

**How Are Schools Supporting Cultural Identity in Urban Indigenous Youth? School-based
cultural programs and their relationship with Indigenous youth identity development**

by

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We acknowledge and respect the Ləkʷəŋən (Songhees and Esquimalt) Peoples on whose territory
the university stands, and the Ləkʷəŋən and W̱SÁNEĆ Peoples whose historical relationships
with the land continue to this day.

Supervisory Committee

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Supervisory Committee

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Abstract

Schools can play an important role in supporting youth cultural identity. Extant research suggests that inclusive, culturally affirming school practices where ethnic minority students are provided with opportunities to connect with their culture, can strengthen overall school belonging, and reinforce their cultural identity. However, few studies have examined this relationship among Canadian Indigenous youth in the public school system. Urban Indigenous youth face unique challenges to connect with their culture, highlighting the importance of cultural opportunities in schools. Additionally, due to the complex and oppressive history of Canadian school systems and Indigenous people, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada have called on schools to better support Indigenous youth's academic success and mental health. The current study examines how schools are supporting cultural identity among urban Indigenous high school youth. There were 12 total participants, whose ages ranged from 13-17 years old (n=12; ages 13-17). Findings from thematic analyses revealed that schools varied in the availability of support services that are specifically for Indigenous students, the degree of Indigenous representation in schools, as well as the range of culturally-affirming schools practices. These identified themes were, in turn, related to youths' sense of school belonging and willingness to engage in culturally-specific prosocial behaviours (e.g., cultural knowledge sharing). Youth's own personal challenges as an urban Indigenous youth, awareness of whether school opportunities exists, and level of cultural identity exploration was related to how they interacted with cultural opportunities that were available in schools. These findings demonstrate the complex interplay between youth cultural identity and school practices. Implications for more inclusive school policies are discussed.

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Dedications

I would like to dedicate the work of my thesis to my grandmother. She attended Shubenacadie Residential School for nine years when growing up, from the ages of 5-14. Learning of these experiences from her created a passion in myself for advocating for change in modern educational practices with Indigenous students. I am thankful to the participants of this study for their willingness to share their experiences with myself. I would also like to additionally thank the Victoria Native Friendship Centre (VNFC) for their support of my project and for welcoming me into their institution. Specifically, I would like to thank Sef Masalosala for his integral role in my collaboration with the VNFC. Further, I would like to thank my supervisor Dr. Paweena Sukhawathanakul for believing in myself and the success of this project. This research was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC).

Introduction

Indigenous people of Canada face a threat of cultural and linguistic extinction following years of colonialism and oppression. Past colonial policies are responsible for generations of family and cultural disruptions that disproportionately impact Indigenous youth today. The revitalization of Indigenous knowledge and tradition is essential in supporting resilience among Indigenous youth and meeting the calls for action advocated by the Truth and Reconciliation Committee (Truth and Reconciliation Committee, 2015). Despite ongoing reconciliation efforts, the effects of hundreds of years of attempted cultural genocide are still impacting Indigenous communities throughout the country. Suicide, imprisonment and addiction are disproportionately high among Indigenous populations – though these issues represent just a sample of the ways colonization has hurt communities (Statistics Canada, 2019).

However, these disparities do not measure the strength of Indigenous communities, nor does it define their experiences. Collectively, resilience exists country-wide, and Indigenous groups have been working greatly to improve the lives of community members and future generations (Kirmayer et al., 2011). Emerging research shows how impactful promoting cultural resurgence and language revitalization can be among Indigenous youth. For example, culturally responsive leadership programs like *Going Off, Growing Strong* (Hirsch et al., 2016), or those offered by *The Fourth “R”* (Crooks et al., 2008), have been shown to promote cultural identity, as well as increase prosocial behaviours and school belonging (Crooks, Burleigh & Sisco, 2015; Crooks et al., 2015), and individual and collective community resilience (Ritchie & Phillips, 2021; Hirsch et al., 2016). Moreover, values that are promoted in language revitalization schools, such as the importance of learning about one’s traditional language and culture, can help to affirm cultural identity. For example, one study on an Ojibwe language-immersion school found

that attendance predicted high self-esteem, sense of self, and positive perceptions of school climate among elementary school children (Morcom, 2017). However, less is known about how general public schools are supporting cultural identity among urban Indigenous youth.

Substantial variability exists across municipal and provincial educational environments in how schools support Indigenous youth. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action 62 to 64 directly call upon the Canadian government to address the educational needs of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students to learn about Canada's colonial history and build students' capacity for intercultural understanding, empathy, and mutual respect. Yet, schools differ in how much (a) cultural literacy is being promoted in schools for all students; and (b) cultural support is offered to Indigenous students. Additionally, high schools in British Columbia have recently created a requirement for all student to take four credits of Indigenous-focused courses to graduate (Government of British Columbia, 2024). This qualitative study aims to explore how public schools are supporting cultural identity among Indigenous youth through semi-structured interviews with Indigenous high school students. This will add to the contemporary literature base by drawing relationships between cultural identity, school belonging and prosocial behaviours specific to the experiences of urban Indigenous youth. The specific focus on these concepts in urban Indigenous youth using a qualitative framework is what gives this study a novel perspective.

Historical trauma and Indigenous youth

To understand how historical colonial practices continue to impact Indigenous youth today it is important acknowledge Canada's longstanding oppressive history with Indigenous peoples. Since the time of colonization in the 1500's Canada's Indigenous population have faced countless hardships. From exploitative trading practices, to transmission of disease, even early

contact was met with many challenges (Matheson et al., 2022). Over the next hundreds of years, colonization progressed further, and Indigenous culture, tradition and language began to become the target of the Canadian Government. Racist legislature, such as the Indian Act were put in place as a means of control over the Indigenous population. This act allowed for the legal separation of Indigenous individuals from the general population and implemented widespread restrictions on the lives of these people. These laws included restrictions on travel and forbiddance from engaging in traditional ceremonies (Todd, 2021). Assimilation efforts became more severe with the implementation of Residential Schools throughout the country. It is estimated that 150,000 Indigenous youth attended Residential Schools during their existence (early 1800's-late 1900's) (Wilk, Maltby & Cooke, 2017). These schools usually forbid the practice of anything related to Indigenous culture, including forbidding children to speak their native language, and to punish any sort of traditional cultural expression (Wilk, Maltby & Cooke, 2017). As the last school closed in 1996, the wound left by Residential Schools is still fresh for many people. The trauma instilled by these institutions extends between generations, with intergenerational trauma being widespread for Indigenous individuals (Hahmann et al., 2022; Toombs et al., 2023). Further, efforts like the 60's scoop; the (often forced) adoption of thousands of Indigenous youth into white families created an addition layer of disconnection to culture in many Indigenous people, as they were placed into families outside of their traditional culture (Valiquette, 2019). Often these children would be placed far from their biological family and would have little knowledge of their ancestry.

While the Canadian government contributed greatly to the destruction of Indigenous culture, at an individual level, experiences of discrimination and lack of general integration of Indigenous culture have furthered the overall disconnection many Indigenous individuals feel

towards their culture. Roughly 50% of Indigenous individuals report experiencing discrimination or racism at some point in their life (Schick et al., 2023). These historical and modern-day contexts underlie a lot of problems that Canadian Indigenous people face today. All of this has amalgamated into what is referred to as “historical trauma”. According to Gone (2013), “the concept of historical trauma calls attention to the complex, collective, cumulative, and intergenerational psychosocial impacts that resulted from the depredations of past colonial subjugation” (p. 683). Indigenous scholar Yellow Horse Brave Heart implicated historical trauma with “depression, self-destructive behavior, suicidal thoughts and gestures, anxiety, low self-esteem, anger, and difficulty recognizing and expressing emotions” (Yellow Horse Brave Heart, 2003, p. 7).

A key colonial effort that requires specific consideration in a Canadian Indigenous context is the removal of people from their traditional lands and territories. Land is central to many Indigenous Peoples’ culture and connection to the world around them. First Nations communities have had their territory taken from them and they were relegated to small patches of land, known as reservations (reserves) that may not even be situated where they traditionally lived. Further, the Canadian Government has sometimes gone as far as to relocate Indigenous communities from their reserve to different land, even after the community had been given a designated plot of land for their reserve. For instance, in the early 1900’s the Canadian Government relocated the Membertou people from the King’s Road Reserve (Kun’tewiktuk) to what is now known as Membertou. The land they were moved to was desolate, compared to the waterfront location of Kun’tewiktuk. These actions were directly against legal limitations on the use of areas designated reservations. Families had to readjust to their new land, and the community suffered the effects of this for decades following their relocation (Membertou First

Nation, 2016). Culture and language is inherently tied to land in many First Nations communities. Using the Mi'kmaq people as an example, even our conceptualization of months is directly intertwined with the yearly cycles that occur on Mi'kma'ki (the Mi'kmaq territory). The Mi'kmaq calendar has 13 months, each of them representing a transition of the land, demonstrated often by animal and plant changes. The removal of individuals from their territory, via colonization, forced relocation for Residential Schooling, or widespread adoptions like the 60's scoop, inherently disconnects individuals from their cultural knowledge and tradition. These widespread traumatic experiences of Indigenous people led to a lot of contemporary challenges for Indigenous individuals. For instance, things like the Residential School (and also Day School) system left Indigenous youth with greater difficulties assimilating into a westernized school environment. General distrust towards academia exists in both youth attending these places and their families as well (Milne, 2016). Many individuals feel that the westernized school environment promotes ideas and practices that are oppressive and contrary to their traditional view, and success in one of these institutions often takes away their cultural identity and pride. This has led to Indigenous individuals having decreased graduation rates from High School, and fewer people graduates pursuing higher levels of education. Only 63% of Indigenous youth are high school graduates, compared to 91% of non-Indigenous youth. Further, 72% of young adults nationally had completed post-secondary education, compared to 37% of Indigenous young adults (Statistics Canada, 2023).

Mental health challenges also disproportionately affect Indigenous people. First Nations individuals are more likely to suffer from depression, PTSD and substance-use problems (Statistics Canada, 2019). Risk of suicide is also statistically heightened for Indigenous people.

