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Infusing Forgiveness Education into Hope Tree Acres Summer Camp

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Follow-up Report of 2018 Summer Fellowship

The Assessment of Infusing Forgiveness Education into Hope Tree Acres Summer Camp

1. Abstract:

The purpose of this project was to investigate the effects of teaching a forgiveness education curriculum using children's literature to children and adolescents attending Hope Tree Acres Nature and Animal camp. Hope Tree Acres Nature and Animal Camp was a week long camp for children who have experienced trauma in their lives and were experiencing anger, anxiety and/or depression because of their past negative experience(s). Most of the campers who attended Hope Tree Acres Nature and Animal Camp were in counseling. The researcher attended the week-long camp and taught the campers both forgiveness education and yoga in daily forgiveness education lessons and yoga sessions. Two UNI students in the College of Education assisted with the camp and helped teach the forgiveness education along with the researcher. Pre-tests assessments consisted of measures of forgiveness knowledge, forgiveness toward a specific offender, an anger inventory as well as a written individual interview about forgiveness knowledge and understanding. Pre-test assessments were completed by the twelve campers (ages 8 to 14) the week before the camp began and the same post-test assessments, other than the individual interview, which was revised, were given to the campers one week after the camp ended. The follow-up assessments are occurring the week of August 20th. Quantitative results are still being analyzed but qualitative data lends additional evidence that forgiveness education is effective in teaching students about what forgiveness is and is not and in helping children and adolescents decrease their anger associated with past injustices as well as work through interpersonal conflicts with friends. Including forgiveness education in the daily curriculum at Hope Tree Acres Nature and Animal Camp proved beneficial for this group of children who had experienced past trauma based on qualitative results analyzed thus far. The two UNI students who helped teach the forgiveness education and served as counselors during this week long camp, also benefited from participation in this research project and week-long camp as reflected in verbal reflections of

the camp. In addition, two counseling interns stated that their favorite part of the camp was learning about forgiveness.

2. Project Narrative:

During the first half of the summer fellowship period, I completed the IRB process and trained two UNI College of Education students about forgiveness and forgiveness education for them to be able to assist with the forgiveness education and serve as counselors during the camp. I also developed the week-long forgiveness curriculum to be used during the five daily forgiveness education lessons during the week-long camp. I had previously been teaching the forgiveness education over a longer period of time so the curriculum had to be reduced to fit the length of the camp. Families of campers were also contacted during this time to recruit potential campers for the forgiveness education research. The research project was explained and permissions, including signed consent forms for both the parents and campers, were obtained. I received a Veridian Credit Union Community Fellowship to fund 15 campers to attend this camp, compensate the UNI students for their work at the camp, pay for snacks at camp and pay for some of the materials for the forgiveness education and other activities at camp. Thus, this research project fit well with the goals of the fellowship I received.

Although the initial plan was to conduct a pre-test- post-test experimental design with a wait-list control group, the director of the camp decided to only offer the camp for one one-week session rather than two sessions, so a quasi experimental pre-test-post-test design was used instead. Although I tried very hard to obtain a group of children and adolescents who could serve as the no-contact control group, it was not possible.

A week prior to the start of camp, twelve of the 15 campers ranging in age from 8 to 14 years old (campers had to be in 3rd grade and above to participate in the research project) completed the pre-test assessments, including measures of forgiveness knowledge, forgiveness toward a specific offender, an anger inventory and a written individual interview about forgiveness. The week-long camp took place from June 18th to June 22nd and I attended the camp full-time teaching both forgiveness education and yoga to the campers daily. Forgiveness education included brief didactic lessons about forgiveness and related concepts, individual and

group activities, and the reading of children's books about forgiveness and concepts associated with forgiveness. Although totally exhausting, participating in the camp, in addition to teaching the forgiveness education was a very rewarding personal and professional experience. Directly observing and experiencing how much the students enjoyed the camp, including the forgiveness education lessons and yoga sessions, and getting to know each other, myself, the two UNI students as well as the other counselors was amazing. The enjoyment had by the campers and the bonds the campers formed during this week-long camp illustrated the positive impact a week-long camp can have on children and adolescents, especially children who have experienced past trauma.

