

Experiences of Resilience among Indigenous and Newcomer Students in Winnipeg High Schools and CEDA

by

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A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of
The University of Manitoba
in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

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Abstract

There continue to be disparities in education access for Indigenous and newcomer youth across Canada. Indigenous and newcomer youth often encounter unique challenges in educational settings, including racism, bullying, cultural alienation, and inappropriate school curricula. Despite these obstacles, Indigenous and newcomer youth demonstrate resilience and thrive in academic environments. Studies examining the factors contributing to their success and resilience are limited. There is a need to understand these dynamics better to create meaningful interventions that support Indigenous and newcomer youth's experience and success in high school. The Circle of Courage® is a resilience framework rooted in Native American cultures, and experiencing its components enhances positive youth development. This project aimed to explore how the Indigenous and newcomer youth at the Community Education Development Association (CEDA) experienced the Circle of Courage® and related to youth's goals, resilience, and wellness. Nineteen youth participating in the CEDA Pathways to Education program were purposively recruited for the study. Data collection involved one sharing circle with seven participants and eighteen in-depth interviews, allowing for the collection of rich narratives. The findings indicate that Indigenous and newcomer youth experience the Circle of Courage® to varying degrees within school environments, with CEDA promoting its components to a greater extent. Particularly, the Circle of Courage® enhanced positive learning experiences and fostered wellness, resilience, and future orientation among youth. Belonging emerged as the cornerstone of the Circle of Courage®. The study underscored the pivotal role of personal connections and relationships, both within school and at CEDA, in promoting resilience and wellness among youth. It also highlighted CEDA Pathways as an afterschool program that completed learning education and offered additional support where schools may fall short. Notably, the project

identified strong similarities between Indigenous and newcomer youth in their experiences related to the Circle of Courage® components, suggesting this framework's universality. These findings contribute to the growing body of evidence supporting that the Circle of Courage® may be applicable to youth of different backgrounds and can be a valuable tool for promoting positive learning experiences, resilience, and wellness among youth in academic settings.

Keywords: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, Indigenous Methodologies, Circle of Courage®, wellness, resilience, Indigenous youth, newcomer youth, community-based research, future orientation.

Acknowledgement

I thank God for guiding me through this journey right from the beginning of my application to the program in 2019. I would also like to thank all the youth who generously shared their stories and wisdom with me and made this project possible. I cherish every moment we share and will carry these memories with me.

I am deeply grateful Community Education Development Association especially Elaine, Janet, and Jordan for their unwavering support. Without you, this project would not be possible.

To my family—my parents, Lukman Makinde and Halimat Makinde, and my siblings, especially my sister, Yusira Makinde, thank you for always listening, encouraging me, and supporting me. And Najib, your moral support and words of encouragement have been a source of strength throughout, and I am grateful for it.

I would also like to express my gratitude to my advisor, Dr. Andrew Hatala, for providing me with guidance and support, as well as to my committee members, Dr. Javier Mignone and Vanessa Van Beyer, for their insights, comments, and feedback.

And Bekelu Negash, thank you for sharing resources, bouncing off ideas, and encouraging me.

Lastly, I am pleased to acknowledge the financial support of the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada through the Manitoba Research Alliance's Partnership Grant Community-Driven Solutions to Poverty: Challenges and Possibilities and the funding through the Rady Faculty of Health Sciences Graduate Studentship at the University of Manitoba.

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CHAPTER 1

Chapter 1 introduces the thesis project, presenting the research questions, objectives, and partnering community organization. It also outlines the organizational structure of the subsequent chapters.

Introduction

Access to and quality education are crucial social determinants of health (Davidson, 2015). In Canada, there continue to be disparities in access to education for Indigenous and newcomer youth (Anderson, 2021; Zeman & Frenette, 2021). Indigenous youth in Canada have lower high school completion rates, reflecting greater structural violence from colonization (Anderson, 2021; Hare & Pidgeon, 2011; MacIver, 2012). Racism, intergenerational trauma, lack of cultural representation, and lack of school belonging are some challenges Indigenous youth have to overcome at schools (Hare & Pidgeon, 2011; MacIver, 2012). Lack of belonging is significant as it is instrumental in bridging social disparities (Haan et al., 2020). Belonging is associated with positive academic outcomes and the decision to complete high school (Allen & Bowles, 2012; MacIver, 2012). Newcomer youth in Canada face similar challenges integrating into the Canadian educational system. They encounter economic challenges, also feel a lack of belonging, and navigate Eurocentric school curricula (Cheyne-Hazineh, 2020; Matejko et al., 2021; Villegas & Aberman, 2019). Furthermore, newcomers in vulnerable positions, such as refugee claimants, may feel unsupported and unable to discuss their challenges (Villegas & Aberman, 2019).

Despite the many challenges, Indigenous and newcomer youth show resilience and can thrive at schools (Anderson, 2021; Matejko et al., 2021; Zeman & Frenette, 2021). Hare and Pidgeon (2011) found that Indigenous youth in their study were supported by their families and

communities while navigating school challenges. Similarly, newcomer youth may value having a positive mindset and actively participating in changing the narrative at schools (A. C. G. Smith et al., 2022).

Studies on factors that foster positive growth and resilience for Indigenous and newcomer youth in high schools are scarce. Understanding how youth experience these factors at schools is pivotal to informing meaningful interventions to enhance school experiences and support academic success. Utilizing the Circle of Courage® framework as a theoretical guide, this research explored factors that fostered resilience for Indigenous and newcomer youth in Canadian high schools. Drawing from Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR), and Indigenous Methodologies, the aim was beyond understanding how youth experience growth and resilience at schools and sought to understand how youth make meaning of the environmental factors that enhance them.

Purpose Statement, Research Questions, and Objectives

The research questions and objectives were drafted with the Community Education Development Association (CEDA), the partnering community organization. In the summer of 2022, I discussed with the Director of the Organization to brainstorm ideas for the project. I then had subsequent meetings with the researcher at CEDA to draft the proposal for the study to ensure that the study would reflect CEDA's values and interests. After receiving feedback from an initial draft, we refined the proposal to align with the Circle of Courage® framework, which CEDA preferred to guide the study.

The study aimed to understand Indigenous and newcomer experiences of the Circle of Courage at schools and CEDA, including noting similarities and/or differences between the

groups. In addition, it sought to explore how components of the Circle of Courage relate to youth wellness and resilience. The thesis research questions and objectives are outlined below.

Research Questions

1. How do Indigenous and newcomer youth experience and understand factors that foster their belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity in schools and at CEDA?
2. How do the Circle of Courage® components support Indigenous and newcomer youth educational goals and orientations towards the future?
3. How do the Circle of Courage® components relate to feelings of resilience and wellness among the youth?

Objectives

- Describe how youth understand and experience factors that foster their belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity in schools and at CEDA.
- Understand how youth make sense of and understand components of the Circle of Courage® and wellness as well their interrelation with each other.
- Understand how aspects of education and belonging function as social determinants of health for youth within urban contexts.

Project Background: Community Education Development Association

The project took place at CEDA, located in the North End of Winnipeg. CEDA is a non-profit organization established in 1979 to support communities and educational development in communities (CEDA, n.d.). The organization hosts three programs: Pathways to Education, Community Schools, and Centre for Anti-oppression Studies (Brendtro et al., 2002, 2014) (CEDA, n.d.). Pathways to Education Program is an after-school tutoring program that assists students in succeeding in high school (CEDA, n.d.). Comparably, the community school program

at Hugh John Macdonald involves community organizers working with school administration, teachers, and community members to develop plans that aid student academic success (CEDA, n.d.). Lastly, the Centre for Anti-oppression Studies is concerned with developing resources to advocate anti-oppression strategies (CEDA, n.d.). The study focused on youth attending CEDA's Pathways to Education.

CEDA's Pathways to Education

Pathways to Education is a national program that supports students in low-income communities in completing high school and transitioning to post-secondary education (CEDA, n.d.). The program provides students with resources ranging from emotional and financial to social support (CEDA, n.d.). In 2010, CEDA began hosting the Pathways to Education program in Winnipeg (MacKinnon, 2018). CEDA's Pathways to Education Program is unique in various ways. The program serves one of the poorest neighborhoods in Winnipeg, and youth who attend the programs are often considered "at-risk" with exposure to multiple social and historical factors that affect their educational outcomes (MacKinnon et al., 2018). Indigenous youth at CEDA may experience food insecurity, housing instability, and addictions, all of which arise from intergenerational trauma and colonization of Indigenous Peoples (MacKinnon et al., 2018). Consistent with communities that experience similar challenges, the catchment area CEDA serves has lower high school completion rates compared to the rest of Winnipeg (MacKinnon et al., 2018). Many of the communities served by CEDA are Indigenous, with some catchment areas having as high as over 50% Indigenous population (MacKinnon et al., 2018). Although CEDA Pathways serves a large population of Indigenous students, it also serves several newcomer students (MacKinnon et al., 2018). Collaborating with CEDA Pathways to Education was beneficial as their student demographic possessed the lived experiences to answer the

research questions. In return, the findings from this work can inform CEDA programming and best practices for supporting young people in their educational aspirations.

Organization of Paper

The thesis is organized into five chapters. The first chapter introduces a brief literature background, the project's objectives, the research questions, and community partners. The second chapter provides a literature review on past and present scholarship on the research topics, providing readers with an understanding of the current literature. The project's methodologies, design, ethics, and methods are discussed in the third chapter, while the fourth chapter introduces the readers to the project's findings. Finally, the fifth chapter situates the project findings among broader literature and includes discussions, implications, and conclusions of the thesis project.

CHAPTER 2

This chapter introduces readers to current literature on the experiences of Indigenous and newcomer students both within Canada and globally. It also reviews the literature on resilience, highlighting existing strengths and limitations within the current literature. The chapter introduces the Circle of Courage® framework, which served as the guiding framework for the project's research questions. The chapter ends with a summary that connects the central ideas.

Indigenous Students in High School

Indigenous Peoples, encompassing the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Peoples in Canada, face systemic inequities rooted in colonization that persist to the present (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). Many communities experience high poverty rates—approximately 25.3% of Indigenous Peoples live in poverty (Citizens for Justice, 2015). Poverty in communities arises from colonial policies such as the dispossession of Indigenous Peoples from their land and residential schools (MacDonald & Steenbeek, 2015). Experiences of intergenerational trauma from residential schools and other assimilation policies also lead to a lack of trust in the educational system (MacDonald & Steenbeek, 2015). As a result, Indigenous youth in Canada have lower high school completion rates than non-Indigenous students (Anderson, 2021; Hare & Pidgeon, 2011). Statistics Canada (2023) reveals a 63% high school completion rate for all First Nations youth compared to 91% for non-Indigenous youth. In addition, youth may have to navigate issues including family stability, drug usage, and whether their family places a high value on education and cultural identity to thrive at school (Baxter & Meyers, 2016; MacKinnon, 2018).

The school climate based on Western assumptions and worldviews may further marginalize and create a sense of alienation among Indigenous youth through racism and

bullying (Hare & Pidgeon, 2011; Richmond & Smith, 2012). Bullying also frequently coexists with other unhealthy school traits like violence, drugs, and alcohol, compromising student's well-being and safety at school (Arim et al., 2020). For example, Arim and colleagues (2020) reported that youth who perceive bullying as a problem also experience higher levels of psychological stress. Although students are often perpetrators of bullying, teachers do not do enough to prevent it (Kentel et al., 2015; Richmond & Smith, 2012) or participate in prejudice themselves (Hare & Pidgeon, 2011). Richmond and Smith (2012) found that several Indigenous youth experienced bullying but did not seek help or support from schools due to a lack of trust. Their findings suggest that the students felt unsafe to talk with teachers and school administration about their experiences (Richmond & Smith, 2012). Youth in the study also reported feeling like they did not belong—feeling segregated socially, culturally, and in the curriculum (Richmond & Smith, 2012).

Findings of alienation are common for many Indigenous youth in Canadian schools, and these feelings are amplified by the underrepresentation of Indigenous epistemologies and cultures (Denbow, 2015; Hare & Pidgeon, 2011; Richmond & Smith, 2012). MacIver (2012) identified the absence of cultural representation as a significant factor contributing to school dropout rates. Historical practices, like the residential school system, aimed to colonize and assimilate Indigenous Peoples by eradicating their culture and devaluing Indigenous ways of knowing (Cote-Meek & Moeke-Pickering, 2020; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). However, since the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Call to Action in 2015, there has been some effective mobilization of action to decolonize education and incorporate Indigenous ideologies within the curriculum (Barkaskas & Gladwin, 2021; Cote-Meek & Moeke-Pickering, 2020). Some initiatives include increased discussion on the

underrepresentation of Indigenous students in post-secondary education, awareness of Canada's colonial and Indigenous history (Cote-Meek & Moeke-Pickering, 2020), and incorporating talking circles in the classroom spaces (Barkaskas & Gladwin, 2021).

Manitoba has proactively incorporated Indigenous culture and history into its education system. The Winnipeg School Division adopted an Indigenous Education Policy in 1996 and continues to have an Indigenous Education Department supporting staff in implementing culturally appropriate programming (Winnipeg School Division, 2023). Such policies allow Indigenous students to learn their histories and cultures, and non-Indigenous students develop an understanding of and respect for Indigenous histories and lifestyles (Winnipeg School Division, 2023). Nonetheless, there are opportunities for improvement because succeeding through Western educational systems often still requires youth to give up Indigenous learning methods (Garcia-Olp et al., 2022).

Newcomer Students in High Schools

Literature on newcomer youth also points to the challenges of adapting to a new country and educational climate (Cheyne-Hazineh, 2020; A. C. G. Smith et al., 2022; Spaas et al., 2022). Immigrants and refugees have different immigration statuses, but reasons for moving overlap (economic disadvantage and persecution, Dávila, 2021; Spaas et al., 2022). Both groups face discrimination, marginalization, and challenges settling in the new host countries (Dávila, 2021; Spaas et al., 2022). Citizens for Justice (2015) reports that 34.2% of newcomers in Canada live in poverty, and it is no surprise that the pressure to earn competes with education (Cheyne-Hazineh, 2020). Newcomer students experience challenges with language barriers and lack of cultural representation and often have their educational trajectory distorted as a result of gaps in education and moving to the new host country (Cheyne-Hazineh, 2020; Matejko et al., 2021;

Villegas & Aberman, 2019). Newcomer youth must come up to speed and work through literacy gaps as they navigate and form their identities in their host countries (Cheyne-Hazineh, 2020). A study in Ontario exploring the experiences of newcomer youth in Canada found that these youth encountered racism, being misunderstood by teachers, and feelings of alienation (A. C. G. Smith et al., 2022). Nyika's (2022) study, whose participants were Black immigrant students also reported difficulties with the English language in classes and being "black conscious" at schools. Participants described black consciousness as receiving more attention because of their skin color and navigating racial stereotypes and lack of representation (Nyika, 2022). Belonging in schools is diminished further when teachers reinforce classroom environments that remarginalize newcomer cultural knowledge and epistemologies that they bring with them (Cui, 2019). Often misinformed about access to appropriate resources, newcomers face further administrative challenges with school registration (Villegas & Aberman, 2019).

Manitoba's population continues to grow, with Winnipeg ranking among the top ten cities to immigrate to in 2020 (Manitoba Government, n.d.). A study examining families and youth who immigrated to Winnipeg found numerous challenges, including economic hardships, discrimination, language barriers, and difficulties in finding employment (Thomas, 2009). These challenges impact family income and the wellbeing of youth under their care. While there are organizations that assist families in transitioning to Winnipeg (the Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization of Manitoba, Aurora Family Therapy Centre, Canadian Muslim Women's Institute, and English Online), many of these organizations, particularly those rooted in ethnocultural communities, are underfunded and may struggle to have a meaningful impact (Thomas, 2009).

Resilience—Definitions and Gaps

Resilience is complex to define; however, it is associated with positive outcomes during experiences of adversity (Shean, 2015; Ungar et al., 2008). Resilience is viewed in the literature as a process and an outcome and is defined within individual or community resilience (Rolnick, 2018). When an individual's resilience is discussed, it frequently refers to processes that involve both the individual and their environment rather than innate traits that make individuals more resilient than others (Shean, 2015; Rolnick, 2018).

The conceptualization of resilience presents multiple challenges. One such challenge is the ambiguity surrounding resilience; in various circumstances, resilience can mean different things to different people and involve various processes (Shean, 2015; Rolnick, 2018). For example, communities are resilient when they resist change or maintain stability, yet individuals change or adapt to be resilient in the face of adversity (Rolnick, 2018).

Another challenge arises due to how resilience is studied (Shean, 2015). Researchers often use quantitative methods to study, predict, and generalize associations between multiple risk factors, protective factors, and health outcomes (Ungar, 2004); Shean, 2015). The challenge is then in defining universal health outcomes, risks, and protective factors (Rutter, 2012; Shean, 2015; Ungar, 2004). Outlining universal risk and protective factors and positive health outcomes is challenging primarily because these factors are context-dependent and affect people differently (Rutter, 2012; Shean, 2015; Ungar, 2004). For example, Rutter, (2012) highlights how adoption is often perceived as a risk because it separates families; however, adoption can also be a protective factor when the adopted child is from an abusive home. Additionally,, Njeze et al. (2020) revealed that resilience for Indigenous youth in their study involved strengthening connections, family, and art in an Urban context.

Furthermore, underprivileged and racialized groups are underrepresented in resilience studies (Ungar, 2004). Resilience may be misconstrued if cultural and local contexts are not considered (Shean, 2015; Ungar, 2004). For example, a community that does not perceive illiteracy as a risk factor will not prioritize that as a concern; however, a researcher who does, as is the case with most Western research, will interpret illiteracy as a risk, even though illiteracy has no significance to the community. Lastly, there are challenges with the concept of resilience because it is often exclusively associated with positive outcomes (Béné et al., 2014; Rolnick, 2018). Some scholars contend that resilience should not be viewed as desirable because it undermines the sacrifices and difficulties people endure to be resilient, ultimately impacting their well-being (Béné et al., 2014; Rolnick, 2018). For example, Béné et al. (2014) present examples where people living in poverty give up their needs or well-being to be resilient; while this occurs, little attention is paid to the institutions that can reduce poverty or improve well-being. Rolnick (2018) cites similar examples with the Indigenous Peoples in Canada, who have endured devastating losses and challenges due to colonization. While acknowledging that the survival of the Indigenous Peoples of Canada is evidence of resilience, Rolnick (2018) highlights that because resilience still has some individual connotation associated with it, the focus on individual-level resilience runs the risk of maintaining the status quo without taking to account the structures that place people in the situation in the first place. In their paper, Isbister-Bear et al. (2017) advocate for a shift in focus towards addressing the structural factors that necessitate resilience among Indigenous youth in Canada. They emphasize the importance of promoting *sokkastwâwin*—a holistic sense of strength encompassing the body, mind, and heart—rather than solely emphasizing *Âhkamêyimo*—individual resilience (Isbister-Bear et al., 2017). The authors argue that the shift towards focusing on structure and *sokkastwâwin* has the potential to empower

Indigenous youth and address the root cause of structures that cause adversity (Isbister-Bear et al., 2017).

Circle of Courage®: A Resilience Framework?

The Circle of Courage® is a framework supporting positive youth development for youth “at risk” (Brendtro et al., 2002, 2014). It is based on Native American (primarily Dakota) child-rearing philosophies and proposes that universally, children need to experience belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity to thrive (Brendtro et al., 2002, 2014). Often depicted in a medicine wheel (see Figure 1), the Circle of Courage® serves as a resilience framework, shifting the focus from negative expressions of youth due to their environment to their interaction with their environment (Brendtro et al., 2002, 2005). It can be adapted as a wellness model because wellness involves more than an individual but relational and collective processes that include communities (Armitage et al., 2012).

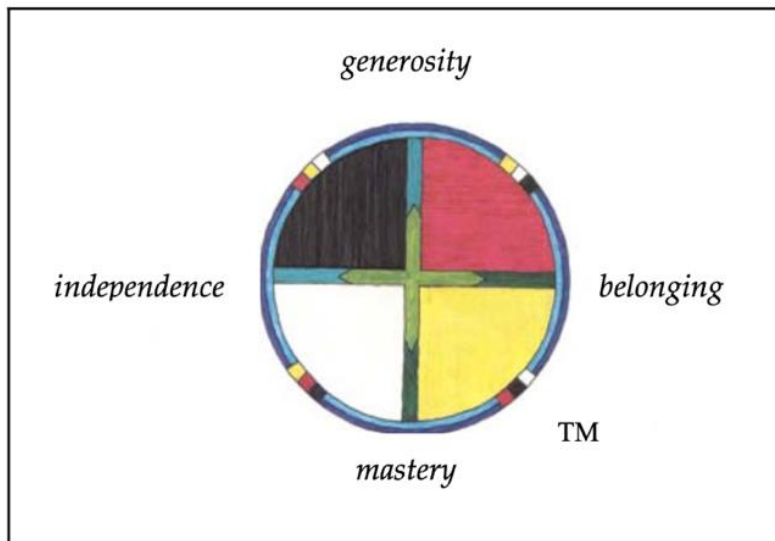
The framework is adapted in various academic settings to help support or improve challenging behavior and academic success (Reyneke, 2020; Winter & Preston, 2006). Its simplistic nature avoids debates on universal risk and protective factors (Brendtro et al., 2014), and its foundation in Indigenous philosophies provides perspectives that differ from the Eurocentric lens associated with most resilience frameworks (Brendtro et al., 2002). Moreover, the Circle of Courage® avoids a deficit lens through which youth “at risk” are often viewed, shifting the focus to strength-based approaches that promote growth (Brendtro et al., 2002). While the literature on the Circle of Courage® is limited, the framework embodies the qualities of other resilience frameworks (Brendtro et al., 2005, 2014) and is associated with positive behavioral outcomes (Lee & Perales, 2005). For instance, Lee and Perales (2005) investigated the relationship between the Circle of Courage® experience and placement success (earning

privileges) at a residential care facility in the United States. Measuring outcomes from interviews, surveys, and staff reports on participants, Lee and Perales (2005) found that experiences of the Circle of Courage® positively correlated with earning privileges (due to behavior). However, the authors call for caution with their interpretation because of limitations with sample size, representation, and survey tool (Lee & Perales, 2005).

