

Intentional Child and Youth Care Life-Space Practice: A Qualitative Course-Based Inquiry

Hannah Amero¹, Tasha Barrow¹, Carly Currie¹, Kadin Pochynok¹,
Brennin Turner¹, Rebecca Stiller², Gerard Bellefeuille³

¹Bachelor of Child and Youth Care Fourth Year Students, MacEwan University, Edmonton, Alberta.

²Assistant Professor of Child and Youth Care, MacEwan University, Edmonton, Alberta.

³Professor of Child and Youth, MacEwan University, Edmonton, Alberta.

ABSTRACT: This course-based research study explored how child and youth care students both understand and engage in life-space practice. Data collection strategies included a conversational, open-ended interview and an arts-based activity. The open-ended interviews were conducted via Zoom and Google Meet. The thematic analysis resulted in the identification of four themes. The first three themes: a) it is meeting youth where they are at, b) it is relational, and c) it is intentional practice are directly related to the central research question, and the final theme: d) bureaucratic structures, policies, and procedures was extracted from a sub-question that asked about what “gets in the way of” effective life-space practice.

KEYWORDS: *child and youth care, course-based research, life-space practice, qualitative*

I. INTRODUCTION

“Threshold concepts” are pedagogical constructs that underpin an academic discipline and are instrumental in helping students to construct new and previously inaccessible ways of thinking about their learning experiences. They are epistemologically and ontologically transformative in nature, and once they have been grasped, students experience a paradigmatic change in their perceptions and worldviews (Barradell, 2013; Bellefeuille, Stiller & Heaney-Dalton, in progress; Meyer & Land, 2003; Steckley, 2020). As Meyer and Land (2003) explain,

A threshold concept can be considered as akin to a portal, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something. It represents a transformed way of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing something without which the learner cannot progress. As a consequence of comprehending a threshold concept there may thus be a transformed internal view of subject matter, subject landscape, or even world view. (p. 412)

Similarly, Tucker, Bruce, and Edwards (2016) state that wholeheartedly grasping a threshold concept,

...involves learning to see some aspect of the world in a new, transformative, and often counter-intuitive manner. Following such transformed understanding, continued and profound learning associated with the concept becomes possible. (p. 150)

Meyer and Land (2003) explain that, once a threshold concept has been absorbed, the result is a radical and lasting shift in the student’s perceptions of the discipline.

Relational-Centred Child and Youth Care Practice

Praxis, relational ontology, and life-space are three core threshold concepts that underpin students’ abilities to understand the nuance relational-centered child and youth care (CYC) practice (Bellefeuille et al., 2017; Gharabaghi & Stuart, 2013; Garfat, Freeman, Gharabaghi & Fulcher, 2018). The focus of this course-based research study is the threshold concept of life-space.

The Concept of Life-Space

The term “life-space” was made popular by renowned psychologist Kurt Lewin in his theoretical approach to the study of behaviour as a function of the total physical and social situation, which was an elaboration of Fritz Redl’s “life-space interview” (Morse, 2001; Wood & Long, 1991). Redl designed the LSI “because he felt the environment of the traditional individual therapeutic session was artificial and too far detached from a child’s reality (Sharpe, 2009, para. 7).” For Redl, the LSI offered a way for professional helpers to develop therapeutic relationships with youth by using the daily in-the-moment interactions that arise from the variety of natural situations that comprise the daily run of life. Building on the work of Redl, Lewin’s concept of life-space includes an individual’s past experiences, current perceptions, goals, and the external environmental factors. More recently, life-space has been conceptualized as having four dimensions (Gharabaghi and Stuart, 2013). These are reported by Steckly (2013) as follows:

- the physical dimension, which not only involves physical locations but also the experience of those locations by the five senses;
- the mental dimension, which involves thoughts, feelings, and how a young person constructs or makes sense of his or her life-space;
- the relational dimension, which is about what young people do with and within their relationships and can have a profound impact on how the various physical locations of life-space are experienced (and constructed) by the young person; and
- the virtual dimension, which includes “those environments in which we interact and relate to others, but where all the senses are not fully utilised” (p.16).

The final dimension above might include social networking or other mediums supported by technology, but it also includes madness, imagination, and the spiritual world (p.28).

As CYC students, we come to understand life-space practice as something more than an environment—as an intimate relational space with co-constructed boundaries in which we create “co-experiences” (Phelan, 2015, p. 23). Life-space practice can be difficult to define, as it is experienced differently by everyone and equally difficult to intentionally accomplish. The purpose of this course-based research project is, first, to explore CYC students’ understanding of life-space practice and, second, to explore how they intentionally utilize “life-space practice”.

Undergraduate Course-Based Research: A Pedagogical Method to Promote 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 *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.

