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Article abstract

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Becoming Self-in-Relation: Coming of Age as a Pathway towards Wellness for Urban Indigenous Youth in Care

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Author Note

Abstract

Two workshops were held with urban Indigenous youth who live in foster care on Lekwungen Territory on southern Vancouver Island. The workshops were informed by guidance from community knowledge holders and Elders and explored the meaning of Indigenous coming of age and adolescence with 15 youth through oral, visual, and text-based activities. Following a thematic analysis of the workshop transcripts, five themes emerged: self-continuity; self-awareness; empowerment; being part of something bigger; and support networks. These themes provide evidence that engaging with coming of age teachings and activities are protective to youth wellness and help youth to build strong foundations from which they can learn about their Indigenous ancestry and history in their own time. (Re)connecting to coming of age teachings is part of a broader discourse of (re)writing narratives that celebrate the strength, leadership, and independence of the urban Indigenous youth community. Although the voices shared reflect young community members living in and around southern Vancouver Island, the essence of our key messages are relevant to the broader Indigenous community and those practicing allyship through education, health care, social work, and other areas of influence.

Keywords: urban Indigenous, foster care, coming of age, community-based participatory research

Territory Acknowledgement

*Hay'sxw'qa si'em Lekwungen elth'tel'nexw, Hay'sxw'qa si'em
Lekwungen tung'exw, hay'sxw'qa si'em Lekwungen xa'sa*

Thank you Respected Place to Smoke Herring people, thank you Place to
Smoke Herring people's lands, thank you Place to Smoke Herring people's sacred waters,

*Thlaninulth hay'sxw'qa si'em a'nelth hali, chay, ye'yah'sung
stay'tha en'sne i'ey'mut tung'exw, i'ey'mut xa'sa*

We thank you Respected for allowing us to live, work, play
on your beautiful lands, beautiful sacred waters.

Project Acknowledgement

We wish to express our gratitude to the Youth whose voices guided this project. We raise our hands to the knowledge keepers, community members, and staff of Surrounded by Cedar Child and Family Services who took the time to be with us. The sharing at the dinner and the workshops helped to guide us in doing this project in a good way.

Surrounded by Cedar raises its hands in gratitude to those who have supported the agency over the years, to those who envisioned this organization and were instrumental in its development, and to the children, youth, and families with whom we walk each day.

We extend a special thanks to one of our project's Lekwungen knowledge holders who shared the Lekwung'athun territory acknowledgement with us and gave us permission to share it here.

Introduction

Indigenous traditions surrounding the coming of age transition from childhood to adulthood are celebrated through teachings and ceremonies that promote strength, resilience, and discipline in the face of obstacles that may be encountered in one's life. The rites of passage enacted during one's coming of age promote a sense of connection, belonging, and community (Richardson, 2012) and create a foundation that strengthens personal autonomy in a way that is socially supported and encouraged (Risling Baldy, 2018). Passing on coming of age teachings transcends "this life" by creating what Nishnaabe Elder Edna Manitowabi refers to as *kobade*, meaning "a link in a chain – a link between generations, between nations, between states of being, between individuals" (Simpson, 2016, para. 22).

This *kobade* was damaged through the intentional dismantling of community and family units, and by disconnecting Indigenous people from their territories, teachings, and ceremonies. The impacts of settler-colonialism have resulted in an intergenerational living history that is carried by Indigenous youth in foster care. These impacts are reflected in data from the province of British Columbia which

reports that nearly half of all youth in care have Indigenous ancestry despite Indigenous populations representing only four percent of the overall population (Hughes, 2006). And, with more than half of Indigenous people living in urban centres of greater than 30,000 people (McIvor, 2018), (re)connecting[1] urban Indigenous youth to traditional coming of age teachings and ceremonies cannot be decontextualized from the social and political environment within which they reside.

Receiving traditional coming of age teachings is an active part of cultural preservation and revitalization for Indigenous youth. Revitalization is a larger movement that works to heal the wounds of colonialism by recovering traditional cultural practices and undoing systems that cause harm to Indigenous peoples, land, and culture (Jacob, 2013, p. 12). The preservation of culture or cultural continuity is one of several factors that nurtures the mind, body, and spirit, and is protective to health and wellness (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998; Chandler et al., 2003; McIvor et al., 2009; Petrasek Macdonald et al., 2013). (Re)connecting to coming of age teachings aligns with what Risling Baldy (2018) calls "embodied decolonization" because it actively seeks to counter ways that settler-colonialism has and continues to disrupt the passing of cultural knowledge to current and future generations of Indigenous youth. This decolonization reflects participating in a future rooted in Indigenous epistemologies that resist narratives suggesting Indigenous teachings are relics of the past (Goeman, 2013; Jacob, 2013; Risling Baldy, 2018).

