

A Course-Based in-Queer-y Into the Preparedness Of Child and Youth Care Students to Support 2SLGBTQ+ Youth

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this course-based study was to explore the perceptions of child and youth care (CYC) students at MacEwan University regarding their readiness upon graduation to effectively support 2SLGBTQ+ youth. Working in the interpretive and critical research paradigms, data were collected using focus groups and an expressive arts-based activity. Three overarching themes were identified during the thematic analysis: a) need for more education, b) need for a change in the teaching approach, and c) lack of preparedness.

Keywords: child and youth care, course-based research, 2SLGBTQ+, qualitative, queer.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Understanding dominant theories of human growth and development is fundamental to professional child and youth care (CYC) practice. However, the education of CYC students has historically lacked content specific to the two-spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (2SLGBTQ+) community. Before proceeding, we would like to briefly address the acronym 2SLGBTQ+, which is used throughout this article. We use this acronym in recognition of the fact that the language used by sexual and gender minority communities is diverse and always evolving and in no way does it intend to suggest that the experiences of these youth are identical. Members of the 2SLGBTQ+ community have a diverse and varied range of experiences.

A. Setting the Context

There is a growing body of scholarship addressing issues facing 2SLGBTQ+ youth, much of which is presented in the language of “concerns,” “challenges,” and other pathologizing framing (de Finney *et al.*, 2011; Vachon, 2020) and sourced from other professional disciplines, such as social work (Abramovich & Shelton, 2017; CWLA, 2017), nursing (Brennan *et al.*, 2012), and secondary education (Hatzenbuehler *et al.*, 2014). As CYC practitioners, we are increasingly called upon to support 2SLGBTQ+ youth. It is, therefore, critical that we do so in ways that consider and respect not only their sexuality, gender, identity, needs, and life choices but also their full lived experiences.

B. The Intersectionality of the Lived Experience of 2SLGBTQ+ Youth

Understanding the notion of intersectionality is essential to thoroughly grasp the lived experiences of 2SLGBTQ+ youth. Intersectionality is a theoretical framework that explores how individual experiences are impacted by a web of intersecting factors, including race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, age, culture, (dis)ability, and religion (Cho *et al.*, 2013). As such, it requires a shift from single factor analysis to analysis based on the assumption that an individual's experiences are the sum of multiple factors that can be associated with more than one source of discrimination or oppression. Recognizing that 2SLGBTQ+ youth are as diverse as the general Canadian population, an intersectional approach to research involves taking into consideration that they often face social isolation, discrimination, bullying, and acts of violence and are at higher risk of experiencing certain mental health issues, substance abuse, and suicide. For example, Taylor and Peter (2011, p. 15) report the following findings in a 2011 Canadian study examining homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia in Canadian schools:

- 1) 64% of LGBT youth and 61% of students with LGBT parents report that they feel unsafe at school.
- 2) 74% of transgender students and 55% of LGB youth report being verbally harassed about their gender or sexual identity.
- 3) 21% of LGB youth report being physically harassed or assaulted because of their orientation.

- 4) 37% of trans-youth report being physically harassed or assaulted due to their gender expression.
- 5) 49% of trans-youth reported being sexually assaulted as result of their gender expression.

Several other studies report that 2SLGBTQ+ youth are at a higher risk of suicide than their straight peers (Egale Canada, 2011; Haas *et al.*, 2011; Kitts, 2005; Suicide Prevention Resource Center [SPRC] & Rodgers, 2011). While the suicides of 2SLGBTQ+ youth must be understood in the context of their lived reality, the numbers are nevertheless devastating. For example, a study on 350 2SLGBTQ+ youth in Canada, the US, and New Zealand found that over 4 out of 10 had considered suicide, and 1 in 3 had attempted suicide (D'Augelli *et al.*, 2001). Another study of 139 young gay and bisexual males in Ontario found that more than half had considered suicide (Mattson, 2012). Similarly, the results of the Canadian Trans Youth Health Survey (Veale Saewyc *et al.*, 2015) revealed that 69% of trans-youth (19–25 years old) have seriously considered suicide at some point in their lives. Finally, a University of Calgary study indicated that in Calgary, 2SLGBTQ+ youth are 13–14 times more likely to contemplate and attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers (Ramsay, 2001). It is also estimated that between 25% and 40% of homeless youth in Canada identify as 2SLGBTQ+ (Abramovich, 2008; Gaetz, 2004; Ray, 2006). Research on 2SLGBTQ+ homelessness has found that 2SLGBTQ+ youth feel safer on the streets than in a shelter due to homophobia, transphobia, discrimination, and threats of violence in the shelter system of care (Gaetz *et al.*, 2016; Kidd, 2003; Nichols *et al.*, 2017).

