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Connection Between Camps and Social Emotional Learning in Middle School

Annie E. Lochridge

University of Akron

Honors Research Paper

Fall 2021

Abstract

The purpose of this project is to generate a survey instrument grounded in existing scholarship to explore middle grades teachers' experiences and attitudes connecting camp and students' social emotional learning (SEL). The literature review gathered information about SEL, the importance of SEL, Ohio's SEL standards, camp's historical context, and students' and teachers' perceived advantages and disadvantages of camp. After drafting the survey instrument, three practicing middle level Ohio teachers were surveyed on its design using Google Forms. Participants were selected based on Ohio SEL standard familiarity, participation in school camping trips, and experience teaching in the middle grades. The pilot survey featured 21 questions about teacher experiences and motives regarding camp, its SEL impact, potential camp and Ohio SEL standard alignment, and the impact of COVID-19 on SEL. Participants provided feedback about the survey via email or in-person interviews. Preliminary data shows that teachers enjoy camping experiences and are motivated by student growth. Students are more likely to practice team building and conflict resolution, try new things and develop a sense of adventure, exploration, and inquiry at camp than at school but more likely to develop positive self-esteem at school rather than camp. At both camp and school, students had increased independence levels and had opportunities to practice making friends. Many Ohio SEL competencies can be met by unique qualities and characteristics of camp. Teachers surveyed have not observed a significant impact on student SEL due to COVID-19. This research is useful for educators, curriculum decision makers, students, and even parents or community members.

Keywords: camp, middle level education, social emotional learning, adolescents, outdoor education

Connection Between Camps and Social Emotional Learning in Middle School

In elementary and middle school, I often received comments on my report card such as “very responsible”, “works well with others”, “kind and helpful to all students”, or “resolves conflict on her own”. For a long time, I thought that everyone got those comments on their report cards. But when we started discussing social and emotional learning in my middle level education undergraduate classes, I realized that I had been, in fact, very mature during my adolescence. As I began to reflect upon my childhood, I realized how much value my parents placed on outdoor recreation. My childhood was filled with family camping trips, rock-climbing adventures, swimming outside at the public pool, riding bikes with my childhood best friend, hiking with my cousins, boating with the dogs, and going to Girl Scout camp each summer. Even before they had kids, my parents spent most of their time outdoors. In fact, they met working as wilderness therapy staff at an experiential psychiatric hospital by leading wilderness therapy backpacking trips for juvenile delinquents. Another intentional choice my parents made, besides providing opportunities to explore the outdoors, was allowing my siblings and me to be independent. For as long as I can remember, I picked out my own clothes, did my own hair, packed my own bags for trips and sports practice, made my own lunches, chose extracurricular activities, decided what to play with my friends, when to do chores, etc. Some of the few activities my parents did require my siblings and me to try was Scouts and attending summer camp.

The first time I went to summer camp I was seven years old. My childhood best friend and I spent three days and two nights at sleep away camp and had the times of our lives cooking over a fire, playing group games, singing camp songs, boating, arching, crafting, eating in the

mess hall, learning camp skills, and making tie-dye shirts. To that seven-year-old, camp was a magical place and I couldn't wait to come back the next summer and the summers after that. As I got older, I transitioned from camper to counselor in training, to counselor and waterfront staff, and even to planning committee member.

I've always believed that my parents knew exactly what they were doing when they signed me up for camp 15 years ago. They saw how influential being outdoors was for the adolescents enrolled in the wilderness therapy programs they led and wanted to give their children the same opportunities for growth and development. Although there is no way to be sure, I've always felt that my experiences with camping and the outdoors were to credit for the comments my teachers wrote on my report cards regarding social and emotional development. So, when it came time for my Honors Research Project at The University of Akron, I knew that I wanted to better understand the relationship between camps and youth social and emotional learning.

For this project, I chose to investigate middle level teachers' attitudes and experiences regarding the connection between camps and social emotional learning. First, I conducted a literature review on related topics to build my background knowledge. Specifically, the importance of SEL for middle grades and how the State of Ohio incorporates SEL into the curriculum. Then, I researched camps with a focus on their historical development and impact on youth. Research will be shared about how camps can expand SEL, gains and pains of camps and outdoor education opportunities for students, and gains and pains of camps and outdoor education opportunities for teachers. Using my literature review, I then generated a survey instrument with questions aligned to emergent themes in my research. These themes included: teacher experiences and motives, camp SEL impact, potential alignment of camp to Ohio SEL

standards, or the impact of COVID-19 on SEL. Next, I piloted and field tested the survey instrument with three Ohio middle level teachers to gather preliminary data and feedback. My paper will follow this format.

Literature Review

Importance of Social Emotional Learning

The discussion of social emotional learning has increased in the educational profession. According to author M. Elias (1997), social and emotional learning (SEL) can be described as “the process through which children and adults develop the skills, attitudes and values necessary to acquire social and emotional competence” (p. 331). SEL skills are important to successfully navigate the world and identify and communicate emotions, identify needs, understand perspectives of others, solve conflict, set boundaries, identify healthy relationships, and acknowledge actions and consequences. People without social emotional skills may have trouble reaching compromise, regulating emotion, controlling impulses, and solving problems. Students without social and emotional skills are also more likely to skip school and to have little inclination to do what is asked of them. When teachers foster an environment that is supportive and encouraging, students are more likely to want to be at school and engage in learning (Taylor & Larson, 1999, p. 331). SEL skills are valuable in today’s world.

Social emotional learning is especially key for students in middle school because they are entering periods of change. During middle grades, students are transitioning into adolescence. This period in their lives marks changes students’ social lives, physical development, and understanding of the world. Middle school can be full of new and unknown things, and “[s]ome students thrive during this period; some lose a bit of momentum; others continue to wrestle with

the same difficult challenges faced since early childhood.” (Strahan & Poteat, 2020, p. 1).

Adolescents are also known for characteristics specific to their age group. For example, they begin to focus on forming new relationships, learning social norms, interacting with others in a way they feel is appropriate, observing themselves, becoming friends with other genders, craving autonomy, turning peers for guidance, feeling pressure from peers, and are learning who they are. Students may be creating new friend groups, engaging in conflicts they previously wouldn’t have, rebelling against teachers or adults, and succumbing to peer pressure. In addition, early adolescents are experiencing physical changes because of hormones and growth spurts. Middle level students are also transitioning from the concrete to abstract cognitive domain, often gaining a new understanding of morals and values and improving abstract thinking skills and better think “hypothetically, reflectively, and critically”. Many adolescents will need help navigating these new milestones, and social emotional skill instruction can help them do so (Taylor & Larson, 1999, p. 333). Early adolescents in the middle grades can greatly benefit from social emotional education.

CASTLE Social Emotional Research

The importance of social emotional learning has been studied in relation to the classroom. In a report titled “The Missing Piece: A Report for CASTLE” (2013), Civic Enterprises, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASTLE), and Peter D. Hart Research Associates John Bridgeland, Mary Bruce, and Arya Hariharan surveyed a group of nationally representative prekindergarten through twelfth grade educators to learn more about how SEL in schools can have a positive impact on student development (p. 4). The study concluded that “(1) Teachers Understand, Value, and Endorse Social and Emotional Learning for All Students; (2) Teachers Believe Social and Emotional Learning Helps Students Achieve in

School and Life; and (3) Teachers Identify Key Accelerators for Social and Emotional Learning.” This report defines social and emotional learning (SEL) as ways in which adults and youth cultivate aptitudes in five categories: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Bridgeland, Bruce & Hariharan, 2013, p.4). Over three fourths of teachers surveyed in this study feel that more attention should be focused on student SEL because of increased “workforce readiness (87 percent), school attendance and graduation (80 percent), life success (87 percent), college preparation (78 percent), and academic success (75 percent)” (Bridgeland, Bruce & Hariharan, 2013, p. 5). The study also found that 80 percent of teachers surveyed believe that increased SEL can solve the problematic negative school climate (Bridgeland, Bruce & Hariharan, 2013, p. 7). The report goes on to further dissect and discuss each of the three major findings listed above using statistics, charts and graphs, quotes from educators, and case studies. Towards the end of the report, there is a section titled “Paths Forward” that discusses what educators and policy makers can do to implement SEL in their school or community. For example, educators can relate SEL to lesson instruction, implement a school wide SEL program, assess the resources and needs of the school and district, and strengthen school-family and school-community connections (Bridgeland, Bruce & Hariharan, 2013, pp. 37-38). Likewise, policy makers are urged to provide financial support for teacher training in SEL, incorporate SEL into classroom, school, and district expectations, establish a standardized SEL curriculum relating to Common Core, continue financing SEL, promote SEL legislation, and continue researching SEL (Bridgeland, Bruce & Hariharan, 2013, pp. 39-41). This report makes a strong case for SEL implementation in the classroom.