The project *"Supporting Culturally Appropriate Coming of Age Resources for Urban Indigenous Youth in Care on Vancouver Island: (Re)Connecting with Self-Determined Health and Wellness"* advocates for the importance of culturally appropriate coming of age ceremonies and teachings for urban Indigenous youth in care. This community-based participatory research project comprises a collaborative team of Indigenous child and family youth workers (Surrounded by Cedar Child and Family Services [SCCFS]), university-based researchers (University of Victoria), and health practitioners (Island Health). Together, we worked with knowledge holders, Elders, and urban Indigenous youth to foreground the voices that are a part of the diverse urban Indigenous community in Victoria, British Columbia on the topic of youth coming of age.

All the authors, collaborators, and team members have unique histories and stories to tell. Our paths began converging when Andrea, an interdisciplinary doctoral student, and her supervisor, Denise, a health geographer at the University of Victoria, were introduced to SCCFS through a mutual connection at Island Health. Together, we collaborated to understand how we could support SCCFS as an organization to determine what is possible for Indigenous youth and Indigenous coming of age ceremonies while growing up in care and in an urban location. (Re)connecting to coming of age teachings, and Indigenous knowledge more broadly, is part of SCCFS' mission to connect youth to spirit and identity through familial, hereditary, and cultural linkages because these are protective factors that promote safety and wellbeing amongst Indigenous people.

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1   The prefix "(re)" is an acknowledgement that the connection to ancestral teachings may have been broken, but it was never lost despite the efforts of colonial governments to disconnect Indigenous children and youth from their culture.

This paper shares the voices and wisdoms of youth and knowledge holders that were gathered during two youth workshops designed to explore questions about what coming of age means and how it is celebrated. The findings that emerged from the workshops reflect five key themes that illuminate the importance of celebrating coming of age as a passage in one's life, and recognizing its potential in supporting holistic wellness and its part in preserving cultural knowledge. This work contributes to the growing body of research focused on promoting the positive development of urban Indigenous youth.

Ensuring that this project was done in a "good way" meant that we conducted the research respectfully by honouring Indigenous traditions and spirit, cultivated authentic and lasting relationships, and engaged in meaningful dialogue so that the research could benefit the Indigenous community as a whole (Aboriginal HIV/AIDS Community-Based Research Collaborative Centre [AHA Centre], 2018). During our first full team meeting, we began the project with the Anishnaabe song Wildflower, a call and response drum song about a mother calling her child, appropriate for this project as we are "calling the children in." We then began planning a knowledge holder's dinner which would provide the guidance to lead this project in a way that aligned with the community's wisdom and wishes. This paper begins with sharing what we learned at the dinner as the project background. Although it is not a conventional "background" in the sense that we are not integrating findings from previous published works (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2003), it aligns with our research framework that honours the wisdom and expertise of Indigenous knowledge keepers and Indigenous ways of knowing and doing, setting the foundation for our community-based work. This paper uses the language and terminology held up by all our research partners and has cited direct quotes as accurately as possible.

Guidance from Knowledge Holders

The knowledge holder's dinner explored the ways that SCCFS, the LGBTQ2S+, urban, and home/ancestral communities are involved in the coming of age of Indigenous youth in care. Four sharing circles discussed the unique roles of each community, but also the interconnected roles that support youth coming of age. This includes a shared responsibility in cultivating safe spaces where youth can self-determine their identities and have access to role models, mentors, and teachers who help provide context and understanding on their place as Indigenous people. These spaces support physical, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing and foster opportunities to experience healing, love, acceptance, empowerment, and curiosity.