In addition, while the precise number of 2SLGBTQ+ youth in the Canadian child welfare system is not known, several studies conducted in the US suggest that 10% of the general population is 2SLGBTQ+ and that 2SLGBTQ+ youth are overrepresented in the child welfare system (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013). The Ontario Ministry of Children, Community, and Social Services (2018) resource guide, which was developed to help children's aid societies, residential service providers, and caregivers (e.g., foster, kin, and customary caregivers) better meet the needs of 2SLGBTQ+ children and youth, states that 2SLGBTQ+ youth face the following added challenges within the child welfare system:

- 1) Difficulty finding a trusted person to be open with about their identity (e.g., an ally in whom to confide) (p. 5).
- 2) Lack of safe, welcoming placement options and permanent homes that affirm, and are inclusive of, 2SLGBTQ+ identities (p. 5).
- 3) Hostility, harassment, or violence from their peers in foster and group care settings may go unchallenged by staff and caregivers (p. 5).
- 4) Discipline for, and/or restriction of, age-appropriate behaviors that might be accepted between youth of different sexes and/or genders (e.g., dating; p. 6).
- 5) Child protection workers and caregivers who lack awareness and understanding of the needs of 2SLGBTQ+ children and youth and/or the resources available to support them (p. 6).
- 6) Challenges developing lasting relationships or accessing appropriate services due to stigma and discrimination (p. 6).

- 7) Lack of understanding on the part of child welfare professionals of their roles in supporting families who may be struggling with their 2SLGBTQ+ child or youth's gender identity, gender expression, and/or sexual orientation (p. 6).
- 8) Lack of specific 2SLGBTQ+ inclusion policies and promising practices (e.g., placement related to gender identity, access to gender-affirming health care; p. 6).
- 9) Not seeing themselves and other 2SLGBTQ+ identities represented among workers, caregivers, and leaders (p. 6).

C. Coming Out

In addition to their everyday lived experiences, the challenges faced by 2SLGBTQ+ youth include the risks associated with “coming out.” As reported by Cohen *et al.* (2009), coming out remains one of the single most impactful experiences in the life of an individual who self-identifies as a member of the 2SLGBTQ+ youth community. Coming out responses can vary from immediate and absolute support to xenophobic vilification and rejection (Mosher, 2001). In a study of 32 gay and lesbian young adults, participants reported that their greatest fear of coming out was being rejected by their parents (Ben-Ari, 1995). Faith-based 2SLGBTQ+ youth often face additional risks. Research examining the association of 2SLGBTQ+ youth's religiosity with suicidality suggests a risk factor effect (Barnes & Meyer, 2012; Harris *et al.*, 2008). One study of 2SLGBTQ+ young adults ages 18–24 revealed that the religious beliefs of their parents concerning homosexuality correlated with up to twice the risk of attempting suicide (Gibbs & Goldbach, 2015).

Hence, the purpose of this course-based inquiry is to explore the preparedness of CYC students to understand both the lived experiences and needs of 2SLGBTQ+ youth.

II. UNDERGRADUATE COURSE-BASED RESEARCH

First, a word about course-based research. The Bachelor of CYC program at MacEwan University is continuously searching for new pedagogical approaches to foster criticality, reflectivity, and praxis as integral components of the overall student educational experience. As such, the design and implementation of a course-based approach, in contrast with 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 minimum-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 for CYC students are significant. 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 then reviewed by the course instructor and a course-based REB committee to ensure each course-based research project is completed and is in compliance with the ethics review requirements of the university.

III. RESEARCH PARADIGM

This course-based research project was designed within the interpretivist and critical research paradigms. A research paradigm provides a theoretical framework with assumptions about reality and how to study it (Weaver & Olson, 2006). As explained by Lincoln and Guba (1985), a research paradigm is comprised of four elements, namely epistemology, ontology, methodology, and axiology. These elements provide the conceptual lens through which the researcher determines the research methods that will be used and how the data will be analyzed. The aim of the interpretivist approach is to grasp "the subjective world of human experience" (Cohen *et al.*, 2011, p. 17). The interpretive paradigm is congruent with the core ontological assumption of relational-centered CYC practice, which holds that individuals are relationally constituted and that meaning-making itself is a co-constructed relational process (Bellefeuille *et al.*, 2017). This course-based research project was also informed by critical theory. Critical researchers focus on eliminating injustice in society by conducting research that aims to promote critical awareness as a vehicle that can, ideally, transform society by addressing inequality, particularly in the realms of ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, disability, and other socially marginalized elements (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006).

