

# Learning landscapes: American summer camps and educational possibilities

Paisagens de aprendizagem: acampamentos norte-americanos de verão e suas possibilidades educacionais<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

For over 100 years educational researchers have concerned themselves with a “summer learning gap” for students who experience academic losses during the summer months they are away from school. Simultaneously, American summer residential camps have provided landscapes of learning for generations of school children to improve skills and build competencies. Despite the current availability for camp experiences to fill the “summer learning gap” experienced by students during the summer vacation, contemporary education reform initiatives have largely not recognized the seemingly natural connection between camp and school. This article examines the significant historical linkages and theoretical underpinnings that relate the American camp movement and formal school settings, as well as contemporary possibilities for camps to serve as learning landscapes for 21st century learning outcomes that include relationship building, role modeling, collaboration, confidence, independence, and academic enhancement. Conclusions of the article indicate the significant role of camp experiences in the learning lives of children, and the need for policy makers to adopt reforms that include provisions for out-of-school time learning opportunities such as summer camp.

**KEYWORDS:** Summer camp; Learning; Educacional experiences out-of-school.

## Resumo

Por mais de 100 anos pesquisadores do campo da educação têm se preocupado com “hiatos de aprendizagem no verão” de estudantes que demonstram descréscimo de aprendizagem durante os meses de verão fora da escolar. Ao mesmo tempo, acampamentos norte-americanos de verão tem fornecido paisagens para aprendizagem de inúmeras gerações de estudantes em idade escolar com o intuito de aprimorar habilidades e construir competências. Apesar da atual disponibilidade das experiências de acampamento para atenuar esse “hiato de aprendizagem de verão”, as reformas educacionais contemporâneas não têm ainda reconhecido a aparente conexão natural entre acampamentos e escolas. Esse artigo examina, assim, tanto os laços históricos e teóricos significativos que subjazem as configurações do movimento de campistas e da escolar formal, quanto as possibilidades contemporâneas dos acampamentos para a aprendizagem do século 21, cujas competências envolvem o estabelecimento de vínculos sociais e colaborativos, redefinição de papéis, de confiança, independência e aprimoramento acadêmico. As conclusões indicam a significativa importância das experiências de aprendizagem nos acampamentos para as crianças, como também a necessidade de formulação de políticas educacionais que criem oportunidades de aprendizagem extra-curriculares – tais como oferecidas pelos acampamentos de verão.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Acampamentos de verão; Aprendizagem; Experiências educacionais extra-curriculares.

## Summer camp

Rustling footsteps blend with plumes of voices rising to the open sky, where stars twinkle like city lights in distant worlds. Not far from the peaceful glow of fireflies and flashlights, summer's dreams take flight inside young heads resting in tents and teepee, fields and forest. For over 150 years, summer camps have thrived in North America, both as sites of recreational pleasure and educational enhancement.

The United States is where children's camps began and where they achieved their greatest success (Paris, 2008). Henderson et al. (2007) define "camp" as "organized experiences in group living in the outdoors that use trained leaders to accomplish intentional goals" (p. 755). Additionally, Penny A. James (2009), a researcher at North Carolina State University, has identified four stages that describe the evolution of the organized camp experience of the last century:

- Recreational Stage: 1860s to 1920
- Educational Stage: 1920-1950
- Social Orientation and Responsibility Stage: 1950-1970
- New Directions Stage: 1970 to present (DeGraaf, Ramsing, et al., 2002; James 2009)

Thus, the purposes of the organized summer camp experience have evolved over time. Yet, despite shifting priorities, even the earliest camp directors recognized the educational value of the summer camp experience, including educator C. Hanford Henderson, founder of Camp Marienfeld on the Upper Delaware River in 1896. He planned a "study camp" that would combine a formal curriculum with outdoor recreation, later writing what a "novel and magnificent educational opportunity" camps represented (Paris, 2008, pp. 36-37). Later, Teachers College of Columbia University was the site of a major policy address on the importance of camping in the field of education. Ben Solomon's (1930) speech "Camping as a National Movement" was later printed in the March issue of *Camp Life*, establishing five comprehensive values of camping: recreational, physical up-building, character-building, educative, and spiritual (pp. 15-16).

