A Course-Based Qualitative Exploration into the Views of CYC Students on the Use of Harm Reduction Strategies for High-Risk Youth

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this course-based research study was to examine child and youth care (CYC) students' attitudes toward of the use of harm-reduction programs and services for high-risk youth. In this qualitative interpretive inquiry, an open-ended, scenario-based questionnaire was used to collect data via email. A non-probability purposive sampling strategy was applied to recruit 16 CYC student participants. The thematic analysis method defined by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used to identify three main themes: a) a safe place free of physical and emotional harm, b) relationships really matter, and c) support versus control is the CYC way.

KEYWORDS: Child and youth care, Course-based research, Harm-reduction, Qualitative

INTRODUCTION

Harm reduction is an evidence-based, non-judgmental public health approach that treats all individuals with dignity, compassion, and respect. Harm-reduction strategies seek to reduce the adverse health and social consequences associated with substance abuse, without necessarily requiring individuals to abstain from further drug use (Lenton & Single, 2004; Marlatt & Witkiewitz, 2002). In recent years, harm-reduction programs have also been employed to promote sexual health as a strategy to decrease the prevalence of both teen pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV (Jackson & Tremblay, 2019; Stewart & Baeten, 2020). A review of the existing scientific literature reveals that harm-reduction strategies have been proven to prevent death, injury, disease, overdose, and substance misuse (Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse, 2005; Harm Reduction International, 2020; Strathdee et al., 2010). However, when it comes to the high-risk youth population, there is less enthusiasm about the use of harm-reduction interventions. Yet, conventional drug-prevention educational approaches such as "just say no" have not met with great success (Jenkins, Slemon, & Haines-Saah, 2017; McBride, 2003). According to Newman and Newman (2020), harm-reduction approaches are congruent with what we know about adolescent development and decision-making. As they explain, adolescence is a time of increased autonomy, experimentation, and risk-taking in decision-making behaviors. It is also a period of rejecting authority and striving for autonomy (Reyna & Farley, 2006; Steinberg, 2014). It should therefore not be difficult to understand why youth are unresponsive to the conventional educational approaches aimed at reducing high-risk behaviors.

Child and Youth Care Practice

A belief in the benefit of harm-reduction-based approaches for high-risk youth is a core philosophical tenet of child and youth care (CYC) education at MacEwan University. However, there appears to be no literature on how the CYC students themselves view harm-reduction measures for high-risk youth. For that reason, this course-based research inquiry was conducted with the aim of exploring the views and experiences of CYC students.

UNDERGRADUATE COURSE-BASED RESEARCH

This section begins with a word about course-based research. The Bachelor of Child and Youth Care program at MacEwan University is continuously searching for new pedagogical approaches to foster critical thinking, reflection, and praxis as integral components of the overall student educational experience. As such, a course-based research 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 low-risk research projects under the guidance and supervision of the course instructor—commonly, a professor with an extensive background in research and teaching. The use

of course-based research in higher education has increased substantially in recent years (Allyn, 2013; Bellefeuille, Ekdahl, Kent, & Kluczny, 2014; Harrison, Dunbar, Ratmansky, Boyd, & Lopatto, 2010). The benefits derived from a course-based approach to teaching research methods are significant for CYC students. First, there is value in providing students with authentic learning experiences that enhance the transfer of knowledge learned in traditional education practice. For example, former students have reported that their engagement in course-based research enabled them to deepen their scientific knowledge by adopting new methods of creative inquiry. Second, course-based research offers students the opportunity to work with instructors in a mentoring relationship; one result is that a greater number of student's express interest in advancing to graduate studies. Third, results generated through course-based research can sometimes be published in peer-reviewed journals and online open-access portals and thereby contribute to the discipline's knowledge base. The ethical approval required to permit students to conduct course-based research projects is 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; each application is reviewed by the course instructor and an REB committee to ensure that the project is completed in compliance with the ethics review requirements of the university.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This qualitative course-based research inquiry is located within the interpretive paradigm. As Creswell (2013), Scotland (2012), and Tronvoll, Brown, Gremler, and Edvardsson (2011) point out, assumptions and beliefs about the nature of reality shape research designs across the social sciences. To this end, Guba (1990) contends as follows:

> [Paradigms] … can be characterized by the way their proponents respond to three basic questions, which can be characterized as the ontological [different ways of understanding the nature of being], the epistemological [one's world view and how this shapes what can be known about the world], and the methodological questions. (1990, p.18)

Therefore, Jennings (2001) states that "the argument should not be about which paradigm is superior, but rather the best to achieve the research aims" (p.135). Research undertaken from an interpretive perspective rest on an assumption that there is a subjective reality, comprised of the meanings that individuals place on their lived experiences value systems, experiences, biases, and social strata (Kaushik & Walsh 2019; Scotland, 2012). Interpretive research uses qualitative research methods to both capture the subjective meaning of participants' lived experiences and enable the self-reflective nature of researchers as interpreters of data (Creswell, 2013).

