

Toward a Model of Camp Staff Engagement: A Look at University-Based Day Camps

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Camp staff who feel engaged in their work are more likely to gain a variety of beneficial outcomes as well as create quality experiences for the campers they serve. Engagement, which is fundamentally situational, can be described both as a state of being fully present and as an overall sense of deep connection to the given context. While many models explaining engagement and its antecedents exist, most represent either an educational setting or a traditional work setting; neither of which may accurately apply to college-age camp staff. The camp setting may provide unique intersections between work and school for staff members and is a promising environment to explore camp staff engagement. The purpose of this study was to understand day camp staff engagement both as a day-to-day state of being fully present as well as staff members' larger sense of deep connection to their day camp staff jobs. The guiding question was "What do engaged staff say, feel, and do?"; secondary questions explored staff members' perceptions of the factors that affect or prevent engagement in their jobs.

A total of 38 staff members from two university-based day camps that are of comparable size and program focus participated in this study. Data were collected using daily staff journals and focus groups. Daily staff journals were used to examine the day-to-day nature of engagement, and focus groups were used to explore engagement more broadly and to understand what factors impede and foster staff to optimally engage in their work at camp. Activation, participation, and connection with campers and peers were three dominant themes that described what engaged staff say, feel, and do in their jobs. For the participants of this study, physical and emotional wellness, stress, and connection were the three primary factors that either supported or prevented engagement. These results suggest that university-based day camp staff engage in ways that are different from how existing models imply they might engage in non-camp jobs or in college. This study takes a needed first step toward developing an operational model of camp staff engagement and offers important considerations for camp managers in university as well as other recreation-based day camp settings who hire college students, students soon to be enrolled in college, or recent graduates as frontline day camp staff.

KEYWORDS: *Recreation program staff, summer camp, engagement*

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Day camp managers who successfully engage camp staff in their work are more likely to be successful in creating a quality camp experience for the youth they serve. Although the linkage between staff engagement and camper outcomes is not yet known, there is a wealth of evidence connecting an individual's engagement in work or school to a variety of desirable personal and organizational outcomes. At work, for example, engaged employees report greater job satisfaction (Adkins, 2015) and less burnout (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). A 2013 Gallup study found that Millennials, which they defined as individuals between the ages of 18 and 34, were more likely than older employees to leave their jobs if they felt disengaged. In the context of school, engaged college students persist through graduation and are more academically successful than disengaged students (Fredricks, Blumenfield, & Paris, 2004; Hu & Kuh, 2003). Within these contexts, there is considerable variation in how scholars conceptualize engagement, and there are a number of models that depict engagement and its antecedents. Despite this degree of variation, Kahu (2013) contends that engagement is "fundamentally situational," which means that day camp staff are likely to engage differently with their day camp responsibilities than they might in a non-camp job or in school (p. 263).

This situation is problematic for camp managers because there are no camp-specific models of engagement they can use to recruit, train, and support their staff throughout the summer. University-based day camps, a segment of day camps that is large and gaining attention, are especially notable in this regard, because many hire college students or recent graduates to work directly with youth at camps on the very campuses where the staff members attend classes. A recent report by Hill, Milliken, Goff, Clark, and Gagnon (2015) provides one example of how university students are working as frontline staff in youth programs; however, it does not directly address issues surrounding students as staff members.

This study is a first step toward building a model of camp staff engagement. By focusing on staff working directly with youth at university-based day camps, this study aims to add one perspective to what will later become a much larger understanding of staff engagement and its role in providing quality camp experiences. The guiding question was informed by Handelsman, Briggs, Sullivan, and Towler's (2005) work and explored the nature of camp staff engagement, specifically by asking, "What do engaged college-age day camp staff say, feel, and do?" In addition, factors that support or inhibit staff members' ability to be fully present in day-to-day activities as well as foster an overall connection to the day camp job were examined.

Review of Literature

Day Camp Employment

Previous research on summer camp employment provides insight into multiple aspects of the camp work experience. According to this research, people seek camp work for intrinsic (e.g., personal satisfaction) and altruistic (e.g., to serve as a role model for youth) reasons (Roark, 2005). In addition, many people choose to work at camp because of the beneficial outcomes associated with the work, such as personal transformation (Garst, Franz, Baughman, Smith, & Peters, 2009), identity development (Johnson, Goldman, Garey, Britner, & Weaver, 2010), and workforce preparation (Duerden, Witt, et al., 2014). DeGraaf and Glover (2003) found that these benefits extend well into adulthood, and others have suggested that working at camp prepares individuals for academic and professional success (e.g., Browne & Heiser, 2015; Duerden, Garst, & Bialeschki, 2014).

