but she went the other way. I couldn't find her, so I walked to my grandma's house, and my mom couldn't find me. She called the police, and then they said it was like bad parenting, so we ended up going to foster care for a few years.

During their time in foster care, Camper 4 and Camper 5 changed schools and moved around quite a bit. Eventually their maternal grandma was given custody of both children and they returned to their neighborhood elementary school. They lived with their grandmother until Camper 4 was in eighth grade and Camper 5 was a freshman in high school. Both children were old enough to make the decision to go back and live with their biological mom, but the transition was not an easy one, especially for Camper 5. She recalled:

The whole journey was a roller coaster ride. Loved living with my grandma, moving back with my mom was very hard, being fourteen. I mean seven, when I was younger, and then fourteen. Granted, we got to see her, it was just a different situation.

Both Camper 4 and Camper 5 described many examples of loving and caring adults in their lives. They both told stories about teachers and family members who provided a lot of physical and emotional support during transitional periods throughout their childhood. During a discussion about childhood summer memories, Camper 4 and Camper 5 both remembered spending time outside riding their bikes, swimming at the neighborhood pool, and hanging out at their elementary school with all of their friends.

When talking about his favorite summer memory prior to camp, Camper 4 remembered the following experience:

We was in front of the park, and we were walking down the street, coming from the park, and some guy in a red Cadillac, he stuck his hand out the window. He didn't say nothing to none of us. He just rode down the whole street, letting money fly out of his hand. Dollar bills everywhere. For a kid, you get 49 cents or something, you get like 50 cents, you could go get a lot of snacks at the store. Then one person ran, then we all ran. We're picking up money, the whole block in the middle of the street. That's just something I always thought about doing.

Camper 4 also described an event that changed his life forever. In middle school, he and his two best friends had bought a car for \$500. One evening, they were drinking underage and they crashed the car into a building in their neighborhood. No one witnessed the incident, so they wiped down the car and left the scene of the accident. Camper 4 recalled:

That was kind of like the boom. When that happened, we, all three of us, it was like a shock between all of us. That's when we all went our separate ways. That was like the wake-up call of my younger childhood right there. We can get together every now and then and make sure somebody's on the right path, but every day wasn't the right time to be together.

After that, Camper 4 reflected on how his time away at summer camp really impacted the way he thought about his future.

Just think about it. If you didn't take me out of the summer, the summer is when the kids in my communities, that's when the crime rate goes up. If it doesn't go up, that's when the kids go crazy because, during the school year, you got a certain time to come in. You gotta be in by the streetlights. You gotta be in the house. In the summertime, you can say, "I'm staying the night at my cousin's house that lives around the corner." What's you gonna do when you staying out all night? You gonna go bust windows, be a little kid. You gonna steal bikes. You just look for too much stuff to do. When you're in a certain neighborhood, you can't do everything. You run out of stuff to do is what I'm saying.

Camper 4 found his academic years more challenging but excelled in athletics. After he graduated from high school, he attended a small college in Minnesota on a football scholarship. He enjoyed his time there and started dating a girl who lived in a very small Iowa town. Camper 4 eventually moved to her home town and they lived together in a trailer. He began to work at a factory that cuts steel used to make farm equipment and states he does well financially. He also frequently gambles both for enjoyment and to supplement his income. After a few years, Camper 4 and his girlfriend decided to go their separate ways and he moved into a three-bedroom house in the same small, Iowa town. While he still enjoys living there, he has aspirations to start his own car repair shop back in Omaha with a good high school friend. He intimated there were challenges being one of the only black males in the community. However, Camper 4 mostly remained positive, instead choosing to focus on how he was able to educate those around him.

Think about if I didn't go to camp or something, how would I... You think I would've been able to react with white people that way I do now? Seriously though? Because I felt like growing up, I always tell people, if you're racist, you're confused because most people don't know what racism is. I grew up thinking I was racist, but I wasn't. All the white guys around here, in my community growing up, they thought they were better than us, so we'd try to take their bikes or tell them they can't come on this street no more, just because they judge us so much. Then I started going to camp, seeing other people, how nice everybody is. Some people look at you different or treat you different, but it's just that person's got a heart, just like all of us. If you can steal that heart, you're gonna find happiness all the time. You just take their heart, put happiness in it, and put it back.

Camper 5 attended Howard University in Washington, DC where she majored in business and finance. After she finished up her degree, she moved back to Omaha for a little under a year and worked at Boys Town as a family assistant. She really enjoyed working with the youth in her house but found the formulaic approach to behavior frustrating at times. Camper 5 was much more interested in the stories behind the behaviors and getting to know each youth as an individual. So after some time, Camper 5 left Boys Town and decided to pack up her belongings and move to Los Angeles, California. Moving to Los Angeles had been in her plans all the time, but she felt she had finally saved up enough money and was ready to make the change. Camper 5 currently nannies for a few families during the day and drives for both Uber and Lyft.

One of Camper 5's more recent goals involves creating her own YouTube channel to inspire young girls to become more self-aware and practice self-care.

I wanted to start a YouTube channel because I've been through a lot of these things, and I've been through a phase where I've been so insecure about my abilities where I made a lot of excuses and said I wasn't able to do certain things. Or I tried to do certain things that I know in my heart I never wanted to do, and therefore when the door kept closing on that, I think I'm supposed to keep trying to do more of what I love.

### **Thematic Analysis**

Upon revisiting the initial research question and sub-questions, Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle was utilized as a guiding precept to intentionally design interview questions to explore the following inquiries:

### **Research Question**

- What were the perceptions of children living in poverty after attending a Northern Minnesota residential summer camp?

### **Sub-questions**

- What were the pinnacle experiences that resonated with each participant during their time at summer camp?
- Did these summer camp experiences influence the participant's perceived beliefs about future hopes and dreams?

Much like the evolution of the research questions, the Experiential Learning Cycle appeals to how one experiences an event like summer camp; taking the mere experience further through analyzing whether the research participant reflected on, learned from, and



ultimately made decisions based on their summer camp experience. Gathering perceptions and sharing the stories surrounding research participants' perceptions of their experiences at summer camp were primary research question objectives. Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle helped to more intentionally identify pinnacle experiences; exploring how or if these experiences influenced research participants' future hopes and dreams (Kolb & Kolb, 2017).

Common themes were identified and in keeping with the theoretical lens, analysis occurred in each stage of Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle. Participant interviews were transcribed and initially analyzed using open, descriptive coding. Interview responses were then "cut" and organized in a word document in order to further analyze data in conjunction with Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle. Savin-Baden and Howell-Major (2013) shed more light on the process of cutting:

Cutting can occur at the level of word, phrase, sentence or full transcript. Cutting now happens in many ways, however, whether through writing text segments on note cards or simply highlighting meaningful chunks in a word processing file or by marking the chunks in a data analysis software package (p.421).

Using this qualitative coding approach, data was analyzed further, and comparison matrixes were developed to identify common themes, along with themes that perhaps strayed from current camp research outcomes. Specific word counts were also utilized to portray a more holistic picture of prominent themes and shared experiences of involved research participants (Creswell, 2012; Savin-Baden & Major-Howell, 2013).

## **The Summer Camp Experience**

### ***Physical Camp***

Facets of the physical camp environment were articulated as a primal camp experience for every research participant interviewed. Participants recalled specific cabins where they resided, gave detailed descriptions of their time in common areas like the dining hall and the waterfront, and spoke at length about the lack of electricity and technology, camp showers, and other physical areas that resonated with each camper. The camp landscape was also universally mentioned, with vivid descriptions of the North woods and the lake that served not only as a place for swimming and camp activities, but an important focal image that emerged again and again as research participants described their time at camp. Camper 5 recalled:

I remember sitting on that Lakeside bench and just reading and stuff. You can't help but to love being there, and the chill time really allows you to take a breath and really look around like, "Wow." Camp is beautiful. I like being there. So peaceful. So I think that's why I never wanted to actually leave camp.

Camper 5 went on to say:

So camp is that moment to me. I liked being a camper, yes, but if anything, I always think back, if I could walk through camp, because it is beautiful. And just go through it and watch the water or just be in that circle in Lakeside. I love the way the trees circle that area. It's just really beautiful,

and so yeah, it just shapes ... I just look at the beauty in it. And the beauty in it just makes me want to experience a lot of things like that.

Another shared sentiment from research participants involved a dichotomy of missing technology, while feeling free and almost relieved to have a break from it.

Camper 1 shared:

Camp taught me you don't have to depend so much on technology. 'Cause I know while we were there we didn't have any phones or computers or tv's or anything. And I think that's extremely important. Especially in today's world where technology is just everywhere. I think for kids, it's great to be exposed in an environment where there's not so much technology. You can just do things and have fun in a way that strengthens your physical and mental and emotional ability and strength, you know?

Experiences surrounding electricity, showering, and other daily tasks were also emphasized during camper interviews. Camper 5 remembered:

What I take away most from summer camp is just sleeping in the cabins at girls' camp. Because it was just crazy to me. It's just super dark outside. We're in the woods and it's dark. What if we have to go to the restroom? I have to walk to the restroom by myself with a flashlight? So that was very interesting.

All campers elaborated on their experiences with bathing and swimming in the lake. During the majority of the summer, campers took "soapies" in the lake, which was the term the camp used for taking baths with soap in the lake. Camper 3 shared, "Swimming in lakes, really weird at first, then I got the hang of it, and then I was like,

Okay, this is kind of unhealthy. Just a little bit.” Camper 4 remembered that the showers in boys’ camp were always cold. He shared that when he returned home from summer camp, his skin would be rough, and he would look forward to standing in his warm shower for the longest time. Campers 1 and 2 recalled “soapies” and their time swimming in the lake as being some of their favorite memories from their camp experience.

### ***Exposure to New Skills***

Camp activities were also universally mentioned throughout participant interviews. Sharing stories about camp activities, and an appreciation for the opportunity to be exposed to activities they would not have been able to experience at home, were revisited often. Camper 1 shared, “I feel like these activities were things that I probably wouldn’t have never done had I not gone to camp. Like I would have never kayaked, canoed, or did any of that stuff had I not gone to camp.” And Camper 2 remarked:

Let’s see...I did water skiing. You can to try new things at camp. You get to try things that you’ve never tried before, and I think that’s wonderful to do, to add to your experience list. Water skiing, I had never done it, and I did it for the first time, and I stood up, and I was so proud of myself.

Camper 3 spoke at length about her experiences with horseback riding, theater, arts and crafts, and swimming at summer camp; sharing some of the challenges and triumphs within each experience. She appreciated that many of the activities she learned, like making friendship bracelets in arts and crafts, could be attributed to her time at camp. For Camper 5, activities like archery, waterskiing, and day trips were among the first experiences shared during her interview.

Camper 4 often returned to his camp activity memories, “I been fishing, but I never been fishing in the big lake before. It was a whole lot of new experiences out there.” He went on to talk about his experiences with kayaking:

Yeah, the kayaking was the best...because it was like the sunset, like you could see the sunset right there and you could see it on the water. And the water was just formed just right. I never thought I’d be the guy who would kayak way out in the middle of the lake.

Camper 4 also attributed learning some more obscure camp skills to helping him make connections with friends and coworkers later in life.

Like we used to help start the fire with flint and steel. I can picture the counselor’s face, but we used to be out there all day with that man. He was like an outsider for real. He showed us how to tie the knots and everything. I’ve used the knot experience at Okoboji last year with the boat.

The variety of activities mentioned were as varied and different as each participant. But every participant shared how important the exposure to these activities were on both a recreational level and in developing personal hobbies and future career interests, to be explored in later sections.

