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The Journey to Authentic Non-Self: A Course-Based Qualitative Inquiry Into the Lived Experience of Child and Youth Care Students

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ABSTRACT: Cultivating a greater sense of self-authenticity is a major emphasis of child and youth care (CYC) education. This requires a supportive and safe teaching and learning environment that fosters introspection, curiosity, critical dialogue, and most importantly, creative and experiential learning assessments. This qualitative course-based inquiry explored CYC students' perceptions of becoming more authentic as a result of their CYC education experience. A non-probability, convenience sampling strategy was used to recruit CYC students from all four years of study at MacEwan University. A triangulated data-collection strategy consisting of a focus group, an open-ended online survey, and an arts-based activity was used to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. Two dominant themes supported by a deeper, over-arching implicit theme emerged in the analyses: a) learning to embrace who I am, b) a lifelong learning journey of liberation, and c) the over-arching implicit theme, the symbiotic relationship between authenticity and relationality.

KEYWORDS: *child and youth care; course-based research; authenticity; learning assessment*

I.   INTRODUCTION

Each person had only one genuine vocation--to find the way to himself. . . . One's task was to discover one's own destiny--not an arbitrary one--and to live it out wholly and resolutely within oneself. Everything else was only a would-be existence, an attempt at evasion, a flight back to the ideals of the masses, conformity, and fear of one's own inwardness—Herman Hesse

Cultivating a greater sense of self-authenticity in students is a major and foundational emphasis of child and youth care (CYC) education. This relies on a relational pedagogical approach to teaching and learning that positions learning as a transformational endeavour, shaping not only what students know, but how they understand themselves and their place in the world (Gravett, Taylor, & Fairchild, 2024; Bellefeuille, Heaney-Dalton, & Stiller, 2024). Relational teaching and learning pedagogy centers education on strong, caring connections between teachers, students, peers, and community, prioritizing trust and mutual respect to foster deep learning, engagement and development, moving beyond mere content delivery to focus on the "being-in-relation" and co-constructing knowledge in a supportive, ethical space, often blending care with appropriate challenge to empower students (Hickey, Riddle, 2022; Bellefeuille, Heaney-Dalton, & Stiller, 2024; Leadbetter et al., 2024).

The Relational Dimension of Authenticity

While the concept of authenticity has different meanings in different disciplines, in the field of CYC, it is viewed through a relational, ontological lens. As such, authenticity is not considered an internal trait or fixed state, in which there is a "core" or "true self" to which individuals consistently stay true (De Haan, 2020; Fletcher, 2013); rather, it is understood as a process that unfolds in relation to others (Andersen, & Chen, 2002; Bellefeuille, Heaney-Dalton, & Stiller, 2024). As such, the starting point to developing a greater sense of authenticity is the recognition that the "self" (i.e., one's identities, beliefs, and values) is a byproduct of our relational life histories (Gallagher, Morgan, & Rokotnitz, 2018; Lynch, & Sheldon, 2020).

The Relational Ontological Authentic Non-Self

In its simplest form, relational ontology fundamentally shifts the focus from isolated things to the web of connections that define them (reality consists of dynamic processes, events, and change). This is a contrasting view from substance ontologies that prioritize individual substances as the primary units of reality (the world is fundamentally composed of independent, enduring objects or "substances"; Nancy, 1990). In other words, relationships between entities are more fundamental to their existence than the entities themselves (Gergen, 2009). Viewed from a relational ontological perspective, the "self" is not contained in a single, fixed inner core within our fleshly shells but is a process that shifts and changes depending on context and relationships with others throughout life (Churchill, 2011; Gergen, 2009).

Building upon the relational ontological view of self, authenticity is not about finding oneself, speaking one's mind no matter what, acting on impulses without fear of consequences, or being raw and unfiltered; rather, it means being vulnerable and honest "about one's thoughts, feelings, and fears" (Barclay, 2000; Iftode et al., 2022; Mortimer, 2025). It means learning to recognize one's true values, beliefs, and emotions, rather than conforming to external pressures or pretending to be someone that one is not. It involves self-awareness, self-acceptance, and the freedom to express honestly one's thoughts, feelings, and uniqueness (Cross, Bacon, & Morris, 2000). As Peterson (2005) explains, becoming authentic is a continuous journey of self-discovery that leads to inner peace, resilience, and meaningful relationships. While it is a common belief that authenticity is something to be attained, like a prize or a destination, working towards becoming more authentic is an uncomfortable and challenging process. It is a lifelong practice characterized by ongoing self-reflection, introspection, and the embrace of vulnerability to overcome fears (Dammann, 2021). In that context, this course-based study explored CYC students' perceptions of becoming more authentic as a result of their CYC educational experience.