While past research provides insight into the reasons people seek camp work and the outcomes they receive after working at camp, an aspect of the camp staff experience that is still somewhat unclear is what happens in between: the day-to-day moments when staff engage or disengage from their work.

There is, however, evidence that specific features of the camp work experience are linked to positive staff outcomes. For example, camp staff members who feel a sense of community are more likely to continue working at that camp year after year (McCole et al., 2012) as well as achieve a variety of beneficial staff-related outcomes (Duerden, Witt, et al., 2014; Whitacre & Farmer, 2013). In addition to sense of community, Garst and his colleagues (2009) found that organizational factors, such as camp culture, play an important role in promoting personal growth among camp staff. While these studies illustrate the relation between specific contextual factors and camp staff outcomes, they do not consider how and why staff connect with their work in the day-to-day and to their job in general. Of further concern is that these studies focus almost exclusively on the resident camp context, which leaves the day camp staff experience largely unexplored.

The day camp staff experience is likely very different than the daily experiences of resident camp staff. One unique factor affecting day camp staff is the camper population. In Browne and Sibthorp's (2014) study, day camp counselors reported that the high degree of camper turnover day after day negatively impacted their ability to implement camp programs. These staff also expressed feeling burned out from working long hours and dealing with difficult camper behavior. These findings are consistent with Duerden and his colleagues' (Duerden, Witt, et al., 2014) finding that long hours prevented camp staff (which, in this study, included both day and resident camp staff) from gaining important skills. In this same study, social support was found to sustain staff members' skill development, which is notable because day camp staff may have fewer opportunities to interact informally with their peers. Furthermore, individuals who are not experienced working with youth in a dynamic context, such as a day camp, may be prone to stress and burnout (Paisley & Powell, 2007; Pavelka, 1993). The American Camp Association (2013) reported that there are an increasing number of day camp programs in the U.S.; thus, it is critical that managers of these programs understand effective strategies to prevent burnout over the course of the summer.

Employee Engagement

Engagement is perhaps most widely documented in the research on employees in traditional work contexts. Kahn's (1990) foundational work examining engagement (which, interestingly, was conducted with summer camp counselors) defined employee engagement as the congruence between a person's preferred self and his or her role at work. Kahn contended that when the self and the job role are aligned, "people become physically involved in tasks, whether by themselves or with others, cognitively vigilant, and empathetically connected to others in the service of the work" (p. 700). From this theoretical foundation, the predominant models of employee engagement depict engagement both as a state characterized by "being fully present" as well as the employees' feelings of deep connection to their job.

One of the most frequently cited approaches is Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, and Bakker's (2002) model that defines engagement in relation to burnout. According to these scholars, the employees' degree of engagement or burnout depends on two factors: their activation (physical, emotional, and cognitive energy) and their identification (with their role and the organization in general). Engagement, from this perspective, is defined as vigor (high activation), dedication (high identification), and absorption (state of being fully present). These authors further contend that engagement is a "state of mind" in a given context that is persistent over time and not reflective of a single event or behavior. In contrast, others have shown that an individual's feelings of engagement can vary daily (Bakker, 2014) and week to week within their job (Bakker & Bal, 2010). Whether fluctuating or stable over time, engagement in the work context is best defined as a state of being fully present as well as an overall sense of deep connection to the job role and the organization.

College Student Engagement

Much of the research on college student engagement, in contrast, focuses on the broader processes by which students connect to their learning. Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement informs much of this work by suggesting that engaged students invest energy in educationally purposeful activities. Fredricks and colleagues (2004) suggest that engagement is a "metaconstruct" with behavioral, cognitive, and emotional facets. Kahu's (2013) multidimensional model adds a "holistic domain" that represents students' developmental stage and past experiences. To Kahu, college student engagement is fundamentally situational because it emerges from the constant interplay between the individual (which, for college students, is in a state of developmental flux) and the university context.