### ***Unabashed, Visceral Fun***

The words fun, play, and laughter, along with feelings of joy and happiness, were universally articulated and came up 212 times during camper code application. In a sense, these “fun” experiences were a thread that connected almost every interview question, for every research participant. Within the very first research question, each participant shared a statement that described the “fun” they had at camp. Simply stated,

Camper 1 remembered, “I just had so much fun. I just remember, yeah, camp was really, really, really fun.” Friendships, special camp activities like Island Day, overnights, trips, team competitions, camp songs, and daily activities were all contributing factors in the “fun” that was universally described.

Camper 1 and Camper 4 immediately described “Island Day” as one of the most “fun” activities. Camper 1 recalled:

I loved Island Day. So we would usually kayak or canoe over to one of the islands on the lake and we would stay overnight there, so we would either stay in a tent or just stay there the whole day and then come back later in the evening. I just remember swimming a lot and just having so much fun in the water.

Camper 2 shared the “fun” she experienced through camp activities:

Oh my gosh, it was amazing, just being able to do stuff that you usually, you wouldn’t normally do in an everyday basis. So like archery, we can’t do archery here. I mean maybe you can, but archery. Like archery was so fun, oh and the water. We loved the water, that was our thing. We loved the lake. It was so fun, we was always swimming.

Camper 5 went on to summarize her feelings on the camp experience:

After camp, I realized that it’s just a place that you go for them to really...they want you to have fun. They want you to have fun, they want you to be yourself, and you really do make friends. They feed you well. I

really loved eating at camp. I found out peanut butter tastes good on everything.

Including the personal stories of each camper gives additional credence to why these “fun” experiences were so universally embraced. Context surrounding the adult circumstances many of these campers faced in their daily home lives provided a small window into the importance of experiencing the unabashed, visceral fun described vividly within participant interviews. In a sense, their camp experiences gave them permission to be children for a few weeks, every summer. Camper 2 reinforced:

Camp took us away from everything that was going on with us at home. Once we stopped going to camp, basically, it just came right back, like all this stuff just happened again. So as we got older, we kind of had to find our own ways to cope.

All participants lamented they wished they could have stayed at camp for a longer period of time. This came in the form of just wanting to add additional weeks during the summer or reflecting on how they wished they had continued through their Counselor-in-Training [CIT] summer. Camper 2 shared:

We always wanted to come back, but we just couldn't. Camp would've helped us. With all those skills we learned at camp, I think we would've had a better way to deal with certain situations. I think if we would've stayed at camp, we would've had a better, I guess advantage, a better advantage for those skills that we could use now. Even though our time at camp was short, it definitely made a huge impact, I know especially for me.

Camper 4 also recalled:

I don't even know how I felt after I came back from camp. I just know that I was different. Because you still would meet an adult that's older than both of us [Camper 4 and his sister, Camper 5] that's missing some spots that need to be filled in. And it was like that camp filled in this whole area that people from my community never get to experience, or areas that never get filled in over on that side. If I never went to camp, I only would have known one learning experience, and that's from my community. And that's violence. Where I come from is violence, and where camp was, it was nothing but love. Everywhere you went, it was love. And you got to learn that.

## **Reflecting on the Summer Camp Experience**

### ***Personal Development and Growth***

Every research participant reflected on the ways they experienced personal development and growth during and after their summers at camp. Greater self-confidence, newfound independence, risk-taking, and social emotional development were among the more commonly attributed development areas among campers. Oftentimes, there was a sense that camp gave research participants permission to be more authentically themselves. Camper 1 shared, "I was really closed off and shy at home, but as soon as I was around a whole bunch of other kids at camp, I was just so open and so free and so friendly." Camper 2 also felt she was more open at camp:

I was quiet at home. I didn't really talk at home. Just because with everything going on, I'm not really a talker. But I feel like at camp, I was able to open up more, and express myself more, I mean of course we were



shy the first time we were there, but as we got to know people, we grew together, we opened up more. I was really shy at home. And I didn't get as involved in stuff as...like I always wanted to do all this stuff, but I never did. But at camp, I got involved in so much stuff, it was so great.

Camper 3 and Camper 5's reflection on their Counselor-in-Training [CIT] summers were particularly poignant memories for them. Camper 3 attributes her CIT summer to developing her not only as a leader but having a profound influence on how she viewed her world.

And my CIT experience...my CIT experience really changed everything for me. Because going to camp and being a camper was fun, but really being in that CIT position made me look at camp and appreciate camp in such a different light. Camp is where I feel like I grew the most as a person, as a young woman, as a friend, as a leader. It takes a lot of people a lot of time to build that, and camp just gave me those tools. Not to be cheesy, but it really changed my life, it changed who I was, and I always tell my mom that and we always sit and talk about it. A lot of those same experiences that I had at camp that I probably wouldn't be able to have in North Omaha or just as a young African American female, I got a lot of that at camp.

In Girls' Camp, the role of the CIT was often one filled with leadership responsibilities. Camper 3 and Camper 5 revisited their leadership role and sense of responsibility often during their interviews. They touched on the challenges that came with such a high level of responsibilities as 16 and 17-year-olds, but mostly reminisced

about how this leadership role helped develop them into the strong, female leaders they consider themselves today. Camper 5 shared:

My favorite year, though, by far...my CIT year was my favorite. I just felt like I was able to be a big sister to a lot of girls and just make them more comfortable with just having fun and talking to them and going to the cabins and saying goodnight and different things like that. You're really able to lead by example, yet experience a little bit of camp outside of what it is, which I love.

For those campers who were not CIT's, not completing their CIT summer was something they looked back on with regret. Camper 1 remarked, "I would always want to be a CIT, because they were so cool to me. They would lead certain activities and songs and stuff. And they would kinda look after us like big sisters." Camper 2 lamented:

Summer at camp was great, it was fantastic, and we wanted to keep going because I wanted...we [Camper 1 and 2] wanted to be CIT's together. We would have if we had kept going to camp, but with all the stuff that was going on, so we stopped going to camp. But we thought it would be cool to be CIT's, lead the songs, have people follow us...stuff like that.

Camper 2 went on to share how camp counselors and CIT's influenced her personal growth and development:

And they were always, they always wanted you to get involved. No one was ever left out of anything, and so no one felt alone. That was good. And then we all worked together to become this big community at camp, I think

it made everyone's experience...made everyone have a great experience at camp. Just the involvement, the community, leadership, relationships between everyone there.

### ***Challenges***

Homesickness was addressed as a challenge, but not universally. Camper 1 mentioned it as an initial challenge that faded after the first few nights in her cabin. It appeared to be the greatest challenge for Camper 3 because she was extremely connected to her mother. She shared she would often seek comfort from her counselors and the camp director. Camper 3 explained:

Just being away from home and not having any family was the most challenging. Because my CIT year, my cousins came the first two weeks. After that, I was just on my own. So then it was just me. So it became much, much more difficult.

Those feelings never completely dissipated for Camper 3. Homesickness was something she often fought through during the camp experience. However, her mother and others at camp served as an immense support to help her through feeling homesick. Other research participants did not speak to homesickness as a prominent challenge – even though homesickness is often addressed as a common challenge for sleepaway camps (Burkhardt et al., 2005; Dahl et al., 2010; Henderson et al., 2007).

Reflecting on some of the universal challenges research participants endured at summer camp exposed some common themes surrounding the lake. Swimming was mentioned as something that was both a positive and challenging experience for every research participant. Some participants mentioned the physicality of swimming – having

never been exposed to swimming lessons prior to camp. Camper 4 simply stated, “You know, I was scared of all that water out there.” Camper 3 shared:

My first couple of years, I liked swimming, I just couldn’t get the hang of it. And they really made a big, big deal about swimming, especially because of the lake and it’s just one of the predominant things at camp. So swimming and passing my levels were just not my...I was like level three my whole entire time. I just did not learn it, and I didn’t get it.

Camper 3 and Camper 5 specifically mentioned the impact swimming in the lake water had on their African American hair. At camp, the word “soapie” was used to describe a common practice of bathing in the lake as a substitute for showers or baths. While showers were available to all campers, most campers enjoyed participating in daily “soapies” during their free swim time before dinner. For Camper 3 and Camper 5, this experience was not as enjoyable and perhaps a missed opportunity for camp staff to understand or demonstrate an awareness regarding a cultural concern. Camper 3 shared she felt like she frustrated lifeguards when she wouldn’t go underwater, but also felt there was not a shared understanding regarding why going underwater was hard on her hair. Camper 5 agreed:

Some things were challenging...especially the swimming. The lake part. That was hard for me. I couldn’t do it every day and stuff, with my hair. I couldn’t blow dry it and do that, so getting it wet every single night was hard. You’re doing something you don’t really want to do. I think that was one of the hardest challenges, because I had to pay so much attention to my hair and just how certain things were different from what I’m used to doing.

In fact, Camper 5 revisited this later in the interview as she reflected on thinking about camp in her current context. She lamented, “I know how to take care of my hair better now. I really think about that. If I could go back in time.”

Aside from swimming, some research participants reflected on times they felt singled-out or certain pressures to perform at camp. Camper 5 felt there were times she and her brother were being “watched” by camp staff. As she reflected on the summers she spent with her brother at camp, she shared:

I remember it was this one time...I couldn't hug them [my brother] or something. We couldn't really interact. But then other brothers and sisters would interact. I don't know. I felt like people were always watching how we interacted or when we interacted, and I didn't get that part, and then I remember me and him, we would get frustrated about it, like why is something always getting said to us like we're brother and sister? We are super close. This is nothing. It just didn't make any sense to me, but I felt like we were singled-out. And it's hard for me to even remember which year it was, but we were always being watched. Certain counselors would be watching us. So, we were singled-out for sure, and I just thought that was...it was just very odd. That was one of my most negative experiences that I did have with camp.

As a camper and in her CIT role, there were times Camper 5 felt unrealistic expectations were placed on her. She shared instances where her energy level may have been a little less, and how quickly the counselors were “on her” about not feeling happy

and energetic. She wondered, “Maybe I wasn’t as happy but am I really not normal?”

She also expanded on the pressures she felt to perform at camp:

I felt like there was some pressure on me to always just perform at my highest level of performance, no matter what it is I did, and then if I didn’t, if I’m like, “No I don’t want to do that,” it’s like me making excuses...that or being a Debbie Downer or something like that. But it wasn’t overwhelming, because most of the time I was pretty good at what I did. It was just those times where you wasn’t, it was a big deal.

Camper 3 also shared a few instances where she felt singled-out by other campers or camp staff. She shared:

I guess now that I’m older, looking back, the biggest thing was my hair. I always had my hair some kind of different way, and I got 40 million questions every day about my hair. From campers, from staff members, and it was never...it was honestly genuine curiosity. And times it was like, “Y’all act like y’all have never seen a black person.” But then I thought about it and I was like, “They probably haven’t.”

Adjusting to camp routines, the bugs, lack of electricity and technology, and cabin life were also almost universally mentioned in participant interviews. While research participants settled into camp routines and came to appreciate the disconnect from technology and living a simpler camp life, their relationships with Northern Minnesota bugs were not remembered so fondly. Camper 2 shared, “I remember, I was crying because of all the spiders out there.” Camper 3 came around the most in her reflection:

The bugs, they were terrible, until my CIT year, we went to another camp and it was like a YMCA kind of thing. We stayed there, and I have never experienced so many mosquito bites in one night from being there, so when we came back, the rest of my CIT year, I did not wear bug spray. I was like, “I can handle it, so bite me.”