Within this construct, there exist multiple subsets of camping, including private camps, most of which were segregated by religion and organization-run or "organizational" camps, some of which are run by youth groups, others by community centers, as well as an important subset by charities. While all of these "camps" are worthy endeavors, they do not typify the children's camp experience; therefore, my research focused on the camp mainstream: "sleep-away" summer camps. By definition, at these institutions children spend both their nights and their days away from home. To be considered a sleep-away camp, sessions last at least a week, rather than a night or two. To preserve the definition's focus, I do not include shorter-term excursions, nor the winter camps, or "family" camps that serve parents with their children, or charitable camps that shelter working-class children under the supervision of their mothers (Paris, 2008).

## Camp as sites for youth development

Camp is a vital landscape for learning and living, just like other institutions that educate from a variety of life experiences, including families, communities, and schools. Youth have attended camp for a variety of reasons, and since the 1970s, camps have been increasingly devoted to the positive development of youth. Therefore, my research focused on camps that highlight aspects of the “youth development” approach to camping as opposed to the recreational or outdoor adventure aspects. While these are valuable components of a well-rounded camp experience, the youth development model best fits my interest in camps as learning venues. Youth development has been defined by multiple studies that have identified social development as the primary predictor of life success, including academic success, and have identified several critical skills contributing to life success. This other research in the field has concluded these skills involve: 1) communicating effectively; 2) ability to work cooperatively with others; 3) emotional self-control and appropriate expression; 4) empathy and perspective-taking; 5) optimism, humor, self-awareness; 6) ability to plan and set goals; 7) solving problems and resolving conflicts thoughtfully and non-violently; and 8) bringing a reflective, learning-to-learning approach to life situations (Elias & Weissberg, 2000; Zins, Weissberg, et al., 2004). To better understand the factors promoting the acquisition of these skills or positive social development of adolescents, researchers at the Search Institute have established 40 developmental assets (Leffert, Benson, et al., 1998). These 40 assets are categorized into 8 domains representing the internal and external characteristics of a child and his/her environment: 1) support, 2) empowerment, 3) boundaries and expectations, 4) constructive use of time, 5) commitment to learning, 6) positive values, 7) social competencies, and 8) positive identity (Leffert, Benson, et al., 1998).

More recent research suggests that camp participation impacts youth in multiple ways by enhancing affective (self-esteem and self-concept), cognitive (knowledge, skills, abilities, and attitudes), behavioral (self-reported behaviors and behavioral intentions), and physical, social, and spiritual growth (Powell, 2003). More recent theorizing about the organized camp experience has included “outcomes measures” in order to define the benefits of camp. “Youth Development Outcomes of the Camp Experience” (Thurber, Schuler, et al., 2007), a study authorized by the American Camp Association (ACA), demonstrated that camp typically benefits children by building confidence, self-esteem, helping make new friends, showing more leadership qualities, and increasing willingness to try new things.

For these reasons it is necessary not to think of camps simply as fun factories, as popular culture far too often suggests. These deeply researched, groundbreaking catalogue of youth development and 21st-century learning skills makes clear that American summer camps are the products of intentional and intellectual influences. Indeed, it is possible to think of camp as what happens when you cross three distinct factors that all flourishing communities possess: supportive relationships, shared and personal responsibility, as well as a love for learning and continuous improvement. Campers often reflect on how, during the several years of their camp experience, they took on aspects of these three values (and more) and learned to successfully and simultaneously make friends, increase their independence, and acquire new skills.