Handelsman and his colleagues (2005) explored student engagement in the context of the college classroom, specifically the things engaged students say, feel, and do in a typical college course. With a focus on specific characteristics, Handelsman and his colleagues (2005) conceptualized college student engagement as a state of deep connection to course material that is characterized by using effective skills (i.e., note taking), interaction (with the instructor and with peers), emotion (interest in the subject and desire to succeed), and performance (success on course measures). This model differs from Schaufeli et al.'s (2002) model of employee engagement because it emphasizes interaction (in this case, with peers and course instructors), while employee engagement, according to Schaufeli and his colleagues, involves some degree of dedication to the job and the organization. Table 1 compares the two frameworks described here. The extent to which engagement in a day camp work environment mirrors a non-camp job or a college class is unknown. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to better understand day camp staff engagement both as a state of "being fully present" and as a sense of deep connection to their day camp staff role. The guiding question was "What do engaged staff say, feel, and do day-to-day during their jobs?"; secondary questions explored staff members' perceptions of the factors that support or prevent engagement in their jobs.

Methods

This study used multiple methods to provide different perspectives on engagement and its related factors among university-based day camp staff. These methods were chosen because they are consistent with many of the methods used to explore engagement in the work and school context, and because they are tools that may be useful to camp managers interested in fostering engagement among their staff.

Setting and Participants

Two university-based day camps were the setting for this study, which was of interest because it is possible that staff working in this context approach their work differently than they would a non-camp job or a college class. Both camps were held on the campuses of two public universities in the Western U.S. and were similar in size and program focus (Table 2). The most notable difference between the programs was that staff from Camp #1 participated in a 2-day intensive training but did not receive course credit; staff from Camp #2 received one unit of nonrequired course credit to participate in an 8-week staff training program. Students enrolled in the staff training program met weekly for 2 hours each week and completed online learning assignments. Topics from both trainings were similar.

Data Collection

Prior to camp, staff members completed a questionnaire in which they consented to participate in the study. If they chose to participate, respondents then provided their age, the number of years they worked at the camp, and several questions related to their status as an enrolled college student (e.g., year in college, major). Questionnaire responses from staff members not consenting were not included in data analysis.

Table 1*Comparison of Engagement Frameworks*

Framework	Context of focus	Definition of Engagement	Components of Engagement
Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, and Bakker (2002)	Employees in a traditional work context	<p>“A positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption...a persistent and pervasive affective state” (p. 74).</p> <p>Note: Engagement is the “positive antithesis” burnout; however, it is conceptualized and measured as a distinct construct (p. 75)</p>	Engaged employees feel a sense of vigor , which is characterized by high activation, “energy, mental resilience while working, and willingness to invest effort” (p. 74)
			Engaged employees feel a sense of dedication to their role in the organization, which is characterized by a “sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride, and challenge” (p. 74)
			Engaged employees feel absorbed in their work, or “fully concentrated and deeply engrossed...time passes quickly and [the employee] has difficulties detaching from work” (p. 74)
Handelsman, Briggs, Sullivan, & Towler (2005)	College students in a typical college course	The authors do not define engagement, but draw from Astin (1984) theory of student involvement, which defines engagement in terms of a student’s investment of energy in educationally purposeful activities.	Engaged college students use practical skills (i.e., note taking, study strategies) to achieve intrinsic and extrinsic goals.
			Engaged college students become emotionally involved (i.e., applying material to their lives, thinking about the material outside of class).
			Engaged college students participate in class and interact in and outside of class with their peers and the instructor.
			Engaged college students believe they can perform successfully on course measures and successfully meet their performance goals.

The day-to-day nature of staff engagement, which was defined as a state of being fully present while doing the responsibilities of a day camp counselor, was explored through daily journals, a tool known to effectively capture daily fluctuations in engagement in the work context (Bakker, 2014). The daily journal prompt first asked staff to rate their level of engagement for that day on a 10-point scale (1 = low to 10 = high), which was included not to provide a quantitative measure of engagement but rather to focus their thinking about engagement prior to responding to the open-ended prompt, which asked, “What was going on today that helped you feel either highly engaged at camp or highly disengaged?” The journal was explained to staff during a staff meeting, where participants were ensured that their responses would be shared only with the research team. Journals were kept on the staff members’ camper attendance sheet and were completed at the end of each camp day, in some instances as a part of a regularly scheduled staff meeting.

Focus group methods were used to explore staff members’ sense of engagement to their day camp job in general. Focus group methods implemented in this study are consistent with those described in Krueger and Casey (2014), who assert that focus group interviews are best used when: 1) the researcher is looking for a range of opinions and ideas about a topic, and 2) the group processes and the sharing of ideas generates a collective level of understanding. In addition, focus groups are an efficient method for collecting qualitative data, which was necessary as little is known about the day camp setting.

