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A COURSE-BASED QUALITATIVE INQUIRY INTO THE MEANING OF AUTHENTICITY FOR CHILD AND YOUTH CARE STUDENTS AND THEIR AUTHENTIC PRACTICE EXPERIENCES IN THE FIELD

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ABSTRACT: This course-based study explored child and youth care students' perspectives of the ontologically informed concept of relational authenticity and their experiences of authentic relational practice in the field. It used a qualitative design and took an interpretivist stance that a person's experience of their own reality is shaped by their own perspective. A nonprobability purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit undergraduate CYC students at MacEwan University. A data-collection and triangulation method was used, with multiple data sets, including conversational-style face-to-face and Zoom interviews and an arts-based activity. Reflexive thematic analysis was used to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns of shared meaning (themes). Three dominant themes were generated: a) authenticity is a pathway to meaningful relationships, b) authenticity is the power of owning your truth, and c) following the rules is a roadblock to authenticity.

I. INTRODUCTION

A major emphasis of our learning as undergraduate child and youth care (CYC) students at MacEwan University is embracing vulnerability as a gateway to our authentic selves. Though there are various interpretations of "authenticity" in the context of relational-centered CYC education, the concept is instructed within a relational ontology. Relational ontology is a philosophical perspective that views the "self" as relationality constituted and a reflection of one's relational experiences (Bellefeuille, Heaney-Dalton, & Stiller, 2024; Gergen, 2009; Nancy, 1991; Thrasher, 2015).

Becoming Authentic

The starting point to forming a deeper connection to our authentic selves is the recognition that our identities, beliefs, and values are all byproducts of our relational life histories. As CYC students, we are given time to explore our conscious and unconscious fears and those defense mechanisms that we acquire over time to help us cope with difficult feelings, thoughts, and events. The learning process involves embracing vulnerability and emotional risk-taking. The path toward authenticity is a significant theme in CYC education. The hard truth is that this path is uncomfortable and challenging. It is a lifelong practice and an ongoing process of discovery, requiring constant introspection with the intention of becoming the best version of ourselves. It is not a destination.

Relational-Centered CYC Practice

Relational-centered practice is not just a part of CYC: rather, it *is* CYC, at an ontological level. The underlying assumption of relational ontology in CYC practice is that the self is relationally constituted and, as such, relationships are the foundation on which to build genuine connections with children and youth. The CYC practitioner–child/youth relationship is central to the provision of care. Authentic engagement and relationships with children and youth in an attentive, compassionate, and non-judgmental way creates a safe environment for children and youth to trust in the relational interactions with the CYC practitioner.

The Transactional Practice Context

Within the broader system of helping disciplines, relational-centered CYC practice is at times seen as soft practice that is less focused on achieving immediate outcomes such as behavioral changes and attitudinal shifts in children and youth. As a result, CYC practitioners can feel pressure to abandon, or at least suspend, authentic relational practice to fit into the more traditional or conventional "transactional" practice modalities.

The latter tend to reflect a more arms-length (i.e., less relational) approach in which one gets and gives exactly what one thinks is needed and nothing more; operates within rigid boundaries; and has a more short-term engagement emphasis, with a focus on compliance and following the rules for the youth with which one works. Given the differences in practice perspectives, the aim of this course-based research project was to inquire into CYC students' understanding of "authenticity" and their authentic practice experiences in the field.

II. RESEARCH DESIGN

A research design provides a systematic approach and framework of methods and practices used to execute a study (Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Motulsky, 2021). A rigorous research design also ensures methodological congruence. Methodological congruence is the fit between the researcher's chosen methodology and the research question, the methods used to collect and analyze the data, and the presentation of the research outcomes and conclusions (Thurston, Cove & Meadows, 2008). Given that this study explores the meaning of authenticity for CYC students and their authentic practice experiences in the field, a qualitative interpretive approach was chosen to guide the research design.

