Evulation of the Hero’s Journey Adventure Program for Adolescents with Serious Illness
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Background
The Hole in the Wall Gang Camp offers a free-of-charge adventure-based program for youth aged 16-18 living with serious and life-threatening illnesses. The program, Hero’s Journey, engages participants through value-forming challenges, and teaches important life skills such as positive communication, self-reliance, and decision-making. One major feature of Hero’s Journey is training in wilderness first aid, including a mock search and rescue. Other activities include outdoor challenges such as climbing a tower, teambuilding, journaling, map and compass work, and living outdoors. The Hero’s Journey program is grounded in Joseph Campbell’s 1949 book, “The Hero With A Thousand Faces,” (Carlson & Cook, 2007). Crafted as a rite of passage to help youth answer “what’s next?” as well as a developmentally-appropriate and challenging extension of the traditional camp program, in 2013, Hero’s Journey served 67 adolescents aged 16-18 in groups of 11-17 over five sessions of 7 days each. One nurse, 5 counselors, 1-2 program administrators, and 2-3 volunteers supervised each session of Hero’s Journey. Participants were youth living with hemophilia, sickle cell, HIV/AIDS, cancer, and metabolic disease.

Hero’s Journey is one of several outdoor- and adventure-based challenge programs for people with disabilities and chronic illness. Recent research on similar programs has found that such programs can promote social performance (Alison, Negley, & Sibthorp, 2013), social skill development (Shirilla, 2009), socialization abilities, satisfaction, and outdoor skills (McAvoy, Smith, & Rynders, 2006), and achievement and sense of accomplishment (Holman, McAvoy, Rynders, & Goldenbe, 2003). However, the specific population of youth with serious and life-threatening illnesses is rarely examined in adventure and wilderness program research.

The theoretical framework for this study was Developmental Systems Theory. Developmental Systems Theory proposes multiple levels of influence (e.g., biology, family, social policies) involved in individuals’ lives that must appropriately align with developmental trajectories in order for individual potential to become fully expressed (Damon & Lerner, 2008; Lerner & Castellino, 2002). The theory addresses the fit between youth and their contexts. Contexts with good fit are those with activities that are developmental-stage appropriate, interesting, and engaging, and that provide support via interactions with caring adults and peers, and opportunities for competence-building.

The purpose of the evaluation was to understand the outdoor challenge outcomes of Hero’s Journey, and participants’ satisfaction with the adventure activities. The evaluation questions were:
1. Are the outdoor challenge and satisfaction with adventure activities scales reliable?
2. Is there a difference in the outcome of outdoor challenge for youth who were more or less satisfied with the adventure activities?
3. Does adventure activity satisfaction predict the outcome of outdoor challenge?
4. What elements of the Hero’s Journey program related to the outcome of outdoor challenge?

Methods
Parent or caregiver consent was obtained for 38 of the 67 Hero’s Journey participants. Participants completed the questionnaires on their last evening at camp, during dinner preparations at their wilderness site. Eight quantitative questions comprised the outcome scale of “outdoor challenge.” Examples of questions included “I was often confident during Hero’s
Journey;” “Getting around Base Camp was easy for me,” and; “I liked having no running water or electricity.” Seventeen questions focused on program activity satisfaction. Four open-ended questions comprised the qualitative portion of the questionnaire and focused on suggestions for adventure-related program improvement, favorite moments, and engaging in unexpected experiences. Campers shared two iPads to complete the questionnaires through the QuickTap Survey app, which took 5-10 minutes per person. Campers responded very enthusiastically to the iPad method of data collection, indicating no hesitation in using this technology, even after living without technology for the previous six days. Interestingly, campers’ responses to the open-ended questions reflected both depth and breadth in responses, meaning that the use of iPads did not inhibit their abilities to type responses. Responses were uploaded through the app and analyzed after the iPads were returned to the main camp. Campers who had consent to participate used one iPad, and those without consent used another. Only results from the 38 participants with consent are reported here.

Data analysis involved three parts, using a concurrent triangulation strategy to confirm quantitative and qualitative findings of data (Creswell, 2003). First, the quantitative data related to eight camper outcome items were analyzed to describe the data and to determine the reliability of the scale. Additionally, quantitative data related to 17 program activity satisfaction items were analyzed to describe the data and to determine the reliability of the scale. Differences between youth who were above and below the mean of the activity satisfaction scale were compared using t-tests. Relationships between the variables were examined with regression. Second, qualitative analysis involved coding the responses to the four open-ended questions and generating themes across the open-ended responses. Third, patterns of relationship of outcome- and satisfaction-related data across both forms of data were examined for convergent responses to the research questions (Greene, 2007), and strong convergence emerged.

Results

The mean of the outdoor challenge scale was 4.26 (SD = .49) out of 5 and the mean of the satisfaction scale was 3.48 (SD = .32) out of 4. The alpha reliability coefficient was acceptable for the outdoor challenge measure (α = .74) and the activity satisfaction measure (α = .75). There was a significant relationship between satisfaction with adventure activities and the outcome of outdoor challenge, r = .66, p < .001. On average, youth who were above the mean of activity satisfaction had higher outdoor challenge scores (M = 4.54, SE = .09), than those who were below the mean (M = 3.98, SE = .1). This difference, .56, CI [-.83, -.28], was significant t(35) = -4.11, p < .001, representing a large effect, d = 1.24. Activity satisfaction significantly predicted outdoor challenge scores, b = .66, F(1, 36) = 27.4, p < .001. The overall regression model fit was $R^2 = .43$. Across the four open-ended questions, five elements of the Hero’s Journey program related to the outcome of outdoor challenge: accomplishment, learning new skills, dealing with outdoor life discomfort, using challenging activities to get to know others more deeply, and the key activities of Mock Rescue, Tower, and Key Ceremony. These themes comprised the main theme of “learning about self through challenge” (n = 103), and provided context for the quantitative findings.

Discussion

Hero’s Journey provides satisfactory adventure activities to participants that have the outcomes of youth experiencing personal growth and feelings of accomplishment through engagement in outdoor challenges. This is particularly important for young adults who are living
with a serious or life-threatening illness who otherwise have limited opportunities to develop these outcomes and have these developmental experiences in their everyday lives. Hero’s Journey answers the call of Sibthorp and Morgan (2011) to extend the accessibility and delivery of the benefits of adventure experiences to diverse youth populations. The Mock Rescue, Tower, and Key Ceremony were very strong program activities that appeared to be major drivers of the development of the outdoor challenge outcomes. Program staff should continue these activities, consider how these activities contain essential program features that drive participants’ outcomes, and integrate similar features (i.e., challenge by choice, emotional and physical safety, competence-building, reflection) into other program activities. Outdoor living items had variable responses, and program staff should consider the range of attitudes that participants bring to living in the outdoors and provide support to those who struggle with living in a yurt, bathing in a river, bugs, and cooking outdoors. This study contributes to the literature on outdoor adventure programs for youth with disabilities, and extends the literature to include youth with serious and life-threatening illnesses. Additionally, this study provides theoretical links between activities and developmental outcomes. More research is needed to better understand how outdoor adventure challenge contexts can serve as developmental systems for youth with serious illness.

References

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