

SUMMER CAMP AND EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING – A QUALITATIVE STUDY EXPLORING THE PERSPECTIVES OF SELECTED PARTICIPANTS, LIVING IN POVERTY, WHILE ATTENDING A SLEEP-AWAY SUMMER CAMP IN NORTHERN MINNESOTA

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY:

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore if summer experiences at a residential sleep-away summer camp in Northern Minnesota, influenced future life decisions and beliefs for a select group of children living in poverty during their time at camp.

PRIMARY RESEARCH QUESTION:

What were the perceptions of children living in poverty after attending a Northern Minnesota sleep-away summer camp?

SUB-RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

- What were the pinnacle experiences that resonated with each participant during their time at summer camp?
- Did these summer camp experiences influence the participant's perceived beliefs about future hopes and dreams?

METHODOLOGY:

- Qualitative Phenomenological Research
- Research Participant Backgrounds/Bracketing
- Semi-structured interviews were transcribed, described, coded, and analyzed for common themes.
- Coding organized through comparison matrices (broken down by individual camper & overall presence).
- Member checking was utilized to strengthen validity.
- Artifacts (camper letters and essays) were also analyzed.

PARTICIPANTS:

| | Camper 1 | Camper 2 | Camper 3 | Camper 4 | Camper 5 |
|---------------------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Age | 19 | 20 | 19 | 23 | 24 |
| Gender | Female | Female | Female | Male | Female |
| Race/Ethnicity | African American |
| Age During First Summer at Camp | 8 | 9 | 8 | 12 | 13 |
| Summers Spent at Camp | 4 | 4 | 6 | 2 | 5 |
| Sibling Status at Camp | Siblings | | None | Siblings | |

OVERVIEW OF IMPORTANT THEMES:

- Fun & Play
- Exposure to New Skills
- Relationships
- Challenges
- Personal Development
- College & Career Paths
- Love of Travel

RESEARCH FINDINGS:

Play, self-discovery, camp relationships, increased confidence, and learning new skills were all central phenomena revealed within every participant interview, and substantiated through camper letters and personal writing. Challenges surrounding the camp environment and some examples of cultural bias were also prevalent. Pinnacle experiences included engaging in camp activities, special camp trips and events, the physical camp environment, and camp relationships developed and fostered over time. In a qualitative research study, it would be naïve to assume there were no other contributing factors influencing the future hopes and dreams of involved research participants. Strong family and educational role models, perseverance and determination, and the individual dispositions of every research participant were all paramount in determining the trajectory of their lives. However, the influence of their camp experiences certainly helped define their worldviews. For every participant, the camp experience supported changing mindsets, shaping interests, and building confidence – at home and within the school setting, with continued impact in their current context.