The suicide rate for Indigenous people is roughly three times that of the general population (24.3 vs 8.0 deaths/100,000 people). Additionally, those living on reserve are about twice as likely to commit suicide compared to those living off reserve. Chandler and Lalonde (1998) found that cultural discontinuity is directly related to these rates. Further, suicide rates are drastically higher in communities that suffered tremendous loss of their traditional language (Hallett, Chandler and Lalonde, 2007). Substance-use in Indigenous communities has also been directly linked to colonial trauma. Hahmann et al., (2022) found that people with a parent or grandparent who attended Residential School are at higher risk of mood disorders, heavy drinking and frequent marijuana use. These results are corroborated by Toombs et al., (2023), who found Residential School attendance to be associated with substance-use problems. This pattern was also present in individuals with a parent or grandparent who attended Residential School. Yet, culture can serve as a means to protect against these harms. Hahmann et al., (2022) also reported cultural connection as a protective factor against this trend of substance-use.

The hardships brought about by colonialism and historical trauma are not limited to a Canadian-Indigenous context. This pattern is true in many Indigenous groups worldwide who have suffered similar assimilative and colonial actions. In the United States, suicide is more common in Indigenous youth compared to white people (Stone et al., 2022). Also, substance-use problems are heightened. Further, in Australia colonialism has been described as a key factor in mental health issues in the Indigenous peoples of this land. One factor persists amongst all of these populations as a crucial hedge against these sorts of outcomes: cultural continuity and connection to community is a protective factor for Indigenous people worldwide.

Cultural continuity as a protective factor

Cultural continuity has been conceptualized as the persistence and maintenance of culture, tradition and identity throughout historical changes. This concept is extremely important in a Canadian-Indigenous context, as culture and tradition suffered greatly since colonization. Cultural continuity and connection to Indigenous culture is a protective factor against many of the negative outcomes that are common for Indigenous people in Canada including suicide (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998), addiction (Adams et al., 2015), and various health conditions, including diabetes (Oster et al., 2014). This connection to culture is especially important for Indigenous youth, as the adolescent years are crucial for identity development. Erikson's Psychosocial Theory of Development posits that adolescents have to resolve an identity crisis in order to successfully transition into adulthood and support fidelity, which refers to aligning oneself with values or ideas, as opposed to having a lack of inner conviction (Erikson, 1980). Another influential theory on identity is the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which posits that an individual's connection to an identity-related group (e.g., Indigenous culture) is a crucial part of one's sense of self. Connection to an identity-related group is said to be foundational for a sense of belonging, purpose, self-worth and identity. Cultural/ethnic identity is a core part of this development, and often involves the building of values perpetuated through one's social environment.

In an Indigenous context, identity has been conceptualized using the "Peoplehood Matrix" (Holm, Pearson & Chavis, 2003). This model describes four key aspects that make up Indigenous identity and culture, and provides a framework for how connection to Indigenous identity may be conceptualized. Core elements of Indigenous identity include language, sacred history, place territory (land) and ceremonial. No element is more important than another, and all

are interrelated. All four aspects of identity have suffered due to colonial action, which have disrupted cultural identity development among Indigenous youth (Holm, Pearson & Chavis, 2003). This is exacerbated by societal perceptions of Indigenous people often being negative, such as the pervasive concept of the “drunken Indian” (Wexler, 2009), resulting in ongoing discrimination and prejudice against Indigenous populations.

Indigenous-related research often conceptualize cultural connection in four different levels. These levels are bicultural, mainstream, traditional and marginalized. Bicultural identity (in an Indigenous context) refers to adherence to both western colonial culture and to their Indigenous culture, mainstream identity refers to connection to western culture, traditional identity refers to specific alignment with Indigenous culture and marginalized identity status refers to no meaningful connection to any given culture. In general, those with bicultural identity see less challenges than those with marginal status (Eketone & Walker, 2015).

Studies on cultural continuity and cultural identity in Indigenous individuals highlight the positive benefits of alignment with traditional culture and biculturalism. In a study on ego strengths and cultural identity, those with traditional ethnic identity (EI) demonstrated the highest ego strengths (measured by the Psychological Index for Ego Strengths) compared to the other three types of EI (Gfellner & Armstrong, 2013). Another study by Gfellner (2016) indicated that Racial and Ethnic Identity (REI) measures predicted wellbeing amongst First Nations participants. In a study of REI in First Nations adolescents, participants rated as having traditional identity displayed the highest degree of adaptive functioning, followed by bicultural participants (Gfellner & Armstrong, 2012). In First Nations adoptees, connection to traditional culture was found to be a crucial factor for wellbeing (Carriere, 2005).

Moreover, increasing research has focused on developing more culturally representative scales with Indigenous samples. Snowshoe et al., (2016) developed the Cultural Connectedness Scale (CCS) as a means to assess cultural identity in Indigenous people. Results from one of Snowshoe's studies using the CCS indicates that high CCS scores (high cultural connection) predicted positive mental health in a sample of First Nations youth (Snowshoe et al., 2016). These results are corroborated through another study by Crooks et al., (2015), where connection to culture predicted feelings of belonging and greater mental health through a reduction in shame. Bombay, Matheson & Anisman (2010) studied in-group attitudes among First Nations adults. Their results indicate that higher in-group affect (positive attitude towards one's group) predicted lower depressive symptomology and acted as a buffer against perceived discrimination. Results from Corenblum (2013) on in-group attitudes in First Nations children support results and coincide with the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

These benefits extend beyond occupational and mental contexts, as Indigenous people with higher cultural continuity were less likely to have diabetes, a physical impairment that is statistically pronounced in the Indigenous population (Oster et al., 2014). Engagement in culture has been shown to hold a variety of benefits. In Cruddas' (2019) studies of urban Indigenous youth, engagement with culture was found to promote happiness and wellbeing. Further, learning to make traditional regalia (connecting with traditional culture) was found to strengthen cultural identity, community connection and overall wellbeing in Kwakwaka'wakw people (Brown et al., 2021). These results are supported by the results of Freeman's (2014) work with Indigenous youth, where participating in cultural activities promoted greater sense of self and wellbeing. On the other hand, there has also been some scholarly consideration into how lack of cultural continuity can influence negative outcomes. For example, Chandler and Lalonde (1998) explored

how cultural loss contributes to the heightened suicide rates in First Nations communities in British Columbia. Cultural continuity was deemed a “hedge” against suicide and language loss was found to contribute to increased suicide rates (Hallett, Chandler & Lalonde, 2007).

Despite the cultural and colonial contexts of Canada being different than that worldwide, the previously mentioned literature is consistent with research on Indigenous peoples globally. In a study on Indigenous people in Australia, competence in a traditional language was viewed as fostering empowerment, connection to community and greater senses of belonging. Further, connection to culture was found to be greatly associated with happiness in a study by Dockery (2011). These results are supported by a review of relevant literature conducted by Maclean and colleagues (2016) and a model by Wexler (2009), who described how cultural connection can buffer against the harms of colonialism. This was also discussed to be true for Indigenous people in Scandinavia (Forrest, 2006). This is supported by Ruokonen & Eldridge (2017) through their work with Sami artists. Further, cultural/ethnic identity is known to be important for healthy development in non-Indigenous racially diverse people (Smith et al., 1999).

Opportunities that promote cultural continuity

There are many ways Indigenous individuals can connect with their culture. These ways can be represented by the Peoplehood Matrix (Holm, Pearson & Chavis, 2003) which comprises of four aspects that make up Indigenous identity (Language, Sacred History, Place Territory and Ceremonial Cycle). For example, a way to connect with Indigenous culture could be learning a traditional language from family or community members, or by learning language independently. There are also various ways to engage with Sacred History. Though Indigenous history is often passed on through oral means, but historical accounts can be readily accessed online or through archives with local cultural community centres. Place Territory encompasses one’s connection

with their traditional land and territory. This can be a challenge as the majority of Indigenous individuals live off-reserve. However, even for these individuals it is possible to connect with land through forming new connections and finding opportunities to visit their traditional territory. Ceremonial Cycles were once legally inhibited by the Indian Act. Currently, Indigenous communities are free to engage in ceremonies like powwows and potlatches, without the risk of persecution from the Canadian government. Spending time at these ceremonies, whether it be through one's ancestral community or their local community, are ways to connect with Indigenous culture.

One of the most formative environments for fostering cultural connection in Indigenous youth is through their family and community. Many Canadian Indigenous cultures share knowledge through oral means (Cruikshank, 1994). Because of this, it is important that Indigenous culture continues to be passed down by one's family and community. Many traditional teachings would be lost if this oral tradition was stopped. Additionally, foods that a family introduces to their child can perpetuate cultural connection and strengthen their overall cultural identity. Access to traditional foods predicts stronger cultural identity in Indigenous youth (Robin & Cidro, 2020). Further, within one's community they can talk to elders, who play a crucial role in perpetuating cultural knowledge in Indigenous communities. Engaging in local ceremony is another way one's family and community can support cultural identity. It is worth note that every family is different, and every family incorporates culture in a different way. For instance, in my family, traditional healing practices like smudging are common at many of our large family gatherings, but this may not be the case for other families or cultures.

Further, programs and places exist to promote engagement in traditional culture and healing. The Victoria Native Friendship Centre (VNFC) is an example of a place that exists to

help support Indigenous people, including promoting cultural practice. The VNFC is one of over 100 Friendship Centres located throughout the country, all of them working towards supporting urban Indigenous people in cultural practices, amongst other services (National Association of Friendship Centres, 2024). Many Friendship Centres offer language courses, cultural programs, and other opportunities for Indigenous people to connect with Indigenous culture and knowledge. In addition to supporting cultural practices, Friendship Centres also offer a lot of social support to Indigenous individuals and the general population. In addition to Friendship Centres, many treatment facilities now incorporate Indigenous healing practices, with some health centres in Canada being specifically for Indigenous people to offer culturally safe and affirming care. The merging of Indigenous knowledge with psychological treatment is also common in addiction treatment facilities. Health Canada, in collaboration with the Assembly of First Nations and the National Native Addictions Partnership Foundation created a framework for addictions care based on data collected from Indigenous community members and healthcare professionals (*Honouring Truths*, 2011). This framework emphasized the importance and effectiveness of providing culturally safe and affirming care for Indigenous people with substance-use issues. An example of this sort of care is a study by Adams et al., (2015) who studied equine-assisted learning programs and wellbeing in Indigenous youth with substance-use issues. This program used horses as a means of connecting Indigenous individuals with land, spirituality, and culture. The program was found to contribute positively to overall psychological, social and spiritual health in these youth. These results are supported by Rowan et al., (2014), Urbanoski (2017) and Maina (2020), who all cite culturally relevant care as effective in substance-use treatment for Indigenous people.