IV. QUALITATIVE RESEARCH DESIGN

A qualitative design was selected for this course-based research project in order to provide an empowering space for participants to describe and reflect on their preparedness as CYC students to support 2SLGBTQ+ youth. As Creswell (2014) notes, qualitative research stems from human experience in that it involves asking participants about their perceived realities. It allows researchers to gain insights into what it feels like to be another person and to understand the world as others experience it (Schwandt, 2000). Similarly, Gentles *et al.* (2015) describe qualitative research as a method of inquiry that allows for the description and interpretation of participants' experiences in the natural setting and context in which those experiences occurred.

V. SAMPLING STRATEGY

A non-probability purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit participants from all four years of the CYC program of study at MacEwan University. As Creswell (2013) explains, purposive sampling involves a deliberate choice to recruit participants due to the specific qualities they possess. It is commonly used in qualitative research to identify and select information-rich cases that best provide insight into the research questions (Patton, 2002).

VI. DATA COLLECTION STRATEGY

Given the interpretive nature of this course-based study, data were collected using semi-structured focus groups and an expressive arts-based activity. Barbour (2005) considers semi-structured focus groups to be an effective data collection strategy when little is known about the topic under investigation. According to Duggleby (2005), Fern (2001), and Freeman (2006), the primary aim of this method is to use the social interactive discussions among participants to increase the depth of the inquiry and expose aspects of the phenomenon assumed to be otherwise less accessible. Finally, as Krueger (1994) explains, the purpose of focus groups is to understand and gain insight rather than to infer and generalize. As a result of the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, we used the Zoom video conferencing platform to conduct our focus groups. There is growing interest among scholars in the use of internet-based data collection methods (Chen & Neo, 2019; Fielding *et al.*, 2016; Pang *et al.*, 2018). Among the key advantages of online data collection methods are convenience, cost-effectiveness, and access to unique populations (Braun *et al.*, 2017; Cater, 2011; Deakin & Wakefield, 2014).

The arts-based activity involved participants applying words to images of tools that represented aspects of their learning that they felt contributed to their capacity to effectively support 2SLGBTQ+ youth (Fig. 1). Utilizing the artistic process as a research method is a central aspect of CYC research. Bellefeuille *et al.* (2014) argue that although scientific and positivistic inquiry are widely recognized and respected as a means of generating some aspects of CYC knowledge, arts-based inquiry can provide further understanding:

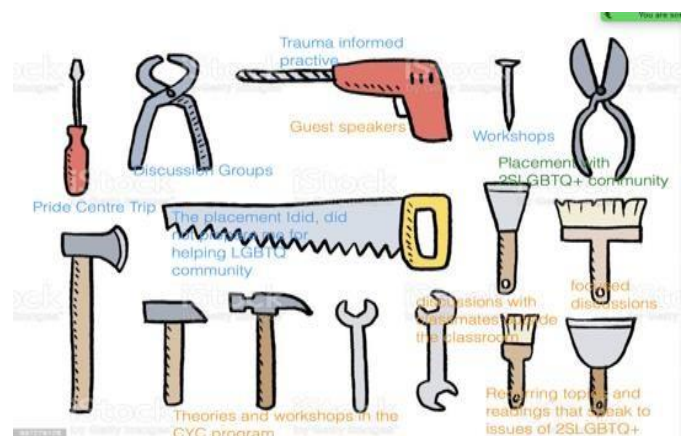


Fig. 1. Arts-based activity.

Creative inquiry is an approach to the human sciences that is ontologically and epistemologically different from the positivist approach that was derived from the empiricism of the natural sciences and directed by a process of empirical and deductive thinking. In creative inquiry, both researcher and research participant share in the journey of exploration. This collaborative approach to inquiry fits nicely with relational-centred CYC practice, which is more aptly defined ontologically (through understanding or meaning-making) than epistemologically (by truth or fact) (p. 3).

Relational-centered practice is based on the ontological assumptions that our perceptions, relationships, and behavior are conceived and reside in dynamic, co-constructed, pluralistic, intersubjective realities in which “the self is not so much a personal possession as a reflection of one’s relational experiences,” and, as such, “we are relationally constituted and that meaning-making itself is a co-constructed relational process” (Bellefeuille *et al.*, 2017, p. 47).

VII. DATA ANALYSIS

A core principle of qualitative data analysis situated within the interpretive paradigm is the search for meaning through what is observed and what is experienced and reported by the research participants (Creswell, 2013). For this reason, thematic analysis methods are considered the best-suited approaches to data analysis in qualitative research.

