Child and Youth Care Undergraduate Students' Perceptions of Their Learning Environment: A Qualitative Course-Based Study

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ABSTRACT: This course-based inquiry, situated within the interpretivist paradigm, explored how child and youth care (CYC) students at MacEwan University perceive their learning environment. A purposive non-probability sampling strategy was used to recruit participants from all four years of the CYC program. A triangulated data-collection approach was used to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings by drawing on multiple data-sources. Participants were given the option to participate in an online survey or an online interview. Both options included an art-based activity component. Four overarching themes were identified during the thematic analysis: (a) a peaceful shore, a place to anchor; b) together we stand, united we thrive; c) we share this theatre together; and d) taught me to be open and cry without flinching.

KEYWORDS: child and youth care, course-based research, learning environment, qualitative, students.

INTRODUCTION

The relational focus of child and youth care (CYC) practice implies a thoughtfully designed academic learning environment committed to fostering a relational teaching and learning emphasis by prioritizing the development of positive, trusting, and safe interactions between students and instructors and among peers (Bellefeuille, Heaney-Dalton, & Stiller, 2024). Such an environment is crucial for supporting the students' motivation and well-being by creating a secure, connected atmosphere in which individuals feel valued and understood, leading to increased engagement and better academic outcomes (Bellefeuille & Berikoff, 2020).

Learning environment research seeks to understand how the social, physical, psychological, and pedagogical contexts in which learning occurs influence student outcomes, motivation, and development. It provides critical data to inform educators and administrators, enabling them to design effective learning spaces and policies and ultimately support the learning and success of all students. Studies of undergraduate educational environments have shown that the quality of the educational environment is indicative of the effectiveness of an educational program, with learning environments affecting students' achievement, happiness, motivation, and success (Cotton & Wilson, 2006; Dwyer, 2017; Fuentes et al., 2014; Lizzio, Wilson, & Simons, 2002). For the purpose of this course-based research project, the learning environment is defined as everything experienced in the classroom, including relational interactions with faculty and program-related events and activities. It seeks to make both a theoretical and practical contribution to the literature on the nature and impact of undergraduate CYC students' perceptions of their learning environment on their professional and personal development.

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

The undergraduate CYC program at MacEwan University continuously seeks new pedagogical approaches to improve how CYC students are educated for a dynamic, ever-evolving field, incorporating evidence-based curriculum, digital technologies, and arts-based methods, and experiential pedagogies to enhance critical thinking, practice competencies, and prepare CYC students for complex and diverse practice environments. Course-based undergraduate research immerses students in authentic research projects. It differs significantly from the traditional didactic approach to research methods, which focuses on passive instruction and predetermined outcomes. Course-based research 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.

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

This course-based research project was situated within the interpretivist paradigm. The interpretive research paradigm "requires that social phenomena be understood through the eyes of the participants rather than the researcher" (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016, p. 56). It views reality as a social construction and, therefore, as subjective and multiple (Merriam, 2009). A qualitative research design situated in an interpretivist paradigm is structured to study participants' personal and relational experiences by understanding the meaning and context that they attribute to them (Lim, 2024). This design was deemed suitable for this course-based study as it would grant the researchers access to how CYC students truly perceive their learning experience. Qualitative methods also enable a more in-depth empathetic understanding of the subtler nuances of the participants' experiences (Creswell, 2009).

Research Question

The guiding research question for this course-based research study is as follows: How do child and youth care students at MacEwan University perceive their learning environment?

Sampling Strategy

A purposive non-probability sampling strategy was used to recruit participants from all four years of the CYC program at MacEwan University. Purposive sampling is commonly used in qualitative research to identify information-rich cases that provide the most insight into the research questions (Creswell, 2013). It is a non-random method that relies on the researcher's judgment to select participants who meet specific criteria, combined with practical consideration of who is easily accessible (Creswell, 2013). Twenty-six students participated in the course-based study: 5 first-years, 2 second-years, 6 third years, and 13 fourth years.