Another way to support Indigenous culture is to create “safe spaces” for Indigenous people (Liu et al., 2014; Louie et al., 2021). An important place for Indigenous people to feel culturally safe and supported is in a school setting. However, the intergenerational impact of residential schools has instilled a culture of mistrust in the Canadian educational system (Milne, 2016) and public schools today can play an important role in rebuilding trust and reconciliation among Indigenous communities, but more research is needed to assess these impacts. While many provincial educational systems acknowledge the importance of promoting cultural literacy among both non-Indigenous and Indigenous students, substantial variability exists in the depth and breadth of cultural programs that are delivered by schools, as well as the role that these programs play in supporting cultural identity. The current study intends on filling this gap.

The role of schools in supporting cultural continuity

Schools are one of the most important environments for positive youth development. Supporting cultural identity is one of the areas that schools can aid in positive youth development (Altugan, 2015). Some recent scholarly work has been done in analysing the ways a school can support cultural identity in youth. Through culturally sensitive teaching, and by including perspectives from diverse cultures, schools can create a sense of cultural continuity that extends from one’s home into their school (Olsen, 2023; Warzon & Ginsburg-Block, 2008; Wegmann & Bowen, 2010). Culturally relevant teaching practices have been shown to improve student learning, such as story sharing improving literacy in an Indigenous youth context (Bird et al., 2008). This has been further shown to increase student belonging and success (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008). This sort of inquiry has been specifically important in a Canadian Indigenous context. Influential research by Kirkness and Barnhardt (2001) outlined the importance of supporting Indigenous students in what they described as the “Four R’s”. The Four R's represent

a set of guiding principles for schools to follow: Respect, Relevance, Reciprocity, and Responsibility. Schools have begun to uphold these principles through cultural support and specific programming for Indigenous youth.

Implementation of school-based culturally relevant programming for Indigenous youth has occurred throughout the country, both on and off-reserve. Programs such as “the Fourth R” (Crooks et al., 2008) aim to provide cultural fluency and connection to at-risk Indigenous youth, through collaboration with schools. This program includes both changes to curriculum to include more Indigenous content, and opportunities to learn from other Indigenous educators. These sort of school-based culturally affirming programs have received ample scholarly support. Crooks, Burleigh and Sisco (2015) examined the impacts of the Fourth R’s “Uniting Our Nations” program through interviews with collaborators of the program. This included school board staff members and teachers, as well as local Indigenous community members and elders. The program engaged youth with culture, as well as offered mentoring and developed an Indigenous student advisory committee for the school. There was an overall benefit to the wellbeing of those involved in the programming, and cultural connection and cultural leadership was supported in these youth. Crooks et al., (2015) additionally examined the same program in another study, and found it promoted student success, improved leadership, developed greater school belonging. This was attributed to the culturally affirming nature of this program. The Fourth R has programs all throughout Canada (Crooks et al., 2008) and is continuing to expand as far as into the United States, with the programs having demonstrated effectiveness in Alaska as well (Crooks et al., 2018). Other additional school-based cultural programs have been beneficial for Indigenous youth. Tyler (2020) did practicum work at Aatse Davie School, located on the traditional territory of the Kwadacha Nation. The author used Indigenous culture and knowledge to promote sense of

self and wellbeing in a group of young Indigenous males. Also, in a study of a social skills program for Indigenous students in the Northwest Territories found the culturally relevant program to be particularly useful for developing prosocial behaviour in Indigenous students (Chalmers-MacDonald, 2005).

Outside of specific programs for Indigenous people through schools, there has been work to create more inclusive school environments and efforts to support cultural continuity. In 2010, the National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health, in collaboration with, the Canadian Council on Learning Knowledge Centre on Aboriginal Learning and the Canadian Association for School Health, proposed a framework for Indigenous student health within schools. This framework holds culture as the primary mechanism by which Indigenous students will be successful (ie. academic attainment and retention) in schools (Tagalik, 2010). Similar to what has been done with other Indigenous pedagogical frameworks globally, respecting, teaching and upholding Indigenous knowledge and values is a fundamental aspect of Indigenous student success in Canada (Tagalik, 2010). Another project supporting the inclusion of Indigenous content in schools is the LUCID (Learning for Understanding through Culturally-inclusive Imaginative Development) program in BC (Nielson, 2010). The goals of this program were to include culturally-relevant content in schools to support the success of Indigenous students, and to develop a framework of imagination-based education that would be applicable to all students. The LUCID Program worked in collaboration with the local schoolboards of the Sto:lo, Haida and Ts'msyen First Nations to offer teachers and students new ways to teach and learn respectively, through culture-based imaginative education practices. Feedback from the students, their families and the workers of each schoolboard were overall positive (Nielson, 2010).

Provinces vary in educational leadership and organizations dedicated to Indigenous learning and knowledge. For example, British Columbia has provincial institutions like the BC First Nation Schools Association (FNSEA) and the First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC), which have given First Nations communities the opportunity to control their own educational institutions autonomously, and have also supported public schools in incorporating Indigenous culture and knowledge into the general curriculum (Richards, 2013). Another study of Indigenous education in BC by Larson (2017) worked with the Taku River Tlingit First Nation, and their local schoolboard School District 87 (Stikine). Their findings suggested that support for Indigenous culture and identity in schools is important for school belonging and success in Indigenous youth. Further, the author specifically noted that the benefits of learning Indigenous-focused content within schools is important for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Outside of BC, cultural safety for Indigenous students was found to be important for Indigenous student success in Ottawa (Richmond et al., 2012). These findings are consistent with other studies that examine school-wide policies and programs that support Indigenous youth through culturally relevant education practices (Ormeaux, 2023). Ormeaux (2023) created an Organizational Plan for Catholic schools in Ontario with high amounts of Indigenous students. This program uses culturally relevant content, and emphasizes respect and leadership, as a means of supporting Indigenous student success.

The importance of school belonging in Indigenous student success

A large part of one's success in a school setting involves a sense of belonging within the school (Allen & Kern, 2017; Par, Shochet, Cockshaw & Kelly, 2020; Shochet, Smith, Furlong & Homel, 2011; Vargas-Madriz & Konishi, 2021). School belonging has been shown to decrease depressive symptoms and foster overall academic achievement in the general adolescent

population (Allen & Kern, 2017; Par, Shochet, Cockshaw & Kelly, 2020; Vargas-Madriz & Konishi, 2021). The importance of feelings of belonging to a school environment has been shown to be important for non-Canadian Indigenous populations as well (Waite, Walsh & Black, 2023). Creating a sense of school belonging is crucial in a Canadian Indigenous context, as the Residential and Day School systems has created a large degree of mistrust in academic institutions largely. Through interviews with Residential School survivors, Milne (2016) found that Residential School attendance predicted mistrust in educational systems, including a general fear of teachers. Further, cultural insensitivity and discrimination has alienated Indigenous individuals from public education systems as well. Blacklaws (2014) interviewed Diaga First Nation community members who attended Ontario public schools from 1960-1980. Findings from the interviews suggests that Canadian public schools used discriminatory and culturally insensitive practices when educating Indigenous youth. These findings are supported by another research that examined the experiences of Indigenous youth attending high schools in the Sioux Lookout Zone (Pencier et al., 2018), where many of the students attending these schools felt like they did not belong in these institutions. Silver et al., (2002) found the experiences of Indigenous youth in Winnipeg to be similar, suggesting that these school climate-related challenges are faced by Indigenous youth throughout the country, and which may partially explain the lower average educational attainment rates of Indigenous people (Statistics Canada, 2023). Despite this, Indigenous communities are committed to improving the educational landscape (e.g., TRCs Calls to Action 64), with calls for an increase in access to culturally-relevant content in schools (Michell, Antoine & Mike, 2023). Given the complex relationships of the Indigenous Peoples of Canada to the educational system, and the overall importance of school belonging, it is crucial that school systems support the success of Indigenous students.

Some other studies have discussed factors that are important for belonging in Indigenous students, outside of specifically culture-based support. In a set of interviews gathered from Mi'kmaq and Wolastoqiyik students, four major themes were identified on how to support Indigenous student belonging within their local schools Pyers (2023) which were: Language, Space, History and Relationships. Regarding the first theme, students desired to hear their language within the school, and hoped for more rigorous language classes to be offered through their school. Spaces for Indigenous students to feel culturally safe was important for these students as well. Also, learning about Indigenous history and the history of colonialism from a perspective outside the common western narrative was important to these students. Finally, relationships between students and faculty, as well as students between each other was important for building a sense of belonging. Consistent with previous literature (Muskego, 1995), the ethnic identity of the teachers in these schools was not noted as particularly important. Teachers did not need to be Indigenous, as long as the demonstrated respect and interest for Indigenous culture and the languages of the students (Pyers, 2023). In the previously mentioned study by Muskego (1995), teachers being able to speak a Canadian-Indigenous language was noted as highly beneficial to youth's feelings of connection and belonging to their school. Additionally, teachers should serve as mentors and role models to their students (Muskego, 1995; Pyers, 2023). The conclusions of the previous studies are supported by Archibald (2011). Through their research with Ontario schools teaching Indigenous musical knowledge, cultural sensitivity and respect from teachers was necessary for student belonging (Archibald, 2011).

These results are largely consistent with research from other studies of global Indigenous populations (Leydens et al., 2017; Liu, 2022; Marmion, Obata & Troy, 2014; Rahman, 2013; Shochet et al., 2011), with a lot of the work coming from Australia and New Zealand. Cultural

promotion in schools is a promising mechanism to supporting Indigenous populations globally but more research is needed to assess their impacts in among urban Indigenous youth in Canada. This study can serve as a means of examining this relationship, using a qualitative approach similar to those mentioned in aforementioned articles (e.g. Blacklaws, 2014; Pyers, 2023).