The interpretive research paradigm assumes that the social world must be examined through the interpretation of subjective lived experience (Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Motulsky, 2021). In short, one can only gain understanding of another person's reality when that other person chooses to share their experiences (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020); thus, interpretive research relies on questioning and observation to understand the phenomenon under investigation (Schwartz-Shea &Yanow, 2013; Williams, 2000).

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.

III. RESEARCH QUESTION

How do CYC workers discover and maintain their authenticity when stepping into traditional transactional professional environments?

IV. SAMPLING STRATEGY

A non-probability convenience sampling strategy was used to recruit participants. Non-probability convenience sampling is defined by Polit and Beck (2012) as a suitable, non-random sampling technique for qualitative studies in which researchers seek out participants who are easily accessible. Polit and Beck (2012) explain that convenience sampling is an efficient and appropriate sampling approach for a researcher recruiting participants who have insights, experiences, or knowledge related to a specific phenomenon. The target sample size for this study was 10–20 CYC student participants.

V. DATA-COLLECTION STRATEGY

Methodological triangulation was employed to facilitate objective analysis and avoid researcher bias in the results. Data triangulation enriches qualitative research by strengthening methodological rigor (credibility, trustworthiness, confirmability, dependability) through empirical comparisons with similar data gathered using different collection methods and techniques (Ramaekers et al., 2012). A fundamental assumption of data triangulation is that each of the multiple data sets could provide a slightly different picture of the phenomenon under investigation (Ploeg et al., 2010; Sharif & Armitage, 2004).

Participants were first invited to take part in a 15–30-minute, open-ended, conversational-style interviews. Some of these interviews were conducted online, using Zoom videoconferencing, while others were face-to-face. Like comparable communication platforms such as Skype and Microsoft Teams, Zoom offers the ability to communicate in real time with participants via computer, tablet, or mobile device (Archibald, Ambagtsheer, Casey & Lawless, 2019; Davis et al., 2020). Arts-based data-collection methods employ artistic expression as a way of understanding and examining participants' experiences (McNiff, 2008). At the conclusion of the interviews, participants were invited to engage in an arts-based activity that involved creating an image that defined authenticity for them.

Open-Ended Conversational Style Interviews

Open-ended conversational-style interviews are one of many qualitative data-collection methods used to gather data on the subjective experiences of participants (Abell, Locke, & Condor, 2006; Merriam, 1998; Swain & Spire, 2020). A conversational-style interview resembles a conversation but is designed to stimulate depth of meaning from the perspective of the participant (West, Conrad, Kreuter, & Mittereder, 2018). Conversational interviewing may also provide more accurate data than closed questionnaires, as it provides the opportunity for the participant to clarify their responses, making them more direct and accurate (Schober, 2016). Asking thought-provoking, open-ended questions may allow the research to be enriched with experiences and accuracy based upon participant emotions, rather than leading a closed questionnaire. Conversational interviewing allows a more natural flow, potentially resulting in more authentic and genuine interactions.

Arts-Based Activity

When employed as a qualitative data-collection method, art-based activities involve one or more art forms, such as drawing, painting, or theater performance, to examine experiences (McNiff, 2007.) Arts-based activities can give research participants more scope to express their interpretations of the topics in question by conveying their emotions and awaken the participants' imagination, creativity, and expression (Burge, Godinho, Knottenbelt, & Loads, 2016). The arts-based activity in this study involved participants being asked to draw two self-portraits, one describing their professional self and the other their authentic self. When the activity was complete, the participant was asked to share their thoughts on whether—and if so, how—their self-portraits differed from one another.

VI. DATA ANALYSES

The data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke (2006) six-phases reflexive method of thematic analysis to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns of shared meaning (themes). The six phases are (1) familiarizing oneself with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing and refining themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing a report. Braun and Clarke (2006) view the practice of reflexive data analysis as inherently subjective embracing researcher subjectivity as a resource for research rejecting positivist notions of researcher bias. From the data analysis, four main themes were extracted: a) authenticity is an ongoing practice and not a destination, b) authenticity is a pathway to meaningful relationships, c) authenticity is the power of owning your truth, and d) following the rules is a roadblock to authenticity.