CEDA adopts the Circle of Courage® as a framework to guide its student programs, with staff evaluating the support provided to youth based on this framework. The decision to adopt the Circle of Courage® as a framework to guide this project stemmed from discussions with CEDA described in Chapter 1.

Figure 1

Circle of Courage®. Cited in Brown (2005)



The Circle of Courage

Belonging

Belonging is the desire to feel connected to each other and is a fundamental human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Brendtro et al., 2002). Under the Circle of Courage®, belonging is a

foundation for the other components; however, development through the Circle of Courage® is non-linear and cyclic (Brendtro et al., 2002). Brendtro et al. (2002) propose that the environment fosters belonging in a child, and the environment is not just the nuclear family but includes a larger community and nature (Brendtro et al., 2002). Within the school context, the school environment functions as its own community and should promote a sense of belonging among students (Brendtro et al., 2002). Belonging is also identified in other resilience theories (Ungar, 2011). For example, Ungar's resilience theory includes experiences of a sense of cohesion with others and supportive relationships as part of the seven tensions youth need to experience to develop resilience (Ungar, 2011).

Similarly, the need to belong has been validated by theorists and other studies that found an association between belonging with positive emotional and cognitive functioning (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) and positive meaning in life (Lambert et al., 2013). Students who report belongingness exhibit better academic outcomes and report a positive attitude toward learning (Allen & Bowles, 2012). Thus, it is unsurprising that belonging fosters a positive school climate (Denbow, 2015; Hare & Pidgeon, 2011) and resilience (Ungar et al., 2008). When belonging is absent, children/youth may seek alternative ways to get that feeling through delinquent acts, joining gangs, or other high-risk behaviors (Brendtro et al., 2014; Ungar & Teram, 2000). Though often criticized by mainstream society, these acts of delinquency can be a form of strength and resilience because the youth create a sense of belonging and independence despite society failing them (Brendtro et al., 2002). Ungar (2011) also mirrors these thoughts in his resilience theory when he calls for understanding atypical behaviors that help youth cope, even though these behaviors are not always healthy (Ungar, 2011).

Mastery

Mastery refers to competency within the Circle of Courage® framework. Youth who are competent can troubleshoot problems and develop skills and talent (Brendtro et al., 2002). When youth achieve mastery, they are inspired to reach other self-directed goals in life (Brendtro et al., 2002). In contrast, failing to develop mastery skills may lead to children/youth compensating by being a workaholic, overachievers, cheating, or unmotivated to achieve anything (Brendtro et al., 2002, 2014). The mastery component can be challenging to develop in a Western-centric academic environment and Reyneke, (2020) suggests that a lack of mastery may explain the high school dropout rate in some cases. Nonetheless, developing mastery under the Circle of Courage® is possible. In Lee and Perales's (2005) study, which implemented the Circle of Courage® at a residential care program in the United States, students demonstrated increased mastery levels at 24 weeks post-implementation compared to 12 weeks post-intervention. Moreover, at 24 weeks post-intervention, the youth demonstrated better familiarity with the components of the Circle of Courage® and could relate them to their experiences at the facility (Lee & Perales, 2005). Lee and Perales's (2005) findings indicate increased self-awareness regarding the Circle of Courage® but highlight the potential for integration within learning environments.

Independence

Akin to autonomy, Brendtro et al. (2002) propose that allowing children to experience independence helps with their growth. Independence is achieved when adults provide opportunities for children and youth to make responsible decisions (Brendtro et al., 2002, 2014). Independent youth take control of their emotions, set self-directed goals, and make good decisions; this allows them to live/grow outside their communities (Brendtro et al., 2002, 2014).

When the need for independence is unmet, the child may become overly dependent, manipulative, or lack confidence (Brendtro et al., 2002, 2014).

Generosity

Generosity is linked with respect, as respectful behavior starts with realizing that other individuals have the same rights to freedom and social resources (Brown, 2005). In Indigenous culture, generosity is considered the highest virtue to live a good life (Brendtro et al., 2002). When children experience generosity, they also show kindness to others, which helps nurture both the receiver and giver (Brendtro et al., 2002, 2014). Conversely, when children do not receive generosity, they may show selfishness, codependency, or antisocial behavior (Brendtro et al., 2002).

Circle of Courage® and Newcomers

Although the Circle of Courage® originates from Native American cultures, Brendtro et al. (2019) assert that its components are universally essential for youth to thrive. Newcomers in Canada experience challenges with belonging when they move to new countries and with learning in the classroom (A. C. G. Smith et al., 2022). Consequently, they may benefit from the Circle of Courage® framework. However, literature examining the Circle of Courage® in the context of newcomers is generally scarce, particularly studies in Canada. Recent scholarship indicate a growing interest in incorporating the Circle of Courage® in the classroom— (Reyneke, 2020), who explored how teachers implemented the Circle of Courage® amongst youth attending a South African school and within residential care programs (see Lee & Perales, 2005). However, these studies often do not measure specific outcomes of the Circle of Courage® or provide detailed information about the demographics or cultures of their participants. As such,

this project will be among the first to explore the experiences of the Circle of Courage® among newcomer youth in Canada.

Summary

Indigenous and newcomer youth in high school experience challenges in their personal and academic lives that require support to foster positive growth and resilience (MacKinnon et al., 2018; Villegas & Aberman, 2019). There are limited studies on Indigenous and newcomers' experiences of growth factors in their environment that promote positive academic outcomes despite adversities. The literature is equally limited on the Circle of Courage® resilience framework, even though it highlights universal developmental needs (Brendtro et al., 2014). Studies have largely approached resilience using quantitative measures to predict and understand relationships between successful outcomes and adversity (Shean, 2015). These studies fail to centre on the perspectives and experiences of youth (Shean, 2015) and neglect aspects of wellness (Béné et al., 2014; Brendtro et al., 2002, 2014). There is a benefit to exploring resilience from a qualitative framework—like Njeze et al. (2020), who found that art and culture could be used to promote resilience among Indigenous Urban youth. Understanding how Indigenous and newcomer youth are aware of factors contributing to their academic success despite the odds in their environment is crucial to enhancing the educational experience and successful academic outcomes (completion of high school). As noted earlier, education is a crucial social determinant of health and is a driving factor of income and economic progression (Haan et al., 2020). Hence, there is a need to support educational outcomes among Indigenous and newcomer youth to bridge disparities with the rest of the Canadian population. These interventions cannot be successful without understanding how Indigenous and newcomer youth experience and describe factors contributing to their success, which is the gap my study seeks to

address. By adopting the Circle of Courage®, the study avoids the current trending debates of resilience theories and instead focuses on the foundational wellness needs of belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity, all of which are associated with positive outcomes (Lee & Perales, 2005).

CHAPTER 3

This chapter discusses the methodologies that guided the research, the project design, and the methods—including the role of the researcher, recruitment, data collection, data analysis, and ethical consideration. It also includes reflexivity piece.

Guiding Methodologies

The project adopted a qualitative research paradigm, which is based on specific assumptions and beliefs regarding the reality and nature of the phenomenon being studied. Ontology is concerned with the nature of reality—the assumptions we make about what makes sense (O'Reilly & Kiyimba, 2015). I embrace the belief that social reality is subjective, and people construct the meaning of their experiences, suggesting that there are multiple versions of truth as opposed to a single reality. This is consistent with Cuthbertson et al. (2020) explanation of qualitative paradigms. Similarly, my epistemological standpoint is grounded in the belief that knowledge is likewise socially constructed (Cuthbertson et al., 2020). Therefore, in formulating the research questions, my aim was to (1) comprehend the participants' interpretations and understanding of the Circle of Courage® within their academic lives and (2) explore its relationship with their resilience and wellness. It was essential to draw from methodologies that aligned with my personal values, reflected CEDA's values, and allowed me to answer the research questions. Therefore, I decided to guide the study by drawing on the principles of Integrative Phenomenological Analysis, Community-Based Participatory Research, and Indigenous Methodologies.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

IPA is concerned with understanding how people experience a phenomenon and making meaning of their experiences (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). It is rooted in phenomenology and involves double hermeneutics: understanding how the participants make sense of their experience and, simultaneously, the researcher's attempt to understand how the participants are making sense of their experiences (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). IPA stems from an interpretive framework, acknowledging that reality is inter-subjective, and people interpret and give meaning to their experiences (Cuthbertson et al., 2020; J. A. Smith et al., 2009). As such, the participants' knowledge is the interpretation and sense-making of their experience. Similarly, IPA views knowledge as individually or socially constructed, gained through personal experience and perceptions. The researcher captures knowledge through systematic analysis and interpretation. Utilizing IPA in this project allows for the co-construction of knowledge between myself, the participants, and the context or environment in which that knowledge is being created (O'Reilly & Kiyimba, 2015).

Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR)

Community-based participatory research involves a collaborative partnership between academic researchers and a community, utilizing a bottom-up approach where community members are actively engaged throughout the research process, from formulating research questions to disseminating findings (O'Reilly & Kiyimba, 2015; Springer & Skolarus, 2019). This approach fosters bi-directional learning, allowing for mutual exchange of knowledge (Springer & Skolarus, 2019). CBPR enables researchers to understand better the community's strengths, challenges, and opportunities while also allowing community concerns to be at the

forefront of the research (Springer & Skolarus, 2019). Furthermore, engaging with the community results in research that is more meaningful and supports community needs.

In this project, CBPR was integrated through a partnership with CEDA. The research questions and the Circle of Courage® framework adoption resulted from discussions with CEDA. I collaborated closely with the researcher at CEDA to develop the initial proposal and data collection protocol, which was reviewed and approved by the Director at CEDA. Furthermore, CEDA staff were accustomed to using sharing circles and interviews to hear from youth during their evaluations, and I adopted these data collection methods in this project. As the project progressed, I provided updates and held meetings with CEDA staff to discuss the next steps. Currently, I am discussing with CEDA staff how to effectively translate the project's findings in a manner meaningful to them beyond academic publication.

Indigenous Methodologies

Indigenous methodologies encompass diverse approaches, yet they often share common principles (Drawson et al., 2017; Kovach, 2009; L. T. Smith, 2012). For one, Indigenous methodologies centre the communities, bringing their voices and needs to the forefront of research (Drawson et al., 2017; Kovach, 2009; L. T. Smith, 2012). In addition, how the research is conducted outweighs the outcome; the researcher partners with and shares control of the project (L. T. Smith, 2012). Furthermore, Indigenous methodologies honor or use Indigenous methods and involve self-location and reflexivity (Absolon, 2011; Drawson et al., 2017; L. T. Smith, 2012). Lastly, Consistent with IPA, Indigenous methodologies emphasize the relationality of the knowledge created (Absolon, 2011; Drawson et al., 2017; Kovach, 2009). Knowledge created is not generalizable but co-constructed from a standpoint in relation to time and place (Kovach, 2009).

I drew on the ethics of Indigenous Methodologies for research to guide my project. My efforts to foster rapport with CEDA involved communication with staff, active participation in their events, and volunteering opportunities, such as assisting youth at hockey games and during the youth convocation, where some of the participants in my project celebrated their high school graduation. I would speak to youth in the hallways, smiling and saying hi. Furthermore, the research topic, questions, and process were designed with CEDA. Initially, I had planned to conduct an Indigenous sharing circle for data collection—a method of eliciting people’s stories that can be used to explore similar, nuanced, and different perspectives in a group setting (Kovach, 2009; Lavallée, 2009). Sharing circles can serve multiple purposes and are adaptable to different contexts (Barkaskas & Gladwin, 2021). I intended to conduct a sharing circle that would respect the sacred traditions and ceremonial aspects of one. However, due to time constraints, this approach was not feasible. Instead, I co-facilitated a sharing circle focused on hearing participant’s narratives. With approval from CEDA, this modified sharing circle aligned with practices they already had in place, reflecting a blend of Indigenous and community-based participatory approaches.

Project Design

To address the questions outlined in Chapter 1 and in the following IPA, CBPR, and Indigenous Methodologies, the approach first included meetings with CEDA Directors and researchers to discuss relevant research questions, data collecting, and leveraging their expertise and experience with their student population. Data collection involved a sharing circle and interviews consistent with the guiding methodologies and honoring CEDA-preferred data collection methods with the students. As with most qualitative research—the researcher is the instrument (Ravitch & Carl, 2021), and as such, I was responsible for recruitment with some

assistance from CEDA, which I elaborate on in the recruitment section. In addition, I collected all the data, transcribed them, and conducted the analysis.

Participant Recruitment: Site and Sampling

Nineteen Indigenous and newcomer youth attending CEDA's Pathway to Education program were recruited through purposeful sampling, allowing the selection of participants with experiences to answer the research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018; J. A. Smith et al., 2009). The inclusion criteria for participation were high school students aged 16 or above, who identify as Indigenous or newcomer, and who have attended CEDA Pathways for at least a year. Newcomer youth refer to immigrant and refugee youth who have lived less than ten years in Canada (Immigration Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2017).

I conducted recruitment in collaboration with CEDA. I met with staff at CEDA to discuss my inclusion criteria and shared the project posters. CEDA had a list of students who fit the criteria, and I approached these students to discuss the project. Additionally, CEDA staff were informed about the project and could direct interested students to me. Interested students approached me or I approached them, and dates for data collection were set. Though not intended, I observed that participants also informed their friends who they thought would be eligible to participate. I was at CEDA to answer questions and speak to interested participants. All data collection occurred at CEDA's premises, as it was a familiar location for participants, and CEDA provided a private space for our interactions.

Data Collection

Data collection began in February 2023 and occurred in two phases, with the first informing the second (see Figure 2). The initial phase consisted of a sharing circle, while the subsequent phase involved in-depth interviews. Sharing circles are utilized as a method of group

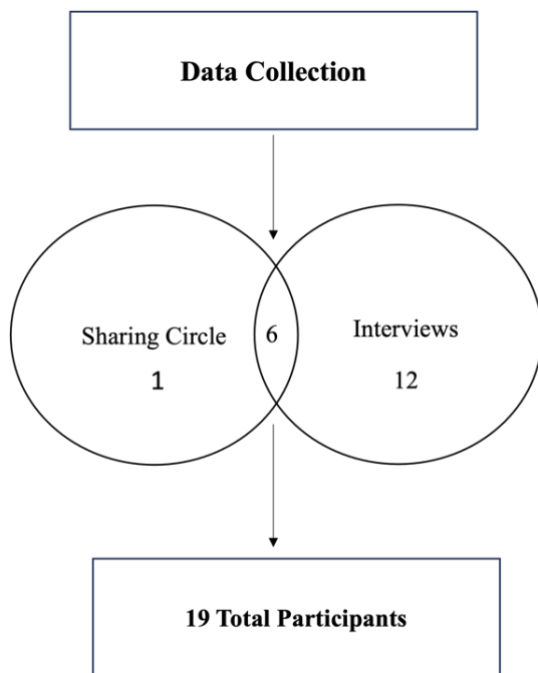
data collection, aiming to establish a power-balanced environment where all participants have equal opportunities to share their perspectives (Hunt & Young, 2021; Kovach, 2009). Under the guidance of the Director of CEDA Pathways to Education, who already held a familiar role within CEDA, the sharing circle lasted approximately an hour and involved seven participants (see Appendix A for protocol). It was adapted to a semi-structured fashion, employing open-ended questions to encourage participants to elaborate on their responses meaningfully (Hunt & Young, 2021; Liamputtong, 2017). In addition, CEDA made food and drinks available to participants who attended, facilitating social interaction. Having CEDA's Pathways to Education Director present helped foster a trusting and safe environment as she knew the participants, and they trusted her to be there. I utilized the sharing circle to foster a relationship between me and the participants and observe how they responded to the questions and the language they used.

Interviews commenced shortly after high-level data analysis of the sharing circle to explore themes/data from the sharing circles. In IPA and Indigenous methodologies, interviews elicit in-depth, personal stories (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Kovach, 2009; J. A. Smith et al., 2009). Conducting interviews after the sharing circles was intended to delve into the themes that emerged from the sharing circle and give opportunities to participants who may have felt uncomfortable sharing their views with the group (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Similar to the sharing circle, the interviews were semi-structured. The sharing circle and interviews were audio-recorded using a digital audio recorder and later stored in a password-locked file computer that only I can access. The interviews lasted an average of fifty-one minutes (average gotten from mean of longest and shortest interview). Field notes were taken at my discretion to provide context during analysis (Liamputtong, 2017). I developed interview protocols alongside CEDA to ensure that questions are appropriate (See Appendix B). In total, I conducted interviews with

18 individuals, seven of whom also attended the sharing circle. Data collection ended in May 2023.

Figure 2

Data Collection Process



Data Ownership

With CEDA's guidance, I followed the principles of Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession (OCAP; The First Nations Principles of OCAP, n.d.), which guides how data will be gathered, protected, and utilized. The implication for this project is that CEDA has full ownership and control of the data collected and will provide me with data access for my project. CEDA also has the right to the data after the project and can decide how they would like any findings from the project shared.

Ethics

I received ethics approval from the Health Ethics Research Board at the University of Manitoba (#HS25771) and locally from my engagement with CEDA. Participants in this research were required to sign a consent form outlining the research goals, participant involvement, confidentiality, privacy, expectations, possible harms, benefits of participation, and voluntary participation and withdrawal (LoBiondo-Wood & Haber, 2013). I explained the information on the consent forms, ensuring participants had time to read them. This was so they would not feel pressured to consent or sign. I welcomed interested participants to ask questions about the research, motivation, and positionality to promote transparency (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Measures to protect confidentiality and anonymity—not limited to but including the use of with pseudonyms in lieu of participants' names, and storing research files on a password-protected device. Any field notes or any paper documents from data collection or analysis were deidentified and stored in a locked cabinet at my home. All data will be stored for five years. In addition, data collection was held at a location in CEDA that is quiet, safe, and free from disturbances. As the sharing circle involves group interaction, I asked participants to remain respectful of each other during the time and not to share information outside the sharing circle. This was done to protect confidentiality during the sharing circle (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). While there were no anticipated potential harms for participants in the thesis project, such as psychological distress, I informed participants that they were not obligated to answer all questions and could choose to stop participating at any time. Furthermore, I provided resources for mental health support, including websites and phone numbers, available after each data collection session. Lastly, participants were compensated with a \$25 gift card for each interview or sharing circle they took part in.

Data Analysis

Following J. A. Smith et al.'s (2009) encouragement for researchers to approach data analysis with innovation, I drew from their recommendations and Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis guidelines during my analysis process. Preliminary data analysis began with a high-level analysis of the sharing circle. This involved listening to the audio recording of the sharing circle, making initial notes, and identifying general ideas and themes related to the Circle of Courage®, which were explored in the interviews. The formal analysis commenced with listening and transcribing the interview audio files. The sharing circle and interviews were transcribed using a transcription software called Trint. I transcribed all the files and made notes of nonverbal interactions like laughing or pauses. Subsequently, I closely read and re-read the transcripts to highlight and comment on significant or interesting statements. Following this, I engaged in line-by-line coding or paragraph coding as appropriate, utilizing Dedoose (J. A. Smith & Osborne, 2008). At this stage, the entire transcript was treated as data, and the goal was to understand and reduce the data to codes rather than focus on specific sections (J. A. Smith & Osborne, 2008). This process yielded 79 codes closely tied to participants' words and phrases. I reached data saturation during this phase while coding my 15th interview, indicating no new emergent patterns (O'Reilly & Parker, 2013). At this time, memos included but were not limited to noting similarities, language use, and nuances.

Subsequently, I reduced the data by pulling similar codes together—going back and forth between reading the excerpts and the codes. IPA involves a double hermeneutic where the researcher tries to make sense of the participants' meaning and experiences (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). Given the framework that guided the interviews and interview protocol, I engaged in more deductive style analysis by organizing the codes into categories representing the Circle of

Courage® framework while remaining open to new ideas forming. I continued to bring similar concepts together while noting divergence and nuances. I also created a Word document to reflect the participant's quotes with the themes. Subsequently, I began theorizing, a concept that Mayan (2023) describes as making theories from the data about explanations about the data and looking back for evidence. Theorizing involves going back and forth between possible explanations and the data; this concept is also supported by J. A. Smith et al. (2009), who report that this analysis stage moves away from representing the participant and relies on the researcher's interpretation of the data. I noted connections and processes between emerging categories within Circle of Courage® (making diagrams to represent concepts and processes).

Although I did not conduct constant comparative analysis across gender or Indigenous/newcomer status, I compared codes within participants' text (for example, language used at the beginning and the end). Similarly, I noted any differences that emerged between groups. The analysis process involved a primarily deductive process as I approached analysis through the lens of the Circle of Courage® framework. However, data analysis also allowed for inductive processes within the deductive framework; the data drove all the processes within the Circle of Courage® categories. Data analysis also involved peer debriefing with my supervisor.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was accounted for in this project in various ways, including a strategic sequence of methods, member checks, thick descriptions, and reflective activities (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The strategic sequence of methods allows researchers to organize data collection methods to maximize the complexity of data and promote a robust research design (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). In this project, a sharing circle was used to build relationships and to guide the in-depth interviews. This allowed me to become familiar with the terms used and confirm emerging

themes from the sharing circle. Furthermore, I employed thick descriptions containing in-depth contextual information about participants and their lived experiences to promote data transferability when discussing the findings (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I also incorporated reflective journals throughout the project to bracket my assumptions (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). All studies have implicit biases, and researchers are responsible for identifying how and when these biases influence their work (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Engaging in reflective journals, memos, and dialogic engagements with the supervisor are some strategies to identify my biases. Lastly, member checks enhance credibility and ensure that participants feel their stories have been represented accurately (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). While member checks were not conducted with participants, I shared the findings with CEDA's Directors and researchers to check if themes resonated with what they had heard from students.

Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

Aligning with my use of qualitative and Indigenous methodologies, I reflect on my positionality and centre myself on the topic. I am a newcomer to Canada, completing my graduate studies at the University of Manitoba in the Department of Community Health Sciences. This project is one of the requirements for me to complete my studies. I come from Nigeria, a country in West Africa, but I was raised in Qatar, where I have lived for more than half my life. I have a Bachelor of Nursing degree and have worked in various places, from medical, surgical, and pediatrics to obstetrics and gynecology. I place a high value on education, witnessing its transformation within the family as my father was the first in his family to achieve education beyond high school. I view education as empowerment and love learning and helping people learn. Furthermore, I come from a stable-income household with extended relatives who do not, so I have witnessed how income instability can impact education and other aspects of

wellness. Transitioning to Canadian education posed challenges; I struggled with issues of representation and language difficulties. Therefore, I believe that transitioning to school comes with difficulty for newcomers and that newcomer students in high school may be able to relate to some of my experiences.

Approaching the research, I grappled with concerns about my identity as an outsider, given that I graduated high school eight years ago. Despite these concerns, I anticipated that the research would be beneficial and that there would be similarities and nuances to the experiences of the Circle of Courage®. Throughout the research process, I experienced personal growth and insights about myself. I rediscovered my passion for working with youth and community, who come to the research with wisdom and knowledge. The stories that youth shared with me, especially on resilience, served as sources of motivation during moments of doubt (and there were many such days!). Their words inspired me to persevere and reminded me of the importance of discipline and seeking support. Many days, my heart was drawn to interdependence when I stubbornly refused to seek assistance despite knowing I would receive support if I asked. I would sit and ask myself why I needed to “do things on my own.”

The memories and connections we shared during the interview—our trust, waves of laughter, smiles, celebrations, and silence are dear to me. I am grateful to the youth for their openness and willingness to share their stories and to the staff at CEDA for their support and encouragement throughout the research process; I knew people were rooting for me. Often, research focuses on the benefits of research to participants—how it allows participants to centre their voices and how it may be a form of empowerment (Ravitch & Carl, 2021), but not much is told about how research benefits the researcher outside of the research, public actions. Overall, I

am thankful for the insights and learning opportunities this project has provided professionally and personally.

Summary

This project was guided by drawing IPA, CBPR, and Indigenous Methodologies. As such, the project was designed in collaboration with the community organization CEDA. Before commencing the research, ethical approval was obtained from the University of Manitoba. Data collection comprised a sharing circle and in-depth interviews, allowing me to explore participants' experiences and foster relationships. I was primarily responsible for recruitment data collection, transcription, and analysis. Data analysis employed inductive and deductive methods, allowing me to better understand participants' experiences in connection with the theoretical framework. Furthermore, data analysis involved theorizing and the relationships between the categories and emerging themes. Throughout the project, I used strategies to promote trustworthiness, such as writing reflective journals, peer debriefing, dialogic engagement with my advisor, and bracketing.

Chapter 4

The study aimed to understand how Indigenous and newcomer youth experience the Circle of Courage® components (belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity) in schools and at CEDA— belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity. In addition, it explored the connections between the Circle of Courage® and youth goals and future orientation, well-being, and resilience. As such, the research was designed to collect information utilizing sharing circles and interviews that allow participants to share their in-depth experiences of their interactions with the Circle of Courage®. This chapter presents the findings from the data generated and analyzed from the sharing circle and interview and begins with a demographic description of all the participants, offering readers a contextual understanding of the participants and their respective backgrounds. Giving readers context enhances the credibility and interpretation of findings (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Following an overview of the participants, the chapter explores emergent themes, and ends with a summary.

Participant Demographics

The study included 19 youth enrolled in the CEDA Pathways to Education program. Among these, 11 youth self-identified as Indigenous, comprising seven females, three males, and one non-binary youth. Information on gender were gotten from through CEDA. The remaining eight youth were newcomers, representing four females and four males. Six youth attended RB Russell, five attended St. John's High School, three attended the University of Winnipeg Collegiate, two attended Children of the Earth School, one attended Technical-Vocational High School, and the other two attended a school not identified due to confidentiality risks. Regarding grade distribution, two youth were in grade 10, six were in grade 11, and the remaining eleven were enrolled in grade 12 at the time of data collection. Table 1 summarizes the demographic

information collected. Lastly, seven youth participated in a sharing circle, six of whom also consented to in-depth individual interviews. The remaining 12 youth only participated in in-depth interviews.

Table 1

Youth Demographic Information.

Youth Demographic Information	
Characteristics	n
Indigenous	11
Newcomer	8
Gender	
Female	11
Male	7
Non-binary	1
Grade	
Grade 10	2
Grade 11	6
Grade 12	11

Themes

Twenty-one themes emerged from the data analysis of the sharing circle and interviews (See Table 2 for an overview of categories and themes). The themes are presented here with contextual information and quotes as evidence.

Table 2*Overview of Categories and Themes*

Analytic Categories	Themes
Meaning of Wellness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Environmental Structures: “just being surrounded by my friends” b. Prioritizing Self
Meaning of Belonging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. “Doing everything together” b. Making Personal Connections c. Checking in d. “They want me to be myself” e. Belonging and Wellness: “I can do more”
Meaning of Mastery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Post-secondary Education: “There’s a lot going on” b. “I don’t have the skill or ability” c. Belonging: “just having communication” d. Lifting the weight off e. “He knew exactly how to explain it.” f. “You can play board games.” g. Physical Structures: “I sing those words to the song”. h. Learning and Wellness: Learning makes me proud
Meaning of Independence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. “Doing it on own” b. Needing Direction c. “They will come ask me for answers” d. Independence and Wellness: “Makes you happy and proud”
Meaning of Generosity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. “Treating people good no matter how they treat you” b. Passing it to the Next c. Generosity and Wellness: I’ll smile at them, they’ll smile back
Overcoming Defeat	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. “We are going through it together” b. Generosity c. “I can be better”

Meaning of Wellness

The Meaning of Wellness category emerged from youth’s interpretation of wellness. The Meaning of Wellness includes two themes: (a) Environmental Structures: “just being surrounded by my friends,” and (b) Prioritizing Self, to allow for a nuanced understanding of ways youth made meaning of wellness. Figure 3 presents an overview of the category. Youth utilized the terms comfort and happiness to describe wellness—the notion of being at ease with themselves or comfortable in their environments and experiencing happiness. Being comfortable allowed youth to be themselves in an environment without worry. Youth also occasionally used the word “healthy” to characterize wellness, with health extending beyond mere physical wellbeing to encompass mental health. For instance, in response to being asked what wellness means to her, an Indigenous female youth, Adsila responded, “I think of myself feeling comfortable and just mostly being myself.” Youth also shared their thoughts on elements of wellness, including structures and actions that promote it. The Meaning of Wellness was similar among the youth and did not differ based on gender, Indigenous, or newcomer status.

Figure 3

Meaning of Wellness



Environmental Structures: “just being surrounded by my friends”

When it came to structures within the environment that youth interacted with to form their wellness, they found wellness in the company of friends, feeling a sense of familiarity within a community, and being in supportive spaces. As one youth shared,

How I picture my wellness is just being surrounded by my friends and the community I'm with and in. And just being a part of something and feeling like this is my other family that I don't have anything to worry about... (Quispe, non-binary, Indigenous).

The description of wellness here is about being around friends and community. Quispe also highlighted not having anything to worry about is akin to being comfortable. Expanding more on finding wellness with friends, another young person narrated,

Just late-night talks with friends. I think that's like, helps my wellness... Because they just hit different... you're just in a call, you're talking about your future plans, maybe like little jokes here and there. But I think it makes me feel happy. We're just, just vibing (Anthony, male, newcomer).

Thus, in part, youth's wellness was shaped by interactions within the environment, suggesting that one's environment embeds elements of wellness.

Prioritizing Self

Wellness was not formed because of environmental elements alone; it involved actions youth undertook. Prioritizing Self emerged because youth expressed that wellness included prioritizing themselves and engaging in actions that allow them to improve in all aspects of their lives. Prioritizing Self includes focusing on one's goals, striving towards the best version of oneself, prioritizing self-love, and improving in sports or even learning self-control to manage situations effectively. For example, Angela, an Indigenous female, shared her perception of

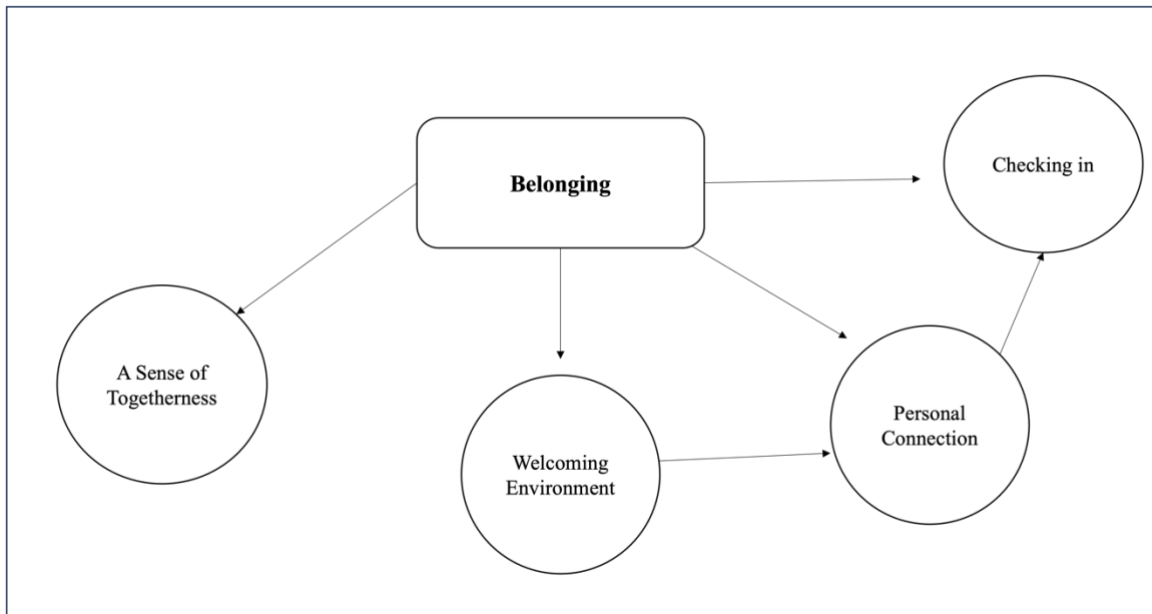
wellness involving “just taking care of yourself. Like setting goals [and] having priorities. Prioritizing yourself, that’s what I kind of think my wellness would be.” Another youth shared a similar sentiment,

I see a lot of things, and I see myself up there. I just see myself, you know, doing good in things I like, whether it’s school. So, it would be me getting 100% on all my grades, me being great in sports, me having better relations with other people, me—I don’t know what else—me being me” (Anika, female, newcomer).

The Prioritizing Self theme highlighted that wellness to youth was a holistic concept encompassing becoming the optimal versions of themselves and superseding the traditional emphasis solely on physical health.

Meaning of Belonging

The Meaning of Belonging describes youth interpretation and lived experiences of belonging, encompassing locations they seek and experience belongingness and their understanding of the connection between belonging and wellness. Youth experienced belongingness at schools, CEDA, and interactions with their friends and families. Additionally, engaging in enjoyable activities with others promoted a sense of belonging. Youth frequently discussed belonging in the context of relationships with others, creating an understanding that interpersonal relationships are the foundation of belonging. They understood and experienced belonging through four main factors outlined as themes: “Doing Everything Together,” Making Personal Connections, Checking in, and “They want me to be myself. These interconnected factors must not be experienced simultaneously to contribute to belonging—instead, they represent components of belonging that youth referenced when narrating their experiences and understanding of belonging. Figure 4 presents the relationship between the themes.

Figure 4*Overview of the Meaning of Belonging****“Doing Everything Together”***

Youth described belonging as a feeling of being together, encompassing various levels of connections. Togetherness ranged from simply being in the same physical space with friends, being taught the same way with their classmates, speaking the same language, and engaging in activities with others to more profound levels of experiencing events together. Togetherness enabled the youth to feel like they were a part of something. As such, language like participation, group, and inclusion were utilized when youth spoke of their experiences of belonging.

Experiencing a sense of togetherness occurred in the presence of friends who played a significant role in fostering this feeling. Engaging in activities and sharing experiences with friends, particularly when invited, was vital for promoting togetherness. Hamisu, a newcomer male, elaborated on this notion, emphasizing how doing things with his friends promoted belonging: “Those friends that make me feel belong[ing]. They don’t keep secrets from me, and yeah, we

practically do everything together.” Engaging in activities with others created a sense of being together, promoting feelings of belonging.

A sense of togetherness was also promoted through figuring things out with others in similar conditions. As another youth shared while reminiscing about a time she felt belongingness,

I guess I was really passionate about going to school every day back then. But, yeah, it’s like it was a comforting environment almost because, like, I had a group of friends and, like, we’re all trying to figure things out together. Not so much anymore, but it was nice back then (Aylen, Indigenous, female).

Here, a sense of togetherness is shared by belonging to a group that collectively navigates situations.

Engaging in enjoyable activities, especially sports, also promoted that sense of togetherness. Youth often spoke about sports in various contexts (for example, why they liked going to school). However, newcomer youth emphasized that participating in sports provided a sense of belonging. Through sports, newcomer youth, irrespective of gender, felt a sense of inclusion as the same rules and similar conditions bound them. For Anika, a newcomer female, engaging in sports created a sense of inclusion, which she compares to having a place: “I like doing a lot of sports. Whenever I’m in like in a team, I feel like I have a place in the school where I belong. Without it, I feel like I don’t really belong anywhere.” Similarly, a male newcomer student who struggled with feeling togetherness and belonging at his school shared,

At the gym, I feel belong[ing] because we all play the same activities, the same rules and nobody is feeling left out, you know?..... I normally feel included if I’m doing the stuff that they’re doing, so like if they’re playing tag and I’m playing basketball by myself I’m

not feeling belonging. And if I'm playing tag with them, that makes me feel like I belong with them and included. (Zikomo, male, newcomer).

The words "same activities" and "same rules" imply equality as a part of togetherness. The term equality was introduced by Wafula (male, newcomer), for whom belonging involved the same treatment in the classroom.

Interviewer: What are the things in school that make you kind of feel like you fit in at school. Like they make you feel included, like I belong here?

Wafula: Like. Oh. Equality. something like that.

Interviewer: Tell me about it.

Wafula: Like when in school the teacher can teach you all of the same things. Stuff like that. She teaches you the same.

In contrast to this young person's experience, Zikomo did not encounter a sense of belonging or equality at school due to racism. This youth observed that Black students at his school faced disparate treatment and received harsher punishment compared to students of other races. For him, togetherness and belonging were closely tied to being around individuals of the same race. Interestingly, he (Zikomo) only experienced that sense of togetherness through sports at school. As one exchange illustrated:

Interviewer: And how about at school? What other things at school help you feel like you belong or feel included?

Zikomo: [The] only stuff that make me belong is like playing sports. You know, sports are like team sports like in division school, like basketball. Yeah. It helps a lot.

Interviewer: What is the reason you think that you tend to feel like you belong when you play sports?

Zikomo: Like the people around you, you know, the coaches like put pressure on you, like they want you to improve. And the players, they go hard on you, always joking around, always playing around and like always helping each other up. That's why I feel like I belong like in basketball. I feel like I'm one of them when we're playing and we're all connected because if one piece falls out, then the whole team falls like, falls off.

Participating in sports can foster a sense of belonging because it places individuals in similar conditions and necessitates teamwork. Sports are an enjoyable group activity at school, fostering connections among students irrespective of race, gender, and newcomer status. While emphasizing the role of sports in promoting togetherness for newcomer youth, it is important to acknowledge that Indigenous youth also experienced togetherness during sports. However, newcomer youth spoke more extensively about sports in the interviews. Lastly, Zikomo's experience highlights teachers and school administrators' responsibility in promoting belonging for students.

Making Personal Connections

The youth also identified personal connections as one of the components of belonging, and this did not differ based on gender and Indigenous or newcomer status. Personal connection refers to shared bonds and connections between the youth and those around them—whether it be family, friends, teachers, or CEDA staff. Establishing personal connections required comfort and trust that allowed youth to initiate conversations outside of academics with teachers at school and CEDA staff and share personal details. In addition, personal connections allowed youth to feel accepted, understood, and cared for. Joanne, an Indigenous female, shared her perspective on the significance of personal connections with teachers and staff:

I got lucky, and I made really good personal connections with a lot of the SPSWs [Student Parent Support Worker]. I feel like a lot of students; more students need that because there's, without today, like how society is today, it's kind of like shit, shitty, and a lot of kids' mental health these days is really crap. So, I feel like if teachers at school and SPSWs here make more of like a personal connection with the students, students, and it'll make them feel more happy, and let them know that they belong here and that they're always wanted here.

The later sections of the thesis discuss the concepts of belonging and wellness; however, Joanne's comments already tie in belonging and concepts associated with wellness, such as mental health and happiness.

The youth also shared extensive experiences of their personal connections with their friends and staff at CEDA. Regarding friends, youth established personal connections by spending time together with friends. Friends were identified as the highlights of attending school, CEDA, and engaging in various activities. For another youth, the company of friends promoted belonging, reduced loneliness, and made school enjoyable:

I feel like friends help you with your sense of belonging because if you're you don't have many friends, then you'll feel lonely, and you won't really feel like you belong anywhere else.... they make the time go by faster instead of everyday feeling like we're robots going to and from school back and forth to work, that helps pass the time (Maxine, male, Indigenous).

Going further to describe his relationship with staff at CEDA and school, Maxine highlighted actions teachers and CEDA staff undertook to foster interpersonal connections.

Interviewer: Besides friends that you have both here at CEDA and schools or the other things that make you feel like you belong at school?

Maxine: Oh, the teachers too. They're really nice like they let you call them by their first name. So, like, kind of more personal a little bit, and they actually treat you like friends rather than like a boss, so you feel less like a computer, [and] more like a person.

Treating youth as friends, avoiding authority in interactions, incorporating playfulness, and sharing jokes contributed to establishing personal connections between the youth and staff. These methods helped build trust and helped the youth freely discuss issues at school and their personal lives with staff. The youth also emphasized the intentionality of CEDA staff in ensuring that they were introduced to other staff and students—promoting an environment where personal connections can be formed with staff and students. Recounting an experience, one youth recalled,

As for my SPSW, he was very nice to me at the start, like he was always including me. I came with only knowing like four people here, so it was always weird and awkward kind of coming here because I didn't know many people, but he always, you know, he talked to me, and then I talked to more people because he talked to them, and he kind of introduced me to other people. And it's like, yeah, he cares that I know more people. And it's like, oh yeah, I feel like I belong here with my SPSWs (Anika, female, newcomer).

Personal connections also made it easy for the youth to talk to their teachers or staff about schoolwork but also in their lives where they needed support—this, in turn, also promoted their feelings of belonging.

I feel like there's more people here at CEDA that understand me better than people do at school. Like for, say, [name of CEDA staff], it would be her against my guidance

counselor, [name of counselor], [and] my guidance counselor wouldn't understand certain things that I want to talk about. And then there's [CEDA staff] that would. And [CEDA staff] usually understands everything that I need to talk about and that I need to get off. And she would always have the perfect advice. But sometimes, when I would go to my guidance counselor, I feel like I can only talk to her about school problems (Joanne, female, Indigenous).

Youth shared experiences of speaking to staff at CEDA about school-related things or otherwise. Compared to schools, where youth could only speak to their teachers or guidance counselors about academic issues, they felt more comfortable sharing at CEDA. Consequently, personal connection allowed CEDA staff to support youth in areas where their staff at school may not be able to support them, reaffirming belongingness.

Checking in

Personal connections allowed youth to form comfortable relationships, making them feel understood. Being understood encompassed the idea that others were acquainted with youth in terms of their physical presence, personalities, habits, and typical behaviors. Personal connection with their teachers, friends, families, and CEDA staff created an environment where teachers, tutors, and CEDA staff were familiar with their typical behaviors. This familiarity allowed staff and teachers to observe changes from normal behaviors and proactively check in on the youth, offering support without the youth needing to ask. Being checked on was essential to youth regardless of whether they were experiencing personal challenges because it made them feel cared for and supported. Sharing an example of how being checked up on made her feel, Trinidad, a newcomer female, narrated,

There was this one old project that we had to do for English class. And like. I was doing something on a topic that was like really vulnerable to me and like my teacher reached out to me afterwards and ask[ed] like, are you okay? Do you need help? And I feel like in that moment, she really did care for me. And I think one of the things that makes me feel like I belong is when, like, you know, somebody cares enough to check in with me and talk to me.... just basically talk to me and like, just make that connection with the person.

Youth also reported being approached more by staff at CEDA when they were acting differently compared to school, where youth had to actively seek help, suggesting that staff at CEDA knew youth better due to the connections they have formed.

“They want me to be myself”

This theme describes the welcoming environment that contributed to the youth's sense of belonging. A welcoming environment played a pivotal role in fostering youth's sense of belonging by providing feelings of reassurance and being wanted. This environment included actions such as being addressed by their names, being remembered, and being accepted. A welcoming environment is closely connected with forming personal connections, as feeling welcomed and accepted allowed youth to establish connections and bonds with those around them. Narrating experiences of CEDA's welcoming environment, Angela, an Indigenous female, states:

When I come to CEDA and school, I feel welcomed. Every time I come to school, they'll say, oh, hey, good morning Angela, and like, it's like I belong, I guess. Yeah, I guess that's here too, like, a lot. I got used to everyone, and it took me, like, a couple of years to get used to it.