Social and Emotional Learning in Ohio

The Ohio Department of Education (ODE) has established social and emotional learning standards for students in grades prekindergarten through twelfth (2019). ODE established five competencies as a framework for their SEL standards based on findings from “The Missing Piece: A Report for CASTLE” (described above). The ODE explains that SEL education must be “well-designed and well-implemented” to have beneficial results for students in “academics, behaviors, attitudes, and skills” as opposed to undesired “emotional distress, conduct, and drug use.” Social emotional learning and skill possession has been shown to bond learners to their school and community, ultimately leading to an increased chance of high school or postsecondary completion. ODE goes on to rationalize that SEL skills can also aid in coping with trauma, future employment, financial security, and obtaining higher education (Ohio Department of Education [ODE], 2019, pp. 4-5). So, in hopes to teach the ‘whole child’, the state of Ohio adopted SEL standards with input from “educators from all grade levels, school counselors, school administrators, higher education professionals, social workers, child psychologists (private and school-based) and curriculum specialists” (ODE, 2019, p. 5). Ohio’s SEL standards recognize “that the developmental progression of social and emotional learning...is contextually and culturally dependent.” (ODE, 2019, p.6) This is important because every student comes from a different background and has different life experiences, impacting their world view and understanding of SEL skills. For example, one student may come from a background that views personal interest as a critical factor when pursuing potential career paths, as described in standard A2. 2.c, but another student may come from a background that finds factors other than personal interest important when pursuing potential career paths. Standards are also designed to be progressively more complex and are sorted by “competency, topic, and standard.” The general skill, or main idea, that the standard addresses is called the “Competency”. Under each

“Competency” is a list of “Topics”, which describe a distinct ability that aligns with the competency. Under each “Topic”, standards are listed to explain what developmentally appropriate mastery of the skill looks like. The grade bands are K-2, 3-5, Middle Grades, and High School (ODE, 2019, p. 6). See Table 1 below. However, the standards do not tell teachers how to teach these topics and competencies.

Table 1*Standards Organization*

Competency A: Self Awareness ←				Competency
A1: Demonstrate an awareness of personal emotions ←				Topic
K-2 ←	3-5	Middle Grades	High School	Grade Band
A1. 1.a. Identify basic personal emotions	A1. 1.b. Identify a range of personal emotions	A1. 1.c. Identify, recognize and name personal complex emotions	A1. 1.d. Identify complex emotions as an indicator of personal state of well-being	Standard
A1. 2.a. Recognize emotions as natural and important	A1. 2.b. Identify that emotions are valid, even if others feel differently	A1. 2.c. Explain that emotions may vary based on the situation, including people and places	A1. 2.d. Analyze ways emotions impact the social environment	
A1. 3.a. Identify appropriate time and place to safely process emotions, independently or with the guidance of a trusted adult	A1. 3.b. Consider when it is necessary to process emotions in a safe place, independently or with the guidance of a trusted adult	A1. 3.c. Utilize appropriate time and place to safely process emotions, independently, with a trusted adult or with peers	A1. 3.d. Utilize appropriate time, place or support systems to reflect on personal emotions, independently, with a trusted adult or with peers	
A1. 4.a. Recognize that current events can impact emotions	A1. 4.b. Describe how current events trigger emotions	A1. 4.c. Explain how others' responses to current events can impact emotions	A1. 4.d. Analyze why current events may trigger an emotional reaction and identify ways to regulate a response	

Taken from page 7 of “Ohio’s K-12 Social and Emotional Learning Standards”, published by the Ohio Department of Education in 2019.

Camp and Social Emotional Learning

Children learn social and emotional skills in all areas of their life, not just at school. In the CASTLE study described above, 81 percent of teachers surveyed describe the biggest obstacle to SEL implementation being time (Bridgeland, Bruce & Hariharan, 2013, p. 8). While students do spend a large portion of their time in school, they also spend a large portion of their time enjoying other activities, such as participating in clubs, playing sports, spending time with friends and family, unstructured play time, and even attending camps. While not every child

attends camp, many do. Camp can be defined as “a place usually in the country for recreation or instruction often during the summer” and “a program offering access to recreational or educational facilities for a limited period of time” according to the online Merriam-Webster dictionary (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Camps have been proven to be a valuable environment to foster youth development, especially overnight camps (Wilson, Akiva, Sibthorp & Browne, 2019, p. 269). Additionally, skills learned at camp have been proven to transfer to other areas of children’s lives. Research by authors Cait Wilson, Thomas Akiva, Jim Sibthorp, and Laurie P. Browne (2019) hypothesize that this is likely because “summer camp programs tend to include experiential or project-based pedagogies and interest-driven topics; they tend to offer psychologically safe environments; and they tend to prioritize adult-youth and peer relationship building.” (p. 270). Camps are a unique part of children’s social and emotional learning landscape.

Historical Context of Camp

Camps have long been known for their important role they can play in personal development. An underlying message of character development and personal growth is a theme at almost every camp. In fact, “[t]he earliest camps were not-for-profit experiences directed by educators who saw opportunities to teach children in ways schools did not.” Initially, during the 1860s to 1920s, children in urban settings were brought into nature to escape the hardships of urban living by private school headmasters and undergraduates studying to be educators. According to research by authors C. Thurnber, M. Scanlin, L. Scheuler, and K. Henderson (2006), the first camp, the “Gunnery Camp”, was started on the Connecticut coast in 1861 for this reason (p.242). Other factors that sparked the emergence of the “youth camping movement” include “[d]issatisfaction with traditional schooling, concern for the physical, mental, and

spiritual health of children, a Protestant work ethic, the American pioneer spirit, interest in American Indian traditions, progressive educational theories, conservationism, and the philanthropic interest of social service organizations”. Later, from the 1920s to the 1950s, camps were supported by “patriotism and military traditions”. In the 1960s and 1970s, camping followed social trends and the characteristics of camp coupled with natural settings was perceived as a powerful means of therapy and rehabilitation. Today, camps are valued for their abilities to promote physical health as well as social and emotional health. (Thurber, Scanlin, Scheuler & Henderson, 2006, p. 242). While camps have always been known for their ability to impact personal development and growth, more and more research is surfacing that proves the long-held belief.

Student Gains and Pains of Camp

The American Camp Association is an organization dedicated to enhancing the quality of camps and youth development. Their mission “is enriching the lives of children, youth, and adults through the camp experience.” (American Camp Association [ACA], 2018, n.p.). Recently, the American Camp Association (ACA) has partnered with researchers and compiled several bodies of research to better understand the experiences and outcomes of camps. In ACA’s 2005 study titled “Directions: Youth Development Outcomes of the Camp Experience” 80 ACA accredited camps and over 5,000 families participated in data collection to help better understand how camps can impact the lives of children. Specifically, this study examined the benefits of camps for children ages 8-14. Confirming what many already believed, “[t]he results from this landmark study provide scientific evidence that camp—a unique educational institution—is a positive force in youth development.” Overall, camp is reported to increase camper confidence, self-esteem, social skills, friendship skills, independence, leadership, sense

of adventure, willingness to try novel activities, and to increase spirituality when focused on (ACA, 2005, p. 2). Because the study was designed to compare pre-camp, post-camp, and follow-up surveys, transferable learning can be observed.

Follow-up surveys for this study were conducted by both campers and parents six months after camp had ended and were asked the same questions as in the pre-camp survey. All three surveys ask campers and their parents to evaluate 10 selected constructs. The constructs were as follows: Self-Esteem, Independence, Leadership, Friendship Skills, Social Comfort, Peer Relationships, Adventure & Exploration, Environmental Awareness, Values & Decisions, and Spirituality. The constructs can be categorized into four main domains: Positive Identity (Self-Esteem and Independence), Social Skills (Leadership, Friendship Skills, Social Comfort, Peer Relationships), Physical & Thinking Skills (Adventure & Exploration and Environmental Awareness), and Positive Values & Spirituality (Values & Decisions and Spirituality). While experiences among campers differ, “the group results tell a consistent story of overall positive growth in all four domains and almost all of the ten constructs...there was substantial evidence that much of this growth was maintained six months later.” (ACA, 2005, pp. 4-5). In fact, 96% of campers report that “Camp helped me make new friends”, 94% reported that “Camp helped me get to know other campers who were different from me”, 92% reported that “Camp helped me feel good about myself”, and 74% reported that “At camp, I did things I was afraid to do at first.” Additionally, 70% of parents reported that “My child gained self-confidence at camp”, 63% reported that “My child continues to participate in activities learned at camp”, and 69% report that “My child remains in contact with friends made at camp” (ACA, 2005, p.1). This study helped spark further research.

The American Camp Association published another study titled “Inspirations: Developmental Supports and Opportunities of Youths’ Experiences at Camp” (2006) to examine developmental supports and opportunities offered at camp (p. 1). The survey used is based on the Youth Development Strategies, Inc. (YDSI) “Community Action Framework for Youth Development”. The study found that “optimal levels of supports and opportunities were highest for the domain of Supportive Relationships (69%); then Skill Building (41%); and then Safety (30%). Reports of optimal levels of Youth Involvement were low (5%)” (ACA, 2006, p. 1). This study further quantifies SEL benefits of camping.

Teacher Gains and Pains of Camp

There are many motivators and deterrents for educators when deciding to pursue field trips, especially outdoor experiences such as camps. The terms “outdoor educational experience”, “field experience”, “nature’s classroom”, “outdoor learning”, “experiential learning”, “place-based education”, or a combination of the above are interchangeable and represent an environment in which students interact with the natural environment as a means of experiential learning and/or social emotional learning. Sadly, field trips and experiential learning opportunities outside the classroom typically end after elementary school for most school districts (Behrendt & Franklin, 2014, p. 235). While field trips and experiential learning are greatly valued by educators, factors such as lack of alignment to learning goals, logistics, and preparing obstacles that can be discouraging. However, a compelling case for participation can also be made because of opportunities for real world-application of content, practice higher-order thinking skills, motivate learning, and to encourage SEL. Experiential learning varies depending on setting and opportunities available (Behrendt & Franklin, 2014, p. 236). There are many

motivators and barriers to teachers implementing experiential learning, especially outdoor educational learning such as attending a camp.

