

Two Sides of the Coin: A Qualitative Course-Based Study of the Lived Experiences of Child and Youth Care Students

Shasily Matowe^[1]

Michelle Ibbotson^[2]

Linda Agyemang^[3]

Jacky Lam^[4]

Gerard Bellefeuille^[5]

Abstract:

Child and Youth Care (CYC) practice is, in essence, ethical work because it seeks to improve the lives of vulnerable children, youth, and families and, in the process, is directed by the moral principles of equality, respect for diversity, and a fundamental commitment to social justice and human rights. Child and Youth Care practice is relational work that occurs in the life-space where people go about their daily lives. This approach requires CYC practitioners to be open-minded and accepting of divergent worldviews. Child and Youth Care students are, therefore, taught to be as non-judgmental and as accepting as possible in their attitudes toward and actions with others, regardless of factors of race, cultural background, sexual orientation, economic class, religious affiliation, or diverse lifestyles. To promote open-mindedness and acceptance of others, self-reflection and critical dialogue about the topics of social justice and inclusivity are fundamental components of the Bachelor of CYC program. Hence, this fourth-year course-based research project inquired into the perceived "lived experience" of CYC students who openly shared their individual cultural and religious beliefs in the classroom.

Keywords: *child and youth care, course-based study, diversity, undergraduate education, research*

I. INTRODUCTION

Child and Youth Care (CYC) practice is, in essence, ethical work because it seeks to improve the lives of vulnerable children, youth, and families and, in the process, is directed by the moral principles of equality, respect for diversity, and a fundamental commitment to social justice and human rights. Child and Youth Care practice is also relational work that occurs in the life-space where people go about their daily lives. This approach requires CYC practitioners to be open-minded and accepting of divergent worldviews. Child and Youth Care students are, therefore, taught to be non-judgmental and as accepting as possible in their attitudes toward and actions with others, regardless of factors of race, cultural background, sexual orientation, economic class, religion, and diverse lifestyles. To promote open-mindedness and acceptance of others, self-reflection and critical dialogue around the topics of social justice and inclusivity are fundamental components of the Bachelor of CYC program.

Diverse Learners in a Diverse World

To create a learning environment in which respect for diversity is encouraged, the instructor and students must consider the wide range of distinct ethnic and cultural lifestyles, religious practices, values, and beliefs that contribute to the changing racial and ethnic makeup of today's CYC student body. These social and cultural

disparities have the potential to differ from the core values and ethical responsibilities expected of students in the Bachelor of CYC program. Therefore, one of many challenges inherent in teaching and learning in increasingly diverse CYC classrooms is that of creating a respectful environment in which all students feel free and safe to share their thoughts and beliefs without academic penalty or rejection by their peers and faculty. If such an environment cannot be established, then an effectual atmosphere of diversity cannot be said to exist.

True inclusion can be achieved in a classroom environment only when diversity is understood as a two-way street. Recognition and acknowledgement of others and their lived experiences must first be accepted as foundational in creating a milieu of inclusion in which all parties can fully and actively engage. When all students feel accepted, regardless of age, gender, race, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, and religious affiliation, individuals are better able to behave authentically with the understanding of others.

II. UNDERGRADUATE COURSE-BASED RESEARCH: A PEDAGOGICAL TOOL TO FOSTER CRITICALITY, REFLECTIVITY, AND PRAXIS

^[1]4th-Year Student, Bachelor of Child and Youth Care, MacEwan University, Alberta, Canada

^[2]4th-Year Student, Bachelor of Child and Youth Care, MacEwan University, Alberta, Canada

^[3]4th-Year Student, Bachelor of Child and Youth Care, MacEwan University, Alberta, Canada

^[4]4th-Year Student, Bachelor of Child and Youth Care, MacEwan University, Alberta, Canada

^[5]Professor, Bachelor of Child and Youth Care, MacEwan University, Alberta, Canada

The Bachelor of Child and Youth Care program at MacEwan University is constantly searching for new pedagogical approaches to foster criticality, reflectivity, and praxis as integral components of the overall student educational experience. As such, the design and implementation of a course-based approach, in contrast to the traditional didactic approach to research-methods instruction, offers fourth-year undergraduate students the opportunity to master introductory research skills by conceptualizing, designing, administering, and showcasing small minimum-risk research projects under the guidance and supervision of the course instructor—commonly, a professor with an extensive background in research and teaching.

