
A QUALITATIVE COURSE-BASED INQUIRY INTO HOW RELATIONAL-CENTERED EDUCATED CHILD AND YOUTH CARE STUDENTS CONCEPTUALIZE RESILIENCE AND BUILD IT IN THEIR DAILY LIVES AND PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT: This qualitative course-based study sought insights into child and youth care (CYC) students' perceptions of resilience and resilient capacities in their daily lives and CYC practice. An interpretive qualitative research paradigm was chosen to guide the research design because this is congruent with the ontological underpinnings of relational-centered CYC practice. The triangulated data-collection strategies included an open-ended questionnaire in a Google form that included an optional arts-based activity, followed by a conversational-style focus group. Four dominant themes emerged in the analysis: a) riding the waves, b) mastering the art of sailing, c) the importance of a supportive crew, and d) with each tide and tempest.

KEYWORDS: child and youth care, course-based research, resilience, qualitative.

1. INTRODUCTION

The term “resilience” is commonly utilized in various professional helping disciplines to refer to the ability of an individual, community, organization, or system to withstand, adapt to, recover from, or even thrive in the face of adversity, challenges, or significant stressors (Frost, Hojer, Campanini, Sicora, & Kullburg, 2018; McFadden, Campbell, & Taylor, 2015; Van Breda, 2018). Though definitions and characterizations of personal resilience vary, the more traditional human developmental theories often conceived of personal resiliency as an intrapersonal (i.e., personality) trait and an intrinsic toughness endowed to a few unique, strong-minded individuals (Kobasa & Puccetti, 1983; Masten, 2018; McDonald, Jackson, Wilkes, & Vickers, 2012). Increasingly, however, researchers are redefining resilience—from a fixed intrapersonal quality to a more dynamic and relational attribute that unfolds over time in the context of relationships and interactions with one's environment (Ledogar, 2008; Hartling, 2008; Masten, 2018). In other words, whether someone bounces back from adversity is deeply influenced by their connections with others and their support systems. Resilience conceptualized as a relational construct is an important concept in relational-centered CYC education that has, as its core focus, the building of resilience in children, youth, and families through an emphasis on the quality of connection and support provided to children, youth, and family systems. From a relational-centered CYC perspective, resilience is not simply an outcome of development but rather a mechanism of adaptive development. A CYC student's understanding of resilience is crucial because it allows them to effectively support children and youth in overcoming past traumatic histories and personal setbacks in life and achieving personal well-being, while also promoting their own well-being by managing the stresses of the CYC profession. Hence, the aim of this qualitative course-based inquiry was to gain insights into CYC students' perceptions of resilience and capacity for it in their daily lives and practice.

2. UNDERGRADUATE COURSE-BASED RESEARCH: A PEDAGOGICAL METHOD TO PROMOTE CRITICALITY, REFLECTIVITY, AND PRAXIS

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. 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.



Figure 1. Public research poster presentation at MacEwan University November 26, 2024
Left to right Ryanna Laurie, Jasmine La, Shelby Hames, Melody Weigum, and Elizabeth Audet

3. RESEARCH PARADIGM

This study utilized a qualitative approach with an interpretive philosophical paradigm. The interpretive paradigm is employed to capture the multiple realities, descriptions, and experiences of a research population (Merriam, 2002). As Ryan (2018) explains, interpretivism expands understanding by probing the subjective and constructed nature of reality, accentuating the meaning of personal experiences and social contexts (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Crotty (1998) states that, “for each of us, when we first see the world in meaningful fashion, we are inevitably viewing it through lenses bestowed upon us by our culture” (p. 54). As such, the interpretive paradigm was appropriate for this course-based study because the goal of the study was to understand how CYC students conceptualize resilience and how they build and employ it in their daily lives and practice.

4. RESEARCH QUESTION

The research question is as follows: how do relational-centered educated CYC students think about the concept of resilience and how do they build and employ it in their daily lives and practice?

5. SAMPLING STRATEGY

A purposive sampling technique was employed to recruit participants for this study. As Creswell and Poth (2018, p. 148) explain, purposeful sampling is used to “intentionally sample a group of people that can best inform the researcher about the research problem under examination.” The target population consisted of second-, third-, and fourth-year CYC students at MacEwan University. Participants were initially recruited by a direct email that contained an information and consent form.

6. DATA-COLLECTION STRATEGY

The data-collection strategies included an open-ended questionnaire in a Google form that included an optional arts-based activity, followed by a conversational-style focus group.

Google Form Open-Ended Questionnaire

Thanks to advances in information and communication technology, the use of online data-collection technologies has become common in research (Evans & Mathur, 2005; Fleming & Bowden, 2009). The reported benefits include a reduction in travel expenses and time (Walker, 2013); the more rapid collection of data, with respondents able to complete surveys at their own pace (Lefever, 2006); and easier access to hard-to-reach groups and individuals due to geography or sensitivity of the subject (Al-Saggaf & Williamson, 2004; Madge & O'Connor, 2002).

