

Original Paper

A Qualitative Course-based Inquiry into the Use of Strengths-based Language in Child and Youth Care Residential Field Practicums

Gerard Bellefeuille^{1*}, Lerynne Biton², Yulieth Chinchilla², Francesca Doniego², Hiba Iqbal², Vivian Lin²,
Anett Parokkaran², & Angelo Sison²

¹ Professor, Child and Youth Care, MacEwan University, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

² BCYC, Child and Youth Care, MacEwan University, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

* Gerard Bellefeuille, Professor, Child and Youth Care, MacEwan University, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

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Abstract

The strengths-based approach is a cornerstone of relational-centered Child and Youth Care (CYC) practice. However, few studies have investigated the use of the strengths-based approach in a CYC residential setting for youth and children. Hence, this qualitative course-based study explores the use of strengths-based language as observed by CYC students in residential field practicums. Data were collected through an online semi-structured interview (using the Google Meet platform) with a purposive sample of third- and fourth-year CYC students at MacEwan University, Canada. Four main themes were extracted from the data analysis: “not in plain sight”, “a product of feeling stressed”, “lacking the confidence to speak out”, and “reframing”.

Keywords

child and youth care, course-based research, strength-based, qualitative

1. Introduction

Acquiring the skills and approaches to practice using a strengths-based approach is an important part of relational-centered CYC education (Bellefeuille & Jamieson, 2008; Garfat, Freeman, Gharabaghi, & Fulcher, 2018). The core principles of strengths-based practice are that all people have strengths and capacities and can change given the right conditions and resources (McCasken, 2005). As such, the strengths-based approach avoids the use of deficits-based labels and instead draws upon a different

language that stresses the positive attributes of a person, which allows them to see opportunities, hope, and potential solutions (Laursen, 2003). Importantly, the strengths-based approach does not attempt to ignore problems and difficulties but rather to identify a person's resources and strengths as a way to encourage growth and change. For example, the strengths-based approach employs the following strategies: (a) normalizing (i.e., helping a person to understand that their reaction to a problem is a normal and understandable response to life's difficulties); (b) reframing (i.e., redefining a problem and considering it in a different way, especially in a way that makes it manageable, concrete and specific, which opens the way for change); (c) noticing and externalizing (i.e., the problem is the problem; the person is not the problem); and (d) identifying exceptions (i.e., finding exceptions to the problem; Brendtro & Ness, 1995). All of these strengths-based strategies emphasize cooperating and facilitating rather than fixing and focus on potential rather than dysfunction.

1.1 The Field Practicum Context of CYC Education

Field practicums are an integral part of CYC education curriculums. Students undertake their practicums in a variety of settings (e.g., schools, family support programs, residential care facilities, and community-based programs). The purpose of field practicums is to enable students to integrate the academic curriculums (i.e., theories and applied practice skills) of the CYC profession with the practical day-to-day fieldwork of CYC (CYCEAB, 2021). These practicums provide an opportunity for students to take what they have learned about strengths-based practice and various theoretical frameworks and practice them in real life. Practicums also allow students to explore what type of CYC work they wish to pursue upon graduation.

1.2 The Practice Context of the CYC Profession

There is little debate that CYC, like other helping disciplines, is a stressful profession (Krueger, 2002; Savicki, 1993, 2002). According to Bellefeuille and Berikoff (2020), CYC work has not only been historically a very challenging and emotionally exhausting profession, but it is practiced today "in communities that are radically more diverse, much less certain or predictable, and considerably more complex" (p. 14). In addition, CYC students who engage in residential care practicums (e.g., group homes and residential treatment facilities) experience higher levels of stress than students in other practicum placements such as school, family support, and community-based placements because of the "high-risk" behaviors of children and youth placed in residential care. These children and youth often have significant psychological, behavioral, and emotional problems and CYC workers aim to avoid reactive responses (e.g., negative labels and coercive behavior controlling responses) and practice using a strengths-based approach. Hence, this qualitative course-based research project explores the use of strengths-based language as observed by CYC students in residential field practicums as evidence of a strengths-based approach to residential care settings.

2. 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 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.

3. Research Paradigms

Research paradigms inherently reflect the views researchers hold about (a) the nature of reality and what they can know about it (i.e., ontology); (b) the process by which knowledge is acquired and validated (i.e., epistemology); and (c) appropriate strategies for collecting and analyzing data, such as questionnaires and open-ended interviews (i.e., methodology; Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). According to Grix (2004), "ontology and epistemology are to research what 'footings' are to a house: they form the foundations of the whole edifice" (p. 59).

Both the interpretivist and critical paradigms shaped the methodological design of this course-based study. The central aim of the interpretivist paradigm is to understand the subjective world of human

experience (Glesne, 1999). Emphasis is, therefore, placed on understanding how humans make meaning of their worlds (Bhattacharjee, 2012). Interpretivist research is aptly attuned to the ontological and epistemological foundations of CYC relational-centered practice, in which knowledge and meaning-making are regarded as a product of social relationships embedded in cultural, socio-economic, and socio-political contexts (Bellefeuille & Ricks, 2010). As Bellefeuille and Jamieson (2008) stated in Bellefeuille et al. (2017), “the basic contention of relational theory is the notion that the self is a process of relatedness” in which “the self is not so much a personal possession but a reflection of one’s relational experiences” (p. 47).

This course-based research study is also informed by the critical research paradigm. The critical research paradigm goes further than the interpretive paradigm to not only aim to increase understanding but to address the political, social, and economic injustice in society by promoting critical awareness (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Relational-centered CYC education incorporates critical pedagogy throughout the curriculum to prepare students to act with moral courage as they face ethical challenges in the field and to serve as cultural stewards of their profession (Bellefeuille & Berikoff, 2020).