Use of course-based research in higher education has soared in recent years (Allyn, 2013; Bellefeuille, Ekdahl, Kent, & Kluczny, 2014; Harrison, Dunbar, Ratmansky, Boyd, & Lopatto, 2011). The benefits derived from a course-based approach to teaching research methods for CYC students are significant. First, there is enhanced value in providing students with authentic learning experiences that enhance the transfer of knowledge obtained in formal education to practice. Past students have reported that their engagement in course-based research has enabled them to expand their depth of scientific knowledge by adopting new methods of creative inquiry. Second, course-based research offers students the opportunity to work with instructors in a relationship characterized by mentoring, which results in a greater number of students who express interest in advancing to graduate studies. Third, the results of course-based research can sometimes be published in peer-reviewed journals and online open-access portals, and thus contributes to the discipline's knowledge base.

Ethical approval required to enable students to conduct course-based research projects was granted to the course instructor by the university's research ethics board (REB). Student research groups are then required to complete an REB application form for each course-based research project undertaken in the class, which is then reviewed by the course instructor and a sub-REB committee to ensure each course-based research project is complete and in compliance with the ethics review requirements of the university.

III. RESEARCH DESIGN

All forms of scientific inquiry are guided by a research paradigm that represents a set of basic beliefs that reflects the researcher's worldview (Creswell, 2003). While no research paradigm is superior, a given paradigm defines in a particular way the researcher's understanding of the nature of the world, as well as the relationship between individuals and their surroundings (Crotty, 2003). For the purpose of this course-based study, we intentionally choose a research design that would allow research participants to share their stories in a manner that took note of the importance of those stories. It was important to us, from a CYC relational worldview (Bellefeuille, Ricks, & Jamieson, 2012), that research participants knew they were being heard and that what they said would affect how their audience understood their lived experience and, perhaps, influence the classroom setting to cultivate a safe learning environment. For this reason, the course-based study was based on an interpretive research

paradigm grounded in critical epistemology. Broadly speaking, critical-interpretive research takes into account individual subjective understandings of reality, along with societal patterns and norms that shape such interactions (Creswell, 2003; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005). The task of critical-interpretive research is to reveal the oppression and inequalities at work in a given society in order to bring about change.

Purpose of Study

The course-based study employed a qualitative approach to explore the lived experiences of undergraduate CYC students who shared their personal cultural and religious beliefs in the classroom with the aim of improving the pedagogical practices of CYC educators seeking to create a safe, respectful learning environment for students. As human beings, regardless of one's race or ethnic background, we each have our own values, beliefs, and attitudes that contribute to our sense of who each of us is and how we view the world. For the purpose of this study, cultural and religious beliefs were defined as the cumulative deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relations, concepts of the universe, and material objects and possessions passed along through communication and imitation from one generation to the next. This broad definition allowed all students the opportunity to participate and to be heard.

Statement of Research Question

The following six questions formed the foundation of the study:

1. What are the lived experiences of CYC students who have an earnest commitment to their distinct religious and cultural beliefs and practices?
2. How do CYC students perceive and deal with differences in values and beliefs presented in the classroom?
3. Do CYC students experience unique challenges because of their distinct religious and cultural identities?
4. How comfortable are CYC students with expressing their beliefs and values in the classroom?
5. How do CYC workers negotiate their distinct cultural and religious identities while studying CYC at MacEwan University?
6. What do CYC students with distinct cultural and religious identities expect or want from the Bachelor of CYC program?

Research Participants

A non-probability purposeful sampling strategy was used to select research participants for this course-based study. The participant selection criteria included second- and fourth-year CYC students. First-year students were excluded because of their limited experience in the program. Third-year students were also excluded because many are transfer students and thus have limited experience in the program.

Data Collection Methodology

Data was collected through self-reflective open-ended surveys and the arts-based method of creating a collage.

