

The Effectiveness of an Intentionally Focused, Residential Summer Camp Experience on the Social Skill Development of Pre-Adolescent Youth

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The purpose of this study was to examine the effectiveness of Merrowvista's intentionally focused, residential summer camp experience on the social skill development of pre-adolescent youth. Merrowvista is an American Youth Foundation camp seeking to inspire youth to "be their best, seek balanced living, maintain healthy friendships, and make a positive difference in their communities and the wider world" (American Youth Foundation, 2005, p.1) Based on their core values, philosophy, and program goals, Merrowvista intentionally chooses activities and designs experiences to positively impact the development in these four areas. Each activity in Merrowvista's program (e.g., eating arrangements, activities, cabin assignments) is based on a strong belief that what and who they are as an organization and staff makes a difference in the way a child develops socially, emotionally, and physically while attending camp (American Youth Foundation, 2005).

THEORETICAL FRAME

Positive youth development programs have been designed to address the challenges of adolescence and adulthood (e.g., alcohol and other drug use, tobacco use, violent activity, sexual activity, and poor school performance) and employ a coordinated series of activities and experiences that encourage social, emotional, physical, and cognitive growth (National Collaboration for Youth Members, 1998). Research in this area indicates that engaging in these prosocial, constructive, non-academic activities can lead to prosocial behavior and positive social development (Bruyere, 2002; Eccles, Barber, Stone, & Hunt, 2003; Garst, Schneider, & Baker, 2001; Moote & Woodarski, 1997).

One critical element of social development programming is the instruction or coaching of prosocial skills (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2002; Damon, 2004; Granger, 2002; Larson, 2000; Scales, 1996; Weisberg, Kumpfer, & Seligman, 2003; Witt, 2002). The following prosocial skills and behaviors have been identified as important to positive social development: time management, social competence (listening, communication, cooperation), achievement motivation, appropriate goal setting/decision making, intellectual flexibility, task leadership/initiation, emotional control, active initiative, self-confidence, trust, locus of control (Gass, 2005; Neill, 2005). Pre-adolescence (youth ages 10 to 12) is recognized as a critical time for the acquisition of these types of skills (Dorman, Lipsitz, & Verner, 1985; Ormrod, 2006). During pre-adolescence great emphasis is placed on the physical and social self with an intense focus on trying new things, expanding generalizations of self-concept, skill attainment, competency acquisition, and basic social interaction and independence (Erikson, 1974; Ormrod, 2006).

Social development programs targeting pre-adolescents occur in a variety of settings including residential summer camps. Summer camps seek to create a network of resources, providing children with social and emotional competencies while instilling age-appropriate skills and knowledge-building opportunities. While thousands of youth attend camp each year and many programs believe they positively benefit the social development of their participants, a limited amount of research has evaluated the effectiveness of camps in this area.

METHODS

This study was a quasi-experimental, non-equivalent control-group design involving administration of two instruments before and after an intervention to the experimental group and to two non-randomly assigned comparison groups (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003). Participants from the study group (Merrowvista campers) included 201 youth ranging from 10 to 12 years old (116 males and 85 females). Participants from the comparison group (students from two middle schools from the seacoast region of New Hampshire) included 130 youth ranging from 10 to 12 years old (65 males and 65 females). The comparison group was matched on similarity of several criteria including age, gender, and interest in outdoor programming. The camp and comparison groups were compared using composite and subscale scores on the Life Effectiveness Questionnaire (Neill, Marsh, & Richards, in press) and Social Skills Checklist (Gass, 2005). Gender and age were also examined for potential difference between and among the camp and comparison groups. Group assignments during Summer 2004, the number of years attending an AYP camp prior to Summer 2004, and the number of weeks attending camp during Summer 2004 were studied for potential difference among the camp group participants.

FINDINGS

Overall scores from the Life Effectiveness Questionnaire (LEQ) showed a significant difference between the camp and comparison groups. The camp group showed significant improvement while the comparison group did not. Since the comparison group did not significantly change over time and the camp group did, it can be suggested that the intervention provided for the camp group caused this effect. The following LEQ subscales were significantly improved for the camp group when compared to the comparison group: Time Management, Active Initiative, and Self-confidence.