## Campus

From the Latin word *campus* (for field) we find an etymological link between school campuses and campsites. These two institutions not only share a common root, but together account for countless hours of engagement and influential experience for American children and adults. Families come to mind as the only other structure surpassing the influence of camps and schools. Relationships between camps and schools are historically well established and often overlap. In her history of summer camps and the shaping of American youth, Abigail A. Van Slyck (2006) writes "Private camps, for instance, were usually founded, owned, and operated by one or two individuals (sometimes a married couple) who were often educators" who treated the camp experience as an extension of the school experience, even hiring some of the same teachers to work in both places. In addition to sharing staff, there were more formal relationships between camps and schools in the early 1900s. For instance, in the 1910's, private camps were listed in their own section of Porter Sargent's *A Handbook of American Private Schools*. Beginning in 1924, a separate Porter Sargent publication, *A Handbook of Summer Camps*, provided parents with a comprehensive listing of private camps. In the same years, *Red Book* magazine 'adopted an editorial policy which consistently sought to promote the work and influence of the private school and the cultural camp,' and began publishing guides of its own.

These publications exemplify the formal ways in which camps (primarily private) and schools (also private) were connected, or at least that they catered to similar clientele. Despite the mutual participation of campers and staff in these private schools and camps, the content of the two experiences, however, would have been mutually exclusive. For example, during the decades between the First and Second World Wars, John Dewey (1938), published *Experience and Education*, outlining a curriculum of cooperative, democratic learning environments that stress an interactive process among students and teachers and experiential learning, a language with which most camp professionals remain comfortable even today.

Encouraged by this shift in pedagogy and philosophy, the leaders of the National Council of Teachers of English also sought to incorporate experiential education, "recommending in 1935 that the nation adopt An Experience Curriculum in English" organized around Dewey's philosophy. While progressive, experiential educational programs have persevered in camp programs, Dewey's ideas slowly disappeared from the few schools where they had been tried by the 1960's (Applebee 1974).

In decades since, although camps and schools often shared human resources, there has not been widespread pedagogical influence of camp's experiential learning practices over school curricula. Despite this historical schism, momentum suggests, however, a renewed interest in further collaboration between summer camps as models of summer learning opportunities.

## Camps and classrooms

Identifying linkages on the network of educational institutions that envelop us, and imagining all the spaces where we acquire information, processes, and skills leads through a variety of points among and between people and places. Writing for a special edition of the *Teachers College Record*, Hope Jensen Leichter (1978) identifies many of these institutions as "places of work, associations, neighborhoods, friends, religious institutions, (and) museums." Each of these institutions respectively contributes to the holistic development of our intellectual, cultural, social, and academic being, and much of this web exists beyond the walls of schools. So, just as children go about the activities of learning in classroom settings, similar skills are acquired through experiences in families, communities, and yes, even camps. Philosopher of education, Maxine Greene (1978), suggests meaningful learning experiences "cannot, of course, happen solely within the schools and through the agency of the schools." These spaces, according to Greene, are created and lived in "living rooms, on playgrounds, in workplaces, studios, and waiting rooms." Greene could just as easily be talking about camps when advocating for learning that takes place in and across many settings, and between, and among many individuals as well as groups of people.

## Educational settings, landscapes, and spaces

Since educational settings greet us at every corner, camp is merely one of the spaces in which a great deal of teaching and learning occurs. The question then becomes whether or not the features of camp qualify as educational experiences? Esteemed historian of education, Lawrence Cremin (1978) provides a broad definition of education as "the deliberate, systematic, and sustained effort to transmit, evoke, or acquire knowledge, attitudes, values, skills, and sensibilities, and any learning that results from the effort, direct or indirect, intended or unintended." Each element of this definition informs and illuminates a component of camp, further relating and legitimating its role as an educational institution.

Additionally, camp has the capacity to imagine the spaces and traditional landscapes of learning differently. Ruth Vinz (2004), who evokes an almost philosophical approach to this question of where learning takes place, imagines this to be a "constructing/ producing site" in which we begin or attempt to understand what "interdisciplinary, multi-disciplinary, or transdisciplinary learning might mean" and how these places can be actualized in our everyday situations.

