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Traversing the Threshold in Child and Youth Care Education: A Qualitative Inquiry into the Meaning-Making Experience of Student Participants in an International Study Tour

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Abstract: This qualitative, relational-centred inquiry explores the learning experiences of a group of twenty Child and Youth Care (CYC) students who completed a twelve-day international study tour through parts of Ireland and Scotland. The international study tour offers experience-based learning opportunities for CYC students to see first-hand Irish and Scottish history, culture, and social care systems. Through this inquiry the student participants communicated and interpreted the meaning of their study tour experience. The data analysis revealed five thematic categories organized around five guiding research questions, the results of which are described below.

Keywords: Child and youth care; International; Relational; Study tour.

1. Introduction

Aimsir (AM-shir) The Elements That Surround Us

Setting out from Dublin, the place we first touched down on foreign soil, it was not yet revealed to us that the lush and varied landscape of Ireland would echo the adventure that lay ahead. With the beauty of Ireland filling our senses, we ventured on to Athlone the place we were to meet our hosts. From a welcoming stroll along the River Shannon, to the historic Trinity College and pubs of Dublin, our journey wound us along the coast, through the land where Game of Thrones came alive in our imaginations. On to the Giant's Causeway at the foot of the basalt cliffs along the sea coast on the edge of the Antrim plateau in Northern Ireland where legend has it rival giants, Irish Fin McCool and the Scottish Benandonner, once taunted one another from their respective shores. A journey through time in Belfast's Titanic museum followed by a voyage across the Iris Sea to Scotland, the newness and yet to be discovered beckoned us on together. In Edinburgh, where we ended our journey, lies an ancient fortress atop Castle Rock. At the lower end of the Canongate district, a worn sandstone lintel hangs over a small 17th-century doorway that bears the Latin engraving *Pax intransibus, salus exeuntibus. Peace to those who are entering, and safety to those*

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about to depart. A stirring aide-memoir, whose thresholds represent a point of demarcation, a pass from a place of familiarity and relative security to the unfamiliar, the unknown, and the potentially life changing. Irish Gaelic might describe it as aimsir (AM-shir), for these were the elements that surrounded us.

International study tours can be considered akin to passing through a threshold or conceptual gateway that opens up different ways of thinking. New perspectives emerge that enable insights and ideas not formerly perceived to come into view, which results in a new realm of understanding. According to a number of research studies, international study is one of the most important and transformational experiences a student may ever pursue (Brown, 2009; Chang *et al.*, 2012; Ritz, 2011).

1.1. Internationalization of Higher Education

Higher education, like all other sectors in today's global environment, is placing greater emphasis on collaboration, multidisciplinary knowledge production, and relational networking (Altbach and Knight, 2007; Desai-Trilokekar *et al.*, 2009). Fittingly, Canadian universities have increased their efforts to support the international mobility of students and staff, new technologies that connect scholarly communities, and international partnerships (AUCC, 2007; James and Nef, 2002; Shute, 2002). In particular, short-term international study tours and visiting professor programs have become key strategies for increasing the internationalization of learning, teaching, and research in higher education institutions (Bond, 2003; 2006; Hayle, 2008). The widely reported educational merits of short-term study tours and visiting professor exchange programs include increased cultural sensitivity and diversity awareness (Anderson *et al.*, 2006); improved student confidence, communication skills, and leadership (Weaver and Tucker, 2010); acquisition of professional skills and experiences that a traditional classroom setting simply cannot provide (Harrison and Malone, 2004); and the promotion of new ways of thinking about practice issues arising from a different cultural perspective (Lewis and Niesenbaum, 2005). Other studies have also shown that the internationalization of curriculum in higher education better prepares students to be successful in today's increasingly interdependent global society (Leask, 2001; Schuerholz-Lehr *et al.*, 2007). Recognizing, however, that there is a no "one size fits all" approach to the pedagogical design and structure of international short-term study abroad and visiting professor programs, evaluation becomes an important aspect of determining the impact of travel on students, particularly from the students' perspectives as after all, it is their education and their experiences that are the focus of such programs.