Teachers may choose to participate in field experiences outside of their classroom for a variety of reasons. The primary motivator is to benefit the students. Outdoor experiences can often be aligned to material being learned in subjects such as ELA, math, science, and social studies (Ray & Jakubee, 2018, p. 326). Additionally, “[e]xperiential learning is authentic, first-hand, [and] sensory-based”. These methods have all been shown to deepen learners’ understanding of a topic. Participating in experiential learning often motivates and interests students because they can see real-world application to what they are learning in school. Increased student motivation and interest in learning is encouraging to teacher and makes the overall educating of students more enjoyable for both parties involved (Behrendt & Franklin, 2014, p. 237). Additionally, some skills difficult to learn organically in a traditional classroom can be best learned outside the walls of a classroom subtly in the outdoors because of how closely real-life skills can be mirrored. (Ray & Jakubee, 2018, p. 326). Experiences outside the classroom can also “sharpen [student] skills of observation and perception by utilizing all their senses” (Behrendt & Franklin, 2014, p. 328). While students can make personal connections, find emotional support, and have positive interactions in school, the outdoors has been proven to enhance SEL. Interestingly, “[t]he calm of nature’s classroom further supports children’s imaginative play and the development of healthy relationships, and nature’s classroom becomes a place of positive learning for childhood education”. Field experiences usually have experiences that promote skills such as teamwork, collaboration, and communication with peers gives students a sense of accomplishment, boosting their belief in themselves. The associated physical activity, such as walking, hiking, climbing, etc., has also been shown to increase student belief in

themselves (Ray & Jakubee, 2018, p. 327). Overnight trips, such as camping, can benefit students even more than day trips. Overnight trips provide more time for relationships among students, teachers, and other staff to develop as well as more chances for students to experience freedom and independence. Teachers may also observe new techniques to teach content or broaden their classroom management ideas from camp staff (Behrendt & Franklin, 2014, p.238). While teachers can be drawn to spend time in nature's classroom, they can also be deterred.

Researcher M. Michie (1998) describes challenges "to successful field trips: 1) transportation; 2) teacher training and experience; 3) time issues such as school schedule and teacher's ability to prepare; 4) lack of school administrator support for field tips; 5) curriculum inflexibility; 6) poor student behavior and attitudes; and 7) lack of venue options" (Behrendt & Franklin, 2014, p. 239). Other challenges include teacher values or interest, financial support, chaperone coordination, and the perceived dangers of field trips. Parents, regulations, and policies often oppose trips, especially trips in the unknown of nature. The added stressors of student safety in a new setting, following guidelines, and possible fears of legal consequences only makes time spent outside of the traditional classroom less appealing (Ray & Jakubee, 2018, pp. 327-328). Unfortunately, funding is always another issue in education. Time spent outside the classroom requires the cost of transportation, facilities, activity experts, and fees from the programs themselves. Many schools cannot justify financing endeavors outside the classroom, especially outdoor based experiences, so the students and their families become responsible for meeting cost demands. Additionally, organizing transportation, accessing programs and field experiences, staffing, and record keeping are all additional duties associated with field trips and many teachers are already limited time and energy (Ray & Jakubee, 2018, p. 328). Some teachers also view trips outside the classroom as subtracting from valuable teaching time,

teaching content poorly, or misaligning with learning goals. Additionally, not all teachers are instructed on how to implement a field trip, so they will choose not to. Similarly, some teachers have limited knowledge or experience outdoors. Naturally, both qualities are less likely to lead to outdoor experiential learning opportunities. Teachers also may worry about behavior management in a new setting, especially if the experience is outside. Teachers usually need help in facilitating field trips, so volunteers are necessary. These chaperones must be qualified, helpful, and ready to be outdoors. Unfortunately, there usually isn't an abundance of helpers at the teacher's disposal for field experiences (Behrendt & Franklin, 2014, p. 239). While outdoor educational opportunities can be excellent, there are often challenges.

My Research

Methodology

After conducting a review of existing literature, I investigated my theory of there being a connection between camps and SEL. To further my investigation, I focused my research on middle grade teachers' attitudes and experiences regarding camps and students' SEL. I gathered my data using a survey instrument grounded in what I had learned from my literature review. Then, I piloted and field tested the survey instrument with the help of three Ohio middle school teachers. Participants were selected based on the grade level they teach, their active teaching in Ohio, and participation in a school sponsored camping experience. I surveyed the three selected teachers using a brief, 21 question survey with short answer responses and rating scales. Teacher responses were recorded automatically by Google Forms. The automated recordings of teacher responses and survey questions from Google Forms are shown in the Appendix. After the teachers completed the survey, I interviewed them to gain insight into the survey itself. They

could choose how they wanted to be interviewed for feedback: via email, via phone call, or via in-person.

The piolet survey helped me gather initial data about middle grades teachers' attitudes and experiences connecting camps and students' social emotional learning. For my research, I am interested in middle school teachers in the state of Ohio that have participated in some sort of overnight camping experience with their students. I decided that middle school teachers would be excellent evaluators of adolescent SEL growth at camp because they spend a significant amount of time with this population, are familiar with Ohio SEL standards, and observe students at camp and in the classroom. The three teachers (Teacher A, Teacher D, Teacher S) I received responses from were conveniently sampled, having taught at the middle school I attended, and all had chaperoned students on overnight camping trips and were familiar with Ohio SEL standards. Although I did use data from teachers that taught at the middle school I attended, I had no idea how they would respond or what the climate is like at the school now. This made responses even more intriguing and helpful because I am somewhat familiar with the camping experience and school they were referring to. I predicted that there would be a mixture of results, but that results would prove that camping experiences can be a positive instrument for student SEL.

The piolet survey instrument has 21 questions that were categorized into four main topics. Main topics are as follows: Teacher Experiences and Motives (Appendix A), Camp's Social Emotional Impact (Appendix B), Potential Alignment Between Camp and Ohio SEL Standards (Appendix C), and COVID-19 Impact on SEL (Appendix D). To gather data about Teacher Experience and Motives, I asked about their background, their camp experiences with their students, and what they thought of their experiences. To better understand Camp's Social and Emotional Impact, I asked them to use their experiences about the top skill or understanding

learned by students at camp, to rate student SEL at camp, and to rate student SEL at school. Questions asked about Camp's Potential Alignment to Ohio SEL Standards were about existing school SEL programming and how camp can meet each of the five Ohio SEL standard domains. Although not directly related to camp, I did want to take this opportunity to record teachers' perceptions of the COVID-19 pandemic. I asked about how they think COVID-19 and Social Distancing will impact students' SEL, the likelihood of their school continuing overnight camping experiences post COVID-19, and about students' relationship with the natural world.

After field testing the pilot survey with the same group of teachers, I interviewed the participants to gather feedback. Teachers had the option about how they wanted to conduct the interview portion. Two selected emails and one selected an in-person interview. I asked them the following questions:

1. What recommendations would you make to enhance the survey?
2. Would you change anything about the survey?
3. What would you keep the same about the survey?
4. What questions did you like from the survey?
5. Did you like completing the survey using Google Forms?

In total, the pilot survey and responding to interview questions took about 15-20 minutes of teachers' time.

Preliminary Results: Teacher Experiences and Motives

I surveyed three teachers working at an Ohio middle school about their experiences and motives using short answer responses. Teacher A is a 6th grade science teacher at North Canton

Middle School (NCMS) in their 23rd year of teaching. Teacher D is an 8th grade STEM teacher that has worked at NCMS for 20 years. This teacher noted that their educational career began as a horseback riding and summer camp counselor in their teen years. Teacher S is a 6th grade teacher also at NCMS and in their 27th year of teaching. They noted that 26 out of 27 years have been spent teaching 6th grade (see Figure A1 in Appendix A). The teachers report that the 6th grade class used to attend a 3-day, 2-night sleep away camping experience at FFA Camp Muskingum in Carrollton, Ohio each fall. Teacher S shares that the 6th grade participated in this experience for over 20 years, but last year it was decided to only do a day trip to Camp Wyoah. Teacher D adds that this was due to financial restrictions. The overnight camp experience “used Ohio Science Standards to conduct Nature Activities on Earth, Physical, & Life Science”, shares Teacher A. Teacher S adds that camp also “focused on team building activities, nature classes, and crafting” (see Figure A2 in Appendix A). Overall, camp was “fun-filled for the students and a great educational experience,” says Teacher S. When asked if they enjoyed the overnight, outdoor school sponsored youth camping experience with their students, Teacher D responded “YES, I loved it... You get to connect with your students in a completely different fashion. They see the teachers as humans, and relationships/trust is built in a way that is different from the daily 50 minutes of formal classroom instruction.” Teacher S agreed, explaining that “It is fun to see the kids in a different and more unstructured environment, exploring the outdoors. When attending as a team, the camaraderie developed between the students and the staff is a very positive experience.” However, Teacher A highlighted some of the challenges that accompanied the camping trip. Teacher A explained that teachers had to stop chaperoning camp because of overwhelming student and parent concern and many phone calls were made by students wanting to go home due to anxiety. Discipline and behavior issues were also common, such as being loud

at night. Teachers also lost sleep dealing with anxious or troublesome students. Teacher A shared that it is difficult to voluntarily spend time away from family without financial compensation, only to return to angry parents. Although parents and students were required to sign a code of conduct stating that they understand the expectations and rules of camp, parents still complained about disciplinary actions their student received. For example, “[e]ven at Day Camp this year, a student purposely overturned a canoe and was given a 1 hour detention. The counselor gave implicit directions and said the muddy water was not safe for swimming. The parent of the child refused, complained and eventually pulled their child out of NCMS because of this consequence” (see Figure A3 in Appendix A). Although all three teachers work at the same school and have had chaperoned the same 6th grade camping experiences, their responses differed.

