

Concept Mapping Analysis on Social Camp Experience Among Children with Disabilities

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Abstract

This study aims at identifying the therapeutic camp experience for 47 children with disabilities attending a 10-day social summer camp using concept mapping. Results emerged with seven themes: Personal Growth; Nurturing Relationships; Non-judgmental Environment and Attitude; Traditional/Classic Camp Fun; Beneficial and Unique Opportunities; Learning/Thinking with Structures and Rules; and Independence and Recognition. Results suggested that children with disabilities experienced positive personal growth as well as learned new skills.

Introduction

Children with disabilities often face difficulties with social adjustment and behavioral issues (Asher & Gazelle, 1999). They have been shown to have greater difficulty maintaining friendships (Asher & Gazelle, 1999; Briery & Rabian, 1999), feel more isolated (Asher & Gazelle, 1999; Lindsay & McPherson, 2012; Vreeman & Carroll, 2007) and face academic difficulty and depression in later life (Mrug et al., 2012).

The passage of the American with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 introduced a new dimension of opportunity for outcome research on the efficacy of integrated, inclusive camps (Brennan, Arick, & Fullerton, 2002; McAvoy, Smith, & Rynder, 2006). Studies have shown that children who engage in integrated social group interventions such as in camp experiences has been associated with positive outcomes, including greater self-efficacy, confidence, self-esteem, independence as well as overall increase in social interaction (Cushner-Weinstein et al., 2007; Dawson & Liddicoat, 2009; Devine & Dawson, 2010; Hantson et al., 2012; Walker, Barry, & Bader, 2010). In addition, children and youth with disabilities are more receptive to intervention in an integrated camp setting due to the fun environment associated with camps (Rosenbloom, 2001; Seal & Seal, 2011).

Methods

Concept mapping analysis (Trochim, 2005) was used to gather information on 47 campers who attended an integrated, 10-day social camp. Phrase 1 data collection consisted of a focus group of brainstorming led by a researcher. The stimulating question asked was “A child should come to Cradle Beach because...”. Qualitative responses were written and cross-checked with the group. 100 items were generated from phrase 1 after the elimination of redundant items. Each statement was printed on index cards and provided to each camper for sorting and rating. Each child was asked to sort by putting the 100 items that made sense to them and to rate the importance of each item from 1 “Very Unimportant” to 5 “Very Important”.

Data Analysis

Sorting and rating data were entered into the Concept System mapping software (version 4.0.175) for analyses. The sorted statements were analyzed using Multidimensional Scaling (MDS) and Hierarchical Cluster Analysis (HCA)

Results

The 47 campers had a average age of 12.3 years old. 64.3% are males and 35.7% are females. 61.9% are White, followed by 19.0% multi-racial and 11.9% African Americans. 33.3% had ADHD, followed by 14.0% multiple disabilities, 11.9% LD, 4.8% physical disability, 2.4% of speech impairment, ID, ODD and bipolar respectively.

Cluster 1. Personal Growth (14 items). Examples: “You can become a new person at CB”; “At CB, you feel special”. The average importance rating is 3.67. Participants felt transformed in a positive way. Specifically, they felt they learned to become a better leader and learned to take responsibilities. Transformative experiences also refer to the ability to engage in novel activities that made participants become a new and different person.

Cluster 2. Nurturing Relationships (14 items). Examples: “At CB, the staff care about the campers”; “You can become more social at CB”; “At CB, you can feel connected with people like you”. The average importance rating in this cluster is 4.08. These items all centered around the value of fulfilling social connections with peers and counselors. In addition, a number of the items focused on positive interactions that campers might not have experienced outside of camp. The campers were afforded the opportunity to interact with other campers (both with and without disabilities).

Cluster 3. Non-judgmental Environment and Attitude (21 items). Examples: “At CB, there is no judgment and you are accepted no matter what”; “CB is a place where you understand and respect people from different backgrounds (different cultures, disabilities, religions)”. The average importance rating in this cluster is 4.17. These items focused on how the counselors and the camp provide a safe environment for children to be. Counselors and other campers also develop a welcoming and non-discriminative attitude when interacting with others who are different such as those with a disability. and children were more accepting of children with disabilities than in the “real world.”

Results Cont

Cluster 4. Traditional/Classic Camp Fun (14 items). Examples: “There is a cool playground at CB”; “You have a bounce house”. The average importance rating in this cluster is 3.52. These items listed activities that might not be available to campers at home or take on a different meaning in a camp environment (e.g. the opportunity to play in a tree house and on the beach).

Cluster 5. Beneficial and Unique Opportunities (15 items). Examples: “Going to camp at CB is a good way to spend your summer,”; “You get to scream and pound on the tables at CB” The average importance rating in this cluster is 3.73. These items focused on certain beneficial aspects of Cradle Beach that make it a novel environment for the campers. It differs from the last cluster in that it includes items that do not necessarily refer to organized camp activities. For instance, eating healthy and banging on tables may not be available to campers at home and, while beneficial, these things do not necessarily fit under the heading “camp activities.”

Cluster 6. Learning/Thinking with Structures and Rules (10 items). Examples: “You can get put on a behavior contract at CB”; “There is no drama at CB”. The average importance rating in this cluster is 3.68. These items concerned incentives for good behavior, disincentives for bad behavior, and actual behavioral change that occurs at cradle beach. This cluster is especially valuable because it demonstrates that campers take meaningful lessons with them, even after the camp ends.

Cluster 7. Independence and Recognition (12 items). Examples: “There is a cool playground at CB”; “You have a bounce house”. The average importance rating in this cluster is 3.52. These items listed activities that might not be available to campers at home or take on a different meaning in a camp environment (e.g. the opportunity to play in a tree house and learn water safety).

Discussion & Implications

Children attending the integrated camp appeared to show benefits on three major life aspects, i.e., social, physical and psychological. They were able to achieve personal growth and undergo transformative experience by socializing and interacting with other children with and without disabilities in non-judgmental environment. The camp setting, counselors, staff and other children created a nurturing environment and established a non-discriminative attitude in supporting and welcoming children with disabilities so that they were provided unique opportunity to develop their self esteem, as well as to learn new skills. They were provided the experience to engage in traditional camp fun activities and to learn to follow/respect structures and rules in group activities. Ultimately children with disabilities felt recognized and they developed a sense of independence and self-acceptance. Results from this study showed positive experience for children with disabilities to attend an integrated social summer camp. Counselors can provide such opportunities to allow children with disabilities to integrate and grow.