Collages are visual artworks that are created from an assemblage of magazine images, photographs, and portions of other materials or texts that are then attached to a piece of paper. Collages “provide a safe and structured resource in the difficult self-expressive process” (Linesch, 1988, p. 47). The use of arts-based research, defined as “a process that uses the expressive qualities of form to convey meaning” (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. xii), has grown significantly over the last 20 years (Finley, 2011; Knowles & Cole, 2008).

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was selected as a flexible means to analyze qualitative data because of its potential to allow data to speak for itself and to provide a rich and detailed account of the data. This involved a six-step iterative process that included becoming familiar with the collected data, generating initial categories or meaning units, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing a report (Braun & Clark, 2006).

Results

Three main themes emerged following analysis: conditional openness, incorrectly positioned, and freedom to express views.

Conditional Openness

A number of participants expressed the view that while they were encouraged to openly share their opinions in the classroom, they felt several levels of discomfort when expressing specific attitudes, beliefs, or values that did not perfectly align with the CYC perspectives that were presented in the classroom. These participants talked about their fear that they would be judged by other students to be unsuitable CYC students. For example, one participant stated, “I’m trying to be open and accepting of others lifestyle, but then they bash mine and I’m supposed to be fine with it...”

Another participant expressed their opinion about others sharing in the classroom. Although other students were describing how they felt unable to be open, this participant described how they viewed others talking about their religion or culture in the class. This individual remarked: “I am open to all religious and cultural identities. I respect where they come from. Good on them that they practice a religion also showing their culture is a great strength to have. Just don’t rub it in people’s faces.”

Incorrectly Positioned

A second dominant theme that emerged from the data analysis was that of feeling misunderstood because of one’s cultural, ethnic, or religious affiliations. A large number of participants shared significant commonalities of experience in feeling misunderstood, rejected, and pigeonholed by other students after they identified their religious or cultural orientation. For instance, a number of participants felt other students would make assumptions about them because they belonged to a specific religious or cultural demographic. Instead of feeling that their classmates and instructors were open to learning about what they thought about certain sensitive topics, at times they felt prejudged and pigeonholed.

For example, one participant felt inhibited and disinclined to speak up in class due to statements made by other students about the participant’s culture:

“There are moments when other students make comments about my xxxxxxxx culture that I do not agree with, but I avoid arguing, so I will keep my opinions to myself.”

Another participant wrote that their classroom setting is was more accepting to of those who don’t ascribe to any particular religion or cultural, and if someone does ascribe to a particular belief that doesn’t align with CYC guidelines, they are scapegoat and feel forced to change their views in order to fit in. One student wrote: “I want to be encouraged in my beliefs [so that they] strengthen me and fuel me as a CYC worker, instead of being told that it’s impairing me from being effective.”

Freedom to Express Views

The third dominant theme was that of feeling free to express one’s views. Interestingly, this theme was specific to a group of participants who self-identified as having no attachment to a specific culture or religion. These participants spoke of feeling comfortable in the classroom setting and of being very open to the opinions and views of their peers. One participated said: “When it is something I do not agree with, I will speak up on my different view[s]. I do take [in] what was being said and try and look at it from that perspective. I still respect it”. Another participant remarked, “I am comfortable with who I am and don’t particularly care what others think”.

IV. DISCUSSION

The results of this course-based inquiry demonstrated the difficulty of respecting diversity while teaching diversity. This can be a daunting task for CYC educators, given that the CYC classroom is a microcosm of today’s diversity and reflects the community’s changing demographic. In general, most students are comfortable interacting with their classmates and instructors. However, a significant number of students hold back from sharing their cultural or religious beliefs for fear that they will be misunderstood and rejected. Some students felt that their grade suffered due to their expression of alternative views. A real acceptance and respect for diversity in the CYC classroom requires that we engage in an open and honest conversation about how instructors become aware of and address students’ diverse beliefs, attitudes, and values that do not align with the core ethical principles that underpin CYC education. Several of the course-based study participants clearly expressed their reluctance to speak freely and openly in the classroom environment and desire a more open, safe, and receptive learning experience, regardless of the differences that are present among fellow students and faculty.

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