Preliminary Results: Camp’s Social Emotional Impact

Participants were asked to share how camp can impact students SEL using one short answer response and 12 rating scales. Teacher S shares that the top skill or understanding that students gained from this camping experience in comparison to the regular classroom is “how to use nature as a classroom for learning skills, learning about new concepts, and learning about themselves.” Teacher D shares that students gained independence because “when you get out of the cocoon of your day-to-day life, you find out who you really are.” Teacher A wrote that although some of the classes offered at camp aligned well with science standards, some did not, and “[a]dministration did not feel they could give up 3 days of instructional time for the level of classes offered.” (see Figure B1 in Appendix B). The next 12 questions asked teachers to rate statements on a scale of 1-5 (one being strongly disagree and five being strongly agree). Using my prior research, I selected 6 skills and/or areas in which camp could meet Ohio SEL standards. The areas are as follows: developing a positive self-esteem, increased level of independence,

learn how to and have an opportunity to make new friends, practice team building and conflict resolution, try new things, and develop a sense of adventure, exploration, and inquiry. The first six statements asked the teachers to rate the areas based on their experiences at camp and the next six asked for ratings based on their experiences at school for comparison. For example, one question was “Based on my experience, this camp helps students to try new things,” and the comparison question was “At school, students are likely to try new things.”

Data shows that the three teachers believe that students are most likely to try new things and develop a sense of adventure, exploration, and inquiry at camp out of all the skills and areas asked about. Based on their experiences, the teachers reported as follows: disagree, agree, strongly agree that camp helps student develop positive self-esteem; disagree, agree, strongly agree that camp increases student independence; disagree, agree, strongly agree that camp allows students to learn how to and have an opportunity to make new friends; disagree, strongly agree, strongly agree that camp helps students practice team building and conflict resolution; agree, strongly agree, strongly agree that camp helps student try new things; and agree, agree, strongly agree that camp helps student develop a sense of adventure, exploration, and inquiry (see Figures B2- B6 in Appendix B). Based on preliminary results, camp is proving to have an impact on middle grade SEL.

Data shows that the three teachers believe that students are most likely to show positive self-esteem and try new things at school out of all the skills and areas asked. Based on their experiences, the teachers reported as follows: agree, agree, strongly agree that student show positive self-esteem at school; disagree, agree, strongly agree that student have more independence at school; were neutral, neutral, and strongly agreed that students learn how to and have opportunities to make new friends at school; disagree, disagree, and strongly agree that

students practice team building and conflict resolution at school; disagree, strongly agree, strongly agree that students are likely to try new things at school; and were neutral, neutral, and strongly agree that students develop a sense of adventure, exploration, and inquiry at school (see Figures B7-12 in Appendix B). Preliminary findings show that middle level teachers believe that school can impact student SEL.

Data from the questions regarding camp can be compared to the questions regarding school. Based on the data collected, these teachers' experiences prove that students are more likely to practice team building and conflict resolution, try new things, and develop a sense of adventure, exploration, and inquiry at camp than at school. However, teachers reported that students were more likely to develop a positive self-esteem at school rather than camp. Increased independence levels and learning how to and having opportunities to make new friends were just as likely to occur at camp as at school based on preliminary data. Both school and camp prove to aid students' SEL.

Preliminary Results: Potential Alignment Between Camp and Ohio SEL Standards

Another section inquired about the participation of the teachers' school in SEL programming and how camp can align to Ohio SEL standards using short responses. Teacher A explains that SEL "is done through of WEB program. "Where Everyone Belongs"... [t]hey sponsor dances and activities to foster emotional connectivity." Teacher D adds that WEB is a "committee of teachers and students to help with the transition from elementary to middle school". As shared by Teacher S, "there are activities that students could choose to participate in that would foster their social emotional health", none of the teachers reported that NCMS implements mandatory school-wide SEL programming (see Figure C1 in Appendix C). Because my literature review proved that camp can foster SEL in a plethora of ways, the next question

asked how camp can display the five competencies addressed by Ohio SEL standards (A: Self-Awareness, B. Self-Management, C. Social-Awareness, D. Relationship Skills, and E. Responsible Decision-Making). Teacher D described that “[s]omething as simple as rolling a sleeping bag Hits all these components... This is a skill most kids don’t have. They become aware that they don’t know everything, they need to take care of their stuff, other kids might know how to roll a bag, asking for help, and choosing to roll it as opposed to stuffing it in a garbage bag...which happens too!” Similarly, Teacher S shares that “discovering their likes and dislikes...packing their overnight bags and managing their belongings...through the team-building activities...when they are assigned a field group, an instructor, and bunkmate...choosing classes and the activities that they want to experience” are all ways that Ohio SEL standards can be met uniquely at camp. Teacher A points out that “[c]ounselors worked very hard to get students to cooperate and try new things,” but ultimately, “[c]onfident students did and anxious students did not” (see Figure C2 in Appendix C). Preliminary results prove that teachers believe that camp can meet Ohio SEL standards.

Preliminary Results: COVID-19 Impact on SEL

The final three questions ask about the potential impact of COVID-19 and students’ relationships with the natural world. When asked how they think social distancing and COVID-19 will impact students socially and emotionally, Teacher S shared that district buildings “have not had to take significant measures to socially distance, so at this time, it is felt that there has been no impact”. Teacher A agrees that there has not been much impact in the classroom because NCMS has remained open this year. They add that while students did not attend Day Camp this fall, they will next year. However, Teacher D shares that “[a]s a parent and teacher I have seen very emotionally stable kids become depressed and anxious from COVID-19 and quarantine.

They are becoming more and more isolated and relying on technology to stay connected, which helps... but it is a poor replacement for actual physical interaction” (see Figure D1 in Appendix D). Teachers A and S do not believe that NCMS will be more supportive of an overnight, outdoor sponsored youth camping experience after COVID-19. This year the day camp experience was canceled, but Teacher S states that students will be attending next year. Teacher A is unsure about future participation, reiterating discouraging challenges that usually accompany the trip. For example, “[t]here are too many parents that are quick to complain if their child is held accountable for their actions. Teachers cannot be expected or required to sleep overnight in the same room with children. Teachers cannot be expected to supervise showers etc. These are activities only a camp counselor should supervise.” Teacher D adds that “[i]f teachers wanted to be camp counselors, they would have perused that field.” Although Teacher D hopes that NCMS will renew the overnight experience, it is unlikely due to budget cuts because “[d]ay camp provides all the outdoor learning opportunities without the “down time” that brings forth discipline problems & anxiety” (see Figure D2 in Appendix D). The final question asked about students’ relationships with the natural environment and world. Teacher S shared that some students acclimate to being outdoors very well and others take some time, but “[o]verall, the kids have a very positive experience [at camp].” Teacher A adds that students’ familiarity and relationship with the natural world isn’t always in their control. They add that “[p]arents who value these activities provide many opportunities for their children. Parents without the resources or desire do not. Many Universities are reaching out to us as educators to provide resources within the classroom. OSU has provided incubators and brooders for us to raise live chicks every year.” Teacher D describes most of their students as “indoor-sie” (see Figure D3 in Appendix D).

The three teachers shared interesting findings regarding COVID-19 SEL impact on students and their relationships with nature.

Piolet Survey: Teacher Feedback

After completing the piolet survey, I briefly interviewed participants to gather feedback about the piolet instrument. I asked the following questions:

1. What recommendations would you make to enhance the survey?
2. Would you change anything about the survey?
3. What would you keep the same about the survey?
4. What questions did you like from the survey?
5. Did you like completing the survey using Google Forms?

Teachers A and S shared feedback using email, and I met in person with Teacher D. Overall, the teachers liked the survey. They felt that the length, Google Forms format, open ended questions, and minimal time requirement were all positive aspects of the piolet instrument. Teacher S shares that I could have clarified a bit more that I was looking for responses based on the overnight camping experiences because NCMS has recently only been attending day camp. Teacher A shares that an interesting question to include on future surveys would be “Do you think it is appropriate to expect teachers to spend the night supervising students?” Teacher D said I could add a multiple-choice question prior to the rating scales with answer choices of the skills and areas learned at camp and school and an option to be a “fill in the blank” to see what participants would select. Teacher S “thought the survey was thorough in that it included ideas that encompassed social, emotional, and academic sides of the child...it was insightful to include questions that addressed the child’s behavior, choices and level of participation at camp as

opposed to at school.” and “appreciated being permitted to complete it during...freetime.” Teacher A adds that they “liked that [I was] interested in getting students into Nature. Many students do not have the resources to do this.” Teacher D also shared that they think outdoor education is so important and that it’s a shame that it can’t be incorporated more into schools and will probably appear even less post-pandemic. Overall, the feedback about the piolet survey was helpful and offered some excellent insight.