School belonging, cultural connection and prosocial behaviour

Research has shown a robust relationship between school belonging and a variety of positive student outcomes. Pittman and Richmond (2016) found trust in schools and cultural competence to predict academic achievement and psychological adjustment in African American students. Additionally, Gizir (2019) found school belonging to positively influence the relationship between students and teachers. School belonging is also thought to reduce bullying and victimization between students (Kosir, Zaksek & Kozina, 2023). These positive benefits are further supported by Gillen-O' Neel and Fuligni (2012), who demonstrated school belonging is associated with academic motivation and achievement. School belonging can be related to prosocial behaviour in youth through greater engagement with the institution and more positive relationships between students (Allen, Vella-Brodrick & Waters, 2017). For instance, Demanet & Van Houtte (2012) examined a sample of nearly 12,000 students and found that belonging in the form of connection to the institution and staff within (such as teachers) predicted reduced misconduct and more prosocial behaviour. Further, based on a review by Spivak, Lipsey, Farran and Polanin (2015), schools that promote diversity, multiculturalism and cultural respect amongst students are thought to increase overall school belonging and is associated with prosocial behaviour in youth.

However, there has been little research on how this relationship exists in Indigenous populations. Emerging research findings suggest that prosocial behaviour is improved both by

connection to school and connection to culture, often facilitated through culturally relevant programming (Chalmers-Macdonald, 2005; Crooks et al., 2015; Crooks, Burleigh & Sisco, 2015; Tyler, 2020). In an Indigenous context, prosocial behaviour may include mentoring other students, getting involved in other Indigenous cultural events, and sharing their culture with friends and family (Crooks, Burleigh & Sisco, 2015; Woolrych, Eady & Green, 2020). These results are consistent with other diverse contexts, although research in schools specifically is limited. Regarding schools, ethnic identity in Black American youth is thought to predict prosocial behaviour within schools (Harris & Kruger, 2019). Additionally, Chavous et al., (2003) found ethnic identity in Black youth to be predictive in success within schools as a whole. Also, among Mexican students, school belonging predicted prosocial behaviour (Maiya et al., 2020). These results are supported by Shah et al., (2021), who found that school belonging fostered prosocial behaviours in minority-immigrant youth. School belonging in Black youth is also thought to be protective against the harms of peer discrimination (Montero et al., 2020). Ethnic identity fostering prosocial behaviour has been shown in various other populations. For instance, connection to identity predicted prosocial actions in Mexican-American youth (Armenta et al., 2011). These results are corroborated by Streit, Carlo & Killoren's (2020) study on Latin-X Americans broadly. One's perceived efficacy in prosocial behaviour is also influenced by their connection to their ethnic identity (Smith et al., 2002). The rationale for this study is in accordance with the previously discussed literature on school-based cultural programming for Indigenous students, and its relationship to wellbeing and prosocial behaviour.

The current study

The current study intends to examine the opportunities and programs that exist within southern Vancouver Island schools for Indigenous youth to learn about and connect with culture.

Based on previous literature on cultural identity, we hypothesized that (a) more opportunities to connect with culture in schools would be associated with a stronger cultural identity among Indigenous youth; (b) Indigenous cultural identity would be related to a more consolidated sense of self and positive wellbeing; and (c) Indigenous cultural identity and school belonging (as supported by their school) will be associated with prosocial behaviour. These hypotheses were examined through group interviews with urban Indigenous youth who are currently attending public high schools on Vancouver Island. The overarching goal of this study is to understand how Vancouver Island schools are supporting cultural identity among urban Indigenous youth, as well as how cultural identity may be related to prosocial behaviours. Findings will help inform practices for school-based culturally responsive opportunities for Indigenous youth.

Methods

Developing a culturally responsive methodological approach: A journey and positionality

Following the work of other Indigenous scholars (Archibald, 2011; Larson, 2017; Pyers, 2023; Tyler, 2020), the details of my methods will first be told from a narrative perspective, as I believe the journey by which I came to these methods is just as important as the methods itself. When I first began at the University of Victoria (UVIC), my understanding of Indigenous research methodologies was limited. Despite being Mi'kmaq on my mother's side and having grown up learning about Indigenous culture and attending ceremonies, I was disconnected from my Indigenous heritage in many regards. I came into my master's degree at UVIC with the intention to conduct research for the benefit of Indigenous communities and Indigenous people throughout the country broadly. I knew that the Residential School System had contributed greatly to the academic challenges faced by Indigenous people, as my grandmother and her two siblings attended Shubenacadie Residential School for roughly nine years. This created a particular interest to study Indigenous relations with contemporary school systems. While I had an idea of what I wanted to do, it was unclear to me how to execute this plan.

I had previously received my BA in Psychology from Queen's University, and while I learned extensive amounts of western research methodologies, I was not taught what it meant to use Indigenous methodologies. My original methods were highly westernized, and likely culturally insensitive and harmful. It was not until I began learning from other Indigenous scholars at UVIC through the Department of Psychology and the Center for Indigenous Research and Community-Led Engagement (CIRCLE), that I realized I needed to reframe my methods. It was around this time I enrolled in a graduate-level course in Indigenous Research Methods, which ended up being invaluable experience. I was given the opportunity to discuss my research

in a culturally informed context, with both Indigenous students and faculty. This course also introduced me to a book that would be foundational for my methods and my understanding of Indigenous methodologies as a whole. The book was *Indigenous Methodologies* by Margaret Kovach (2021). Kovach (2021) discussed what qualifies something as Indigenous methodologies, in comparison to Indigenous-relevant methodologies. For something to be considered an Indigenous research method, it must come purely from an individual's own Indigenous knowledge or worldview. As someone who grew up separated from their culture in a lot of ways, it became clear to me that while it is not appropriate to use strictly western methods, it was also not appropriate or accurate to claim to use Indigenous research methods. Kovach discussed how some traditionally western methods are adaptable to an Indigenous context, and that not all work with Indigenous people requires only Indigenous methods. An example of this would be focus-groups, as they hold similarities to knowledge sharing practices in many Indigenous communities (Hunt et al., 2021; Kovach, 2021). It was now my goal to work towards developing culturally sensitive methods, rooted in my conventional western education in psychology. Through reading the works of other scholars, I saw certain western methods and paradigms that were particularly common in culturally sensitive Indigenous research. The primary methods I identified to be culturally sensitive and to fit my research goals was a mix of talking circles/focus groups and Thematic Analysis (Pyers, 2023; Hunt et al., 2021; Kovach et al., 2021; Crooks, Burleigh & Sisco, 2015). These sorts of approaches are rooted in western methodology, but are thought to be generally appropriate for research involving Indigenous participants. This is in-part due to these approaches being more in-line with traditional Indigenous means of knowledge sharing (Kovach, 2021).

Partnership with the Victoria Native Friendship Centre

A culturally responsive approach to research methodology involves recruiting Indigenous youth in a meaningful, socially responsible manner. This requires establishing rapport with the youth organizations that serve Indigenous youth and working collaboratively with them. Recognizing that the Victoria Native Friendship Centre (VNFC) provides outreach to Indigenous youth, we approached the Youth Coordinator in the summer of 2023 about this research. They saw the importance of my proposed project, and were interested in collaborating with me. Despite their invitation to work together, I wanted to be conscious of my role as a researcher. Historically, research in Indigenous contexts has been exploitative and in the interest of the researchers only. Kovach (2021) defines this as research *on* Indigenous people, rather than research *with* Indigenous people. This was not my intention when working with the VNFC, so I knew it was important to become known and trusted in this institution before I did any data collection. Over the following months I took on a variety of different volunteer opportunities and completed the VNFC's Community Learning Program, which teaches individuals how to respectfully work with Indigenous communities. To establish trust and rapport with youth and staff, along with Allison Joyce, an Indigenous Undergraduate student, we offered an information sessions on our experiences as Indigenous students at the University of Victoria, as part of their *Gathering Our Voices* LGBTQ2S+ youth event. I began developing relationships with specific staff at the VNFC, and once I felt trusted enough, asked if they could assist with recruitment. I am thankful to the people of the VNFC for creating a welcoming and supportive environment for myself, and for all they do to help the community as a whole.

Procedure

Recruitment began in January 2024 and the study was promoted through posters, word-of-mouth (i.e., personal connections with friends and family), and collaboration and relationship building. The majority of participants were part of the Youth Drop-In Program at the VNFC. This program provides an after school gathering space for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students middle and high school students.

Youth responses were represented through three semi-structured group interviews. Informed consent was gathered prior to the start of the interview. All interviews were no longer than 1 hour in length. All youth were provided with an honorarium in the form of a \$30 gift certificate to a coffee shop. One interview took place over Zoom with 2 participants. The remainder were conducted in-person. The second interview also included 2 participants and was conducted on the university campus. The final interview included 8 participants and was held at the VNFC during the Youth Drop-in time. Transcriptions were made using Zoom from the audio recorded in the first two interviews. The transcript for the third interview was created using Microsoft Word. These transcripts were then edited for transcription errors.

Participants

Participants included 12 Indigenous high school students ranging in age from 13 to 17 years old. All students were currently attending high school on Vancouver Island, with the majority of them ($n = 10$) residing in the Greater Victoria Area, and the remainder in the Campbell River area ($n = 2$). While this was not specifically asked or recorded, participants were from a diverse array of Indigenous communities throughout Canada. For instance, a participant had Mi'kmaq heritage from a community in Newfoundland and others mentioned belonging to communities in BC and other parts of Canada broadly.

Analytic approach

In line with Kovach's (2021) recommendations for interpreting data, thematic analysis was used to distill emerging themes and trends from the data. Specifically, a semantic, deductive approach to thematic analysis was used to interpret participants' responses (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This approach was also inspired by Joy (2023), who described Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), as this method focuses on understanding participant responses in a contextual manner. The themes expected to emerge were factors that contribute to school belonging, cultural affirmation through schools, prosocial and leadership behaviours and areas for improvement within schools. These themes are grounded in the findings based on previous studies with Indigenous youth (e.g. Crooks et al., 2015). However, themes other than these four were expected to emerge from the data, so there was an inductive element to the methodological approach.