Perhaps the significance of a welcoming environment in an academic space is demonstrated by Zikomo, a newcomer male who shared no feelings of belonging or personal connections with his teachers at school yet speaks of feelings of belongingness at CEDA.

It feels more like I fit in in CEDA because everyone here is welcome[ing]. At school like, you're welcome but then, you got to be there anyways. It don't matter if you don't want to or not, you just got to be there. But here [at CEDA], you're welcome... The way CEDA does it is like they want me to be myself. Like it gives me a right to be myself and the right to learn. Not like school. I don't get the right to be myself; they want me to be this—that I don't want to be.

Although he chose not to elaborate on the statement “be who I don't want to be,” it raises questions about the possibility of a lack of proper cultural representation in the classroom, especially considering his mention of not having people of his race at school. Similarly, he speaks about the “right to be himself,” akin to acceptance. Acceptance was also echoed by other youth, who explained that being accepted meant being able to comfortably be themselves and voice their opinions without fear of judgment. Feeling welcomed was a factor in establishing personal connections at school and with one's family. Trinidad, a female newcomer, reconnected with family members she had never met and felt like she belonged after feeling welcomed with “hugs” and “gifts.” Thus, a welcoming environment promoted youth's interpersonal connections with others.

Belonging and Wellness: “I can do more”

When youth experienced belonging through personal connections, togetherness, or a welcoming environment, they felt “happy” and “bright.” The youth acknowledge that feeling like they belonged allowed them to focus on other things for self-improvement. When they do not

feel like they belong, they spend time and energy worrying about trying to belong. However, they can move ahead, work, explore, be creative, and do more when they belong. Adsila, an Indigenous female, elaborated in her interview,

I feel like almost like a bright leader when I do feel like when my wellbeing is okay, in a place where it feels like I belong. I feel like I can just, like, create more and, like, do more than what I already am doing....When I do feel like I belong, it does feel like I can accomplish, like, all kinds of things actually, that I want to do guess like being in a place where I feel like I know that I don't have an idea of what's going on there. That's when my well-being starts to go downhill.

Belonging promoted aspects of wellness, particularly enabling the youth to prioritize themselves and work towards being their best selves. Moreover, being in the company of friends was an environmental structure of wellness and engaging in activities with friends not only promoted wellness (making them feel happy) but also, through the togetherness aspect of belonging (engaging in activities together), encouraged the youth to explore other activities to improve themselves as well:

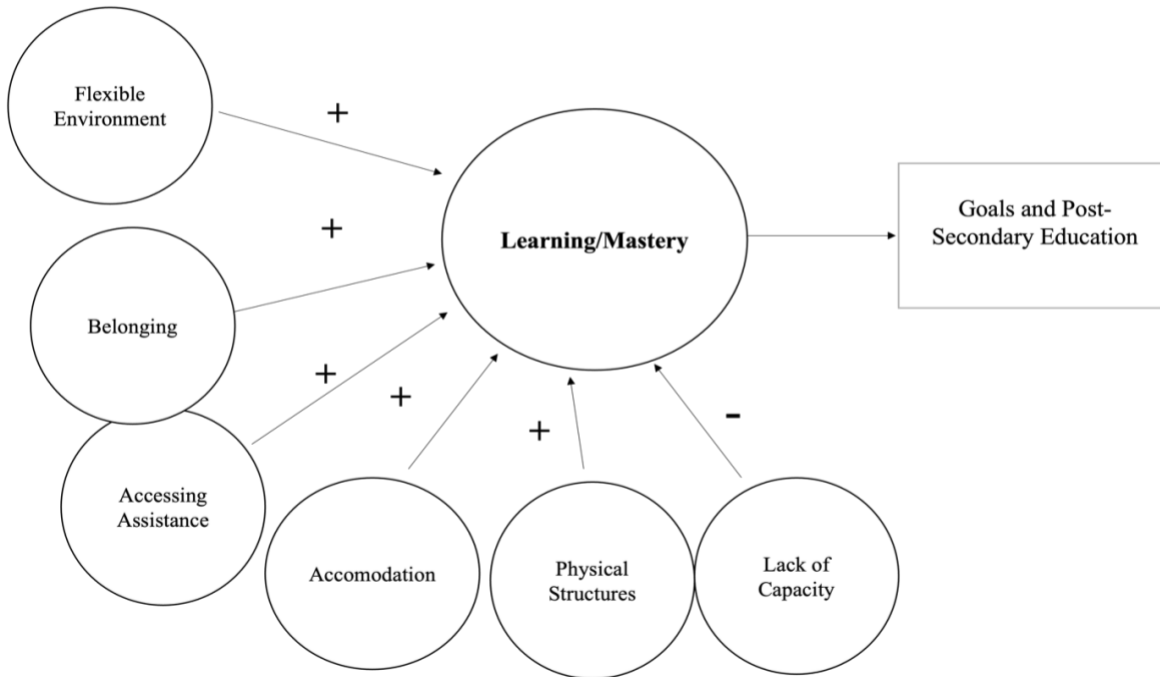
I think because like ice skating is like, kind of like you, you want to learn it. So, you want to try of course with your friends, you'd want to try other experiences too. So, I feel like if you going out with, finding stuff with friends, it can lead you to like, can lead me to like try out other opportunities and stuff. And like maybe like some of us would like to stick to that and actually like get better at it and stuff (Anthony, male, newcomer).

Seemingly, aspects of belonging and wellness are interconnected with environmental structures, such as friends promoting wellness and belonging in nuanced ways.

Meaning of Mastery

This project's research question aimed to understand youth experiences of the Circle of Courage® within academic contexts. Therefore, responses to interview questions regarding mastery centred on the youth's understanding of learning—factors that promoted their learning in the classroom and outside. Consequently, the word learning describes the concept of mastery. The Meaning of Mastery delves into youth's learning experiences within and outside academic contexts, including facilitators and barriers to learning, and explores associations between learning and wellness. This category includes eight themes described below. Figure 5 shows the interaction between the themes that relate to youth learning.

Youth understood learning as a concept both within and outside of school premises. They predominantly discussed academic learning within the classroom, but they also acknowledged other dimensions of learning, such as understanding wellness, discipline, stress management, and hobbies. Learning was linked to goals that youth set for themselves, with school spaces supporting their learning and goals. Whether within or outside the academic environment, learning required self-direction and using academic and non-academic resources, such as YouTube and apps.

Figure 5*Themes associated with Learning****Post-secondary Education: “There’s a lot going on”***

Youth recognized the importance of school and its relation to their post-secondary educational goals and careers, which was not surprising as eleven were in grade 12 at the time of the interview—all wanting to further their education given the right opportunity. The youth were often enrolled in prerequisite courses they needed for their desired university programs. In one case, Ayanda, a newcomer female, shared how taking English was important to her goal of getting into criminal justice:

After I'm done with grade 12, I want to go into criminal justice. I want to get a degree in criminal law. After I get that degree, I want to go into policing because I feel like this is an interesting thing to do.... just because I really want to help my community.... there's a lot going on, it's not safe. So, I want to be that person that inspires people, other people to

follow their dreams and stuff.... last semester, I took an English course because I normally need it in university like to be able to help me with my skills like writing skills so I'm taking extra English course this semester.

In this case, Ayanda shared the value of school and its relation to her future career goals. Youth in this project also identified that the school and CEDA were equipped with resources to support their learning and, in turn, their post-secondary educational goals. They described receiving help from guidance counselors, teachers at school, CEDA staff, and sometimes families helping with their applications to university or college and goals outside of school. Highlighting the importance of engaging with resources available at school and CEDA, one youth narrated,

I really enjoy going to school, actually, even though this year I feel like I'm taking a lot of hard classes, just taking all the prerequisites that I do have to take to get to the post-secondary that I want to. But I feel like even though I'm taking hard classes, it's kind of like the school does have the resources that I need to be able to learn that stuff. Like, they have a bunch of career advisors, they have the guidance counselor, which, like recently, I've been really getting in touch with that because I feel like, you know, it's very important that I'm able to, like, ask questions and like make connections with those resources, just like because I feel like it's better for me, like in the long run. I'm not going to get anything from just standing there and like, you know, being by myself. I realized recently that it's just very important that I'm able to actually use the resources that they have at school and use them to my advantage (Trinidad, female, newcomer).

Trinidad shared that experience in the sharing circle before knowing she was accepted into her preferred university program. Later, during her interview, she spoke of receiving assistance from her guidance counselors and teachers with her application:

I definitely think my guidance counselor, guidance advisor person, because they're the ones who kind of helped me fill in the application and help submit everything. And also my parents, I had to talk with them about like, what I really wanted to do on that, like, you know, like, just general stuff like generic stuff. And like, I don't know, just my teachers, like, I have really good teachers, thankfully.... I'm really thankful actually got really good teachers for that, that teach in a way that I'm able to understand so that I can get those good grades so that I can get into the program that I want because it's like, competitive programs.

Similarly, Maxine, an Indigenous male, shared,

There's this counselor I talked to about, like, what I'm trying to do for my future. And so, he sent me, like, I used to take carpentry, and he sent me to this little program where we could work at a film set making film sets, a film like set props and stuff like that and that to help me with my career. That's how the school can help give you resources to go and work towards your future.

The quotes show that resources at schools and CEDA can go a long way in supporting youth's post-secondary educational goals. They also emphasize the importance of connecting students with available resources to be utilized as needed. Further, youth often received help with assignments, creating resumes, and getting connected with external resources at CEDA. For one youth, CEDA paved the way for her to achieve her career goals through a scholarship:

Interviewer: Tell me about how you got into the high school.

Sara: Oh, with scholarship through CEDA.... Well, with the school. I wanted it to come because it was a private school, and it was also part of the university. So I thought that would be a good opportunity for me. And like with that opportunity, I was able to come

to the school, and that was like one of my goals. I want to go into education, so CEDA has really helped me, like, I guess, through school, meet a lot of people in the education system.

Here, Sara, a newcomer female, wanted to get into education, and CEDA connected her with resources to get into a private school, which will support her goals. This example further highlights the significance of resources and support within academic spaces to support post-secondary transition and goals. Being connected with the right resources was not the only determinant to enhancing one's learning or achieving personal goals; the youth also identified the need to strive towards learning and their future goals. Successful learning required time management and "discipline," among other skills, occasionally acquired following a setback:

I failed a couple of my classes when we went into remote learning that was because I didn't feel like doing that online schoolwork. I just wanted to go play video games, I just wanted to sleep, I didn't want to work [at] school.... being self-disciplined has helped a lot and having a belief in my own abilities has also helped. Because motivation, while useful when it does pop up. And that's the problem, it only pops up, it's not always there. So being self-disciplined makes you do the things that you need to do no matter what the motivation will pop up after you start doing them after you write the first line. But it's not going to be there before you write the first line (Marc, male, Indigenous).

Recounting experiences where the youth utilized failure to learn, Aylen, an Indigenous female, shared,

I think the one thing I really picked up like a skill I picked up at school is time management, because like I was I had really bad attendance and I had to work on it...like, my attendance was so bad, and then I didn't get my credit. And then, like, I took

the credit again. I actually went, and I participated, and I got my assignments, and then I was like, I passed. Well, good job, me.

Youth learning went beyond the traditional classroom curriculum—including transferrable skills such as discipline, time management, wellness, self-confidence, quick decision-making, and learning to ask for help. These skills were acquired through experiences at school, through workshops, and at CEDA, and sometimes by experiencing setbacks.

“I don’t have the skill or ability”

While youth often found resources at school and CEDA to support their learning and post-secondary education goals, this was not the case for those who did not meet the academic cut-off standards. I illustrate this complexity by drawing on Timoti, an Indigenous male’s experience with the school system. Timoti initially expressed feeling unsure about post-secondary after high school. Family dynamics interfered with his education, so he struggled with school. Furthermore, he believed he did not fit in the school and was not as work-driven as others, questioning his ability to succeed in post-secondary. Later during the interview, however, he discussed enjoying games and art and would potentially consider getting into game development—but for the requirement:

I want to try go into coding and game development, but I don’t have the skills or ability to do something like that. My school is trying to get me into something like that. But looking at what I need to get into that in the first place is disheartening; I need to have an average of a certain score that I can barely get normally. And I also need digital forms of my artwork, but I only use physical stuff rather than digital. The stuff I need is something that I can’t provide (Timoti, male, Indigenous).

Timoti circumstances present a complex reality where family circumstances and societal structure intersect to affect learning and potential goals. Home circumstances impact his learning at school, which further impacts his post-secondary education goals. This raises questions about more prominent structural determinants of education and the nuanced factors influencing the decision to pursue post-secondary education. Similarly, during the sharing circle, Trinidad, a female newcomer, raised the issue of scholarships and financial constraints impacting post-secondary education:

I think that one thing I would change about our schools is the scholarships that we have for like it's like a foundation. And they give scholarships to students, like full scholarships, but it's only for certain faculties.... I think one thing I would change is that instead of conditioning the students to apply for certain faculties, I think it would just be better to choose like the best candidates and let them choose what they want to go into. Because I just feel like it's not really good because I feel like some students do only go into those faculties because of the scholarships, because like, it's a lot of money, right? And if they're paying for your whole university education, it's really tempting that you go into it even if you don't like it, you kind of gaslight yourself.

These narratives speak to the nuances of pursuing post-secondary and reflect larger societal structures that influence these decisions. Timoti's circumstances raise questions about accommodations for students who do not meet the academic cut-off requirements to get into universities or colleges. Often, these requirements do not consider the broader factors that impact students' grades. Similarly, how scholarships are structured may lead students to attend programs because they are paid for rather than out of genuine interest or choice. In addition, the youth described four primary factors that enhance their learning. Like belonging, these factors do not

have to coexist all at once but are things youth generally mention when narrating a positive learning environment.

Belonging: “just having communication”

The youth described aspects of belonging and how it promotes their learning. Under aspects of belonging, the youth spoke about togetherness—doing activities together and engaging in interactive and fun activities together. Furthermore, the youth also spoke about their personal connections with their teachers or tutors, including being able to talk to their teachers, actions their teachers take, such as treating them as friends rather than with authority, and their tutors checking in with them. Regarding aspects of togetherness in the classroom, this involved engaging in activities in group work and class discussions, which promoted partnership and fostered relationships with other students. Group work allowed the youth to share their ideas and voice opinions while learning about a topic. It was essential to the youth that the teacher facilitated group activities and discussions in a non-judgmental environment, allowing diverse views and opinions to be shared—as Sara, a newcomer female, put it, “I guess group activities help me a lot. ...It's just like can communicate with classmates and if you're not or if you disagree with something. Or like, you don't know, something like they'll inform you.”

Outside the classroom, a sense of togetherness is involved in engaging in student homework club that allows students to work together and interact with one another but also provides them with the resources they need to learn. Having food available at student clubs also helps create a relaxing environment and provides opportunities for the students to interact with each other. As Hamisu, a newcomer male, shared,

Hamisu: Oh, there was like a like a homework club in my school. And that really helped because, like, you know. I used to go there where there was no CEDA here. That's it.

Interviewer: Tell me about it. What was it like?

Hamisu: Oh, it was fun. There was laptops there, but after, like, 5:00, they make this good food, and then I aint going to lie. There's a lot of tutors.

Afterschool clubs, as described by Hamisu, can enhance learning by fostering a sense of togetherness, providing resources, and offering food to meet basic needs. Additionally, these clubs promote a more relaxed environment, where student interaction and personal occur. Youth also discussed aspects of personal connections and highlighted ways that promote their learning. Having personal connections with the teachers resulted in students fostering a sense of comfort and safety, which made it easier for the youth to ask questions and seek support when needed. Personal connections in the classroom were formed when teachers treated the youth as “friends” rather than with authority. Therefore, when teachers weren’t too strict and engaged in play, it helped the students be comfortable and learn as well. Witnessing teachers being friendly and supportive with other students also encouraged the youth to form connections and feel comfortable around them. Describing personal connections in the classroom, Maxine, an Indigenous male, explained,

Well, in culinary, it’s kind of a small class, I guess, but a handful of students, and everybody knows each other well. And so, even the teacher will be, like. Just like last week on, I think, Friday, one of my friends, [name], he was, I guess as a joke, he said, Oh, let me drink that. And then he’s talking about some cheese broth that he shouldn’t be drinking, and the teacher told him to drink it, and everyone just gathered around and watch[ed] him drink it. And he was just, he didn’t like it. So like, we’re all, like, pretty much close friends rather than like a teacher. They encourage us rather than like demean us.

Aside from the personal connections with teachers, the small number of students in the classroom allowed students to know each other. Furthermore, the teacher being playful made the students feel comfortable and supported. Supporting Maxine, Angela, an Indigenous female, described the relationship between personal connections and learning as “just having communication with the teachers” that made her “feel comfortable asking questions.”

Once again supporting the interaction between personal connections with teachers and learning, Maxine narrated,

It’s just mostly that teachers are making me feel comfortable in the classroom. That helps me learn because it feels like if I mess up and it feels like it’s a bad thing, rather than encouraging me to get it, like to get it done at my own pace, I’d rather them do that than just tell me that it needs to be done.

Notably, youth in the project utilized languages of wellness such as comfort and support when discussing personal relationships with teachers. Personal connection allowed them to seek assistance to learn—showing some connections between aspects of belonging, wellness, and learning. This connection is discussed in depth in further sections.

Lifting the weight off

Another factor that promoted youth learning was being acknowledged and accommodated. This theme relates to teachers’ behavior in the classroom and response when youth struggle with understanding a concept or fail to meet expected standards. The youth learned better when teachers acknowledged the efforts they put into their work, especially when they struggled to meet expectations. They wanted to be recognized as individuals with families and lives outside of school, not just students—that their lives outside of school may impact their academic outcomes. Understanding that family circumstances, working, a health challenge, or

stress may poorly reflect their academic outcomes. For example, issues at home may prevent them from coming early to class or even result in missing classes. Some of the youth also worked to support themselves or their families. Ayanda, a newcomer female, extensively shared her struggles with working multiple jobs to support her family and studies. Working takes away time from learning and limits her opportunities with other things. Therefore, having a teacher who made accommodations when needed was necessary for her learning. Speaking about one of her favorite teachers in whose classroom she learns best, she shared ways the teacher was understanding and accommodating:

She's [teacher] really cool. If you have your work handed in late, like as long as you do, and you put some work into it and some creativity into it. She doesn't care as long as you hand it in and she sees it. And she knows that you're doing your best and stuff. She'll still give you the mark because she knows you're working or going through stuff at home.

Like, she's really fun. She [is] just, she is so fun to be around... For example, she'll stay behind, she'll give you ideas, and she'll be like, Oh, if you want to like earn extra marks, you can do this mini assignment for me, and I can get be able to like, you know, see how much like you've improved and stuff (Ayanda, female, newcomer).

The youth also wanted accommodation from teachers when it came to their mental health. Acknowledging that they might have bad days or weeks and not feel their best, the youth valued teachers who understood and made accommodations during such times. It helped the youth learn better when teachers empathized, understood, and made accommodations without passing judgment. It helped, as Sara, a newcomer female, put it, "lift the weight off" and provided relief, easing worrying about things so that youth could focus on other things. In essence, it promoted their well-being.

In contrast, it was unhelpful when teachers responded to youth's struggles with frustration, responding harshly or rudely. Teachers did not have to respond harshly directly to impact the youth. Watching a teacher react harshly to another student discouraged the youth from asking for help with learning in the classroom was sufficient. Being afraid of a reaction contributed to feeling belittled, underappreciated, and hindered in establishing personal connections with teachers as it made the youth avoid interactions, which in turn did not promote belonging in the classroom.

Sharing an experience with one of her teachers at school where being understanding could have created a more positive learning experience, Joanne, an Indigenous female, shared,

There was a time last year, I think I was I had a really tough time with one of my teachers, and he was really, like, kind of rude to me because we were two weeks into the school year and at the beginning of school I had I was struggling with my family again. And so my teacher said Joanne, you know, if you keep with this behavior, if you keep missing class, if you don't keep doing your work, which I was doing my work, he said, then you're just going to continue being in my class again next year. You're going to fail. And he was just being really rude toward me.

Similarly, Angela, an Indigenous female, recounted a time talked about a time where empathy and curiosity on the part of the teacher could have created a more supportive environment for her learning:

I don't like my history teacher. She was just really mean, and I don't think that she's really professional. She's just really, I don't know, but yeah, I'll change that [change that about school]. I wouldn't want. But I'm glad I'm done with her classes so I am not gonna see her no more. It's just really hard, that class. It was like morning classes, and she

would get mad at me for being late. And I tried, it was not enough for her. But then she kept putting my mark low, like every day. And I handed in my assignments, too. But then I don't know, she just didn't like me because I was loud and I was always happy.

Instances where teachers are not accommodating and fail to recognize the external factors that impact youth learning can have detrimental learning in the classroom. Firstly, it affected youth wellness (i.e., changing their mood) and made them hesitant to ask for help—hindering their ability to focus on improving themselves (an aspect of wellness). Furthermore, responding harshly also created a sense of fear towards the students and, notable from Angela's quote above, a sense of inadequacy ("I tried, it was not enough for her") and mistreatment (i.e., putting marks low). Lastly, aside from avoiding the teacher, it also discouraged the youth from attending school. As Sara, a newcomer female, expressed on witnessing a teacher get "mad" at a student for coming late without being curious about the reasons for being late:

Sara: Seeing makes me feel like I'm not appreciated it, or it's like you're being shamed for it, and [it] also makes you feel small, like... they're using that authority over you.

Interviewer: Now, does that make you feel about school?

Sara: It makes me feel like not coming from being honest. And I feel like I don't [want to] have them as a teacher, but it makes me like, hope I don't go through like next year. It makes me want to avoid them, which I know I shouldn't.

Various external factors impacted the youth's experiences at school. Personal connections allow teachers to detect when the youth's behaviors deviate from the norm and offer support or accommodations for a positive learning environment. When the youth witnessed harsh responses to other students' behaviors or requests, they avoided teachers, hindering personal connections and ultimately impacting their learning experience.

