What do vulnerable populations of children, specifically those who are infected/affected by HIV/AIDS, need in order to have a meaningful experience at summer camp? A comparison of literature versus counselor perspectives

Hailey Nelson
University of Vermont

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/hcoltheses

Recommended Citation
Nelson, Hailey, "What do vulnerable populations of children, specifically those who are infected/affected by HIV/AIDS, need in order to have a meaningful experience at summer camp? A comparison of literature versus counselor perspectives" (2019). UVM Honors College Senior Theses. 289.
https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/hcoltheses/289

This Honors College Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Undergraduate Theses at ScholarWorks @ UVM. It has been accepted for inclusion in UVM Honors College Senior Theses by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ UVM. For more information, please contact donna.omalley@uvm.edu.
What do vulnerable populations of children, specifically those who are infected/affected by HIV/AIDS, need in order to have a meaningful experience at summer camp? A comparison of literature versus counselor perspectives

Hailey Nelson

A senior thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of a Bachelors Degree of Science in Environmental Studies

Environmental Program
Honors College
College of Agriculture and Life Sciences

2019

Brendan Fisher, Associate Professor, UVM RSENR
Patricia O’Kane, Lecturer, UVM RSENR
Rachelle Gould, Assistant Professor, UVM RSENR
Abstract

Unfortunately, today HIV/AIDS is still influencing the lives of many children in the United States who are either infected or affected by this virus. Many of the children who are infected or affected by HIV/AIDS also disproportionately face other social determinants of health that influence their overall development and wellbeing such as lower socioeconomic status and lack of availability to resources including sufficient food and shelter, education, and quality health care services. Having to deal with HIV/AIDS and the related social determinants of health can take a huge toll on children, and often means that they are unable to enjoy their childhood to the fullest. Fortunately, there are numerous summer camps throughout the United States that have taken these children into consideration and have worked to create camps that are focused on both the medical and psychosocial care of these children so that they can enjoy just being kids. Based on the existing camp models the literature has synthesized the aspects of a camp experience that are most important in allowing children who are infected or affected by HIV/AIDS to achieve a meaningful experience from camp. The purpose of the research that was conducted in fulfillment of this senior thesis was to compare what the literature states vulnerable populations of children need in order to have a meaningful experience from summer camp versus what the counselors at one specific summer camp, Camp Totokett in Branford, CT, believed campers needed in order to have a meaningful experience. An anonymous online survey of the counselors as well as counselor testimonials provided by Camp Totokett were utilized to gain a clear sense of the counselor perspectives which were then compared to the literature that was reviewed.
Acknowledgements

The process of settling on a research topic and idea of interest for my senior thesis was definitely not an easy feat, and I could not have worked through this process without the continuous support and advice given to me by so many this past year.

**Dr. Brendan Fisher**- Thank you for always having faith in me and for helping me see the light at the end of the tunnel. If it was not for you, I do not think I would have ever stuck with the thesis process, and I am so beyond glad that I did. Your encouragement and guidance allowed me to see a potential within myself that I never knew existed, and for that I am forever grateful. Thank you for being a tremendous professor and someone I know I can always turn to.

**Dr. Patricia O’Kane**- Thank you for your incredible insight, advice, and words of encouragement throughout the process. Thank you for a beautiful semester spent with an incredible flock at Derway. Our many Wednesday’s spent outside taught me more than I could have ever possibly imagined and allowed me to give back to the Burlington community, and for that I am forever grateful. Your work is truly inspiring, and I hope to take much of what I have learned from you back to camp with me this summer! There is nothing quite as powerful as community building and Flynn is so incredibly lucky to have you.

**Dr. Rachelle Gould**- I cannot thank you enough for your willingness to join my advisory board so last minute. You are an incredible addition and someone whose work I greatly admire, thank you from the bottom of my heart.

**My parents**- Thank you for the constant love, support, and motivation throughout this past year. Thank you for encouraging me to rise to my full potential and to stick with the process even when it felt so incredibly daunting. You both inspire me each and every day to be a better version of myself and I would not be the person that I am today without you both my side.
Table of Contents

Abstract ............................................................................................................................................. 2
Acknowledgements .......................................................................................................................... 3
Table of Contents ............................................................................................................................ 4
Introduction ......................................................................................................................................... 6
  1. A personal narrative .................................................................................................................. 6

Literature Review .............................................................................................................................. 8
  1. Introduction .................................................................................................................................. 8
  2. Background information about children with HIV/AIDS ........................................................ 8
    2.1. Overview of children affected by HIV/AIDS in the US ....................................................... 8
    2.2. Stigma and stereotypes ....................................................................................................... 9
    2.3. Resources for families and children .................................................................................. 10
  3. Influence of summer camps with a medical/psychosocial focus ............................................ 11
    3.1. Counselor and staff influence on camper outcomes ......................................................... 11
    3.2. Community building experience ...................................................................................... 13
  4. Factors the literature deems most important in order for children to have a meaningful experience from attending summer camp ................................................................. 14
    4.1. The influence of relationship development and feelings of acceptance for vulnerable children at camp .................................................................................................................. 14
    4.2. Campers’ sense of autonomy .............................................................................................. 17
    4.3. Significance of outdoor time ............................................................................................... 19
  5. Background information about Camp Totokett ...................................................................... 20

Objectives .......................................................................................................................................... 22

Methodology ...................................................................................................................................... 23
  1. Participants .................................................................................................................................. 23
  2. Collection of Counselor Perspectives ...................................................................................... 23
    2.1. Survey and testimonials ......................................................................................................... 23
    2.2. Particulars of survey and testimonials ................................................................................ 24
  3. Procedure ..................................................................................................................................... 24
  4. Analyses ....................................................................................................................................... 24

Results ................................................................................................................................................ 26
  1. Survey Descriptive Results ........................................................................................................ 26
    1.1. Overall camp experience ................................................................................................. 26
    1.2. Counselor training ............................................................................................................... 26
    1.3. Counselor/camper relationship ....................................................................................... 27
    1.4. Additional thoughts/comments ....................................................................................... 29
  2. Counselor Testimonials ............................................................................................................. 30
    2.1. Shared themes among testimonials .................................................................................. 30
      2.1.1 Mutual learning experience ....................................................................................... 30
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.1.2 Friendship</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1.3 Safe environment</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1.4 Importance of camper-mentor relationship</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1.5 Life-changing experience</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Divergent themes found in testimonials</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.1 Perspective and positivity</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.2 Importance of living in the moment</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.3 Importance of outdoor time</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.4 Life-changing experience</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Synthesis</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 Relationship development and feelings of acceptance</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 Campers’ sense of autonomy</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3 Importance of outdoor time</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Personal Results/Interaction</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. With Respect to the Literature</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. With Respect to Practice and Policy</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Recommendations</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Statement of Interest</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Larger Takeaways</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Online Survey</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix B</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Key Words</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix C</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Data Visuals</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

1. A personal narrative

I have always loved working with children, and throughout the course of my life I have continuously found myself getting involved in activities that allow me to work directly with children. Every summer for the past six years I have had the pleasure of volunteering as a mentor and group leader at a weeklong day camp, Camp Totokett in Branford, CT. It is a nondisclosure camp for children grades K-8 who are either infected or affected by HIV/AIDS, which means that their status is not revealed or discussed while they attend camp. The majority of the children who come to camp come from New Haven, CT and the surrounding county which is a predominately urban setting. Camp is an incredible place because it allows kids to just be kids for one week, as many of them often do not get to enjoy their childhood given theirs and their family’s circumstances. Many of the campers come from homes in which they have experienced things no child should ever have to, and many of them have been forced to grow up faster than they should have. They look forward to coming to camp all year long because it is the one week in the summer where they can relax and just have fun. Each camper is paired one on one with a mentor, counselor, who is their buddy for the duration of the week. The mentor-camper relationship ensures that each camper feels special and valued while at camp.

When trying to determine what the central idea of my senior thesis would be I spent a lot of time critically thinking about the things I am most passionate about, and I came back to the conclusion that volunteering, summer camp, children, and entering into a helping profession were the things that I am most passionate about. As an undergraduate I have consistently chosen to get involved in organizations that look to benefit children. Since my first year at the University of Vermont I have been actively involved in RALLYTHON which is a yearlong fundraising effort for the University of Vermont Children’s Hospital that culminates in a 12-hour dance marathon. Joining RALLYTHON seemed like an obvious choice for me considering my love for children and my background with Camp Totokett, and I have loved getting to dance and fundraise so that kids can just be kids. Now, as a soon to be graduating senior, I have put a lot of time into thinking about the ways in which I can weave all of my interests together in terms of academics and my extracurriculars. In terms of academics I will be graduating with a Bachelors Degree of Science in Environmental Studies and a minor is
Human Development and Family Studies, which I believe beautifully supports what I hope to pursue professionally. Upon graduating this spring, I will be pursuing my Masters Degree in Social Work at Columbia University in the hopes of becoming a Licensed Clinical Social Worker. Camp Totokett has largely influenced what I aspire to do with the rest of my life, and so for my senior thesis I wanted to integrate my love for camp and my future aspirations.

Through the literature review process, I came to realize that there are many children in the United States who are either infected or affected by HIV/AIDS, which largely shapes their development socially and emotionally. I also came to learn that there are numerous summer camps, Camp Totokett being the one of focus for my thesis, throughout the country that have taken the circumstances these children face to heart and have worked to create camps that are focused on medical and psychosocial care. Furthermore, based on existing literature for other camp models I was able to draw on the main themes expressed in each to gain a better understanding of what the literature deems to be the most important qualities of a camp environment in order to ensure that campers have a meaningful experience. This led me to think critically about the experiences Camp Totokett provides its campers each summer. I decided that I wanted to delve further to see if the perspectives of the counselors at Camp Totokett were in agreement with what the literature states are most important. The hope for this research was to be able to provide some insight for the camp administrators about areas where counselors are clearly helping to create meaningful experiences for campers and areas where they could improve to create an environment that further facilitates meaningful experiences.
Literature Review

1. Introduction

This literature review is divided into four sections: Background information about children with HIV/AIDS, Influence of summer camps with a medical/psychosocial focus, Factors the literature deems most important in order for children to have a meaningful experience from attending summer camp, and Background information about Camp Totokett. In the first section a discussion is presented on the background of children who are infected/affected by HIV in the United States. The discussion includes a look into stigmas and stereotypes, resources for families and children, and medical information about diagnosis and treatment plans. In the next section the influence of summer camps with a medical/psychosocial focus will be discussed. The discussion includes counselor and staff influence on children’s outcomes from attending camp, the socio-emotional impact of attending camp, the importance of outdoor education, and insights into the successes and failures of similar camp programs. The third section provides a discussion on the factors the literature deems most important in order for children to achieve a meaningful experience from attending summer camp. This discussion will provide insight into the numerous factors that influence a camper’s experience. In the final section, background information about Camp Totokett, the camp of focus for my research, will be presented. For the purpose of this literature review a meaningful experience for campers will be defined as a time and place that the campers associate with being of serious importance and beneficial in quality to their overall development.

