



The Celebration of Life's Milestones and Significant Events: A Course-Based Qualitative Inquiry into Milieu Relational Work in Child and Youth Care Residential Programs

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ABSTRACT

There has been little focus on the milieu relational work in child and youth care (CYC) residential programs for children and youth specific to the celebration of life's milestones and events. The goal of this course-based study is to improve understanding of how CYC practitioners initiate and celebrate milestones and significant events with children and youth in care. The study uses interpretivism to identify and understand phenomena from the perspective of the individuals who have direct experience of the phenomena under investigation. Data was collected using an anonymous Google forms questionnaire. An interpretive thematic analysis of the data revealed four themes: (1) quality time with loved ones, (2) importance of acknowledgement (e.g., of youth's wants and needs), (3) awareness of implementing culture, and (4) building connections and creating memories.

Keywords: child and youth care, course-based research, milestones, milieu, qualitative

INTRODUCTION

Celebrating life's milestones and significant events is an important way to show individuals that they matter and that their lives have meaning to others. A few of the more common milestones are birthdays, graduations, awards or medals, engagements, and pregnancies, all of which honor one's life journeys. The celebration of milestones and significant life events is particularly important in promoting healthy development in children and youth (Boyd, Johnson, & Bee,

2018; Papalia, Olds, & Feldman, 2004; Rathus, Longmuir, Berk, & Rogerson, 2018) because such celebrations show children and youth that they are appreciated and respected. But what of those children and youth living in residential care?

The Therapeutic Milieu

A key feature of child and youth care (CYC) practice is the therapeutic milieu. As Burns (2006) describes, the therapeutic milieu consists of five inter-related elements: the physical, emotional, social, cultural, and ideological. As such, the therapeutic milieu provides a healing life-space rich in inter-personal relationships and attentive to the children and youths' physical and emotional needs. Its purpose is to provide a safe place that supports children and youth to work through unresolved relationship difficulties, develop new coping and problem-solving skills, and enhance their self-esteem. Surrounded with qualified CYC practitioners who act as mentors, advocates, and friends, a residential care program's therapeutic milieu offers children and youth some breathing room from the stress and difficulties that they experience in their homes, schools, and communities (Hawkins-Rodgers, 2007; Maier, 1991). However, the celebration of milestones and significant events may be overlooked in residential care programs due to factors such as turnover rate in staff, lack of resources, or simply not having the adequate time to celebrate. We recognize how important the celebration of milestones has been in our own lives and want to further explore ways to incorporate such celebrations in the field. Hence, the main aim of this course-based research is to explore the experiences of CYC students who work in residential care related to the celebration of children and youth's life milestones and significant events. First, a few words about the nature of undergraduate course-based research.

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. The focus of the course-based research project presented here is to explore how CYC practitioners initiate and celebrate milestones and significant events with children and youth in care.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The methodological approach used in this study was a qualitative exploratory inquiry based on the research paradigm of interpretivism. A research paradigm encompasses the philosophical assumptions that guide the researcher's approach to inquiry (Polit & Beck, 2012). The ontological position in relation to interpretivism is that reality is socially constructed and is a product of individual interpretation (Creswell, 2013). The rationale for using this qualitative interpretive approach was that it would facilitate understanding of phenomena as interpreted by the individuals who had direct experience of them. Additionally, interpretivism is not wedded to a particular methodological convention but rather operates on the principle of methodological appropriateness in which decisions are made based on how well the methods fit the research questions (Crotty, 1998). An exploratory research design illuminates the ways in which a phenomenon is manifested and is especially useful in exploring topics that have limited coverage in the literature with the aim to contribute to the development of new knowledge (Polit & Beck, 2012).

SAMPLING STRATEGY

In line with an interpretive philosophy, purposive sampling techniques were used in this course-based study (Creswell, 2013). Purposive sampling allows the researcher to select participants that can purposefully inform an understanding of the research question (Creswell, 2013). It is further defined by Crookes and Davies (2004) as "judgemental sampling that involves the conscious selection by the researcher of certain subjects or elements to include in the study" (p 232). We selected twenty participants based on the criterion that they had residential care experience. As Liamputtong (2009) explains, there is no set sample size in qualitative research; rather the sample size should consider the depth of data sought and the intensity of contact with participants.

DATA COLLECTION

Given the conditions created by the Covid-19 pandemic, data was collected using questionnaires hosted on an online platform (Google forms). With the ongoing advancement of information and communication technology, rich literature has emerged on internet-based data collection, the benefits of which include greater flexibility in time and location of data collection, convenience, efficiency, and cost-effectiveness (Fielding, Lee, & Blank, 2016; Cater, 2011; Horrell, Stephens, & Brehenv, 2015). For example, the videoconferencing platform Zoom is now being extensively used for research purposes (Archibald, Ambagtsheer, Casey, & Lawless, 2019; Daniels, Gillen, Casson, & Wilson, 2019).