Occasion to think in this way rarely, if ever, takes place in schools; however, the presence of adults with varied talents and interests makes this conversation possible in camps. These individuals provide the passion and resources to "tutor sensibilities" and "tease usual ways of looking at the world into new images of the possible" as Herbert Kohl (1994) remembers the adults and mentors of his childhood doing. Counselors, teachers, and other adults in camps are given the liberty to create robust courses of inquiry for children. Literary magazines deal with the often uncomfortable and misogynistic perceptions of women by society, children as social activists, cartography and orienteering, stream ecology, and the ample availability of books to read.

A concerted effort among those involved to emphasize process rather than outcome, often sets learning in camp apart from other settings, primarily school settings, which continue to rely on high stakes achievement tests to measure success. As children are encouraged to take ownership of their experiences, activating their inquisitiveness and relying upon their own sense of motivation, we increase the likelihood of shaping what Kohl remembers enabled him "to take conscious control of my own education."

## Common messenger

In addition to camp, children obviously participate in multiple settings, and since it is possible for children to combine the expanded horizons acquired in camp with those more fundamental school experiences, children's typical ways of learning and thinking can be dramatically altered. In these instances, children become the "common messenger" between these settings, allowing spiral and cyclical ways of gathering information to emerge rather than typical linear models (Leichter 1978). As children begin to pass through and participate among these various settings, the learning becomes bound to the individual in more meaningful ways, traveling with them, lending a greater sense of purpose and value of the process, and accentuating the practice of learning.

The learner who remains focused becomes the "common messenger" between the camp and school settings, combining diverse experiences, information, and other assorted learning. The task of delineating the complexities of these relationships is extensive. And, since children recognize a distinction between camp and school settings, their ability to transfer skills gained from one experience to a different space is entirely possible. Children who attend camp benefit from the experience of a camp program, emphasizing opportunities to participate in games with complex rule structures, explore the natural world, and cultivate their artistic talents and interests thus encompassing the passive learning component.

The "common messenger" can take on many forms and assume many responsibilities. Children are, perhaps, most commonly assigned this role. In both camp and school settings (and to some extent in family and community settings) children often are the beneficiaries of adult and teacher energies. Schools devote a tremendous amount of energy and resources to assuring every child obtains the skills necessary to become productive and competent members of a democratic society. Years are spent conditioning children for a livelihood through exposure to reading, writing, and mathematics, accented by coursework in science and social studies.

Although advanced in a much different way, camps and schools share a similar and somewhat common agenda. That is, they spend a great deal of time focusing on the child as a learner. Children who attend camp benefit from the experiences, interactions, and learning in both settings. Their ideas become linked and connected in ways that might not have been possible without the benefiting from both settings. As we have seen, what is learned in school is often reinforced and substantiated in activities at camp, and vice versa.

## Linkages over time

The process of these experiences being catalogued and stacked in the conscience of an individual over time is vital in analyzing the relationships between all the settings identified thus far. Varied and diverse are these bits and pieces of life, acquired here and there, both realized and subliminal, which help to assemble tools and skills useful to the individual as they advance to other settings.

The very nature of these linkages permeate the walls of traditional educational institutions, eventually seeping through strongly enough to break free and become something better. Therefore, camp is more than an educational institution; it is a space, a setting, a canvas. Unconstrained by the rules and regulations of school, few institutional barriers exist between teacher and learner; configurations among all actors are free to evolve and multiply; numerous settings are incorporated; and robust communities of interaction begin to flourish and foster. Camp, unlike any other organization, becomes a vital landscape for learning and living. Institutions that educate from a variety of life experiences, including families, communities, and schools, converge and become juxtaposed with one another to form unprecedented learning outcomes. With the summer school surge on the horizon, camps can combat the call for "more of the same." Public education reform relies on the input and innovation of the private sector, while holding true to the values of equal and broader access for children to have opportunities.