Two focus groups were facilitated at each camp, approximately midway through the summer. Holding the focus groups at camp provided participants and familiar and safe environment to promote honest and thoughtful discussion. Focus groups followed a semi-

Table 2*Comparison of the Two University-Based Day Camps*

	University-based Camp #1	University-based Camp #2
Average weekly attendance	N=160, 70% attend 3 or more weeks	N=175-200, 75% attend 3 or more weeks
Camper age range	5-14 years old	4-15 years old
Cost of 1-week session	\$225	\$175
Total number of staff assigned to work with small groups of campers	20-25	30-35
Average number of campers per session	175	250
Camper demographics	White, upper middle class; many university faculty and staff children	White, upper middle class; many university faculty and staff children
Program structure	Each themed weekly session includes a mix of self-selected, small group electives such as art, dance, STEM, and soccer, daily free swim, all camp themed events, and field trips to local parks, museums, or trails.	Each themed weekly session includes specialty programming each the morning, including theater, dance, crafts, sports, cooking, or general recreation, and all camp activities relating to the theme in the afternoon.
University funding/support	Program under Continuing Education. Camp relies on its own revenues but receives some funding for full-time salaries.	Program under Campus Recreation. Camp relies completely on its own revenue, does not receive any funding.

structured format where a general interview guide provided the basic structure and probing questions were asked to seek clarification. One of the pitfalls of focus group research is that group discussions can veer off topic (Patton, 2002). The interview guide was a tool the moderator could use to provide a clear focus to the group discussion and to refocus participants if the conversation strayed off topic. The interview guide included questions about what camp staff do when they are engaged in their jobs, what it feels like when they are engaged, and what factors help and prevent camp staff from feeling engaged in their jobs. Staff members were similar in age, experience, and job title, providing a fairly homogeneous group, as recommended in the literature (Krueger & Casey, 2014). Camp staff volunteered to participate in the focus groups and were told their responses would remain confidential and would not be shared with their supervisor. Each focus group lasted approximately 30 minutes and was digitally recorded.

Data Analysis

Descriptive data from the pre-camp questionnaire were analyzed using measures of central tendency. Numerical data from staff members' daily engagement ratings were inspected for variability in order to provide further insight into the qualitative description

that accompanied the rating. Instances when ratings were notably high or low, and included an interpretable description, were used to triangulate focus group data.

Data from the focus groups were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using methods consistent with a grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Creswell, 1998). One of the primary aims of this study was to gain an increased understanding of the complexities of day camp staff engagement and to take an initial step toward building a model of camp staff engagement. The data analysis methods in grounded theory research are consistent with this aim as they provide clear procedures for formulating theory, or in this case, understanding the relations between the central phenomenon (e.g., engagement) and its causal conditions (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

Data analysis began with open coding, where each researcher independently read the transcripts to identify categories supported by the text. Using a constant comparative approach, the researchers looked for categories that emerged within and across each data set, ensuring the categories were accurately represented and grounded in the data. Upon identifying an initial set of categories, the researchers met to compare their results, come to agreement, and refine each category to its most central properties. The researchers then returned to the data to apply the newly refined codes. Next, the researchers engaged in the process of axial coding, a data analysis process that makes connections between a category and conditions represented in the data that influenced the central phenomenon, which, in this case, was staff members' engagement (Creswell, 1998). Through an iterative process, codes were applied to the data until all data were saturated and connected to a core category.

Results

A total of 38 staff members ($n_{\text{Camp \#1}} = 11$; $n_{\text{Camp \#2}} = 27$) consented to complete the questionnaire, and daily journals and to participate in a focus group. Seven of the staff members at Camp #1 and all at Camp #2 were students currently enrolled at the university in which they worked. Across both camps, staff had spent an average of 2.9 years in college prior to working at camp. The age range was between 18 to 25 years old ($M = 20.7$ years old). More participants identified as female ($n = 25$) than male ($n = 10$); eight participants did not indicate a gender preference. Between both camps, staff had worked at their respective camp for an average of 1.2 years. The most notable difference between the staff members at the two sites was that Camp #1, which does not require its staff to be enrolled in school or give course credit for staff training, had four staff members who were not currently students. All of the remaining staff from Camp #1 and all of the staff members from Camp #2 were enrolled at the university in which the camp was held.

