

CANADIAN CAMP RESEARCH AWARD OF EXCELLENCE WINNER 2014

“It’s not just camp”:

Understanding the Meaning of Children’s Cancer Camps for Children and Families.

by

Catherine Mohrea Laing

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES, UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF
PHILOSOPHY

FACULTY OF NURSING

CALGARY, ALBERTA, FEBRUARY, 2013

© Catherine Mohrea Laing 2013

Abstract

In response to the stress of the childhood cancer experience, children’s cancer camps arose in the 1970s as a way for children and their families to escape the rigidity and severity of cancer treatment. Cancer camps are designed to meet the needs of the whole family at each stage in the cancer experience - from diagnosis through treatment, to survival or bereavement. In 2008, the eight camps across Canada provided specialized oncology camps and community support programs to 5,252 children and their families – a 10% increase from the previous three years. As more children are surviving childhood cancer, the need for specialized camps and community programs continues to grow.

My purpose in this philosophical hermeneutic inquiry was to understand the meaning of children’s cancer camps for the child with cancer and the family. Six childhood cancer families and five cancer camp counsellors were interviewed in order to bring understanding to this topic. Findings from this research revealed that camp means different things for different families, and that much is at play in the cancer camp experience: finding acceptance and fit, grief as something to live with versus “get over,” storytelling as a means of re-shaping and understanding traumatic experiences, and the solidarity of the community as one that creates intense, healing bonds.

Children’s cancer camps, I conclude, need to be considered a necessity, versus a luxury, and should even be thought of as a psychosocial intervention for some children and families. Barriers such as structure of funding and access to resources are present, and likely due to the separate-ness of camps from hospital programs.

In addition, this research speaks to the need for interpretive methods like hermeneutics to incorporate a tool such as Social Return on Investment, a principles-based approach that values change that would not otherwise be valued, when questions of social value are present.