VIII. FINDINGS

The six-step thematic analysis process defined by Braun and Clark (2006) was used to identify the following three themes: a) need for more education, b) need for a change in the teaching approach, and c) lack of preparedness.

A. Need for Additional Education

One of the most common responses was that participants felt they needed more education to feel prepared to work with 2SLGBTQ+ youth. This was voiced through storytelling about students’ experiences in practicum and class. One participant noted that “relationally, [they] do feel prepared” but, regarding specifics such as advocacy and language, they “still have a lot more to learn.” The idea of feeling comfortable in building relationships with 2SLGBTQ+ youth but feeling that there are significant informational knowledge gaps was echoed by several other participants. One participant stated that they did not think the CYC “program does it justice.” Participants spoke about informal learning opportunities, such as being in relationships with 2SLGBTQ+ classmates and interacting with 2SLGBTQ+ youth at practicums. They stated that most of their in-class learning about 2SLGBTQ+ youth came from classmates doing presentations, with one participant noting that their “only real recollection of it is whatever [other] students have put forward.” A desire was expressed for formal, structured learning opportunities such as in-class discussions, speakers, and practicums working directly with 2SLGBTQ+ youth. Furthermore, participants expressed a desire to learn more about sexual and gender

minorities on their own time outside of the CYC program.

B. Need for a Change in Teaching Approach

In combination with more education, participants felt that how the topic of 2SLGBTQ+ youth is taught and discussed needed to be changed. Participants noted that the topic needed to be integrated more throughout the entirety of the courses in the program. One participant stated, “just bringing it up in every course and having a conversation about ‘okay well, how does it look in this course, or in this subject, or in this situation, either in court, or in the home’” would be helpful for their learning. Education on the 2SLGBTQ+ community could be compared to, and then based on, how Indigenous populations are often addressed in the context of different courses and classes. Some participants stated they would like a course specific to working with 2SLGBTQ+ youth: “I think we could have a whole class based on how to have those conversations, how to make ourselves a safe person to talk to, how to make our workspace more inclusive for everybody, how to talk to other staff about it.” Participants noted that they learned more about 2SLGBTQ+ youth in practicum placements than in the classroom.

C. Lack of Preparedness

Lastly, participants identified a spectrum of feelings of preparedness to support 2SLGBTQ+ youth in the field; these personal feelings ranged from feeling prepared, to feeling unprepared, to feeling that further education was required. One participant commented “I could try my best, but I honestly would not feel prepared at all,” illustrating a feeling of lack of preparedness to support 2SLGBTQ+ youth. Some participants identified feelings of nervousness that contributed to feeling unprepared to support 2SLGBTQ+ youth. For example, one participant stated, “I would feel nervous just because I’m not LGBTQ myself;” however, the participant later continued, “Even though I’d be nervous, I’d also be curious to know what their experiences are like.” In this example, a lack of personal experience and knowledge of the experiences of others contributes to feelings of unpreparedness; however, this example also illustrates that further education would be helpful to increase feelings of preparedness. Participants discussed supporting 2SLGBTQ+ youth with a sense of “openness and curiosity,” which enhances learning and, thus, feelings of preparedness. Some participants did express feeling prepared to adequately support 2SLGBTQ+ youth in the field, as one participant stated, “I feel more or less prepared.” Another participant commented, “I feel comfortable with the youth, as comfortable as I would feel with any youth.” Participants who identified feelings of preparedness emphasized the importance of practitioner competence and interpersonal understanding when supporting 2SLGBTQ+ youth in the field.

IX. CONCLUSION

Child and youth care education is responsible for the preparation of knowledgeable, competent, and compassionate CYC practitioners. As CYC practitioners are increasingly called upon to support 2SLGBTQ+ youth, it is critical for CYC education to ensure the readiness of students to deliver positive and valuable services to these populations. While

participants in this study were positive about their overall educational experience and instructors, they identified a need to increase both the amount and variety of instruction to allow for open and safe discussion of strategies to respond to 2SLGBTQ+ issues. It should also be noted that MacEwan University is committed to enhancing research, teaching, and resources about 2SLGBTQ+ individuals and communities. For example, in 2019 a Child and Youth Care Associate Professor was named Canada Research Chair, (Tier II) for the Public Understanding of Sexual and Gender Minority Youth. Subsequently, there is now a Centre for Sexual and Gender Minority Youth on Campus and an interdisciplinary course titled Working with Sexual and Gender Minority Youth was developed. Child and youth care students can take this class as a required elective toward their credential. This study along with the enhancement of 2SLGBTQ+ resources on campus will inform ongoing curriculum development in the child and youth care department.

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