

# Voices of Introverted CYC Students: A Course-Based Qualitative Inquiry into the Lived Experiences of Introverted Students in the Classroom and the Field

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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative course-based study explored the lived experiences of introverted child and youth care (CYC) students in the classroom and the field of practice. An interpretive research paradigm was chosen to guide the research design, as this is aligned with the ontological underpinnings of relational-centered CYC practice, which holds the view that multiple realities and perspectives exist and that these are shaped by experiences and contexts. A nonprobability purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit undergraduate CYC students at MacEwan University who self-identified as “introverts.” A data-collection triangulation method was employed, with semi-structured face-to-face and remote interviews and a focus-group conversation. A reflective thematic analysis revealed six significant themes uncovering underlying meanings, concepts, and patterns within the datasets for the three questions posed to participants: a) shyness, b) low social battery, c) comfortable spending time alone and having quiet time, d) quiet energy is my superpower, e) beyond small-talk, and f) honoring my quietness.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Relational-centered child and youth care (CYC) practice is multifaceted in that it occurs in the “lifespace” of children and youth (Amero *et al.*, 2024). It is necessary to point out that lifespace work is about more than the physical environment: it concerns an intimate and dynamic space in which the use of everyday events are opportunities to positively impact a child or youth’s development (Phelan, 2009). The ontological relational foundation of CYC practice necessitates practitioners to be intentional and consciously aware of both their own in-the-moment experiences and the in-the-moment experiences of the children and youth whom they encounter in their work (Bellefeuille *et al.*, 2017). Ultimately, it is a way of being that encompasses open collaboration, trust, respect, compassion, and a readiness to actively engage in relationships with children and youth (Garabaghi & Stuart, 2013; Steckley, 2020).

### 1.1. The Essential Characteristics of CYC Practice: Is Introversion a Non-Starter?

Decades of research and theoretical frameworks on the essential characteristics of CYC practice and the desirable attributes of CYC practitioners have indicated the need for an outgoing, social, and people-oriented personality and great communication skills. Noticeably absent from the literature is the discussion of how introverted CYC students view their experiences both in the classroom and in the field. The term “introversion” is often associated with such traits as “introspection” and “quietness,” as well as being “shy” and “antisocial.” For self-proclaimed CYC students, this misunderstanding has, at times, resulted in feelings of being misunderstood, undervalued, and unappreciated. Susan Cain (2012), in a groundbreaking exploration of introversion and author of *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World that Can’t Stop Talking*, contends that while “one out of every two or three people” (p. 4) on earth are introverts, Western culture devalues the attributes

and capabilities of these people. Cain chronicles the challenges of introverted individuals and reveals some of their fundamental characteristics, which include “having fewer close friends, listening more than speaking, thinking before speaking, writing better than conversing, working slowly and deliberately, and having the power to focus on a specific task” (Cain, 2012, pp. 10–12). Throughout the book, Cain argues for the competence and brilliance of introversion by offering empirical evidence that has been ignored and overlooked in Western culture, which tends to focus on one’s personality rather than one’s characteristics. As she explains, even educational institutions such as schools and Ivy-league universities are designed to fit the personalities of extroverts. She claims that major scientists such as Newton and Einstein, who accomplished significant discoveries, were introverts (Cain, 2012, p. 6). Hence, the purpose of this course-based study is to better understand the educational and field practicum experiences of CYC students who self-identify as introverts and clarify how those experiences shape introverted people’s capacity to engage effectively in CYC practice.

### 1.2. Undergraduate Course-Based Research

Unlike the conventional didactic approach to research-methods instruction, undergraduate course-based research presents students the opportunity to grasp introductory research skills by conceptualizing, designing, administering, and showcasing small minimal-risk research projects under the direction and mentorship of the course instructor—commonly, a professor with an extensive background in research and teaching (Auchincloss et al., 2014; Hensel, 2018). 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. Second, course-based research offers students the opportunity to work with instructors in a mentoring relationship. 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.

### 1.3. Research Paradigm

A research paradigm is a philosophical framework that shapes the entire research process—from framing the research question to highlighting the ideal methods of data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2013; De Vaus, 2001). It also influences how researchers perceive and interact with their participants and defines the ultimate goals of the research (Gage, 2007; Guba & Lincoln, 2005). As Pretorius explains:

By understanding and consciously choosing a research paradigm, researchers ensure that their work is coherent, meaningful, and aligned with their philosophical perspectives on reality, knowledge, and values. (Pretorius, 2024, p. 2708)

Given that the purpose of this course-based study was to explore the lived experiences of introverted CYC students in the classroom and field of practice, an interpretive

research paradigm was chosen to guide the research design. Interpretive research is aligned with the ontological underpinnings of relational-centered CYC practice, which holds the view that multiple realities and perspectives exist and that these are shaped by experiences and contexts (Bellefeuille et al., 2024).