Overall scores from the Social Skills Checklist (SSC) showed a significant difference between the camp and comparison groups. The camp group showed significant improvement while the comparison group did not. Since the comparison group did not significantly change over time and the camp group did, it can be suggested that the intervention provided for the camp group caused this effect. The majority of growth in the SSC occurred in the growth of camper Interpersonal Skills.

CONCLUSIONS/IMPLICATIONS

This study found significant gains for 10-12 year olds in the areas of Time Management, Active Initiative, Self-Confidence, and Interpersonal Skills. Elements of Merrowvista's program atmosphere and activity options were reviewed in order to determine plausible elements of intentional camp programming that may have contributed to significant changes.

Time Management is the perceived ability to make optimum use of one's time (Neill et al., in press). Merrowvista's daily schedule of activities includes several opportunities to practice time management. The days are full of activities and campers are able to choose many activities based on personal interest (e.g., the choice of four different "Interest Groups" per day, "Go-Getters," and "Your Time"). Making optimum use of one's time and effectively maintaining living space is often rewarded which reinforces this behavior.

Active Initiative is the perceived ability to initiate action in new situations (Neill et al., in press). Merrowvista offers opportunities for campers to participate in activities both as individuals and as group members. Campers can choose how they want to be involved in programming up to six times in a day (e.g., "Go-Getters," "Your Time" options, and "Interest Groups"). The element of choice may encourage campers to practice the skill of participation, a key to pre-adolescent development (Ormrod, 2006).

Self-confidence is the perceived ability to be successful in one's actions (Neill et al., in press). One of the primary goals of Merrowvista's program is to develop the "Best Self" by improving self-confidence. This is done by recognizing the competencies and accomplishments of campers in various aspects of programming and cooperative living (Ormrod, 2006). Campers design goals within each of their "Interest Groups" and develop "Benchmarks" which staff and campers can use to measure progress. Consistent progress toward a goal can encourage a camper to stick with an activity even when it becomes difficult, leading to improvements in self-confidence (Ormrod, 2006).

Interpersonal Skills, the subscale as measured by the SSC, examines how children interact with others and their perception of their peer group with respect to: trust, cooperation, communication, kindness, respect for rules, respect for other's property, understanding other's feelings, and responsibility for one's actions (Gass, 2005). These specific skills are valued by Merrowvista as seen in the descriptions of their goals of "Best Self," "Creating and Maintaining Healthy Friendships," and "Positive Group Culture." Exposure to the Merrowvista community allows campers consistent and frequent opportunities to practice positive social interaction, especially in the Camp Village. Through various concrete and specific experiences (e.g., "Recipe for Success," "Village Tree," or "Village Chain") a code of living is established to set expectations for cooperative living (e.g., respecting other people's personal space and property and offering to help others). These established social norms and boundaries (critical to pre-adolescent development) assist campers in assessing their behavior and quality of participation (Dorman et al., 1985; Ormrod, 2006).

This study provided evidence in support of the benefits of participation in intentional, residential summer camp programs. It also provided an understanding of the specific

influence these types of programs have on the social development of youth. While further research will determine causal connections between Merrowvista's processes and outcomes, this study has established that residential summer camp communities such as Merrowvista have the capacity to formally and informally instruct prosocial skills. Studies such as this one could benefit other camp programs by determining their current outcomes and identifying aspects of their own camp program which may be contributing to these outcomes and can be targeted for further research.

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**ACA Camp Research Symposium
Chicago, Illinois**

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University of New Hampshire &
American Youth Foundation
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Overview

- Introduction
- Research Methods
- Results & Discussion
- How can this help me do my job better?

Introduction

- Youth Development: Prosocial skills
- Pre-adolescence: A critical time in development
- Programming for social skill development
- Camp and social skill development

Research Questions: The Short Version

Camp vs. Non-Camp

- Life Effectiveness Questionnaire
- Social Skills Checklist

Demographic Variables

- Gender
- Age
- Years of Participation in an AYF Camp
- Weeks of Participation during Summer 2004
- Individual Group Assignments at Camp during Summer 2004

Life Effectiveness Questionnaire

1. Time Management
2. Social Competence
3. Achievement Motivation
4. Intellectual Flexibility
5. Task Leadership
6. Emotional Control
7. Active Initiative
8. Self Confidence
9. Locus of Control