What Engaged Staff Say, Feel, and Do

Three themes emerged related to the guiding question in this study: activation, participation, and connection. Activation represents the affective quality of enthusiasm and positivity, as well as a cognitive awareness of being fully present. Activation emerged from the daily journals; for example, several staff members from Camp #2 rated their daily engagement as a "10" and said, "I had lots of energy all day" or "I felt very active all day at camp." Another camp staff member with a high daily engagement rating felt "excited to go swimming and had tons of fun playing with the campers." Staff members who rated their engagement lower wrote descriptions, including "I just did not have a lot of energy today" and "I just kept zoning out." Activation, as it was represented in the daily journals, is a state in which staff feel energetic and enthusiastic about their work.

Focus group data also suggested that activation is a characteristic of engagement. One staff member, for example, described feelings of fatigue and burnout, but "playing with the kids gave me more energy" (Camp #1). Another said, "So I've noticed that time flies when you're more engaged, [be]cause I think you aren't worrying about the next thing you are going to do, you are focusing on the thing right in front of you" (Camp #2). Activation,

according to focus group participants, is also a catalyst for engagement. A focus group participant from Camp #1 described activation as something that “starts the spark” for an “all around good time”; another focus group participant from Camp #2 shared:

I think that also the energy level of other counselors also really makes a big difference, and like this afternoon, I’ve sort of been feeling under the weather today, and I was sitting...just waiting for pack up times, and then...we started to play campers vs. counselors medic ball..., so I went over there and started playing that, and since everyone was so into it, you know like I was able to get my energy back up and participate and have fun...

For the participants in this study, engaged staff feel enthusiastic and energetic, and this sense of activation is a characteristic of being fully present as well as a characteristic of feeling engaged with the day camp job.

Participation, on the other hand, was a theme that emerged as a behavioral component of engagement and is perhaps best represented by the following quote: “[Engaged staff members] are...excited to participate along with the campers. They aren’t bystanders, but they are in the activities, they are participating, they’re making sure there’s a good time for everyone” (Camp #1 focus group participant). Participation appeared to play a particularly important role in engagement when it was spontaneous or done over and above job expectations: “I was playing music...in the bus and the kids were really into lip syncing and watching me be goofy” (Camp #1 journal entry). A focus group participant from Camp #2 shared:

So when a camp staff is engaged in my mind is when we are interacting with the kids, if we are in the pool, we are actually inside the pool playing sharks n’ minnows...we are actually engaged, playing rather than just standing outside the pool just supervising.

Participation, then, is a behavioral dimension of engagement that is characterized by active involvement with the campers, spontaneity, and a willingness to go beyond required job responsibilities.

Connection emerged as a third characteristic of engagement. Similar to activation and participation, connection includes intrapersonal and behavioral components. The data from both the daily journals and the focus groups suggested that engaged staff connect with their campers, as well as with their peers at camp and outside of camp. The ways feeling connected with campers impacted engagement appeared most notably in the daily journals. There were several instances, particularly those recorded on Mondays, where staff would rate their engagement lower than normal and describe “feeling distant” from the campers because it was “the first day of the session” (Camp #2 staff journal). A staff member from Camp #2 wrote, “Mondays are sometimes hard to keep the kids’ attention,” while by Friday, that same staff member wrote, “I finally feel connected to my campers.” Connection to campers, as represented in the daily journals, emerged alongside activation and participation as a part of staff members’ overall sense of being fully present in their jobs.

Focus group participants also described similar ways that feeling connected fostered engagement: “So, for me, someone whose mind kind of wanders sometimes, when I’m engaged, with a kid, I just know that I’m really focused and my mind isn’t wandering I’m just really there with the kid...” (Camp #2). Focus group participants also described the importance of feeling connected with their peers as a feature of their overall engagement in their job. For example, one focus group participant shared, “It’s this huge thing to have a good relationship with fellow staff...like if someone messes up, it happens you know, but if it’s like consistent, everyone will see them differently and then it just creates tension among everyone” (Camp #1). Another focus group participant thought that engaged staff connect with one another outside of camp:

We work with each other for like seven hours a day...so when we hang out outside of camp too that helps us during camp so that we know each other pretty well, and like we are engaging with each other is also really important. (Camp #2)

Alongside activation and participation, connecting with campers and peers emerged as something engaged staff do. For example, when staff feel connected to campers, particularly one on one, they feel fully present in their job. More broadly, connection is also a feature of staff members' sense of engagement in their job. For the participants in this study, staff members who felt deeply connected to their job also felt connected to their peers.