2. Background Information about Children with HIV/AIDS

2.1 Overview of children affected by HIV/AIDS in the United States

In 2007, an estimated 14,489 people age 19 and younger were living with HIV or AIDS in the United States, as reported by 37 states and five United States dependent areas with long-term, confidential, name-based HIV infection reporting (Prevention, 2008). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates, as of 2016, there were 6,704 adolescents aged 14 to 19 living with HIV/AIDS in the United States (Swartz, 2009). Young people (aged 13-24) accounted for one in five (22%) new HIV infections in 2015 (AVERT, 2018). These numbers
have been getting smaller and smaller each year, and children who are infected with HIV/AIDS are now surviving well into adulthood due to incredible antiretroviral medications and medical regimens (Weiner & Battles, 2006). These children, on top of being infected or affected by HIV/AIDS, too face a great deal of stressors with very little support (Gillard, Witt, & Watts, 2011). Some stressors include: family member’s uncertain disease progression, complicated medical regimens, and grief related to multiple and simultaneous losses of family members (Gillard et al., 2011). Additionally, HIV/AIDS tends to be a disease that is incredibly prevalent in marginalized and disenfranchised populations who face disproportionate inequalities in terms of racism, poverty, lack of access to health services, increased risk of violence, prejudice (Gillard et al., 2011). Black/African American women and men as well as Hispanic men and women have higher incidence rates of new HIV diagnoses per year in the United States as compared to White men and women (AVERT, 2018). Therefore, Black/African American children as well as Hispanic children are disproportionately affected by HIV/AIDS. The children in the United States who are affected or infected by HIV/AIDS unfortunately too are likely to be dealing with many other stressors and inequalities (AVERT, 2018; Gillard et al., 2011; Swartz, 2009).

2.2 Stigma and stereotypes

Unfortunately, in the United States and across the world HIV/AIDS is associated with a great deal of stigma (Gillard et al., 2011; Swartz, 2009). In a journal article that focused on a summer camp for children and adolescents who were affected or infected by HIV/AIDS it was stated, “From a very young age, campers understand that countless people in their communities still associate blame and shame with HIV/AIDS, and they struggle to cope with ignorance. Discrimination leaves them isolated both emotionally and physically. Our hope is to lift this burden by creating a space where the campers can feel loved and accepted unconditionally and can live ‘normally’ without stigma or fear, even if only for one week.” (Swartz, 2009). HIV/AIDS is heavily stigmatized in the United States because most people perceive those who are HIV positive to pose a threat to theirs as well as other people’s well-being (Leary & Schreindorfer, 1998). Because HIV/AIDS is a contagious and incurable disease most people see those who are positive for the disease as a threat and they avoid and often harshly stigmatize those who are affected (Leary & Schreindorfer, 1998). Many people associate HIV/AIDS with
lifestyles that are deviant, if not morally wrong and that is where the deep-rooted stigma tends to originate from (Leary & Schreindorfer, 1998). People associate HIV/AIDS with being related to unprotected sex, in particular unprotected gay sex between men, drug use, and the sharing of unsanitary needles (Leary & Schreindorfer, 1998). It is difficult for people to remove those perceptions of HIV/AIDS from their conscious as it historically has been so engrained in societal beliefs and has continued to prevail into the present day.

The stigma and stereotypes associated with HIV/AIDS greatly impacts the social and emotional health of those who are infected and affected by the disease (Gillard et al., 2011; Leary & Schreindorfer, 1998; Swartz, 2009). Those who are affected or infected often are very careful of who they do and do not disclose their status to, which influences and impacts their interpersonal relationships. Additionally, the stigma and stereotype surrounding the diagnosis of being HIV positive impact the psychosocial health of individuals and can lead to depression, anxiety, and feeling of fear when treated hostilely, which unfortunately can and does happen (Leary & Schreindorfer, 1998). These thoughts and fears even run through the minds of children who are infected and affected by HIV/AIDS (Gillard et al., 2011). At a camp for children who are infected or affected by HIV/AIDS campers described the fear of labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination as pervasive in their lives (Gillard et al., 2011). This is something that is incredibly important that camp staff and counselors are aware and cognizant of so that they can do everything in their power to ensure that while at camp these fears and concerns do not become a reality (Gillard et al., 2011).

2.3 Resources for families and children

HIV/AIDS is a family disease, one that affects every member. (Swartz, 2009; Weiner & Battles, 2006; Wiener, 1998). All family members are greatly affected by the impact that the disease has on their family, whether or not they are HIV positive themselves (Wiener, 1998). Even children who are not infected are still affected and often have to take on caregiving roles at very young age for their parents, elders, and sibling that are infected by the disease (Swartz, 2009). The resources that are available to families and children dealing with HIV/AIDS has greatly expanded in past decade.

One of the most important resources for families and children tend to be social workers, whether they be school or community social workers, who help them to navigate the disease
Social workers can help families to work through difficult conversations about disclosure and how and when that information should be conveyed to children and school systems which is not an easy conversation to navigate because those who are affected often fear being stigmatized by those they share the information with (Wiener, 1998). They can also work with children to ensure that they are able to keep up in school if they have an unusually higher number of absences as a result of doctors’ appointments or extenuating family circumstances related to HIV/AIDS (Wiener, 1998). Social workers can also be resources for parents, children, and families to confide in, as they can provide psychosocial support in helping to cope with stigma, deaths in the family, depression, anxiety, and anything else that may arise (Wiener, 1998). There are also summer camps and support groups that are available for children and families as resources. Furthermore, prevention education and curriculum for families and children too are a resource in terms of working to prevent further spread of HIV/AIDS (Wiener, 1998). HIV/AIDS “Risk-reduction education entails specifically addressing issues regarding substance abuse and sexual behaviors” (Sunenblick, 1998; Wiener, 1998). There are numerous resources available to families and children; however, not every resource meets the individual needs of each family and unfortunately these resources tend to be limited or under-resourced or under-funded.

3. Influence of Summer Camps with a Medical/Psychosocial Focus

3.1 Counselor and staff influence on camper outcomes

Counselors and staff members largely influence the outcomes of campers at summer camps, especially those who have a medical and psychosocial focus (Gillard & Watts, 2013; Gillard, Witt, & Watts, 2010; Halsall, Kendellen, Bean, & Forneris, 2016; Swartz, 2009). Adult staff members greatly influence the climate of camp and can even be considered the primary program input (Gillard et al., 2010). In camp settings there are multiple stakeholders who influence the outcomes of campers: counselors, adult staff, and directors or administrators (Gillard et al., 2010). Every stakeholder is likely to have differing theories and beliefs about the value of camp for youth (Gillard et al., 2010). Often counselors tend to value camp as a time for campers to have fun and be kids; adult staff and directors/administrators often value camp as having potential enduring benefits for the campers in terms of supporting the campers’ overall positive development (Gillard et al., 2010). In order for camps to ensure that all stakeholders
are on the same page, they should make an effort to align everyone to an overall goal of creating camper outcomes (Gillard et al., 2010). In doing so camps effectively work to promote positive development across the board, as well as, promote their overall camp goals (Gillard et al., 2010).

Intentional programming is another area that counselor and staff use to promote positive development and meaningful experience for campers (Gillard & Watts, 2013). Implementing, planning, and utilizing engaging activities that alleviate stress and promote fun resonate well with campers (Gillard & Watts, 2013). Intentional programming and activities are often the things that campers remember most and take away from the camp experience; this is a leading factor in contributing to whether or not a child is able to have a meaningful experience at summer camp (Gillard & Watts, 2013). This type of programming is most effective and memorable when the camp provides and experience that the camper would not otherwise get the opportunity to engage in at home, and these are often incredibly powerful experiences for campers (Gillard & Watts, 2013).

Having counselors and staff who genuinely choose to come and participate in camp to ensure that the campers have the best time are the most effective and memorable (Gillard & Watts, 2013). These staff members and counselors help to establish strong caring relationships with campers (Gillard & Watts, 2013; Halsall et al., 2016). Campers at a summer camp for children with cancer “indicated that relationships between campers and staff promoted feelings of being valued, as evidenced through statements about the staff listening, treating campers as capable, providing sympathy, and creating closeness” (Gillard & Watts, 2013). These same relationships hold the same importance for other vulnerable populations of children, such as those who are infected or affected by HIV/AIDS. High levels of compassion from counselors and staff is remembered by campers and is something they cherish from their time at camp (Gillard & Watts, 2013; Halsall et al., 2016). At the same camp for children with cancer one camper expressed, “they don’t look at you like you’re a cancer patient; they look at you like you’re a person” (Gillard & Watts, 2013). Counselors and staff who are able to make children feel as though they are not defined by their condition and circumstances allow the camper to feel valued and as though they have an identity as a person that is not directly linked to their condition. Furthermore, having counselors and staff members that always put campers first help to further create caring connections that campers remember (Gillard & Watts, 2013). Simple things such as allowing campers to go ahead of staff and counselors in lines for meals or ensuring
that counselors and staff allow campers to go first when opening a door provide an additional effort that sticks with the campers and makes them feel special during their time at camp (Gillard & Watts, 2013).