Social Skills Checklist

1) Intrapersonal Skills

- Looks at individual behaviors (e.g., decision making, appropriate goal setting, listening, task initiation)

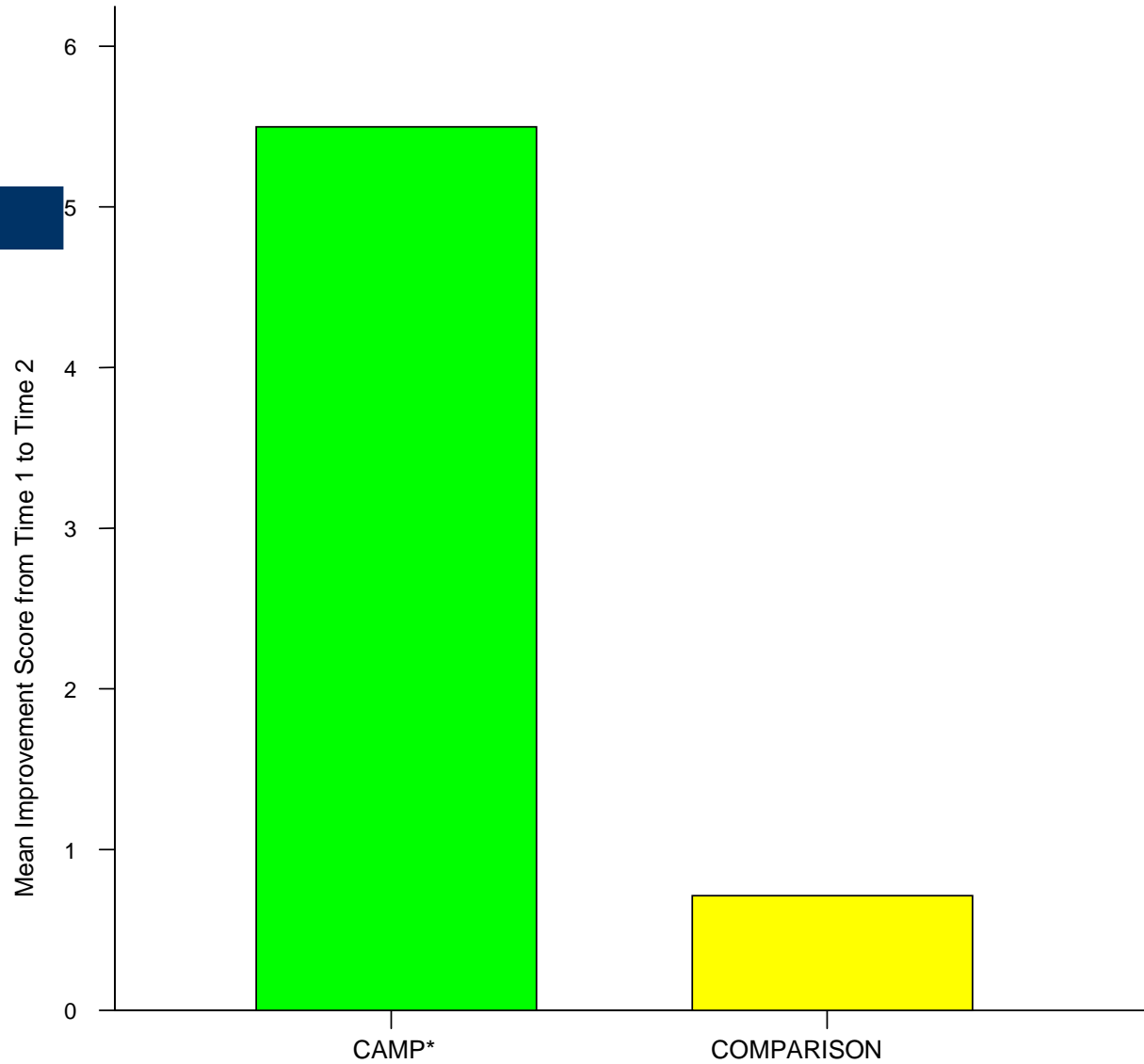
2) Interpersonal Skills

- Looks at how children interact with others (e.g., trust, cooperation, communication)