For some research participants, saying goodbye and leaving the camp environment became more of a challenge every summer. Every research participant shared they wished they could have stayed longer – whether it was additional summers or adding additional weeks onto their summer experience. Camper 3 shared that even though she spent a lot of time at camp feeling homesick, she would often come home from camp and feel “campsick.” Additionally, Camper 2 shared a vivid memory about feeling vulnerable during the final campfire:

I didn’t like crying so much. I remember when the last, that last thing before you leave, that little get together [the final campfire]. When other people cry, it makes me cry, and I’ve always been like that. And I don’t like to cry, especially in front of other people. If I’m going to cry, I would rather do it by myself alone, where no one can see me. Yeah, crying in front of other people was just, I didn’t like it. And all that crying that I did, I did not like it. But I couldn’t help it because I was going to miss everyone so much.

While challenging, and often uncomfortable, these experiences resonated with research participants as they recalled camp memories that were perhaps not the fun, joyful experiences more apt to be relayed in more casual conversation.

### *Relationships*

Positive camp friendships and relationships were mentioned in every research participant interview. Every participant shared names of counselors, cabin mates, and activity instructors who played a critical role in their summer memories. Camper 2 shared the influence of her first cabin counselor:

My first counselor. Oh I loved her. Just being able to have that relationship with her, that we had, I think it was her first year as a counselor too, and so she did pretty good. Just being able to be a counselor for other people is a huge job, she took on a huge role, and I think that was very important for camp. She was like...basically the mom of the household if you recall. So that was a huge role for all these different girls that she had, we all came from different places, but we all got along so well, I think she was influential. Just in her nature, just influential. She made my experience memorable, my first year, and I think that was important, because obviously we came back.

While this summer camp had some diversity, the majority of campers and counselors were Caucasian. This was also a factor in the memories remembered and shared during research participant interviews. Camper 3 explained:

But being one of maybe one to seven African American kids there, surrounded by everyone else that is mostly either white or...well, we had a lot of people, we had people from Mexico, we had people from Africa, we had a lot of different people. But doing that [being one of the only African American campers] was really, really different for me.



And while every research participant shared stories featuring diverse counselor and camper connections, almost all research participants mentioned their friendships with their fellow North Omaha campers, along with important friendships fostered among other African American campers and counselors. Camper 4 shared one of his most positive memories:

My best time, his name was \_\_\_\_\_, the other black guy that was there. We got in the kayaks and we kayaked on the lake. And we kayaked so long that when we was trying to come back, the water was going the way that we was going, and we was tired, but we kept paddling back. So we like togethered our paddles. I put my end over there, he brought me his end, and we like stayed together. So then when we got our energy back and we paddled again, we all would stay together instead of floating apart from each other. We just went out there and we just talked. We just vented to each other, we told everything about each other, our darkest secrets.

For Camper 4, his connection with this camper was revisited throughout our interview. He shared memories about tetherball matches, along with their reign as “kings of the basketball court.” He also shared he had tried to look him up on social media to find out if he had become a “famous” basketball player but never had much luck finding out about him, present day.

In Girls’ Camp, the Camp Director was mentioned often and at length during every research participant interview. Many of the research participants relied on her in almost a maternal way, especially when they experienced struggles at camp. They also reminisced about her wild tubing/water skiing boat rides, along with her guitar playing,

singing, and leadership during the final campfires. She was, without a doubt, one of the most influential relationships articulated during research participant interviews. Camper 2 shared:

Oh, I loved her, she just had this reputation about her, if you would call it, that was just...she was just friendly, she was involved, oh I just loved her. Oh man she was just so lovely, oh man, other than some of our other teachers, I never met somebody like her.

Camper 3 reinforced:

There's just something about her. Maybe it's just because she's a teacher...maybe that's why I really just loved her so much. There's something really calming about her and talking to her and being around her, you feel safe and you feel secure and you feel like right in that moment, there's nothing else. I don't know, just talking to her about a lot of things. Most of our conversations were always deep. There was just some kind of thing that made me just feel like everything, no matter what, everything was gonna be okay. She made everything better just by a conversation, or a hug. Oh my God, she has the best hugs ever.

The singing, guitar playing, campfire feels, and overall presence of the Camp Director were commonly revisited during Girls' Camp participant interviews. Camper 5 summed it up when she articulated one of her favorite camp memories:

I really liked the singing, when people would be leaving, even though it was sad, I really like the experience. I really liked the campfire stuff. I loved when [the Camp Director] would bring her guitar and do her thing. I don't

know. I just started bawling, like... “Oh they just want us to cry.” I love that.

## **Learning from the Summer Camp Experience**

### ***Self-Reflection***

Research participants often returned to what they learned about themselves during and after the camp experience. This level of self-reflection appeared to deepen as campers spent more time in the camp setting but was certainly prevalent for all campers interviewed. Camper 3 believed:

When I was at camp, I got most of my lessons of being a good friend, being a good leader, being generous, being kind, pushing myself to different limits that I didn’t even think were possible...not settling. A lot of the same characteristics that I’ve grown to have now, I wouldn’t have gotten that without camp.

Camper 3 went on to address how she utilized this self-reflection to her benefit during her school year.

Then I got to carry that into the school year, and the same things that I learned at camp about different, just honest people skills, characteristics about yourself and everything like that, I carried that with me. Then I got to reach and touch other people with that. I think that’s good.

Attributing the camp experience to overcoming feelings of shyness were also common themes during participant interviews. Camper 2 discovered, “I can do a lot more than what I thought I could. Because I was so shy, I didn’t think I was going to make a lot of friends, but I did.” Camper 3 shared similar sentiments:

At camp, my first few years, I was really standbackish and seeing how it was. Once I got the hang of it, I was like, “Oh, I got it. I’m fine.” I got to be really carefree at camp. That was something I would not have gotten at home.

Camper 3 went on to reflect on her issues with control.

I learned that I had a really, really big issue with control. I’ll say that for sure. I’m like a natural leader, so most of the time when I was at my cabin, I was probably the one that was a little bit outspoken, which is really weird. I guess, what I will say, a lot of people say that changed about me being young. They’re like, “You used to be so quiet and so shy. You did not talk. Where did that confidence come from?” I never could pinpoint it. I think it came from camp.

### ***Coping Skills***

Coping skills learned were also widely recounted during participant interviews. Gaining perspective through experiences, along with understanding and witnessing other ways to cope with life events, were prevalent themes among participants. Camper 4 shared:

Everybody at home was like, “We gonna drink. We gonna eat this bad food. And we ain’t working out.” But at camp, it was like everybody got to work out or it was like everybody want to work out. It was just all positive.

Camper 5 agreed:

I was happier going there [to camp], especially after a certain age. I don’t think there’s a lot to do in Omaha but party. And then I wasn’t a part of any

other program, so I felt like it's not like back when I was a kid where I'm just going to play, play, play. It would have been more like, are you going to this party or...you know, that transition between basically just being a teenager and not really having anything to do, just being bored. Not having stuff to do every day and staying active like I would be at camp.

Camper 2 also spoke about how her camp experiences could have helped her cope with some of the struggles she endured within her family life. She shared:

So, as we got older, we kind of had to find our own ways to, I guess cope.

Yeah, and we always wanted to come back, but we just couldn't. Camp would've helped us. With all those skills that we learned at camp, I think we would've had a better way to deal with certain situations. We would've had a better, I guess advantage, a better advantage.

Important lessons about risk-taking, failure, and persistence were also learned at camp. Most research participants addressed experiences that while challenging, helped them grow as individuals. Camper 3 shared her struggles with physically getting around the camp landscape, citing her fitness level as an issue. Camper 4 vividly remembered a game he played called Sentry, essentially a spy game set deep within the woods, and pushing through wanting to quit because of the arduous game. Camper 5 spoke at length about her CIT trip and the ups-and-down she felt in dealing with the bugs, the rigorous kayaking, and outdoor camping. Even after sharing these events campers may not have excelled at initially or ever, all research participants agreed they were happy they saw each experience through until the end. Camper 1 summed up these shared sentiments:

I would say during the camp experience I kind of learned that it's okay to fail at something. You just have to get back up and try again and hopefully you'll succeed, you know? You're not going to get it on the first try always. And so that's one of the biggest things I think I took away from the camp experience.

### **Summer Camp Experiences Influencing Action**

#### ***Love of Travel***

A sense of adventure, a love for travel, and an appreciation for other cultures were also widely attributed to camp experiences through participant interviews. Participants shared they often felt a greater sense of independence during their summers at camp. Perhaps these early experiences with independence were contributing factors in nurturing and prioritizing a love for travel and risk-taking, both prominent themes uncovered during interviews.

Camper 4 shared:

You gotta have a starting point of learning, somewhere. And that's crazy because camp is just like traveling to me. I can use previous experiences to handle specific people, or specific words that people say, and handle myself better in certain situations. Camp helped me experience this first.

Camper 5 shares her brother's love for travel, as they often plan their trips together.

Camper 4 and Camper 5 have enjoyed many adventures together out in Camper 5's current residence, Los Angeles. They have new trips on the horizon and are happy they share a mutual passion for traveling.

Camper 3 also expressed aspirations for future travel.

Something that I know that I planned and decided that I am going to travel a lot. Just seeing a lot of the different people at camp and all these different experiences and everything, even though they're at camp, they're also from everywhere else around the world. Seeing people come from Mexico, from France, I had a girl from Brazil. It was like, "Wow, this is different and it's super cool. I really got it...even though it was small...a different taste of different kinds of culture. Camp made me want to travel and be a little bit outside of the box that I'm usually in.

Camper 1 and Camper 2 also talked about their desire to travel and explore new places. As a freshman at Howard University, Camper 1 remarked:

So I'm having a lot of fun, and I'm meeting a lot of new people from different states, all around the country, and it's a really cool experience. And I'm in DC as well, so I'm trying to do a lot of traveling and going to museums and theaters and seeing a lot of productions and stuff...as much as I can.

Camper 2 recently got married to a man who immigrated to the United States from Benin in Africa. She shared they were saving money to travel to Benin in order to celebrate their marriage with his family. She believes her time at camp fostered an interest in learning about and embracing other cultures. "You get to meet other people from all different places in the world. I have friends from Spain, and Mexico, and France, and Tucson." She went on to share:

Yeah, just when we went back home [from camp], I wanted more international friends. Now I have a foreign husband. It's so great because

I like to learn about other cultures and stuff. Learning about his [culture] has fascinated me, and it has been wonderful. Just meeting people from other places is new and exciting, it's refreshing, I think, because they don't know your culture, you don't know theirs, and you get to learn about each other's. That's exciting to me.

These shared connections to travel, paired with a desire to learn more about other cultures, were revisited on multiple occasions during participant interviews. Their prevalence makes them salient themes to be explored further in subsequent thematic discussion.

### **Risk-Taking and Independence**

Four out of the five research participants left their family and moved away to attend college after graduation. While Camper 2 and Camper 3 stayed or returned to familiar settings in Omaha, both are currently living in dorms and experiencing college life away from their families. They are also actively involved in campus life and excelling in their studies. Camper 3 believed:

Getting away from your parents, getting away from the world that you know and that you were raised in, and being introduced to something completely different and completely new with completely different people will definitely spark some change within you. It has to. If it doesn't, you were not there for the right reasons, I promise. That getting away and learning independence and learning who you are is the best, best, best thing to do at camp.



Camper 4 decided to play football at a smaller school in rural Minnesota. He attended school on a sports scholarship and shared how his time at camp prepared him with important leadership, teamwork, and life skills. He reminisced, “I learned that you can adapt to anything and everything, just how you want to do it.” He is now living in a small Iowa community, working, and traveling whenever possible.

Camper 5 shared how camp influenced certain decisions she made in her college search.