Authenticity is an Ongoing Practice not a Destination

A dominant theme to emerge from the data was the practice aspect of the ongoing journey toward authenticity. For example, one participant stated, "the move into more authenticity takes noticing and practicing." Another participant noted, "I think, for me, the whole notion of, like, becoming authentic is it is a journey, and I don't think it necessarily has a destination point." Various other comments supported this notion of authenticity as something ongoing—rather than something that is done once and finished. For example, "we are always developing a new sense of authenticity", and "the process of becoming authentic is the process of becoming more honest with ourselves and having more of a clear connection to and understanding of ourselves over time."

Authenticity is a Pathway to Meaningful Relationships

A second dominant theme to emerge was the view that authenticity is the key to building meaningful relationships. For example, one participant stated, "you can't truly engage in *the space between* with other people if you're not showing up as your most authentic self. If you're not being authentic, then you're not able to engage

in praxis of learning and understanding and engaging in reflective practice." Another participant asserted, "you can't truly engage in the space between with other people if you're not showing up as your most authentic self." Other comments included, "authenticity is so important because these kids are going to see right through you, and if they see you as fake, you are not going to get anywhere", and, "I do think it's important because if everybody was the same and no one was acting in their authentic self, then you wouldn't have a, I guess, you wouldn't have a memorable experience with the people that you work with."

Authenticity is the Power of Owning Your Truth

A third dominant theme was embracing vulnerability and having the courage to be honest with oneself. For example, participant comments included, "authenticity is developing a strong level of like honesty with yourself"; "I think the process of becoming authentic is the process of becoming more honest with ourselves and having more of a clear connection to and understanding of ourselves"; and, "like maybe not hiding the parts that you don't love about yourself and like leaning into like all that you are and all that you bring to your practice." Most participants shared a view of authenticity as the daily practice of letting go of who they think they are supposed to be and embracing who they are: "Becoming more honest with ourselves and having more of a clear connection to and understanding of ourselves and I think that that's so important in the work that we do. Because if we aren't aware of ourselves and what we're bringing to the table, we could unintentionally do harm." Furthermore, "When it comes to being authentic, it's like operating and going about the world in a way that's truly from what you want to do inside instead of doing what the world has shaped you to be."

Following the Rules is a Roadblock to Authenticity

This final theme was concerned with the reality that participants encountered in the field. "I think probably, like, the red tape of it all. Like, for example, there's protocols or ways that we're supposed to report and document things that aren't necessarily intuitive." Other comments included, "you're just working with someone to establish a relationship, and then all of a sudden, you're putting the pressure on them, like, we have to come up with, like, a goal," and "I would say the protocol's getting in the way of it."

VII. DISCUSSION

A relational ontological approach to CYC education employs more holistic, collaborative, and experiential methods of teaching and learning in which students' minds, bodies, emotions, spirits, and environment are all considered essential components of the learning process (Bellefeuille, Heaney-Dalton, & Stiller, 2024). It is within this learning context that we, as CYC students, are encouraged to ask certain questions: what is this "self," and does it even exist? What does it really mean to be authentic? How do you find it? And how do you recognize it if you find it? How can you be an authentic CYC practitioner when you must work in roles in which you often have to compromise—or at least put aside—authentic dimensions of your being? The findings of this qualitative course-based research study suggest that CYC students are committed to authentic CYC practice. As a core element of relational CYC practice, further investigation is needed into how CYC practitioners practice authentically over time and the potential impact of authentic practice on preventing burn-out and ensuring overall job satisfaction.

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From left to right Sam Leadbetter, Victoria Gladue, Elisha McInroy, and Cassie Fox.

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