Implications

My preliminary findings have many implications. The topic of SEL is just beginning to enter mainstream teaching. As the COVID-19 pandemic continues, SEL is going to increase in importance, especially for adolescents. I would be interested to gather opinions from more teachers about the impact COVID-19 is having on their students’ SEL, especially as the pandemic drags on. I’d also be curious to see long term impacts of COVID-19 on SEL. My preliminary study proves a connection between positive SEL development and the natural world. Although the sample size is small, teachers seem to enjoy spending time with students at camp and are motivated to participate in outdoor education because of the student benefits. Preliminary findings suggest that there are many aspects of SEL that camp can help develop. Likewise, results share that camp can align to all Ohio SEL competencies in some way. While teachers shared that they enjoyed experiences, they also explained many barriers accompanying school sponsored outdoor education. Data suggests that a decreasing importance is being placed on outdoor education, such as camping, and field trips in general.

The next phase of this research would be to improve the piolet survey using teacher feedback and obtain a larger sample-size for data collection. Future researchers could choose to use on my themes to further investigate the topic of camps and SEL. Because Ohio SEL

standards are just as important as content area standards, teachers can use preliminary research and data to justify district support of outdoor educational opportunities, such as camping trips. Educators could also note the underlying theme of SEL development through experiences with nature and make changes to their teaching practice and classroom. Changes could include teaching outside, having plants in the room, using field notebooks, leading after-school nature clubs, etc. Personally, I will use the study's implications in my own middle level teaching practice to continue advocating for outdoor education and SEL to teach the 'whole' child. Even if my district does not participate in outdoor education, I have done my own research to justify practices that could include occasionally teaching outdoors, allowing for natural light, having class plants or animals, conducting nature observation walks on school grounds, and connect my lessons to real-world experiences. I can also connect students, families, educators, and schools to organizations, professional development, research, and funds that make outdoor education more accessible. Preliminary findings have many implications.

Social emotional learning is defined by CASTLE (2017) as “the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships and make responsible decisions” (ODE, 2019, p. 4). While SEL is critical for everyone, it is especially critical for adolescents because this age group often struggles with their changes in hormones and bodies, social situations and peer expectations, and transitioning from the concrete to abstract cognitive domain (Taylor & Larson, 1999, p. 333). Using research from CASTLE, the Ohio Department of Education decided to implement developmentally appropriate SEL standards for students in grades K-12 to aid competencies in self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and

responsible decision-making. While SEL does occur in a school setting, social and emotional skills can also be learned in other settings, such as camp settings (Wilson, Akiva, Sibthorp & Browne, 2019, p. 270). Although I could only describe the feeling I got from camp as “magical” at seven years old, I now can describe what I was feeling as exponential social and emotional growth. The American Camp Association quantified SEL and positive youth impact possibilities at camp in their study “Directions: Youth Development Outcomes of the Camp Experience” (2005) (ACA, 2005, p. 1). The ACA published further research titled “Inspirations: Developmental Supports and Opportunities of Youth’s Experiences at Camp” (2006) that explained how SEL skills can be improved through unique opportunities and supports offered at camp (ACA, 2006, p. 3). However, scholarship also existed explaining barriers to outdoor educational opportunities (Ray & Jakubee, 2018, p. 323). My pilot survey instrument gathered data about middle level teachers’ attitudes and opinions on the topic. Themes of the pilot survey included teacher experiences and motives involving camp, camp’s SEL impact, potential alignment between camp and Ohio SEL standards, and the impact of COVID-19 on SEL. Overall, the preliminary results imply that teachers support the camping experiences, although there are some challenges that can accompany trips. Data also showed that the teachers believed camp can have a positive impact on SEL and be aligned with Ohio SEL standards. They also shared that, based on their experiences, they do not believe that COVID-19 will have an impact on their students’ SEL as of now. In the future I hope to continue advocating for SEL through outdoor educational experiences, such as school sponsored camping trips. Although my parents didn’t have the research to explain their motives, they certainly were on to something when they signed their seven-year-old daughter up for Girl Scout summer camp.

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Appendix A

Piolet Survey Questions and Responses: Teacher Experiences and Motives

All survey responses were collected using Google Forms. All figures are screenshots of Google Forms responses. The first response is from Teacher A, the second is from Teacher D, and the last is from Teacher S for all Figures.

Figure A1

Briefly tell me about yourself- grade and content area, years teaching, school currently teaching at, and anything else you feel necessary.

3 responses

I am a 6th grade Science teacher at North Canton Middle School. This is my 32nd year as an educator.

I teach 8th grade STEM classes. I am in my 20th year of teaching at north canton middle school. I started my educational career as a horseback riding instructor and summer camp counselor as a teenager.

I am a sixth grade math teacher at the North Canton Middle School, North Canton City Schools. This is my 27th year of teaching, all of which but one year has been with sixth grade.

Figure A2

Describe the overnight, outdoor school sponsored youth camping trip your grade has attend (time of year, camp type, goals and purpose, length of stay, activities, etc.) and anything else you feel is important for me to know.

3 responses

Our Middle School use to attend the Muskingum FAA Camp in Carrollton, Ohio. We stayed for 2 nights and 3 days.
We would attend in late October and early November. Camp counselors used Ohio Science Standards to conduct Nature Activities on Earth, Physical , & Life Science.

We used to go to Camp Muskingum in the fall for 6th grade camp. That trip has been cancelled for budgetary concerns. This was a 2 night sleep away camp that focused on team building activities, nature classes, and crafting.

Our school has typically attended Camp Muskingum for over 20 years. The three days/two night experience was fun-filled for the students and a great educational experience. Last year it was decided to not have an overnight experience for the kids. Instead we attended a one-day camp at Camp Wynoah.

Figure A3

Do you enjoy going to the overnight, outdoor school sponsored youth camping experience with your students? Why or why not?

3 responses

The teachers stopped attending the overnight part of camp because of excessive anxiety of students and parents.
Many students were opting out and many that attended were asking to call home due to anxiety. We also had problems with discipline. A few students who refused to be quiet at night ruined it for the rest. Teachers were having to stay up most of the night with behavior issues, & anxiety issues. When students were disciplined as per the code of conduct signed by every student and parent, parents complained. On several occasions parents complained to principals regarding any discipline at camp from teachers or counselors.

Even at Day Camp this year, a student purposely overturned a canoe and was given an 1 hour detention. The counselor gave implicit directions and said the muddy water is not safe for swimming. The parent of the child refused, complained and eventually pulled their child out of NCMS because of this consequence.

Teachers were attending camp without pay and being away from their families.
Asking teachers to do this and then return to parent complaints resulted in teachers and administration cancelling overnight camp. We now only attend day activities and do not stay over night.

YES, I loved it... You get to connect with your students in a completely different fashion. They see the teachers as humans, and relationships/trust is built in a way that is different than the daily 50 minutes of formal classroom interactions.

It is fun to see the kids in a different and more unstructured environment, exploring the outdoors. When attending as a team, the camaraderie developed between the students and the staff is a very positive experience.

Appendix B

Piolet Survey Questions and Responses: Camp's Social Emotional Impact

All survey responses were collected using Google Forms. All figures are screenshots of Google Forms responses. The first response is from Teacher A, the second is from Teacher D, and the last is from Teacher S for all Figures except the graphs. Graphed responses do not tell what teacher responses with what answer, only what percent of answers the teachers chose.