### 1.4. Research Design

A qualitative, exploratory research design was chosen as the method of inquiry. As explained by Willis (2007), qualitative research is embedded in the interpretivist or constructivist paradigm in that it is used to gather quotes, personal stories, and other information that can provide insights into people’s lives and experiences. Thus, the value of qualitative research lies in its ability to capture the nuances of feelings, beliefs, and values, which traditional methods often overlook (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). An exploratory focus was chosen because this is suited to exploring a phenomenon with limited coverage in the literature (Polit & Beck, 2012).

### 1.5. Research Question

The research question posed in this study was as follows: what are the lived experiences of introverted students in the classroom and field of practice?

## 2. METHOD

### 2.1. Sampling Strategy

A non-probability purposive sampling strategy was employed to recruit CYC student participants from all four years of study in the Bachelor of CYC program at MacEwan University. Purposive sampling is widely used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases, offering valuable insights into the phenomenon of interest (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Elo et al., 2014; Patton, 1990, 2002, 2015). The target population (first-, second-, third-, and fourth-year CYC students) was estimated at 200. Although there is no consensus on the exact size of a proper sample in qualitative research, an adequate sample size from a target population is ultimately a matter of the researcher’s judgment and experience (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). However, qualitative samples are intended to provide depth and insight rather than sheer numbers (Cohen & Crabtree, 2008). A targeted sample of 20 participants was achieved.

### 2.2. Data Collection

Data collection occurred through semi-structured, open-ended face-to-face and remote Zoom interviews, followed by a focus group to discuss the initial thematic analysis of the data generated through the interviews. As Patton (1990) explains, “the purpose of interviewing is to find out what is in and on someone else’s mind” and to find out from them those “things we cannot see” or “experience on our own” (p. 196). The interviewers were consciously aware of the importance of entering the interview process as unbiased as possible, genuinely looking to develop an understanding and not asking leading questions that could sway the results (Merriam, 2009). The interviews

were recorded with the permission of the participants. The recordings were then stored in Google Drive under password protection.

### 2.3. Data Analysis

The method of reflective thematic analysis developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used to analyze the interviews and the focus-group data. This method is commonly used and enables researchers to explore participants' experiences and perceptions in a rich and nuanced manner through the detection and analysis of patterns and themes in a data set (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Braun and Clarke (2021) describe six sequential steps in the theoretical-inductive data-analysis process: (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.

The technique of bracketing was employed in the thematic analysis process. As defined by Fischer (2014), "bracketing" involves the researcher undergoing a conscious process of suspending or holding in abeyance their presuppositions, biases, or assumptions to better explore a phenomenon as described or experienced by participants. This act of focusing on the participants and their experiences and perceptions greatly enhances the credibility of the study findings (Moustakas, 1994; Wilson & Creswell, 1996).

## 3. RESULTS

The reflective thematic analysis revealed six significant themes, uncovering underlying meanings, concepts, and patterns in the datasets for the three questions put to the participants: a) shyness, b) low social battery, c) comfortable spending time alone and having quiet time, d) quiet energy is my superpower, e) beyond small-talk, and f) honoring my quietness.

### 3.1. Question 1: Why Do You Consider Yourself an Introverted Person?

#### a) Shyness

Although the word "shyness" lacks a clear-cut definition, it is generally viewed as a temperamental trait characterized by anxiety and discomfort that can substantially affect participation in social situations (Henderson & Zimbardo, 2001). Shyness can also exist on a spectrum ranging from mild discomfort to a debilitating fear of social situations (Asendorpf, 2000; Koydemir, 2006). Only a portion of the participants considered their shyness to be the major source of their introversion. The common sentiment expressed by participants in the interviewing process was, "I've always been shy." In the follow-up focus group, although a number of participants described their introversion differently, they all reported a degree of shyness: "While I describe my introversion as having a low social battery, I do consider myself a little shy in social situations."

#### b) Low Social Battery

The term "social battery" is a metaphor to describe how socializing affects certain individuals and describes

the amount of energy that a person has for socializing. Each individual has a social battery, and the capacities of these batteries differ. For example, individuals with a full social battery have plenty of energy for social interactions, whereas those with a low social battery may feel that it needs recharging (Bennington-Castro, 2013; Hurst et al., 2013). As poet and novelist Charles Bukowski puts it, "People empty me. I have to get away to refill." Clinical psychologist, author, and educator Dr. Helgoe clarifies that introverts have a desire to connect with others but find the act of socializing emotionally draining, whereas extroverts seek out opportunities to connect with others (Helgoe, 2010). Comments by participants in support of the "low battery" theme included, "I get tired of socializing and often need a break from being around people," "Being around lots of people exhausts me. I work best when I'm in one-on-one conversations," and "I kept to myself because I have a low social battery. I have a few close people I spend time with, such as my boyfriend, family, and a few close friends."