## Family-camp linkages

The year-round nature of the many camp organizations — including reunions and winter trips — affords families the opportunity to strengthen communication between parents and full-time staff. Linkages between these groups provide myriad opportunities for families to experience the residual benefits of their children's camp experience. As the number of exchanges increases over time, and the interaction is sustained over a period of years, the sharing of knowledge, values, attitudes, skills — the learning — is more valuable. Within this relationship, each party is responsible at some level for assuming an alternating role between teacher and learner. That is, families have an equal amount to teach the camp organization about how to best deal with their children as the camp organization has potential and responsibility to teach and share with parents and families.

In another sense, while children participate in camp, away from their families, they still carry with them norms and behaviors originating at home. These home behaviors remain influential and affect not only the original child, but those with whom they come into contact. Multiple versions of norms and values from many different families arrive at camp via participating children. Many children, consequently, benefit from the teachings of several families through other children in contact with theirs.

As evidence of these family-camp linkages, an outcome study of campers conducted by Deborah Bialeschki, et al. (2002) asked parents to provide written

feedback in the form of answers to open-ended questions several months after the completion of camp. One of the first questions asked how the parent perceived the child had been affected by involvement at camp. Parents noted that their children had become "more independent" and, concomitantly, "more mature and responsible." One parent stated: "[Her child] became more open and not as shy." Another parent said, "I believe that [girl's name] has found out about herself what she never knew she had in her." Two other changes parents noticed in their children related to "improved interpersonal skills and a more caring attitude." For example, parents said, "His social skills are continually improving," and "Her attitude is better. She has learned to work in group settings." Another parent stated: "She has become more caring for others through her experiences."

Bialeschki reports campers and parents were aware of the "direct positive psychological, social, and physical benefits of the camping experience." Regardless of whether the comments were from a fifth grader or a parent, they all articulated many of the values traditionally associated with going to camp. The activities that required physical skills in a natural setting resulted in enhanced environmental awareness and feelings of physical competence. The social interactions from daily living in a shared community resulted in a recognized growth in respect, problem-solving, and interpersonal skills. The combined effect was one of self-empowerment and personal growth that reached into all aspects of the child's life well beyond the confines of the camp environment.

Evidence of the "common messenger," or instances in which children create links between institutions, combining among settings diverse experiences, information, and other assorted learning, one parent in Bialeschki's study conveyed a poignant viewpoint illustrating the extending possibilities and implications beyond the child for the camp experience: "This program has not only helped my daughter, but it has also helped me in a great way." Children clearly transmit camp experiences with their families, and ultimately, the community to which that child returns, increasing the possibilities for unrestricted learning emerge, adding to the potential social capital of that community. For example, children from camp that have stressed responsibility, respect, caring, leadership, and good citizenship may return to their home communities and put these attitudes into action in their home, school, and daily living. Among and between the several spaces, landscapes, and settings identified thus far, children have the chance to shape and bind these images into solid pieces, which are then combined with others over time, constructing a vibrant array of learning.

### Distinguishing camps and classrooms

Opportunities for learning are ubiquitous in the camp settings, therefore offering a unique experience for children to explore, discover, appreciate, and experiment. The creation of such a space where possibility abounds for children, in whom new meanings and understandings can emerge, results from what Maxine Greene (1978) calls the "risk of risking."

Occasions for children to choose, challenge, and reflect — to actually risk taking — are too often absent from the dialogue, if even dialogue exists, at school. The sincere appreciation of children's ideas as real and valuable, as truth, more likely occurs in unstructured environments, as opposed to the institutional framework of schools. As a result, the attitudes and perceptions of the learner — the participant — become much more accommodating to the acquisition of knowledge and the advancement of information, skills, and procedures in places like camp. This combination of risk and success, a space in which children feel safe and comfortable with their attempts and mistakes, yields greater achievement and more productive outcomes. Children desperately need time to negotiate with other children and adults the contradictions and complexities, consider alternatives, and identify the compelling.

To look upon education and our learning world through the lens of what Greene (1978) describes as "finished and predefined" is both dangerous and unfortunate. Progressive notions, indifferent to boundaries and commonly held fences, are necessary to reach a level of comprehension with capacity to shape more appropriate versions of teaching and learning — versions open to embracing and valuing all settings and the links that exist between these spaces. The acknowledgement of camp as a classroom is capable of widening our view.