So I was definitely more open to certain things. I think I was a little focused, too, like, “Oh, now I know people in Arizona. I could apply to this school.” I would never have thought of Arizona...I would never have thought of that school, to apply to college. And then I’m like, “Oh, people live here, that I could probably get in contact with.” So I applied there. It just did open my eyes to some things.

Ultimately, Camper 5 weighed her options and scholarships and chose to attend Howard University in Washington DC. Five years later, Camper 1 also weighed her options with multiple acceptance and scholarship offers and decided upon Howard University as well. While the girls’ paths had not recently crossed, their friendship was inspired on social media, and both Camper 1 and Camper 5 shared they felt connected through their camp and now Howard University ties.

## Career Paths

For some research participants, their experiences at camp influenced their future career interests and choices. Camper 2 just completed her second year in an early childhood teaching program and specifically spoke to this:

I guess, in a way, being at camp kind of started my whole plan to be a teacher. Everyone was older, but you're still like a teacher to those people if you're like a counselor, or a CIT, or something. You're still like...you're a leader to them, so you're educating them. You're caring for them. You're supporting them. You're building a relationship with them. I think that's how my whole being a teacher career, my teaching career started.

Camper 2 went on to articulate the impact of the CIT's and camp counselors on her decision to become an educator:

I mean all the CIT's and the counselors just made the experience memorable, and they all are influential, because they're all leaders in their own way. So as a future educator, a leadership role is important, so that's influential to me. As an educator, I want to be a leader for my students. They're like the role models of camp, so I would like to be a role model for my students too.

Camper 3 is also interested in becoming a secondary English teacher, although she vacillates between this career and keeping up with her theater and creative writing interests. She felt her time at camp, especially as a CIT, helped her realize she preferred working with older kids, when she initially thought she might prefer teaching elementary-

age students. She also attributes camp for introducing her to theater and ultimately fostering a love for performing and writing plays. She recalled:

Through high school, all four years, I was heavily involved in theater. I was a playwright, director, actress, everything. And I started writing plays my sophomore year of high school, and from then I've just been a playwright, and I absolutely love it. Theater is probably half of my heart. And I got that from camp.

She went on to attribute her experiences as a CIT to developing her as a performer:

Singing songs every morning. No matter how tired you were, how sick, how much you really just did not want to sing, especially being a CIT, you put a smile on your face, and you sung. I guess that was kind of theater experience, too. But I never sung as much as I did at camp, and that helped me find my voice, as well, through singing and just being in front of people and not really being afraid.

Camper 1, also interested in theater, believes camp led her to that decision as well. She shared, "I think just being around people at camp really helped with me and my confidence in being in front of other people."

Though Camper 5 majored in Business and Finance at Howard University, her career path after graduation has often involved work with children. One of her favorite roles as a CIT involved tucking in cabin groups at night. She shared:

I loved going into cabins at night, because you go to see...they would be in there, braiding the hair of their counselor or something. They were energized little ones. I think the feedback from that [cabin tuck-ins] was

really positive, and it was just something I just wanted to do. Because me and \_\_\_\_\_ started off by ourselves as CIT's, so I felt like it was one of my favorite parts. And it helped me get to know all of the campers so much better.

Throughout Camper 5's interview, she shared instances where she enjoyed being the "big sister" or engaging in more of a nurturing role with her family, friends, and other campers. This innate quality led Camper 5 to stray from her business background and choose jobs that fulfilled her need to help others, especially adolescent children. After graduation, Camper 5 returned to Omaha and found her niche working with adolescent girls in a residential home. While she found that work both rewarding and frustrating at times because of the behavioral philosophy, she also had an urge for another adventure, away from her hometown. A year later, after saving her money, she packed up her belongings in her car and set off for Los Angeles. She immediately got work as a nanny for a few families and feels extremely connected not only to the children, but their parents as well. While she is unsure of future plans, she knows she wants to continue her work with children and families and would like to inspire others through a YouTube channel.

## **Conclusion**

The primary purpose of Chapter 4 was to share the qualitative coding process, while exploring common research participant themes under the lens of Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle. Chapter 5 will continue to explore, analyze, and interpret themes with a goal to strengthen connections within past and current research. Through continued analysis, the researcher is hopeful this study might provide insight on how

summer experiential learning may best benefit children and families, with particular attention placed on children and families living in poverty. Sharing researcher recommendations and inspiration for future studies will also occur within Chapter 5 of this study.

## **Chapter 5 Conclusion and Discussion**

The cost and availability of quality summer programming for children, especially for children living in poverty, are often considered barriers within summer experiential learning. According to statistics from the National Summer Learning Association [NSLA], 51 percent of families surveyed expressed a desire to participate in a summer program, but cited availability as an obstacle. Additionally, for families paying for summer programming, the average weekly cost was reported as \$288 per child (2018). While academic research on summer learning loss and its impact on the achievement gap is substantial, research surrounding effective interventions, community partnerships, and alternative summer programming has received far less attention. Extensive educational studies have illustrated that summer learning loss is further magnified for children living in poverty (Alexander & Entwisle, 1992; Alexander et al., 2001; Alexander et al., 2007; Bell & Carrillo, 2007; Borman et al., 2009; Heyns, 1989; Howard, 2013; Leefatt, 2015; Miller, 2007). In fact, one of NSLA's (2018) latest summer learning statistics indicates, "The achievement gap between children from high-and-low income families is roughly thirty to forty percent larger among children born in 2001 than among those born twenty-five years earlier." Times have changed. The needs of children and families during the summer months have changed. Therefore, analyzing the current state of summer learning needs, through the worldview of diverse perspectives, deserves special attention within educational academic research.

In an interview about important discoveries within his research on summer learning, Karl Alexander shared:

Statistically, lower income children begin school with lower achievement scores, but during the school year, they progress at about the same rate as their peers. Over the summer, it's a dramatically different story. During the summer months, disadvantaged children tread water at best or even fall behind. It's what we call the "summer slide" or "summer setback." But better off children build their skills steadily over the summer months. The pattern was definite and dramatic. It was quite a revelation (NSLA, 2014).

Alexander's revelation surrounded the dramatic effects of cumulative summer learning loss for low-income children, with stark evidence that catching up to their more affluent peers during their elementary years was almost an impossible feat without appropriate interventions. Subsequent research has found that a hybrid approach, combining both academic and experiential learning opportunities for summer learning programming, contributed to greater student academic gains (Alexander & Entwisle, 1992; Alexander et al., 2001; Alexander et al., 2007; Bell & Carrillo, 2007; Borman, 2000; Borman et al., 2009; Howard, 2013; Leefatt, 2015; Miller, 2007). There is a documented, research-based need for exploring what summer learning initiatives might positively impact closing the achievement gap for students. Deepening an understanding surrounding the enriching effect summer experiences may have on children, along with developing summer programming responsive to meeting the needs of every child, are critical avenues to explore within current summer learning research. Experiential learning during the summer months became an important place to begin the conversation within this research study.

## **Overview of Study**

This purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perceptions and experiences of five former campers who attended the same summer camp in Northern Minnesota. All research participants grew up in the same North Omaha neighborhood and attended the same neighborhood elementary school during their time at this specific summer camp. Phenomenological research served as the chosen methodology in order to explore the true essence of summer camp as the research participants experienced it.

Along with the phenomenological research approach, Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle helped organize and analyze the following research questions:

### **Research Questions**

- What were the perceptions of children living in poverty after attending a Northern Minnesota residential summer camp?

### **Sub-questions**

- What were the pinnacle experiences that resonated with each participant during their time at summer camp?
- Did these summer camp experiences influence the participant's perceived beliefs about future hopes and dreams?

While individual participants were not necessarily referencing the Experiential Learning Cycle during their time at summer camp, the framework intentionally guided interview questions and helped the researcher analyze participant perceptions, pinnacle experiences, and perceived beliefs about future hopes and dreams. Exploring the lived experiences of research participants, in order to capture the phenomena of summer camp, complemented Kolb's (2017) Experiential Learning Theory [ELT] in multifaceted ways:



In ELT, development occurs through learning from experience. This is based on the idea that the experiential learning cycle is actually a learning spiral. When a concrete experience is enriched by reflection, given meaning by thinking, and transformed by action, the new experience created becomes richer, broader, and deeper. Further iterations of the cycle continue the exploration and transfer to experiences in other contexts. In this process, learning is integrated with other knowledge and generalized to other contexts leading to high levels of development (p.81).

Considering this, factors including length of time at camp, relationships developed and fostered over time, and additional practice in areas of new skills development should all be contributing factors in the reinforcement of the Experiential Learning Cycle. For the most part, this proved to be a true synopsis of research participant experiences. Those who continued into their Counselor-In-Training [CIT] years spoke to the value of their leadership experience and personal relationships developed with conceivably more depth than participants who did not continue into their CIT years. However, Camper 4's rich memories, vivid descriptions, and continued reflection on his camp experience could prove to be an outlier. While Camper 4 spent the least amount of time and corresponding summers, his camp experiences were recounted as widely influential throughout his middle school and high school years into his current context. Perhaps his personality is more reflective in nature? Perhaps storytelling and memory recall are strengths for this research participant? Or perhaps his time at camp occurred during critical summer months when the influence of peers, dangerous neighborhood situations, and acute life choices were in the balance for him? In any event, the Experiential Learning Cycle

proved to be a useful framework to intentionally synthesize summer camp perceptions and pinnacle experiences influencing involved research participants.

Additionally, a research study designed to capture camper perceptions and beliefs, linking them to influencing future hopes and dreams, could be considered broad and difficult to define within qualitative research. Gauging camper perceptions, hearing and interpreting pinnacle experiences, and analyzing personal beliefs or life events the camp experience may have influenced, were enhanced under the lens of Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle. The fluidity of the Experiential Learning Cycle allowed the researcher to gain a more holistic picture of where pinnacle experiences occurred within the cycle, along with how those experiences later resonated with each individual research participant.

## **Discussion and Analysis of Research-Related Themes**

### **Fun and Play**

A recurring theme throughout research participant interviews involved imparting memories surrounding play and the fun they experienced during their time at summer camp. Taking into account research participants' background experiences, there were oftentimes participants took on very adult roles and responsibilities during their childhood years. Their summer camp experiences appeared to give them permission to play and have fun without environmental concerns weighing them down. When children are burdened with adult responsibilities at such a young age, the brain development profoundly impacted through playful childhood experiences can be inhibited (Brown & Vaughan, 2009; Howard, 2013; Kolb & Kolb, 2017; Miller, 2007). As Camper 2 explicitly stated, "Camp took us away from everything that was going on with us at

home.” This sentiment was certainly shared within every research participant story; viewing camp as a powerful mechanism to compartmentalize the stresses of home-life with more developmentally appropriate, playful childhood experiences.

While research participants recalled many happy moments with their families and friends during the summer months, the barriers addressed were certainly consistent with the barriers contributing to the summer learning gap among students. Socioeconomic concerns, neighborhood safety, domestic and childhood violence, and the accessibility of quality summer programs were common threads throughout research participant stories. The summer learning gap grows larger when children are not afforded the same opportunities as their more affluent peers to experience summer learning. When long breaks occur with family turmoil and a lack of consistency, the summer learning gap widens, making it more challenging for children to close that summer learning gap during the traditional school year (Alexander & Entwisle, 1992; Alexander et al., 2007; Bell & Carillo, 2007; Borman et al., 2009; Dierking & Falk, 2003; Howard, 2013; Leefatt, 2015; Miller, 2007).