It is also important that staff and counselors work to create an environment with a strong sense of structure and routine that may not otherwise be a part of the campers’ lives (Swartz, 2009). Many of the campers who are either infected or affected by HIV/AIDS come from marginalized and disenfranchised communities, and some do not even have a basic understanding of life skills such as brushing their teeth twice a day (Swartz, 2009). Additionally, camp is often the only time and place where those who are infected by HIV/AIDS receive their medication consistently and in a supportive environment by those who know how to properly administer the regimen (Swartz, 2009). Providing structure and a sense of routine for these children is incredibly important to promoting positive development and ensuring that they have a meaningful experience (Swartz, 2009).

Finally, camp staff and counselors that are able to provide and create fun ways for campers to remember their time at camp even when they are not there enhance the overall experience (Gillard & Watts, 2013). Having personalized photo albums or other crafts that allow campers to reminisce on their time at camp allow for their experiences to live on and hold meaning long after camp has ended (Gillard & Watts, 2013). Camp t-shirts and apparel as well as fun camp songs or handshakes are seemingly small things but tend to hold a great deal of value to campers in reminding them of the incredible experience they took part in (Gillard & Watts, 2013).

3.2 Community building experience

Creating a sense of community in the camp setting is crucial to ensuring that campers are able to have meaningful experience while at camp, and one that lasts and sticks with them (Meltzer & Rourke, 2005). When campers feel connected to a positive, accepting community that cares for them, a space is created in which campers are able to become more open to trying new ideas, activities, and attitudes (Gillard et al., 2011). Furthermore, when camps choose to promote activities that are not centered around the child’s illness they normalize the experience as much as possible and they allow the child to be the one to decide whether or not that is something they want to share with the rest of the community (Meltzer & Rourke, 2005).
Engaging in a new setting, summer camp, can be extremely stressful and nerve-wracking for children, especially if they fear they might be stereotyped or discriminated against for their status; therefore, camps that promote nondisclosure help to alleviate some of those concerns (Meltzer & Rourke, 2005; Swartz, 2009). Another benefit of camps that have a medical and psychosocial focus is that they often create a community of children who suffer from the same diagnosis or similar ones (Meltzer & Rourke, 2005).

These communities of children who share the same or similar diagnoses allows for the campers to engage in social comparisons with peers who have had similar experiences (Meltzer & Rourke, 2005). Social comparison is used to evaluate emotions and abilities (Festinger, 1954). There are both upward and downward social comparisons. Upward comparisons “occur when we compare ourselves with others who are better off, which may provide hope or inspiration” (Aspinwall, 1998). Downward comparisons “occur when we compare ourselves to less fortunate other to make us feel better about our own situation” (Aspinwall, 1998; Meltzer & Rourke, 2005). Camps with a medical and psychosocial focus create communities of peers who share similar or the same diagnoses which can help them to make social comparisons that can be used to answer questions related to one’s coping, adjustment, functioning, and health status (Aspinwall, 1998). This is particularly important during adolescence when youth rely heavily on their peers for feedback about their physical and emotional functioning (Meltzer & Rourke, 2005). Camps with a medical and psychosocial focus provide adolescents and children with a comparison group of similar peers to compare themselves too; this can help to decrease feelings of social isolation and can help to improve a camper’s self-concept (Meltzer & Rourke, 2005). Social proximity tends to bond and unite campers and leads to positive attitudes about perseverance and confidence, all of which is linked to whether or not a camper has a meaningful experience at camp (Gillard & Watts, 2013).

4. Factors the Literature Deems Most Important in Order for Children to Have a Meaningful Experience from Attending Summer Camp

4.1 The influence of relationship development and feelings of acceptance for vulnerable children at camp

Developing relationships and feeling accepted by peers and counselors are at the forefront of helping vulnerable populations of children achieve a meaningful experience from
camp (Desai, Sutton, Staley, & Hannon, 2014). Both the development of relationships and feeling accepted by peers and counselors help children to establish a sense of belonging (Desai et al., 2014). Sense of belonging has been defined as, “the sensation of being connected and accepted by one’s family, friends, and community” (Kitchen, Williams, & Chowhan, 2012). When considering the major factors that influence a child’s ability to perceive camp as a meaningful experience, many described that camp was a place where they felt they belonged (Gillard & Allsop, 2016).

One of the largest factors that create a sense of belonging at camp for vulnerable populations of children is being surrounded by peers who share the same common experience or medical diagnosis (Desai et al., 2014; Gillard & Allsop, 2016; Gillard et al., 2011). In a study by Desai et al., (2014) the campers who were interviewed spoke about the comfort of being surrounded and supported by those who shared the same common experience and that they often felt much more accepted at camp than they did in other settings they participated in such as school, where some described being stigmatized and rejected by peers. Being surrounded by peers who shared the same commonalities helps campers to feel less isolated and as though they belong to a supportive community (Gillard et al., 2011). In settings outside of camp many campers often lack opportunities to interact with other youth and adults who share the same diagnosis, which often they describe as something that makes them feel isolated from others (Gillard et al., 2011). In a study that looked at oncology summer camp it was stated that “disease-specific summer camps provide adolescents with a community of similar peers who are an appropriate comparison group for self-evaluation” (Meltzer & Rourke, 2005). Having an appropriate group by which to evaluate yourself allows children to have more positive psychosocial experiences, especially when they are surrounded by peers who share the same or similar medical diagnoses (Meltzer & Rourke, 2005). In a study looking at camp experiences in the lives of children with serious illnesses Ann Gillard (2016) shared one campers description of his camp experience “what makes camp special is like how random strangers from all over the world can just, like, come together and be like a family for a week.” These shared commonalities help vulnerable populations of children to develop relationships with their peers which helps to establish feelings of acceptance while at camp. The development of relationships, in particular friendships with peers is important for campers (Helgeson, Reynolds, Escobar, Siminerio, & Becker, 2007). These relationships and friendships with peers
were described across each of the studies as being one of the most favorited aspects of camp for children (Desai et al., 2014; Gillard & Allsop, 2016; Gillard et al., 2011; Kitchen et al., 2012; Meltzer & Rourke, 2005).

Furthermore, the formation of relationships with adults while at camp were key elements of the experience that children identified as helping them to develop social relationships and to help them establish feelings of acceptance (Desai et al., 2014). The formation of caring connections with staff and campers leads to increased feelings of belonging for campers which allows for meaningful experiences to be had while at camp (Gillard et al., 2011). In the study conducted by Gillard et al., (2011) looking at the outcomes at a camp for children with HIV/AIDS it was found that strong supportive relationships with staff members were very important to the campers. When staff and counselors provided praise, hugs, genuine attention, and active listening their camper’s often feel a greater sense of belonging and acceptance (Gillard et al., 2011). In the same study it was stated that “relationships drive programs” and that caring connections with individuals and the community at camp facilitate feelings of reprieve and recreation, and increased knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Gillard et al., 2011). Having adult staff and counselors at camp who provide a strong support system for the campers help them to feel less homesick and as though there really is a safe place for them while they are away from home (Desai et al., 2014; Kitchen et al., 2012). Children also find comfort in their camp if they are supported by doctors and other medical professionals who are able to ensure that they will be well cared for medically during their time at camp (Desai et al., 2014). Knowing that they will be well cared for allows campers to be less concerned and worried about their condition and better able to spend time just enjoying camp with their peers (Desai et al., 2014). The development of relationships with adult staff members greatly influences a child’s experience while at camp and are relationships that are highly valued among campers.
4.2 Campers’ sense of autonomy

Establishing feelings of autonomy within the summer camp settings largely influences whether or not a child feels as though they were able to have a meaningful experience at summer camp (Garst & Gagnon, 2016; Ramsing & Sibthorp, 2008; Roark, Ellis, Wells, & Gillard, 2010; Schmalz, Kerstetter, & Kleiber, 2011). Summer camps that support autonomy “create a context or environment that provides choices within limits, freedom, encouragement toward autonomy, involvement with others in decision making, and the ability to facilitate motivation that originates from within and inevitably leads to increased sense of self-determination” (Ramsing & Sibthorp, 2008). Summer camps that instill and promote feelings of autonomy are “ones that engage a child’s psychological needs in actions that positively influence a child’s behavior” (Roark et al., 2010).

There are many factors that influence the level of autonomy support at summer camps (Garst & Gagnon, 2016). First, the instructional style of those who work with children at camp, such as counselors and other leaders, matters immensely in determining the level of autonomy a child will experience as well as influence whether or not the time spent at camp was meaningful (Garst & Gagnon, 2016). Instructional style is particularly important when campers and other staff members are engaging in activities and events (Garst & Gagnon, 2016). There are two main types of instructional styles either more leader centered (didactic) or camper-centered (constructivistic), and these styles vary depending on the content and the goals of certain activities (Garst & Gagnon, 2016). It has been stated that “instructional styles that were more camper or youth centered and less didactic in nature were perceived as more autonomy supportive. The findings are not surprising given that youth-centered instructional styles provide for free-flowing discussion on topics of interest for the age group with limited interjections by adults” (Garst & Gagnon, 2016). Furthermore, having activities at camp that facilitate autonomy such as sports and art play an important role in promoting self-regulation and autonomy (Garst & Gagnon, 2016). In a study by Garst & Gagnon it was found that “the arts provided campers with high levels of interaction and active participation and therefore were perceived as being more autonomy supportive than sports, games, and athletics. Arts offer recreation programmers a powerful and creative alternative to sports and games and may offer benefits and lead to outcomes less easily attained through other program areas” (Garst &
Finally, non-competitive activities tend to be higher in autonomy support than competitive ones in summer camp settings (Garst & Gagnon, 2016). These “non-competitive activities are framed around events that provide choice” and when children have the choice to determine which activities they want to participate in they feel satisfied, self-directed, and supported which lead to increased perceptions of autonomy (Garst & Gagnon, 2016). In a study by Eccles, Barber, Stone, & Hunt it was said that “youth develop better mental health, motivation, and values in sports programs that emphasize skill acquisition and mastery motivation rather than social comparison and winning” (Eccles, Barber, Stone, & Hunt, 2003). The same applies to summer camp settings, and therefore non-competitive activities are incredibly important when implemented in summer camp settings (Garst & Gagnon, 2016).