## Seasonal perspective of learning

The question is not only about where we learn, but when. Education researchers for over a century have been interested in a seasonal approach to learning that seeks to determine whether or not there are months during the year when children are more likely to make greater academic gains and progress. Across much of the nation, excluding those on a "year-round calendar," school systems follow a traditional agrarian calendar, originally created to allow for farming and labor rather than the modern vacation and relaxation. Interest in the seasonality of learning can be traced back to a review of thirty nine studies completed by Cooper, Nye, Charlton, Lindsey, and Grea-thouse (1996), the oldest dating back to 1906 (White 1906). These studies essentially point to the same conclusion: all young people experience learning losses when they do not engage in educational activities during the summer. In terms of standardized test results, the research is clear in concluding that students typically score lower at the end of summer vacation than they do on the same tests at the beginning of summer vacation (Cooper 1996).

The cumulative summer learning loss for children is even more striking. On average, students generally lose over two and a half months of grade level equivalency in mathematical computation skills, and almost two months of reading achievement are lost for low-income students. In addition, studies reveal that the greatest areas of summer loss for all students, regardless of socio-economic status, are in factual or procedural knowledge (Cooper 1996).

Richard Rothstein, former national education columnist for *The New York Times*, and now a research associate with the Economic Policy Institute, agrees that "disadvantaged children get less educational support in summers and after school." His

research confirms that this differential “summer setback” occurs partly because middle-class children’s learning is reinforced in the summer months—“they read more, travel, and learn new social and emotional skills in camps and organized athletics” (Rothstein, 2005, p. 13). More recently, a research brief published by RAND Education (Wiseman, 2011) cited that summer learning programs “have the potential to help children and youth improve academic and other outcomes” (p. 1). These “other outcomes” are well documented in the field of positive youth development, and as the final school bells ring and the summer season gets underway, summer camps respond to the “summer learning gap” by offering high-quality comprehensive learning experiences to every child that are not necessarily grounded in classrooms. Strong schooling is an essential feature of modern societies; however, much of what it means to be an educated and intellectually competent person involves attitudes, appreciations, dispositions, tacit knowledge, and meta-cognitive abilities that depend on good schooling and good out-of-school activities and experiences (Gordon, Bridglall, et al., 2005). In fact, a comprehensive review of learning outside the classroom, *Supplementary Education: The Hidden Curriculum of High Academic Achievement* (Gordon, Bridglall, et al., 2005), finds that

The most effective youth development programs have both academic and recreational content. High-quality programs also enable young people to examine various topics, skills, or projects that interest them deeply but may not be clearly linked to the school curriculum...increasing capacity for creative thinking and problem solving. (pp. 42-43)

Noticing the achievement gap is only part of the challenge; recognizing ways camps can bolster children’s experience outside the classroom and combat the learning gap is a worthy undertaking. Standardized testing measures represent only the most conventional way our society thinks about learning and often carry the most authority. Little to no research inspects the ways camps can bolster children’s learning experiences outside the classroom not exclusively as an effort to raise conventional test scores, but rather to combat the “summer slide” in ways that recognize all forms of learning and the places these experiences might exist.

## Educational possibilities

Summers have always belonged to children, whose vacations often carry the connotation of being unlikely places for learning. Yet, camps and the summers they occupy have served as “landscapes for learning” (Greene, 1978) for many generations of campers. While schools have traditionally been charged with academically enhancing our capacity to live and work in an ever-changing society, camps are gaining recognition as vital summer learning venues, most notably for those underserved in the classroom. Identifying the various spaces where learning takes place and the value of each setting is crucial when emphasizing the camp experience as a viable alternative to mandated summer school. Peg Smith (2009), chief executive officer of the ACA says the solution is “not to confine children to classrooms for year-round school,” but instead “the answer lies in much more natural, developmental settings that promote experiential learning, improve social skills and physical fitness, teach kids to take

calculated risks in a safe environment, and expand the creative mind allowing for the possibility of innovation” (p. 4). Understanding the characteristics of learning at camp and the features of learning at school, and the ways children cumulatively link their learning experiences from these spaces, reinforces the singularity of these institutions and the possibilities for mutual contribution.

