A Course-Based Qualitative Exploration of the Adaptive Capacities of Child and Youth Care Students Transitioning from First- to Second-Year Field Practicum

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ABSTRACT: Child and youth care students (CYC) perceive the transition from first- to second-year practicum as stressful and challenging and occasionally view themselves as not ready. Located within the constructivist–interpretive research paradigm, the aim of this qualitative course-based study was to gain greater insight into the transition process of CYC students from first- to second-year practicums with a focus on their adaptive capacities. A triangulation data collection method was used, comprised of conversational style, semi-structured interviews, a focus group, and art-based activity. Three main themes were extracted from the data analysis: (a) leaning into uncertainty, (b) being real, and (c) tapping into support systems.

KEYWORDS: Adaptive capacity, child and youth care, course-based, qualitative

INTRODUCTION

Transitioning from first- to second-year field practicum requires child and youth care (CYC) students at MacEwan University to assume new roles and greater responsibilities, adjust to new service areas, and apply the more advanced skills and theory they learn in the classroom. The transition to second-year field practicum is supported by a seminar class designed to provide students with a safe space to process their weekly field experiences. While it is natural for CYC students to feel a certain amount of stress due to the increasing complexity and performance expectations inherent in second-year field practicum settings, most CYC students evaluated their experiences positively and highlighted growth in their learning. Nonetheless, it is important to explore the experiences of CYC students who find the transition more challenging.

Relational-Centered CYC Adaptive Expertise

Relational-centered CYC practice pertains to CYC practitioners not only possessing the personal qualities and skills to form meaningful connections with children and youth but also having the personal resilience and capacity to contend with the demanding complexities of today's practice environments (Fewster, 1990; Freeman & Garfat, 2014). Hence, there are two aspects of CYC practice: professional relational practice expertise and adaptive expertise. CYC professional relational practice expertise is distinguished from other profession disciplines due to its focus on the daily life (lifespace) of children and youth, which allows CYC practitioners to intervene compassionately, intentionally, and in the moment to offer care and support (Gharabaghi, 2014). Conversely, adaptive expertise refers to developing the creative, innovative, and flexible capacities to handle the complexities of today's practice environments in addressing multiple stakeholders, radically more diverse practice settings, an absence of quality supervision, higher performance expectations, and more complex needs.

The Adaptive Art of Not Knowing

Adaptive practice involves a unique relationship with knowledge and problem solving in which knowledge or knowing is considered assumptive, improvable, and dynamic While the adaptive component of relational-centered CYC practice stresses the importance of being an engaged, dedicated, and self-motivated learner, paradoxically, it also embraces the notion of not knowing. As Bellefeuille, Stiller, and Heaney (2024) explain,

The emphasis on not-knowing encourages CYC students to approach the learning process not as archaeologists unearthing artifacts or "truths" but rather as artists in the process of discovery, free to pursue new insights and an informed ethical awareness in their education and practice. Adopting an attitude of not-knowing enables students to enter a space of curiosity and creativity and undertake the open questioning and self-reflection necessary to discover and formulate new ways to reflect on and make sense of information about themselves and the world.

Without developing adaptive expertise, CYC practitioners may struggle with rapidly changing care environments and the ever-expanding body of knowledge underpinning CYC practice. The purpose of this course-based qualitative study is therefore to explore the adaptive capacity of CYC students in their efforts to make a successful transition from first- to second-year field practicum.

UNDERGRADUATE COURSE-BASED RESEARCH: A PEDAGOGICAL METHOD TO PROMOTE CRITICALITY, REFLECTIVITY, AND PRAXIS

This section begins with a word about course-based research. The co-authors of this paper are fourth year CYC students who were mentored by their professor to design and execute a course-based research study. The Bachelor of CYC 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 et al., 2014; Harrison et al., 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 students 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

A qualitative descriptive design was adopted to explore students' lived experiences from transitioning from first- to second-year practicum placement. From an epistemological standpoint, the qualitative method is embedded in the interpretive paradigm. Interpretivism is the belief that reality is culturally and socially constructed and subjective and varies from one person to another (Adil et al., 2022; Pulla & Carter, 2018). As a result, the participant's subjective account of a phenomena is the focus of inquiry, while the researcher's role is that of a co-constructor of meaning (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002). As Hunt, Mehta, and Chan (2009) explain, interpretive description is "a noncategorical methodological approach to developing clinical understanding [of] complex experiential questions that are relevant to…health disciplines, but which are not easily answered by traditional qualitative methodologies" (p. 1285). Thorne (2016) also notes that interpretive research differs from other popular qualitative methodologies such as grounded theory, which has as its purpose to build theory, and phenomenology, which "seeks to understand the core essence of a thing," in that it extends beyond theory and description into applied use of the information gained "in the everyday world of practice" (p. 34).

RESEARCH QUESTION

How do CYC students describe their adaptive capacity in transitioning from first- to second-year field practicum?