Figure B1

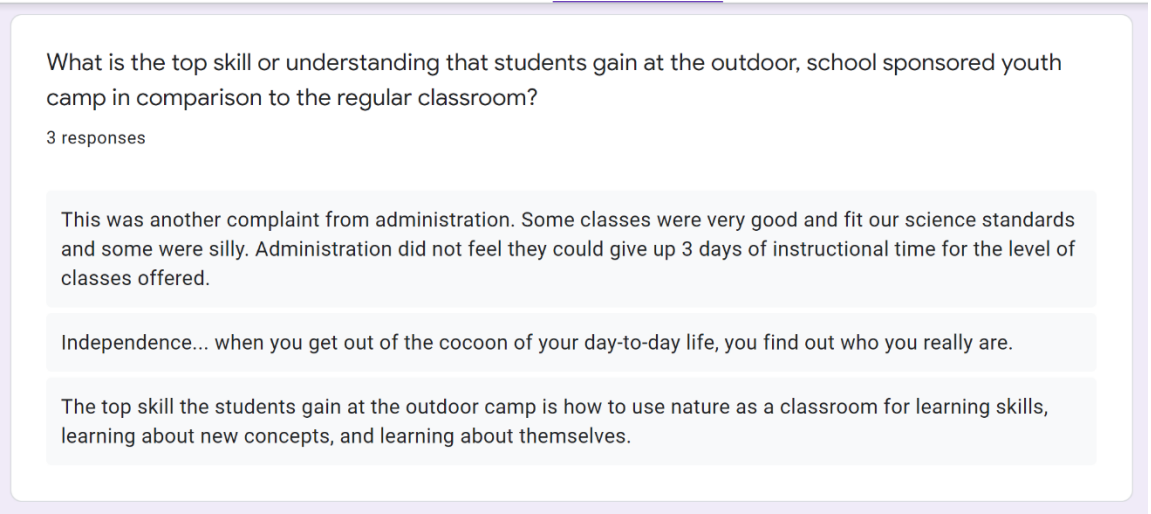


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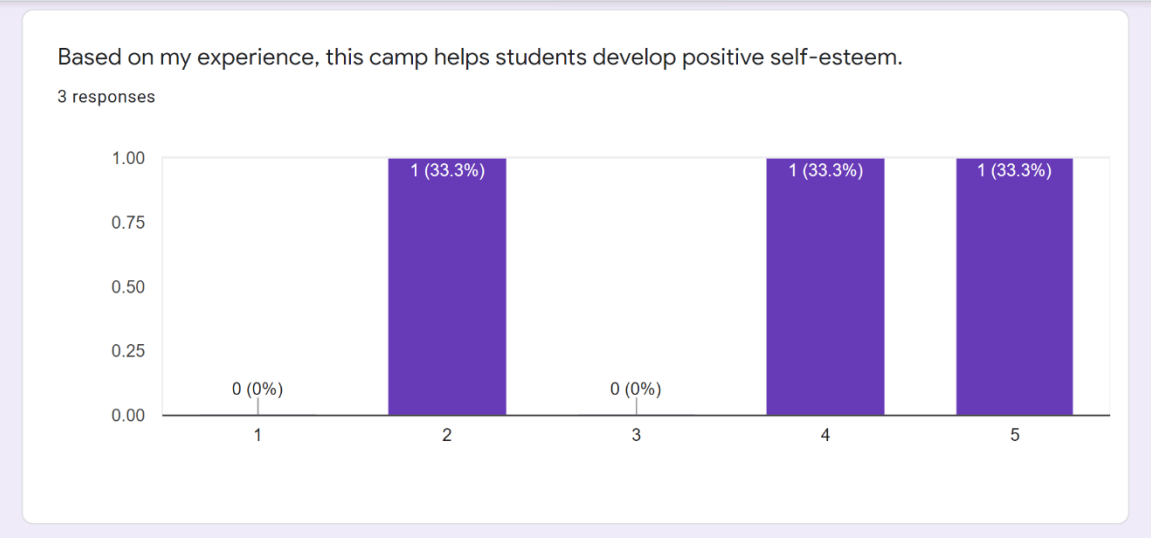


Figure B3

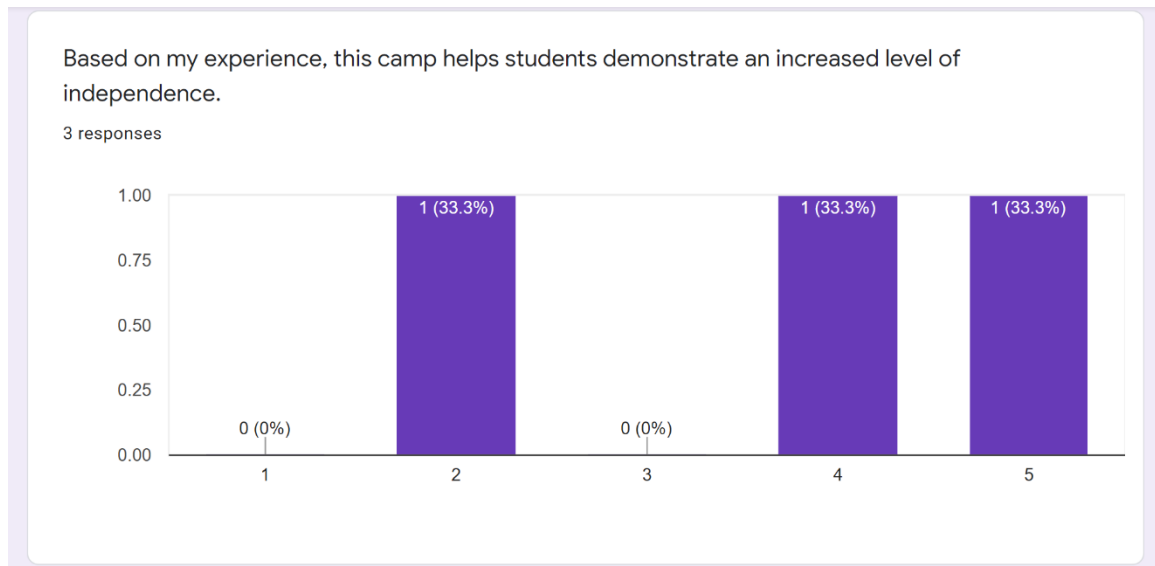


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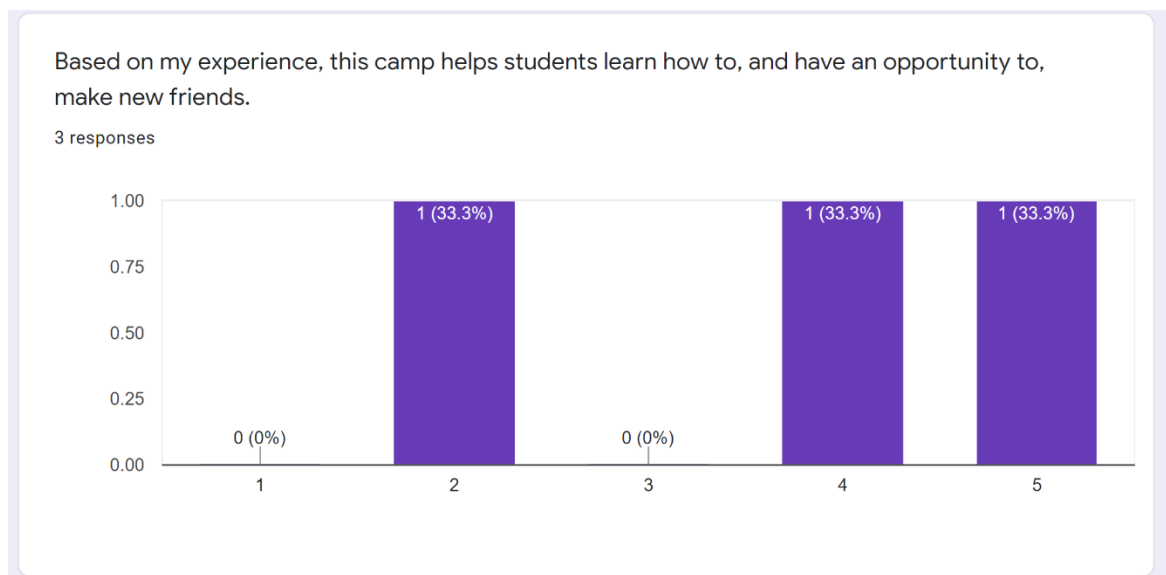