Data-Collection Strategies

A triangulated data-collection approach was used to strengthen the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, with multiple data-sources utilized (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Participants were given the option to participate in an open-ended online survey or online interview. Both options included an art-based activity component. The interpretive research paradigm rests on the premise that human behaviour is best understood through the exploration of subjective meaning (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). In this view, open-ended surveys and interviews allow researchers to explore the complexities of meaning-making, with open-ended questions used to gather detailed, personal accounts of experiences, feelings, and perspectives (Braun et al., 2021). In this voluntary arts-based activity, participants were asked to submit an image that best captured their learning experience as a CYC student (see Figure 1). Art-based data-collection methods are also situated within the interpretive paradigm, as artistic expression serves as a powerful means of exploring subjective experiences, evoking an emotional, visceral response that words often cannot capture (Barone, 2012; Chilton, Gerber & Scotti, 2015). This method is particularly well aligned with the pedagogical underpinnings of CYC relational-centered education, advocating for flexible, inclusive, and experiential learning environments, inviting students to attend to alternative ways of knowing and sense-making (Bellefeuille, Heaney-Dalton, & Stiller, 2024).

Figure 1

Data Analysis

Braun and Clarke's six-phase reflexive thematic-analysis framework was used to identify themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Thematic analysis involves the search for and identification of common threads that emerge from the data (Braun et al., 2021). Four overarching themes were identified during the thematic analysis: (a) a peaceful shore, a place to anchor; b) together we stand, united we thrive; c) we share this theatre together; and d) taught me to be open and cry without flinching.

a) A Peaceful Shore, A Place to Anchor

The overarching and prevalent theme that emerged from the data was the presence of a trust-based relationship between students and instructors that helped to create a safe and supportive learning environment. Comments in support of this theme included:

I feel comfortable sharing in the class, knowing that the instructors will respect confidentiality.

Instructors consistently model non-judgment, curiosity, and cultural humility, which normalizes reflective practice and invites honest conversation about power, identity, and ethics.

How connected and encouraging everyone seems. The encouragement from professors to be yourself, open and honest, and not fear making mistakes. Also, the positive things they have to share about the career. Another thing would be the support they offer to students.

I am neurodivergent and appreciate the respect from everyone and the understanding that comes with that.

Instructors are open and welcoming with students, making the learning environment feel safe. The environment is welcoming, supportive, and inclusive for all students.

A lot of communication, patience, kindness and listening. The access to what feels like a judgment-free zone when sharing personal information and opinions. The level of respect and encouragement people seem to have for each other.

Description of arts-based activity: *I feel that I carry around a certain light as a result of the personal growth I experienced as a student in the CYC program. I feel that peers and faculty also provide me with some of this light by being gentle, humorous, understanding, etc.*

b) Together We Stand, United We Thrive

A second salient theme emphasized the importance of unity, collaboration, and collective strength. Participants' comments included:

The small classes/cohorts allow for deeper connections with classmates, so we can create a bond with our instructors and our classmates.

All my peers and instructors are really supportive and open-minded. It helps me feel ok to be myself. There's also an emphasis on relationships and community in CYC, which encourages me to engage with others.

I have great, healthy connections with my peers and the faculty. I find that I've found my place; everyone is kind and supportive, which helps a lot with everything.

We are all individually beautiful, but even better when we work together. We are open to new ideas and can adapt to different situations.

I have a good relationship with many CYC professors. I feel I can talk to them when I am struggling and go to them to get valuable support. I definitely think the professors in our program try to create meaningful relationships compared to other programs at the university.

It is amazing to build these connections with my peers who love the program as much as I do, we can relate in that way and talk about our engagement in the program. Which really makes me feel like I found my place, and that I belong in this program.

Description of arts-based activity: *I chose a picture of the solar system to represent how I feel about being a CYC student. It just reminds me of my peers, and although we are in the same program, we're all going to be going in different directions that encompass CYC once we dive into our careers. I think this also serves as a reminder that even though we're all different, we all hold value and bring meaning to the line of we do.*

c) We Share This Theatre Together

The "we share this theatre together" theme embodies several key emphases shared by participants on elements of their learning experience, including collaboration and co-creation, **s**ocial and emotional development, and a sense of belonging. Participants' comments included:

The CYC program has helped me bloom and grow into the kind of person and professional I want to be. I think being comfortable with the faculty has tremendously helped me feel that I belong in the program.