For some research participants, there were continued challenges reported as they progressed in their school careers; however, every participant wondered what they would have done during the summer had they not been at summer camp. Camper 4 went as far to share a life-changing event in middle school, where he was able to draw from his positive camp connections to alter a way of life he felt so many others in his community were drawn to because they did not believe there were any other options. He credited his camp experience with changing his outlook on what he envisioned as possible within his own future. With two participants studying to be educators, one playing football in a

small Minnesota college town, one studying to be an actress, and another taking risks to leave her family both in college and career choices, a connection could be made to the influence of rich summer learning experiences. Camp was often articulated as an integral learning experience that led to camper decisions and choices surrounding risk-taking and the courage to try new things. This was certainly reinforced often during participant interviews.

In addition to positive feelings during the act of play, research participants also experienced individual growth and learning through playful experiences at camp. Kolb and Kolb (2017) assert:

While play has undoubtedly been a unique and universal human experience across cultures, it has also been the subject of scholarly inquiry across diverse fields of social science with a focus on its significance in the process of individual expression and adaptation (p.284).

Learning through play is an important research consideration within the modern-day classroom. Integrating play within the traditional classroom setting has been influential in the development of social-emotional and executive functioning skills (Brown & Vaughan, 2009; Howard, 2013; Kim, 2011; Kolb & Yeganeh, 2009; Miller, 2007). In light of this research, how impactful could additional playful experiences, integrated during the summer months, be for children who may not have the luxury to play during their daily lives? Or on the contrary, when the school year is not in session, how detrimental are a lack of playful experiences for our children? These are also important questions to consider in future research studies.

### **Camp Activities and New Skill Development**

Research participants also emphasized how much they appreciated the exposure to new activities within the camp setting. Whether it was swimming in the lake, learning the proper archery stance, or riding a horse for the first time, participants recalled camp activities more than any other camp memory during interviews. Campers 1 and 3 shared how their initial exposure to drama class at camp led them to seek out drama opportunities in high school and college. Camper 4's story about learning how to tie sailing knots from one of his camp counselors also entered into his current context during a trip to Okoboji where he helped his group tie a boating knot. Moreover, multiple participants addressed how the exposure to camp activities influenced future interests within the school setting. Learning new skills, along with gaining competence and confidence in new skill development, were common positive developmental outcomes associated with summer camp-related research (Burkhardt et al., 2005; Dahl, 2009; Henderson et al., 2007; Miller, 2007; Readdick & Schaller, 2005). New skill development and camp activities were certainly reiterated numerous times throughout participant interviews in this study, which is in alignment with current summer camp research trends.

In a broader context, learning these new skills at camp often contributed to opening new doors for research participants. Every participant shared examples indicating they may have never thought to explore some of the activities they are very passionate about today without exposure at summer camp. Experiences with many of the activities they learned at camp also contributed to their knowledge base, allowing them to display confidence or expertise in certain areas. This exposure and confidence may have

influenced research participants to try new clubs or activities they may not have considered. The worldviews of research participants were expanded through participation in camp activities they would not have otherwise had the opportunity to experience at home.

In addition to research interviews, camper letters, written to the researcher at the time of the summer camp experience, were analyzed as artifacts. The excitement of learning new activities during the camp experience were clearly conveyed in letters from Camper 1, 2, 3, and 5. Letters often surrounded the daily camp schedule and all of the new activities they were learning. In addition to listing camp activities, campers also shared obstacles and victories within their camp activity schedule. Earning feathers and the final campfire were often revered as some of the most important moments and celebrations for research participants. Camper 5 recalled that one of her proudest moments involved winning the award for having the cleanest cabin in girls camp. And Camper 4 shared he still had his camp shield hanging up in his childhood bedroom. The shield symbolized the many activity levels passed and special camper awards presented to him during the final campfire.

### **Personal Relationships and Camp Connections**

For every personal obstacle noted within participant research interviews, the power of positive, influential adults were prevalent and certainly influential. Research participants all had caring, loving adults intertwined within their lives, even during the most complicated times. Whether mothers, fathers, stepmothers, grandmothers, teachers, foster families, or compassionate friends, every research participant shared stories describing caring friends and adults who took the time to make sure they were doing all

right. There is no doubt these connections helped propel each research participant through academic and personal challenges, from their adolescent to their young adult lives.

Additionally, the importance of camp connections and relationships were shared in every participant interview and often the main subject of camper letters sent to the researcher. Many of these memories centered around other campers and relationships developed over the years. For Camper 3 and Camper 5, memories during their CIT years, along with relationships formed with their CIT counterparts, contributed to pinnacle experiences. Camper 3 and Camper 5 also shared how some of their relationships have grown, even after their time at summer camp. Camper 5 found herself in Los Angeles with one of her good camp friends, and she shared they try to get together a few times a year to eat dinner and reminisce about summer camp stories. They have even talked about returning to camp as counselors if their schedules allowed. Camper 4 recalled a relationship he developed with one of the other African American campers and shared how he has since tried to locate him on social media. He had many vivid memories surrounding an all-day lake kayaking adventure, ruling the boys' basketball court, and intense games of tetherball together. Additionally, Campers 1 and 2 shared many memories about their cabin-mates during their time at camp. Every camper reported feeling connected to their camp peers both through written letters and later through social media. For some, relationships continued to develop many years after attending summer camp.

Equally powerful were connections made with their camp counselors. Counselors were often described as role models, with participants remembering stories, experiences,

and conversations they had with specific camp counselors during their time at summer camp. In girls' camp, the girls' camp director was mentioned as being influential within every participant interview. Participants shared experiences she helped them navigate, like working through feelings of homesickness, and universally remembered her presence during the campfire ceremonies. Her musicality, her calm presence, her nurturing personality, and her strength were all remembered fondly with many examples. As much as their cabin and activity camp counselors, the camp director played an integral role in how each participant felt about their camp experience.

Heath's (2012) research on "intimate strangers" reinforced the idea that these camp connections may have been responsible for stretching participants ideas on "language, interests, values, and context" (p.49). Her research on the value of these relationships and how they might contribute to new perspectives and cognitive connections, strengthens the benefit of fostering relationships beyond what might be offered solely within the family setting. Henderson (2007), certainly found this to be true in her research on positive development outcomes within the summer camp setting. The opportunity to learn from and work with other caring adults often occurs through teacher/student interaction within the traditional school year. Enhancing these connections with additional caring adults during the summer months would be another benefit of the summer camp experience.

### **Challenges**

Challenges represented within current summer camp research often relate to overcoming homesickness, a sense of belonging, and navigating social and emotional issues during the camp experience ((Burkhardt et al., 2005; Dahl, 2009; Henderson et al.,



2007; Miller, 2007; Readdick & Schaller, 2005). Interestingly, homesickness did not surface as an issue during three out of five participant interviews. While Camper 3 shared that homesickness was a consistent struggle, even throughout her CIT summer, most participants never mentioned homesickness as a challenge. While Camper 1 briefly touched on feeling homesick during her first summer, she also stated those feelings went away quickly. Reflecting on the background stories of each research participant, Camper 3 repeatedly articulated how close she was to her family, especially her mother. Camper 3 also never reported escaping anything pertaining to her family life or neighborhood safety issues. In thinking about the personal backgrounds of Campers 1, 2, 4, and 5, the support structure at home may have been such that the summer camp experience held more stability than their home lives during those particular summers at camp. Additionally, it is possible Campers 1, 2, 4, and 5 had developed more independence and resilience as a result of some of the tumultuous family situations they had experienced during their childhood. Thus, making the camp experience less of an adjustment to living without their families, and instead an opportunity to experience summers with more developmentally appropriate, child-centered responsibilities.

Some food insecurity issues were addressed during participant background stories, and every research participant discussed how important camp meals were during their time at summer camp. Having a consistent meal schedule with enough food were welcome memories from research participants. Favorite camp meals were often described in camper letters to the researcher. Many recollections surrounding the family feel of the dining hall, along with enjoying meals together, were also conveyed during participant interviews. Every research participant shared family struggles with poverty,

paying bills, and keeping food in their house – all issues that were temporarily resolved within the summer camp setting.

Research participants did address times they felt singled-out, unsure of where to attribute these feelings and instances. Camper 5 had vivid memories where she felt she was being “watched” as she interacted with her brother [Camper 4] and other camp friends who were also African American. As she thought about her time at camp, it was the one event she wished she could go back and change. Camper 3 also shared there were times when she felt she experienced cultural appropriation within her CIT group. She cited instances where her CIT friends would ask her about her hair and then try to wear their hair the same way. At the same time, she also believed most of her camp friend’s inquiries came from an honest place of curiosity. In a sense, Camper 3 felt there was power in education and took that role very seriously during her CIT summer. In many ways, these examples could be attributed to unconscious bias within the camp setting. Acknowledging unconscious bias exists is an important way for summer camp administrators to better understand how to make every camper feel safe, supported, and valued within the camp environment.

In this particular research sample, swimming was also mentioned as a challenging activity for some participants. While Campers 1 and 2 associated swimming in the lake with some of their most positive memories about their camp experience, Campers 3, 4, and 5 had a more strained relationship with the lake. Both Camper 3 and Camper 4 shared concerns about their inexperience with swimming and how intimidating the size of the lake felt at times. Camper 3 mused about being in the same swimming level during her entire time at summer camp, but clearly articulated feeling uncomfortable in the water

throughout her interview. Camper 4 enjoyed swimming, but never felt like he became proficient in swimming like he had hoped. He recalled the uneasiness he felt when he was in a canoe or kayak out in the middle of the lake. He also shared that repeated “soapies” in the lake were hard on his skin, which made the first hot shower after camp one of his happiest moments back at home.

In girls’ camp, it is possible that camper ages influenced the perspectives of research participants. Campers 1 and 2 were quite a bit younger during their summers at camp and did not attend camp very far into their adolescent years. Campers 3 and 5 attended camp into their middle and high school years, which perhaps gave them a different perspective regarding the impact of lake water on their hair. At this specific camp, campers had the option to take showers in their cabin, in a group bath house, or bathe in the lake. Camp counselors and campers referred to the act of bathing in the lake as a “soapie,” with “soapie-time” often described as one of the most popular camp activities. Campers 3 and 5 spoke at length about the impact daily “soapies” had on their African American hair. They both recalled incidents where they felt camp staff were less than understanding about alternatives to bathing in the lake or going underwater during their mandatory camp swim lessons. Camper 5 indicated one of the things she would like to go back and change about her camp experience involved how to take better care of her hair during the summer months. At the time, she felt she did not have the resources or the voice to truly articulate the impact the lake was having on her hair.

Within ACA’s most current research, it was shared that while many summer camps surveyed had more diversity within their camp population, their voices were not represented within their survey responses (Burkhardt et al., 2005). Within this research

sample, there is an important opportunity for summer camp administration to reflect on the unique perspectives and experiences of involved research participants. Engaging in continued dialog and seeking diverse perspectives only enhances the overall experience for every summer camp participant. This reflection also has the potential to inform future staff trainings, camp programming, and candid conversations with camp staff, campers, and even their families.