Public education reform relies on the input and innovation of the private sector, while holding true to the values of equal and broader access for all children to have educational opportunities both in and out of the classroom. As Smith (2009) states, “the camp experience is a well-tested, viable learning environment that contributes to the overall health and development of children, youth, and adults,” and she urged policymakers to “reframe the issue...to introduce the importance of understanding how children learn—not pass the test” (p. 4). Teachers, counselors, learners, campers, organizations, and institutions—all operate collectively and independently to reform our understandings and unchallenged beliefs of what is possible. Research in this area can help camps gain recognition as vital summer learning venues, most notably from those who are in a position to make their promise a reality for all children.

Camps are not singular in their potential to promote high-quality learning experiences during the summer months; however, the distinction lies in the nature of relationships between campers and their surroundings, tapping creativity and utilizing experiences in ways other summer experiences simply do not employ, while averting the danger of summer camps becoming exactly like school classrooms. The significance of research in this area is great and potentially greater collaboration between camp organizations and educational institutions may result, as well as dedicated resources for engaging more children during summer vacation to think and build competency so that their school year is more successful.

Each summer at camps, children enjoy recreational, artistic, nature, and adventure programs that can help students acquire important skills that are not always or explicitly taught in the classroom. The kids practice sportsmanship, positive peer relations, social skills, and a sense of belonging. All of these, according to Dr. Gordon (2005), “create positive social and psychological conditions for academic learning” for when campers once again return to school in after summer vacation (p. 43).

## Education for the “new economy”

A few years back I conducted a study (Ozier, 2012) with kids who had gone to summer camp for at least six or seven years. I asked them to talk about their camp experiences, and from their stories identified convincing evidence that summer camp is an important place for kids to learn and grow. Recently, the skills campers in my study attributed to their camp experiences — confidence, leadership, social skills, independence, self-direction — have been described in books and articles as important non-cognitive factors essential for success in the “new economy.” Evidence suggest camps are a likely place for young people and adults to acquire and practice these important skills so they can imagine ways they might adapt to the challenges in an ever-changing world.

William Poundstone's *Are you smart enough to work at Google?* describes the “new economy” in the context of the Google corporation's decision to shift hiring techniques from screening job candidates “beyond learning particular sets of skills, toward measuring the ability to innovate and problem solve.” He provides several intriguing examples illustrating how the new Google interview questions emphasize intelligence as more than what is learned in school and rather the “ability to reason well and grasp the subtleties of the world around us.”

Industry and economics have historically driven the educational reforms necessary to prepare kids for the workforce. Schools often lag behind, and while gaining this type of insight would enable educators to teach students how to learn, as well as what to learn, enabling students to take more ownership and control over their own learning, camps, on the other hand, have long been leaders in giving semantic parity between cognitive knowledge and youth development skills essential for learning.

Paul Tough's (2012) *How Children Succeed* calls attention to this tension between “what you know” and “how you use what you know” by questioning “the cognitive hypothesis,” or the belief “that success today depends primarily on cognitive skills — the kind of intelligence that gets measured on I.Q. tests, including the abilities to recognize letters and words, to calculate, to detect patterns — and that the best way to develop these skills is to practice them as much as possible, beginning as early as possible.” In his latest book, Tough sets out to replace this assumption by emphasizing the notion that non-cognitive skills are more crucial than sheer brain power to achieving success, including:

- persistence;
- self-control;
- curiosity;
- conscientiousness;
- self-confidence.

Additionally, a recent review of literature on the role of non-cognitive factors in shaping school performance issued by the University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research (Farrington, et. al, 2012) identified behaviors, attitudes, and strategies that are critical for success in school and in later life. These factors included attendance, work habits, time management, help-seeking behaviors, self-control, persistence, and social problem-solving skills that allow students to successfully manage new environments and meet new academic and social demands. To anyone who knows the power of the summer camp experience, this list sounds like a familiar list of characteristics campers carry home with them at summer's end.