Having positive relationships with my peers and faculty makes it easy to feel like I belong and want to engage in discussions inside and outside of class.

I feel like I can share and be heard with both the peers and profs, and as a result, I am open to listening, learning, and doing. The relationships are quite transparent, and people know where you're at in every aspect, making it easier to feel like a team in the cohort. Peers and instructors do a great job of holding space in class discussions, group work, and discussion forums, and offer multiple different ways of expression (art, reflections, videos), making it easier to be fully engaged and feel like a part of the CYC professionals.

Because the program is so relational, I find that there is a great sense of community in which I feel supported, encouraged, and understood.

Feeling a sense of belonging as a CYC student is largely co-created by peers and faculty. Peer relationships, study groups, shared resource banks, and informal peer supervision are a buffer against burnout and a catalyst for creativity (e.g., co-designing activities, swapping facilitation tips, or troubleshooting documentation). That mutual aid makes me feel seen and motivates me to contribute.

Faculty reinforce belonging when they recognize effort publicly, invite student voice in shaping topics or exemplars, and link our classroom work to the communities we serve. Moments that especially deepen my engagement are when instructors consult the class on case scenarios, or when they highlight how our diverse experiences (coaching, camp leadership, group care, etc.) are assets rather than side notes. This shared authorship of the learning environment keeps me invested and accountable.

<u>Description of arts-based activity:</u> *My submission represents us as a whole and how we are all individually beautiful, but even better when we work together. We are open to new ideas and can adapt to different situations.*

d) Taught Me to be Open and Cry Without Flinching

The final visible theme captured participants' recollections of feeling vulnerable and uncomfortable at times, while recognizing that the learning was necessary. One noted that "it is hard to do with our clients what we cannot do for ourselves." Other comments included:

I have *gained a lot of confidence and trust in myself because I started to understand my worth as a mature, responsible practitioner and student.*

The topics at times make me feel a bit overwhelmed, which can affect how I feel for a portion of the day, but in the end, I am better for it.

Sharing of trauma and personal history in big group classes can be embarrassing or shameful, and it also just gets awkward sometimes when you hear the trauma of others and can't really help in the moment.

The learning environment may be uncomfortable at times when students are asked to step out of their comfort zone and are challenged by instructors. It is uncomfortable in the moment, but it allows us to try new things and grow in our identities.

<u>Description of arts-based activity:</u> *I chose a tree with roots because for me, this photo symbolizes growth and the impact of learning. The trunk can represent your values and beliefs, which I learned from a project I did in this program, and the leaves can represent my knowledge and willingness to learn. Overall, the tree shows my stability, connection to the community, and my determination to grow as a CYC student.*

DISSEMINATION AND PUBLIC OUTREACH

Effective dissemination of practice-based evidence is an important component of knowledge translation, bridging the gap between research, policy, and practice (Gagnon, 2009; Walley et al., 2007). A public research poster is a standard method of disseminating findings (Briscoe, 1996). This course-based research was presented in the form of a public research poster at a public showcase (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Left to right: Haley Giesbrecht, Taylor Glandon, Natania Hadley, Chantal Whelan, Alyson Makowichuck, Sara Cournoyer, Olivia Dumont

SUMMARY

Relational pedagogy is a holistic endeavour that prioritizes the teacher–student relationship, which should take place in a trusting and safe learning environment. It is an educational approach that is central to CYC accreditation, predicated on the assumption that the relationships between teachers and students have a direct bearing on students' experience of education, how learning proceeds, and how the educational experience can be a transformational force in students' lives. Notwithstanding the small sample of this course-based study, the findings provide valuable insights into CYC students' lived experiences and perceptions of their learning environment. The findings provide a level of reassurance and comfort to the CYC faculty in validating their efforts to deliver a relational-centered learning experience to their students.

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