Figure B5

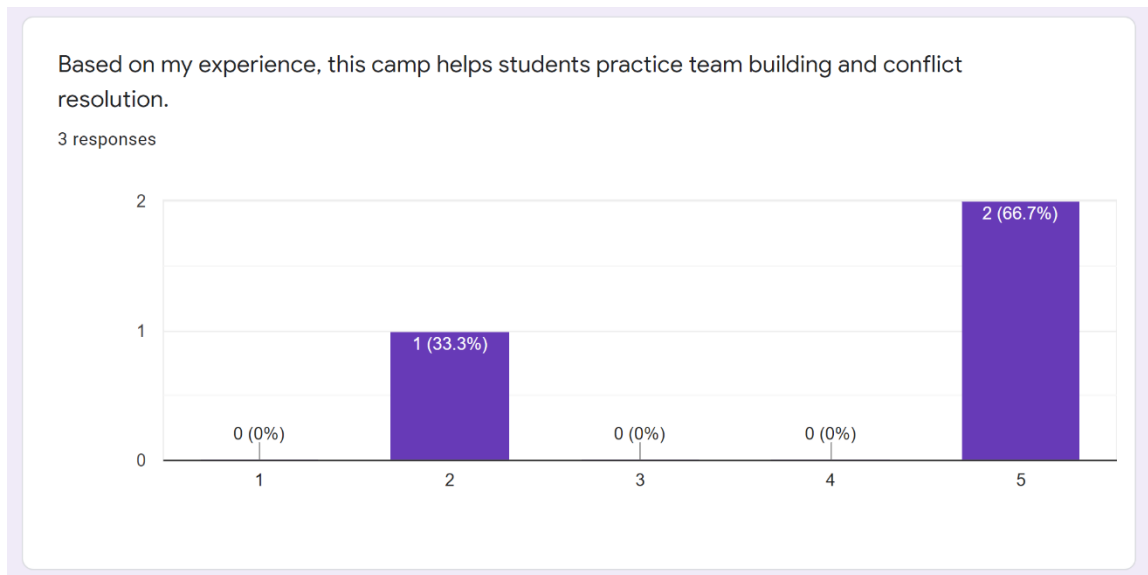


Figure B6

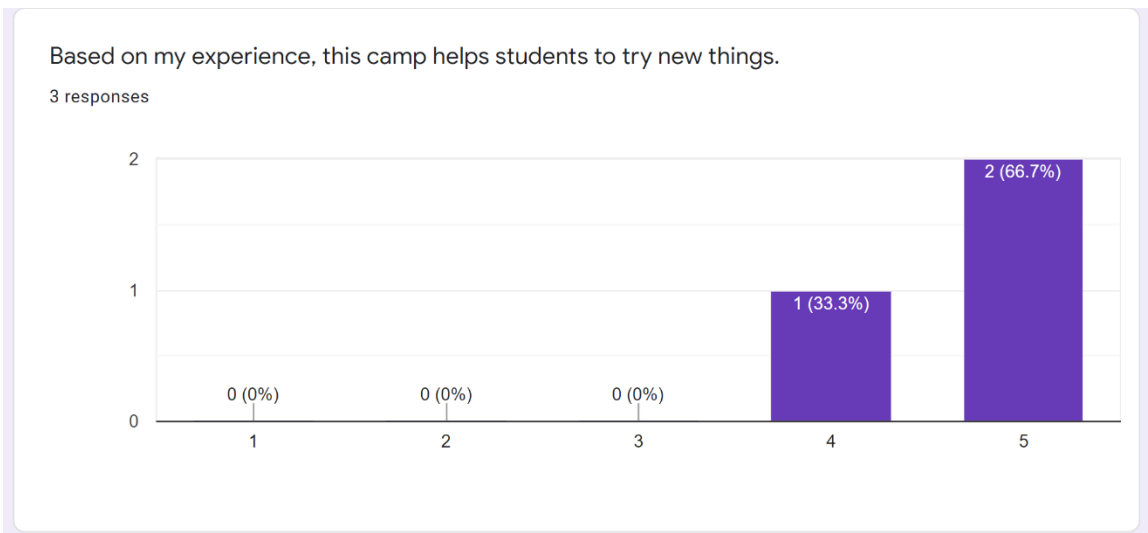


Figure B7

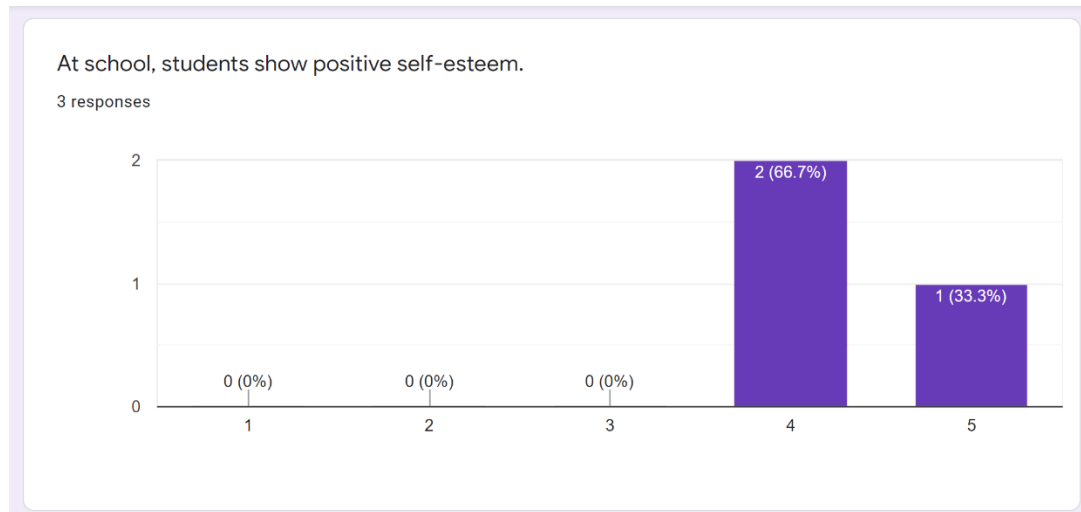


Figure B8

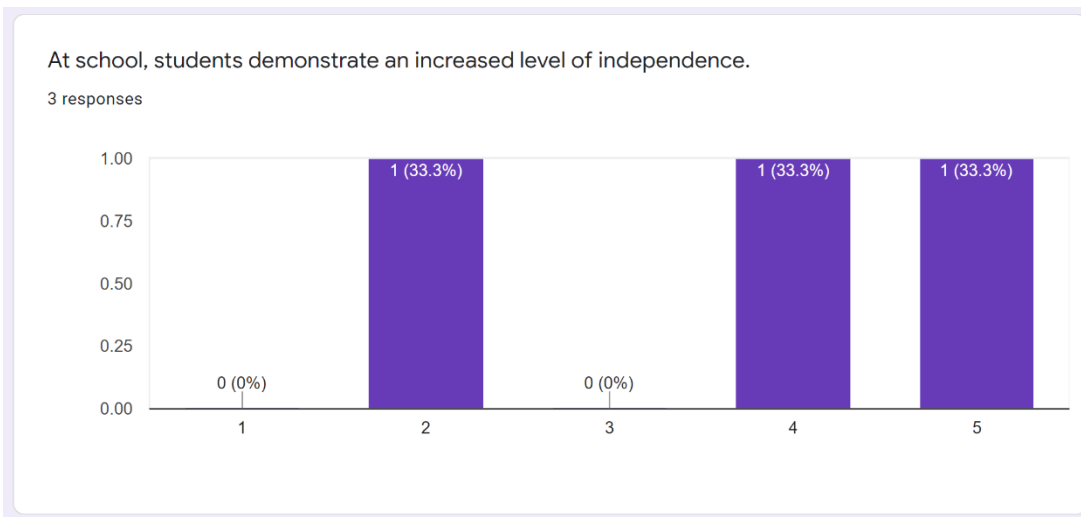


Figure B9

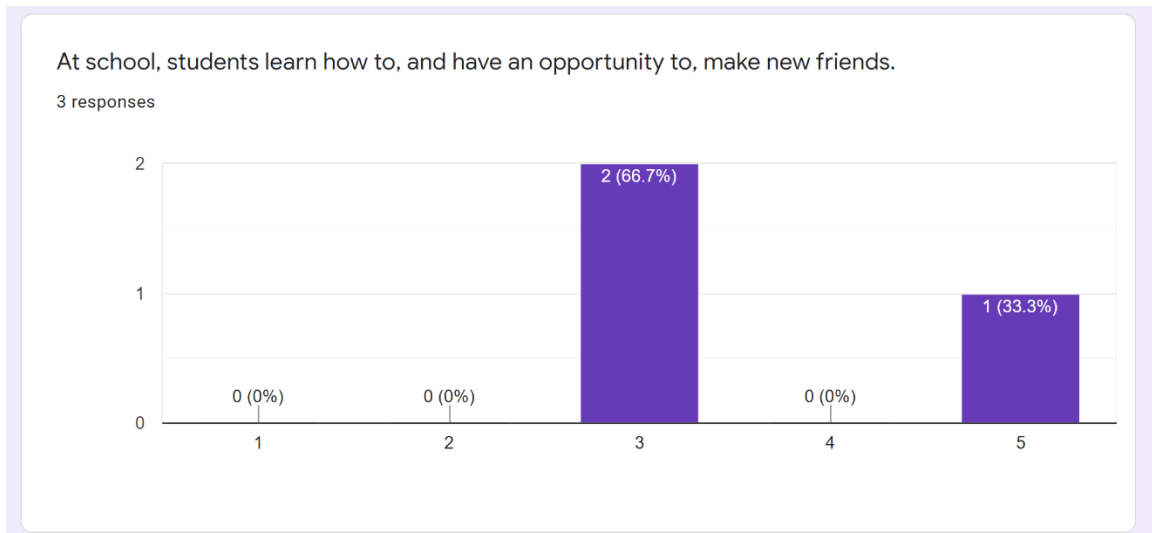


Figure B10



Figure B11

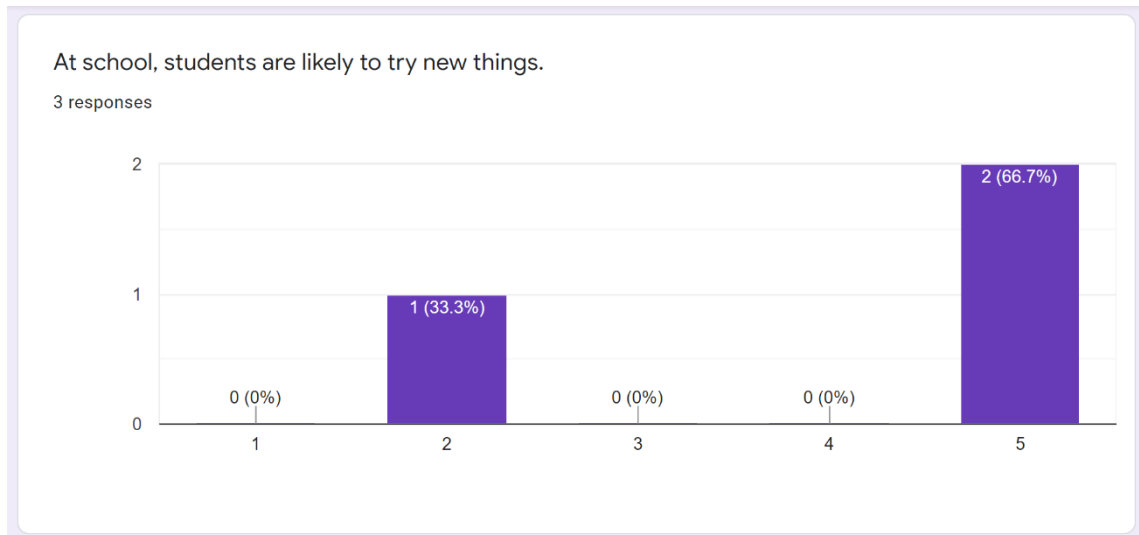
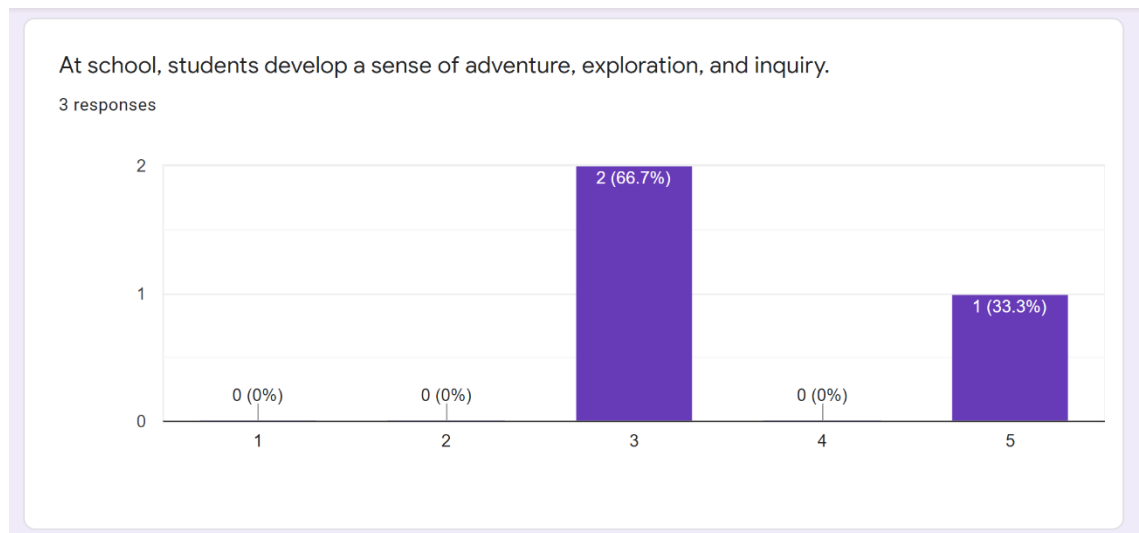


Figure B12



Appendix C

Piolet Survey Questions and Responses: Potential Alignment Between Camp and Ohio SEL Standards

All survey responses were collected using Google Forms. All figures are screenshots of Google Forms responses. The first response is from Teacher A, the second is from Teacher D, and the last is from Teacher S for all Figures.

Figure C1

Does your school participate in student social emotional education? If so, briefly describe.

3 responses

This is done through of WEB program. "Where Everyone Belongs " They sponsor dances and activities to foster emotional connectivity.

We have a WEB committee of teachers and students to help with the transition from elementary to middle school (Where Everyone Belongs)

No, but there are activities that students could choose to participate in that would help foster their social emotional health.

Figure C2

Briefly list ways that students display the following categories at the overnight, outdoor school sponsored youth camp: A. Self-awareness B. Self-management C. Social-awareness D. Relationship skills E. Responsible decision making

3 responses

Counselors worked very hard to get students to cooperate and try new things. Confident students did and anxious students did not.