4. Research Design

A research design is a framework or blueprint for answering a research question (Creswell, 2013). Since the overarching purpose of this course-based study is to explore CYC students’ experiences in field placements regarding their observations of the use of strengths-based language, a qualitative, descriptive approach was deemed to be the most appropriate. Thorne, Reimer-Kirkham, and MacDonald-Emes (1997) defined a qualitative descriptive research design as that which seeks to describe and interpret a phenomenon through the lens of those who live it. Creswell (2013) further explained that the strength of qualitative descriptive research is in its focus on gaining greater insight into how people interpret their experiences and construct their worldviews.

5. Statement of Research Question

How do CYC students in residential care field practicums experience the use of strengths-based language?

6. Sampling Strategy

A nonprobability convenience sampling strategy was used to recruit participants for this course-based study. Nonprobability sampling involves a non-random selection of participants (Battaglia, 2008). It is a commonly used sampling strategy in qualitative research to identify and select “information-rich” participants from whom the most can be learned (Patton, 2002). The inclusion criteria for this study were that participants were third- or fourth-year CYC students on a residential care practicum. Six third-year and 19 fourth-year students participated in the study.

7. Data Collection Strategy

Due to the Covid-19 outbreak, a semi-structured online interview (using the Google Meet platform) was used as the primary data collection strategy. The literature contains a wealth of information on the benefits of remote data collection methods (Chen & Neo, 2019; Ferrante et al., 2016; Tuttas, 2015). The reported benefits of remote data collection strategies include flexibility in time and location, as well as convenience, efficiency, and cost-effectiveness for both the researcher and participants (Cater, 2011; Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Fielding, Lee, & Blank, 2016).

8. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to identify themes. As Braun and Clark (2006) explain, thematic analysis is not only the process of identifying themes within qualitative data; the researcher also becomes an instrument for analysis. As such, each qualitative method or approach to thematic analysis has specific techniques for conducting, documenting, and evaluating data analysis processes (Starks & Trinidad, 2007), but it is the individual researcher's responsibility to assure rigor and trustworthiness. Although numerous examples exist of methods for conducting qualitative data analysis, for the purpose of this course-based research study, we used the six steps described by Braun and Clarke (2006): (1) familiarizing oneself with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing and refining, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report.

9. Findings

Four main themes were extracted from the data analysis: (1) "not in plain sight", (2) "a product of feeling stressed", (3) "lacking the confidence to speak out", and (4) "reframing".

9.1 *Not in Plain Sight*

Several of the participants talked about hearing the use of deficits-based language but not in the presence of the youth. For example, one participant stated that "deficits-based language happens more often when clients are absent from the setting". Another participant noted that deficits-based language mostly takes place during staff meetings and or during shift exchanges. Other participants made comments such as "I hear it used between staff", "I feel like it is usually when all the staff are together", and "[The staff] use it as a vent thing during staff-to-staff conversations".

9.2 *A Product of Feeling Stressed*

The next common theme that emerged was how feeling stressed played a role in the use of deficits-based language. For example, many of the participants commented that staff used deficits-based language "most often in a situation where they felt frustrated over not knowing what to do with a child". Other participants reported that staff were more prone to using deficits-based language when they were tired and so projected their frustrations onto the children in their care. The participants commonly stated that

deficits-based language was used as a reaction to feeling frustrated, uncertain, and tired, all of which are related to stress.

9.3 Lacking the Confidence to Speak Out

A third theme that surfaced was the participants' feeling of being helpless to correct the language of other staff members. The participants referred to the power imbalance of being students and feeling that they could not voice their concerns over the use of deficits-based language by some of the staff. As one participant noted, "[The fact that] I am just a student came up multiple times during the data collection interview process". Several participants talked about how uncomfortable they were when staff used deficits-based language, because they knew that this language use was improper but were reluctant to verbally correct it for fear of jeopardizing their practicum placement. The participants shared that they often felt frustrated and upset about how professionals used deficits-based language toward the children and youth with whom they worked. During one interview, a participant shared that they felt "Overwhelmed, because [they] do not know how to address such actions knowing that [they are] just a student".

9.4 Reframing

While the majority of the participants did not feel sufficiently confident to speak out when deficits-based language was used, a minority made an effort to reframe the deficits-based language they encountered into strengths-based terms. This group of participants talked about how they chose to model strengths-based language by (as one participant phrased it) utilizing their "Reframing skills to encourage positive reinforcing language". This group of participants also offered other perspectives "Through posing questions that possibly create an active and less provoking meaning into the behaviors that the children and youth displayed". One of these participants stated that "debriefing with my supervisor at the end of the shift gave [them] the opportunity to voice [their] perspective concerning the labels". Participants expressed that they felt uncomfortable confronting other workers who were labeling negatively.

10. Conclusion

Despite the emphasis that is placed on strengths-based practice in CYC education, there is a lack of research on how and whether it is applied in CYC practice settings. This course-based research study provided insight into the culture of residential settings concerning the use of strengths-based language. An important finding was that although CYC students are taught the importance of strengths-based language in the classroom, what is happening in the field is unknown. The findings have implications for CYC education and practice. CYC instructors can make use of these findings to promote further discussion and use of strengths-based practice and methods for challenging the use of deficits-based language in field practicums. Finally, given the need to conduct more research in this area, further investigation should take place at the faculty level or in future student-led course-based research projects.

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