### **The Influence of the Camp Experience and Future Actions**

Understanding whether the camp experience influenced future actions and certain life decisions of research participants were primary research objectives. Analyzing summer experiential learning through a phenomenological, qualitative research lens, allowed the researcher to explore the influence of the summer camp experience on future actions and life decisions with greater clarity. The voices captured within participant interviews and collected artifacts cultivated a more holistic, longitudinal narrative of the summer camp experience. Case in point, Camper 3 shared she often found ways to incorporate camp memories into classroom assignments, both in high school and college. The following is an excerpt from a social media post from 2017 Camper 3 granted the researcher permission to include:

So as an assignment in my Autobiography class, we were to write an Abecedarian poem based on a place from our childhood or a place embedded into memory that we wrote about in our paper and naturally I wrote about [Camp]. It went like this:

Absent campers from September to May at [Camp]  
beckon for the seasons to sweep through/

Connecticut warblers sing their tunes while  
dirty cabins are cleaned and the beautiful glass like surface  
of [Camp Lake] succumbs to the frost  
Every camper misses  
friendship tied tightly in friendship bracelets and moments  
of  
great sadness are wisped away in  
hopes of returning the next summer/  
It's important to take leisure strolls in the wake of the  
morning dew to remind you of thin and sky- reaching white  
birch bark trees lining the tree farm/  
jump in the lake to earn your polar bear badge/  
kick a ball and dance while singing your teenage heart out  
because  
life isn't always fair and tomorrow isn't always promised  
[Camp] is our home/ from which we'll  
never roam/ camp of togetherness/ a place of happiness but  
also a place of youth, friendship,  
opening up and creating new memories, and fulfilling the  
promises of yesterday you may never get to promise again  
Quietness fills the air as you remember the awful  
ringing of the morning bell in the park  
screaming "Flag raising, flag raising! Get your laundry!"

There will never be anything like a [Camp] Sunday  
 unless there are oversized cinnamon rolls and bacon with  
 various campers and counselors, especially the boys,  
 searching, bribing, and  
 wanting more  
 extreme longing for damp towels and bathing suits after  
 you forget to take them in will haunt you as  
 you are in your hometown, near or far from [Camp] with  
 none of the people, songs,  
 memories, or meals forcing your senses to  
 zing with happiness and anticipation for the next summer  
 and first night spaghetti

I hope I get an A because I just might frame it. Nine years later, just into  
 college, [Camp] still holds a special place in my heart. I believe this is my  
 love letter to the wonderful place that changed me so much. Thank you for  
 all the wonderful summers and memories, [Camp].

In her own words, Camper 3 shared the personal impact camp had on her life, along with  
 vivid descriptions of the physical camp surroundings, so often associated with camp  
 memories. The summer camp experience did not cease to influence Camper 3's life upon  
 the completion of her CIT summer. In fact, as her poetry suggests, the influence of the  
 camp experience continues to strongly resonate with her, now ten years later. The ability  
 to analyze artifacts, along with participant interview data, became a critical component in  
 understanding the greater influence of the camp experience. This is the qualitative

impact a quantitative research methodology may have missed in determining the true influence of the camp experience for individual research participants.

The longitudinal aspect of this study provided unique insight as to how these early camp experiences may have influenced new hobbies, club and activity involvement, personal relationships, collegiate, and career choices among involved research participants. All participants shared how their time at camp exposed them to new skills and activities they would not necessarily have explored at home. Campers 1 and 3 attributed their formative experiences with acting and drama to their decision to take first period drama at summer camp. Both described increased self-confidence and comfort when performing on stage due to their continued involvement with camp drama. While learning new skills and activities were explored at the “experience” level of Kolb’s Learning Cycle, it is the reflection and continued opportunities that led to decisions to explore drama within both the school and collegiate settings.

It was also interesting to reflect on the varied collegiate paths of research participants. Camper 4 chose to play football in a small college town in Minnesota. Both Campers 2 and 3 cited that their camp experiences in leadership led them to consider teaching as their collegiate major. Camper 1 and Camper 5 had a significant age gap, but both chose to leave home and attend Howard University in Washington, DC. They remained connected after their summers at camp together, and Camper 1 shared she reached out to Camper 5 prior to committing to Howard University. Camper 5 also shared she would have never considered Arizona in her college search if she had not felt connected to it through some of her camp friends. A large camper contingent happened to come from Arizona at this particular summer camp. Begging the question, how many

other decisions may have been influenced during late-night cabin group chats, conversations with camp counselors, or social media connections beyond the camp experience? These questions are hard to quantify, but certainly worth exploring in subsequent summer camp and summer experiential learning research.

Additionally, all research participants expressed a desire to travel. Even taking risks in collegiate choices aligned with research participants' expressed desire to learn from and see more of the world. During interviews, participants often shared that while they noted the diversity among African American campers was lacking, their exposure to campers and counselors from other countries was eye-opening. Camper 3 shared:

Just seeing a lot of the different people at camp and all these different experiences and everything, even though they're at camp, they're also everywhere else around the world. Seeing people come from Mexico, from France, I had a girl from Brazil. It was like, "Wow, this is different and it's super cool." I really got it...even though it was small...a different taste of different kind of culture and everything like that. Camp made me want to travel and be a little bit outside of the box that I'm usually in.

Camper 1 discussed the impact that living in Washington, DC has had on her worldview. She shared how much she has enjoyed visiting museums, seeing performances, and engaging with the political energy in the city. She also identified her time away at camp as a large reason she felt prepared to take-on her freshman year in such a big city. Camper 2 also shared how her exposure to other cultures during her time at camp left her feeling more open to new experiences with other cultures as a young adult. She is now married, and her husband is from Benin in Africa. They have plans to



travel to Benin together to meet his family, and share a mutual love for learning languages and finding opportunities to explore other cultural experiences. Campers 4 and 5 often make plans to travel together and both have expressed the desire to see more of the world. All participants intimated their time at camp was their initial introduction to a world outside of their neighborhood in North Omaha. These early experiences, along with continued connections to campers all over the United States and in other countries, helped spark a universal love for adventure and travel among every research participant.

### **Implications for Policy and Practice**

The summer months present a unique challenge within our educational system. With summer opportunities often influenced by socioeconomic status, there is an incredible opportunity to be intentional about improving access and opportunities available to all children during the summer months. Through community partnerships and enrichment activities, schools are recognizing the importance of exposing students to experiences beyond standardized curriculum. When students have the opportunity to explore areas that are intrinsically meaningful and make new connections to content, lifelong learners are developed.

This qualitative research study provided insight on the influence summer experiential learning opportunities had on research participants during their childhood and adolescent years. Participants shared pinnacle experiences, triumphs, challenges, and personal perspectives from an underrepresented population within current summer experiential learning research. Through qualitative analysis, utilizing the Experiential Learning Cycle as a guide, research participants' time at summer camp positively influenced certain life decisions and future hopes and dreams. Over time, research

participants continued to reflect on their camp experiences and thoughtfully incorporated gains in personal development, activity exposure, and influential camp relationships into their daily lives.

### **Specific Considerations**

One of the most powerful aspects of the Experiential Learning Cycle involves the fluidity of the process. Kolb and Kolb (2017) offered the following perspective:

Avoid an excessive focus on the outcomes of immediate performance and focus instead on the longer-term recursive process of learning by tracking your performance progress over time. Rarely is a single performance test a matter of life and death, and to treat it as such only reinforces a fixed identity (p.108).

So often in education, immediate outcomes are given more credence than the road taken to get to those particular outcomes. Research participants attested to the power of their camp experiences, not only within the moment, but how those same experiences continued to influence personal development, executive functioning skills, and important life decisions. It could be argued that the summer camp environment more easily lends itself to build opportunities for experiential learning within the camp context. However, considering the stories and the long-term influence research participants shared regarding their experiences at summer camp, imagine if there were more opportunities to incorporate experiential learning within the classroom environment? ELT attributes experiences as the source of learning. There is power in the process, and often the process is not validated in the ways we assess student learning within the traditional classroom setting (Kim, 2011; Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2017; Kolb & Yeganeh, 2009).

## **Future Research**

Opportunities for future research in summer experiential learning are vast. More research surrounding effective summer programming initiatives and how those initiatives might bridge the summer learning gap are warranted. Including diverse perspectives within future research will add to improving the quality of summer learning interventions for every child. Future research should also inform educators and policy-makers to implement, support, and fund summer initiatives that best meet the needs of students, families, and the communities they serve.

Within the United States, there are multiple avenues to further research on summer learning through established summer learning institutions. With innovative school partnerships and summer programming occurring all over the country, there is a strong capacity to gain a better understanding of those programs through research. Thinking globally, it would be interesting to explore international summer learning models and community partnerships. Understanding how other countries envision their school calendar could provide valuable insight on current school practice within the United States. Additionally, analyzing other educational models that incorporate informal learning partnerships and foster experiential learning opportunities within the classroom, would be important to explore.

## **Conclusion**

Fairchild and Smink (2010), spoke at length about the perception of summer school and summer learning being viewed in a less than positive light. Oftentimes, this negative perception contributes to funding cuts for existing summer programs, or summer

learning lacking innovation, student engagement, and/or attunement to the needs of the students, their families, and their community. Fairchild and Smink (2010) believe:

By re-envisioning this maligned institution, those same districts could make summer school an investment in improved student achievement later on – a way to extend learning, provide effective intervention, and offer enrichment opportunities, particularly for those students who have few other good options during these months out of school.

Realistically, sleepaway camp may not be the most appropriate or viable option for every child during the summer months. But what if there were opportunities to re-envision the way society embraced summer learning? For those who can afford summer programming, activities, and vacations, these memories are often at the forefront as they share how they spent their summer with their teachers and peers. While most students, regardless of socio-economic status, lose academic ground during the summer months without continued practice, the evidence illustrating the power of summer learning experiences is overwhelming. These summer experiences often help students make greater connections within the learning environment, which ultimately aids in bridging the summer learning divide at a faster pace for both students and teachers (Alexander & Entwisle, 1992; Alexander et al., 2007; Bell & Carillo, 2007; Borman et al., 2009; Dierking & Falk, 2003; Howard, 2013; Leefatt, 2015; Miller, 2007).

Play, self-discovery, camp relationships, increased confidence, and learning new skills were all central phenomena revealed within every participant interview, and substantiated through camper letters and personal writing. Challenges surrounding the camp environment and some examples of cultural bias were also prevalent. Pinnacle

experiences included engaging in camp activities, special camp trips and events, the physical camp environment, and camp relationships developed and fostered over time. In a qualitative research study, it would be naïve to assume there were no other contributing factors influencing the future hopes and dreams of involved research participants. Strong family and educational role models, perseverance and determination, and the individual dispositions of every research participant were all paramount in determining the trajectory of their lives. However, the influence of their camp experiences certainly helped define their worldviews. For every participant, the camp experience supported changing mindsets, shaping interests, and building confidence – at home and within the school setting, with continued impact in their current context.

Reflecting on what their summers would have looked like without camp became a focal discussion piece during participant interviews. It became clear that camp served as a vehicle to escape pressures at home, within the neighborhood, and within their own socio-economic constructs. Returning to Camper 4's realization:

Just think about it. If you didn't take me out of the summer, the summer is when the kids in my communities, that's when the crime rate goes up. If it doesn't go up, that's when the kids go crazy because, during the school year, you got a certain time to come in. You gotta be in by the streetlights. You gotta be in the house. In the summertime, you can say, "I'm staying the night at my cousin's house that lives around the corner." What's you gonna do when you staying out all night? You gonna go bust windows, be a little kid. You gonna steal bikes. You just look for too much stuff to do. When

you're in a certain neighborhood, you can't do everything. You run out of stuff to do is what I'm saying.

For Camper 3, the influence of the camp experience became much more about independence and self-discovery:

Getting away from your parents, getting away from the world that you know and were raised in, and being introduced to something completely different and completely new with completely different people will definitely inspire and spark some change within you. It has to. If it doesn't, you were not there for the right reasons, I promise. That getting away and learning independence and learning who you are is the best, best, best thing to do at camp. I would not know the things that I like so much. I would not have known a lot of my hobbies if it weren't for camp. Getting away and getting out of the environment that you're so used to is so, so, so important, especially for young kids...eight, nine, that's when you have to, have to, have to do it. Especially in the summer 'cause it's the perfect time.