As an organization, the community views SCCFS as having a role as a cultural hub that, in addition to having legal guardianship responsibilities, also facilitates access to culturally centered care to support holistic wellness. Wherever possible, birth families are involved in hosting coming of age ceremonies/processes, though in some cases, SCCFS may be able to assume the responsibility of safely delivering coming of age ceremonies for youth who may not be connected to their home communities or who are learning about their Indigenous identities. The urban community can

help SCCFS identify cultural assets, teachers, and knowledge holders during these times. A youth's ancestral or home community can be supportive by sharing teachings, offering ceremony, or hosting youth in their territory. They may also be able to inform SCCFS in preparing youth "coming of age" plans. However, individual circumstances must first be considered because not all youth have this connection to their home community.

The knowledge holders emphasized the ways that traditional coming of age teachings are intentionally healing and empowering, and teach life skills to prepare for future life stages. Adolescence is seen as part of a cultural continuum and receiving teachings is an important step in learning how to pass teachings on and keep culture alive. Knowledge holders shared that teachings may be grounded in tradition and protocol, but they can be adapted to urban environments and contemporary living situations.

Although there may be shared meanings in coming of age teachings between Nations, the protocols and ceremonies through which they are taught will differ. It is important not to pan-Indigenize coming of age teachings and respect both the nation from which the youth is a member and the territory upon which ceremonies are happening. This requires consultation with knowledge holders and Elders. There will be differing opinions and points of view on how this should be undertaken and some of these politics might create tension between different groups. It is important that the welfare of the youth is the focus in all discussions and that the safe spaces created for them are not disrupted by lateral violence or tensions that may obscure the goal of connecting youth to culture, community, and their Indigenous strengths. Additional detail on the dinner can be found in Mellor et al. (in press).

Methodology

This project seeks to understand the meaning of coming of age from the perspective of the youth participating in two workshops. More broadly, the project aims to create a cohesive web of meanings woven from pieces of their unique living experiences and stories that they chose to share. This project aligns with the metaphor of hoop dancing detailed in Garrett et al. (2014), which suggests that youth must balance multiple identities, pressures, and expectations while constantly remaining in motion, much like they do when they are hoop dancing. These authors say that to better understand this dance we must "… hear and understand their voices, their stories, and their experiences" (p. 471).

To activate this metaphor, we engaged with complementary methodologies that honour relational meaning making or inquiry that engages with shared physical, experiential, and sacred ways of coming to know (Hendry, 2010; Meyer, 2014). We recognize the diversity in Indigenous ways of knowing and doing across nations but also acknowledge that shared epistemological principles such as deriving meaning through relationships to place can bring communities together and shape the cultural, spiritual, emotional, physical, and social lives of individuals and communities (Wilson, 2003). This shared worldview grounds us in an Indigenous methodological framework, "… the theory and method of conducting research that flows from an Indigenous epistemology" (Kovach, 2009, p. 20).

We worked with an Indigenous research paradigm and a community-based participatory research (CBPR) framework because these work to prioritize Indigenous community needs and the issues that are of interest to them (Brant Castellano, 2004; Schnarch, 2004), and have an "… underlying goal of collaboration, research equality, and community control" (Drawson et al., 2017, p. 6). We also recognized that Indigenous CBPR frameworks require additional considerations, some of which include but are not limited to: recognizing the legacy of research harms that have been experienced by Indigenous communities; ensuring that research materials are interpreted using an appropriate cultural context; and using Indigenous ways of knowing and doing to conduct research activities (De Leeuw et al., 2012; LaVeaux & Christopher, 2009). Honouring these considerations and CBPR principles more broadly ensured that our engagement activities were designed in ways that explored the cultural dimension of our work and created space for youth to "… take part in and influence processes, decisions, and activities that will affect their health and the community within which they live" (Blanchet-Cohen et al., 2011, p. 89) if they wished to do so.

We also used narrative inquiry to understand how coming of age was understood by the youth participants and knowledge keepers. Narrative inquiry allowed us to engage with the stories shared by our participants, listening and trusting that a unique, co-created meaning about urban Indigenous coming of age would emerge from our time spent together (Hendry, 2007). This meant listening to each story and acknowledging that each participant had a unique lived experience and relationship with adolescence. By approaching our data in this way, we hoped to counter methods of meaning-making that have historically disassembled and reassembled stories to "fit" a narrative of Indigenous youth that is deficit-based, and sometimes deviant and sadly fatalistic (Cameron, 2012; Goeman, 2013; Leeuw et al., 2010).