Fostering summer camp settings that allow for high levels of autonomy allow campers to establish better self-regulation skills (Garst & Gagnon, 2016). When staff and counselors use meaningful choice and rationale that take into account the child’s perspectives, ask the child they want to do, listen carefully, allow children time to talk, encourage effort, and praise progress and mastery help to foster high levels of autonomy among campers (Roark et al., 2010). Autonomy-supportive contexts such as camp may help children develop self-regulation skills like managing emotions and handling success and failure appropriately (Garst & Gagnon, 2016). Autonomy-supportive relationships lead to numerous developmental gains in the child: increased sense of self-worth (Ryan & Grolnick, 1986), greater self-actualization (Kasser & Ryan, 2001), lower depression levels (Kasser & Ryan, 2001), stronger interpersonal relationships (Kasser & Ryan, 2001), greater sense of community and affiliation (Kasser & Ryan, 2001), perceived competence (Ryan & Grolnick, 1986), and positive emotionality (Patrick, Skinner, & Connell, 1993).

Furthermore, summer camps where children are given free-choice help to establish high levels of autonomy which has been deemed as one of the most important aspects in terms of campers feeling as though they achieved a meaningful experience (Garst & Gagnon, 2016; Ramsing & Sibthorp, 2008; Roark et al., 2010; Schmalz et al., 2011). Free-choice, self-directed environments have the potential to facilitate personal learning development, and self-exploration (Falk, 2006; Falk, Heimlich, & Foutz, 2009; Larson, 2000; McKennzie, 2000). When allowed to participate in self-directed activity, children are able to explore potential pathways for creative, intellectual, artistic, and physical growth (Bridges, 2003; Falk et al.,
2009). In a setting, such as summer camp, where children and adolescents are well-monitored “youth perceive themselves to be autonomous in their decision making, yet they are protected from making bad choices” (Schmalz et al., 2011). Campers enjoy having choice and identifying activities that a camper is intrinsically motivated to participate in is an important part of the camper’s experience (Bridges, 2003).

4.3 Significance of outdoor time

Time spend in the outdoors is incredibly beneficial for children, and having it built into the plans for summer camp greatly enhances the overall experience (Gillard et al., 2011; Readdick & Schaller, 2005). The natural environment best compels biophilia, which is an innate urge to affiliate with other forms of life and to derive benefits from this affiliation (Wilson, 1984). Outdoor experiences are significant because “discovery in the natural world continues to offer unrivaled context for physical, emotional, and mental growth and maturation” (Kellert, 1997). Children who are given opportunities to spend time outside tend to experience and increased sense of self-confidence and self-esteem, which is in part due to the fact that being in the natural world allows us to grow and connect in ways we cannot within the confines of a building (Readdick & Schaller, 2005). The natural world too enhances group bonding which is linked with creating more positive self-concepts in terms of social comparisons (Readdick & Schaller, 2005).

The campers who enter into natural settings, or more rural settings, from more urban areas also experience a transition from one environment to another which leads to a shift in feelings about self, especially when each setting is vastly different from one another (Readdick & Schaller, 2005). Spending time in the outdoors has also been linked to “campers feeling that they had a reprieve from the stresses of everyday life, as well as opportunities to engage in recreational activities” (Gillard et al., 2011). These activities include and are not limited to outdoor sports and activities such as swimming, kayaking, horseback riding, and rock climbing (Gillard et al., 2011). These activities also often facilitate more social development between peers and counselors, which is a factor that determines whether or not a child has a meaningful experience (Gillard et al., 2011). Natural settings also tend to be stress-free environments and allow kids to just be kids (Gillard et al., 2011).
5. Background Information about Camp Totokett

Camp Totokett is a free one-week summer day camp for children who are infected or affected by HIV/AIDS (FCCB, 2018). Camp Totokett is a non-disclosure camp which does not identify the children or their family members with regard to health status (FCCB, 2018). Most of the children who attend camp are not infected themselves, but they live in families where one or more family member is infected by HIV/AIDS (FCCB, 2018). The First Congregational Church of Branford founded Camp Totokett in 1996. Since its founding in 1996 camp has been held yearly at Killiam’s Point, the Church’s waterfront property in Branford, Connecticut (FCCB, 2018). The property has a variety of different natural areas for the children and counselors to enjoy and explore throughout the week including beaches, hiking trails, caves, and everyone’s favorite location the Point House (FCCB, 2018). Most of the campers come from the Greater New Haven area of Connecticut. The Church works closely with local Social Work Agencies to get in touch with families whose children they believe would greatly benefit from a week at camp (FCCB, 2018). The camp is free for all campers who attend and includes two meals daily (breakfast and lunch) for the duration of the week, camp t-shirts and backpacks, bathing suits and towels, and anything else a child would need in order to fully enjoy camp (FCCB, 2018). The campers are also picked up and dropped off at their door front by buses that are paid for by the Church each day of the week (FCCB, 2018). Camp offers a respite from the stress, trauma, and responsibilities which these children face daily (FCCB, 2018). In recognizing the impact of trauma and stress on children, Camp Totokett recently offered the camping experience to a small number of refugee children, relocated to New Haven through Integrated Refugee Immigration Services (FCCB, 2018). Camp is meant to provide these vulnerable populations of children with the most incredible and memorable week of their summer in an effort to allow kids to just be kids and not have to deal many of the stresses they do in their everyday lives at home (FCCB, 2018). Camp Totokett also seeks to promote individual, family, and community connections between urban and suburban participants (FCCB, 2018).

Camp would most certainly not be able to function without the help of all of the volunteers (FCCB, 2018). The camp staff is mainly community volunteers, including high school and college students, teachers, nurses, physicians, social workers, and clergy (FCCB,
2018). Without volunteers the camp experience would not be the same (FCCB, 2018). Each camper that attends is paired one on one with a mentor (FCCB, 2018). The mentor is a high school or college student who stays with the camper throughout the entire week and is their buddy for all of the activities (FCCB, 2018). The campers too are divided into color groups based on age, and so they participate in group activities with other children and their mentors throughout the week (FCCB, 2018). The one on one pairings of campers and mentors is what makes Camp Totokett so unique and truly provides each camper with the feeling that they are important as they receive a lot of one on one attention from their mentor (FCCB, 2018).
Objectives

The main objective of this thesis was to gain a better understanding of the Camp Totokett counselors in terms of what they believe are the most necessary qualities and elements in terms of ensuring that campers are able to have a meaningful experience from camp. By use of online surveying and counselor testimonials I gained insight into the perspectives of the counselors which I then compared to the literature that has been reviewed as a part of this research in an effort to answer the following question: What do vulnerable populations of children, specifically those who are infected/affected by HIV/AIDS, need in order to have a meaningful experience at summer camp? I did this by comparing what the literature states campers need in order to have a meaningful experience at summer camper versus counselor perspectives at Camp Totokett.

I hypothesized that the counselor perspectives would likely be very similar to what the literature deemed most important in ensuring that campers are able to have a meaningful experience form attending camp. The objective was to compare the responses of counselors to the literature that has been reviewed in an effort to provide the camp administrators with a better understanding of the areas counselors excel in as well as areas that could use improvement to ensure that the campers have as meaningful an experience as they can while attending camp.
Methods

The following section describes the methods that were used to achieve the research goal. The goal was to compare what the literature deems vulnerable populations of children, in particular those who are infected or affected by HIV/AIDS, need in order to have a meaningful experience at summer camp versus counselor perspectives.

1. Participants

The sample included 15 counselors and staff members from Camp Totokett in Branford, Connecticut ages 18 years and older. The ratio of counselors to campers was 1:1 and there were 45 campers this past summer. Of the counselors who participated there were anywhere between 35 who were 18 years and older and therefore eligible to participate in the research; however, only 15 chose to participate in the survey portion of the research which was 42.9% of all counselors. The breakdown in the gender will depend on who volunteers to be a counselor this year and who consents to participate in the research. To ensure confidentiality and to ensure the sample remained random and unbiased gender was not recorded. Given the nature of my research I gained IRB approval prior to beginning my work. The study was conducted in accordance with IRB and camp confidentiality clauses. All participants provided informed consent to participate in the research.

2. Collection of Counselor Perspectives

2.1 Survey and testimonial process

There was one online survey generated through UVM LimeSurvey that all counselors and staff 18 years and older were given the option to participate in at the conclusion of the camp week. At the conclusion of the week the online survey was emailed to all of the eligible counselors and staff. It was optional and allowed individuals the right to at any point choose to not participate or to refrain from answering certain questions. In addition to the survey I was also able to gain access to the end of the summer testimonials that many of the counselors choose to write. These testimonials provided additional insight and information as to how aspects of the camp and the camper/counselor relationship influence the ability of campers to have a meaningful experience.
2.2 Particulars of survey and testimonials

This research was a qualitative analysis of the perspectives of camp counselors and staff members who were 18 years and older. It included a combination of anonymous online surveying and optional anonymous counselor testimonials provided by the camp administration. Convenience sampling was used to reach the participants who participated in the online surveys and optional testimonials, as they were all counselors and staff members from Camp Totokett. For the testimonials, counselors were asked to reflect on their time at camp and were not given any specific prompt. The testimonials provided additional supplemental information alongside the survey results as they allowed for more reflective thinking and sharing versus question asking. Consent was gained by all participants at the start of the online survey and the testimonials were provided by the camp administration. The online survey is included in Appendix A. The survey asked questions that were aimed at gaining a better understanding of if the literature themes of relationship development and sense of belonging, autonomy, and importance of outdoor time were shared by counselors at Camp Totokett.

3. Procedure

All consenting participants participated in an anonymous online survey sent out using UVM LimeSurvey at the conclusion of the camp week. The survey began with an acknowledgement of consent prior to the start of the survey, this was built into LimeSurvey. The data gathered from the surveys was collected and stored to allow for further use and for conclusions to be drawn from during the research process. The counselor testimonials were shared with me after the conclusion of the camp week. I was given permission by Camp Totokett to store these anonymous responses for further use and for conclusions to be drawn throughout the duration of the research process.