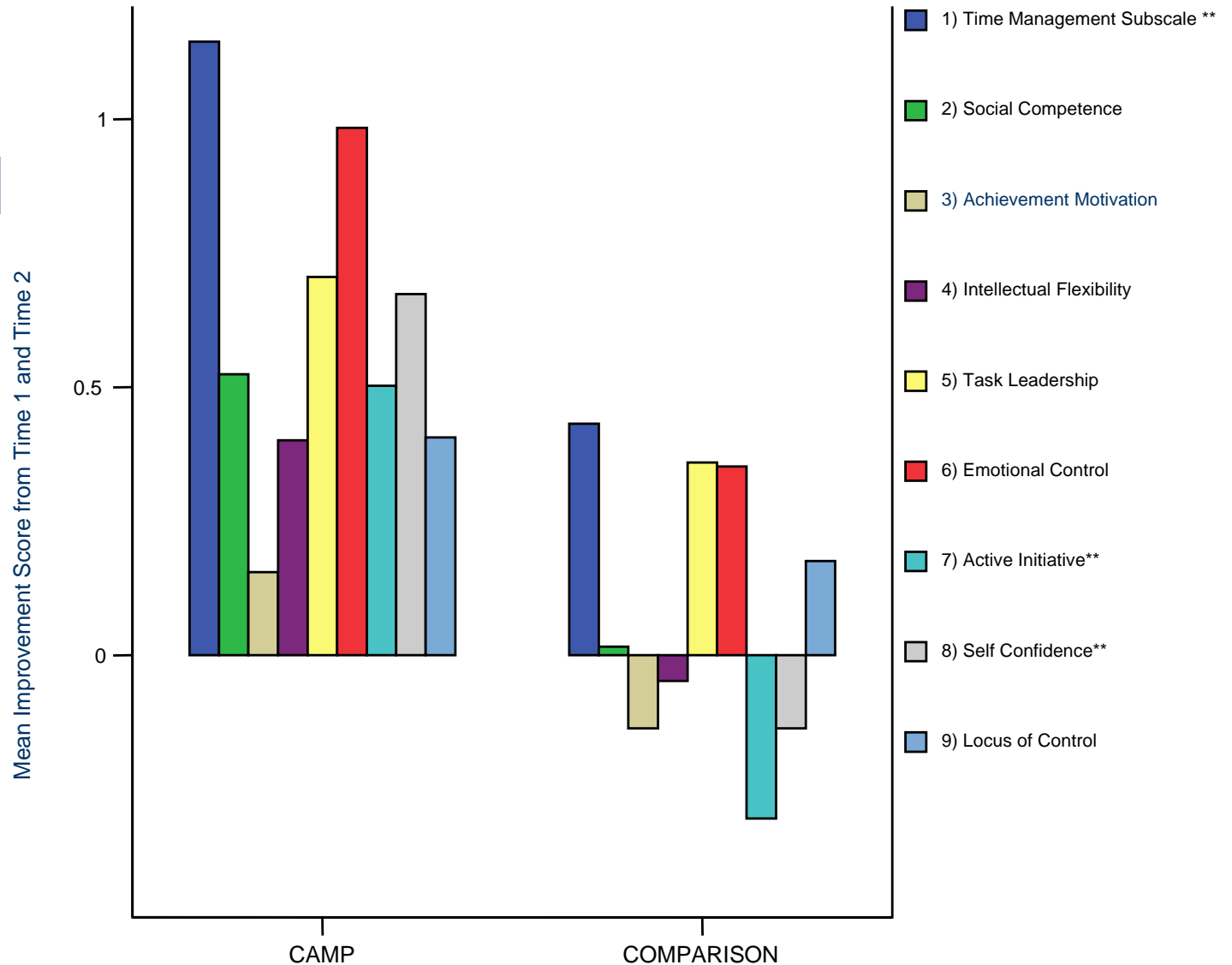
Research Methods

- **Quasi-Experimental Nonequivalent Control Group Design**
 - Camp vs. Non-Camp
- **Sampling and Instrumentation**
- **Data Analysis**
 - Repeated Measures ANOVA

