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A Qualitative Course-Based Exploration of the Spiritual Character of Child and Youth Care Practitioners

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Abstract. This paper presents the findings of a qualitative course-based study that explored how child and youth care (CYC) students draw on their spirituality in forming connections with children and youth. A nonprobability purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit CYC student participants in their second, third, and fourth years of study. Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, data were collected using an online questionnaire and Zoom video conferencing focus groups. An inductive data analysis revealed three dominant themes: a) being respectful of the spiritual practices and beliefs of others; b) maintaining a sense of hope, meaning, and purpose as an important aspect of mental health; and c) creating, negotiating, and transcending boundaries without sacrificing one's spiritual identity.

Keywords. Child and Youth Care, Course-Based, Spirituality, Qualitative Research

Introduction

While there is widespread recognition of the role of spirituality as an aspect of professional practice among helping professions (Ai, Moultine, Picciano, Nagda, & Thurman, 2004; Anandarajah & Hight, 2001; Burkhardt & Nagai-Jacobson, 2016; Cashwell & Young, 2005; Shoshani, Kor, Pirutinsky, Mikulincer, & Miller, 2019), little attention has been devoted to the integral relationship between spirituality and child and youth care (CYC) practice. However, CYC is described as a holistic discipline (Bellefeuille, McGrath, & Jamieson, 2008; Fewster, 1990; Garfat, Freeman, Gharabaghi, & Fulcher, 2018). As fourth-year students in the CYC program at MacEwan University, it has been our experience that CYC students feel uneasy about discussing their spirituality in the classroom (Buss, Erbacker, Kryzanowski, Pisca, & Bellefeuille, 2020). Hence, we are interested in exploring how CYC students draw on their spirituality as a component or function of their CYC practice in forming connections with children and youth.

The Conceptualization of Spirituality

Before presenting an overview of our research design, we thought it important to first discuss the wide-ranging and, to some extent, the open-ended concept of spirituality. As Pesut et al. (2008) state, "spirituality remains an unexplored and uncertain terrain." To date, no clear definition of spirituality can be found in the literature of the various helping disciplines. However, there are some common themes: For example, spirituality is often described as a uniquely

individual journey towards a greater sense of peace, meaning, purpose, and connectedness (Lepherd, 2015: McCarroll, O'Connor, & Meakes, 2005). While this definition is relevant, Lepherd (2015) suggests that one of the most intriguing qualities of spirituality is that it can be experienced and practiced differently by everyone. Finally, Derezotes (2006) writes that "human spirituality can be simply understood as a person's desire for and expression of loving connection with everything" and that "spirituality can be seen as the individual's sense of connectedness, meaning, peace, consciousness, purpose, and service that develops across the life span" (p. 3).

Based on the definitions presented above, there is a fundamental difference between the concepts of spirituality and religion; in this course-based research study, spirituality is understood as referring to an individual's search for meaning in life and experiences.

Undergraduate Course-Based Research: A Pedagogical Tool to Foster Criticality, Reflectivity, and Praxis

This section begins with a word about course-based research. 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, 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 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

Since the aim of this course-based research project was to explore the lived experiences of CYC students through investigating their direct experiences to ascertain whether they are consciously aware of how their spiritual beliefs influence their interactions with children and youth, a qualitative research design based on the interpretive paradigm was considered appropriate to answering the research question. The interpretive paradigm accepts the ontological view that more than one reality exists, and these realities are "constructed socially by individuals" (Merriam, 1998, p.4). As Denzin and Lincoln (2018) and Yates and Leggett (2016)

explain, interpretive qualitative research examines the human experience to describe or interpret how individuals make sense of the world. As such, an interpretive qualitative approach to research does not attempt to uncover a single reality or truth.

Research Question

The specific research question that guided this course-based study was as follows: How do student practitioners use spirituality in their CYC practice, and how doing so helps them develop a sense of connection with children and youth?