Factors that Affect Engagement

Physical and emotional wellness, stress, and social connectedness were three factors that appeared to support or prevent engagement. The most frequently described factors that prevented engagement were those related to physical and emotional wellness. Physical stress, such as lack of sleep, inadequate nutrition, and illness, was a reason several staff members cited in their journal for disengaging during the day. In a journal entry from Camp #1, a staff member shared that he "...didn't sleep well so that slowed me down," while another one from that camp wrote "being sick at work can be hard." A staff member from Camp #2 noted in his journal that "Getting a good night's rest definitely affects my engagement throughout the week." A focus group participant from Camp #1 described the similar role of nutrition in fostering engagement:

I get really affected if I don't have lunch, it'll feel like a half hour went by when it's been two minutes. Especially because I was with the little tiny ones last year so I need a lot of energy to keep up, and these kids really do have a lot of energy so it's just really important to keep energized and well fed, and hydrated.

Stress due to program changes and camper behavior emerged as another factor that affected staff members' ability to feel present in their job. When explaining why her engagement was low one day, one staff member noted feeling "a little lost in the day's agenda" (Camp #1), while another staff member from this camp wrote, "It's hard to stay engaged when the day is so unorganized." A staff member from Camp #2 similarly noted in one journal entry that engagement was low because it was "a very hectic day with lots of schedule changes." Communication, a staff member from Camp #1 described in the focus group, played an important role in mitigating stress:

Communication is key for giving out information because if you know what you're doing for an afternoon, after lunch, that you can then just get into the activity, and you're engaged and you're having the kids do the activity whereas if you don't have the information, then you're learning it as you go so your whole attention isn't on helping the kids play and learn.

Situations involving difficult camper behavior were also stressful for camp staff, as represented in the daily journals and the focus groups. "When the kids were happy," wrote a staff member from Camp #1, "I felt more engaged." In contrast, a staff member from Camp #2 noted lower than normal engagement and wrote, "Campers didn't listen well today, were very excitable. It took a lot out of me." Camper behavior also seemed to affect staff members' more broad sense of engagement, that is, their connection to their camp staff member job in general. A staff member described in a focus group:

Sometimes you have a group where everyone is working so well together, everyone is listening to the counselor and things are just going great, and then other weeks you'll have these hyper little maniacs...I think those weeks when the kids are already coming in being a little difficult makes you want to engage with them less, I guess you just feel a little more on edge the whole time. (Camp #2)

Communication was an important factor that helped staff members deal with program changes and difficult campers:

We ask for advice for each other actually... I'm just like "I don't know how to deal with this... what should I do," and we kind of come up with the best solution as to how to help out a camper who's not participating. (Camp #2)

Difficult camper behavior, as well as programmatic changes and uncertainty, were represented in both the daily journals and in the focus group data as factors that prevented staff from feeling fully present in their job; communication appeared to mitigate these stressors day to day and served to connect staff members more deeply to their roles.

Social connectedness was the final theme that emerged as a factor that fostered engagement among the day camp staff. For example, in the daily journal, one staff member wrote, "Communication was high among the staff, so I was able to manage difficult campers better" (Camp #2), while another staff member, also from Camp #2, shared in a focus group,

It's nice to have this support group both outside the camp and at the camp, you can always talk to someone and we are all there for each other, and that's what makes it easier to engage with the campers and the camp as a whole.

These quotes represent several instances where staff members described how connections with their peers helped them feel more present in their day-to-day responsibilities and helped them connect more deeply with their role as a day camp staff member. As demonstrated in the previous section, connecting with camp staff peers outside of camp may also play an important role in fostering engagement.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to work towards building a model of camp staff engagement by exploring what engaged day camp staff say, feel, and do and to identify the factors staff members perceive affect their daily engagement and their overall connection to the day camp job in general. The results of this exploratory study suggest that frontline staff, particularly those working at university-based day camps, engage in ways that are different from how existing models imply they might engage in non-camp jobs or in college. A preliminary model for camp staff engagement and the implications for camp managers are discussed below.

What Engaged Staff Say, Feel, and Do

Data from this study indicated that engaged staff feel a sense of activation, participate directly with their campers, and connect one on one with their campers and their camp staff peers. These results are consistent with existing models of engagement, namely Schaufeli and colleagues' (2002) model of employee engagement and Handelsman and colleagues' (2005) model of college student engagement. The findings also demonstrated the ways camp staff, particularly those working directly with campers at a university-based day camp, might engage differently in this role than they might in a non-camp job or at school.