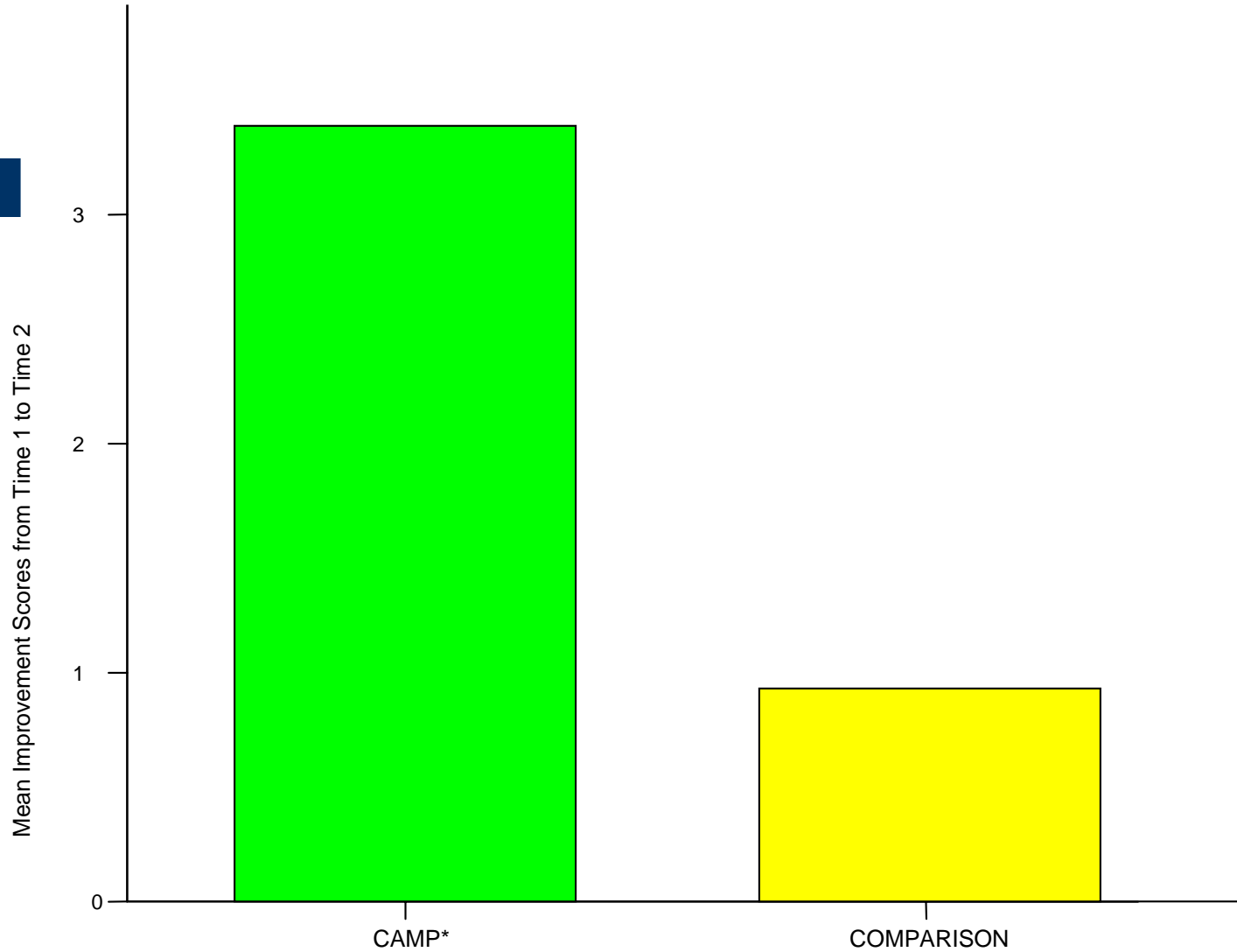
Mean Improvement of Composite LEQ Scores for Camp and Comparison Groups