4. Analyses

A list of key words from the literature was created to ensure that while reviewing open-ended responses on the survey/testimonial attention could be brought to those that aligned with the terminology used in the literature. The list was generated to identify wording and phrases that would highlight and indicate what the literature deems to be most important as
found in counselor responses. The list is divided into three categories: relationship development/feelings of acceptance, campers’ sense of autonomy, significance of outdoor time. Within each category I created a key word list based on terminology used throughout the literature, and for each word I also included more commonly used synonyms that would indicate the same ideas. Please refer to Appendix B for the list of key words that were used when reviewing open-ended responses. Other question types on the survey lend themselves nicely to being interpreted as they used scale ratings and rankings. Once the survey was complete, I created an Excel spreadsheet that allowed me to visually review the responses next to one another so that I could best analyze the results. From that spreadsheet I was able to create data tables, bar charts, and pie charts to better visualize the responses. These can be found in Appendix C.
Results

1. Survey Descriptive Results

The data collected from Camp Totokett mentors through the anonymous online survey was compiled and compared to the literature. The survey focused on gaining an understanding of what counselors deem necessary in order for campers to have a meaningful experience at summer camp. The survey was completed by 15 counselors from Camp Totokett in Branford, CT ages 18 and older. The survey was divided into four sections to gain insight into counselor perspectives: overall camp experience, counselor training, counselor/camper relationship, additional thoughts/comments.

1.1 Overall camp experience

In this portion of the survey mentors were asked to reflect on their overall camp experience this past summer. When asked whether the camp community is a safe space for campers and staff 13 mentors responded with “Strongly Agree” 2 responded with “Agree”. When asked if the atmosphere of camp was positive and welcoming 11 mentors responded with “Strongly Agree” 4 responded with “Agree”. When asked if the duration of camp was just right 4 mentors responded with “Strongly Agree” 5 responded with “Agree” 4 responded with “Neither Agree nor Disagree” 2 responded with “Disagree”. When asked if camp offered many different programs/activities throughout the week for campers 7 mentors responded with “Strongly Agree” 8 responded with “Agree”.

Mentors were also prompted to respond to an open-ended question which asked them to describe Camp Totokett in one word. The responses included: inclusive, fulfilling, welcoming (2), unique, pivotal, humbling, rewarding (2), impactful, a place to call home, family, happy, compassionate, and safe.

1.2 Counselor training

In this portion of the survey mentors were asked to reflect on their training prior to the start of the camp week. When asked if the training before the camp week was informative/helpful 2 mentors responded, “Strongly Agree” 8 responded “Agree” 3 responded “Neither Agree nor
Disagree” 1 responded “Disagree” 1 responded “N/A”. When asked if they fully understood the rules/protocols of camp prior to the start of the week 8 mentors responded, “Strongly Agree” 7 responded “Agree”. When asked if they had a clear understanding of the roles of the Adult Support Staff should they need help throughout the week 4 mentors responded, “Strongly Agree” 7 responded “Agree” 2 responded “Neither Agree nor Disagree” 1 responded “Disagree”. When asked if they felt they have enough background knowledge about their camp prior to the start of the camp week 2 mentors responded, “Strongly Agree” 7 responded “Agree” 3 responded “Neither Agree nor Disagree” 3 responded “Disagree” 1 responded “Strongly Disagree”. When asked if they wished they knew more about their camper prior to the start of the camp week 4 mentors responded, “Strongly Agree” 5 responded “Agree” 6 responded “Neither Agree nor Disagree”.

Mentors were also prompted to respond to an open-ended question which asked them to if there was something that was not covered during training that they feel would have been beneficial for them to have known prior to the start of the camp week. Of the 15 mentors who participated in the survey 6 chose to respond to this question. One mentor responded, “I would say how to deal with attitude, but you can’t necessarily train for that”. Another mentor shared, “It would have been good to know a little bit more about my camper before the week started. Other than that, everything else I needed to know was provided to me”. Another mentor responded, “I wish I knew a small bit about my camper before starting the week just so that I could get a deal for the kind of home they’re coming from”. One mentor responded “No”. Another shared, “No I think we were very well informed and educated as to how to treat our campers and be a good mentor for the week!”. Another mentor shared, “I believe that giving mentors a short blurb about their camper would have been extremely helpful”.

1.3 Counselor/camper relationship

In this portion of the survey mentors were asked to reflect on the relationships they established with their campers. Within this section mentors were prompted to respond to an open-ended question which asked them to describe how they began to establish a relationship with their camper from the first day they met through the duration of the camp week. Of the 15 mentors who participated in the survey 7 chose to respond to this question. One mentor responded, “hugging”. Another mentor shared, “I started by asking my camper about herself and
where she goes to school and what she enjoys doing for fun”. One mentor responded, “As a returning mentor I already knew my camper but it is always good to ask them about school or sports/activities that they do during the year (an try to remember what they’ve told me in the past) to really make them feel like I care about them over the 51 weeks of the year when I don’t see them”. Another mentor responded, “In all honesty, the way my camper and I became close was through our handshake. We made up a handshake within the first few minutes we met. Every day when I got my camper off the bus, we would add on to the handshake. By the end of the week, this was one of the staples of our relationship”. Another mentor shared, “I asked them questions about music, TV, and hobbies and I found that we had a lot in common. It’s amazing how the internet is able to connect us because much of what we had in common were jokes or shows we had both seen via the internet”. One mentor responded, “I had the same camper this year that I had last year so we already had a bond, but I asked them about their year and sports. I tried talking to them about music, football, and food throughout the week. The bond only grew stronger”. Another mentor responded, “I was always starting a conversation asking stuff about them to make them feel like someone was there for them if need be or if something was going wrong. Being with the older group made it easier to relate to them and establish a better connection because I could relate to some stuff that may be going on at home for them or at least help them through. Along with that, I was always open to doing what the camper wanted to do which I think made them feel like it was definitely a week dedicated to them in the best way possible”.

Also, within this section, mentors were asked to consider the following list of character traits in terms of establishing a relationship with a camper: being compassionate, strong ability to listen, ability to be authoritative, being trustworthy, ability to follow the camper’s lead. They were asked to rank the traits in order of importance from 1 to 5 where 1 was the most important and 5 was the least important to them. After reviewing all of the mentor responses 8 ranked “compassionate” 3 ranked “strong ability to listen” 2 ranked “being trustworthy” 1 ranked “ability to be authoritative” 1 ranked “ability to follow the camper’s lead” as being the most important characteristic to them. Additionally, after reviewing all of the mentor responses 9 ranked “ability to be authoritative” 4 ranked “ability to follow the camper’s lead” 1 ranked “strong ability to listen” 1 ranked “being trustworthy” 0 ranked “compassionate” as being the least important characteristic to them.
This section also asked mentors to consider the following yes/no/uncertain questions based on their relationship with their camper: my camper made new friends at camp, my camper enjoyed getting to know new people, my camper wanted to try new things, my camper looked forward to learning new activities, my camper wanted to meet new people, my camper learned new things at camp. When asked if their camper made new friends at camp 12 mentors responded “Yes” 3 responded “Uncertain”. When asked if their camper enjoyed getting to know new people 13 mentors responded “Yes” 2 responded “Uncertain”. When asked if their camper wanted to try new things 12 mentors responded “Yes” 3 responded “No”. When asked if their camper looked forward to learning new activities 12 mentors responded “Yes” 2 responded “No” 1 responded “Uncertain”. When asked if their camper wanted to meet new people 10 mentors responded “Yes” 5 responded “Uncertain”. When asked if their camper learned new things at camp all 15 mentors responded “Yes”.

Additionally, in this section, mentors were asked to consider the following yes/no/uncertain questions based on their relationship with their camper: my camper had a lot of choices at camp, my camper felt welcome at camp, my camper felt like they belonged, my camper trusted me, my camper felt heard, there was mutual respect between my camper and me. When asked if their camper had a lot of choices at camp 12 mentors responded “Yes” 2 responded “Uncertain” 1 responded “No”. When asked if their camper felt welcome at camp all 15 mentors responded “Yes”. When asked if their camper felt like they belonged 14 mentors responded “Yes” 1 responded “Uncertain”. When asked if their camper trusted them all 15 mentors responded “Yes”. When asked if there was mutual respect between their camper and them 14 mentors responded “Yes” 1 responded “Uncertain”.

Finally, in this section, mentors were asked to share what their camper’s favorite program area was from a dropdown list that included: swimming, kayaking, fishing, art, games, nature. Of the 15 surveyed mentors: 9 listed swimming, 3 listed fishing, and 2 listed art as their camper’s favorite programming areas.

1.4 Additional thoughts/comments

In this section mentors were given the opportunity to share any additional thoughts or comments. Of the 15 mentors who participated in the survey 5 choose to share additional
thoughts/comments. One mentor shared, “Camp is a place unlike any other, it gives the kids the chance to be themselves for a week in a beautiful facility without the stressors of their home lives. It is life changing for both the campers and mentors alike”. Another mentor shared, “I am so glad I got involved in this camp! This past week has made me feel so fulfilled and I am so happy I got to share it with you all”. Another mentor responded, “Camp Totokett is an amazing space for kids to enjoy a few days in a very beautiful place that they would not necessarily get to see every day like we do living here. It is such a special experience every year for all of the campers, mentors and staff, whether they be new or veterans of the camp”. One mentor shared, “I hope that this camp keeps running for many years to come. It’s so heartwarming to see how much this camp means to these kids and to see with our own eyes these kids being positively impacted by this camp and to feel this deep sense that we are doing something truly amazing”. Another mentor responded, “I hope to return next year, camp is incredible!!!!! Thank you for having me!!!”.

2. Counselor Testimonials

2.1 Shared themes among testimonials

While reviewing the counselor testimonials, provided to me by Camp Totokett from this past summer, it was evident that there were many shared themes among the written responses. These themes included: mutual learning experience, friendship, safe environment, importance of camper-mentor relationship, and life changing experience.