II. RESEARCH DESIGN

A research design directs the research process and specifies the methods and practices used to collect and analyze the data. Given that the goal of this course-based study was to explore how CYC students understand and intentionally engage in life-space practice, a qualitative interpretive approach was used to inquire into the experiences of the participants. In contrast to the positivistic research paradigm, which assumes that a single tangible reality exists—one that can be understood, identified, and measured—the interpretive research paradigm argues that social worlds must be examined through the interpretation of subjective human experience (Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Motulsky, 2021). Alharahsheh and Pius (2020), for example, explain that interpretivism assumes reality is subjective, multiple, and socially constructed. As such, working from an interpretive perspective, one can only gain understanding of another person's reality when they share their experiences of that reality. Interpretive research relies on questioning and observation in order to discover or generate a rich and deep understanding of the phenomenon being investigated (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2013; Williams, 2000)

Statement of Research Question

The aim of this course-based research study is not only to support individual CYC students/practitioners in providing the highest quality care but also to inform CYC educators in their ongoing review of the CYC curriculum. It is important to provide instruction on life-space theory and intervention, but there has been no systematic review or scientific study of how life-space theory is actually lived in the real world of practice. Hence, the course-based research question is as follows: what does life-space mean to CYC students, and do they practice life-space work intentionally with children and youth?

Sampling Strategy

The population of interest for this course-based study was CYC students at MacEwan University. Participants were recruited using nonprobability convenience sampling. Convenience sampling “is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam, 1998, p. 61).

Data Collection Strategy

Methodological triangulation was employed. Many strengths and benefits of methodological triangulation are identified in the literature. For example, Halcomb and Andrews (2005) and Foss and Ellefsen (2002) suggest that methodological triangulation has the potential to yield more comprehensive, insightful, and authentic data. Other researchers have also claimed that the use of multiple data collection methods allows researchers to achieve the best of each method, while simultaneously overcoming the inherent limitations of each (Flick, 2011; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003).

Participants were first invited to take part in a 15-to30-minute open-ended, conversational-style interviews. Some of these interviews were conducted online, using Zoom videoconferencing, while others were face-to-face. Similar to comparable communication platforms like 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 experiences participants (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 “life-space practice” for them.

Data Analysis Methodology

The Braun and Clarke (2006) method of thematic analysis was used to analyze our data. The sequence of analysis consisted of six steps: (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. This analysis resulted in the identification of four themes. The first three themes: a) it is meeting youth where they are at, b) it is relational, and c) it is intentional practice are directly related to the central research question, and the final theme: d) bureaucratic structures, policies, and procedures was extracted from a sub-question that asked about what “gets in the way of” effective life-space practice.

a) It is Meeting Youth Where They Are At

The dominant theme that emerged from the responses was that life-space work is first and foremost about meeting youth where they are. For example, several participants shared comments such as, “We adapt to the children's needs and do not expect children to adapt to our needs”; “We consider their life and what they are exposed to—like environment and family life—and tailor [our] approach based on each individual youth”;

and, “We meet the child, youth or family where they are at...existing in their space...being adaptable, an attitude you come in with, the way you communicate and interact with them”.

b) It is Relational

A secondary dominant theme to emerge was the emphasis on being relational. Participants noted that life-space work requires CYC practitioners to be authentic in their interactions with children and youth and aware of the complexity of boundary issues inherent in life-space work. For example, participants made the following comments: “Knowing boundaries can be very personal or surface-level...not overstepping boundaries, not intersecting self into lives, working side by side”; “It requires being your authentic self”; “It’s about showing up and taking youth’s time seriously, in their space”; and “It requires being genuine and helping youth to express their emotions and to get things out that they may not feel safe doing in other places.”

c) It is Intentional Practice

A third prevailing theme to emerge was the importance of being intentional. The participants collectively spoke about the importance of being mindful of everything that they do—including the needs and contexts of the children and youth (e.g., their trauma, their developmental context), the intent of their support, and how they are actioning this through their communication and intervention strategies. Comments included, “You can go into it with a guide or a plan, but ultimately it is the child who will guide and determine what it looks like”; “we must cater to the child’s needs in the moment”; “All aspects of their life needs to be factored in when addressing problems (holistic approach)”; and, “we are always looking for new information and thinking about how it plays a role in the areas they are struggling with.”

d) Bureaucratic Structures, Policies, and Procedures

This final theme was extracted from a sub-question that asked about what “gets in the way of” effective life-space practice. The participants identified the bureaucratic features of the work contexts, including rigid and inflexible structures or routines, policies, and procedures. Comments included, “Even though regulations are good [for] safety reasons, they can prevent CYC practitioners from practicing and connecting how they want to”; “Different agencies have different policies that can be disruptive of children/youth’s natural life-space”; and “[There is] too much routine and [too many] rigid structures.”

III. SUMMARY

This course-based research study provides a glimpse into CYC students’ understanding of life-space practice. While a great deal has been written about the philosophy and purpose of CYC life-space practice, its actual visible practice in the field is underexplored. Further research that invited participants to provide descriptive examples of their life-space practice moments would provide further insights into how well CYC students grasp the threshold concept of these interventions. It would also be beneficial to note how CYC practitioners use life space interventions after they graduate and if or how it is applied across other disciplines.