“He knew exactly how to explain it”

Being able to access appropriate assistance promoted the youth’s learning. Access to appropriate assistance involved teachers or tutors actively listening to them, tailoring support to their learning needs, and making it clear that they [the teachers] are there to support them. It involved breaking down concepts into smaller bits, making it easier for the youth to understand, utilizing various methods to explain, and dedicating time to ensure that the youth understood concepts. Other ways to access appropriate assistance may involve receiving help with assignments, receiving support to help youth graduate, and practicing speaking English (for newcomers who did not speak English at the time). At school, appropriate assistance may look like classes that offer extra support, having a teacher explain with images, or even providing external resources such as apps to help youth learn a concept. Illustrating an example of how appropriate assistance enhances learning, Wafula, a newcomer male, expressed,

The way they explain it, it's easy if they explain it. And if I don't understand it, then I ask anything and they can tell me...but sometimes I don't understand, so I just got to try to understand. They [teacher] can find a way to make it easy for me to understand.

Similarly, Maxine, an Indigenous male shared,

That teacher I was talking about earlier. He knew exactly how to explain it for each student, and he made it really easy to understand. Like, oh, there's just one time I didn't understand like geometry, and he explained it in such a perfect way that I think I knew exactly what I was doing for everything else (Maxine, male, Indigenous).

Maxine stressed the importance of tailoring the explanation to students, which comes with understanding their learning styles and needs. Although the youth knew that they could receive assistance at school, it could be intimidating to ask for assistance because of the presence of

other students and concerns about standing out as the only one struggling with a concept. As a result, youth appreciated it when their teachers approached them to offer assistance instead of being the ones to ask explicitly. Furthermore, it often hindered youth's learning when they sought help but did not receive support that met their needs. This lack of assistance was presented by the teacher not dedicating sufficient time to listen; this left the youth with the perception that the teacher did not make enough effort to provide meaningful support. When their needs were unmet, youth felt unacknowledged but resorted to self-direction, using resources on the internet or friends they felt were in a position to help.

Receiving assistance was more accessible at CEDA than at school for various reasons, including the tutors at CEDA proactively approaching students to offer one-on-one sessions and youth feeling more comfortable approaching tutors at CEDA for assistance because of the personal connections they established. At schools, obtaining assistance entailed approaching teachers during lunchtime or scheduling appointments:

[At] school because teachers never ask to help you with homework. You got to be the one to ask but here, they the one that ask you to help you with homework, which is like better because sometimes you won't feel comfortable going up to someone and be like or your teacher and be like, can you help me with homework? You feel like you're little like you're stupid in front of other kids. But here, they come to you quietly, and they ask you to respectfully, which gives you more confidence for you to come more to ask for help (Zikomo, male, newcomer).

Similarly, Adsila, an Indigenous female, echoed the ease of accessing assistance at CEDA:

It is easy to like I would say here [at CEDA], it's easier to ask for help because. They're like they're more, they try to be more comfortable to students, like actually try to be like,

engaged with the students. They don't just try to like, have that role as being teacher and like, yeah, they like see us as people and not just students at school sometimes it is kind of like nerve-racking because like you don't want to be asking for help in front of like your whole class and like, feel like you're the only one who doesn't understand something. Yeah, that's where that pressure comes of like not wanting to ask for [help] at school.

CEDA's structure as an afterschool program eliminated the barriers of asking for assistance; however, the youth were also more willing to approach staff for help because they felt more comfortable with these tutors. This suggests that youth experience a greater sense of belonging at CEDA while learning. Moreover, some youth shared that they witnessed teachers at school respond harshly to other students or get frustrated that they did not understand a concept, which deterred them from asking for assistance. This finding highlights the importance of afterschool programs such as those at CEDA that allow students to receive support they may not necessarily have at school. In a way, the combination of school and CEDA provides a complement that promotes learning.

“You can play board games”

The youth spoke of the benefits of a flexible environment at CEDA that permitted them to take breaks from schoolwork and engage in other activities to relax. The flexible environment at CEDA enabled youth to take charge of the pace and structure of their learning at CEDA, providing opportunities to take breaks when they felt overwhelmed— flexibility they did not experience at school. As Anthony, a newcomer male, explained,

I think just the environment is really nice. If you wanted to take a break, you can play board games with your friends. Or just like draw, I think it's really a nice environment,

and they also give you food. So you know, if you're feeling hungry, they give you food and snacks. I feel like CEDA allows you to have more freedom. Because if in school and just like classes just like mostly studying. And then some like occasional breaks for your next period. But then here at CEDA, it's just, you know [that] you can take a break whenever you want. And you might get sidetracked, but it still helps. Because you know, we all need a break sometimes to wind down.

Notable, while a break might be helpful, it can also cause youth to be sidetracked if they do not know how to manage their own time—speaking to the need for structure to help with flexibility. At the same time, school structures do not allow flexibility to take breaks as often. The environment at CEDA and school allows the students to experience learning in different ways. While the school is more structured with less flexibility, it serves the purpose of those who may need more structure and thrive in those structures. At the same time, the flexible environment at CEDA can provide opportunities to wind down while also allowing youth to learn.

Physical Structures: “I sing those words to the song”

Physical structures that supported youth's learning included music, a quiet environment, and sacred ceremonies. For Nikora, an Indigenous female, singing the words helps her work through her school assignments:

Keeps me going? Music Yeah. I kind of just had this thing where I play a song, and whatever's on my paper, I'll sing those words to the song and not the actual words.

On the other hand, some prefer a quiet environment:

The thing to help me learn is a quiet space and just having like a one-on-one, like a tutor like that I have here, that helps me out sometimes, or even if I just have like some questions, like, they could help (Quispe, non-binary, Indigenous).

Lastly, only Angela, an Indigenous female, spoke of sacred ceremonies, which helped her heal and focus better on school. Sacred ceremonies also promoted her wellness because it allowed her to prioritize herself:

I think the best part, I think, um. I like sacred ceremonies, like at my school and they talk about like how you [are] feeling. When my teacher talked about the part of healing that I was really needed because I felt like I wasn't focused on school that much, it just motivated me to think. It's okay to put myself first.

These examples show the diverse preferences youth had when it came to the environment that supported their learning.

Learning and Wellness: “Learning makes me proud”

The relationship between learning and wellness can be described as reciprocal, where learning contributes to wellness, and wellness, in turn, enhances learning. Youth shared that learning skills, whether academic-related or not, made them happy, proud, and accomplished. These feelings further motivated them to set goals to accomplish, fostering a sense of well-being. For instance, Maxine, an Indigenous male, expressed, “Learning makes me feel accomplished, and it makes me feel better about myself since I, like, I don’t feel like I’m wasting away not learning anything if that makes sense.” Maxine's statements go to show the direct impact of learning and wellness on terms like “feeling better” about oneself and feeling accomplished.

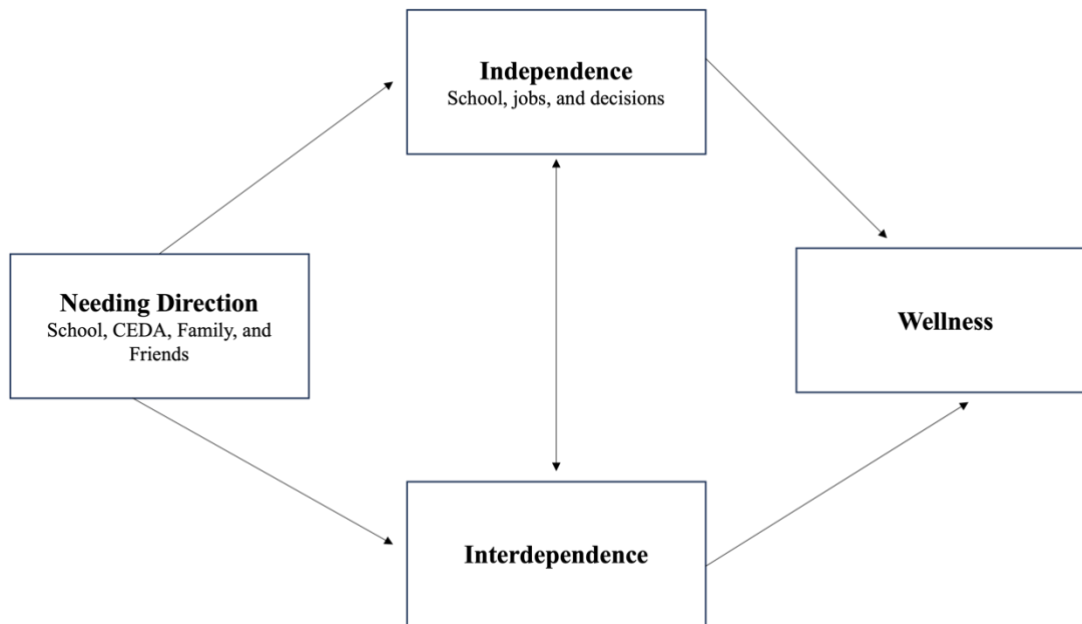
Similarly, Adsila, an Indigenous female, expressed how learning made her feel proud, happy, and excited,

They [learning] make me feel like proud of myself. Like, happy, excited. Like that I learned something new that I didn't think or that I didn't used to do before. Yeah, it feels like feel good....Being able to focus and like, actually do what I said I was going to do and telling people about it and like having them say good things about it just makes you feel more like I can do it and like, if other people are noticing then I could see that notice in myself or like I can notice that to myself.

These examples show how learning fosters feelings of wellness. However, feelings of wellness, such as being comfortable in a classroom, made it easier for the youth to ask questions in the class, as established earlier.

Meaning of Independence

The Meaning of Independence category describes youth's understanding and experiences of independence, exploring the process of attaining independence in academic settings and beyond. It also depicts how the youth's response to failing to achieve independence. The themes include "Doing things on my own," Needing Directions, "They will come ask me for answers", and Independence and Wellness: "Makes you happy and proud." These themes interact with each other (Figure 5 presents the process of independence).

Figure 6*The process of Independence****“Doing it on my own.”***

The youth’s understanding of independence was the ability to do things on their own, at their own pace, without being told to or talked out of by others. As such, independence requires trusting their judgment, having others trust their decisions, and being self-directed. Although independence was often associated with individual behavior, it required others to support them (i.e., others trusting their decisions and allowing them to be independent)—indicating relationships with others can foster that independence. Narrating the meaning of independence, Adsila, an Indigenous female, expressed during her interview, “I see myself being independent when like I’m doing something, at my own time, like out of my own, like ambition and everything, without being told to do it...just doing it on my own. That’s when I feel independent.” The youth especially valued independence as they approached transitioning out of high school, recognizing it as a stage where they needed to make decisions regarding the future.

In addition, they experienced independence concerning their goals—i.e., achieving the things they set for themselves.

Youth primarily experienced independence in academic spaces, their jobs, and in decision-making, and to some extent, there felt an expectation of independence in these places. All the youth experience some form of independence at school because they are expected to work independently with assignments or tasks. Other examples of experiences youth shared included getting a job or being, getting their driver's license, and experiencing living on their own. Speaking on getting her first job, Trinidad, a newcomer female, shared,

So, I got my first job this summer at [location], and it isn't like a big job or anything. But, I was really excited because I really felt like I'm growing, I'm growing up, you know, and just the process of doing the job, doing my resume and sending it and doing the interview and everything, it was so exhilarating for me, like actually felt very independent and like, I you said, like, I'm up there, like, I can do this. You know? I felt like I was up for anything.

All youth experienced varying degrees of independence based on their unique life circumstances and backgrounds. Additionally, their experiences of independence differed across different areas of their lives. Marc, an Indigenous male, recounted during the sharing circle,

Everything I've done in the last couple years has probably been pretty independent. I joined a football team without telling my parents. I got my first job without telling my parents until I told my mom that I need a phone number set up. I didn't even tell my parents I got a job at CEDA a couple of weeks ago. There's a lot of things I don't tell my parents and just do on my own. They still cook for me, that's the only thing I'll never do,

too much time. Other than that, nearly everything I do feels kind of independent. I'm not sure how long it's been that way.

Marc associated independence with making decisions autonomously without needing parental approval or consent. On the other hand, Nikora, an Indigenous female, experienced a more profound level of independence that required her to move cities and live independently. Being primarily responsible for herself, she narrated,

I'd like to say I've been an independent person since I was 16. That's how long I've been on my own for.... I mean, I got kicked out when I was 16, is kind of what I mean. So, yeah, I kind of just do my own thing (Nikora, Indigenous, female).

In contrast, for newcomers, Trinidad and Ayanda are both females who experienced independence in their jobs but not within their homes. Living with their parents, they sought opportunities to experience independence within their homes. Trinidad highlighted when she shared,

Something I wish my parents is that they would give me more independence because my parents are really very strict. And so I find myself actually sneaking around to go places that I want to go, which, like, I don't want to be doing, but you know, you don't give me the freedom. If you don't have the trust in me, then I'll just, I'll just go myself and I won't tell you. And that'll be worse. Right? Like, I just kind of wish that they'd understand, like, you know, I want to get out sometimes. Like, they want me to be at home always like doing chores and babysitting and stuff. And I do it. I just want you guys to be more understanding of, like, my own needs to kind of get a break from the house because it's overwhelming sometimes.

Here, Trinidad can identify her own needs—needing to take breaks from the house because responsibilities at home and the household dynamics do not allow her to exert that independence. Despite this, she still exerts herself, even if it means behind her parent’s back. In circumstances where Trinidad and Ayanda did not receive the trust to carry out their decisions, they still exerted their independence on their own without parental knowledge.

Needing Direction

The path to independence involved a process—evolving from needing direction to achieving independence by doing things on one’s own or, as Adsila, an Indigenous female, puts it, “Just being able to do things on my own where I used to need help.” Youth acknowledged the need to rely on others for guidance and direction before achieving independence. This was evidenced in descriptions of the school system where they initially needed teachers to explain concepts before they understood them; when the youth spoke of experiencing independence at school or in academic spaces, it involved examples of teachers walking through a process before asking them to on their own.

My teacher at school, when I would go into study skills, and I would sit down, and I’d say, hey [teacher’s name], I need some help from my schoolwork, and then he’d be like, is it math? And I’m like, yeah, I really need help, and like, I’m struggling. So, he came down, sat with me for the entire hour I was sitting there, and just helped me understand properly how to do my work. That was the entire booklet that he helped me with (Joanne, female, Indigenous).

Similarly, one encounter revealed,

And like with the learning, it’s like I know a lot of people don’t have like much math skills because I know math is like the most crappiest one. Trust me, I have horrible math

skills. I deal with the same thing. It's like we all get it. But it's like if you go to your teacher for help or even your guidance counselor to see if he could help you, like find some resources like tutors or even just after school, like help, like, was like any, like afterschool programs like that are connected to, like, schools and like learning education and like the perfect example is CEDA, actually (Quispe, non-binary, Indigenous).

Needing directions before achieving independence was also evidenced in the youth's frustrations when they felt inadequate preparation before being required to do things independently:

Sometimes they [parents] expect you to be able to do something when like it's literally never like tell you to do this before. Like, oh, they're like, go and do this. And I'm like, but I don't know how to do that. And they're like, You should. Like what [do] you want from me? Like, please teach me at least like. They want you to do things with, like, no direction without, like, teaching you how to do it for her. That's just something that kind of ticks me off is that they have such high expectations, especially for me because I am the oldest. They have such high expectations for me. They forget that, like I'm still a kid to like sometimes you still need to teach me how to do so (Trinidad, female, newcomer).

Furthermore, youth expressed needing direction before achieving independence when they narrated the necessity of assistance or help from others before evolving to do these things independently:

I'm able to just sit in the classroom, put in my headphones, listen to music, and just work on my schoolwork and not have to ask for help at all with a booklet, which makes me feel pretty happy. Because now I know two years ago, I wouldn't have been able to do that. I wouldn't have been able to look at a book, and I would easily get frustrated and just close the book and go to bed. So now when I look open the book, and I'm able to look at the

questions and understand it right away, like okay, yeah, this is, you got to add these times this divide this it's like, I don't like I don't like division. But I got I got used to it. I finally understand how to do it (Joanne, female, Indigenous).

Joanne's journey exemplifies how success can be achieved by gradually gaining independence with the right support and environment. The relationship between belonging, learning (mastery), and independence is evident in academic spaces—youth needed to learn concepts, which often required a sense of belonging and personal connections with teachers for guidance. While academic direction was typically sought from teachers or tutors at CEDA, the youth also sought guidance from friends, who additionally guided them on non-academic issues. Because youth had more of a personal connection with friends, they found it easier to ask for advice without fearing judgment. The youth also turned to CEDA staff for guidance or advice on non-academic staff. Teachers and guidance counselors at school were often used only for academic direction except when youth had personal connections with them, and these cases were a few.

Achieving independence also requires youth to be ready to receive direction. Joanne, an Indigenous female, illustrates this during one of her hockey practices:

Joanne: There was just one day where I was at, we were at practice and I couldn't get this one drill down. My teacher kept having to come up to me saying Joanne, you got to do this. And then I would do that. And then I would mess up another thing. And she'd have to keep coming back up to me. And that kind of made me feel really defeated because I didn't understand how to do the job properly. And the fact that she kept coming up to me and explaining [to] me to do it over and over again. Like it kind of made me feel a little stupid, because everybody else is doing it perfectly. And then. But the next practice we

had literally a day later, I ended up doing it again. And I got it right because she kept telling me how to do it. And I finally listened to her.

Interviewer: So like, what do you think? Like, what would you have? I guess what helped you?

Joanne: I realized that she was only trying to help me. Like she was just trying to support me, and I guess I was so used to being independent that I didn't really want to listen to her because I was like I can do this on my own. I can learn how to do this on my own and that kind of stuff. So, when she kept having to come up to me, explaining it, I didn't like it, so it wasn't really listening.

In this instance, Joanne initially struggled to grasp a concept and resisted accepting guidance. It was only after realizing her teacher was willing to help that she learned the concept and was able to make the move on her own. The following section on interdependence covers trying to achieve independence despite needing directions.

“They will come ask me for answers”

This theme describes the role of interdependence in learning to be independent. Youth understood interdependence as the ability to rely on others for support or assistance while offering support to others when needed. Interdependence involves a give-and-take dynamic where individuals lean on each other for support, creating a supportive relationship. Because of the added layer of support, this relationship is quite different from just needing direction to achieve independence. Because of this, interdependence was more common among youth and their friends. Sayen, an Indigenous female, described how she and her friends experience interdependence at school, highlighting the reciprocal nature of the relationship:

When I need someone, I look to a certain person to ask for their help, and they give me some answers and stuff. And when they need my help, they'll come to me and ask me for answers. Sometimes, I usually don't have the answers, so I just say something random. It just keeps going back and forth.

All the youth valued interdependence, admitting its need in various situations. Most of the youth valued independence and interdependence, with a select few valuing one over the other. Youth who valued independence and interdependence acknowledged the importance of doing things independently while recognizing the value of having someone to rely on. As another youth shared,

I feel like it's[interdependence] just as important as being independent. Because you need to be able to ask for help because you're not going to be able to do everything on your own. Sometimes you just can't sometimes you need a friend to walk you through a door, metaphorically of course (Marc, male, Indigenous).

Youth also valued having reliable support even when they did not need it because it provided reassurance, further strengthening the interdependence relationship.

A few of the youth valued independence over interdependence for various reasons, such as the desire to be independent, the fear of being overly dependent, the fear of being a burden, and the fear of not receiving adequate assistance. This preference for independence may stem from a fear of lacking reliable support when needed. A newcomer female, Anika, spoke on her value of independence over interdependence:

I think I value being independent more because sometimes when you depend on someone, and they depend on you, I feel like I get you would get used to it. Or just like it being alone, like you're depending on someone for something and then you never know

what if they want to. They don't want to do that anymore. And then you, you're alone. And I'd rather just, you know, get myself used to being, like, doing things individually and not relying on someone else to do them for me. That way, I don't have to, you know, be in a situation later where I'm like, Oh, what do I do in life now? Just because I don't have that person in my life.

Anika's value of independence stems from the fear of dependence and lacking reliable support.

Two of the youth also valued interdependence over independence. These youth share the similarity of experiencing independence when they were inadequately prepared. In Nikora's case—Indigenous female, her value of interdependence stems from living on her own, resulting in living alone without a social worker—"I would value both equally. Mostly, the second word you just said, [interdependence]. Yeah, I value that the most. Being 16 and on your own, what are you gonna do? With no social worker or anything like that."

Meanwhile, Sara's (newcomer, female) appreciation of interdependence results from experiencing hardship with independence at her school. She was the only youth to associate independence with hardship. Earlier, I had introduced that she was excited to get into a school to pursue her education goals. However, the pressure to be independent at school made her question the worthiness of her decisions and made it challenging for her to seek academic and personal help. It also caused her to reevaluate her goals and lower her expectations of what she believes is achievable:

The school I go to is more about independence, that's why when I need help with something, I kind of just push it aside because, you know, the school is about independence, so I'm like, oh, I should kind of live up to it. But then it's bad for me if I think of independence myself, I don't think it would be a good thing because being

independent. I feel like it's very hard for me....Interdependence. I think I value that more because when I ask for help, I like to give back. And the same, like advice, I guess, or help because going back to independence, I don't want them to like them to achieve on their own, but I want to be there to help them (Sara, female, newcomer).

Sara's experience underscores the significance of interdependence and the detrimental effects of feeling obligated to handle everything independently. It highlights the value of a supportive and safe environment that the youth can rely on should they struggle to attain independence.

Moreover, having reliable support, even when unnecessary, can mitigate the pressure of doing things independently.