2.1.1 Mutual learning experience

Mentors volunteer their time to shape the lives of our campers; however, through the written testimonials it was evident that camp in many ways is a mutual learning experience for those involved. Mentors expressed how they often felt they learned more from their campers during the week then they could ever possibly teach them. The testimonials spoke to camp’s ability to provide amazing opportunities for learning through shared experience and time spent with one another. One mentor shared, “Being a part of this camp for the last 6 years, I have learned, and taught more than I ever have in my life”. Another mentor shared, “I am given the opportunity to learn from my campers who have taught me so much about love, life, and resilience”. It is evident that Camp Totokett provides a mutualistic learning opportunity for both mentors and campers.
2.1.2 Friendship

Through the written testimonials it became increasingly evident that Camp Totokett fosters strong bonds of friendship. One mentor shared, “Each year we open our doors to the most amazing campers, volunteers, and adult staff for a week of friendship, growth, and more laughter than you could ever possibly imagine”. Many of the testimonials shared about the beauty of watching new friendships emerge throughout the week among campers and mentors. One mentor shared, “It is remarkable to think that at the start of the week mentors and campers often start out as strangers but within just a few hours of meeting and throughout the course of one-week friendships are established that will truly last a lifetime”. The testimonials shared that the environment of camp provides the ideal setting to allow for friendship to be established between campers. Camp provides campers with opportunities to engage in age-appropriate activities with one another and their mentor that foster friendship and community building.

2.1.3 Safe environment

The testimonials emphasized the fact that Camp Totokett provides a safe environment that allows campers to come and “just be kids” for the week. Mentors shared that the camp setting provides the perfect foundation for mutual trust, respect, love, and support to be established between campers and in the camper-mentor relationship. The phrase “safe space to learn and grow” was included in the majority of the testimonials when speaking about the environment of camp. One mentor shared, “Camp fosters a safe environment that allows campers to overcome fears and ability”. Another shared that campers are able to, “let loose of the many burdens that they may be facing in their home life and just be kids”. Many testimonials spoke to the fact that many of the campers have lives outside of camp that may not be the best socially, mentally, or physically. Yet, camp provides them with a week free of stress and burden. Mentors shared that the love, compassion, and support that is felt among all of the staff at camp helps to establish an environment where campers feel safe to express themselves and to grow as individuals.

2.1.4 Importance of camper-mentor relationship

Through the written testimonials it was evident that the camper-mentor relationships that are established at Camp Totokett are incredible powerful and important. One mentor
shared, “The relationship that is established between the camper and mentor is powerful and truly one of the most inspiring aspects of camp”. They also shared about the everlasting impact of these relationships in the lives of their campers. One mentor shared, “I had the pleasure of working with one of our senior campers who told me that he remembers every single one of his mentors throughout the years and that amp is what keeps him motivated throughout the year to do well in school and to be a strong and confident individual”. Mentors also shared that the relationships they were able to establish with campers helped to facilitate camper growth throughout the week. One mentor shared, “It is beautiful to watch the growth of campers from the start of the week to the end, they become so fearlessly themselves”.

2.1.5 Life-changing experience

Every testimonial included a line or two about how grateful and thankful individuals were to be a part of camp. Many described their experience as “life changing”, “the highlight of their summer and year”, and a “life altering tradition”. One mentor shared, “Camp Totokett holds such a special place in the hearts of campers and mentors alike. I look forward to seeing the smiling faces of campers all year long and camp is the highlight of my summer”. Mentors shared that camp has influenced their lives in incredibly positive ways. One mentor shared, “Camp has largely shaped my life and my academic path. I would not be the person I am today without Camp Totokett, and for that I am forever grateful”. Another mentor shared, “We are told all the time as mentors just how influential and important we are in the lives of our campers, but our campers truly change our lives in more ways that I could ever possibly put into words”. Many mentors also shared how camp has taught them so much about love, confidence, and mentoring.

2.2 Divergent themes found in testimonials

While reviewing the counselor testimonials, provided to me by Camp Totokett from this past summer, there were not many themes that diverged among the written responses. There were however, two themes that were brought up in two of the testimonials that were not shared among the others: perspective and positivity as well as the importance of living in the moment.
2.2.1 Perspective and positivity

One testimonial shared that camp has taught them the power and importance of perspective and positivity. Despite these children’s backgrounds and upbringings, whatever they may be, they are capable of being happy and enjoying themselves. This mentor shared that, “Every single one of them has shown me what it means to not worry about the little things”. They shared about how their camper would often say “it doesn’t matter” when something did not go as planned or expected and how that phrase still resonates with them today. The mentor shared, “Whether it’s a little argument, a poor grade, or just a bad day, I always remember what my mentee told me and am forever grateful for the experiences that Camp Totokett has provided me”.

2.2.2 Importance of living in the moment

One testimonial shared that camp has taught them the power of living in the moment. The mentor shared that their camper shared the burden of their home life with them yet was the happiest kid while they were at camp. The mentor wrote, “It was inspiring to see the resilience and hope that lives within these children. Regardless of circumstances they show up every day with the biggest smiles and ready to seize the day. They cherish every moment at camp and truly have taught me to live in the moment”. This mentor shared that they learned a lot about letting go of worries and stress that are out of our control and just enjoying every second of the time they were able to spend with their camper.

2.2.3 Importance of outdoor time

One testimonial shared that the beauty of the natural space and setting provided the perfect environment for kids to simply be kids. The mentor shared that they could visibly see the stress and worry that their camper shed away the minute they got off the bus each morning. The mentor expressed the healing qualities of nature and wrote, “The sunshine and sea breeze were all that my camper needed this week”. The mentor wrote that their camper had told them that they rarely ever have the chance to play outside and that their camper found beauty and wonder as they explored throughout the week.

3. Synthetic Analysis

In order for vulnerable populations of children to have a meaningful experience at summer
camp the literature states that the most important factors include relationship development and feelings of acceptance, campers’ sense of autonomy, and the importance of outdoor time (Refer to: Literature Review Section 4).

3.1 Relationship development and feelings of acceptance

The literature states that the development of relationships and feeling accepted by peers and counselors are at the forefront of ensuring that vulnerable populations of children achieve a meaningful experience from camp (Desai, Sutton, Staley, & Hannon, 2014). Development of relationships and feeling of acceptance help children to establish a strong sense of belonging within a space and community (Desai et al., 2014).

The formation of caring connections with staff and campers leads to increased feelings of belonging for campers which allows for meaningful experiences to be had while at camp (Gillard et al., 2011). With respect to the literature the following yes/no/uncertain prompts were asked of the mentors to gain further insight into the relationships their camper was able to form while at camp: my camper made new friends at camp, my camper enjoyed getting to know new people, my camper wanted to meet new people. When asked if their camper made new friends at camp 12 mentors responded “Yes” 3 responded “Uncertain”. When asked if their camper enjoyed getting to know new people 13 mentors responded “Yes” 2 responded “Uncertain”. When asked if their camper wanted to meet new people 10 mentors responded “Yes” 5 responded “Uncertain”. The survey also asked mentors to reflect on qualities that they believed to be most important in terms of establishing a relationship with a camper. They were given 5 options: being compassionate, strong ability to listen, ability to be authoritative, being trustworthy, following the camper’s lead and were asked to rank on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being the most important to them. Being compassionate was ranked as the top choice among participating mentors with 8 ranking it as most important. The literature deems compassion as being vital to the formation of relationship development.

The literature states that when staff and counselors provide praise, hugs, genuine attention, and active listening their camper’s often feel a greater sense of belonging and acceptance (Gillard et al., 2011). With respect to the literature another set yes/no/uncertain prompts were asked of the mentors to gain further insight into their camper’s sense of belonging at camp: my camper felt welcome at camp, my camper felt like they belonged, my
camper trusted me, my camper felt heard, there was mutual respect between my camper and me. When asked if their camper felt welcome at camp all 15 mentors responded “Yes”. When asked if their camper felt like they belonged 14 mentors responded “Yes” 1 responded “Uncertain”. When asked if their camper trusted them all 15 mentors responded “Yes”. When asked if their camper felt heard all 15 mentors responded “Yes”. When asked if there was mutual respect between their camper and them 14 mentors responded “Yes” 1 responded “Uncertain”.

Additionally, through the online survey mentors were asked to respond to an open-ended prompt which asked them to describe how they began to establish a relationship with their camper from the first day and throughout the camp week. This question was asked to gain further insight into camper’s ability to form relationships and to better understand their sense of belonging, which the literature deem as important factors that ensure a child is able to have a meaningful experience while attending camp. Many of these open-ended responses emphasized the importance of providing comfort and hugs, actively listening, providing genuine full attention, and being a support system for their camper throughout the week. (Excerpts of these responses can be found in Section 1.3 of the Results section).

Through the written testimonials it was evident that the camper-mentor relationships that are established at Camp Totokett are incredible powerful and important. One mentor shared, “The relationship that is established between the camper and mentor is powerful and truly one of the most inspiring aspects of camp”. They also shared about the everlasting impact of these relationships in the lives of their campers. One mentor shared, “I had the pleasure of working with one of our senior campers who told me that he remembers every single one of his mentors throughout the years and that amp is what keeps him motivated throughout the year to do well in school and to be a strong and confident individual”. Mentors also shared that the relationships they were able to establish with campers helped to facilitate camper growth throughout the week. One mentor shared, “It is beautiful to watch the growth of campers from the start of the week to the end, they become so fearlessly themselves”. Mentors also shared that the camp setting provides the perfect foundation for mutual trust, respect, love, and support to be established between campers and in the camper-mentor relationship. The phrase “safe space to learn and grow” was included in the majority of the testimonials when speaking about the environment of camp. One mentor shared, “Camp fosters a safe environment that allows campers to overcome
fears and ability”. Another shared that campers are able to, “let loose of the many burdens that they may be facing in their home life and just be kids”. Many testimonials spoke to the fact that many of the campers have lives outside of camp that may not be the best socially, mentally, or physically. Yet, camp provides them with a week free of stress and burden. Mentors shared that the love, compassion, and support that is felt among all of the staff at camp helps to establish an environment where campers feel safe to express themselves and to grow as individuals.