Sampling Strategy

The course-based study participants were selected using nonprobability purposive sampling technique based on the following set of criteria: including 1) a target sample of 10 second-year CYC students; 2) a target sample of 10 third-year CYC students, and 3) a target sample of 10 fourth-year CYC students. Overall, 18 students participated in the course-based study. As Patton (2002) states,

> The logic and power of purposeful sampling lie in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry, thus the term purposeful sampling. Studying information-rich cases yields insights and in-depth understanding rather than empirical generalizations. (p. 273)

Similarly, Guetterman (2015) explains that "sampling is not a matter of representative opinions, but a matter of information richness" (p. 3). Finally, Emmel (2013) elaborates that in a nonprobability purposive sampling strategy, "cases are chosen because they contribute to creatively solving the puzzle under investigation and present as convincing a case as can be mustered with the resources to hand" (p. 141).

Data Collection Methodology

Given the interpretive nature of the course-based study and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the primary data collection strategies took the form of an online questionnaire, which included an optional arts-based component using Google Forms as well as three Zoom video conferencing focus groups. Online or web-based data collection tools have become increasingly popular as a collection strategies in response to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic (Dodds & Hess, 2021; Jowett, 2020; King, O'Rourke, & De Longis, 2014). As reported by Jankowski and van Selm (2005) and Walker (2013), remote data collection methods offer a number of advantages, including greater flexibility in terms of time, speed, and data collection locations. With regard to confidentiality and anonymity, Google Forms allows participants to complete the survey anonymously and ensured that confidentiality was maintained.

The arts-based component involved granting the participants the option of attaching an image in response to the research question that has the potential to evoke an emotional, visceral response that words often cannot capture (O'Donoghue, 2011). Eisner (1997), for example, argues that arts-based methods of inquiry add value in regard to answering research questions by drawing upon the emotional and symbolic aspects of participants' experiences that might be overlooked using more traditional research methods.

The Zoom video conferencing focus groups were used in a triangulation context. As Morgan (1997) explains, focus groups can be used as a stand-alone data collection method or as

an additional data collection method. Conducted following the questionnaire data collection process, the focus groups helped to expand and enrich the thematic data analysis process (Merton, 2001).

Data Analysis

An inductive approach to thematic analysis was undertaken to interpret themes and examine patterns of meaning within the data using Braun and Clark's (2020) six-phase inductive thematic analysis method. As such, the themes that emerged through this inductive approach were not driven by the team of researcher's theoretical interests, but rather one's that naturally emerged from the data. According to Harper and Thompson (2012), thematic analysis is one of the most systematic and transparent forms of data analysis, which enables other researchers to rigorously examine the steps undertaken by the original investigator(s) of the research.

Findings

The thematic analysis resulted in the identification of three themes: a) being respectful of the spiritual practices and beliefs of others; b) maintaining a sense of hope, meaning, and purpose as an important aspect of mental health; and c) creating, negotiating, and transcending boundaries without sacrificing one's spiritual identity.

a) Being Respectful of the Spiritual Practices and Beliefs of Others

The majority of the participants acknowledged that they were comfortable and at ease in encouraging children and youth to express their personal spiritual beliefs and practices. As one participant indicated, "I think spirituality can open the door for great connections and meaningful relationships and important learning to happen." Similarly, another participant stated,

> "It is our role to support children and youth that we work within whatever spirituality, faith, or religion means to them. It is about humility and being able to learn from them about what their own unique practices may be and support them in this".

Participants also talked about their openness in terms of actively participating in the spiritual practices of children or youths. One of the participants provided an example of how they had taken part in an Aboriginal "smudging" ceremony. A second example included a participant who stated,

> "My practicum is Catholic, so I have gotten a chance to see how their (children) daily school experiences are influenced by Christian values. I engage with them in their daily protocols without being a Christian myself. In my group care, I used my own spirituality to influence how I interacted with youth and to experience their own Indigeneity through their eyes and experiences".

Finally, one participant provided an example of how they were willing to locate and personally transport children and youth to a suitable place of worship.

b) Maintaining a Sense of Hope, Meaning, and Purpose as an Important Aspect of Mental Health

Participants described a variety of ways in which they draw upon their spirituality to maintain a sense of hope, meaning, and purpose as an important aspect of mental health.