2. Overview of the Bachelor of Child and Youth Care International Study Tour to the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland, and Scotland

In February, third-year Bachelor of CYC students at Edmonton's MacEwan University, have the option to register and pay a special fee to participate in a twelve-day international study tour to the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland, and Scotland. The short-term tour is a type of experiential education—a way to bring students out of the classroom to explore connections and theories in a real-life international context. CYC students are exposed to legislative frameworks; social policies; standards of practice; and methods of interventions as related to the systems of care for vulnerable children, youth, and families. Students learn about social problems, visit government and not-for-profit social agencies that address those problems, and talk with the social care professionals who work in the field. In the process, students gain a deeper understanding of their professional discipline, its cultural expression in different societies, as well as knowledge about themselves.

The itinerary for this group, began with a daylong flight to Dublin, from where students were bused to the Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT) to spend three days attending class lectures, interacting with students, and participating in extracurricular activities including field trips to historic and cultural sites. The ensuing two days were in Dublin and the surrounding area, meeting with government representatives and community-based organizations. Then, on to Belfast for a few days, where students connected with social care agencies and explored areas of social-political significance. Students ferried to Scotland, then travelled by coach to Glasgow and Edinburgh for the final three days. A visit to Strathclyde University, where students attended a lecture, participated in a research project, learned more about social care and a day spent exploring Edinburgh ended the tour.

2.1. The Pedagogical Underpinnings

The instructional design of the study tour is underpinned by relational pedagogy, an instructional approach rooted in the ontological notion of the relational self (Thasher, 2015), which treats relationships as the foundation for optimal learning and "full and creative sharing of meaning" (Gergen, 2009) between people and within communities. Its basic contention has to do with transcending the Cartesian dualism between the object and the subject, the person and the world, and the knower and the known by offering an alternative, radically different *relational ontology* in which the "self" is formed and lived out through relationships in a co-constitutive, intra-relational world (Bellefeuille and Ricks, 2010). In other words, "it is by our relations to others that we ontologically exist as meaningful singularities" (Thasher, 2015), and, as Nancy (1991) explains, "it is by our being-with others as a singular existence within a plurality of unfolding relationships, [that] we meaningfully exist" (p. 9). Hence:

Ontologically, by being with others we are exposed to who we are as a relating person and it is in the space of our ontological sense of relationality that we are understood by our life experiences.

Furthermore, our everyday relationships portray a sense of meaning that defines us, that gives us an orientation to our lives, which gives our lives a sense of meaning. (Thasher, 2015)

In this broad meta-level pedagogical approach, knowledge is constructed through relationships that are themselves embedded in a cultural, socio-economic, and socio-political context. This relational ontology is fundamental to the collaborative meaning-making process that is so central to relational-centred CYC practice (Bellefeuille *et al.*, 2012a) and is quite prominent across a number of other disciplines, such as developmental psychology (Müller and Carpendale, 2000), cultural anthropology (Holland *et al.*, 2001), and education (Barab and Roth, 2006).

2.2. Instructional and Curriculum Design

Relational pedagogical features include the use of modern social media (i.e., Facebook and blogging), web-based e-learning platform tools (i.e., discussion forums, online media resources), and electronic learning content (i.e., online curriculum), pre-departure activities and class meetings, reflective journaling, and a post study tour photo-narrative showcase.

a) Social Media and Web-Based e-Learning Tools:

Social media (Facebook) and e-learning technology helped to promote collaboration and information sharing as a means to enhance student engagement and facilitate relational learning. Canadian and Irish students and professors, and individuals from the various professional and cultural sites visited, learn from each other through the sharing of ideas, and, together, created the learning experience. First, Canadian and Irish students communicated with one another via a dedicated Facebook site to help strengthen their connections with one another prior to the study tour. Second, students participated in a series of Blackboard discussion-board assignments in advance of the study tour. The discussion-board topics encouraged students to become part of a vibrant learning community, rather than just a collection of independent learners. Students were required to watch a number of films and videos about the history and culture of Ireland and Scotland, and to share their thoughts on the discussion-board forum. These reflective activities required students to share a synthesis of the learning experience.

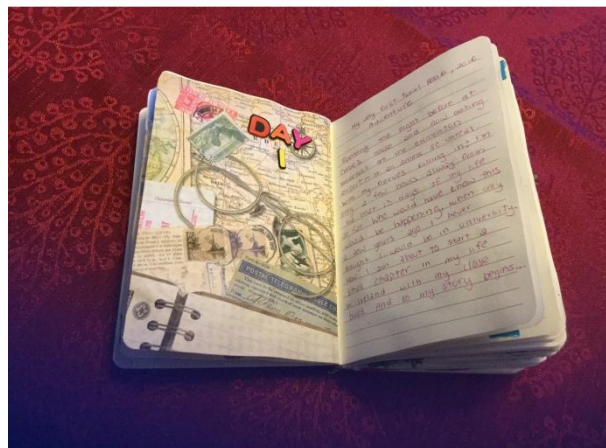
b) Pre-Departure Activities

Students participated in three pre-departure meetings to prepare for the study tour.

c) Reflective Journaling

Reflective journaling assisted and encouraged students to consolidate and reflect upon their learning experiences by critically reflecting, analyzing, and synthesizing their thoughts about various concepts, events, and interactions over the duration of the study tour. The goals of these efforts were to gain insights and find deeper meaning from their experiences (see Figure 1).