SAMPLING STRATEGY

A non-probability convenience sampling strategy was employed to select participants for this course-based study. Thorne (2016) defines non-probability sampling as a strategy in which particular settings, persons, or activities are selected deliberately to ensure that "the eventual findings [produced] have the potential of ringing true or seeming reasonable to [the] audience" (Thorne, 2016, p. 91). As Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) explain, researchers intentionally employ non-probability sampling strategies to recruit participants who have experienced the central phenomenon being explored in the study.

DATA COLLECTION STRATEGY

A triangulation data collection method was employed, comprised of conversational style, semi-structured interviews, a focus group, and art-based activity. First proposed by Denzin (1970) as a strategy to validate results, data collection triangulation is now perceived less as a strategy of validation in which each separate method is seen to constitute the phenomenon under study in a precise way. Instead, the focus is on the theoretical differences between methods systematically allowing for a broad and deep understanding of the phenomenon (Flick, 1992).

Conversational Style, Semi-Structured Interviews

The conversational-style semi-structured interview is a widely used data collection method in qualitative research. Unlike formal interviews, which follow a rigid format of set questions,
conversational style semi-structured interviews are conducted with a reasonably open framework, which allows for a focused, two-way conversation (Schober & Frederick, 1997; Brinkmann, 2012). The interviewer follows a set of open-ended questions but is able to probe relevant trajectories in the conversation. Each interview lasted approximately 20 minutes and was recorded.

Conversational Style Focus group

A conversational-style focus group is a qualitative research method that uses a relaxed, open-ended discussion to explore human experiences and social interactions (Breen, 2006; Krueger, & Casey, 2000). The conversational-style focus group discussions encourage open dialogue, allowing participants to share insights and perspectives that often elude traditional surveys (Gill & Baillie, 2018). It also provides the opportunity to collect large amounts of rich data as participants respond and build on the responses of other group members (Cresswell & Creswell, 2023).

Art-Based Research Activity

The art-based activity was a voluntary exercise for the focus group participants. The activity involved the creation of an image that represented their transitional experiences from first- to second-year field practicum. Each participant was given a large piece of paper and multiple-colored markers. The participants were encouraged to draw an image representing their experience over the course of the focus group session. The merging of art-based methods into qualitative research processes has helped researchers gain meaning (Duygu Bedir, 2015). As O'Donoghue (2001) explains, arts-based data collection activities have the power to elicit an emotional, visceral response that words often cannot capture. The use of arts-based data collection methods can also provide visual cues that serve as an effective way to stimulate conversation as well as provide participants more scope to express their own interpretations of the topics in question (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Leavy, 2009). Examples are provided below.

DATA ANALYSIS

Braun and Clark's detailed six-step reflexive thematic analysis process was employed to identify, analyze, and inform the patterns and themes that emerged from the data (Braun & Clark, 2019).
The main reason for the selection of this thematic analysis framework was that it offered a method of data analysis that is philosophically aligned with the interpretive research paradigm (Byrne, 2022). Three main themes were extracted from the data analysis: (a) leaning into uncertainty, (b) being real, and (c) tapping into support systems.

Leaning into Uncertainty

While most participants describe experiencing *uncertainty* as feeling a lack of self-confidence *in* their skills and abilities, decision making, or actions, they also described how they choose to lean into uncertainty by letting go of control, taking risks, and trusting in their training. For example, one participant commented, "I had to adapt by asking my colleagues lots of questions and learning to read how the kids interact with us, remembering what works for each of the kids, and thinking on the fly of activities

and how to meet their needs, it has been a big learning opportunity." Other comments included "more opportunity to step out of my comfort zone and to work within the unfamiliar," "I really pushed myself to take on more responsibility," and "I am slowly getting comfortable just expressing myself."
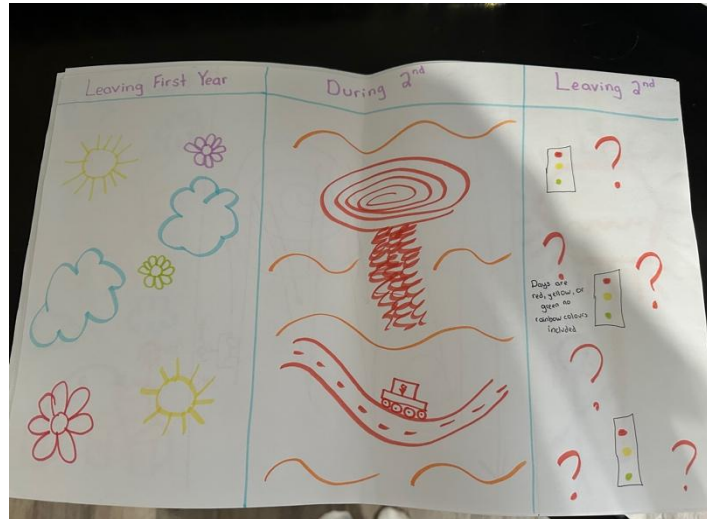