Something as simple as rolling a sleeping bag Hits all these components... This is a skill most kids don't have. They become aware that they don't know everything, they need to take care of their stuff, other kids might know how to roll a bag, asking for help, and choosing to roll it as opposed to stuffing it in a garbage bag... which happens too!

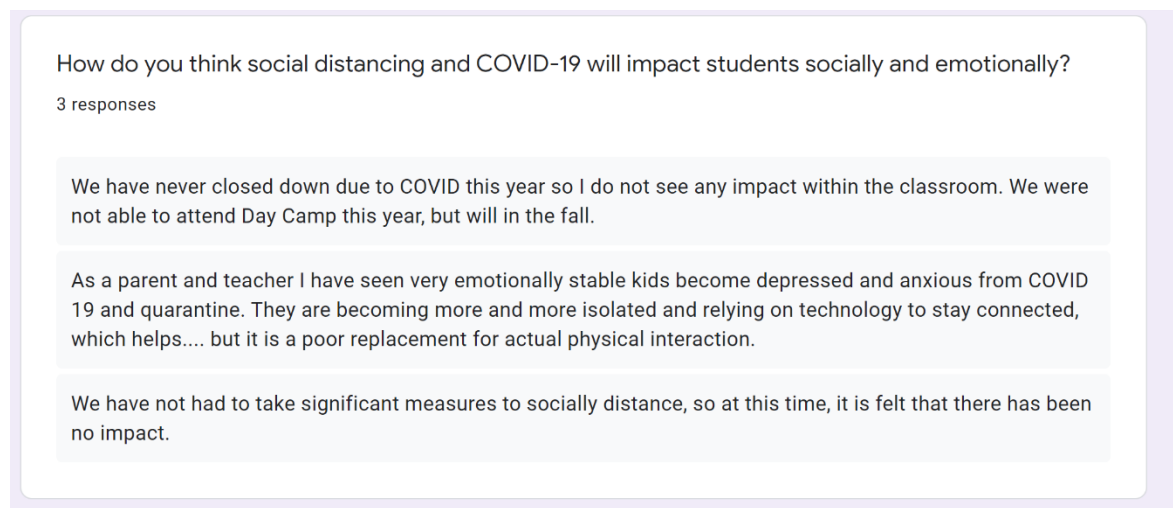
A- discovering their likes and dislikes B- packing their overnight bags and managing their belongings. C- throughout the team-building activities D- when they are assigned a field group, an instructor, and bunkmate E- choosing classes and the activities that they want to experience.

Appendix D

Piolet Survey Questions and Responses: COVID-19 Impact on SEL

All survey responses were collected using Google Forms. All figures are screenshots of Google Forms responses. The first response is from Teacher A, the second is from Teacher D, and the last is from Teacher S for all Figures.

Figure D1



How do you think social distancing and COVID-19 will impact students socially and emotionally?

3 responses

We have never closed down due to COVID this year so I do not see any impact within the classroom. We were not able to attend Day Camp this year, but will in the fall.

As a parent and teacher I have seen very emotionally stable kids become depressed and anxious from COVID 19 and quarantine. They are becoming more and more isolated and relying on technology to stay connected, which helps.... but it is a poor replacement for actual physical interaction.

We have not had to take significant measures to socially distance, so at this time, it is felt that there has been no impact.

Figure D2

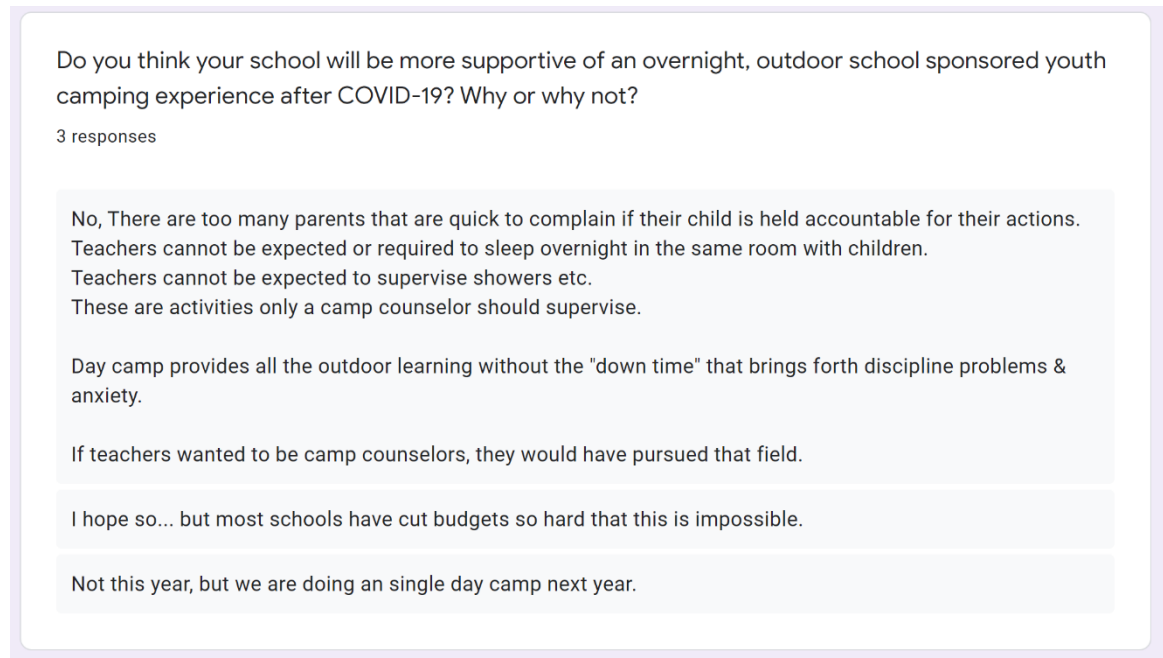


Figure D3