To understand the way this meaning has evolved in a broader social and historical context and how we might help to rewrite these stories, we drew on Judith Butler's theory of performativity (2000). Using performativity helped us to convey how a culturally centered coming of age grounded in Indigenous ways of knowing and doing can be part of a larger space of strength and healing.

Our team worked collectively and individually to practice critical allyship, in part by doing our best to put the youths' voices forward in this project. We worked to center this project in the four "R's" of research involving Indigenous people: *respecting* the plural worldviews and experiences of project participants; ensuring we engage with issues *relevant* to the participants; honouring the *reciprocity* in knowledge sharing, ensuring those who share knowledge are compensated appropriately for their time and effort; and, upholding our *responsibility* to truthfully represent participant voices (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991). This project engages the OCAP® principles of ownership, control, access, and possession (First Nations Information Governance Centre, 2017) and the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Chapter 9 (also known as TCPS 2) (Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2018). Ethics approval was granted by the University of Victoria and the Island Health research ethics boards.

Wisdom Catching

Youth Workshops

The workshops took place in September and November 2019 and were held at SCCFS's office. The workshops explored the meaning of coming of age, cultural traditions related to coming of age, and perspectives on living as urban Indigenous youth in Victoria, BC. The first workshop was an opportunity for youth to learn about the project, and for the team to understand how best to engage with the youth and ask general questions about coming of age. The second workshop focused on specific questions, involved community knowledge holders to guide conversations, and included time for more hands-on activities and one-on-one interviews. We primarily used oral methods to collect data including group sharing circles (Workshop 1), young women's and young men's sharing circles (Workshop 2), and one-on-one semi-structured interviews (Workshops 1 and 2).

The first workshop was attended by nine youth aged 11 to 17 (seven girls and two boys), and six research team members including three youth support staff with SCCFS, two University of Victoria researchers, and one Island Health dietitian. All attendees participated in the sharing circle, and two girls and one boy were interviewed separately. The second workshop was attended by thirteen youth, aged nine to 17 (ten girls and three boys), a female Elder, a male knowledge holder, the granddaughter of an SCCFS team member (age six), and seven research team members including two SCCFS leaders (also occupying roles as female knowledge holders), a graphic designer, and the University of Victoria and Island Health research team. The young men's sharing circle was led by a knowledge holder and attended by three male youth participants. The young women's sharing circle was led by an Elder and the SCCFS team members and intermittently attended by all the female participants. Six young women were interviewed.

Workshop 1 began with an acknowledgement of Lekwungen Territory and workshop 2 began with a territorial welcome from a Lekwungen knowledge holder. The latter included a teaching about coming of age and a welcome song in Lekwungen'athun. The invitation was made to introduce oneself and provide a word on how we were feeling at the beginning of the day. This was followed by a discussion of the project, what it means to consent in the context of a research project, and a review of the consent forms. Prior to beginning our sharing circles and interviews, guidelines were established for the day to ensure that we engaged in respectful conversations with one another. Both workshops included a lunch; Workshop 1 was catered by the Island Health dietician who spoke about "food as medicine" and Workshop 2 was catered by SCCFS's Elder in residence. The day was closed by gathering in a circle and sharing a word of reflection on the day.

Oral Methods

Sharing circles and semi-structured interviews during Workshop 1 were guided by the following broad questions: what do you know about coming of age? And, is coming of age important? If so, why? In addition, a whiteboard was used for youth to write their thoughts about the question, who is part of coming of age? And, how is it part of your life?

The first workshop helped the research team understand what themes resonated with the youth, the best language to use to approach questions around coming of age, and how to organize group and individual activities that encourage sharing in safe ways. This led to the refinement of our guiding questions for Workshop 2:

1) What does coming of age mean to you?
   - What rites of passage can you think of that happen during this time?

2) Do you know about rites of passage ceremonies?
   - Have you had any? Attended any?

3) What does "culture" mean to you? What parts are important?
   - Who has been a teacher for you?

4) What does it mean to have an identity?
   - Do you identify in certain ways and are there ways you want to identify?

Although the workshop questions initiated the conversations, the youth guided the conversations to honour our overarching objective to understand what is meaningful for them. Discussion during the young women's and men's sharing circles were recorded by a circle participant on oversized post-it notes for the group to see. Research team members who were not participating in the discussions were recording the wisdoms shared. Interviews were recorded by the interviewer in handwritten notes and no digital audio recordings were taken. When photographs were taken, efforts were made to not show the faces of the youth as per SCCFS and ethics review protocol. Notes were transcribed into a word processor and transcript cleaning included replacing real names with initials or avatars which had been selected by each participant on their consent form.