During the summer months, the opportunities to bring curriculum to life, offer unique learning experiences, and think outside of the box when it comes to educational and experiential interventions are abundant. Ignoring that the long summer break, so common within the traditional school calendar, can have detrimental effects on children living in poverty would be irresponsible. Understanding the impact that powerful, enriching, summer learning experiences can have on every child, should magnify the need to explore options to make these experiences more accessible to everyone. The voices of these five research participants offered a unique perspective into how summer

experiential learning influenced future goals and dreams for children living in poverty. Carefully listening to their perspectives is imperative if intentional change is to be made regarding how society embraces children, both during the school year and when school happens to be out for the duration of the summer. In a school setting, educating the whole child involves caring for them beyond the classroom walls. It is caring about the well-being of every child, beyond the academic school day, that truly transforms change within a society. Taking care of their needs during the summer months has to become a priority to address the achievement gap that is further magnified because of the summer learning slide.

Carol Ann Tomlinson believed, “Excellence in education is when we do everything that we can to make sure they become everything that they can.” There is no question current educational research indicates how detrimental a lack of summer learning experiences can be for children, especially children living in poverty. What needs to occur now, is a strong research base informing best practices in developing the innovative summer learning initiatives every child deserves. Whether the research focus is on summer camp, school and community partnerships, re-imagining summer school, or non-traditional school calendars, there are new and innovative ways to reach children during the summer months waiting to be discovered.

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## Appendix A

### Letter of Consent

#### Title of this Research Study

**SUMMER CAMP AND EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING - A QUALITATIVE STUDY EXPLORING THE PERSPECTIVES OF STUDENTS, LIVING IN POVERTY, WHO ATTENDED A SLEEP-AWAY SUMMER CAMP**

Dear ,

My name is Mary Achelpohl, and I am a doctoral candidate in the Educational Leadership program at the University of Nebraska Omaha.

I will be conducting a research study surrounding the perspectives of students who attended a sleep-away summer camp in Northern Minnesota. Your participation at this summer camp has given you a unique perspective on summer experiential learning and the camp experience.

Please know that confidentiality throughout the study will be a focus. Your identity will not be shared in the discussion of findings.

Should you choose to participate, I will ask you to participate in an individual interview to discuss your perspective of the summer camp experience. The interview will last about 60 minutes, will be semi-structured in nature, and I will have guiding questions for the interview. The conversation will be the focus of the interview and the questions will remain flexible. The interviews will be recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. The recordings will be reviewed by myself, only, and destroyed following transcription.

Please do not hesitate to contact me with questions. I truly appreciate your consideration in participating in this research study.

Sincerely,

Mary Hill Achelpohl  
University of Nebraska at  
Omaha  
[machelpohl@unomaha.edu](mailto:machelpohl@unomaha.edu)

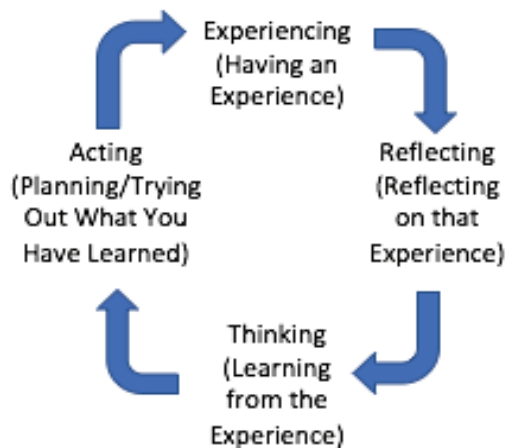
## Appendix B

### Individual “Semi-Structured” Interview Questions

#### Personal Background

- Tell me about your family.
- Tell me about your childhood.
- Tell me about your summer memories.
- Tell me about what you are doing right now, including any future goals.

Individual and group interview questions are based on Kolb’s Experiential Learning Cycle:



Peterson, K., DeCato, L., & Kolb, D.A. (2015). Moving and learning: Expanding style and increasing flexibility. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 38, 3, 228-244.

#### Experiencing

- When you think about your time at camp, what experiences come to mind?

***Social, Activities, Trips, Leadership***

### **Reflecting**

- What camp experiences brought you the most joy?
- Tell me about camp experiences that were challenging.
- In thinking about camp friends and staff, tell me about individuals who influenced you or the way you thought about things?
- Expand on the person you were at camp. What differences – if any – did you noticed about the person you were at camp versus the person you were at home?

### **Thinking**

- What did you learn about yourself during and after the camp experience?
- Are there times you think about your summer camp experience in your current context?

### ***Family, School, Jobs***

### **Action**

- Were there experiences at summer camp that influenced the way you thought about your future?
- Were there experiences at summer camp that influenced decisions you made about your future?

### ***Hopes, Dreams, Goals Career, College, Travel***

### **Conclusion**

- If you could go back in time and experience summer camp all over again, would you? *Explain why or why not?*
- Are there things we haven't covered that you would like to share or add about the camp experience?

## Appendix C

### IRB Approval Letter



NEBRASKA'S HEALTH SCIENCE CENTER Office of Regulatory Affairs  
(ORA) Institutional Review Board (IRB)

March 6, 2018

Mary Achelpohl, M.S. School of Counseling UNO - VIA COURIER

IRB # 071-18-EX

**TITLE OF PROPOSAL: SUMMER CAMP AND EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING - A QUALITATIVE STUDY EXPLORING THE PERSPECTIVES OF STUDENTS, LIVING IN POVERTY, WHO ATTENDED A SLEEP-AWAY SUMMER CAMP**

The Office of Regulatory Affairs (ORA) has reviewed your application for *Exempt Educational, Behavioral, and Social Science Research* on the above-titled research project. According to the information provided, this project is exempt under 45 CFR 46:101b, category 2. You are therefore authorized to begin the research.

It is understood this project will be conducted in full accordance with all applicable HRPP Policies. It is also understood that the ORA will be immediately notified of any proposed changes for your research project.

Please be advised that this research has a maximum approval period of 5 years from the original date of approval and release.

If the research is completed prior to 5 years, please notify the Office of Regulatory Affairs at [irbora@unmc.edu](mailto:irbora@unmc.edu). If this study continues beyond the five year approval period, the project must be resubmitted in order to maintain an active approval status.

Sincerely,

Signed on: 2018-03-06 16:19:00.000

Gail Kotulak, BS, CIP IRB Administrator III  
Office of Regulatory Affairs  
Academic and Research Services Building 3000 / 987830 Nebraska Medical Center /  
Omaha, NE 68198-7830 [402-559-6463](tel:402-559-6463) / FAX: [402-559-3300](tel:402-559-3300) / Email:  
[irbora@unmc.edu](mailto:irbora@unmc.edu) / <http://www.unmc.edu/irb>



## Appendix D

### Research Participant Demographics

	<b>Camper 1</b>	<b>Camper 2</b>	<b>Camper 3</b>	<b>Camper 4</b>	<b>Camper 5</b>
<b>Age</b>	19	20	19	23	24
<b>Gender</b>	Female	Female	Female	Male	Female
<b>Ethnicity</b>	African American	African American	African American	African American	African American
<b>Age During First Summer at Camp</b>	8	9	8	12	13
<b>Summers Spent at Camp</b>	4	4	6	2	5
<b>Sibling Status at Camp</b>	Siblings		None	Siblings	

## Appendix E

### Comparison Matrices

#### Code Application by Camper

##### Physical Camp

	Camper 1	Camper 2	Camper 3	Camper 4	Camper 5
Dining Hall			3	3	2
Food		7		11	7
Schedule/Routine		1	1		5
No Technology	7	2	3		1
Cabins	6	4	2	8	10
Nature	1	1	2	2	3
Lake	2	1	3	8	10
Electricity				3	2
Showers/Soapies	3	5	4	14	1

##### Daily Activities/Learning New Skills/Exposure

	Camper 1	Camper 2	Camper 3	Camper 4	Camper 5
Fishing				16	1
Archery	3	4			1
Gymnastics	3	6			
Drama/Plays	2		8		
Tennis	1	1			
Swimming/Water	4	14	14	18	25
Tubing			1	1	1
Waterskiing		2			1
Kayaking	2			8	2
Canoeing	2				1
Horseback Riding			10	1	3
Kickball				2	
Tetherball				5	
Basketball		1		11	
Capture the Pineapple		2			1
Dance	3	2			
Games		1		7	2
TOTAL (191)	20	31	33	69	38

##### Fun

	Camper 1	Camper 2	Camper 3	Camper 4	Camper 5
Singing/Songs	6	5	19	3	15

Play	5	5		21	18
Fun	16	26	17	22	47
Laughter				10	
Happy				14	11

### Special Activities/Events

	Camper 1	Camper 2	Camper 3	Camper 4	Camper 5
4 <sup>th</sup> of July		3			2
Sabotage	3	2			1
Tribes	1	1		1	
Vespers		4			
Sundays/Co-Ed				3	
Island Day	4	2		5	
Overnights/Camping	4	5		3	7
Swim Meet					1
Track Meet		3		1	1
Banquet		1			
Polar Bear				3	
Big/Little Sister	1		8		2
Campfires	1	2		1	1
Trips	2	1		13	17
Shields/Feathers				10	

### Relationships

	Camper 1	Camper 2	Camper 3	Camper 4	Camper 5
Friendships	10	14	14	21	11
Counselors	6	12	32	6	20
GC Director		4	12		4
CIT	5	8	28	12	32

### Challenges

	Camper 1	Camper 2	Camper 3	Camper 4	Camper 5
Swimming			5	2	10
Hair			7		9
Feeling Singled-Out			1	2	3
Feeling Understood			2	2	2
Homesickness	2		5		
Trips				3	5
Bugs	2	4	1	5	6
Emotional Connections/Leaving		8	1	2	3
Staying Longer	1	4	1	2	2

Sunburns/Health			1	5	
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### Personal Development

	Camper 1	Camper 2	Camper 3	Camper 4	Camper 5
Confidence	1	6	1		3
Conflict Resolution		4		2	
Exposure to Other Cultures	1	5	3	2	4
Independence	1	4	5	4	3
Learning	3	4	2	41	3
Leadership	1	7	7	3	1

### Code Presence by Camper

#### Physical Camp

	Camper 1	Camper 2	Camper 3	Camper 4	Camper 5
Dining Hall			X	X	X
Food		X		X	X
Schedule/Routine		X	X		X
No Technology	X	X	X		X
Cabins	X	X	X	X	X
Nature	X	X	X	X	X
Lake	X	X	X	X	X
Electricity				X	X
Showers/Soapies	X	X	X	X	X

#### Daily Activities/Learning New Skills/Exposure

	Camper 1	Camper 2	Camper 3	Camper 4	Camper 5
Fishing				X	X
Archery	X	X			X
Gymnastics	X	X			
Drama/Plays	X		X		
Tennis	X	X			
Swimming/Water	X	X	X	X	X
Tubing			X	X	X
Waterskiing		X			X
Kayaking	X			X	X
Canoeing	X				X
Horseback Riding			X	X	X
Kickball				X	
Tetherball				X	

Basketball		X		X	
Capture the Pineapple		X			X
Dance	X	X			
Games		X		X	X

### Fun

	Camper 1	Camper 2	Camper 3	Camper 4	Camper 5
Singing/Songs	X	X	X	X	X
Play	X	X		X	X
Fun	X	X	X	X	X
Laughter				X	
Happy				X	X