Youth often regarded CEDA as a safe space to comfortably experience interdependence and seek guidance or support from fellow students and CEDA staff. This was particularly noteworthy for the youth who initially struggled with interdependence. The connections between interdependence and independence are reciprocal, with each concept supporting the other. Youth found relying on support for direction enhanced their independence. Similarly, it also encouraged interdependence among the youth and their friends. When faced with challenges or struggles in achieving independence, youth frequently turned to others, including friends, CEDA staff, and teachers, for guidance and assistance.

Independence and Wellness: "Makes you happy and proud"

Independence promoted youth's wellness in various ways. In their understanding of independence as accomplishing their goals, the youth shared examples of ways independence enhanced wellness through descriptions of feeling happy and proud when they accomplished their goals. Independence also contributed to youth's wellness as it motivated them to do more,

accomplish more, and encouraged them to look at challenges from a different perspective).

Illustrating an example, Joanne, an Indigenous female, narrated,

Knowing that you're able to do something without having to ask for help or anything. You can really like boost you, like makes you feel happy and proud of yourself that you're able to do something without having to ask for support or help or advice. So, I guess asking for advice and support is a good thing, and people shouldn't be ashamed to ask for any of that. But when you know you're able to do it without having to ask it, like [it] boosts your mood and like you're happy. And I guess being happy is a really big thing in wellness.

Another Indigenous youth shared an example of independence promoting her wellness.

Last year March, I think I got my honorary roll and achievement award. Yeah. I'm so happy. I was so happy. Like, I didn't even know I was doing that good. I guess I was just like, I was just doubting myself. But then once I heard that, I was like, Oh damn, I'm really good. Like, I got this. Like, just got stay focused. And I guess that made me feel like it made me realize a lot like I could do a lot of things that I think I can, which made me just like really proud of myself (Angela, female, Indigenous).

Terms like "happy" are associated with wellness. In addition, Angela also expressed being focused and believing she could do more, which is aligned with the Prioritizing Self aspects of wellness. Just as the youth can feel a sense of wellness when they experience independence, they feel defeated when they fail to achieve independence.

Let's say math. So my teacher was teaching us something, and I was really confused.

Didn't know what to do. I asked him. He explained it. I still don't know what to do. I still

didn't get it. And then I was really confused. I didn't know what to do. It made me feel dumb (Sayen, female, Indigenous).

Similarly, in another instance,

There was just one day where I was at, we were at practice. And I couldn't get this one drill down. And my teacher kept having to come up to me saying Joanne, you do got to do this. And then I would do that. And then I would mess up another thing. And she'd have to keep coming back up to me. And that kind of made me feel really defeated because I didn't understand how to do the job properly. And the fact that she kept coming up to me and explaining me to do it over and over again. Like it kind of made me feel a little stupid, because everybody else is doing it perfectly. And then. But the next practice we had literally a day later, I ended up doing it again. And I got it right because she kept telling me how to do it. And I finally listened to her (Joanne, female, Indigenous).

Comparing Joanne's language about experiencing independence and the lack of it, it is noticeable how achieving independence contributes to wellness and how not achieving independence is a barrier to wellness. Thus, independence promotes feelings of wellness and allows the youth to prioritize themselves. Conversely, the lack of independence hinders feelings of wellness.

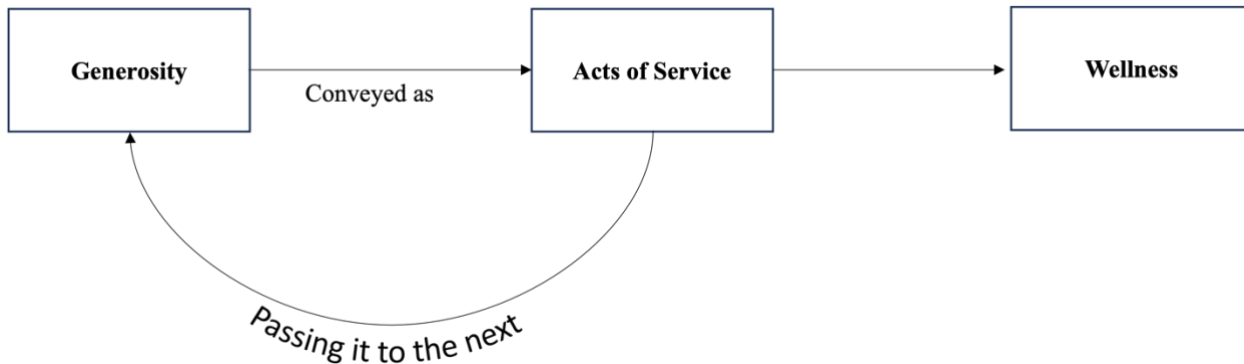
Meaning of Generosity

The Meaning of Generosity delves into youth's interpretation and lived experiences of generosity, encompassing locations where they experience generosity and how generosity relates to their wellness. This category is divided into four themes: "Treating people good no matter how they treat you," Passing it to the Next, and Generosity and Wellness: "I'll smile at them, they'll smile back." Youth generally associated generosity with kindness—using the terms

interchangeably. They understood generosity as being nice and respectful, showing care, listening, and including others who are often excluded. Phrases used to describe generosity also included having a good heart. Figure 7 summarizes the Meaning of Generosity category.

Figure 7

Meaning of Generosity



“Treating people good no matter how they treat you”

The youth expressed generosity through acts of service, extending their service without being required. Examples of acts of service included giving, sharing gifts with others, sharing advice, volunteering, promoting others' happiness, and positively impacting those around them. Generosity included giving without expecting anything in return, as highlighted by Aylen, an Indigenous female, described,

Generosity is like act of service, or you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours kind of thing. Almost, but not really. It's like, okay, I'll help you because you need to help, and I don't really expect anything in return or just like, hey, I noticed your shirt. Let me do this for you (Aylen, female, Indigenous).

Therefore, there is an understanding that generosity is giving without expecting any reward. The youth demonstrated acts of service to people they knew and strangers, inclusive. They carried out these acts for those who could not return the favor, such as giving to homeless individuals,

volunteering at soup kitchens, or giving to those with whom they did not get along. Succinctly summarizing, Maxine, an Indigenous male narrated,

Doing good and treating people good no matter how they treat you, I guess. Say someone could be mean to you, but you mean me back doesn't make anything better. Yes, but generosity, like sharing, like your stories, your own experiences, like sharing in general.

The youth actively incorporated generosity in their everyday lives in small acts such as saying hi to classmates, smiling at others, making others smile, and helping teachers at school to put things away. While for some of the youth, generosity was part of their coursework at schools that involved helping with donations, fundraising, or explaining a concept to a classmate, for others, it required going the extra mile of creating time to volunteer after school and work. Ayanda, a newcomer female, sought opportunities to be generous outside of school and work.

Interviewer: Do you get to experience opportunities to give or receive kindness at schools and at CEDA?

Ayanda: Not really. I'm usually busy working. So, it all like, depends on if I'm like walking home from work, and I see somebody that needs help or somebody that's how that I would usually buy them something to eat or drink. It all depends on where I am....

There's a good program. It's not really a program. It's just like a soup kitchen. I go in there and I help them and hand food to people that come line up. And I just you know that something I do, like on weekends after work, or before work.

As mentioned earlier, the youth incorporated generosity into their everyday lives. In this case, Ayanda actively sought opportunities to do so here despite her busy schedule. Furthermore, CEDA provided avenues to carry out acts of service, such as providing opportunities to clean up

in the community, connecting youth with organizations where they could volunteer, and hosting student conferences that allowed sharing of experiences.

Futhermore, youth in this project encountered generosity in a variety of places. Often, these examples include experiences at school, CEDA, and outside these spaces. Examples of generosity experienced at school included being listened to by teachers, having friends or students help them with assignments, and the school assisting with scholarships. At CEDA, generosity was demonstrated through sharing experiences and advice from students and staff, having fun activities planned for them, and receiving program incentives to assist with post-secondary education. In addition, CEDA provided students with incentives to attend hours, and these incentives were perceived as generosity that would allow the youth to support their post-secondary transition. The youth who received scholarships through CEDA's facilitation viewed it as a generous opportunity that motivated them to focus on their education and pursue their goals.

Acts of generosity that include incentives, scholarship, and having friends or classmates explain concepts connect to broader concepts of mastery and independence. This is because receiving directions (through having someone explain) allows one to learn and do it independently. Similarly, incentives motivated the youth to keep coming to CEDA, where mastery and independence occurred. Lastly, sharing experiences of generosity outside of CEDA and the school. Examples include being given a lift in the cold, having the bus stop for them, or receiving a bus ticket for free:

Interviewer: Do you have a memorable experience where either you are kind to somebody as somebody was kind to you and that just

Marc: Plenty of times where that just happened randomly? Like this one time, I was trying to catch the bus, I came back, and I was like, Oh, it hasn't come yet, it hasn't come

yet. So I ran. And then the bus pulls straight by me. I started running down the street. I said, I am not catching on with that, I started walking. And I see it stopped in a weird spot. I was like why is it stop there? And I was like, the doors are open. Oh, they stopped for me. And I ran. It was a young man. He's like sorry, man, just didn't see you (Marc, male, Indigenous).

Therefore, youth get to experience generosity in a variety of locations and various ways.

Passing it to the Next

The youth explained generosity as a cycle wherein receiving generosity motivated them to be generous to others. They also noted that the emotional impact of demonstrating generosity also fueled a desire to engage in more acts of generosity. In essence, they believed that by demonstrating generosity, they would also encounter generosity in return. Furthermore, giving back or sharing generosity was a sign of appreciation generosity once received. Aylene, an Indigenous female, expressed when recounting the scholarship she received.

Well, it [scholarship] helps motivate me to do great work, great in school, and get those credits to get those grades, whatever finish those assignments. Yeah, but I guess, like. I also carry the generosity with me, and then I try to be generous at home or like just on the street. Like Oh, you're a mom with six kids, you have six kids. Oh my God, you need help. And I'm like, do you need help? And they're like, Oh, yes, please help me. I'm like, Cool. All right. What do you need? But then it was like, can you keep an eye on this kid? I'm like, Yeah, sure.

In summary, the youth were willing to practice generosity in various aspects of their lives, influenced by the kindness they experienced.

Generosity and Wellness: “I’ll smile at them, they’ll smile back”

The youth shared positive emotions concerning generosity—it did not matter whether they were the recipients or the ones giving. They felt happy, great, delighted, or just good and nice, whether it came to being a recipient of generosity or being the ones demonstrating generosity, indicating that generosity invoked feelings of wellness regardless.

Interviewer: Okay, so when someone’s kind to you, maybe the SPSW workers here or the teachers or students, how does that make you feel?

Wafula: Happy, of course (Wafula, male, newcomer).

Similarly, Nikora, an Indigenous female, shared the impact of generosity on her wellness, “It lowkey makes me happy.... then when I go home, that’s all I ever talk about... Or even I’ll go see, like, my friend [name], and I’ll just tell her about it.”

Illustrating an example of what it feels like to demonstrate generosity, Angela, an Indigenous female, shared,

Kindness like when I’m in the hallways, like, I like making people smile. Like, even when I’m not talking to, like, I’ll smile at them, they’ll smile back. I like being able to give that happiness to others and showing them that they can have that too.

In a rather indirect way, generosity enhanced wellness by promoting feelings of belonging.

Sharing on the generosity’s ability to allow one to prioritize themselves and promote belonging, Anika, a newcomer female, narrated,

People are a big part of your life, and well, when people are nice to you and you’re nice to them, it builds relations, and it helps my wellbeing, and that makes me happy. So, when I’m happy, and my mind kind of encourages me to do things more often, it makes,

you know, it gives me, oh, let's do this today, and it can encourage me to do more and achieve the goals I already have.

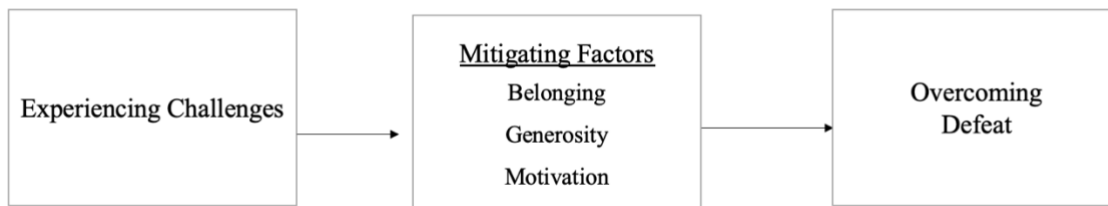
Generosity contributed to feelings of wellness and the youth's ability to prioritize and improve themselves. Here, this youth discussed building relationships, which is similar to forming personal connections. Personal connections also formed belonging aspects, contributing to the youth's wellness. Nonetheless, generosity enhanced the youth's wellbeing.

Overcoming Defeat

One of the research questions sought to answer how the Circle of Courage® relates to youth's resilience. The category Overcoming Defeat describes the youth's experiences of challenges and things that help them overcome them. Three factors helped the youth push through challenges—belonging, generosity, and motivation. As such, this category of Overcoming Defeat has been subdivided to reflect these three themes (as summarized in Figure 8).

Figure 8

Overcoming Defeat



Youth's experiences of challenges at school often centred on the expectations of independence—the ones they set for themselves or feel are expected of them by their teachers. When the youth fail to be independent, they feel defeat, entrapment, and sometimes a sense of

inadequacy. Moreover, the challenges they encountered were not limited to academic difficulties but also encompassed emotional struggles, such as times when their mental health was not optimal. During challenging times, the youth primarily sought support from their friends, followed by CEDA staff and teachers. Furthermore, a few of the youth reported seeking support from their families. This is not to suggest that families were not an essential support system—instead, it was what was shared during the interviews (which took place in an academic setting and focused on academic issues). Youth also valued having a support system and sought out those around them who could provide this support. As perceived by the youth, support involved having someone who listened, provided advice, offered guidance, extended a helping hand through difficult circumstances, provided alternative perspectives, and uplifted their mood. Adsila, an Indigenous female, shared the importance of having people around during challenging times.

When people go through really hard times themselves, just all kinds of things can happen. And you know, you can feel lost sometimes, but having someone be able to say something to you can put your mind in a different state and just, you know, make you like, think like can take it easy and just do other things while like letting that one thing figure itself out, slowly, I guess.

In this example, Adsila emphasized that challenging times can be vulnerable, stating it is a place where “all kinds of things can happen.” As a result, the importance of having someone else who can lift a person out of that place and offer a different perspective—taking things easy and offering distraction with other things while working on the situation is crucial.

In another example, Marc, an Indigenous male, illustrated the importance of a listening ear and friends:

Being able to express myself helps with my mental health, being able to, what's the word? Use my energy and use my anger and use everything that's bothering me as a way to divert it into something else, something useful really helps a lot. I've been going through a hard time as well, and I think the only way I'm ever getting through it is with all my friends. Being able to express myself helps a lot. That's how I feel. That, in turn, helps my mental health. But I also think that the way do it also helps how I deal with it. The way I look at it, it's from walking afterward. If I'm breathing afterwards, If I'm able think and move afterwards, it doesn't matter what I feel. I'm getting through it.

Marc emphasized the importance of friends and having someone listen. This is an interesting finding because, regarding independence, the youth valued being able to do things on their own. However, when experiencing challenges and difficulties, they emphasize the importance of having others who offer support.

“We are going through it together”

Belonging played a crucial role in overcoming challenges, particularly personal connections and togetherness. The youth emphasized having personal connections with their friends, teachers, and CEDA staff, making it easy for them to reach out for help. Personal connection also allowed those around the youth to detect deviation from typical behaviors, so they check up on them. Marc, an Indigenous male, showed an example of being able to reach out for assistance due to personal connections:

I usually don't talk about my problems with my family. They never seem to have the answers I need or that I want to hear because it just feels as if I've heard it before. I usually end up talking just to my teachers. My gym teacher. Okay. My teacher had gym teacher and with my SPSW [name]. They always seem to know, they [are] caring and

understanding. The contrast between [SPSW] and my gym teacher is very different. But again, I know that they're caring. My gym teacher's blunt and funny, but it's always like alright, I get it. [SPSW] is understanding. I just try not to evaluate my life when I'm too tired because I just start thinking of problems that probably won't be there in the morning. Most times, I just want to get through it. I just think back to quotes that I've heard to the end with happy things. You know, I think Tom Hanks said time will pass, and this will pass too, so just sit through it and wait.

Although Marc feels uncomfortable approaching his family when facing challenges, he can approach his teachers because of his relationships with them. His statement also illustrates how he approaches challenges (i.e., what he does to solve or prevent the issue—not thinking about life when he is tired).

Furthermore, youth found support when they realized they were not alone and felt a sense of togetherness. During a challenging time, a sense of togetherness could be that they were in classes with their friends or that their friends were struggling to understand the same concepts, and thus, they were together. Perhaps a sense of togetherness was why the youth often turned to friends first for support. Having a sense of togetherness made it easy for the youth to share ideas on solving challenges and support each other—again, the process of interdependence at play. As one encounter shared with Sara, a newcomer female shared overcoming challenges, “Like with my friends, we're all struggling through the course of the other, like we're going through it together. So, like, let's help each other out.” Her statement emphasized the value of belonging and highlighted important aspects of personal connections and togetherness in times of stress. It also highlighted the role of interdependence with friends.

Generosity

Generosity helped the youth navigate challenges. Because they perceived generosity as kindness and being nice, the language around how generosity helped them cope involved nice and kind gestures. Regardless, the youth shared that receiving generosity in times of adversity made them feel understood, provided space for them to reset, uplifted their mood, and even encouraged them to keep going. As such, generosity during hard times promoted wellness and allowed them to concentrate on other aspects of their lives. Adsila, an Indigenous female, shared,

Being generous and like having generosity shown to me does make me feel like going through hard times; it does feel like it feels uplifting, almost like a very nice tapping.

And, you know, everyone just likes shares without being asked.

Adsila's comments provide evidence of generosity contributing to one's wellness in terms of improving mood and that nice tapping can be akin to providing comfort and the presence of someone else so that a person is not alone. Therefore, generosity does not just help with facing challenges; it also enhances their wellness during challenging times.

Similarly, Maxine, an Indigenous male, narrated receiving kindness at CEDA when experiencing a difficult time,

I was feeling down that one day before, like when I talked to [SPSW]. I felt like after we talked, I felt like everything wasn't over. I guess like it felt okay. It felt like, [it] help[ed] me calm down and help[ed] me want to do my task ahead of me because I was kind of slacking in my work that day but after that, it helped me want to stay out of my own head.

Again, Maxine highlighted the importance of kindness and having someone around to listen. So far, the strategies discussed revolved around having direct support through generosity or

belonging. The following theme discusses the youth who find motivation in their situation and from their surroundings.

“I can be better”

Youth often found that being self-motivated helped them overcome challenges. While some of the youth were able to self-motivate often by thinking of the benefits of going through (for example, being proud and accomplishing something), others found motivation by looking at those around them—friends, family members, teachers, CEDA staff whom they look up or is thought to have gone through challenges. Motivation from friends or family often stems from friends actively supporting or encouraging the youth to do better, witnessing their friends accomplish something, and feeling motivated by their success.

Well, I can kind of self-motivate myself. Like I look at my grades and think like, oh, that's not a good grade. And I'm like, okay, well, I need to work harder. Or, like, when it gets, like, super bad and then, like, I get a phone call, it's like, hey, your grades suck. Yeah. And then I'm like, Oh, okay. Well, I don't know if I can complete all that. Is there, like, an accommodating way to push my grade but, like, not have, like, a billion things to do at the same time (Aylen, female, Indigenous).

Aylen tried to navigate challenging situations herself, trying to find accommodations on the reminder that she needed to work on her grades. Nikora, another Indigenous female, was self-motivated by thinking about the feeling of accomplishment after the fact:

I guess every time I finish my units. I always think I can't do this no more. Well, it's done, especially for hard classes like math. I just know I'm going to be so proud of myself once I've done math just because it's a long, long, long, long unit that you have to basically do by yourself.

Both Nikora and Aylen, find motivation themselves. On the other hand, some of the other youth found motivation from their surroundings. Finding motivation through friends—Anthony, a newcomer male, expressed,

I think with friends, it's like, you want to be on the same level as them as well. So I guess it like it helps me like, oh, I want to be like. How do I explain this? I had something going, and then I forgot it. Like, I guess for me, when I feel like I don't belong, that's when, like, I want to really step it up and make it feel like I do belong. Because sometimes you feel like you're being you're holding your, I'm holding myself back. And that if I want to be if I want to be on the same level as them, if they're on a higher level, then I should also work harder to be with them.

For Anthony, being on the same level as his friends allowed him to feel a sense of belonging, which motivated him to help him through his struggles at school. Being surrounded by that one can look up to has the perhaps unintentional ripple effect of motivating others around to work through their challenges.

Previous examples have illustrated how the youth found motivation when they witnessed others succeed or were motivated by success. However, one youth found motivation in what he did not witness in his family— “I only actually have five brothers, and only one of them actually graduated, and being the youngest of them, I kind of wanted to try to prove that I can be better than those older than me” (Timoti, male, Indigenous). Timoti highlights resilience in finding strength and motivation through his family circumstances. Despite not finding examples of strength in his family, he draws motivation from within himself, using the absence of an example to motivate himself through school.

Summary

The study aimed to understand youth's lived experiences of the Circle of Courage® at schools and CEDA. It also aimed to understand how the Circle of Courage® related to youth's wellness and resilience. Findings from the study support the Circle of Courage® theory that belonging is the foundation of the Circle of Courage®, promoting mastery and independence. Concerning the relationship between belonging and mastery (referred to as learning in this section), aspects of personal connections promoted learning by encouraging the youth to seek teacher assistance. Learning or mastery rather, in turn, promotes independence—once youth master a skill, they can do it on their own without any assistance or guidance. In an indirect connection between belonging and independence, the youth required direction from others prior to attaining independence, and personal connections enhanced seeking that direction. Findings did not show a clear relationship between independence and generosity; acts of generosity can be evidence of independence as youth often carried out acts of service without being told, acting on their own accord, and making decisions. Furthermore, being on the recipient end of generosity promoted the youth's feelings of belonging, forming a full Circle (see figure for the Circle of Courage®). The study introduced the concept of interdependence to the youth. Findings suggest that the youth fell to interdependence when independence was not possible, and interdependence was valued in building resilience. They found support in others to face challenges. Furthermore, belonging, mastery, independence, interdependence, and generosity promoted feelings of wellness and allowed the youth to prioritize and focus on bettering themselves in various aspects of their lives.