3.2 Campers’ sense of autonomy

The literature states that establishing feelings of autonomy within the summer camp settings largely influences whether or not a child feels as though they were able to have a meaningful experience at summer camp (Garst & Gagnon, 2016; Ramsing & Sibthorp, 2008; Roark, Ellis, Wells, & Gillard, 2010; Schmalz, Kerstetter, & Kleiber, 2011). Summer camps that support autonomy “create a context or environment that provides choices within limits, freedom, encouragement toward autonomy, involvement with others in decision making, and the ability to facilitate motivation that originates from within and inevitably leads to increased sense of self-determination” (Ramsing & Sibthorp, 2008). With respect to the literature a set of yes/no/uncertain prompts on the survey were asked of the mentors to gain further insight into their camper’s sense of autonomy: my camper wanted to try new activities, my camper looked forward to trying new things, my camper learned new things at camp, my camper had a lot of choices at camp. When asked if their camper wanted to try new things 12 mentors responded “Yes” 3 responded “No”. When asked if their camper looked forward to learning new activities 12 mentors responded “Yes” 2 responded “No” 1 responded “Uncertain”. When asked if their camper learned new things at camp all 15 mentors responded “Yes”. When asked if their camper had a lot of choices at camp 12 mentors responded “Yes” 2 responded “Uncertain” 1 responded “No”.

The survey also asked mentors to reflect on qualities that they believed to be most important in terms of establishing a relationship with a camper. They were given 5 options: being compassionate, strong ability to listen, ability to be authoritative, being trustworthy, following the camper’s lead and were asked to rank on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being the most important to them. The quality of being able to follow the camper’s lead was aimed at gaining further insight into whether or not mentors believed campers autonomy was an important factor in ensuring
they had a meaningful experience at camp. When reviewing the responses only 1 mentor ranked “following the camper’s lead” as their top choice out of the 15 participants and 4 ranked it as their last choice.

Additionally, the literature states that “the arts provided campers with high levels of interaction and active participation and therefore were perceived as being more autonomy supportive than sports, games, and athletics. The literature also states that non-competitive activities tend to be higher in autonomy support than competitive ones in summer camp settings (Garst & Gagnon, 2016). These “non-competitive activities are framed around events that provide choice” and when children have the choice to determine which activities, they want to participate in they feel satisfied, self-directed, and supported which lead to increased perceptions of autonomy (Garst & Gagnon, 2016). With respect to the literature mentors were asked to respond to the following prompt on a scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree camp offered many different programs/activities throughout the week for campers. When asked about programming and activities 7 mentors responded, “Strongly Agree” and 8 responded “Agree” that camp offered many different programs/activities throughout the week for campers. Mentors were also asked to select their camper’s favorite program area from a dropdown list that included: swimming, kayaking, fishing, art, games, nature. Of the 15 surveyed mentors: 9 listed swimming, 3 listed fishing, and 2 listed art as their camper’s favorite programming areas.

Through the written testimonials it was evident that camp in many ways is a mutual learning experience for those involved allowing the mentors to follow and learn from the camper’s lead. Mentors expressed how they often felt they learned more from their campers during the week then they could ever possibly teach them. The testimonials spoke to camp’s ability to provide amazing opportunities for learning through shared experience and time spent with one another. One mentor shared, “Being a part of this camp for the last 6 years, I have learned, and taught more than I ever have in my life”. Another mentor shared, “I am given the opportunity to learn from my campers who have taught me so much about love, life, and resilience”. It is evident that Camp Totokett provides a mutualistic learning opportunity for both mentors and campers. The phrase “safe space to learn and grow” was included in the majority of the testimonials when speaking about the environment of camp. Safe environments provide the basis for autonomous development, where children can explore and try new things on their own with guidance and support always available to them.
3.3 Importance of outdoor time

The literature states that time spent in the outdoors is incredibly beneficial for children, and having it built into the plans for summer camp greatly enhances the overall experience (Gillard et al., 2011; Readick & Schaller, 2005). With respect to the literature mentors were asked to select their camper’s favorite program area from a dropdown list that included: swimming, kayaking, fishing, art, games, nature all of which were outdoor programming areas. Of the 15 surveyed mentors: 9 listed swimming, 3 listed fishing, and 2 listed art as their camper’s favorite programming areas. Mentors were also given the opportunity to share additional thoughts/comments and many spoke of the beauty of the outdoor camp setting. One mentor wrote, “Camp Totokett is an amazing space for kids to enjoy a few days in a very beautiful place that they would not necessarily get to see every day like we do living here”. Another wrote, “Camp is a place unlike any other, and it gives the kids the chance to be themselves for a week in a beautiful facility without the stressors of their home lives”.

Through one of the written testimonials it was evident that outdoor time is powerful and important. One testimonial shared that the beauty of the natural space and setting provided the perfect environment for kids to simply be kids. The mentor shared that they could visibly see the stress and worry that their camper held shed away the minute they got off the bus each morning. The mentor expressed the healing qualities of nature and wrote, “The sunshine and sea breeze were all that my camper needed this week”. The mentor wrote that their camper had told them that they rarely ever have the chance to play outside and that their camper found beauty and wonder as they explored throughout the week.

4. Personal Results/Interaction

For the past six summers I have volunteered at Camp Totokett as both a mentor and a group leader. My personal connection to camp has definitely provided me with a unique perspective in terms of comparing what the literature deems to be most important versus what the mentors at Camp Totokett deem to be most important in ensuring that campers have a meaningful experience at summer camp. When reviewing the results of the survey and sifting through the testimonials it became increasingly evident that responses aligned very closely with what the literature stated. Based on my personal results and interactions with this camp the responses align closely with
what I expected. The responses to the survey questions were incredibly thoughtful and, in many ways, aligned with the responses I expected to receive from mentors. Camp Totokett prioritizes its campers and their experience and I was not surprised that the responses very much so reflected that.

Given my personal interactions with Camp Totokett and the responses I received through the surveys and testimonials I feel that the literature in many ways was very spot on. In order for vulnerable populations of children to have a meaningful experience at summer camp the literature states that the most important factors include relationship development and feelings of acceptance, campers’ sense of autonomy, and the importance of outdoor time. Relationship development and feelings of acceptance were held in the same high regard by the mentors as by the literature. Mentors spoke in detail about the relationships they were able to develop with their campers and how they strived to ensure that their camper felt safe and welcome at camp. The literature also deems campers’ sense of autonomy as being an important factor and given the responses I believe that mentors at Camp Totokett feel the same. Many spoke about how their campers often do not have many choices in their personal life or time to simply explore and just be kids and that they valued their time spent camp to be able to do just that. The literature also deems the importance of outdoor time as being an important factor and given that Camp Totokett takes place entirely outdoors and the responses from the mentors I believe the two are in agreement. Many mentors spoke about the beauty of camp and the safety of the environment as being incredibly important factors that allowed for their campers to grow, learn, and ultimately have a meaningful experience at camp.
Discussion

To gain further insight and understanding, this thesis attempts to compare the larger historical background and literature (See Literature Review), as well as counselor perspectives (See Results) by addressing the following question:

What do vulnerable populations of children, specifically those who are infected/affected by HIV/AIDS, need in order to have a meaningful experience at summer camp?

After conducting an online survey of counselors and reviewing counselor testimonials from Camp Totokett and internalizing those finding into my own personal experience I have gathered the following conclusions: vulnerable populations of children, specifically those who are infected/affected by HIV/AIDS, are able to have a meaningful experience at summer camp because 1.) they develop relationships and a sense of belonging 2.) they have a strong sense of autonomy and 3.) they are able to spend time outdoors.

1. With Respect to the Literature

The literature states that in order for vulnerable populations of children to have a meaningful experience at summer camp the most important factors include relationship development and feelings of acceptance, campers’ sense of autonomy, and the importance of outdoor time (Refer to: Literature Review Section 4). The development of relationships and feeling accepted by peers and counselors are at the forefront of ensuring that vulnerable populations of children achieve a meaningful experience from camp (Desai, Sutton, Staley, & Hannon, 2014). Development of relationships and feeling of acceptance help children to establish a strong sense of belonging within a space and community (Desai et al., 2014). Additionally, establishing feelings of autonomy within the summer camp settings largely influences whether or not a child feels as though they were able to have a meaningful experience at summer camp (Garst & Gagnon, 2016; Ramsing & Sibthorp, 2008; Roark, Ellis, Wells, & Gillard, 2010; Schmalz, Kerstetter, & Kleiber, 2011). Summer camps that support autonomy “create a context or environment that provides choices within limits, freedom, encouragement toward autonomy, involvement with others in decision making, and the ability to facilitate motivation that originates from within and inevitably leads to increased sense of self-determination” (Ramsing & Sibthorp, 2008). Furthermore, time
spent in the outdoors is incredibly beneficial for children, and having it built into the plans for summer camp greatly enhances the overall experience (Gillard et al., 2011; Readdick & Schaller, 2005).

With respect to the literature counselors were asked a series of questions via the online survey that were aimed at gaining insight into what they believe to be the most important factors that influence a child’s ability to have a meaningful experience at summer camp (See Results Section). These questions provided a great deal of insight and perspective that indicated that what the counselors believe to be most important aligns closely with what the literature deems to be crucial factors in order for vulnerable populations of children to have a meaningful experience at summer camp. The language used by counselors in the open-ended portions of the online survey as well as the voices that came through in the counselor testimonials aligned very closely with the language and factors emphasized in the literature. Counselors shared the importance of relationship building, friendship and one-on-one mentoring, sense of belonging, campers’ sense of autonomy: choices in programming and safe environment to explore and learn, as well as the importance of time spent outdoors. From the online survey responses and the counselor testimonials it was incredibly evident that literature and counselor perspectives aligned.