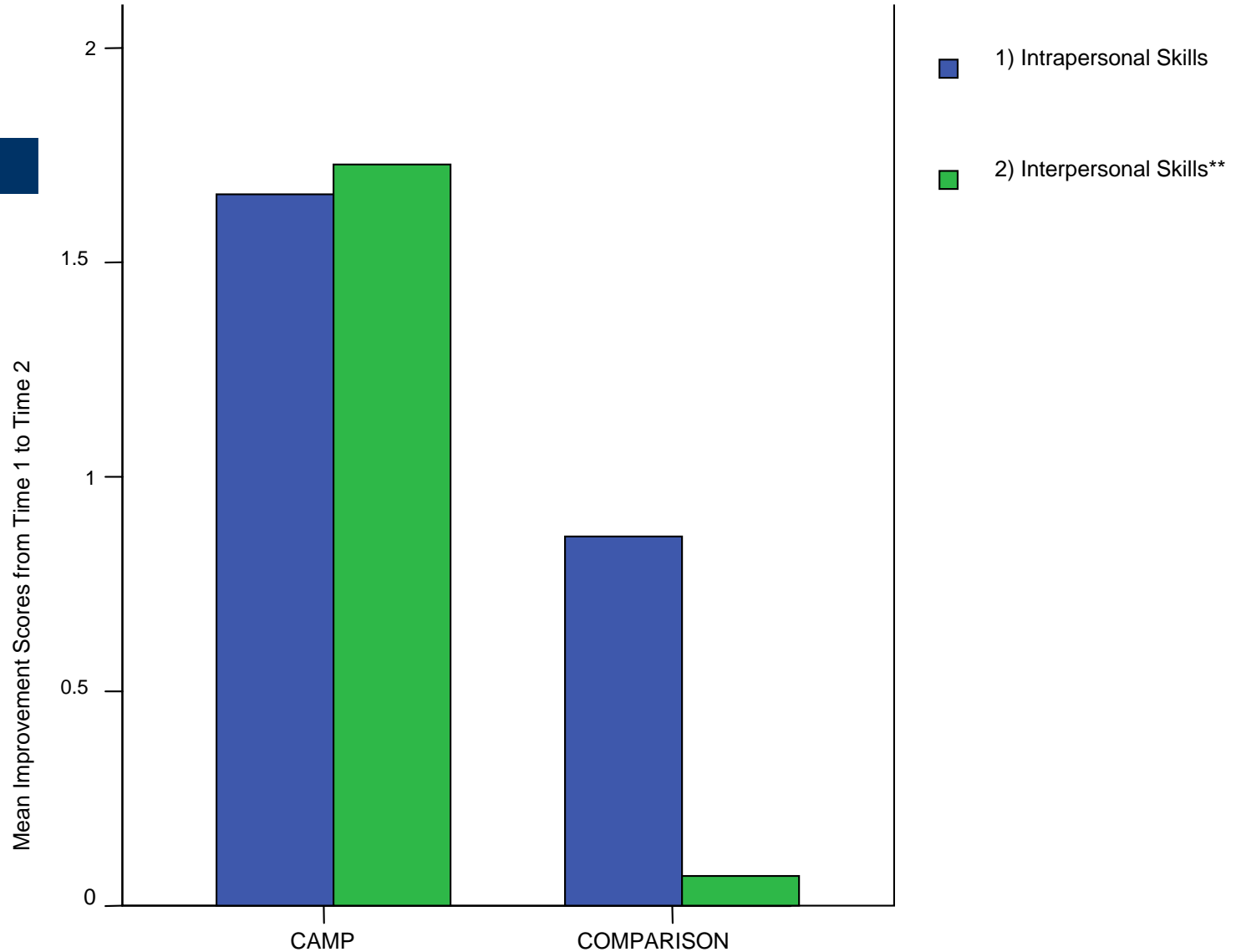
Mean Improvement of LEQ Subscale Scores for Camp and Comparison Groups



Mean Improvement of Composite SSC Scores for Camp and Comparison Groups



Mean Improvement of SSC Subscale Scores for Camp and Comparison Groups



Discussion

- Camp group had significant gains in:
 - Time management, Active initiative, Self Confidence
 - Interpersonal skills (e.g., trust, cooperation, communication)
- Components of the camp experience which may be contributing to these gains:
 - clear and co-created code of conduct
 - choice in activity
 - goal setting
 - allowing for skill mastery
 - consistent positive reward for desired behavior

How Can This Help Me Do My Job Better?

- Supports the benefit of participating in intentional, residential summer camps
- Prompts internal reflection about program capacity to influence social development
- Demonstrates the importance of research within the specific context of own program and contribution to future research.

Questions?

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Thank You!