In the preliminary model proposed here (Figure 1), activation was a theme that represented feelings of energy, alertness, and enthusiasm. This theme overlaps with Schaufeli and his colleagues' (2002) model of employee engagement, particularly the components of vigor and absorption. Engaged employees, according to this model, feel energized (vigor) and are in a state of complete presence (absorption) during day-to-day tasks. Activation represents, both in the current study and in Schaufeli's model of employee engagement, a state that the individual experiences when deeply present in the task at hand. The relation between absorption and engagement is important because, according to Schaufeli and his colleagues (2002), the state of absorption mitigates burnout, which research has shown to negatively affect camp staff members' self-efficacy (e.g., Browne & Sibthorp, 2014) and growth opportunities (Duerden, Garst, et al., 2014) while working at camp.

One way the findings from this study differed from the Schaufeli model was that camp staff engagement did not appear to include anything related to Schaufeli's third domain, dedication to the job and the organization. It is possible that the short-term nature of camp staff employment: in this study, camp staff worked on average just more than a year at their respective camps, which might not allow sufficient time to identify with the organization and its values. McCole, Jacobs, Lindley, and McAvoy (2012) demonstrated that resident camp staff developed a sense of community toward the camp organization for whom they worked; thus, it is possible that dedication, as represented in the Schaufeli model of employee engagement, is more likely among resident camp staff than among day camp context staff.

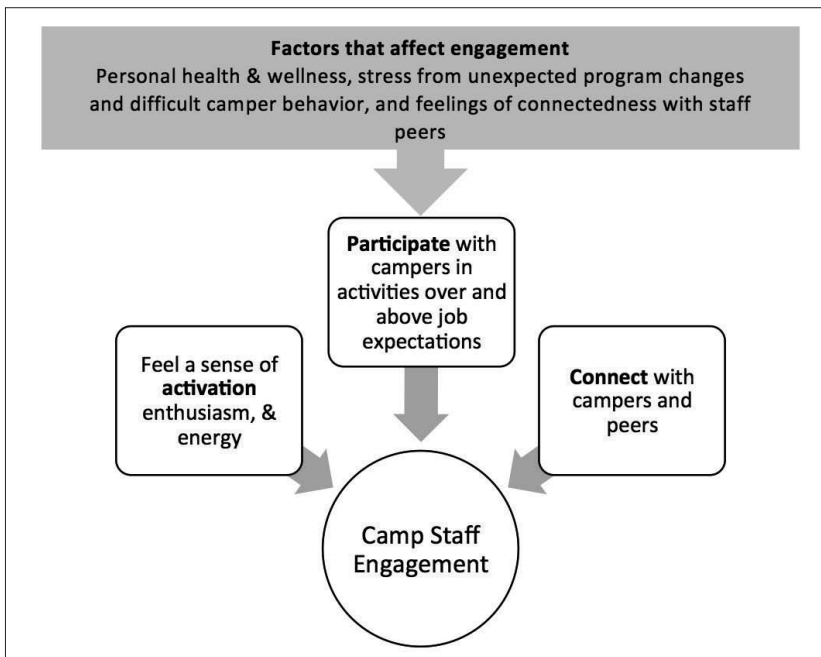


Figure 1. Preliminary Model of Camp Staff Engagement

Participation and connection, on the other hand, are themes presented in the preliminary model of camp staff engagement (Figure 1) that may align more directly with Handelsman and his colleagues' (2005) model of college student engagement. According to this model, engaged college students use a variety of skills known to promote academic success (e.g., effective note taking) and participate by interacting with the instructor and their peers about course material in and outside of class. In this study, participants reported feeling more engaged when they participated in activities with their campers; some even described specific strategies (e.g., asking campers about their personal interests) they used to connect one-on-one with campers. Although these strategies are different from the skills an engaged college student might use in a typical class, they are strategies known to promote program quality in youth programs (Smith, Akiva, Arrieux, & Jones, 2006).

Additional research is necessary to determine the specific skills engaged day camp staff use during their daily work activities and to determine the extent to which these skills promote camp staff outcomes. Duerden, Witt, Garst and their colleagues' (2014) study of camp factors that promote and prevent the development of important workforce skills among camp staff suggests that administrative factors, such as communication and positive

feedback help staff benefit from their camp experience. With these findings in mind, it is possible that day camp staff might become engaged if they are trained in skills relating to communication and giving and receiving feedback.

Another interesting finding is how participants characterized all three themes—activation, participation, and connection—with a distinct orientation toward campers. Participants described feeling fully present when they were focused on and feeling enthusiastic toward their campers, when they participated with the campers in structured activities and unstructured time, and when they connected one on one with campers. Connection, because it also included an element of staff-to-staff member connection, was the only theme that was characterized by something other than a camper-oriented state or behavior.