2. With Respect to Practice and Policy

With respect to practice, it is evident that Camp Totokett in Branford, Connecticut has modeled their program in a way that ensures children are able to have a meaningful experience at summer camp. Their one-on-one mentorship style ensures that children are able to develop meaningful relationships where they feel heard and prioritized. These relationships allow campers to have a very individualized camp experience where they are able to have a strong sense of autonomy through exploration and choice. Given the nature of the outdoor camp setting children and their counselors too are able to play and freely enjoy time spent in the sunshine. Camp Totokett recognizes that the majority of the children who come to their camp come from homes in which they have experienced things no child should ever have to, and many have been forced to grow up faster than they should have. Given this understanding camp works to ensure that kids get to be just kids for one week. Camp Totokett has brought to life many of the concepts that the literature deems to be most important in order for vulnerable populations of children to have a meaningful experience at summer camp. They are a wonderful example of the literature in
practice.

With respect to policy these results can provide context and insight to policymakers who oversee and regulate summer camps. Summer camp licensing is standardized in every state and often places heavy emphasis and priority on the health and safety of campers, counselors, and staff. Which are incredibly important and certainly the number one priorities of summer camps. However, when considering summer camps that are working specifically with vulnerable populations of children policymakers who create the licensing requirements could consider delving into requirements by referring to the results from this study. The literature and the counselor perspectives both emphasize the importance of relationship development and sense of belonging, campers’ sense of autonomy, and time spent outdoors. Policymakers could consider revising the licensing requirements for summer camps that are working specifically with vulnerable populations of children to include these crucial factors. If those factors were required to be met in order to be eligible to be licensed the state would ensure that vulnerable populations of children were able to have a meaningful experience at summer camp as well as ensuring their health and safety.

3. Recommendations

The research I have conducted provides insight to a small group of camp administrators at Camp Totokett in the state of Connecticut who are working with vulnerable populations of children, specifically those who are infected/affected by HIV/AIDS. Further research must be conducted to understand what vulnerable populations of children, specifically those who are infected/affected by HIV/AIDS, need in order to have a meaningful experience at summer camp at the regional, national, and global level.

The results and conclusions of this study are important because they provide tangible and organized sentiment about the perspective and experience that counselors have with vulnerable populations of children, specifically those who are infected/affected by HIV/AIDS, at Camp Totokett. Summer camp has the ability to provide children with meaningful experiences that have long-lasting impacts. It provides children with the opportunity to develop relationships with peers and counselors, establish a sense of belonging, experience a strong sense of autonomy, and spend time outdoors. Broadly, individuals can turn to this study to help influence decisions made about
the planning and programming of camp settings to best ensure that vulnerable populations of children are able to have a meaningful experience. More specifically, the results and conclusions of this study will be incredibly useful and beneficial to the camp administrators at Camp Totokett. The results can be used to highlight the camp to social work agencies to help recruit campers and to help ease any parent concerns. Additionally, the results can provide constructive feedback which can be used to help influence decisions that are made about camp in general as well as counselor training.
Conclusion

1. Statement of Interest

When faced with what felt like an incredibly overwhelming task of designing an Honors College thesis I looked within and reflected immensely on the formative experiences that I have had throughout my collegiate career. I had what seemed to be an endless sea of potential ideas, but I found myself continuously circling back to my time spent at Camp Totokett. My time spent at camp has been an experience that has had such an immense impact on my life in the most incredible ways.

This influence is most tangibly seen through my academic and professional tract. Camp Totokett ignited within me a passion to give back to my community and a desire to work directly with children and families. My summers spent at Camp Totokett expanded my knowledge and desire to pursue a career in the social work field. It motivated me to add Human Development & Family Studies as my minor and ultimately to apply to graduate school for my Master’s in Social Work.

As I reflected on the impact that Camp Totokett has had on my life these past six summers it seemed only fitting that I focus my research on an experience that means so much to me. In an attempt to understand my personal experience of a summer camp inspiring my academic interests and future career path I sought to explore what vulnerable populations of children, specifically those who are infected/affected by HIV/AIDS, need in order to have a meaningful experience at summer camp. Having served as a counselor and group leader I was interested in understanding the camper experience further. I decided to engage with that study by conducting an online survey that allowed counselors from Camp Totokett to share their perspective and by reviewing counselor testimonials from Camp Totokett. I focused on the factors that allow vulnerable populations of children, specifically those who are infected/affected by HIV/AIDS, to have a meaningful experience at summer camp. The hypothesis of this thesis is hinged up the idea that relationship development and sense of belonging, campers’ sense of autonomy, and time spent outdoors could serve to ensure that campers are able to have a meaningful experience at summer camp.
2. Larger Takeaways

When reviewing both the online survey responses and the counselor testimonials it was incredibly evident that the same three themes, as deemed most important by the literature, were expressed by the counselors at Camp Totokett. Threads of relationship development and sense of belonging, campers’ sense of autonomy, and importance of outdoor time were woven into the responses and brought the ideas that were outlined in the literature to life. When present in a summer camp setting these three major themes prove to create the perfect environment for vulnerable populations of children, specifically those who are infected/affected by HIV/AIDS, to have a meaningful experience at summer camp. The counselors at Camp Totokett highlighted the importance of these three themes within their camp setting and shared the beautiful experiences their campers were able to have this past summer.

It is incredibly remarkable to think about the impact that one week of summer camp can have on the lives of children. From the outside looking in Camp Totokett may look like any other summer camp, but those who are a part of it will tell a completely different story. Camp Totokett is far from ordinary and is a place where kids can just be kids. Each year we open our doors to the most amazing campers, volunteers, and adult staff for a week of friendship, growth, and more laughter than you could ever possibly imagine. Every year I have the privilege of watching campers grow throughout the week and it makes my heart smile thinking about how fearlessly themselves they become by the end of our time together. I am fortunate enough to see the magic each summer and I believe that this study helps bring that magic to life on a much larger scale. The literature deems that in order for vulnerable populations of children to have a meaningful experience at summer camp they must develop relationships and have a strong sense of belonging, they must have a strong sense of autonomy, and they have to experience time outdoors. Based on the results of this study and my own personal experience I can attest that Camp Totokett fosters an environment that allows its campers to have a meaningful experience each and every summer.
Bibliography


Appendix A

1. Online Survey

A Note on Consent & Privacy

By completing this survey you consent to being 18 years or older and a Counselor/Adult Staff member at Camp Totokett in Branford, CT. This survey is anonymous. The record of your survey responses does not contain any identifying information about you. There is no way of matching your identity with your survey responses.

Section A: Overall Camp Experience

A1. Please consider the following statements and indicate whether you strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree, or not applicable

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither Agree nor Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The camp community is a safe space for campers and staff</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The atmosphere of camp was positive and welcoming</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The duration of camp was just right</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camp offered many different programs/activities throughout the week for campers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Not Applicable

The camp community is a safe space for campers and staff

The atmosphere of camp was positive and welcoming

The duration of camp was just right

Camp offered many different programs/activities throughout the week for campers

A2. What is one word you would use to describe Camp Totokett?

[Blank space for potential answers]
### Section B: Counselor Training

**B1. Please consider the following statements and indicate whether you strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree, or not applicable**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The training before the camp week was informative/helpful</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I fully understood the rules/protocols of camp prior to the start of the week</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I had a clear understanding of the roles of the Adult Support Staff</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>had I needed help throughout the week</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I felt I had enough background knowledge about my camper prior</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to the start of the camp week</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I wish I knew more about my camper prior to the start of the camp week</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Not Applicable

- The training before the camp week was informative/helpful
- I fully understood the rules/protocols of camp prior to the start of the week
- I had a clear understanding of the roles of the Adult Support Staff had I needed help throughout the week
- I felt I had enough background knowledge about my camper prior to the start of the camp week
- I wish I knew more about my camper prior to the start of the camp week

**B2. Was there something that was not covered during training that you feel would have been beneficial for you to have known prior to the start of the camp week?**


Section C: Counselor/Camper Relationship

C1. Describe how you began to establish a relationship with your camper from the first day when you met them and throughout the duration of the camp week? (Please do not use any camper names in your description)

C2. Consider the following list of character traits in terms of establishing a relationship with a camper. Please rank the following in order of importance from 1 to 5 where 1 is the most important and 5 is the least important to you.

- Being compassionate
- Strong ability to listen
- Ability to be authoritative
- Being trustworthy
- Following the camper's lead

C3. Based on your relationship with your camper please consider the following yes/no/uncertain statements:

- My camper made new friends at Camp
### C4. Based on your relationship with your camper please consider the following yes/no/uncertain statements:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>Uncertain</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My camper had a lot of choices at Camp</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My camper felt welcome at Camp</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My camper felt like they belonged</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My camper trusted me</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My camper felt heard</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There was mutual respect between my camper and me</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### C5. What was your camper’s favorite program area?

- Swimming
- Kayaking
- Fishing
- Art
- Games
- Nature
**Section D: Additional Thoughts/Comments**

Please share any additional thoughts you may have in this space!

D1.

Thank you for participating in my thesis research, I greatly appreciate you taking the time to thoughtfully respond!

If you are interested in participating in either an in-person or phone interview to share further insight into the camper experience at Camp Totokett please email me at henelson@uvm.edu to coordinate a time!
### Appendix B

1. **Key Words**

#### Relationship Development/Sense of Belonging

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Words</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acceptance</td>
<td>Trust/Trustworthy</td>
<td>Hugs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendship</td>
<td>Connected</td>
<td>Attention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support</td>
<td>Belonging</td>
<td>Listening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compassion</td>
<td>Interact</td>
<td>Comfort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring</td>
<td>Praise</td>
<td>Relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared Experience</td>
<td>Love</td>
<td>Welcome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>Inclusion</td>
<td>Respect</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Sense of Autonomy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Words</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Choice</td>
<td>Self-determination</td>
<td>Exploration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limits</td>
<td>Following campers’ lead</td>
<td>Free-choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom</td>
<td>Non-competitive</td>
<td>Self-directed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision making</td>
<td>Self-regulation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Outdoor Time

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Words</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Outside</td>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>Swimming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature</td>
<td>Water</td>
<td>Kayaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fresh Air</td>
<td>Hiking</td>
<td>Outdoor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural</td>
<td>Fishing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C

1. Data Visuals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall Camp Experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The camp community is a safe space for campers and staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Counselor Training</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The training before the camp week was informative/helpful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>