In fact, ACA studies (Thurber, 2007) found similar conclusions aligning closely with this list of non-cognitive factors — 3,395 families whose child attended one of eighty different day or resident summer camps measured growth from precamp to postcamp surveys in four domains:

- positive identity;
- social skills;
- physical and thinking skills;
- and positive values.

For over 150 years, camps have provided landscapes of learning for generations of campers the old-fashioned way by giving kids the space to practice what they learn in school and opportunities to explore ways of making sense of what they know in new and different settings outside the classroom (Ozier, 2010). In fact, despite classrooms having the connotation in society for being exclusive places for learning, schools often don't do enough to prepare young people for the new economy's demands. In his newest publication, educator David Conley (2014) at the Educational Policy Improvement Center suggests most students don't get enough opportunities to practice an array of learning strategies as they go through school. One reason, as Conley suggests, is that developing strategic learning techniques takes time and practice. On the other hand, camp preserves for kids the chance to slow down, to notice, to attend, to engage and interact with their world. A camp curriculum, unlike most school curricula, awakens kids with challenging activities that encourage innovation and exploration, the same kind of innovation that creates jobs, and the kind of exploration through which discoveries are made.

In a recent opinion published in *Education Week*, Conley (2013) calls for the unfortunately named non-cognitive factors to be renamed. Claiming the name suggests “not-thinking,” he suggests the term “metacognitive factors,” as he rhetorically asks “are we not observing a higher form of thinking when we see students persist with difficult tasks, such as overcoming frustration; setting and achieving goals; seeking help; working with others; and developing, managing, and perceiving their sense of self-efficacy?”

In my own study (Ozier, 2012), the stories told to me by kids who attended summer camp described examples of Conley's argument, including metacognitive processes like:

- “exposed me to new ideas”;
- “inspiration to move on”;
- “learning new things”;
- “being okay with myself”;
- “practicing role modeling”;
- “learning how to talk to others”;
- “becoming oneself”;
- “avoiding peer pressure”.

Even as research tells us camp helps kids learn in ways that will improve their school performance, why do we still have such a hard time convincing folks that camps are perhaps better suited to provide kids with the kinds of experiences learners need, and that camp is more likely to grow citizens with the twenty-first century learning characteristics our world demands? In the face of shifting economic and educational landscapes, how do summer camps keep open to the need for developing meta/non-cognitive factors even as we have regard for tradition? How might the next 150 years of camp continue to prepare kids for the world's demands?

## New frontiers

Just this last year, ACA convened a task force to examine the link between the research on meta/non-cognitive factors and the ways camps develop these skills each summer in millions of young people and adults. And each of us must do our part — it's important to help educate teachers, students and parents about the important learning benefits of the camp experience. By simply getting better at what they already do, camps are well positioned to be an important element on the educational spectrum necessary to succeed in this century and beyond — or as Gordon (2005) of Yale and Columbia Universities calls the “supplementary education” necessary for high academic achievement in school and life in this new economy.

North American summer camps are seen as credible experts in the work of equipping kids with life skills the old fashioned way, by providing engaging experiences so that young people grow to learn for themselves; camps open young minds to possibilities they may not have seen before; camp is where imagination flourishes — where kids can explore concepts and turn ideas upside down, creating openings into changing how they see the world and how the world can interact with us. It comes as no surprise then that these research-based characteristics are some of the hallmarks of summer camp alumni, outcomes of the opportunities that come about as a result of their experiences in intentional camp communities, demonstrating that camps are locations for young people to learn the practices and skills that will lead them into bright futures, and if we expect the next generation of young people to create a world in which they identify deficiencies and seek to repair them, then summer camps must be recognized as key locales for developing the relationships, responsibility, and curiosity necessary for children to, as educational philosopher Maxine Greene (2012) puts it, imagine how things should be and how they might be.

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## Notes

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