Connection, as a defining characteristic of engagement, is another way the preliminary model of camp staff engagement (Figure 1) might differ from the existing models of employee engagement and college student engagement. Schaufeli and colleagues' (2002) model of employee engagement, for example, is characterized by vigor, absorption, and dedication. Dedication represents the employee's identification with the organization, its purpose, and its leadership, which, for the participants in this study, was not a defining characteristic of engagement (perhaps due to the short duration of their employment at camp). Vigor and absorption, as described by Schaufeli et al. (2002), align with the themes of activation and, to some extent, participation; however, the preliminary model presented here suggest that day camp staff engage more readily with their campers than with the camp as an organization.

The preliminary model also depicts a connection between staff members' connection with their campers and their overall wellness. First, staff members described lower levels of engagement at the start of each week when they received a new group of campers and higher levels of engagement toward the end of the week once their connections with their campers were better established. Second, difficult camper behavior appeared to mitigate engagement while positive one-on-one interactions with campers seemed to foster a sense of being fully present in the camp staff responsibilities. Among day camp staff, fluctuations in the camper population and difficult camper behavior are known sources of stress (Browne & Sibthorp, 2014) that affect staff members' personal well-being and, ultimately, their ability to engage in their work.

The final way staff members' engagement varied in relation to their personal wellness was when their physical and emotional health—particularly when their sleep, nutrition, and hydration—were compromised. This finding is consistent with Bakker's (2011) definition of optimal employee engagement, which is the alignment between employee resources (e.g., employees' goal orientation, available expertise, and personal health and wellness) and job resources (e.g., training, tools, administrative support, and other organizational factors). To Kahn (1990), engagement is the relation between the preferred self and the role in the organization. Models of college student engagement, such as Handelsman et al.'s (2005) model, do not directly address the role of personal wellness. According to Kahu (2013), though, college student engagement includes a holistic domain, which includes the students' past experiences students' internal processes that evolve over time and vary in intensity based on the environment context. This study adds to existing research on camp staff by highlighting the importance of personal health and wellness and the myriad health-related factors that might impact camp staff engagement.

Implications for Practice and Research

The findings of this study have several implications managers of university day camp programs might consider. First, the results of this study suggest that staff members' social connections may be one way camp administrators can foster health and, ultimately, camp staff engagement. Studies by Whitacre and Farmer (2013) and McCole and his colleagues (2012) support this result by connecting sense of community to beneficial personal and organizational outcomes among residential camp staff; however, staff working at day camps may have less opportunities to interact informally with their peers than resident camp staff.

Participants in this study described the important ways feeling connected to their peers fostered engagement in their job. Therefore, day camp managers might consider ways to facilitate a sense of community among day camp staff as a means to promote staff members' well-being, which in turn will allow staff to engage more readily in their job.

Second, the results of this study also point to the importance of physical and emotional health among day camp staff, as deficits in these areas might hinder optimal engagement. Based on these results, camp administrators might consider ways (e.g., encourage hydration, provide healthy snacks, schedule breaks throughout the day for staff to rest) to support frontline staff members' physical and emotional health throughout the summer. Managers might also consider training staff in what Edwards, Henderson, and Campbell (2013) call "presenteeism" by equipping staff with mindfulness and stress reduction techniques. Future research should explore the connection between staff mindfulness and stress on their ability to engage in their work.

Finally, staff members' orientation toward their campers emerged from this study as a significant characteristic of engagement. This finding suggests that the staff-camper relationship is essential in fostering engagement. Therefore, managers might consider providing their staff strategies to help them build and maintain healthy relationships with camp participants. These strategies may be particularly salient in the day camp setting, where there is typically a high degree of camper turnover.

Conclusion

This study takes the first step toward building a model of camp staff engagement. By examining day camp staff working at university-based day camps, the findings contribute to existing camp staff literature by providing insight into a setting in which staff might engage differently than they would in a non-camp job or in a university class. For the participants in this study, camp staff engagement can be characterized by a state of activation, participation directly with campers, and feelings of connection to campers and camp staff peers. Personal health and well-being, which appears to vary in relation to camper connectedness and staff members' physical and emotional health, may be factors that support or inhibit feeling fully present as well as engagement in the day camp staff role in general. Further research is necessary to better understand engagement among staff working at day camps at locations other than university campuses, as well as among staff working at resident camps.

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