Arts-Based Activity

The optional arts-based activity involved the creation of either a superhero identity or a resilience shield. The participants were also given the choice to create a manual or digital visual-arts image. Arts-based data-collection research methods are described by Barone (2012) as a way to “enhance understanding through the communication of subjective realities or personal truths that can occur only through works of art” (p. 2).



Figure 2. Example of arts-based activity

Conversational-Style Focus Group

The follow-up conversational-style focus group involved giving the participants an opportunity to reflect on themes derived from the data analysis. According to Hurst (2023), a follow-up focus group allows for a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the themes identified in the initial data-collection process, providing participants with the opportunity to reflect on and discuss the themes in greater detail.

Triangulation

The use of three methods of data collection increased the validity and reliability of the findings by enabling cross-checking of the information from multiple sources and perspectives (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2007).

7. DATA ANALYSIS

The six-phase process of reflective thematic analysis developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used to analyze the interviews and the focus-group data. This was chosen because of its flexibility and potential to capture the participants' experiences and perceptions in a rich and nuanced manner (Lamont, 2015; Braun & Clarke, 2021). Each phase of the process was transparent and systematically documented to ensure trustworthiness (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017).

8. FINDINGS

Four dominant themes emerged in the analysis: a) riding the waves, b) mastering the art of sailing, c) the importance of a supportive crew, and d) with each tide and tempest.

Riding the Waves

The theme of “riding the waves” encapsulated the participants' reflections on resilience as a dynamic and active process of successfully adapting to difficult or *challenging life* experiences. The comments made by the participants in support of this theme included, “resilience to me means being able to overcome and power through hard experiences. Essentially being able to bounce back and become bigger and better because of the experience”; “resiliency to me means persevering and overcoming challenges. I believe we are resilient when we acknowledge that something is hard, but we push through anyways, even when we feel like giving up”; and “resilience to me means making it through. It means altering the things in your life that you have control over to best overcome or cope with the things in your life that you cannot change.”

Mastering the Art of Sailing

The theme of “mastering the art of sailing” encapsulates the ethos of life’s ever-changing narrative due to being tossed off course by life’s unavoidable storms. Resilience is about mastering the art of sailing through these storms. As one participant noted, “I interpret resiliency as a form of armor for humans. What builds up and reinforces our armor are the protective and risk factors, which are drawn from our lived experiences, within and beyond ourselves, in connection to all living organisms. All which vary from the day we are born, up until death.” Another participant commented in the same vein that “I think there are aspects of resilience instilled in us, but I do think that environment and community support have a great deal to do with it. So, I would say it mostly develops over time. You need to experience life to be able to know how to overcome it.”

The Importance of a Supportive Crew

The theme of the “importance of a supportive crew” refers to the significance of a strong social network that can act as a buffer against adversity by providing emotional support, understanding, and guidance to navigate the hardships and challenges of life. Comments from participants in support of this theme included, “if it weren’t for a few incredible friends, I would not have been able to overcome certain aspects of my life the same way”; “I view having structure, strong connections to parents, consequences, being positive/outgoing, having hobbies (reading), having outlets to channel stress (dance) as contributing to my level of resilience”; “I think protective factors (grandparents, teachers, friends, friends parents) have helped develop my sense of resilience”; and “it took me many years with lots of love and support from God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Ghost, my family, my friends, random encounters throughout my life.”

With Each Tide and Tempest

The theme of “with each tide and tempest” is about the recognition that resilience is not merely tolerating difficult times or challenges (waiting for the storms to pass), it is about actively finding ways to embrace and navigate them. It is reminiscent of the saying that “life is not about waiting for the storms to pass, it’s about learning how to dance in the rain.” Statements included, “it is important to face adversity because if you have never encountered a hardship, how can you expect to overcome it?”; “overcoming hardships take practice”; “resiliency allows us to learn from our mistakes and when faced next with a similar experience it gives us the opportunity to reflect and respond differently”; “I do think facing struggles is a big factor in creating resiliency. This is where you learn the most about yourself and your feelings. Without challenges, there is no opportunity to learn resilience. Without opposition, there can be no growth. A tree’s roots are built stronger by having the wind.”

9. SUMMARY

The overall purpose of this course-based study was to explore how relational-centered educated CYC students think about the concept of resilience and how they build and apply it in their daily lives and practice. Consistent with the current literature on resilience, this study highlights the influential role of social support networks in one’s ability to cope with life challenges. As reflected through the interview and focus-group data, resilience is both the process and outcome of successfully adapting to difficult life experiences—particularly through emotional, mental, and behavioral flexibility and adjustment to life challenges. Building resilience is at the core of CYC practice, yet there is no scientific CYC discipline-specific literature on how resilience is taught and applied to CYC practice. In view of the need for more research in this area, it is hoped that further investigation will take place at the faculty level or in future student-led course-based research projects.

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