Figure-1. Reflective Journal



d) Photo-Narrative

Narrative photography is the idea that photographs can tell a story. Students were required to take photos throughout the study tour and to participate in a post-study tour photo narrative public showcase (displayed on a 4 x 6-foot poster board) that included all of the subject areas listed below:

- a) Education Partnerships (Athlone Institute of Technology & Strathclyde University)
- b) Culture

- c) History
- d) Politics
- e) CYC Practice

Figure-2. Photo Narrative



3. Purpose

While universities increasingly utilize short-term study abroad courses to provide enriching educational experiences for students, few have been scientifically studied to evaluate the value of such programs or to describe their impact on students. Higher education institutions are, for the most part, proceeding on the good-faith assumption that such initiatives are valuable experiences. This assumption may be correct, but the absence of scientific evaluative data raises the question of whether or not these short-term study abroad experiences are indeed meeting their stated outcome objectives. Hence, the purpose of this exploratory, qualitative inquiry is to gain insight into the learning experiences of a group of twenty CYC students who completed a twelve-day international study tour.

4. Research Design

The interpretive research paradigm and relational-centred inquiry method (Bellefeuille *et al.*, 2012b) shaped the methodological design of the study. The core ontological assumption underpinning the interpretivist paradigm is that reality is socially constructed and that knowledge is embedded in social relationships and contextualized within one's social and cultural environment through culture (Glesne, 1999). As Schwandt (2000) explains, "There is no way to experience real relations of a society outside of its cultural and ideological categories" (p. 198). That is, meaning-making is co-constructed through the relational process. This is congruent with the underlying epistemological assumption of CYC relational practice that knowledge and meaning-making is embedded in social relationships and thoroughly contextualized within one's social and cultural milieu (Bellefeuille and Ricks, 2010). It is this task of coming to understand and interpret the participants' "lived experience" of the international study tour, given the social and cultural context, which was the focus of this study and is in alignment with interpretivist paradigmatic assumptions.

Given the relational emphasis of the study tour and interpretive nature of this study, the qualitative method of relational-centred inquiry was considered an appropriate framework for the research design. Research undertaken from a relational perspective "rejects the methodological distinction between researcher and participant by mutually shifting their roles from being a researcher and a participant to being co-inquirers" (Bellefeuille and Ricks, 2010). Such research is "discovery-oriented and emphasizes how meaning (i.e., data) emerges out of co-created, embodied, and dialogical encounters among all participants" (p. 1238). As such, the goal of relational-centred inquiry is one of inciting dialogue, since it is not the private mind that is being celebrated but, rather, integral connectivity.

5. Statement of the Research Question

While the aim of this inquiry was to explore the personal and professional impact of participation in the international study tour from a qualitative lived experience perspective, the specific research questions that guided the inquiry were these:

1. Following completion of the international study tour, do students feel they are more confident and competent as CYC practitioners?

2. Do students feel they have gained a more comprehensive insight into themselves and the discipline of CYC?
3. Have students expanded their relational skills by forging international friendships and professional networks?
4. Have students increased their level of cultural competency and capacity to understand diversity?
5. What are students' perspectives on the meaning of their study abroad experience?

6. Sampling Strategy

A total population sampling strategy was used to recruit participants for this study. Total population sampling is a type of purposive sampling technique in which you choose to examine the entire population (i.e., the twenty students who participated in the study tour) that have a particular set of characteristics. In total population sampling, researchers choose to study the entire population because the size of the population that has the particular set of characteristics is typically very small (Morse, 1991).

7. Ethical Considerations

The study was approved by the Ethics Review Board (No. 15 16 089) of MacEwan University on April 24, 2016. All participants were given an information letter that described the purpose of the study and an informed consent form.