#### c) Comfortable Spending Time Alone and Having Quiet Time

The dominant theme to emerge in response to Question 1 was that the participants considered themselves introverts because of their need for quiet and alone time. The research suggests that introverts find comfort in quiet moments. Quiet time is a valuable resource for introverts, allowing them an opportunity to process their thoughts in their heads, rather than talking them out, and to reflect on the depth of their lived experiences (Allen, 2015; Cain, 2012; Condon & Ruth-Sahd, 2013). For example, one participant stated, "I keep to myself and keep quiet whenever possible. I do not mind being in group discussions, but I am far more comfortable in 1-on-1 situations." Another participant commented, "I consider myself an introverted person because I find security in my own bubble. I tend to be more comfortable in my own space with my own mind." Reviewing this theme in the focus-group session, one participant explained, "As someone who identifies as an introvert, I'm shy, yes, but that doesn't mean I'm afraid of people or social situations."

### 3.2. Question 2: How Does Your Introversion Impact Your Building of Meaningful Relationships with Children and Youth?

#### a) Quiet Energy is My Superpower

"Quiet energy is my superpower" was one of two closely related themes that emerged in response to Question 2. The participants described how their introverted personalities provided them with a heightened sense of empathy and understanding for the youth and children whom they encounter in their practice. They provided numerous examples to highlight how their observational and empathetic personality traits and listening skills enabled more compassionate interactions, better conflict-resolution skills, and a greater ability to navigate social dynamics with youth and children. This reporting is consistent with the findings from neuroscience personality research in recent decades showing that introverts and extroverts have different brain structures, with introverts possessing denser



gray matter in specific regions of the prefrontal cortex, compared to extroverts, explaining why introverts take longer to process and react to information (DeYoung et al., 2010; Forsman et al., 2012; Zou et al., 2018). In addition, neuroscience research on mirror neurons (i.e., the brain cells involved in empathy and understanding the emotions of others) suggests that introverts have mirror neurons (Decety & Jackson, 2004; Gallese, 2001; Iacoboni, 2008). Some related comments by participants included, “I can relate to them better because I can put myself in their shoes”; “I think it helps me. The youth in my practicum sometimes need space, and I understand how they feel. I’m also very patient when building relationships with youth, taking my time when getting to know them and observing them before I interact,” and “I don’t necessarily think that it hurts my ability to build meaningful relationships or work with youth. In some ways, it can benefit the relationship, being able to be comfortable with silence and awkward interactions.”

#### b) *Beyond Small-Talk*

The “beyond small talk” theme captured how the participants talked about their ability to form connections with children and youth. Related statements included, “My introverted side actually helps me to focus on individual connections”; “my introversion impacts [my] building [of] meaningful relations with children and youth because I am more mindful of my interactions. I notice boundaries more because I am more observant”; “I feel like I give off a vibe of safety because I like to stay calmer. I believe it helps me in conversation with the youth when it comes to serious topics,” and “I tend to be quiet and calm and make sure not to make anyone uncomfortable. This helps me to create relationships because it helps me become relatable to the children and youth who are also quiet and withdrawn.” Introverts’ quiet and calming personalities often align well with the demands of CYC practice. Their listening, self-reflection, perceptiveness, and calming influence help to create an atmosphere of safety and trust.

### 3.3. *Question 3: How Do You Think You are Perceived by Your Instructors, Fellow Students, Coworkers, and Supervisors in terms of Your Ability to Deliver Effective CYC Work?*

#### a) *Honoring my Quietness*

When asked how they felt they were perceived by instructors, fellow classmates, and colleagues in the field, the participants stated that they felt accepted and respected by those who got to know them. When further probed about their classroom experiences, they collectively agreed that while they felt supported by their instructors, the amount of group work involved in the program and being called upon to make comments in the classroom were uncomfortable and, at times, stressful experiences: “I know the importance of group work, but I am always stressed when I have to be part of a group,” and, “I know our instructors’ mean well, but I never like being called upon to make comments.” As Rosheim (2018) explains, introverted students thrive on listening, but the dynamic nature of

an active classroom can increase anxiety among introverted students, who often require more time to process information and develop a response.

## 4. DISCUSSION

This course-based research study provides a glimpse into the lived experiences of CYC students at MacEwan University. While a great deal has been written about the characteristics of an introverted personality, this has not been investigated in the context of CYC education and CYC practice. Notwithstanding the very small sample and narrow investigative questions, this course-based study has revealed that CYC students who self-report as introverts are confident, feel supported, and are comfortable in their CYC practice. A few interesting themes emerged through the data collection process, particularly around question number three, “How do you think you are perceived by your instructors, fellow students, coworkers, and supervisors in terms of your ability to deliver effective CYC work”? There is potential to gain rich data from continuing to explore this question in particular. This is an important question as it may also reveal insights relating to Question 2, “How does your introversion impact your building of meaningful relationships with children and youth”? Given the initial focus of the inquiry: a) it may be beneficial to further refine the research question, b) increase the targeted number of participants by inviting all students to participate, c) utilize class time to conduct portions of the data collection process, and, d) to use a variety of data collection methods starting with a survey and arts-based activity, followed by focused group discussions.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest.

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