

# LEARNING

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## Camp as Educator

Educators for over a century have recognized the American summer camp as an important learning

landscape (Paris 2008), and some leading educators considered summer camp to be an ideal learning environment for children (Van Wagenen 1935). Contemporary ACA camps continue to provide millions of children with recreational, artistic, nature and adventure programs that can help students acquire important skills that are not always or explicitly taught in the classroom.

Most recently, it has been suggested that the camp experience can be a site for the development of 21st century competencies commonly defined as the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to be competitive in the 21st century workforce. These competencies include such skills as *critical thinking and problem-solving, collaboration, adaptability, initiative, and imagination*. In the United States, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills positioned 21st century skills at the center of US K-12 education by building collaborative partnerships among education, business, community and government leaders. In a research report focused on the readiness of young people to enter the 21st century workforce, the findings highlighted the gap between the knowledge and skills most students learn in school and the knowledge and skills they need in typical 21st century communities and suggested that U.S. schools must align classroom environments with real world environments by infusing 21st century skills (Casner-Lotto, Barrington, & Wright, 2006).

## Learning Loss

Over one hundred years of research on “summer learning loss” compiled by the National Summer Learning Association shows all children who are not involved in high-quality learning experiences like camp lose ground academically during the summer (White 1906; Cooper, Nye et al. 1996). As the final school bells ring, and the summer season gets underway, camps respond to the “summer learning gap” by offering outdoor adventures in arts, nature and athletics which enable young people to examine various topics, skills, or projects that interest them deeply but may not be clearly linked to the school curriculum. These camp activities provide the kinds of experiences learners need AND the “social and psychological conditions” for high academic

achievement, thus increasing capacity for creative thinking and problem solving (Gordon, Bridglall et al., 42-43), and preventing summer learning loss (Rothstein 2005).

The emphasis on creating healthy bodies and minds has only limited success within classroom walls, and camp is an American tradition that has impacted the lives of more than 500 million children and their families since 1861 as an important setting for literally living out the promises of meaningful education. Leading educators, including John Dewey himself, emphasized process and creative learning and advocated for the kind of hands-on, experiential learning opportunities camps provide (Elwell 1925; Dimock and Hendry 1929; Mason 1930; Sharp 1930; Lieberman 1931; Ward 1935; Paris 2008).

## How Learners Learn

Research on *how* students learn confirms that camp is an environment that provides the kinds of experiences learners need.

- Results of studies conclude that experience outside the classroom consistently provides significant gains in both cognitive and affective achievement for all students, for all grade levels, and particularly for students categorized as at-risk (Rudman 1994).
- Camps are natural classrooms with programs and materials that provide opportunities for students to manipulate, build, or encounter hands-on experiences that research has proven to enhance learning (Armstrong 1994).
- The opportunity for “active” learning experiences abound at summer camp, and it has been shown that students retain 90% of what they say or discuss while engaged in an “activity” (Dale 1954).
- Classrooms can learn from the lessons of camp since studies have shown that having students stand up, walk, jump, and clap as they review, understand, or master material will strengthen their procedural memories (Sprengr 1999).
- Camps offer ample opportunities for the kinds of movement that research suggests involves more of a student’s brain than does seatwork since movement accesses multiple memory systems (Jensen 2001).

## Learning and Living

Research suggests students experience a greater benefit when the educational experience is closer to reality (Millan 1995), and camp programs approximate the recommendations of researchers by creating situations in which a real artist, engineer, or other professional would engage with a problem (Wiggins and McTighe 1998).

- Camps focus on the individual and studies have shown students must see for themselves the connection between what the curriculum is teaching and their own experiences in order to link new learning to prior knowledge (Brandt 2000).
- Brain research is confirming what camp professionals already know: when learning is linked to real-life experiences, students retain and apply information in meaningful ways (Westwater and Wolfe 2000).
- Through organized athletics, leadership opportunities and adventures in the wilderness, camps allow young people to explore ideas in project-based and problem-based scenarios that research has suggested links new information to previously stored information. This enables students to realize that they already have some knowledge about the new topic and that the activity is relevant to their personal lives (Westwater and Wolfe 2000).
- Thinking in art precedes improvements in thinking in other curricular areas (Dewey 1934). Camps offer the kinds of arts-enriched experiences that studies have demonstrated significantly improve reading and math test scores as opposed to those who experienced the standard curriculum (Gardiner 1996).
- Good storytelling, like those told around the traditional campfire, engages young children intently in the learning process and stimulates their interest in reading (Goetz and Sadowski 1996). During storytelling, listening and reasoning skills are improved as children use the auditory and frontal lobes of the brain to follow the plot of the story (Sturm 1999).

## What is Learned and Why it Matters

Research on the camp experience suggests that camp participation impacts youth by enhancing growth in multiple ways:

- affective (self-esteem and self-concept)
- cognitive (knowledge, skills, abilities, and attitudes),
- behavioral (self-reported behaviors and behavioral intentions),
- physical, social, and spiritual growth (Powell 2003).

More recent theorizing about the organized camp experience has included “outcomes measures” that define the benefits of camp. “*Youth Development Outcomes of the Camp Experience*” (Thurber, Schuler et al. 2007), a study authorized by 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.

ACA believes strong schooling is an essential feature of modern societies; however, research in a comprehensive review of learning outside the classroom, [Supplementary Education: The Hidden Curriculum of High Academic Achievement](#) finds that 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).

At camp, kids will practice sportsmanship, positive peer relations, social skills, and a sense of belonging that improve students’ learning capabilities. All of these, according to Dr. Gordon, “create positive social and psychological conditions for academic learning” for when campers once again return to school in the fall (43).

## Bottom Line

Summer camp is a high quality youth development program that helps students succeed in school by (1) promoting academic success directly, since camps provide the kinds of educational experiences learners need and/or (2) building the nonacademic competencies and skills that have been shown to support school success. While camp’s relationship to academic success in school may not be readily apparent, youth development outcomes of the camp experience have been rigorously evaluated and educational psychologists have found these to have significant impacts on educational outcomes.

## Source

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