8. Data Collection

In consideration of the nature of interpretive research, data collection strategies were chosen to encapsulate the multi-dimensionality of human experience. Accordingly, data was collected from self-reflective journals, a photo-narrative showcase, and focus groups. The use of arts-based research data collection strategies—like the reflective journals that included art work and the photo-narrative as “a process that uses the expressive qualities of form to convey meaning” (Barone and Eisner, 2012) has grown significantly over the last 20 years and is a central feature of CYC research methodology (Finley, 2011; Knowles and Cole, 2008).

9. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis grounded in the essentialist method (Braun and Clarke, 2006) guided the analysis of data. The essentialist method is an inductive, “bottom-up,” and data-driven approach that allows for themes to emerge from the data rather than from a preconceived theoretical position. The essentialist approach “reports experiences, meanings and the reality of participants” (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The sequence of analysis consists of the six processes that are suggested by Braun and Clarke: (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.

10. Methodological Rigor

We used a variety of trustworthiness strategies to strengthen the methodological rigor of the research design and data analysis (Hays and Singh, 2012). First, data triangulation involved collecting data from multiple sources (i.e., reflective journals, photo-narrative, and focus group) as a strategy to increase the validity of the study. Second, we utilized investigator triangulation to analyze data through many in-depth collaborative data analysis meetings over the span of several months (Creswell, 2013; Hays and Singh, 2012), in which each co-researcher undertook a separate analysis of the data, followed by teaming up in pairs and small groups and, eventually, one large group in reaching shared agreement on codes and themes (Creswell, 2013; Hays and Singh, 2012). Third, we created an audit trail to document our data analysis and research processes (Hays and Singh, 2012; Schwandt, 2000).

11. Results

The thematic analysis of the photo-narratives, self-reflective journals and focus group discussion revealed 5 themes organized around the five sub-research questions that guided the inquiry. These include:

- a) *Craic (Crack) The serious work of play*
- b) *Saoi (See) Wisdom through insight*
- c) *Failte (FALL-tcha) Opening up with enthusiasm to those who approach*
- d) *Fios (Fiss) Knowing and understanding*
- e) *Scéal (Shkayle) Telling the tale*

Research Question # 1: Following completion of the international study tour, do students feel they are more confident and competent as child and youth care practitioners?

Craic (Crack): The Serious Work of Play

Craic is an oft heard Irish expression for high-spirited fun. From the outside looking in, the CYC study tour might appear a playful adventure and naturally, that sounds pretty appealing to 3rd year university students. Beyond that though, craic captures the dimension of the study tour that speaks to the more serious work in which the students were engaged. Of the more dominant themes students expressed was a growing sense of personal and

professional affirmation; expansion of psychological boundaries and discovering one's potential both in practice and in life. Numerous examples of this internal shift, some indirect and intensely personal, others through positive encounters with others were reflected on in student journals and discussion. Accounts of how the study tour challenged people to adventure beyond current comfort zones were prevalent. Students were surprised at their own willingness to take risks and to embrace the unknown. For some, this was daring to be more intellectually brave, for others it was venturing out to explore what the cities had to offer. As one student said, "I'm a traveler, an adventurer today". Participants elaborated on how the study tour experience actually helped them demonstrate just how much they already know. In conversations with the international students, faculty, and professionals in the field about theoretical concepts and practice methods, there was pride in how prepared they were to engage in such sophisticated discourse. Some described how astounded they were to be able to recognize aspects of their classroom learning come to life. Gains in self-confidence and pride in the competence they individually and collectively possess in the craft of child and youth care were noticed. Students were propelled forward by the newness of it all and of course eager to have some craic!

I absolutely hate the taste of Guinness-it's gross but what the hell I thought, when in Ireland. To my surprise, I actually enjoyed it...and I had to ask myself why.... I think I just held on to some assumptions. Canadians typically have ketchup on the table, I wasn't sure if they would have it so I was nervous to ask.... (I thought about) ...youth in care...how they may be scared to ask...and it made me think about how scary the culture shock of a new residence would be...something as simple as ketchup.

I was able to talk to one of the presenters and ask them if there was room to not consequence kids, which in turn helps them develop internal control. This conversation went on for ten minutes and he had no answer for me. He ended up making an excuse and going into another room.

I began to speak and didn't even realize that I was. We talked about praxis, relational and strength-based practice and about CYC as a whole... It seemed like common sense to us, but since they are only beginning to get to the point we are at, they were fascinated.