Once the data was collected, interviews were analysed by the lead researcher, in collaboration with their supervisor and an undergraduate research assistant (RA). Following the steps described by Braun and Clark (2006), codes were first generated from the responses and interactions captured in the interviews. Codes were generally direct quotes from participants, but also included actions by participants during the interview. From these codes, five themes were first developed that best captured the majority of responses provided by participants in the three interviews. These five themes were: (a) connection to Indigenous identity; (b) how schools are supporting Indigenous students; (c) Indigenous representation at schools; (d) areas for improvement within schools; and (e) prosocial behaviours/cultural sharing. To establish interrater reliability, thirty random codes were selected from the first interview that were deemed to represent one of the five themes. A research assistant was given these codes and were asked to

rate them as one of the five themes. These ratings were then compared to the initial categorizations made by the lead researcher to generate a kappa value for each theme. These kappa values were then averaged to establish an estimate of interrater reliability. Following this, the research team deliberated to create themes based on codes that were not captured by these five themes. Throughout this process, and following the steps of Bruan and Clark (2006), themes were revised to better capture participant responses, and to avoid potential overlap of content captured by themes. An example of this would be that the aforementioned themes (b) and (d) were combined into one representative theme.

Results

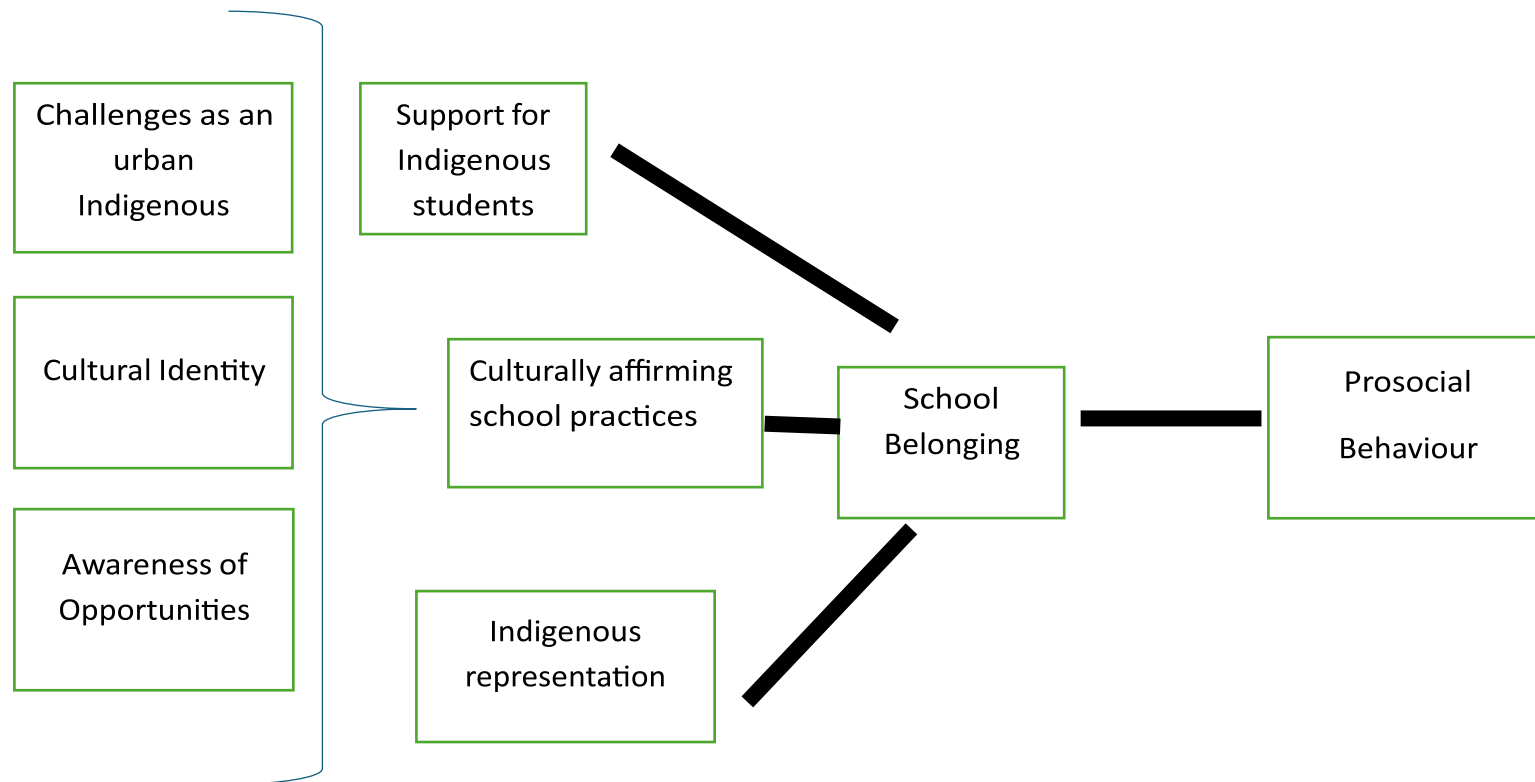
Thematic analyses using Joy (2023) and Braun & Clarke (2006) methods were used to describe common themes that represented school-based relational and academic elements that are related to students' sense of school belongingness, cultural identity, willingness to engage in culturally-related prosocial behaviours and leadership. Participants' experiences were mostly congruent with these proposed themes but themes were expanded to better capture the nuances of the responses shared by the participants. The final codebook comprised of themes that describe school-related factors that contribute to 1.) overall sense of school belonging (or lack thereof); 2.) cultural affirmation (or hindering cultural identity); 3.) prosocial behaviour, leadership and cultural sharing; 4.) cultural challenges as an Urban Indigenous person; 5.) cultural pride/positive in-group attitudes; 6.) Indigenous representation (or lack thereof) in schools; 7.) lack of awareness in opportunities at school; 8.) support (or lack thereof) for Indigenous students (see Table 1). Level of inter-rater agreement for themes codes was high (average Kappa = .948). Discrepancies were resolved through discussion. Participants' experiences represented schoolbased processes that were associated with youths' sense of school belonging, which in turn, was related to their willingness to engage in culturally specific prosocial behaviours (e.g., knowledge sharing). Figure 1 depicts these school-based processes. Specifically, youth who went to schools that provided ample supports specifically for Indigenous students, offered culturally affirming courses and events, and had adequate Indigenous representation was related to connected to their school and was associated with feeling that the schools met their needs. Youth who reported a stronger sense of school belonging also described culturally-specific prosocial behaviours like sharing their cultural knowledge with their family and community members. In addition to these school-based processes, youths' cultural identity and unique challenges as an

urban Indigenous youth was related to how they interacted with and perceive their school environment.

Table 1. Results of Thematic Analysis

Theme	Definition	Example Quote
Cultural Identity	A sense of pride or connection to one's Indigenous culture or ancestry.	"Indigenous people just instantly connect with each other, almost cause we like, understand each other a little more than like we do with other people."
Challenges as an Urban Indigenous Youth	Struggles that Indigenous individuals may find with accessing or connecting with Indigenous culture.	"I wouldn't like wanna intrude on something that isn't really specifically like my culture"
Culturally Affirming School Practices	Ways a school is promoting and supporting Indigenous culture. This can be done through relevant courses or events held through the school.	"Learning about it, you want to learn more about Indigenous culture."
Support for Indigenous Students	Overall school-based supports for Indigenous students. In some cases, these supports may be offered specifically to Indigenous students only.	"There's like a little office next to a class, and you can just go in there and talk...there are a couple people there who work on that kind of stuff (Indigenous student supports)."
Indigenous Representation in Schools	Representation of Indigenous People or cultures in schools. This may be in the form of diversity in student and staff population, or through overall representations of Indigenous culture and art in schools.	"There are a lot of like, Indigenous teachers at our school"
Awareness of Opportunities	The general awareness of the opportunities and supports offered by a student's school.	"I think they need to kind of make us more aware of what we can [access]"
School Belonging	A overall sense of connectedness and positive regard towards one's school. This may be to the staff or the overall environment the school promotes.	"School is really hard for me. [It is] the main thing that...causes my [negative] mental health"
Prosocial Behaviour	Positive behaviours in youth, such as helping and leadership. In this context, prosocial behaviour includes positive sharing of culture amongst Indigenous students.	"I tried to get [my brother] to join the (Indigenous language) class."

Figure 1. Conceptual model of the school-based cultural processes that support Indigenous youths' sense of school belonging and engagement in prosocial behaviours



Sense of School Belonging (or Lack Thereof)

Students described conditions that were related to a sense of school belonging. An example of school practices that were related to students' sense of belonging was actively reaching out to Indigenous students. As one student recalls:

"Sometimes they reach out to students if they are struggling and show them the support that they do have, in case they need it"

School practices that were associated with students' sense of belonging generally had an inclusive atmosphere:

"I think our school's pretty inclusive actually like, I haven't really seen any discrimination."

On the other hand, some students who felt like they did not belong in their school reported negative perceptions of their high school. One student describes just wanting to finish high school and move onto something else:

"I'm just gonna like...get out of there. I'm kind of done with it."

These schools were reportedly cutting out programs and supports that many Indigenous students were using, or threatening to cut them out if students do not donate money towards it.

"When something doesn't go their way, they're like, we're gonna take it away then"

Some students even sought out other schools that were more inclusive as it reportedly made them feel more comfortable. One student described leaving their school to attend another school because the school is:

"Way more chill."

Other non-cultural aspects that were related to descriptions of inclusivity were the characteristic of the teachers themselves. One student described that teachers in their school impose unreasonable pressure on them which impacts their enjoyment of school. Teachers in this student's school were described as particularly strict about homework, allegedly not allowing students to complete it at home and instead having them do it during class time.