### Special Activities/Events

	Camper 1	Camper 2	Camper 3	Camper 4	Camper 5
4 <sup>th</sup> of July		X			X
Sabotage	X	X			X
Tribes	X	X		X	
Vespers		X			
Sundays/Co-Ed				X	
Island Day	X	X		X	
Overnights/Camping	X	X		X	X
Swim Meet					X
Track Meet		X		X	X
Banquet		X			
Polar Bear				X	
Big/Little Sister	X		X		X
Campfires	X	X		X	X
Trips	X	X		X	X
Shields/Feathers				X	

### Relationships

	Camper 1	Camper 2	Camper 3	Camper 4	Camper 5
Friendships	X	X	X	X	X
Counselors	X	X	X	X	X
GC Director		X	X		X
CIT	X	X	X	X	X

### Challenges

	Camper 1	Camper 2	Camper 3	Camper 4	Camper 5
Swimming			X	X	X

Hair			X		X
Feeling Singled-Out			X	X	X
Feeling Understood			X	X	X
Homesickness	X		X		
Trips				X	X
Bugs	X	X	X	X	X
Emotional Connections/Leaving		X	X	X	X
Staying Longer	X	X	X	X	X
Sunburns/Health			X	X	

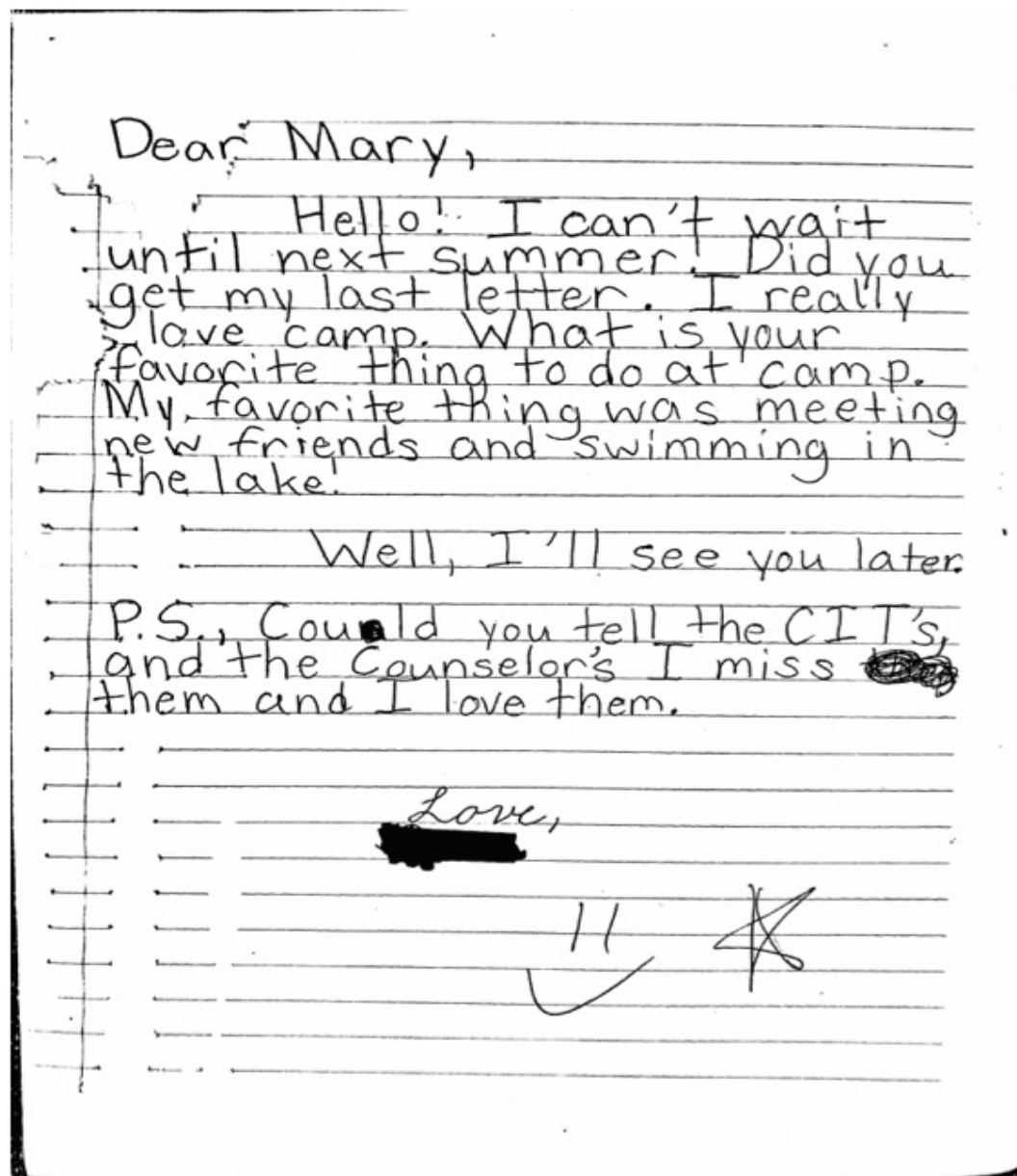
### Personal Development


	Camper 1	Camper 2	Camper 3	Camper 4	Camper 5
Confidence	X	X	X		X
Conflict Resolution		X		X	
Exposure to Other Cultures	X	X	X	X	X
Independence	X	X	X	X	X
Learning	X	X	X	X	X
Leadership	X	X	X	X	X

## Appendix E

## Camper Letters

## Camper 1



hi! 

from camp Dear Mary!, 6/26/11

Hey! I miss you too! I'm good!  
And yes, I'm excited to be at  
camp! My counselor is [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]. She's a new counselor.  
A lot of people from last  
year came back, too! My  
classes for Mon., Wed., and Fri.  
are tennis and swimming (lvl. 4)  
and my classes for Tue., Thur.,  
and Sat. is archery and  
gymnastics. I'll give [REDACTED]  
and [REDACTED] a huge hug!  
Everyone is wondering about  
John, and they want to see  
him! Everyone is disappointed  
you couldn't come! ☹️ It's  
not same without you! Well,  
I hope to hear from you  
again before the end of  
camp!

Lots of Love!,

[REDACTED]

xoxo ♡ back at  
ya!

P.S., Mary, I just wanted  
to thank you for everything  
you've done for me!!!

THANK  
YOU!



Dear Mary,

I ..... Miss ..... **CAMP!**  
I love the **DELICIOUS** food!  
Especially, the great songs and  
games. Now, I'm bored. I told  
my dad about how fun 80's  
night was. Oh, yeah, I forgot.  
I have you as my screen saver.  
I took a picture of Ellie and I  
said to [redacted] she is the cutest  
dog ever. Once again.....

I ..... Miss ... **CAMP!**

Love,

[redacted] and [redacted]  
We miss u!

June 21

Dear Mary,

I'm in [redacted] cabin [redacted], with [redacted] and [redacted].

Yesterday, we got our big and little sisters!

My big sister is [redacted] (again) and

my little sister's name is [redacted].

[redacted] wants to come next year. Everyone was

asking [redacted], [redacted], and I about Colin :)

They also saw the picture that we

took at the airport. The four classes I'm taking

for the next two weeks are archery,

gymnastics, yoga/dance which is so fun, and

swimming. It was picture day today so

we only went to first period. Yoga/dance

is super fun. We did belly dancing and we

stretched. Well I have to go. Thanks

for everything. Love you

- [redacted]



7/5/11

Dear Mary,

Did you do something for the Fourth of July?

Yesterday was so much fun! The dance was fun.

On July 3<sup>rd</sup>, it was the talent show. [redacted] and I did our

step routine, then we danced to Circus by Britney

Spears. Only a week and five days left of camp. Thank

you so much for the package! [redacted] is my counselor.

[redacted] and this counselor named [redacted] teaches

yoga/dance. Valley is awesome! [redacted] didn't do

the pie eating contest this year. [redacted] did it

for valley, and [redacted] did it for the CITs.

Last night after the dance and fireworks, we had

a thunderstorm. My bed was shaking! It was

pitch black outside so I couldn't see anything

except the lightening. Anyways, how old are you?

[redacted], [redacted] and I made you a birthday present. I think

I told you that already. What's your favorite kind

of candy? Thank you for giving us the opportunity to

come to camp. We really appreciate it. Thanks for

everything. Love you xxx

- [redacted]

9/17/08

Dear Mary,  
 How are you? I am fine. Yes, [redacted]  
 [redacted] does go here at [redacted].  
 My librarian lives next door to  
 Mrs. [redacted]. I don't know day  
 we should plan lunch/dinner. Do  
 you know a good day to plan it.  
 I can't wait until next summer  
 so I can swim in the lake again.

Love,

[redacted]

9/28/08

Dear Mary,  
 How are you? I am fine. I love  
 gymnastics so much, my mom said I  
 can compete in the Olympics (when I'm  
 sixteen) because that's how old you can  
 be to compete. I'm going to practice  
 gymnastics for six years. I can do a one  
 hand roundoff & cartwheel. I also like  
 swimming. Do you have a favorite  
 hobby, sport, or a favorite interesting  
 thing?

Sincerely,

[redacted]

from camp

December 4

Dear Mary,

How are you? I am fine. I'm invited to [redacted] birthday. I got her a Michael Jackson CD. [redacted] (who is now in 2nd grade) wants to know if she can go camp. She's only 7 but she'll be 8 in July. [redacted] is now 1 and a half. [redacted] is 5 years old. [redacted] is still 10. I'm still 11 years old. Sorry we missed your birthday. Sorry if I wrote to small. Sixth grade is crazy. I still get As and Bs. We miss you. This is my last stamp and I used it very wisely. Thank you again for the goods you got us at camp.

I'm still practicing gymnastics but in my trampoline. And playing volleyball on my volleyball net. Next year for 7th grade I'm going to [redacted] to get paid for my good grades. How [redacted] is [redacted]. I hear you have a soccer team and new principal. Is she nice. Sorry if I made a sloppy letter. Well, I have to go okay. We MISS YOU! xoxo

Cordially,

[redacted]

P.S. How many days does it take for my letter to get to your house.





Friday, 7/1

Bonjour Mary ♡,

How is everybody? Tomorrow is [redacted] birthday. The Fourth of July is coming up! I'm excited :) [redacted] birthday is July 3<sup>rd</sup>, so I made her a red, white, and blue bracelet. It's been two weeks already. Tonight's the two weeks' camp fire. Yesterday for afternoon classes I did water skiing and wind surfing. Every time it was my turn to ski, I got up. Then when [redacted] and I wind surfed, we both stood up on the board. Shortly after that, we fell :) In yoga/dance, we made a dance to Waka Waka. Then at the carnival, we're going to start dancing like a flash mob. Everybody misses you including me :)! The weather's been nice except for a few rainy days. Yes, [redacted] and I have been in the water a lot :) I'm excited for the track meet and swim meet! OMG it's going to be awesome. Do you have any plans for your birthday? ♡ [redacted], [redacted], and I made you something. Well time for the campfire. Love you xoxo

- [redacted]

**hi!**   
**from camp** Mary, you already know that you are

the most amazing, graceful, strong, and beautiful person in the world! I just wanted to make sure you knew it. You have really been a person that I had never thought I could meet and have in my life. You are there for me, you know me, you know when something's wrong with me, and if it is you are the one to help me through it. A lot of what makes me who I am is strength, but a lot of the strength I have comes from the important people in my life and you are one of the utmost important people. I thank you for everything, SERIOUSLY thank you so much and I thank GOD for having you in my life. What scares me now is that it's the end of my 6th year we will not be able to see each other as much especially during the summers. I just hope that we can continue to stay connected and stay close in contact.