Expressions of spirituality included facilitating breathing exercises, mindfulness meditation sessions, and grounding activities that involve intentional movements such as yoga that allow participants to connect to body, mind, and soul. Some of the participants also discussed connecting to the seven chakras, writing positive or encouraging affirmations, listening to worship music, spending time in nature, going for a walk, collecting leaves and rocks, and using essential oils. As one participant noted the following,

> "My second-year placement was at a group home. However, we supported the youth in their own spiritual/faith practices. One of the youths mentioned that when he used to live at home, his family would go to church together. This youth would sometimes request that we play worship music in the house when we were playing a board game, sitting around the table, or if he was doing his exercises on the treadmill. This is a way that we supported him and his faith and spirituality. We would also support the youth's spirituality by going for nature walks or going around the dinner table and saying what we are grateful for. We also used essential oils in the house and smudging".

Participants also indicated that their spirituality helps them to feel a deeper sense of connection to those whom they work with; provides them with a personal sense of strength, wellness, and support; and therefore, influences the love and compassion that they share with children and youth. For example, some participants stated that they privately pray for the children and youth whom they work with. As one participant said,

> "I use faith to guide my practice in a professional and personal manner. It is a lens through which I view my world, and I use it more as a guide for behavior and thought." Another participant stated,

> "If my faith tells me to love others the same way I wish to be loved, I will do that in how I work with my youth. I will show love to them by our interactions, by cooking them food, by uplifting their strengths, and by being present when conversations are difficult". Finally, a third participant stated,
> "Personally, my spirituality is rooted in the Christian faith. As I connect with my own faith and spirituality, I feel God's compassion, and this influences me to want to build relationships from a place of love and compassion. I think that this compassion influences me to share love in my practice...for example, I pray for the children that I work with. However, I do not force my beliefs onto those I work with. My faith also helps me to have self-compassion because when I connect with my faith, I am able to find my strength and worth in someone greater than myself and not have to carry everything alone...which helps me to take care of myself and have compassion for myself, which influences my relationships with others and helps with my own wellness".

c) Creating, Negotiating, and Transcending Boundaries Without Sacrificing One's Spiritual Identity

A final common theme concerned the creating, negotiating, and transcending of personal boundaries without having to sacrifice one's spiritual identity. For example, participants indicated that there may be times when a youth, child, or family participates in a religious, spiritual ritual that they as practitioners may not be comfortable partaking in themselves due to their own beliefs; however, the participants indicated that they would remain open to supporting the child or family in the practice and learning from the child, youth, or family about what the practice means to them. As one participant stated,

> "It just means to be open. Encourage kids who do need encouragement. If we can encourage kids to find something positive in their lives, I think that's the route we have to go. That might look different from one youth compared to the other. There's no right or wrong answer".Another participant stated, "It's being open-minded. Meeting the kids where they are at. Finding the resources to help those kids." A third participant said,

> "When I went to a sweat lodge, I was there; I was invited, but I didn't participate. I just…umm what's that word… visualized…I watched the kids do it, but I wasn't comfortable enough to do it…so I think in a way it's still there because they know that I'm here to support them. So, I think that whatever we are comfortable with is a great way to create connections through spirituality and religion".

Discussion

This course-based study was designed with the intention of exploring how CYC students draw on their spirituality as a component or function of their CYC practice in forming connections with children and youth. Overall, it was an honor to listen to the participants as they passionately discussed their spiritual beliefs. Each participant described their experiences in an insightful way and provided their professional perspectives on the benefits of utilizing spirituality as a dimension of their CYC practice. Notwithstanding the small sample size, the findings of this course-based study indicate that spirituality matters to CYC students. The participating CYC students reported a high level of spiritual awareness and affirmed the importance of spiritual awareness in addressing the spiritual needs of the children and youth whom they encounter in their work as CYC practitioners. Based on these findings, more attention may be devoted to the spiritual dimension of CYC practice in CYC curricula.

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