METHODOLOGICAL RIGOUR

In qualitative research, the concepts of credibility, dependability, and transferability have been used to describe various aspects of methodological rigour (Morse, 2015). The notion of credibility is the counterpart of internal validity, which depends less on sample size than on the richness of the information gathered and on the analytical abilities of the researcher (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Schwandt, 2001). Credibility refers to the truth, value, or believability of findings as "known, experienced, or deeply felt by the people being studied" (Leininger, 1994, p.105). In this course-based study, credibility was addressed during the selection of the study participants who were CYC students and were the best source of information related to their experience in residential care. Credibility was also assessed during the thematic analysis process. This process first involved the identification of themes through "careful reading and re-reading of the data" (Rice & Ezzy, 1999, p. 258) by each of the five researchers. Recognition of a pattern within the data was achieved in which emerging themes became the categories for analysis. The five researchers then worked together to establish one common set of themes to reinforce the credibility of the data.

Dependability (comparable with reliability) refers to the extent to which individuals not involved in the study can track the research process and determine which raw data was used to reach corresponding conclusions (Erlandson, et al., 1993; Schwandt, 2001). It also addresses the extent to which the research process is consistent across researchers (Benner, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Dependability was ensured by providing a written audit trail (Koch, 1994). Detailed records of the data collection process and analysis procedures were kept, allowing interested people to reference exact quotes and corresponding interpretations. In addition, the researchers kept extensive notes during the analysis process.

Transferability (comparable with external validity) refers to the degree to which findings from an interpretive study "can be transferred to another similar context or situation and still preserve the particularized meanings, interpretations, and inferences" (Leininger, 1994, p. 106). To increase transferability in this course-based study, "thick descriptions" have been provided so the reader can assess the potential transferability and appropriateness of the presented findings.

DATA ANALYSIS

The transcripts were systematically analyzed using the thematic analysis method described by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method identifies, analyzes, and reports patterns (i.e., themes) within data. The sequence of analysis consists of six processes: familiarizing oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing, and refining themes, defining, and naming themes, and producing a report. The thematic analysis resulted in the identification of four themes: (1) quality time with loved ones, (2) importance of acknowledgement (e.g., of youth's wants and needs), (3) awareness of implementing culture, and (4) building connections and creating memories.

Quality Time with Loved Ones

The first dominant theme identified by the thematic analysis was that many individuals celebrate milestones with their loved ones. Those involved in celebrations include parents, grandparents, siblings, friends, and any other important persons in an individual's life. Many participants mentioned celebrating with friends and family in a way that they found

meaningful. For some participants, this meant celebrating their milestones with the involvement of food, by either buying treats or going out to a restaurant to eat. One participant said they “celebrate with friends and family by going out to eat or getting everyone together for a small gathering.” Another participant wrote, “My parents usually take a day off work and take me out to eat, and we just hang out, laugh, and share together as a form of appreciation.” Additional comments included the following: “Depending on the milestone, it’s either a big party or a smaller get together. Either way we get together with our friends and family to celebrate our accomplishments in life!”

Importance of Acknowledgement

Most participants recognized the effect milestones have on the youth that they work with. They emphasized the importance that celebrations have on their development and that acknowledging milestones as a want and need is a healthy way of showing youth they are loved and appreciated. When it comes to the acknowledgement of milestones, the wants and needs of youth can range from big celebrations to recognition of little achievements. Some examples from participants of acknowledging milestones follow. One participant said, “It creates some normality, forms a better relationship.” Another participant wrote, “It can make people feel like they have accomplished something, or they are loved/appreciated.” A third example from a participant is, “The children and youth will communicate important milestones in their lives with you... Celebrate even the small stuff.” Participants understood that they should more frequently acknowledge milestones to meet the wants and needs of youth.

Awareness of Implementing Culture

A third theme identified through our analysis was the lack of awareness of implementing culture in a youth’s life. Although most participants mentioned that culture was not incorporated much in the youth’s life space, one participant recognized that “cultural identity should be considered, but not pressured upon anyone” as well as “depending on the celebrated milestone.” One participant said that including the youth’s cultural identity “allows celebrating the milestones to have a greater impact on their life due to aligning it in a manner they are familiar with.” A participant also emphasized that “CYC practitioners from all cultures should learn and educate themselves with the youth’s culture to see how they can be culturally sensitive while being productive.” As a CYC practitioner, it is important to stay curious and ask the youth about their cultural traditions or celebrations.

Building Connections and Creating Memories

Many participants indicated the importance of how celebrating milestones encouraged the building and maintaining of relationships and memories. This theme was demonstrated in responses from the participants in a variety of ways, but they all were rooted in involving other people and making lasting memories regardless of the type of celebration. Some of the participants used phrases such as “because those [celebrations] are memorable times for the youth and when they reflect back on the times, they will remember that you were there” to further explain why milestones are vital to the relationship that a CYC practitioner has with a youth. The participants also said, “These milestones may go unnoticed if the child/youth does not have people in their support system who are able/willing to celebrate with them or acknowledge these amazing accomplishments,” which deepens our exploration of milestones to questioning whether youth know how to recognize their own important life milestones and how far they really have come. Additional comments included, “Youth feel important when

practitioners celebrate milestones” and “Celebrating milestones also instills hope in the children and youth.”

CONCLUSION

This course-based study provides a preliminary understanding of experiences of CYC students who work in residential care regarding the celebration of children and youth’s life milestones and significant events. While evidence of celebrating milestones and significant events was reported by the participants, it was also acknowledged that celebrations were sporadic and limited in scope. Further research on this topic might consider using a larger sample size and a more thorough data collection process, as well as collecting additional information and perspectives from the youth living in residential care, rather than focusing on the practitioner’s point of view.

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