Chapter 5

The study aimed to understand how newcomer and Indigenous youth experience the Circle of Courage® at schools and CEDA. It also aimed to understand how concepts of the Circle of Courage® relate to their wellness, resilience, and goals that they had set for themselves in the future. While existing literature acknowledges the resilience demonstrated by Indigenous and newcomer students in the face of academic challenges, relatively few studies have explored factors that foster resilience, primarily employing the Circle of Courage® framework. The thesis attempted to bridge that gap by exploring how newcomer and Indigenous youth experience the Circle of Courage® components to facilitate safer and inclusive school spaces. The study employed guiding principles from IPA, CBPR, and Indigenous Methodologies and utilized data collection methods that allowed in-depth explorations of experiences to answer the research questions and gain rich data to fill existing gaps in the literature.

This chapter comprehensively discusses the research questions, aims, and findings. It examines how the findings relate to the research questions, aims, and existing literature and the Circle of Courage® framework. The chapter is structured into sections that discuss the findings and implications, as well as a concluding section.

Discussion

This section introduces a discussion of the emergent themes and research questions—connecting the youth’s experiences to existing scholarship and the Circle of Courage® framework.

Question 1: How do Indigenous and newcomer youth experience and understand factors that foster their belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity in schools and at CEDA?

This question aimed to understand the youth's experiences of Circle of Courage® utilizing data from the sharing circle and interviews with the youth. The youth varied in their experiences of the Circle of Courage® with schools and CEDA spaces. Belonging was promoted through togetherness, personal connections, checking in, and a welcoming environment. In addition, the youth experienced belonging through their interactions with others—particularly friends and staff, and CEDA was notably an environment that promoted belongingness.

Furthermore, the youth mastery experiences centred on attaining mastery at schools and otherwise. As such, the term learning was used interchangeably throughout the paper to discuss mastery. Factors of belonging, accommodation, access to breaks, and appropriate assistance enhanced the youth's learning experiences. Furthermore, the physical structure of learning spaces also played a role in learning, with the youth expressing various preferences for environments conducive to their learning needs. Belonging was identified as a foundation for learning; when the youth felt like they belonged, they felt comfortable and at ease with asking for assistance when they struggled.

Independence was characterized as the youth's ability to make autonomous decisions and achieve or do things independently. Independence was experienced within and outside academic settings, including in their jobs. It was a process where the youth moved from needing directions to establishing independence through interactions with others. Achieving independence requires learning or mastering skills.

The final component of the Circle of Courage® is generosity, which was valued and experienced as kindness demonstrated through acts of service within and beyond academic settings. Generosity was perceived as a cyclical process, where experiencing acts of generosity inspired the youth to reciprocate by extending acts of kindness toward others. The youth believed

that the cycle of generosity created a ripple effect, and being generous was often returned to them, either directly or indirectly. Furthermore, data collected through the sharing circle and interviews did not point to differences among the youth, whether immigration status or gender, except for activities that promoted belonging. These strong similarities across diverse demographic backgrounds may strengthen the literature of the Circle of Courage® as a positive youth development foundation that can be applied to youth universally. The following subsections will delve into detailed explanations of the categories, illustrating the youth's interaction or experiences with the Circles of Courage (Meaning of Belonging, Meaning of Mastery, Meaning of Independence, and Meaning of Generosity) and contextualizing them within existing scholarship.

Meaning of Belonging. Belonging serves as the keystone of the Circle of Courage® (Brendtro et al., 2019). Existing literature underscores the role of belonging in enhancing academic success and positive learner attitude. Brendtro et al. (2019) define belonging as a fundamental necessity universally required by youth, cultivated through interactions with family and peers. Echoing Brendtro et al. (2019), findings from the present study contend that belonging is developed through interactions with others—youth's perception of themselves is impacted by how others treat them Brendtro et al. (2019). This highlights the potential for nurturing belonging within classroom settings. Belonging in the classroom is fostered by establishing trusting relationships with teachers, and thus, teachers can promote belonging through investing time in their students, facilitating collaborative activities, and fostering an environment of acceptance and inclusivity to make learners feel valued and accepted (Brown, 2005).

Youth in the study illustrated some of these established findings documented by Brown (2005) and Brendtro et al. (2019). Youth understood and experienced belonging through a sense

of togetherness, establishing personal connections, being in a welcoming environment, and having people check in on them. A sense of togetherness involved being together and experiencing similar conditions and treatment in the classroom. Part of togetherness included a sense of equality—they would be treated equally regardless of race or gender. By being treated the same way, youth learned that they mattered. Although the study did not specifically explore racism in schools, it is essential to acknowledge the prevalence of racism experienced by Indigenous and newcomer students in Canadian schools. For instance, one of the youths (Zikomo) spoke extensively about racism experience at his school. Ennab (2022) reported experiences of racism among Black and Indigenous students within the Winnipeg School Division, highlighting both individual and systemic racism as significant barriers to their sense of safety. Similarly, a study focusing on Muslim women in high schools, including newcomers, found instances of Islamophobia as well as anti-Black and anti-Palestinian racism within Winnipeg high schools (Ennab et al., 2024). The youth that participated in the study did not explicitly narrate experiences of racism, and this may be due to the nature of the interview protocol, which centred on experiences of the components of the Circle of Courage® at schools and CEDA. Nonetheless, it is essential to draw on existing local literature to contextualize Zikomo's experience of racism, which is not uncommon in Winnipeg schools. Reluctance to go to school is a common response to racism, and this was reflected in Zikomo's response to his experience. This aligns with findings by Hare and Pidgeon (2011), who identified racism as a contributing factor to Indigenous youth dropping out of school. Despite being a newcomer, Zikomo's experience resonates with the broader challenges some Indigenous students experience in Canada (Richmond & Smith, 2012). These findings underscore the complexity of challenges within school environments that need to be addressed, particularly as the Government of Canada

aims to increase high school completion and post-secondary education, aligning with sustainable development goals and fulfilling Truth and Reconciliation Commission calls to action. It also emphasizes the vital role that educators and administrators play in fostering a sense of belonging among all students.

Another major factor that promoted belonging was establishing personal connections. Personal connection was pivotal in youth interactions with peers, friends, teachers, and staff. It involved shared bonds and trustful relationships that allowed the youth to be known for who they are and to feel safe sharing academic and personal experiences with their peers, teachers, and staff. Sharing their personal experiences created avenues for staff to support them. Spending time with students to get to know them fosters belonging, as it allows relationships to become more interpersonal, leading to increased trust in teachers, which is crucial for meeting student needs in the classroom (Brendtro et al., 2019). The youth explained that personal connections were formed through humor, acceptance, and lowering power imbalances between teachers and students. Their role in enabling the youth to share academic and personal struggles with friends and teachers highlighted the significance of personal connections. Schools can potentially mitigate the risks youth experience in their personal lives (Brendtro et al., 2019). In Richmond and Smith's (2012) study exploring Indigenous students' experiences of belonging in an urban high school, trusting relationships with teachers allowed youth to seek support. However, because the youth in their study did not trust their teachers, they often felt uncomfortable seeking help (Richmond & Smith, 2012). The youth that participated in the present study felt they could only speak to their teachers or guidance counselors about academic issues. In contrast, they felt safe and trusting when sharing experiences related to school or otherwise with CEDA staff. This positions CEDA as a centre of support, allowing its staff to assist the youth in areas where school

staff may be unable to support them. Furthermore, it highlights the role of after-school programs as structures that can complement schools in providing necessary support to youth.

The last factor that contributed to belonging was a welcoming environment. A welcoming environment was characterized by the youth feeling wanted, accepted, and included, encompassing actions such as addressing students by their names and greeting them. A welcoming environment promoted personal connections and required intentionality on the part of the staff to foster a sense of belonging among students.

There were strong similarities between Indigenous and newcomer youth in the factors that contribute to their sense of belonging, with the notable difference being that newcomer students spoke more about sports as a means of belonging. This may be because sports are enjoyable activities with rules often laid out and require teamwork. Youth in this study, like those in Bouchard' al.'s (2023) articulated that sports may also provide opportunities to strengthen existing relationships and create new ones. Furthermore, this project highlighted the role of teachers, staff, and friends in their experiences of belongingness in academic spaces. The roles of parents were not mentioned extensively as a factor of belonging to the school. Vargas-Madriz & Konishi (2021) found that students and teachers tend to have more immediate relationships with youth in the classroom compared to parents (Vargas-Madriz & Konishi, 2021). Moreover, parental support does not predict the impact of belongingness at schools (Vargas-(Vargas-Madriz & Konishi, 2021).

Meaning of Mastery. The term learning was used in this project to explain concepts of mastery. As such, the youth spoke of how learning helped them to attain competence. Brendtro et al. (2019) define mastery as the motivation or drive that allows one to achieve competence or knowledge. Youth in this project experienced learning both within traditional academic curricula

and through workshops and activities. They highlighted that learning required resources and personal striving and occurred with support from teachers and peers, but learning was also self-directed. While schools and CEDA provided resources to support learning, the youth's attributes, such as motivation and discipline, allowed them to interact with these resources to attain success. Interestingly, some personal attributes, such as motivation and discipline, were formed after experiencing failure—a process Brendtro et al. (2019) identified as integral to mastery. Youth who fail courageously can use failure as an opportunity for growth and motivation for future success (Brendtro et al., 2019). Given that mastery is a continuous process, academic spaces need to foster environments that allow youth to fail gracefully rather than view failure as a hindrance met with punishment (Brendtro et al., 2019). The findings from the study revealed that when failure is not perceived as an opportunity for growth, it can result in feelings of inadequacy, which may lead to questioning one's ability to succeed in post-secondary education. This reflects the importance of academic spaces to foster confidence in these youth who may not excel academically and provide tailored support to ensure they do not prematurely give up on their education.

Belonging is identified in the literature as a predictor of academic success (Ordaz & Mosqueda, 2021). This project contributes to understanding how it impacts youth learning, mainly through aspects of togetherness and personal connections. Togetherness in the classroom was experienced through group work, and student clubs allowed the youth to engage with other students and exchange ideas. The findings of this study align with Brendtro et al.,(2019) and Richmond and Smith (2012) whom report that group activities in the classroom that facilitate youth interactions and promote learning among students. Elaborating on this further, group collaboration has the potential to foster a positive attitude toward peers and teachers in the

classroom, engage students who may otherwise be disinterested, and enhance social skills (Brendtro et al., 2019).

The study suggested that youth academic lives were influenced by their backgrounds and various social determinants of learning. Family dynamics, health conditions, and socioeconomic circumstances informed their academic experiences; some youth worked to support their families, helped manage health conditions, or had circumstances at home that made learning in the classroom difficult. External factors that impact learning aligns with literature on the social determinants of learning. The social determinants of learning coined by Levinson and Cohen, (2023) are relatively new in literature and refer to “social and structural factors outside the individual learner, often beyond the traditional reach of teachers and schools, that can affect learning” (p. 2). These determinants provide insights into the disparities observed in the classroom, explain the rationale behind some drop-out rates, and situate learner context in broader societal structural and systemic issues (Levinson & Cohen, 2023). Acknowledging and understanding these determinants is crucial as it holds teachers and school administrators accountable for anticipating their impacts and preparing to address the diverse needs of learners affected by these factors (Levinson & Cohen, 2023). Furthermore, it shifts the sole responsibility of learning from the youth and challenges the systems contributing to these disparities (Levinson & Cohen, 2023).

The importance of teachers acknowledging and supporting the social determinants of learning was expressed in this project. Youth did not always feel teachers understood the broader structures that impacted their learning at school, especially compared to their experiences at CEDA, where they felt better understood. Teachers’ harsh responses to youth not meeting their expectations hindered personal connections and led to avoidance and decreased desire to attend

classes or school. In contrast, when teachers took a holistic approach and acknowledged that youth were more than just students with lives outside of school, youth reported more positive learning experiences. Teachers who recognized and accommodated the challenges posed by youth's broader life circumstances were highly valued by the youth. These teachers created a supportive environment where students felt understood.

The study's findings show that teacher interactions influence learning by fostering a sense of belonging in the classroom, facilitated by personal connections with teachers. Youth belonging in the classroom is crucial for educators and teachers to address the social determinants of learning. Study findings showed that youth experienced belonging when they shared personal connections with their teachers and CEDA staff. This sense of belonging was fostered when teachers or staff took the time to get to know them, engage in conversations, lower the hierarchy in the classroom, and build trust. Personal connections made the youth feel comfortable with teachers enough to discuss their personal lives, including the challenges they were experiencing. This allowed the teachers to know them better and, as such, understand, address, make accommodations, or understand when youth fail to meet expectations. Moreover, personal connections can facilitate learning, making it easier for youth to ask for assistance from teachers and staff. Lastly, it is possible that because the youth had better personal connections with staff at CEDA, they felt better acknowledged (of the social determinants of learning), as well as a result of the staff knowing more about the youth's backgrounds and factors that affected their academic lives.

The findings from the study highlighted the importance of access to appropriate assistance as a key factor in promoting learning in academic spaces. Personal connections were crucial in facilitating this access, as they allowed youth to feel comfortable asking for assistance.

Additionally, teacher accessibility and willingness to assist significantly influenced youth's access to appropriate help. Access to help or assistance when needed is one of the essential characteristics of support in the classroom (Richmond & Smith, 2012). The structure at CEDA provided better access to assistance because staff approached students to inquire if they needed help instead of students having to initiate requests for help from teachers in the classroom. The proactive approach of CEDA staff in approaching students helps to alleviate barriers or embarrassment associated with asking.

Meaning of Independence. Study participants defined independence as the ability to accomplish tasks on their own and make their own decisions while recognizing the need for others to trust and allow them the autonomy to make their decisions. The youth experienced independence at schools, in their decisions, and in their various jobs. While independence was discussed primarily at the individual level as an individual responsibility, it occurred in the presence of others (i.e., others trusting their decisions and allowing them to be independent). The youth saw independence as a process that began with needing direction or guidance and eventually becoming able to perform tasks or skills autonomously. When independence was impossible, youth received guidance from teachers and peers with whom they formed interdependent relationships, as interdependence also fostered independence.

As the third component in the Circle of Courage®, independence is essential for youth to grow into respectful adults who take control of their lives (Brendtro et al., 2002, 2019). Brendtro et al. (2019) define independence as a responsibility that occurs in the presence of self-control, self-confidence, and shared responsibility, contrasting with the conventional lens of independence as self-sufficiency without the help of others. Self-control involves regulating one's emotions and impulses, self-confidence—belief in one's power to influence one's life and

others around them, and shared responsibility entails respecting the rights and autonomy of others (Brendtro et al., 2019). Shared responsibility also includes the ability to lead and knowing how to follow.

There are similarities and differences between Brendtro et al.'s (2019) independence process and this study's findings. One similarity is that although youth in this study viewed independence as self-sufficiency, they also acknowledge the role others play in fostering independence, such as providing opportunities to be independent and respecting expressions of youth independence. This aligns with Brendtro et al.'s (2019) concept of shared responsibility, which recognizes the communal role of independence in youth development. Independence is not just about self-efficacy but a communal obligation (Brendtro et al., 2019). Another way the findings contribute to understanding independence as involving a community is that all the youth valued interdependence and its role in achieving independence. Interdependence was incorporated into the interview protocol following the sharing circle discussions. Youth understood interdependence as a reciprocal relationship that allowed them to lean on others for support when independence was not feasible. The connections between interdependence and independence were reciprocal; youth relied on support for direction, which enhanced their independence. Consequently, independence also encouraged interdependence among youth and their friends, creating the capacity to assist.

Another notable similarity between study findings and Brendtro colleagues' (2019) view is the capacity independence provides. Expanding on their concept of independence, Brown (2005) explains that independence is a responsibility to make one's life successful. In the study, youth described independence as it relates to their goals—in that independence allowed them to better the goals that they have set for themselves and overall improve their wellbeing. Similarly,

findings on youth need for guidance support is consistent with Brendtro et al.'s (2019) perspective of independence. Independence is not complete autonomy—instead, adults set expectations, guidance, and structure (Brendtro et al., 2019). In the study youth reaffirmed the requirement for teachers and parents to guide their expectations of independence; moreover, the lack of guidance resulted in feelings of frustration.

The classroom space illuminated the relationship between mastery and independence. For instance, the youth identified the goal of independence as performing coursework on their own in the class. Achieving independence in coursework involved guidance from their peers or teachers, enabling them to master the skill and attain independence. Similarly, youth who valued interdependence over independence highlighted the virtue of interdependence in the classroom, stemming from a lack of support and the expectation of independence without proper direction and guidance. As highlighted in the findings, Sara found that her school placed too much emphasis on independence and not enough interdependence, which created feelings of inadequacy about her post-secondary goals. For Sara, interdependence mitigated the pressure from school. This suggests that school spaces that promote independence and self-efficacy without proper support can pressure youth and make them feel inadequate in their educational pursuits. Therefore, school spaces can consider cooperative and group learning strategies to improve classroom belonging, learning, and independence. Literature highlights that cooperative learning allows students to interact with each other instead of individual learning in the classroom, which can foster competitiveness (Arta, 2018; Brendtro et al., 2019). Cooperative learning has been shown to improve students' social skills and promote interdependence (Brendtro et al., 2019). A study in Indonesia incorporated cooperative English studies among their students and benefits in terms of interdependence and confidence as the students worked

together to achieve common goals (Arta, 2018). Arta (2018) demonstrated that schools can be spaces that support independence through interdependence.

Lastly, while youth in this study may not have explicitly discussed the concepts of self-confidence and self-control, some of their narratives align with Brendtro et al.'s (2019) ideas of self-confidence and control. For example, youth's experiences of achieving independence were accompanied by increased self-confidence, indicating a belief in their ability to accomplish more tasks or goals. Moreover, aspects of self-control, such as regulating one's emotions (Brendtro et al., 2019), emerged in youth's discussions about mastery/learning (i.e., regulating impulses and learning self-discipline). These suggest that the concepts of self-confidence and self-control are intertwined with the themes of mastery and independence within the context of this study.

Meaning of Generosity. Study participants described generosity as voluntary acts of services performed without prompt or expectation of reciprocity. These acts ranged from simple gestures like smiling, listening, and sharing advice to more substantial donating and volunteering. The youth encountered generosity within their schools, CEDA, and beyond these spaces, and they incorporated generosity into their daily lives. The experiences of generosity at school and CEDA showcased the connections between mastery and generosity. For instance, the youth perceived receiving assistance with understanding concepts as acts of generosity, emphasizing the importance of cooperative or group learning methods with the potential to enhance all the components of the Circle of Courage®. Cooperative learning can foster belonging by facilitating youth interactions and supporting learning by facilitating assistance and enhancing belonging. Furthermore, cooperative learning can foster independence through interdependence and generosity through acts of interdependence and having others provide direction. Given that the incentives and scholarships at CEDA were also perceived as generosity,

these incentives allowed and motivated youth towards continuing education at schools—a location where mastery occurs.

As the last component of the Circle of Courage®, generosity is often overlooked in program planning and educational settings (Brendtro et al., 2019; Lee & Perales, 2005; Reyneke, 2020). Reyneke's (2020) study exploring teacher practices related to the Circle of Courage® in South African classrooms found that teachers in the participating school districts did not actively encourage students to assist each other outside the classroom or appreciate the community's value. Similarly, Lee & Perales (2005), who examined youth experiences of the Circle of Courage® in residential care, found that programs did not emphasize the implementation of generosity. Although youth in the program experienced and expressed generosity at CEDA and schools, it was one of the least discussed components; however, it is unclear whether it is because of a lack of experience or because it was asked towards the end of the interview.

Brendtro et al. (2019) recommend incorporating generosity through a “curriculum for caring” (p. 125). A curriculum of caring emphasizes the importance of teaching students to care for others, suggesting that they may find passion and purpose in doing so (Brendtro et al., 2019). This curriculum includes providing youth the opportunities to spend time with elders, children, and the community (Brendtro et al., 2019). Brendtro et al. (2019) suggest that in-person interactions have better learning value than non-direct contact, and as such, this curriculum should aim to incorporate such interactions. While some of the youth spoke of fundraising and donations as part of their curriculum, this was not common among the youth. Additionally, the personal commitment of the youth in this study to incorporate generosity into their lives may have been influenced by their own experiences, serving as motivators for their generosity.

However, as Brendtro et al. (2019) suggest, their families possibly instilled the value of generosity in them.

Question 2: How do the Circle of Courage® components support Indigenous and newcomer youth educational goals and orientations towards the future?

Components of the Circle of Courage® impacted youth educational orientation and goals in various ways. Experiencing belonging made youth focus their energy on improving other aspects of their lives without worrying about fitting in a ‘place,’ mastery, and independence instilled confidence and motivation among the youth to dream bigger and achieve their goals. Additionally, receiving generosity also served as a motivating factor for youth to strive towards their goals. Crespo et al. (2013) demonstrated the relationship between belongingness and future orientation. Their study involving adolescents aged between 9 and 16 from primarily Indigenous and New Zealand European backgrounds found that aspects of belonging predicted positive future orientations (Crespo et al., 2013). They theorized that adolescents who feel they have a meaningful place at school experience safety and support. Because youth do not plan their future alone, their relationships with others at school allow them to receive support, guidance, and feedback (Crespo et al., 2013). My findings align with Crespo et al. (2013) theories, as youth in this project mentioned receiving support and resources from school staff and CEDA for their post-secondary goals, such as applying to universities and accessing relevant resources. Personal connections with staff also allowed youth to discuss aspects of their lives and receive various support, not limited to their goals. This illustrates how belonging may shape youth’s future orientation.