Criticality, Reflectivity, and Praxis

The undergraduate CYC program at MacEwan University continuously seeks new pedagogical approaches to improve how CYC students are educated for a dynamic, ever-evolving field, incorporating evidence-based curriculum, digital technologies, arts-based methods, and experiential pedagogies to enhance critical thinking, practice competencies, and prepare CYC students for complex and diverse practice environments. Course-based undergraduate research immerses students in authentic research projects. It differs significantly from the traditional didactic approach to research methods, which focuses on passive instruction and predetermined outcomes. Course-based research 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 (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

This qualitative course-based study was situated in the interpretivist research paradigm because it sought to understand the subjective meanings and experiences of the participants regarding becoming more authentic due to their CYC education experience. The interpretivist research paradigm is predicated on very specific assumptions, the first of which relates to the ontological view that reality is not a single objective truth, but rather a subjective, multiple, and social construct (Merriam, 2009; Neuman, 2006). A second assumption flows from the first and relates to the epistemological assumptions that reality is understood through the subjective meanings and interpretations of individuals and is shaped by the researcher–participant relationship (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020; Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Mason, 2002). A third assumption of the interpretive

research paradigm relates to its choice of research methods. Interpretivist researchers rely on images and textual data and favour methods such as in-depth interviews, arts-based activities, focus groups, and participant observation (Bellefeuille, Heaney-Dalton, & Stiller, 2024; Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009).

Statement of Research Question

The guiding research question for this course-based research study was as follows: What are CYC students' perceptions regarding becoming more authentic as a result of their CYC educational experience?

Sampling Strategy

Participants were recruited via a non-probability, convenience, and purposive sampling strategy. Non-probability convenience and purposive sampling strategies are a cornerstone of qualitative research because they allow researchers to select participants who are easily accessible and meet specific characteristics relevant to the study's goals, rather than through random selection (Patton, 2002; Robinson, 2014). This approach is appropriate for a course-based inquiry because it minimizes logistical barriers and provides timely access to information from participants. The targeted sample size was 30 CYC students distributed across all four years of study.

Data-Collection Methods

A triangulated data-collection strategy consisting of a focus group, an open-ended online survey, and an arts-based activity was used to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings (Bans-Akutey & Tiimub, 2021; Heale & Forbes, 2013). This technique allows for additional insights into the meaning-making data-analysis process, thus generating a more nuanced understanding of the data (Hoque, Covaleski, & Gooneratne, 2013; Janesick, 1994). Focus groups are a widely used qualitative research method, revealing data that differs from the type obtained through one-on-one interviews by gathering insights into lived experiences through dynamic interaction among participants (Alam, Asmawi, & Fatema, 2025; Chand, 2025). Open-ended surveys are equally relied upon in qualitative research (Creswell, 2013). They are cost-effective, allow participants to respond at their own pace, and offer rich, nuanced data (Merriam, 2009). For the arts-based activity, participants were given access to a variety of arts materials (paper, stickers, pens, markers, etc.) and invited to create an arts-based representation of the evolution of their authenticity (refer to Figure 1). Arts-based data-collection methods are resonant with the onto-epistemological perspective that human experiences are complex and not fully accessible through traditional, verbal methods (Barone & Eisner, 2012; McNiff, 2019).

Figure 1. Examples of Art-Based Activities

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six stages of thematic analysis techniques: (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 (Braun & Clarke, 2022). As MacKenzie and Knipe (2006) explain, the selection of a data analysis method must align with the nature of the research questions, the method of data collection, and the appropriate methods for interpreting the results. Braum and Clarke's six-phase approach of thematic analysis, which emphasizes a subjective and context-dependent interpretation of data, was therefore appropriate for this study. Two dominant themes supported by a deeper, over-arching implicit theme emerged in the analyses: a) learning to embrace who I am, b) a lifelong learning journey of liberation, and c) the over-arching implicit theme, the symbiotic relationship between authenticity and relationality.

a)   Learning to Embrace Who I Am

An interesting pattern emerged when participants responded to the question, "Do you feel that you have become more authentic as a result of your CYC educational experience?" Rather than asserting that they had changed significantly, participants often described gaining an enhanced understanding of who they really are. They identified changes in their thoughts and actions, as seen below.

To be more authentic, I needed to understand myself (values, needs, strengths), align my actions with my inner truth, and practice self-acceptance, which involves being honest, setting boundaries, and gradually expressing my real thoughts and feelings without constantly seeking approval, focusing on internal congruence rather than external validation.

For me, I've become more inclined to share things with people and to speak my mind. When I'm talking. I'm not just speaking because I want to speak, but speaking because what I'm saying is genuinely what I'm thinking.

I've learned how to advocate for myself more. Before, with friends, I used to be more passive—like, Oh, okay, that's fine or I'd pretend things didn't really hurt me. There's a part I really like where it talks about developing authenticity. It says it's not about just finding oneself or speaking one's mind no matter what, or acting on impulses without fear of consequences, or being raw and unfiltered. Rather, developing authenticity involves being vulnerable and honest about one's thoughts. Being in the program has helped me to open up and to be more open to opportunities, not just in school, but in my day-to-day life as well. I actually enjoy interacting with people now, whereas before I kind of tried to avoid those conversations.