One thing I really enjoyed was G-Man asked me to talk about praxis to the students. The look of shock, worry and confusion on their faces when I stood on the table will stick in my head for a long time. The idea of praxis seemed foreign...on the second day the teacher brought it up again...apparently it stuck with them.

I hadn't really thought too much about going into a Master's program...now that I had the opportunity to be exposed...I feel it may be in my future.

Research Question # 2: Do students feel they have gained a more comprehensive insight into themselves and the discipline of child and youth care?

Saoi (See): Wisdom through insight

When reflecting on the Irish experience one realises a belief in the unseen is embedded in the culture. Insight too, is something that is more intuitive than tangible. The reflections of students about their experiences on the study tour did describe a kind of wisdom that comes from a more comprehensive understanding of the world. What surfaced were themes connected to growing awareness through exposure to unfamiliar things. There was the sense the immersion in foreign culture seemed to bring what was right in front of one's eyes all along into sharper focus. As one student described, "it was mystifying to mature so much in 12 short days".

A greater empathy and compassion emerged in relation to self and the personal histories of children, youth and families that the students had contact with in the past. Many connections were made beyond the personal and outside the Canadian context about the importance of social issues, policies and legislation on CYC practice. This sparked a desire in students to be mindful of the big picture and strive for more creativity in their praxis. Many felt it was the lived exposure to Irish and Scottish culture and stories that created space to delve deeper and find clarity that they will carry forward. This transformative quality is represented in a range of reflections.

It's so hard to wrap your mind around the fact that the differences between these two communities still have such an impact today.... Learning about some of those dynamics in the location where it originated gave a whole new insight into the story and was truly amazing.

Being literally put into another country has got me to experience what it would be like trying to adjust to a new atmosphere. This experience of adjusting is what the children and youth are dealing with and I feel like I can be a little bit more understanding if they act out.

Even humans can be threshold concepts...we are literally a concept bound in flesh, filled with a variety of thoughts and feelings that can be used to provoke change in either a positive or negative way.

As I looked at the (Famine Memorial) and everything else, it just visualized resiliency theory. It was a sign of where the Irish people were in the past and also how far they have come since then. Very neat dynamic. This (the Titanic Museum) really reinforced the importance of expressive therapies we learned about...they actually work and can be influential and powerful.

I love graffiti, because I believe it tells the story of the people.

I was travelling without my family and had a lot more responsibilities...I was kind of excited to be independent from my parents...but I must admit that I was extremely nervous and have never felt that

homesick...I came to a realization that my attitude really needs to change in order to fully enjoy my time in Ireland.

Research Question # 3: Have students expanded their relational skills by forging international friendships and professional networks?

Failte (FALL-tcha): Opening up with Enthusiasm to Those Who Approach

The participants shared many stories and statements to emphasize the reciprocal benefits of the study tour on relationships and relational practice. Present in the themes that emerged were feelings of inclusivity, mutual support, acceptance and validation as CYC professionals. MacEwan participants set out with expectations of bonding with their Irish and Scottish counterparts in meaningful ways and this kind of networking was realized but to a lesser extent than students hoped. While there were both social and educational opportunities to inter-mingle, most reflections expressed a wish for more. The encounters that did occur were enthusiastically embraced on both sides and valued as open doors to future friendships and collaborations. Students indicated they are networking on Facebook and other social media platforms.

I felt very proud of our group. I think we have a very profound and unique group, and the skills are spread across all of us and not just with a few select people. Everyone in our class is exceptional.

So many connections and relationships were conceived on this trip, and to see the passion and energy within the room was powerful.

We stayed behind to talk with some of the Ireland students who were interested in travelling to Canada to complete a practicum or find work. It was awesome to really engage with some of the students in a more personal way and I felt that I was able to share lots of information for them. Two of the students ended up adding me on Facebook so they could stay in touch.

She was engaging with the lesson by asking us on our experiences in Canada both as a professional and a person....it felt like relearning about who I am as a person and practitioner (and) was a refresher of why I am even in this field in the first place.