The youth discussion of their educational goals focused on post-secondary education and their careers. Therefore, the mastery component of the Circle of Courage® was the most relevant

to their educational and career goals in the future. While their career goals varied among the youth, they valued their education and skills, acknowledging their role in their post-secondary educational pursuits. In the study, youth also understood that achieving their goals required personal striving, and each worked toward their goals (i.e., taking pre-requisite classes, devoting time outside of school to learn, and seeking resources). Deciding on their careers and setting goals was perceived as an act of independence by the youth. Similarly, achieving goals that the youth had set for themselves was evidence of independence and taking responsibility for their lives, aligning with Brendtro et al.'s (2019) concept of independence.

Schools and CEDA were locations with resources to support youth's future endeavors, even as pursuing these goals may be challenging. One of the key challenges identified by Indigenous and newcomer youth was related to their backgrounds and social determinants of learning. In particular, issues relating to financial constraints and meeting university cut-offs were raised by both Indigenous and newcomer youth. The youth desired institutional scholarships that would allow them to attend their desired programs. Over the past decades, college and university tuition fees across Canada have increased, potentially worsening the disparities in marginalized groups, particularly with reduced funding opportunities (Jones, 2023). Access to post-secondary education in Canada continues to be associated with parental income (Belley et al., 2014). Belley et al. (2014) report that youth with parents among the highest income are 25% more likely to attend post-secondary than youth with parents of the lowest income. While the Canadian government continues to distribute funds based on the need to support education, these funds are usually insufficient and require out-of-pocket expenses (Belley et al., 2014; Jones, 2023). Moreover, funds do not always reach those in need (Belley et al., 2014; Jones, 2023). For example, the Canada Learning Bond is intended to help families of

low income save for their children's post-secondary education. Since its inception in 2005, only 42% of those eligible have received payment, citing barriers to access such as needing parents to file taxes, opening RESP in the name of children, and a lack of coordination between government bodies responsible for its distribution (Robson, 2022). While acknowledging that youth desired scholarships to allow them to attend their choice programs, institutional aid minimally influences post-secondary education in Canada (Belley et al., 2014). This highlights the need to assess the effectiveness and distribution of government-funded aid.

The government of Canada remains committed to enhancing the quality and access to education, which aligns with the Sustainable Development Goal and Truth and Reconciliation (Government of Canada, n.d.). However, barriers to post-secondary education stemming from structural social issues can hinder this commitment. Research suggests that social determinants of learning impact one's ability to learn (Levinson & Cohen, 2023), and the youth in this study reflected similar findings, discussing how circumstances beyond their control interfered with learning in the classroom and, consequently, their post-secondary educational goals. There is a need to reconsider ways to enhance equitable access to post-secondary education and reduce educational disparities.

One alternative path is exploring Australia's enabling programs—these programs are fully funded by the government and provide free access (i.e., unrestricted access) to all people who do not meet the traditional cut-off (Pitman et al., 2016). These programs allow people to meet the requirements and acquire skills necessary for success at university (Pitman et al., 2016). Australia's enabling programs are overrepresented by equity groups (students from low socioeconomic, Indigenous, rural, and remote backgrounds) and those from diverse backgrounds who may not have had access to undergraduate programs (Pitman et al., 2016). Studies show that

students who attend enabling programs in Australia perform better and have higher education rates than those enrolled using GPA (Taylor et al., 2020). Furthermore, the programs provide students with the confidence, management, and study skills required for post-secondary success (Taylor et al., 2020). Cost-free enabling programs are just one way to enhance equitable access to education.

Another key aspect to consider is the indirect impact of the Circle of Courage® on post-secondary education goals. Many of the youth's aspirations revolve around higher education. Therefore, strategies that promote the Circle of Courage® and help youth graduate high school will indirectly enhance their ability to achieve these future goals. By creating a safe environment that fosters belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity, we can support youth in their educational journeys and pave the way for their future success.

Question 3: How do the Circle of Courage® components relate to feelings of resilience and wellness among the youth?

Individual resilience refers to skills, behavior, and characteristics that allow a person to adapt or cope with challenges (Qi & Yang, 2024). It is an evolving trait influenced by one's surroundings (Brendtro et al., 2019; Qi & Yang, 2024). Youth study participants demonstrated resilience when they failed to meet their goals and expectations or encountered suboptimal mental health that affected their schedule. Failure to achieve their goals was met with feelings of defeat and entrapment, and in these times, support was crucial to navigate the circumstances and foster resilience. Support entailed various things, including listening, providing advice, helping, and offering encouragement. Acts of support were perceived as acts of generosity, providing youth with space to reset, uplifting their mood, and reinforcing the feeling of being understood. While the immediate feeling of failure was defeat, some youth viewed it as an opportunity to

improve. Notably, despite valuing independence, youth often sought out and appreciated the support of others during difficulties, emphasizing the importance of personal connections and interdependent relationships.

More youth mentioned receiving support from their families compared to when they discussed their experiences of the Circle of Courage® concerning their academic lives. When speaking about their experiences at schools and CEDA, responses predominantly centred around friends and teachers. As Vargas-Madriz and Konishi (2021) suggested, this emphasis on peers and educators may be attributed to the close relationships between youth and these individuals at school. However, the fact that the youth turned to their families during challenges at school highlights the significant role of family as a source of support, even though families are not always directly present in the school environment. Furthermore, youth drew strength and motivation from the successes within families. For example, Ayanda looked up to her brother, using his accomplishment as a motivation. However, it was not only success within families that promoted motivation; sometimes, strength was found in the desire to excel beyond the achievements of those around us, as with Timoti.

Literature on the impact of family on individual resilience and academic engagement or success is limited—the few that examine family, resilience, and academic engagement support that family characteristics, the family value of education, and support enhance academic engagement (Baxter & Meyers, 2021; Kenny et al., 2003). In particular, Kenny et al. (2003), who investigated school engagement for children from 9-11, found that family support was associated with positive views of the school, doing homework, and reported engagement with the school. Similarly, Baxter and Meyers (2021), who examined characteristics of high-engagement Indigenous Students in Australia, attributed family characteristics as a reason for engagement

despite the socioeconomic disadvantages they experienced (Baxter & Meyers, 2021). Although the youth in this project were not in primary school, they attended high school despite their backgrounds. All wanted to attend post-secondary school and also spoke of their family support.

Regarding the Circle of Courage® and its role in resilience, findings from the study primarily support the importance of belonging and generosity. Belonging promotes resilience in youth by providing them with relationships from which to draw strength. Personal connections with friends, teachers, and CEDA staff allowed youth to seek help and support when needed, a process observed with belonging, mastery, and learning independence. These personal connections also enabled others who knew the youth to check in on them when they behaved differently. The significance of personal connections emerged as a crucial factor in promoting belonging, mastery, and independence within the Circle of Courage® framework, and this significance extended to resilience as well. Aligning with the findings of this project, (Lukey et al. (2024) highlighted the significance of relationships with teachers, schools, community, and culture to promote the continuity of education. Maintaining connections with culture is highlighted in literature for building resilience among Indigenous students (Hunter et al., 2022; Njeze et al., 2020) and newcomer students (A. C. G. Smith et al., 2022). However, only one youth study participant mentioned the cultural practice of smudging at her school, which helped her focus, and only one newcomer talked about needing to be understood and accepted at school.

Furthermore, the sense of not feeling alone and experiencing togetherness (an aspect of belonging), where individuals face similar situations together, allowed youth to find strength and navigate solutions collectively. This form of interdependence among the youth is like that of A. C. G. Smith and colleagues' (2022), who explored how newcomer youth adapted to living in Ontario. Although their study did not directly focus on high school experiences, the participants,

aged 15-22, shared similar experiences of attending school. Similarly, participants in A. C. G. Smith et al. (2022) study resilience in self-motivation, positive refrainment, and accessing community. In addition, A. C. G. Smith et al. (2022) emphasized the value of having someone who listens—a finding echoed in this project. These findings of belonging and resilience align with existing literature like Hatala et al., (2017), who found that belonging and mastery promoted future-time resilience among Indigenous youth in Saskatchewan. While this project did not directly find that mastery directly promoted resilience, the feeling of accomplishment or success was a motivator to be resilient.

Additionally, wellness was understood holistically, encompassing happiness, comfort, physical and mental health, and positive future orientations. Environmental structures like being surrounded by family, friends, and support enhanced wellness. These factors also promoted belonging among the youth, showing the interconnections between belonging and wellness. Experiencing the Circle of Courage® contributed to wellness, enabling feelings of happiness and self-prioritization. Notably, the relationship between mastery and wellness was also reciprocal; when the youth felt comfortable in the classroom, they learned better, and mastering a skill enhanced feelings of accomplishment and motivation to do more. Additionally, both giving and receiving generosity contributed to wellness; however, receiving generosity prompted the youth to think about their futures and work towards their goals.

Wellness is multidimensional, encompassing the physical, emotional, spiritual, environmental, financial, and intellectual aspects (Stoewen, 2017). Interestingly, the youth in this project considered their future orientation a part of their wellness. An optimistic future orientation is crucial for youth development and overall wellbeing (Crespo et al., 2013). As such,

promoting youth experiences of the Circle of Courage® can contribute to enhancing youth wellness, including fostering more positive future orientations.

Implications

The study explored the experiences of the Circle of Courage® as they relate to Indigenous and newcomer youth in schools and at CEDA. While the framework originated from Indigenous culture, its relevance extended beyond specific cultural contexts, emphasizing that these components are essential for all youth. The findings contribute to the limited literature calling for the Circle of Courage® as a developmental and wellness model that enriches youth experiences in educational settings. The study's findings align with the Circle of Courage® theory, emphasizing the foundational role of belonging in promoting mastery and independence. While the relationship between independence and generosity was not explicitly demonstrated, acts of generosity can be viewed as evidence of independence. Youth often carried out acts of service without being told, acting on their own accord, and making decisions, suggesting that while independence and generosity may not be directly linked, generosity can reflect an individual's autonomy and self-directedness. One notable finding was the potential of the Circle of Courage® to support positive future orientation among youth. Youth who experienced the components of the Circle of Courage® exhibited high hopes and a positive outlook regarding their future. Therefore, fostering experiences of the Circle of Courage® contributes to youth success in the classroom, wellness, resilience, and future orientation.

Personal connections emerged as the highlight of the Circle of Courage® in this project, particularly highlighting the importance of relationships with teachers in fostering safe and inclusive learning environments. Aligned with Canada's commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly in achieving quality education, government initiatives such as

the Canada Learning Bond and Canada Student Financial Assistance aim to address educational barriers (Government of Canada, n.d.). However, there is a need to support other aspects of education, particularly safety within academic spaces. Issues such as prejudice, discrimination, and racism within educational environments require attention and action. Strategies such as cultural sensitivity training, anti-racism policies, and a commitment to inclusivity goals are needed to address these challenges. Research by Ennab (2022) and Ennab et al., (2024) in Winnipeg suggests that these approaches mitigate prejudice and discrimination within educational settings and foster a more inclusive and supportive learning environment for all students.

Furthermore, enhancing mastery in the classroom necessitates exploring barriers that hinder access to appropriate assistance in the classroom setting. As Richmond and Smith (2012) reported, the most essential characteristic of support in a classroom is the ability to receive guidance. Nevertheless, this project revealed a lack of personal connection and time as hindrances. Further research is warranted to explore additional barriers that impede access to assistance. In addition, there is a need to recognize and address the social determinants of learning to tailor support and create an environment conducive to youth's needs. Schools could adopt models like those described by Baxter & Meyers (2021) that require trusted staff students to have a relationship with and be accessible to discuss possible barriers to learning. However, staff in such roles must foster safe spaces without discrimination or prejudice, as research indicates that staff may harbor prejudicial or discriminatory behavior (Ennab et al., 2024).

School spaces are environments where independence is expected and valued by youth who actively seek opportunities to exercise their independence. However, independence is a developmental process that progresses from dependence to autonomy, with failure being an

integral aspect of this journey (Brendtro et al., 2019; Brown, 2005). Therefore, academic spaces should create an environment where failure is viewed as a learning opportunity that can foster students' resilience and a growth mindset. Furthermore, school spaces should encourage and facilitate independence without overly emphasizing the need for self-efficacy, which can result in feelings of inadequacy among students when they do not meet expectations. One strategy is promoting student cooperative learning that enhances independence and nurtures all components of the Circle of Courage® framework. This balanced approach ensures that youth develop independence while benefiting from collaboration and support within the learning community.

Generosity was the least explored aspect of the study. However, it is essential to recognize its significance, especially considering that generosity included small daily acts such as smiling, listening, and sharing for the youth in this project. These acts can be easily incorporated and encouraged by teachers within the classroom. Schools and afterschool programs have opportunities to develop curricula that centre around generosity. This could entail providing youth opportunities to engage with the community, such as spending time with the elderly or participating in community service activities. Such experiences may help youth find purpose in focusing on helping or meeting the needs of others (Brendtro et al., 2019).

Lastly, the project highlighted the significance of CEDA as an afterschool program in complementing youth learning by enhancing opportunities for the Circle of Courage® framework. Where the youth may not have found adequate support at school, they found it through CEDA. Afterschool programs such as CEDA allow teachers to build personal connections and dedicate time to assisting students (Durlak & Weissberg, 2007). Moreover, just as the Circle of Courage® elements are interconnected, strategies that promote them are also

interconnected. Therefore, there are benefits to incorporating strategies that target multiple aspects of the Circle of Courage® simultaneously to support youth development.

Strengths & Limitation of Study

Several limitations should be acknowledged in the study. Firstly, potential researcher bias may have influenced the findings due to my role as the sole researcher and my background as a newcomer. My position as a newcomer may mean that I can quickly identify or relate to findings shared by the newcomer participants. Qualitative research does not operate under the assumption that the researcher is bias-free but requires them to identify their bias (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I engaged in reflective journals, memos, and dialogic engagement to identify my biases.

The heterogeneity of the project population, consisting of Indigenous and newcomer youth from various race and backgrounds may also limit the transferability of the findings, in addition to not examining intersecting identities such as sex, gender, which may be useful to understanding experiences better (Anderson, 2021). The large sample size in this project did not allow for in-depth case-to-case analysis. Nonetheless, there are IPA projects with as many as 14 participants (see Flowers et al., 2011). Moreover, the large sample size for this project may promote transferability due to shared similarities between participants; they attended the same schools, lived in similar neighborhoods, attended CEDA programs, and interacted with each other. Other strengths of the project include its methodologies that promote mutual learning and benefit between the researcher and participants, as well as the centring of the voices of the youth involved in the project.

Conclusion

The study aimed to explore the experiences of the Circle of Courage® among Indigenous and newcomer students and its relation to their wellness and resilience, utilizing principles from IPA, CBPR, and Indigenous methodologies. Despite the challenges some Indigenous and newcomer students face, they demonstrate resilience through support and self-motivation and continue to work towards their goals and post-secondary education. The Circle of Courage® framework enhanced positive youth learning experiences, wellness, future orientation, and resilience. Belonging was the keystone of the Circle of Courage®, influencing other aspects of the framework except for generosity. Generosity, however, was evidence of independence. While students' experiences in school varied, they found that CEDA provided a supportive environment that promoted the Circle of Courage®, particularly through fostering belonging and relationships with staff, highlighting the virtue of the afterschool program, which can complement learning and provide support where schools may fall short.

Furthermore, findings highlighted the similarities between Indigenous and newcomer students in their experiences of the Circle of Courage®, indicating that the framework may be beneficial to newcomer youth. Although this Circle of Courage® may be beneficial to newcomer youth, further research is needed to explore nuances in the meaning of its components across youth in various cultures. Lastly, barriers to youth learning, future orientation, and wellness are related to a lack of experience with the components of the Circle of Courage®, as well as structural issues stemming from social determinants of learning beyond the youths' control. As such, addressing structural issues and promoting the Circle of Courage® framework can enhance the educational experiences and well-being of Indigenous and newcomer youth.

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Appendices

A. Focus Groups Sharing Circle Guide

Belonging

1. Talk to me about a typical day at school, what are the highlights and lowlights of going to school? What makes school a place you would like to go?
2. When you think of belonging, what comes to your mind? Tell me about the things that make you feel like you belong, it could be at school, at home, CEDA or anywhere.
3. When you think of belonging and you think of wellness—the things that make you feel well and strong, does feeling included/ belonging help you feel well? If so, how?
4. Does feeling included or a sense of belonging help you picture or plan for your academic ambition or goals towards the future? If so, how? (For example, when I feel included or feeling included makes me? Or feeling excluded makes me?)

Mastery

1. Let's move on to mastery. Tell me about a time you felt like you learned or mastered something at school or even here at CEDA.
2. What are the things that help you learn? it could be at school, at home, CEDA or anywhere.
3. Do you have experiences where you feel like you have learned skills at school helped you in any way and even more so towards a goal in the future? If so, how?
4. How does learning skills at school relate to your wellness?

Independence

1. When you think of the idea of being independent/autonomous, what comes to your mind? What does independence mean to you?
2. Tell me about the things that promote your independence? it could be at school, at home, CEDA or anywhere.
3. If you could think about a time when you felt a sense of independence or autonomy. How does independence and autonomy relate to your wellness and goals?

Generosity

1. What does generosity mean to you?
2. Do you experience opportunities to receive kindness? it could be at school, at home, CEDA or anywhere.
3. How do these acts of generosity and kindness relate to your wellness?

B.Sharing Circle Interview Guide

General Questions

1. What are your names or pseudonyms you would like to go by?
2. Are you a Canadian citizen? PR? Refugee?
3. How long have you been in Canada and how long have you been studying in Canadian high school?
4. How long have you attended CEDA programs?

Circle of Courage Questions

Belonging

5. Tell me about a typical day at school.... what are the highlights and lowlights of going to school? What makes school a place you would like to go?
6. Following up with that, are you familiar with the Circle of Courage? (If not explain belonging, mastery, independence, & generosity).
7. Think about a time where you felt like you belonged at school or here at CEDA, do you mind sharing?
8. What does belonging mean to you? What does it feel like when you belong?
9. Where do you tend to feel like you belong the most, and why?
10. What factors at school help you feel belonging and inclusion?
11. Think about that feeling of belonging at school, does it help you face/overcome challenges at school? How does it do so?
12. Let come back CEDA, what factors help you belong? What are the barriers?
13. Does belonging help you picture or plan for your academic ambition or goals towards the future? If so, how? (For example, when I feel included or feeling included makes me? Or feeling excluded makes me?)
14. Does feeling included help you feel well? How does it relate to your wellness and wellbeing?
15. Let's thinking about the opposite of belonging for a little bit more. Can you think of a time where you felt you did not belong at school or at CEDA? Do you mind sharing?
16. What are the barriers that prevent that feeling of included at school or at CEDA? Please describe what these barriers are.
17. What are the impacts of feeling excluded on you? On your experience at school? On your future ambitions?

Mastery

1. Let's move on to mastery. Tell me about a time you felt like you learned or mastered something at school or even here at CEDA.
2. What does mastery mean to you?
3. How do you learn? What helps you learn the most at school and why?
4. What about CEDA, what factors help you learn here?
5. Think about that the times you felt like you learned something and got good at it. How do experiences like these help you face/overcome challenges at school?
6. Do experiences where you feel like you have learned skills at school help you picture or plan your academic future or goals towards the future? If so, how?
7. How does learning skills at school relate to your wellness?
8. Are there any barriers to your learning at school or at CEDA? Please, describe them.
9. Can you tell me about a time you felt like you did not master or couldn't learn anything at school or CEDA. How did that make you feel?

10. What are the impacts of this and other experiences on you? On your experience at school? On your future ambitions?
11. What are the barriers that prevent you from learning at school or CEDA? Please describe what these barriers are.

Independence

1. Now let's talk about independence. What does independence mean to you? Do you experience independence at schools?
2. Think about a time where you felt independence at school, do you mind sharing?
3. What are the aspects that contributed to that feeling of independence for this experience and others?
4. What promotes your independence at school and why?
5. What promotes your independence at CEDA and why?
6. Does being independent help, you overcome challenges in any aspects of your lives? At schools? Please explain.
7. Does independence help you plan for your academic goals or goals towards the future? If so, how? (For example, when I feel independent or feeling independence makes me? Lack of independence makes me about the future or school or planning)
8. Let's keep that experience of independence and autonomy in mind. How do independence and autonomy relate to your wellness and wellbeing? (For example, when I experience independence, I feel my wellbeing is because ...)
9. Are there any barriers that hinder your growth towards independence at school or at CEDA? Please, describe them.
10. Can you tell me about a time you felt a lack of autonomy? At school or CEDA? How did that make you feel?
11. What are the impacts of this and other experiences of lack of autonomy on you? On your experience at school? On your future ambitions?

Generosity

4. Now let's talk about generosity. What does generosity mean to you?
5. Do you mind sharing an experience where you received generosity/ kindness or carried out generosity or was kind to someone? How did that make you feel?
6. Do you experience opportunities to receive kindness at school and CEDA?
7. What opportunities do you have to show kindness at schools and at CEDA?
8. What helps you show kindness and generosity at schools and CEDA?
9. Does receiving or giving out generosity help you overcome challenges in any aspects of your lives? At schools? Please explain.
10. Does kindness you receive help picture or plan future ambitions and goals? School related goals? If so, please explain.
11. Think about a time you've been a recipient of generosity, or you were generous to someone. How do these acts relate to your wellness? (For example, when I experience generosity, I feel my wellbeing is because ...)
12. Are there barriers at school and CEDA that restrict or limit your ability to show or receive generosity from others? Can you describe these factors?
13. Can you tell me about a time someone was unkind? At school or CEDA? How did that make you feel?

14. What are the impacts of this and other experiences on you? On your experience at school? On your future ambitions?