Meaning Making

A thematic analysis of the transcripts was completed to understand the meaning of the responses to our research questions from the perspective of the youth participants and knowledge holders. There were four main steps in the data analysis: summarizing each transcript; generating narrative phrases; developing main themes; and detailing and verification. The thematic analysis was led by the first author and validation of meanings and interpretations was accomplished through several collaborative team meetings and e-communications.

In the first step, 12 transcripts were reviewed. Each transcript was read at least three times by the first author prior to cleaning the text in a first pass and generating point form summaries that paraphrased comments related to coming of age, culture, family, and self-reflection. Step two generated narrative phrases that captured the essence of each summary point and was used to categorize statements for later analysis (Saldana, 2015). Phrases were not intended to decontextualize the voice of the interviewee or the circle, rather they were used to reflect a shared quality like "not a child anymore" or "everyone is different." The repetition of phrases or phrase topics reflected common experiences and those that were repeated were connected or combined where appropriate. Step three organized narrative phrases with shared qualities into categories that became one of five overarching themes. The final step provided context and validation for our interpretation by generating a table that connected the overarching themes and narrative phrases (Table 1). Teachings and supporting quotes from the participants were included to complete an iterative loop of analysis bringing us back to what was shared at the workshops.

Table 1
Excerpt from the Table of Project Themes

Overarching Theme	Narrative Phrases	Teaching	Supporting Quotes
Self-awareness	(Selected) • Recognition • Body awareness • You feel different	Coming of age ceremonies and teachings help to teach and guide you through the changes that happen to your body, mind, and spirit as you transition to adulthood.	"[after my ceremony I felt] weird, I had this feeling, I don't know what it was. It felt like I wasn't a child anymore" (TS, interview)

Findings

Five themes emerged from the thematic analysis: self-continuity; self-awareness; empowerment; being a part of something bigger; and support networks. These are described in the following sections.

Self-Continuity

The first theme aligns with Chandler and Lalonde's (1998) definition of self-continuity, which relates to "a young [person's] belief about personal persistence" (p. 193). During our workshops, youth talked about ways that Indigenous coming of age teachings helped connect them to the past, present, and future and talked about how relationships with themselves, their families, and their communities were changing over time.

Youth saw themselves as playing an active role in carrying ancestral teachings into the future and reflected on how this was beneficial. For instance, one workshop participant said, "… it's always good to keep it with you so your culture doesn't die. If you say your language every single day, your ancestors will hear you and give you good things" (*RT, interview)*. Learning and speaking one's language was

raised on several occasions as a proactive way to connect to the past, present, and future. It connected youth to their own Indigenous identities, and to their families and communities: "… history, ancestors and keeping it alive, a naming ceremony, language … [I'm] going to be learning [my] language (Carrier and Dakelh) from a cousin who speaks it fluently. [I'm] looking forward to it a lot" (*RT, interview*). Youth also expressed personal accountability in carrying these language teachings to the future: "language is important … so I can teach my kids or grandkids" (*young men's sharing circle*). This also reflects seeing oneself *in* the future, as parents, knowledge holders, and teachers.

Many cultural values are embedded in Indigenous coming of age teachings and ceremonies, and reinforce the important role of an individual in their community (Markstrom & Iborra, 2003). In addition to helping develop one's identity as young Indigenous people, we also learned how coming of age ceremonies can help with, as one workshop participant put it, "… looking forward and being ready for obstacles," in other words, occupying spaces of resilience and building strength and coping skills.

Self-Awareness

Ways that youth expressed how they feel, how they see themselves, and how they want to be seen, was part of recognizing themselves in relation to their surroundings (i.e., self-in-relation). Coming of age ceremonies and teachings help youth to be reflexive about the changes taking place in one's body, mind, and spirit, for example, "[It was] different … you just feel different after … . Feel older, more mature. You just let the younger self in you out -the child" (*LC, interview*).