The dynamic that perhaps was more prevalent and meaningful to students was the coming together of the Canadian cohort that had reformed itself with the influx of new students at the beginning of third year. Although some had been together in the program since year one, the tour provided a context for new ways of being and relating within the group. Participants recognized the capacity for greatness in each other, which revealed itself in new and surprising ways. An integral part of this expansion was the value students placed in the accessibility of the study tour facilitators (three MacEwan faculty and one spouse) as a living embodiment of relational work. Students wrote with enthusiasm about equality and balance, and valued how they interacted as both friends and colleagues. Relationships transcended the traditional, as one student reflected, "the arms-length relationship of professor/student was lifted". Going into the future, these child and youth care workers described a belief in a support system that will sustain them in years ahead. The tour has resulted in fresh and reconfigured bonds from which several joint initiatives, including this collective journal have emerged. Professional speaking opportunities such as involvement in global awareness week and conference presentations that are not generally part of the student experience are now underway.

The profs were doing it; they were breaking down the barriers.... I was discovering what it is like....to step out.... You see the human side when you meet them in a different context.

Choosing a different roomie in each city was very cool. They see the you that's not the school you.

You are trying new things because you feel safer in deeper friendships and because different friends drew you in.

I felt we came together as a CYC family...In that moment, the transfer student-original CYC student divide no longer existed...I will be walking away from this experience with a few more friends.

This may sound silly, but the most important thing about the trip for myself was the friendships I built...(these) have the potential to last a lifetime.

Research Question # 4: Have Students Increased Their Level of Cultural Competency and Capacity to Understand Diversity?

Fios (Fiss): Knowing and Understanding

As the study tour progressed, so too did awareness of privilege and power. In journals and the focus group, students shared about developing new and more competent perspectives, perhaps made possible because the students themselves were a little off balance and more open. Students began to see more clearly how macro level influences have profound impact on the daily lives of children, youth and families, and in particular how citizens are educated about the prevalent norms and values of a society. There was a growing awareness that for CYC workers the social, political, and economic conditions that people have historically lived with cannot be ignored. Participation in classes at AIT and discussion of threshold concepts at Strathclyde University as well as visits to social care agencies in both countries, were reinforcing for some and eye opening for others. Comparisons to Canada and their own cultural origins were inevitable. Equally powerful were aspects of the tour that brought students in touch with the *Great*

*Famine*¹, the devastation of the *Titanic*², the plight of the *Irish Travellers*³, the *Troubles*⁴ in Ireland and the resulting *peace walls*⁵. Through these windows into the past, the current milieu became better known and understood. The reflections students shared show the recognition that these elements are integrally woven together in peoples' stories and this diversity is the source of both despair and hope.

Disabilities class (AIT) was unique because I was more aware of the two cultures and issues faced...the education level and style of learning is so different for such similar fields.

What really stood out for me during the classes were the dynamics or lack thereof between the student and teachers.

We seemed to be more confident when participating in class. Whether it is because we know a lot about the topics, or because it's a cultural difference, I can't say for sure, but my guess would be a bit of both.

It reminds me a lot of the Aborigines and immigrants back in Canada...they are discriminated against because of where they come from, their beliefs and history...it has opened my eyes to the idea that we never really know the stories unless we are willing to listen. It has changed my whole outlook on how I will interact and work with others in Canada.

Hearing the stories about the Great Famine, the failed up-risings, and the troubles...I felt deeply sad and more motivated to work for social justice.

Our first day in Athlone we were talking to a bartender who asked us our plans...we told him we were planning on visiting Belfast. He said, "That will be interesting. The Catholics really f**cked us here literally." It made me realize how the troubles are still really raw.

They would think each other's sides are terrible, but really they are both ethical.

The wall was filled with art...also messages of hope and change and peace.

After the tour I went off on my own...and reflected on how privileged I am that I have not had to endure such overt hatred from others.

Many of the participants made reference to the law class they attended at AIT as an example of their privilege. They journaled about the differences in laws and were surprised that the Catholic Church in Ireland was such a powerful force in shaping social policy in particular in on issues such as divorce, contraception and abortion.

I would have been regarded as nobody's child because I am a child out of wedlock...therefore having no automatic rights.

Youth in Ireland are still being detained in adult prison facilities even though this practice has been condemned by international human rights monitoring bodies.

Research Question # 5: What are students' perspectives on the meaning of their study abroad experience? Scéal (Shkayle) Telling the Tale

One of the unique aspects of this qualitative research project is that through being relational students appeared to make the connection between the knowing they arrived with and the deeper understandings that they were left with. Although the journaling was an intensely personal process the real value of the tour seemed rooted in togetherness. Each experience was felt and interpreted according to one's unique perspective and world view, shifts in understanding were dependent on where students were in the evolution of their own praxis and sense of personal capacities at the outset. And yet, the meanings made of these experiences were bound by camaraderie with others. The tale was each participant own to tell but, shared meanings emerged.