School practices that were not associated with a positive sense of belonging also were associated with teachers that were described as overly strict or were not responsive to students' academic needs. When students struggled, these teachers reportedly did not provide adequate support, which was related to students' mental health, as one student expressed:

“School is really hard for me. [It is] the main thing that...causes my [negative] mental health”

The same student also mentioned that their school was not a place they would feel comfortable seeking mental health support. Overall, students' sense of school belonging was related to by three prominent themes that described the level of support their schools provided to Indigenous students, degree of Indigenous representation within the school, and how well schools offered culturally affirming courses and events.

Support for Indigenous Students (or Lack Thereof)

A central theme to much of the interviews was ways in which the schools supported Indigenous students. This theme comprised of two subthemes tapping supports that were described as effective in that students felt they met the needs of Indigenous students, and supports that were described as ineffective in meeting the needs of Indigenous students. Typical

school-based supports for Indigenous students were in the form of a counsellor or an office space to seek mental health support. Many students detailed having this support in their school, with some having accessed it before. One student wrote:

“There's like a little office next to a class, and you can just go in there and talk....there are a couple people there who work on that kind of stuff.”

Schools with Indigenous counsellors also reportedly at times had multiple support workers specifically for Indigenous students to help with academic or personal challenges. For instance, one student described having Educational Assistants (EAs) at their school specifically for Indigenous students. In addition to mental health services, another form of support for Indigenous students was offerings of free food or lunches for Indigenous students. One student describes:

“We have like lunches and only the Indigenous students can like get the lunches”

These lunches would occur during school hours, at a place where Indigenous and nonIndigenous students participate in culturally-relevant activities, such as drumming and playing Lahal. This additionally serves as a social support, as Indigenous students are given a place to connect with other students in a culturally safe space. As one student notes:

“Anyone is welcome to drum and play Lahal as long as they're respectful.”

While some schools had support services in place specifically for Indigenous students, other schools did not. In response to other students sharing responses about what their schools respectively offer, one student said they did not feel their school was as supportive of Indigenous students. They said:

“Well, I go to [school name redacted], and I don’t really see anything like that”

This is similar to the experiences of other students, who felt like their school did not support Indigenous students. One student describes of their school:

“It's brutal because we don't get any help [as] Indigenous kids. No one actually cares about them at the school, they just want them out.”

This student additionally described having had supports such as a room specifically for Indigenous students taken away at their school. A different student in the same interview paralleled this experience when they said:

“They were trying to just get rid of that [room to] make [a] storage room”

These previously mentioned quotes highlight the diversity of experiences Indigenous youth have regarding school-based supports. Students who are not as supported by their school may not report a sense of school belonging.

Awareness of Opportunities for Indigenous Students

An important consideration that can influence the degree to which support is effective within schools is students’ awareness of whether support opportunities exist for Indigenous students. There were a few responses related to a lack of awareness of opportunities. Though this was not discussed at great lengths with all participants, some of the participants described this as the biggest barrier to supporting for Indigenous students. As one student notes:

“I think they need to kind of make us more aware of what we can [access]”

For example, despite offering academic grants for Indigenous students, based on participant responses, few Indigenous students were aware of such opportunities. Students supposedly either heard about these opportunities from a friend or from a teacher. Other students

were reportedly not even aware of whether such opportunities existed in their school or where to go to find such information.

Cultural Affirmation (or Hindered Cultural Identity) Through Schools

Students report that schools have been implementing culturally-relevant opportunities for Indigenous students, though often to mixed success. The responses relevant to this theme describe the degree to which these opportunities affirm youths' cultural identity, which is an important contributor of overall school belonging. A common cultural activity that is offered by most schools is drumming, which is normally offered to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. The majority of respondents who attended these events described that it was a positive experience. For instance, one student mentioned that during the free lunch events for Indigenous, they would also drum and play Lahal with other Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. The student felt that this event was implemented well, and that non-Indigenous students were generally respectful of the activities which helped to affirm their cultural identity and sense of school belonging. However, not all students felt that cultural activities were well received by non-Indigenous students which consequently was associated with less attendance to these events. One student described peers who were laughing at a drumming circle that took place in their school. They said:

"I could tell that they were just like finding [the drumming] so hilarious."

In these instances, cultural respect and protocol were not addressed by the school prior to the drumming events, and this was related to feelings of alienation from the drumming event.

Another student detailed similar experiences of a school not implementing a drumming event in

a way they felt was appropriate. As a result, they and their fellow Indigenous peers reportedly refused to participate:

“All four of us were just laughing at that.....like we didn't stand up. We didn't drum with them.”

In addition to drumming events, some schools also provided culturally-relevant courses for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. For example, some schools offered an Indigenous language course which was well received by students as they were inspired to learn more about Indigenous culture. This course not only provides an opportunity to engage with Indigenous culture, it also was effective in supporting their cultural identity, by increasing their desire to learn about Indigenous culture. As one student said:

“I just wanted to learn more about Indigenous culture. It just kind of made me want to join that class to learn more.”

The effectiveness of this class in bolstering Indigenous cultural connection is demonstrated by a statement the student followed up with:

“Learning about it, you want to learn more about Indigenous culture.”

However, similar to the drumming, there was diversity in the experiences of students who had taken a similar class. For one student, they felt that the Indigenous culture course offered by their school for all students to take was not implemented well. Specifically, students reported feeling that the course was taught with a colonial perspective which neglected Indigenous strength and culture and instead focused more on settler's guilt. As one student states,

“Even to me who, being someone who’s Indigenous. It seems like they’re just shoving it in your face....I would be more for it if they actually talked about like.....culture”

“They kind of make it like a pity party for themselves, like, we’re so sorry we colonized you.”

These responses capture the mixed reactions from students to Indigenous content taught in schools, suggesting substantial variability in course delivery and content. Such comments highlight the need to reassess generic cultural programs that may not appropriate for all students and are related to reduced school belonging.

Indigenous Representation in Schools

The degree of Indigenous representation in schools was also related to students’ sense of belonging. Students described varied ways in which schools promoted Indigenous representation in their school ranging from presence of Indigenous artwork displayed in schools to the number of Indigenous students, faculty and guests in the school community. Indigenous representation was pivotable in promoting uptake of cultural courses provided by the school. In some schools, the Indigenous language courses was taught by an Indigenous teacher, students also had opportunities in the class to connect with Elders.

“There are a lot of like, Indigenous teachers at our school”

“When I was in my Indigenous class. We talked to a couple of elders”

This student described feeling positively about this class and kept some of the course materials they reportedly found interesting following completing the course. One student noted positively about this class:

“I feel it was a pretty safe space to just say what I felt”

Another student had similar experiences with their school, and their school had many Indigenous faculty workers. This is contrasted by the experiences of some other students, who referred to them and another participant as attending schools that lack diversity:

“We go to like, maybe the two whitest schools”

Students who had this perception of their school did not generally report a sense of belonging to their school.

“They just want [Indigenous students] out.”

Prosocial Behaviour, Cultural Sharing & Leadership

The theme of prosocial behaviour was captured in the responses of a few participants which describes the degree to which participants felt the urge to engage in helping behaviours and leadership activities including sharing their cultural knowledge. Participants who described feeling connected to their school also reported prosocial behaviours. One participant went to gather their course materials at two different times throughout the interview to share what they learned with the interviewee. The participant shared these two pieces of cultural information with passion and pride in what they had learned which demonstrates prosocial cultural sharing. The student also shared what they learned from their course with friends and family:

“When I would come home, I'd sometimes just like say what we learned and if I found it interesting.”

This same student also mentioned trying to get a family member to join the class they were taking.

“I tried to get [them] to join the class.”

Other students had similar endorsements of prosocial behaviour, as two participants shared that they considered getting a career or volunteering in an area to support Indigenous people. On the other hand, there were also some participants who described how their school had not inspired them to act in a prosocial manner. When asked about if their school has ever inspired them to volunteer or get involved in a community opportunity, the participant responded:

“I don’t think the school will ever inspire me to do anything.”

This quote highlights how a negative perception of one’s school environment can hinder prosocial behaviours.

Cultural Pride/Positive In-Group Attitudes

Participants consistently expressed cultural pride and endorsement of Indigenous culture, as well as overall positive in-group attitudes throughout the interviews. The following quote reflects the overall sentiment from many of the participants:

“Indigenous people just instantly connect with each other almost cause we like understand each other a little more than like we do with other people.”

Additionally, one student recounts the positive feelings they experience when learning about local Indigenous culture and comparing it to their culture:

Yeah, [it] feel[s] pretty nice because like most of it was pretty similar to our culture. It's not way too far off.”

Another student described being Indigenous as:

“Sacred and fun”

When asked to reflect on how they feel about being Indigenous, students generally embraced their cultural identity as one student says:

“I do feel very [connected]. If someone asks my ethnicity I’ll tell them I’m Indigenous....I find myself being more close to my Indigenous side”

Challenges as an Urban Indigenous Person

A theme that emerged was general challenges in connecting with culture as an urban Indigenous person. This seemed to be associated with differences in individual cultural identity. Moving away from areas where participants previously had more exposure to culturally relevant opportunities was a major contributing factor. One participant mentioned how they used to attend more events where they previously lived and have not attended as many since moving. When asked if they feel any sort of longing to attend events like they previously did they responded:

“Yeah, it was like, it was super fun.”

Furthermore, some participants found it challenging to connect with local cultural opportunities, as they did not feel it was their culture or place to interfere, out of respect for the local communities.

“[It is] not really geared towards, like the culture that I’m from. So it’s kind of like cool. I’m learning about your guy’s culture. But [there’s] just not really like an opportunity to here [to connect with my culture]”

“I wouldn’t like wanna intrude on something that isn’t really specifically like my culture”

On the other hand, some students reported struggling to connect with other Indigenous individuals when they were younger, but now do because there are more cultural opportunities:

“We haven’t grown up around too many people who are Indigenous. Just cause where we lived when we grew up.”

Overall, these responses reflect some of the challenges urban Indigenous youth may face when attempting to connect with Indigenous people and culture.