Youth need safe spaces to navigate the coming of age life stage, because experiences may occur that can be triggering for some. Knowledge holders in the young women's sharing circle acknowledged this as an area in need of further understanding, "… how [do we] recognize the old traumas that can resurface and draw strength from this, rather than being crushed by past memories and recollections." Cultural teachings can help youth to cope and manage their emotions during these challenging times. Activities like drumming, singing, and connecting to nature were discussed as ways to connect to culture and stay personally grounded. For example, "[Beading] calms me down. It's like a healing thing. There's no point if you have bad energy or are in a bad mood … (*LC interview*).

On several occasions, youth shared ideas about ways that they wished to be recognized and seen as their own person, "… sometimes [I] tell people my story, and that's part of who I am. Personality makes up identity. Introducing ourselves … Nation, territory … [this is] also part of identity, and [I] enjoy doing introductions like that." The ways that youth discussed "who you are" was different from the views of the knowledge holders, particularly when it came to dualities. Youth talked about competing identities within themselves. When reflecting on an illustration of a bear with a flower crown on its head during a vision boarding exercise, one youth said,

[The bear is] seen as a tough and strong, and sometimes a scary animal, but the flower crown made it less scary and showed how we have different sides to us, and how we can be strong and tough but also soft and pretty *(RT, interview)*.

On the other hand, knowledge holders shared more about self-in-relation to different societal communities. During the young men's sharing circle, a knowledge holder shared the teaching "… sometimes we have to walk in both worlds, colonization has impacted our language and culture." Female knowledge holders reflected during the young women's circle, on how it is a confusing time to be Indigenous, where an Indigenous person may know they are Indigenous, but there is identity confusion about this because there is a sprinkling of many different cultural practices arising from the reality of blended families with different origins.

Empowerment

Empowerment reflects youth finding the strength and power that resides within them. Empowerment also suggests that youth are active agents of change and that they can (re)write their own stories. Empowerment is cultivated through increased access to independence, recognition of Indigeneity, and confidence gained through self or culturally defined activities. Youth and knowledge holders expressed ways that these are activated through various Indigenous rites of passage and ceremonies (e.g., naming ceremonies, coming of age ceremonies, vision quests), but also shared ways that empowerment is accessed in their daily lives. For example, the young men in the sharing circle said,

> There is a component of trust with guardians … [like] being able to walk home, be home by myself, being trusted … Not doing what I'm not supposed to do … [have the] knowledge that I can manage myself – makes me think of discipline (love and respect). (*composite of ideas from the young men's sharing circle*).

Becoming independent was understood as a reciprocal process of earning trust and cultivating self-discipline. Developing confidence in the independence one gains from trust is also a teaching on self-protection/preservation. Reflecting on teachings from his uncles' during his coming of age, a knowledge holder shared, "… in your life you're going to be the only person around; [it's] up to you to hear, see and feel about that around you …" (*BD, young men's sharing circle)*.

Having a name (both family names and receiving an Indigenous name) and speaking one's language was a source of empowerment shared by several youth. In one situation, a young woman talked about how she gets frustrated that she must explain why she has two last names, and that after her adoption, "… my last name will change to … After it won't be confusing – at school, I'm under two names." This same young woman also shared how she is learning her language with her family and noted: "… when I introduce myself, I want to say it in Gitxsan. Then they'll know you speak your language." This reflects Lertzman's (2002) argument that "having a sense of place in the world and a community in which to experience it is an important foundation in one's life, especially for young people transitioning to adulthood" (p. 35).

Being Part of Something Bigger

Cultural activities were discussed as events that cultivate a sense of connection between individuals and their home, urban, and SCCFS communities. As one workshop participant explained, "Cultural activities like dancing, singing, and drumming help to connect me to my teachers. Speaking my language is a way to also get teachings, and for me (and others) to know who I am." A knowledge holder reinforced the important connection of these activities to lands, ancestors, and identities, and how they "... offer our worldview."

The youth recognized the important role that SCCFS plays in facilitating cultural activities. However, some youth expressed a view that the connection to their family of origin is important and that coming of age ceremonies are the "home family's job" (*RT interview)* and that they should involve "... either going home or having someone from the home community support the coming of age" (*young men's sharing circle)*. The relationships that these urban youth have with their home communities speaks to the connection to place, identity, and land, even if they are not physically present. The efforts SCCFS and foster families place in helping to maintain connections where possible to home communities clearly resonates with youth, regardless of whether they are aware of these efforts. The "blood memory" of a place that one may possess without being there is something carried by youth, and was articulated by a knowledge holder in the young women's circle "... just going there [*to her home place*] was about a connection to [my] ancestors ... [I] started to cry just when being there."