The study tour experience ignited and rekindled passion for work with children, youth and families. Participants wrote about how they discovered new ways to think about doing the work and described being truly inspired to be more creative and actively engaged with the practice of child and youth care. Journal entries made during the tour showed recognition at a more profound level of the possibilities for innovation and a renewed vigor going into the future. Students expressed a stronger sense of CYC identity and inclusivity in something bigger and more important than was originally imagined.

I feel inspired to bring these ideas back home and try to stretch the boundaries of Canadian practice.

It was an amazing experience listening to the staff at Finglas (social care agency) talk passionately about what they love. It made me feel proud to be in the field of CYC, and reminded me that no dream is too big. It gave me hope and uplifted my spirit in a way that I have never felt before.

I believe that this experience gave me the skills and motivation to return to Canada and start to advocate for positive change in our field.

¹ The Great Famine was a period of mass starvation, disease, and emigration in Ireland between 1845- and 1852 [Donnelly,\(2000\)](#)

² The Belfast built ship Titanic, which took years to complete and was significant source of employment, sunk on her maiden voyage in 1912 killing 1,517 people.

³ Irish Travellers, are an itinerant ethnic group who have experienced discrimination.

⁴ The Troubles refers to violence and political problems in Northern Ireland, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, that happened because Catholics and Protestants disagreed about whether Northern Ireland should remain part of the UK or should become part of the Republic of Ireland.

⁵ Peace walls, are a series of barriers in Northern Ireland that separate Catholic and Protestant neighbourhoods.

I truthfully believe that my trip to Ireland and Scotland changed my life; not only as a Child and Youth Care Worker but as a person. I learned so much about the history, culture and social care system, but I also learned a lot about myself. This trip has inspired me to be a better CYC worker and work twice as hard to achieve greatness.

It helped me be aware that I will never fully understand another person's struggle or story until I encounter it head on, face first. We are all using our own perceptions to describe and interpret their hardships.

Even many weeks later when students met in focus groups to further reflect on the meaning of their experience it was evident they had been left with deep, lasting impressions. As one described in the focus group, "I had this awakening, I'm new". As students returned to their everyday activities, ways in which they felt changed were acknowledged as powerful even if difficult to delineate and express in words.

I got a little misty realizing how lucky I've been to get this experience with the only true friends I've ever had.

It's amazing how you notice and appreciate the little things when you change your mind set.

This definitely a life changing event that forever shaped that way I view the world.

I had a breath taking, heart stopping, sweat dripping adventure with some amazing people.

Back home it is hard to hold on to the feeling of I can do anything... but I still want to know more and recognize the sky is the limit.

Seeing these things reminded me how small I am in comparison to the rest of the world, it was an indescribable feeling.

To think those rocks (Giant's Causeway) have been through different processes and changes in order to be what they are today. Much like people. Our whole journey is what shapes and forms us into what we are today. Always changing and forming into elements and experiences.

12. Conclusion

The results of this study, which were disseminated in a public showcase at MacEwan University (see [Figure 3](#)), present an exceptional interpretation of students' study tour experience. Described through a thematic analysis resulting in 5 core themes, the interpretations are ultimately interrelated and multidimensional. The results of the study can be summarized as a transformative life experience. The results illuminate the effects of the study tour on students in terms of their professional development and capacities as helpers. Also shown, is the impact on personal growth. The dynamics of acceptance, collaboration, modelling and support enhanced the student experience. A beneficial fostering of mutually affirming relationships between student and faculty and amongst the student cohort paved the way for risk taking and dynamic shifts in perspective.

Figure-3. Public Research Poster Showcase



CYC is a caring discipline of personal commitment. It is ethical work because it seeks to improve the lives of vulnerable children, youth, and families. In the process, it is directed by the moral principles of equality, respect for diversity, and a fundamental commitment to social justice and human rights. The participating students' showed development of a heightened awareness and sensitivity which they feel inspired to carry forward in new and creative ways. The multicultural institutions of learning and communities of care in which our CYC students find themselves, require an appreciation for diversity. The global trajectory our society has taken over the last few decades has

dramatically altered the practice context of child and youth care work, calling into question not only what we teach but also how we teach our students. On a small scale, this transformative learning experience points the way to preparing competent CYC practitioners who are more likely to be open-minded and accepting of divergent worldviews.

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