Figure 1: Arts-Based Activity Drawing

Being Real

A second dominant theme to emerge was the idea of being real and trusting in oneself. As one participant stated, "It's not necessarily being perfect with the art but being able to relate with the children and youth." Other comments included, "honesty and authenticity helped build connections," "giving yourself grace, accepting the process of growth," and "I think I was rushing things; I have to do this; I have to get good grades; I have to make the connections. But now it's the things as small as good morning and goodnight that make a good CYC practitioner."
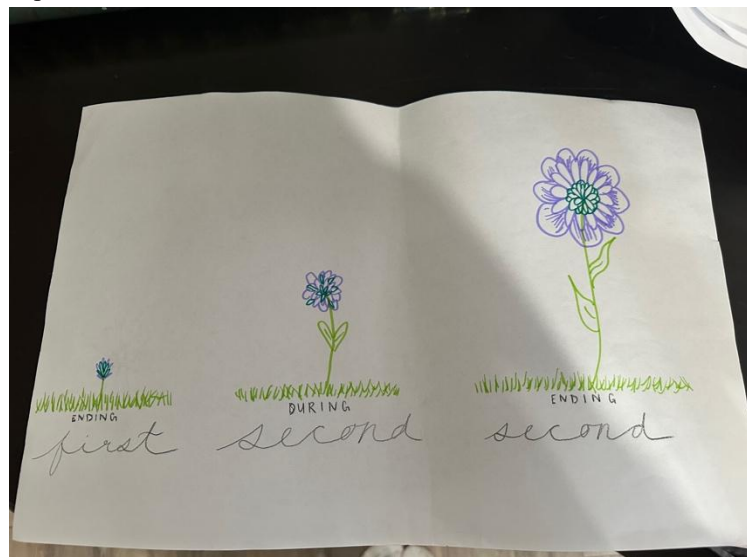

Figure 2: Arts-Based Activity Drawing

Tapping into Support Systems

The final theme that emerged was the notion of tapping into support systems. Examples include, "I found seminar was super helpful; my professor was always able to answer questions," "the support that I had for my classmates was awesome," "my

supervisors and I were a great team," "this year in practicum my supervisor told me I was so confident so it made me feel better than last year when they told me I should focus on my confidence more," "my supervisor adjusted my schedule to make sure it was safe for me to take transportation," and "like I said, honestly my supervisor was more than willing because in the past she's already had practicum students so she was more than willing to kind of explain my role and what she was expecting from me."
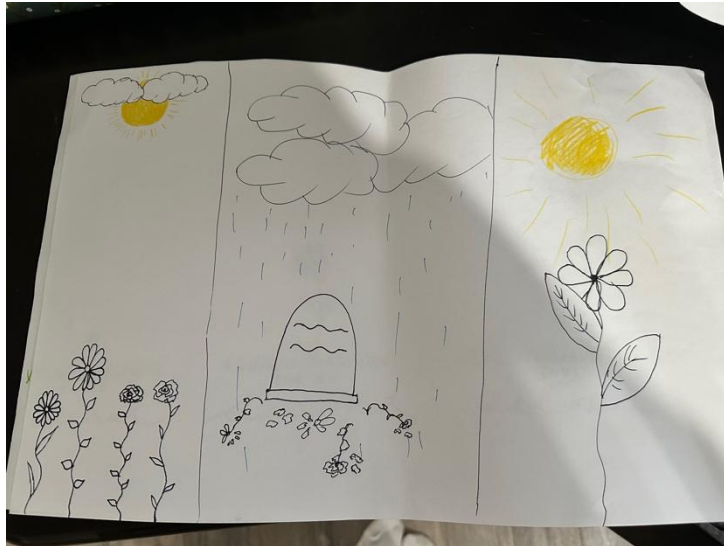

Figure 3: Arts-Based Activity Drawing

DISCUSSION

The transition from student in the classroom to practice contexts is understandably a challenging process. Though the classroom setting provides a safe place for students to acquire professional knowledge, hone their critical thinking skills, and foster their sense of self-confidence, multifaceted challenges in the reality of practice await them in their field practicums. A challenge for all undergraduate CYC programs is designing curriculum that both addresses students' anxiety prior to their field placements and prepares them to enter the field with the essential values, skills, and knowledge. While there is a plethora of literature discussing anxiety among undergraduate students entering field practicums, there is limited scholarly investigation on CYC students. The findings of this course-based inquiry highlight the adaptive capacities of CYC students as they journey through the transition from first- to second-year field practicum. Unexpectedly, the principal grievance the majority of the participants expressed was the travel costs associated with their field placement locations.

Figure 4: Public Research Poster Presentation at MacEwan University November 26, 2024

From left to right Sydney Libbus, Jaden Lafreniere, Jordan Hansford, and Serena Armstrong

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