STATEMENT OF RESEARCH QUESTION

This course-based study sought to determine the perspectives of CYC students at MacEwan University on the use of harm-reduction strategies for high-risk youth.

SAMPLING STRATEGY

The non-probability purposive sampling method was used to recruit participants. The sample population was first-, second-, third-, and fourth-year CYC students. As Patton (2013) explains, the logic and strength of purposeful sampling lies in the selection *of information-rich cases* to yield insights and deepen understanding. A total of 16 CYC students took part in this study.

DATA COLLECTION STRATEGY

An open-ended questionnaire detailing various harm-reduction scenarios involving youth was the primary data-collection instrument. The questionnaire was transmitted electronically by email. Creswell (2013) explains that open-ended questions do not restrict responses, allowing participants to respond with minimal constraints and to elaborate upon their responses. As a means of data collection, email allows researchers to obtain results more quickly and at minimal cost. It also allows for greater sample diversity through easier access to potential participants and offers greater convenience to both researcher and participant (Bosnjak et al., 2008; Corley & Jansen, 2000).

DATA ANALYSIS

A distinguishing feature of qualitative research is that it permits the use of thematic analysis of the data (Creswell, 2013). However, Braun, Clark, Hayfield, and Terry (2019) explain that thematic analysis is not a homogenous or standardized method but better understood as a broad term, describing a number of approaches. In the current study, the Braun and Clack (2006) six-step reflective thematic analysis method was used to analyze the data. The six steps were as follows: (1) familiarizing oneself with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. This thematic analysis revealed three major themes: a) "a safe place free of physical and emotional harm," b) "relationships really matter," and c) "support versus control is the CYC way."

RESULTS

a) A Safe Place Free of Physical and Emotional Harm

The dominant theme to emerge was that the participants overwhelmingly supported the use of harm-reduction programs for high-risk youth. The overarching rationale given was the need to provide a safe space for youth where they could be safe from the threat of physical and emotional harm. For example, one participant said, "Harm reduction is a strategy that allows for behavior to happen in a safe environment. It is something that requires trust, communication, empathy, and patience from everyone involved." Another participant stated, "Harm reduction is a system that allows us to keep people safe (safer) while they engage in risky behavior like drug use." Other comments included the following: "For anyone, a safe injection site will always be better than a random one on the street," "The injection is controlled and safe," and, "If [they are] going to access the drugs anyways, it is important to ensure [they are] doing so safely." To illustrate their beliefs, two participants submitted images of symbols representing harm reduction.

b) Relationships Really Matter

A second, closely related theme was the importance of relationships in the professional support provided to youth. For example, one participant commented, "harm reduction allows people to realize they are not alone in their struggles." Another participant wrote, "To me, harm reduction is a warm hug. It offers a sense of relief and gives a sense of something warm wrapped around you in a difficult time." Other comments included the following: "Talking to other individuals who are experiencing similar things can be very helpful in helping [someone] feel less alone in [their] life experiences," "[Being] in a more supportive environment where [you can be] surrounded with others going through the same thing is important," "[Harm reduction] shows compassion and understanding to individuals we work with and keeps human dignity at its core," and, "They are more likely to reach out in the future if they feel accepted for who they are."

c) Support vs Control is the CYC Way

A third theme to emerge was the strong conviction among the participants that CYC practice was based on the core value of respect for the rights of young people to ultimately choose their own paths in life. On that note, one participant stated, "Harm reduction helps those people to do the harmful things they were going to do anyway, but in a safe manner." Another said, "We are here to support people as they navigate the complexities of life, so we do what we can when people ask or need our support." Additional comments included the following: "We [practitioners] are working to boost their risk competency," "The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step, and it doesn't have to be a big one," "Harm reduction means that you are implementing a strategy to make a behavior less risky, not because you are stopping it," "It is not about stopping a bad or risky behavior or insisting that something needs to change; rather, it is a non-strategy to make a behavior that can't or won't be prevented become less harmful," and, "We cannot control the behavior or choice of those we work with, but we can provide them with information and resources to better equip them."

CONCLUSION

The results of this course-based study demonstrate that CYC students perceive harm-reduction strategies as a useful intervention for high-risk youth. This is important in that CYC practitioners are uniquely positioned to form relationships with high-risk youth. These findings also highlight the importance of supporting CYC students to develop, maintain, and continually improve their relational practices to enhance outcomes for the high-risk youth with whom they are working.

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