Discussion

The current study explored school-based processes that are related to Indigenous students' cultural identity. Students shared personal appraisals of what they believe their schools are doing to effectively support Indigenous students, as well as barriers they faced within the school system that was associated with differences in their cultural engagement and cultural identity. Findings from thematic analyses revealed several individual and school-based pathways that are associated with Indigenous youths' sense of belonging. Specifically, schools that promoted culturally affirming practices, Indigenous representation, and offered academic and mental health supports specifically for Indigenous students were associated with reported strengthening of youths' sense of school belonging, which in turn, was related to behaviours that were culturally prosocial, such as sharing of cultural knowledge. Youths' awareness of cultural opportunities within their school, how they identify with their Indigeneity, and challenges they faced as an urban Indigenous youth was related to differences in how they interacted with these school-based processes.

Schools and Indigenous Cultural Identity

Schools have a longstanding disruptive and harmful history with Indigenous populations. Decades of historical oppression and colonial indoctrination disguised as "education" has led to intergenerational mistrust in the Canadian educational system, as well as eroding cultural identity (Milne, 2016). While disparities in educational outcomes among Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth remain (Statistics Canada, 2023), academic achievement (e.g., secondary and postsecondary attainment) among Indigenous youth has increased compared to previous decades.

Previously mentioned studies have shown that programs that are developed to support Indigenous cultural connection among Indigenous youth has a positive impact on their wellbeing, improving a range of outcomes including social competence and academic achievement (Tyler, 2020; Crooks et al., 2015; Crooks, Burleigh & Sisco, 2015; Chalmers-Macdonald, 2005). Youth Indigenous language immersion schools are also more likely to be studied, compared to public schools (e.g. Tyler, 2020). However, less is known about how cultural identity is being supported by schools in the public educational system. Given emerging evidence linking cultural identity and inclusion among minoritized populations (Shah et al., 2021), as well as meeting the TRC calls to action on cultural literacy (Truth and Reconciliation Committee, 2015), more research is needed to identify effective and ineffective ways that schools are supporting the cultural needs of Indigenous students. This is especially important, given the recent graduation requirement that was added for all high school students in BC, where all students must complete four credits of Indigenous courses (Government of British Columbia, 2024). Our findings show that school practices may be associated with Indigenous students' cultural interest and engagement, but cultural identity is not contingent upon support from schools. Most participants, if not all, spoke of their general positive regard towards their Indigenous identity. However, for some students, their experiences within the school system was related to their willingness to connect and engage with cultural content and opportunities within and outside of school settings, particularly for schools that provided cultural content in a respectful and engaging manner. For instance, one student who was participating in an Indigenous-focused class held by their school reported connected to their Indigenous identity, and this was related to their attendance to this class. This student mentioned how learning about Indigenous content makes them 'want to learn more' and also spoke about how they connected to

it further by relating it to their own Indigenous culture that was different from that taught in the class. This type of interaction highlights how school practices are related to the development of cultural identity in Indigenous youth. On the other hand, schools can also be engaging in activities that are deemed not culturally supportive by some Indigenous students. A number of participants reported finding the culturally-relevant content in their high school to be damaging to their sense of belonging in schools which was related to a reduction in their willingness to engage within cultural opportunities. A major source of this disconnect reportedly came from a perception of cultural insensitivity within their school. For example, while the majority of participants reported having Indigenous drumming as a school-based opportunity to connect with culture, there were differences in youths' receptivity towards this cultural activity. Many of the students reported attending and enjoying these events, but a few participants found it to be offensive and opted to not participate in these gatherings. The source of this frustration reportedly came from teachers and faculty for two of the participants, and peers for one participant. Students reported having non-Indigenous peers 'laughing at' these cultural gatherings, and others spoke about teachers and staff who approached this content with a lack of sensitivity. The staff of the school also did not do anything to stop these individuals from laughing. This was troubling for these students to witness, and it resulted in a general negative view towards cultural opportunities in their school and their school environment as a whole. Cultural insensitivity in schools was associated with reports of not engaging with culture in the school system. In general, research has shown that culturally responsive schools promote school climates that are inclusive with fewer instances of racism and discrimination (Altugan, 2015). However, cultural responsiveness varies from school to school, and simply offering a cultural

activity (i.e., drumming) without going over cultural protocol or historical context may indirectly be harmful to minority students.

Another important consideration that is related to how youth engage with cultural programs and activities provided by schools is youths' own Indigenous identity. One student mentioned that even when their school has information on Indigenous culture, they did not connect with it as it was 'not their culture'. This participant had a different perspective than the other aforementioned participant, who was able to relate the culture taught in their school to their own culture, despite there being many differences. Perhaps this student may have felt more inclined to relate the content in the school to their familial culture if their school had treated other cultural opportunities with more respect and sensitivity. It is also worth noting that two of the participants who experienced cultural insensitivity in their school during the drumming event, also provided responses that may indicate a negative perception of Indigenous-focused courses in their school. For instance, one student spoke about how their school is 'shoving [Indigenous content] in [their] face' in classes, which contrasts the experience of the previously mentioned student who enjoyed these sorts of classes. This may be a reflection of the school's approach to this content, as two students mentioned how the content was heavily focused on 'settler guilt' and did not highlight Indigenous strengths and culture. On the other hand, the student who enjoyed this content mentioned that some of these courses were taught by Indigenous faculty from a non-settler perspective, and they did not mention any notion of 'settler guilt' coming across in these classes. This may reflect overall differences in the school's treatment of Indigenous content and whether it was related to apathy in some students, rather than a lack of cultural development, as these students generally reported a strong sense of cultural identity and willingness to learn and engage outside of the school setting. These findings

are represented in the proposed conceptual model of school-based processes that are related to school belonging among Indigenous students (see Figure 1). Cultural identity and challenges as an urban Indigenous individual is associated with differences in the ways students interact with their school environment as a whole. Other studies have emphasized a more passive pathway of how cultural connection can be promoted through cultural programming opportunities (e.g., Crooks, Burleigh & Sisco, 2015), but our findings suggest that differences in cultural identity can influence how urban Indigenous youth interact with cultural opportunities provided by their schools.

Sense of School Belonging and Youth Well-being

There is considerable research on how youths' sense of school belonging develops (Review by Allen & Kern, 2017), as well as their positive impacts on promoting academic success (Vargas-Madriz & Konishi, 2021), reducing peer victimization (Leadbeater, Sukhawathanakul, Thompson & Holfeld, 2015), as well as promoting prosocial behaviours (Demant & Van Houtte, 2012). Yet, limited research has examined how school belonging relates to cultural identity particularly among Canadian urban Indigenous youth. There are a range of factors that influence retention, which are related to sense of school belonging including peer relationships. For example, after controlling for other child and family characteristics, O'Gorman and Pandey (2014) found that Inuit children whose friends had dropped out were more likely to have thought about dropping out themselves. Schools that affirm youths' cultural identity by not only helping them connect with their Indigenous heritage but also supporting their academic and mental health needs, are more likely to foster a sense of belonging and reduce barriers to academic attainment.

Our findings show that cultural identity and cultural engagement is associated with sense of school belonging. Students' overall well-being was related to this sense of belonging. One student described the 'main thing' impacting their 'mental health' was their school. Notably, this was one of the students who had mentioned instances of cultural insensitivity in their school. Additionally, another student mentioned instances of cultural insensitivity, where a teacher had told them they did not have to complete an assignment on Indigenous content 'because [they are] Indigenous'. This student spoke of feeling unsupported and disenfranchised from their school environment as a whole, and went as far as to say they would often leave their school during any spare time to go to a different local high school. Worth noting is that this student did not report going to the other high school for something recreational like visiting a friend, rather they said they prefer it because they are 'left alone' and do not have teachers 'yelling' at them to 'go to class'. Similar to the previous student, this participant mentioned how they also experienced a reduction in wellbeing because of their school environment. This student also reported feeling like their school did not support them because of their 'ADHD' and that they 'learn different'. When speaking to this student in the focus group, the interviewer mentioned how it sounds like their school assumes a 'one-size-fits-all' model of education, and they agreed to this. Other students in the focus group also felt like their school had this type of education style. It is also worth note that when the participants were asked if they would consider going to a staff member at their school for wellbeing support, the resounding answer amongst all participants was that they would not likely do this. These experiences are consistent with research that shows that sense of school belonging can be impacted in general by the availability of appropriate mental health and academic supports (e.g. Vargas-Madriz & Konishi, 2021).

Outside of the school experience, participants did mention how accessing cultural opportunities outside of their school was related to their well-being. For instance, one student spoke about the highly positive experience they had when visiting their family on their traditional territory. They mentioned how ‘experiencing all of it and just being welcome’ made them feel ‘really nice’. Additionally, a student spoke about how ‘Indigenous people just instantly connect with each other’ due to them ‘understand[ing] each other a little more... than other people’. This example of positive and innate connection between Indigenous individuals is likely to be related to better peer relationships, and potentially greater overall wellbeing which is consistent with previous work that has looked at how cultural programs can promote social connections (Tyler, 2020; Chalmers-Macdonald, 2005). Additionally, there were some students who spoke positively of going to cultural events, and mentioned how these opportunities were related to a sense of wellbeing. An example of this was a student who spoke about a traditional community gathering they would often attend when they were younger that they could not attend since moving away. They described this gathering as ‘super fun’ and that they felt a sense of ‘longing’ to go to these types of events now that they were unable to. Such comments provide some support for the notion that connecting with Indigenous culture is associated with wellbeing in Indigenous youth though the connection between cultural identity and mental health cited in previously studies (e.g., Chandler & Lalonde, 1998) was not explicitly salient in these interviews.

Schools, Cultural Identity, and Prosocial Behaviours

School environments that support belonging in students often demonstrate higher overall prosocial behaviour (Allen, Vella-Brodrick & Waters, 2017). For instance, Demanet & Van Houtte (2012) found connection to a school and the staff within (such as teachers) predicted

reduced misconduct and more prosocial behaviour. These relationships were present in a few of the responses provided by participants. An example of this came from acts of knowledge/cultural sharing from one student to the interviewer during the focus-group. In accordance with Crooks, Burleigh & Sisco (2015) and Woolrych, Eady & Green (2020), cultural sharing is an index of prosocial behaviour. This student went to gather course materials at two points in the interview and spoke about them and their experiences in the course with fondness and enthusiasm. Another instance of prosocial behaviour was when two youth said that they would consider working in a position that would benefit Indigenous people. These students both came from school environments that they felt were supportive of them and implemented cultural material in a sensitive way. These responses demonstrate how a supportive school environment can be related to prosocial behaviours. This is in-line with previous research, such as Boyle & Allen (2023), who discussed school belonging as having a bidirectional relationship with prosocial behaviour. This is also consistent with literature on non-Indigenous minority populations (Shah et al., 2021), where school belonging was shown to predict prosocial behaviour in minority-immigrant youth. This research extended this effect to urban Indigenous youth, and was able to replicate this relationship.