The forgiveness education taught to the campers proved effective in teaching the campers about forgiveness, including what it is, what it is not and the steps in the process model of forgiveness developed by Enright and The Human Development Study Group (1991), as illustrated in the responses in the individual written interviews completed by campers. All twelve of the campers responded, "Yes" to the question, "**Do you think that you will use forgiveness in the future as a result of learning about it**". When asked **how their understanding and definition of forgiveness changed as a result of the forgiveness education**, campers' responses included the following statements: "*You can forgive even if the other person does not say sorry*"; "*You don't have to forget when you forgive*"; "*It is okay to be angry*"; "*You don't always have to be friends again after forgiving*"; "*You don't have to forgive if you don't want to*"; "*Forgiveness is a way to take care of my anger*"; "*I learned a lot more about forgiveness and that you don't have to become friends again with the person who hurt you*"; "*I learned more about what it means to forgive and open up to people and say its okay*"; "*I can make the decision to forgive on my own*"; and "*I learned that forgiveness means you don't have to be mean and not help someone who does something bad to you. You can be kind even if someone is mean to you*". Campers were also asked, "**Do you think that forgiveness can help you or your friends?**" and some of their responses included the following statements: "*I often have fights with some friends, and now I know how I can forgive them right*"; "*Forgiveness can help me work things out with friends*"; "*If your friend hurts you, you can say it's okay and learn how to forgive them*"; "*Forgiveness will help me let go of my anger at people who hurt me*";

“Forgiveness will help to become better friends”; “Resolve fights”; “Forgiveness can make you a more open person about things”; and “Forgiveness will help me see that everyone is the same underneath their skin”. In summary, students’ qualitative responses indicated that they plan to use forgiveness in the future and that they learned more about what forgiveness is and is not including, that one does not need an apology to forgive, that feeling angry is part of the forgiveness process, that one does not have to reconcile with the offender, that forgiveness is an individual decision that involves being kind even to someone who was mean to them, and that forgiveness helps one open up and deal with their anger. Campers also indicated that they thought forgiveness would help them with their friendships. These results are significant as children’s and adolescents’ anger within and outside the school setting is increasing with negative consequences for both students and society. The need for social-emotional learning education is being recognized by mental health professionals, teachers, and administrators. Teaching children and adolescents about forgiveness, ways to deal with their anger and the importance of perspective-taking and empathy can be an effective form of social-emotional learning.

In addition to the campers learning more about forgiveness as a result of the forgiveness education, two counseling intern students who were also helping with the camp reported that learning about forgiveness and how to forgive was their favorite part of the week-long camp. The two UNI College of Education students who helped out at the camp and assisted me in teaching the forgiveness education also benefited from learning about forgiveness and participating in the camp. Specifically, following the camp, one student assistant e-mailed me the following message, *“Suzy - I just want to take a moment to thank you for all you did to make camp enjoyable to the campers and for me. It was a fabulous week and am so happy I took this opportunity to learn more about forgiveness and forgiveness education”*. Involving the UNI students in this research and camp experience was an important goal of this project and proved beneficial for the UNI students, myself, and the campers. Quantitative data will be analyzed once the follow-up assessments are completed by the campers.

3. Evidence of submission:

Once all data is collected and analyzed, this study will be written up for publication and submitted to an appropriate journal such as *The Journal of Moral Education*. The results of this study will be reported along with two other forgiveness education research projects I conducted with school age children using the forgiveness education curriculum I developed. I also plan to present the results of this study at a national or international conference such as the Annual Association of Moral Education Conference.

4. Project Value to the College of Education and the University of Northern Iowa

One main value of this project to the College of Education is the inclusion of two education students in this research and camp experience. In the future, I would like to involve even more UNI students in my research and to serve as camp counselors. The director of the camp and I plan to collaborate next year to offer the camp, with a focus on forgiveness education and yoga, again to more campers, in addition to the campers we had this year. Another value to the College of Education and UNI is the partnership with non-profit organizations, such as Hope Tree Counseling Services. I will also present and publish the results of this research and UNI will be acknowledged. I will also incorporate the results of this study into my child and adolescent development classes as well as my Psychology of Interpersonal Forgiveness class. Lastly, I will use the results of this research to continue to build evidence that forgiveness education is an effective form of social-emotional learning that can be adopted by schools to help students cope with anger and other negative emotions resulting from past offenses as well as help students learn perspective-taking, empathy and the importance of showing kindness even to those who are not kind to them.