(November 2023 public course-based research poster showcase, MacEwan University.
Left to right: Kadin Pochynok, Tasha Barrow, Hannah Amero, Carly Currie, Brennin Turner)

REFERENCES

- [1]. Alharahsheh, H.H., & Pius, A. (2020). A review of key paradigms: Positivism vs interpretivism. *Global Academic Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 2 (3), 39-43.
- [2]. Allyn, D. A. (2013). Course-based undergraduate research: It can be accomplished! *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation and Dance*, 84(9), 32–36.
- [3]. Archibald, M.M., Ambagtsheer, R.C., Casey, M.G., & Lawless, M. (2019). Using zoom videoconferencing for qualitative data collection: Perceptions and experiences of researchers and participants. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 18, 1-8.
- [4]. Barradell, S. (2013). The identification of threshold concepts: a review of theoretical complexities and methodological challenges. *Higher Education*, 65, 265–276.
- [5]. Bellefeuille, G., Ekdhal, C., Kent, L. & Kluczny, M. (2014). A course-based creative inquiry approach to teaching introductory research methods in child and youth care undergraduate education. *International Journal of Teaching and Education*, 2(2), 1-9.
- [6]. Bellefeuille, G., Stiller, B., Neuman, S., Deol, J., Smith, C., Brown, M., Gautreau, & Diduch, A. (2017). Building a child and youth care culture of relational-centred praxis: Ours to make. *American Journal of Education and Learning*, 2(1), 43-64.
- [7]. Bellefeuille, G., Heaney-Dalton, K., & Stiller, R. (in progress). Relational-centred arts-based teaching and learning: Engaging body, mind, & soul. A primer for child and youth care educators. CYC Net.
- [8]. Creswell, J.W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. 3rd edn: CA: Sage: Thousand Oaks.
- [9]. Davis, M.G., Haas, M.R., Gottlieb, M., House, J.B., Huang, R.D., & Hopson, L.R. (2020). Zooming in versus flying out: Virtual residency interviews in the era of COVID-19. *AEM Education and Training*, 4(4), 443-446.
- [10]. Denzin, N.K., and Lincoln, Y.S. (eds) (1994). *Handbook of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc.
- [11]. Flick U. (2011). Mixing methods, triangulation and integrated research: Challenges for qualitative research in a world of crisis. In N. Denzin and M. Giardina (Eds.), *Qualitative inquiry and global crisis* (pp. 132-152). Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
- [12]. Gharabaghi, K., & Stuart, C. (2013). *Right here, right now: Exploring life-space interventions for children and youth*. Don Mills, Ontario: Pearson Education Canada.
- [13]. Harrison, M., Dunbar, D., Ratmansky, L., Boyd, K. & Lopatto, D. (2010). Classroom-based science research at the introductory level: Changes in career choices and attitude. *CBE Life Sciences Education*, 10(3), 279–86.
- [14]. McNiff S. (2008). Arts-based Research. In Knowles J. G., Cole A. (Eds.), *Handbook of the arts in qualitative research*. London, England: Sage.
- [15]. Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- [16]. Meyer, J. H. F., & Land, R. (2006). Threshold concepts and troublesome information: An introduction. In J.H.F. Meyer & R. Land (Eds.), *Overcoming barriers to student understanding: Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge*. Oxon, UK: Routledge.
- [17]. Morse, W. (2001). A half century of children who hate: Insights for today from Fritz Redl. *Reclaiming Children and Youth*, 10(2), 75.
- [18]. Motulsky, S.L. (2021). Is member checking the gold standard of quality in qualitative research? *Qualitative Psychology*, 8(3), 389–406.
- [19]. Phelan, J. (2015). *The long and short of it – child and youth care*. Cape Town, South Africa: Pretext Press.
- [20]. Schwartz-Shea, P., & Yanow, D. (2013). *Interpretive research design: Concepts and processes*. Routledge.
- [21]. Sharpe, C. (2009). *Fritz Redl and the life space interview*. Goodenough Care.
- [22]. Steckley, L. (2013). Is life-space a threshold concept? *CYC Online*, 172, 23-29
- [23]. Steckley, L. (2020). Threshold concepts in residential child care: part 1, The selves of learners and their praxis. *Children and Youth Services review*, 112(2), 104594.
- [24]. Tashakkori, A., & Charles, T. (2003). *Handbook of mixed methods in social and behavioural research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- [25]. Tucker, V. M., Bruce, C., & Edwards, S. L. (2016). Using grounded theory to discover threshold concepts in transformative learning experiences. *Theory and Method in Higher Education*, 2, 23-46.
- [26]. Williams, M. (2000). Interpretivism and generalisation. *Sociology*, 34(2), 209-224.

- [27]. Wood, M., and Long, N. (1991). *Life space intervention: Talking with children and youth in crisis*. Austin, TX: Pro-Ed