There was also a student who provided a response that can evidence the potential hinderance of prosocial behaviours being related to lower school belonging. These feelings were captured by them saying that their school 'never inspired them to do anything'. This is further support for the proposed model, as the results from these interviews point to school belonging being a associated with prosocial behaviour. The student who gave this response came from a school they reportedly did not connect with. Additionally, this school had handled cultural information in a means that was offensive to this student. This can be related to Spivak, Lipsey, Farran &

Polanin (2015), as these authors described cultural sensitivity and respect as an important part of school belonging, and how school belonging often predicts prosocial behaviour. To extend this research in the opposite direction, a lack of cultural sensitivity and respect may be associated with decreased school belonging, and thereby prosocial behaviour, which was captured in the student's responses.

Recommendations for School Practices and for Future Research

Findings from this study indicate that schools are currently implementing culturally-relevant content and gatherings for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in the public school system. While exploring ways to include such content, it is important that schools are mindful of how cultural content is taught and appreciated. While not ill-intended, promoting cultural content without the necessary cultural protocol is associated with harms to Indigenous youths' sense of school belonging and overall identity if not implemented with appropriate sensitivity. This is supported by previous authors (e.g., Wegmann & Bowen, 2010; Olsen, 2023; Warzon & Ginsburg-Block, 2008) who described culturally safe and sensitive education as crucial to the success of students from diverse populations. Further the impactful work of Kirkness and Barnhardt (2001) described the Four R's of Indigenous educational practices (responsibility, respect, reciprocity, relevance) which were not entirely upheld by many of the schools as perceived by Indigenous students. A key example of this from the interviews is through the varied experiences students had with the school-led drumming events. Some students were given a safe space to connect with Indigenous and non-Indigenous peers through engagement in Indigenous culture, whereas others left these events feeling disrespected and alienated from their school environment. The National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health, in collaboration with, the Canadian Council on Learning Knowledge Centre on Aboriginal Learning and the

Canadian Association for School Health emphasizes that culture is the primary mechanism by which Indigenous students will be successful in schools (Tagalik, 2010). They recommend a holistic and strengths-based approach to implementing Indigenous cultural content in schools, which should emphasize respect and interconnectedness. For some Indigenous youth, efforts to connect with their culture may be impeded by school-wide cultural activities that are not delivered with the right cultural protocol or sensitivity. Additionally, if school systems are implementing supports for Indigenous students but not making them aware, this can provide additional challenges for Indigenous students who may benefit from access to these services. Another issue with implementation of content emerged in these interviews when students expressed concerns with the way Canadian and Indigenous history is being told in their schools. Some students spoke of how demonstrations of ‘settler guilt’ were common in their courses, and that they wished that teachers would work to highlight ‘Indigenous culture and strength’. It may be useful for students to be able to do projects or coursework that allows them to further learn and engage with Indigenous culture and strength. Further, perspectives highlighting collective resilience amongst Indigenous people should be at the core of what is discussed in these classes (Kirmayer et al., 2011). Rooting Indigenous content in a deficit perspective, rather than a strength-based perspective should be avoided when discussing this content (Fogarty et al., 2018; Kirmayer et al., 2011). This can help buffer against some of the responses that emerged pertaining to challenges as an urban Indigenous person. Some students were apprehensive about engaging in cultural content in their school as it was ‘not their culture’, so if schools provided educationally-grounded course work that promotes engagement with a student's own culture, Indigenous or not, it may be beneficial to many students. It would be worth considering how programs like LUCID (Neilson, 2010) may be an important example for how to provide

culturally relevant and inclusive content in BC schools through imaginative education. These examples of engaging educational styles can be used to offer evidence-based culturally safe education to Indigenous youth who may struggle in the current education system. These sorts of steps to adapt course content to be more relevant to Indigenous students are especially relevant given the aforementioned graduation requirements for BC high school students now including an Indigenous-focused course (Government of British Columbia, 2024). Moreover, there were some instances of students describing differential treatment by teachers due to them being Indigenous, such as not having to complete an assignment focused on Indigenous content. These findings underscore the need for standard cultural sensitivity training for teachers and staff on how to implement cultural activities and events, and in particular, how to support Indigenous youth. Such training could be publicly funded, as this falls directly within the proposed TRC Call to Action (Truth and Reconciliation Committee, 2015).

This research expands on an already growing literature on elements of inclusive school climates and minority students, but it provides more nuance on what is working and not working where a “one-size-fits-all” approach to cultural education is not appropriate. It would be beneficial for scholars of pedagogy to examine the content that is included in Indigenous focused classes, as well as classes pertaining to Canadian history. Ensuring that perspectives shared on Indigenous peoples in these classes focus more on Indigenous strength should be a core component of these inquiries. Also, scholars should look further into the relationship between cultural identity and prosocial behaviour. While this study was able to provide some evidence of this association, it is important to build on this study and support these results, as well as prior research (Tyler, 2020; Crooks et al., 2015; Crooks, Burleigh & Sisco, 2015; Chalmers-

Macdonald, 2005) that have found the same relationship. Further, our research provided support for the importance of school belonging and how this may predict prosocial behaviour and overall wellbeing among Indigenous youth, which has been shown in students from other minority populations (e.g., Kosir, Zaksek & Kozina, 2023; Allen, Vella-Brodrick & Waters, 2017; Demanet & Van Houtte, 2012). Future research should focus on how to promote school belonging in Indigenous students. This study points to cultural respect, Indigenous representation and support for Indigenous students as primary contributors to sense of school belonging.

Limitations

There are some limitations to this study to consider. Although 12 participants is an adequate number for group interviews, it is not entirely representative of the experiences of all urban Indigenous high school students. Supplementing these qualitative findings with representative survey of urban Indigenous youth may allow for more nuance in the variability that exists among schools. Another limitation was the depth of responses shared by some participants, likely as a result of a lack of familiarity with the interviewer coupled with time constraints (1 hour limit). While relationship building was a priority of this study, time constraints and the variability of attendance to programs at the VNFC made it challenging to connect personally with all participants before beginning the interview. This led to the first part of the interview containing shorter, more prompt responses to interview questions, likely as a result of lack of familiarity with the interviewer. To follow respectful research protocol (Kovach, 2021) and to honour the participants of any future research, it is important that proper relationship building is done to the best of the researcher's ability. In line with this recommendation, a more collaborative process in co-creating the summary of findings and conclusions *with* the youth participants themselves would enable a richer, more complete portrait of the overall trends found in this research. Therefore, a more participatory action research framework would further the reach and depth of this work.

Conclusion

This study indexed existing research that highlighted the relationship between cultural connection, school belonging, prosocial behaviour and wellbeing. Our findings support emerging research which links the pivotal role that schools can have in nurturing minority students' connect to their culture and sense of school belonging. An important contribution of this study was the specific focus of experiences among urban Indigenous youth. Another novel perspective of this literature comes from the broader examination of cultural opportunities that exist schools as opposed to programs that are specifically developed for Indigenous youth (e.g., Tyler, 2020; Crooks et al., 2015; Crooks, Burleigh & Sisco, 2015; Chalmers-Macdonald, 2005). Findings show that school-based support for Indigenous students, culturally affirming opportunities, and Indigenous representation are all related to school belonging. School belonging was associated with prosocial behaviour and wellbeing. Cultural connection seems to be impacted for some youth due to being an urban Indigenous person. Further, cultural identity is related to the ways students interact with cultural opportunities in their school. This research takes a qualitative approach to support previously mentioned findings regarding school belonging and prosocial behaviour and factors that influence school belonging (e.g. Demanet & Van Houtte, 2012). This allows further nuances to be captured through the diverse and insightful responses given by participants. Further, a novel perspective is added to this literature, that cultural identity and challenges as an urban Indigenous person may be related to how school-based cultural opportunities are perceived and engaged with.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions Indigenous Identity Questions

- What does Indigenous identity/culture mean to you?
- What are you most proud of regarding your Indigenous identity?
- How has being Indigenous impacted your sense of self throughout your life?

Culturally-relevant School-based Programs Questions

- Do you feel like your school makes an effort to make you feel like you belong?
- Does your school have any classes or programs that discuss Indigenous culture?
 - What is covered in these classes?
- Are there any specific programs for Indigenous students?
 - What sorts of activities do you do as part of these programs?
 - If these programs exist, what have you learned? ○ If these programs exist, is there anything that is missing, that you wish you could learn more about?
 - Do these programs help you feel like you belong in the school? Connect with other students?
 - If programs don't exist, what program would you like to have in your school that would be useful?
- Is there a place in school where you feel like you can get support as an Indigenous student?
 - Are there teachers that you can go to get support as an Indigenous student? ○ Do you feel like your school supports you as an Indigenous student (e.g., when faced with discrimination/ racism/ bullying)? ○ Was this support helpful?

Prosocial behaviours related to Indigenous-identity and community belonging ○ How often do you go to Powwow or other traditional events/gatherings? ○ Does your school inspire you to promote culture to others? (this may be something they want to do as a career, or something they want to volunteer in),

- Does your school inspire you to volunteer in cultural activities hosted by your community? (e.g., fundraisers, helping elders),
- Do you ever discuss and share cultural information from your class/school cultural program to others? (potentially to family, friends, both Indigenous or not, or to something broad and public like a social media post talking about their recent journey into culture etc.).
- Does your experience with cultural programs in your school (if any) reinforce your sense of belonging or connection to your community?

Mental Health

- How does engaging with your culture make you feel?
- When you are feeling down or sad, where do you turn to for support?

Improvements

- In closing, how do you think your school can better support Indigenous students?