It involves accepting myself and my uniqueness

My parents knew how I was labelled in high school, so they were very overprotective of me. They knew what I was going through. I didn't have a lot of friends, and when I did, I was the third wheel or fifth wheel. I wasn't actually accepted into those groups; I just had friends because they were there. Now, I can be myself. I can find people who are like me, and I can have so much joy with it. My parents are like, "This is such a good program, we're so happy you picked this.

Before I started, I had a hard time being myself. I would try to please people, conform, and say yes to everything. Now I'm learning to say no and stick to my guns a little bit more, to be stronger.

b)   A Lifelong Learning Journey of Liberation

As the participants reflected on how their experiences in the CYC classroom had influenced their understanding of themselves and others, they also acknowledged that "becoming more authentic" is a lifelong journey of self-reflection, described as the "daily practice of letting go of who they think they're supposed to be and embracing who they are"—an ongoing process of aligning their inner values, beliefs, and emotions with their outward actions, requiring courage, vulnerability, and a willingness to confront social pressures. Comments in support of this theme included the following:

I don't think it will ever be "finished." Like, you'll always keep going and going and going—yeah, it'll never be finished.

I feel like authenticity is continuous and ongoing, in both my professional and personal life.

I think I'd give myself more grace. Yes, we should take our time and reflect, but sometimes—especially lately at work—I think, "Oh, I should have said this or done that or spoken up about this.

So, it would be just telling myself, there is still growth, and I did address some of these things.

Not that some of the things that happened were okay, but the fact that I'm now aware that they're not okay and I'm speaking up about it still creates change.

Going back to the CYC definition of authenticity, it says authenticity is about learning to recognize our values and beliefs and making sure we aren't conforming to external ideals or external pressures of who other people want us to be or pretending to be someone that we aren't.
It involves accepting ourselves and our uniqueness.

It is a lifelong journey of self-discovery, involving increased self-awareness, self-acceptance, and the courage to act in accordance with one's inner core.

c) Symbiotic Relationship Between Relationality and Authenticity

One of the strongest themes was the symbiotic relationship between relationality (the state of being connected or in relationship with others) and authenticity (recognizing one's true values, beliefs, and emotions), which suggests a mutually reinforcing, dynamic feedback loop where each component shapes the other, in which one cannot exist without the other. Some of the most powerful comments expressed by the participants suggest that a sense of connection emerged through the creative journalling shared experience. They spoke about initially feeling vulnerable and fearful. However, as they engaged in the creative journalling assignment and shared their work with their peers, they came to realize how common feelings of self-doubt, fear, and inadequacy are among their peers. Seeing others express these struggles creatively helped to normalize their own experience and reduced the sense of shame attached to it, fostering a sense of community and belonging, allowing classmates to connect through vulnerability in ways that traditional academic assignments rarely allow.

I've become more open throughout the years and more able to be vulnerable with people. I've also come to learn how important relationships really are, and that to be able to have a relationship, you have to be open and vulnerable.

Being in the program has helped me to open up, feel better, and try to be more open to opportunities—not just in school, but even outside, in my day-to-day life. Like, I actually enjoy interacting with people now, whereas before I kind of tried to avoid those conversations. And I know how to advocate for myself more. Before, with friends, I used to be more passive—like, "Oh, okay, that's fine," or I'd pretend things didn't really hurt me.

Even yesterday, I was thinking about whether I should talk to a friend about something. In the end, I did tell them what was wrong, and I felt better not having to carry that with me. So yeah, I feel it's helped me become more open and more authentic.

It's honestly fair, though—that's how it should be. You should find people in your program who are like you, and you shouldn't be afraid to express yourself when you know this is something you want to do long-term, probably for the rest of your life.

III. Dissemination and Public Outreach

Dissemination of CYC course-based research is essential in bridging the gap between academic findings and practice application for better outcomes for children, youth, and families. As such, this course-based research was presented at a public showcase, which was held at MacEwan University in November 2025 (see Figure 2).

From left to right (standing): Paige Meyers, Olivia Kammer, Skyler Mabutt, Kate Klassen, Elizabeth Heil, Kara Cadwell
From left to right (sitting): Michaela White, Hasnaa Fattah, Sam Rodgers, Zoe Manning, Kaitlyn Harbour

Figure 2.
Course-Based Research Student Team

Summary

This qualitative course-based study explored the perceptions of CYC students about becoming a more authentic person as a direct result of their CYC educational experience. While the undergraduate CYC program at MacEwan University strives to promote a greater sense of authenticity in students through specific pedagogical practices and institutional commitments that prioritize psychological safety, inclusivity, and personal expression, this course-based research study is the first attempt to systematically produce scientific results

regarding how CYC students actually experience their learning experience, with a particular focus on developing a greater sense of authenticity.

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