Support Networks

Coming of age teachings come from knowledge holders, family members, and Elders. These are the people that youth identified as individuals they could go to for support. When asked what advice a participant would share with the granddaughter of one of our team members, she replied, "[I would tell her to] just be proud of herself. Let her know she has a bunch of support in difficult times ... like to talk to, just be there" (*LC, interview)*. Support for youth can come in different ways. Some ways they identified included being listened to, acknowledged, trusted, and recognized for the many sides of themselves. For instance, one participant said, "I need people to know there is more to me than just test scores and bubbly personalities. Sometimes I need space to do what I have to in order to keep myself calm" (*CT, interview)*.

Support networks are important to connect the five themes in healthy and positive ways. Having guidance in these networks helps to gently teach about the confusion that might arise when youth are learning about the changes in their bodies. "[Coming of age is] a time of teaching about our roles and responsibilities as a woman or as young ladies," explained one of the knowledge holders during the young women's sharing circle. Cultivating a healthy sense of self and how one becomes self-in-relation with the world is supported by teachings that flow through support networks. Self-continuity, seeing oneself in the future, and surviving are all learned from these supports. One

participant shared, "I learned how to bead a feather, make jam, make drums and cedar head bands … cook salmon heads, fire bread, seafood chowder, butter … So when we're older, we know how to prepare meals" (*RT, interview)*.

Discussion

Connecting to Holistic Wellness

This paper began with the question, *what does coming of age mean for urban Indigenous youth in care?* to help us learn how to support (re)connecting to traditional teachings in ways that are meaningful, relevant, and culturally appropriate for the youth and the communities that support them. One of the most significant findings of this project is that coming of age for Indigenous youth in care reflects a site of convergence of overarching individual, family, and community relationships, each of which supports youth in different and connected ways. These interrelated relationships converge and weave like a three stranded braid. Like a braid, if one strand has too much tension, or another has too little, the balance in the braid becomes skewed or even lost. The interaction between these communities reflects the wholistic model of health and wellness that is shared across Indigenous cultures, which operates with a fluidity between wellbeing of the body, mind, heart, and spirit (First Nations Health Authority, 2020).

In reflecting upon historical events that have compromised the ability for cultural teachings to be transmitted from knowledge holders (community) through kinship networks (family), and in turn, embodied at individual levels, we can understand how the entire structure of this "braid" has at times been compromised. And yet, the persistent plaiting of these tresses helps to see the temporal nature of teachings and that they are continuous and can regain balance over time.

Knowing our relations connects us to the past, helps us understand the present, and lays out our responsibility to the future (Wilson & Wilson, 2013, p. 33). The findings from the coming of age workshops suggest how Indigenous coming of age teachings transcend space and time to support youth in becoming part of an interconnected network of self, family, and community, each of which have special roles as protective factors for health and wellness. Protective factors as a determinant of health are defined as "… characteristics at the individual, family, or community level that are associated with a lower likelihood of a problem outcome" (O'Connell et al., 2009, p. 82). The risk of negative outcomes for Indigenous youth are heightened as a result of the social, economic, and political precariousness that is associated with colonialism and might include risks related to feelings of anxiety and depression, substance use, and suicide (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998; Garrett et al., 2014; Reading & Wien, 2009; Nelson & Wilson, 2017). Because of this, supporting and engaging with protective factors, such as those related to Indigenous child rearing, are crucial to counter risks rooted in colonialism (Anderson, 2011).

The five themes identified through our collective efforts connect in ways that indicate coming of age teachings facilitate protective pathways supporting healing, wellness, and resilience (Petrasek Macdonald et al., 2013). The themes "being part of something bigger" and "support networks" align with protective factors identified at multiple levels: individual; family; and community (O'Connell et al., 2009; Petrasek Macdonald et al., 2013). "Self-continuity," "self-awareness," and "empowerment" reflect pathways to wellness that are strengthened by having support networks and by belonging to a community, nation, and family. Figure 1 is a schematic diagram that illustrates these nested relationships in the context of this research:

Figure 1

A Conceptual Model of interconnected protective mechanisms specific to Indigenous Coming of Age That Support Youth Wellness.
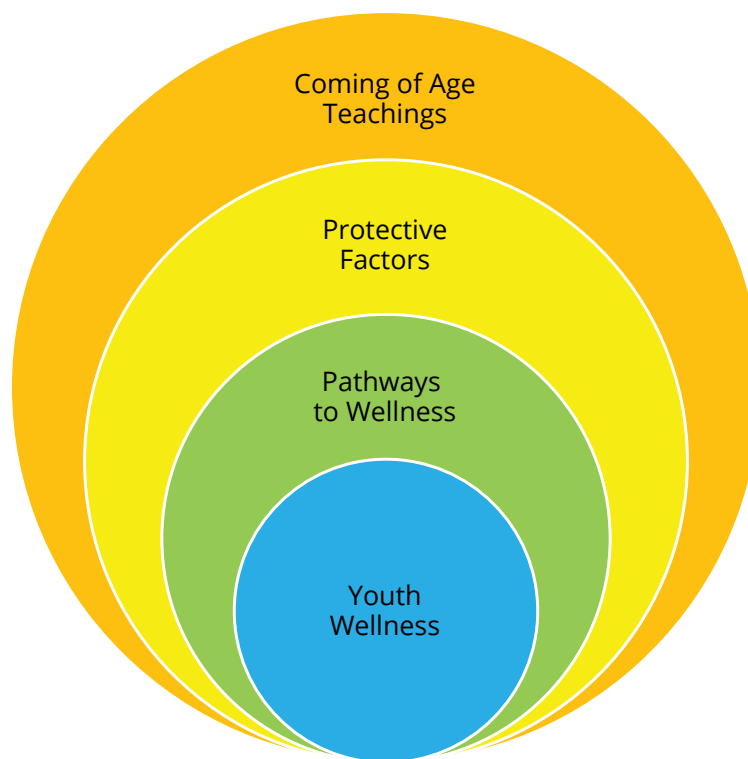
Note. Pathways to youth wellness such as the embodiment of self-continuity, self-awareness, and empowerment, are nested within and facilitated by protective factors including support networks and being part of something bigger. These in turn, are nested and embedded more broadly within coming of age teachings.

In their systematic review of literature specific to Indigenous youth in the circumpolar north, Petrasek Macdonald et al. (2013) identified more than 40 protective factors related to enhanced mental health and linked them with causal pathways that directly protect and increase resiliency. Our findings support our position that Indigenous coming of age teachings for youth in urban environments present opportunities to enact culturally specific protective factors and in turn,

cultivate pathways to wellness. This aligns with the literature on culturally centered protective factors in that they contribute to supportive social environments, they enhance self-esteem and self-confidence, they foster self-reliance, and they enable individuals to participate in their culture (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998; McIvor et al., 2009; Petrasek Macdonald et al., 2013).

Indigenous Coming of Age as Performative

To say that Indigenous coming of age is performative is to say that a cultural Indigenous adolescent identity is not fixed but constructed, dynamic, and evolves over time. Judith Butler describes performative as being the way that actions (re)produce a series of effects (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). This differs from performing, which more simply, is the enactment of these actions (Big Think, 2011). Indigenous coming of age can be considered performative in that it consolidates an impression of *becoming,* and in turn *being* an Indigenous adult. (Re)connecting to coming of age teachings in this way suggests that "being Indigenous" is different from merely having Indigenous ancestry, much like the gender assignment of *being a* man or *being* a woman can be vastly different from one's assigned sex at birth. It is in the "doing" of coming of age that one aligns with Indigenous as a way of being.

Guidance through the "being" or "becoming" is a crucial function of coming of age rites of passages and ceremonies (Markstrom & Iborra, 2003). An Indigenous coming of age is unique not only regarding the traditions specific to each Nation but is also a reminder that becoming an Indigenous adult reinforces *Indigenous* as it has been shaped over time. Celebrating the ways that traditional teachings adapt and evolve over time is a decolonial act that resists fatalistic narratives suggesting that "traditional" is synonymous with the past, and should therefore be relegated there (Goeman, 2008; Risling Baldy, 2018). To illustrate this, knowledge holders spoke of this specifically with the young people in mind, noting that it is the essence of the teachings that is crucial, not necessarily the mode of transmission. One knowledge keeper shared during the knowledge holder's dinner the following reflection:

> Father would wake us at night to get berries from the juniper bush, in the dark ... Can you duplicate that in an urban environment? It's how you learn to navigate in the dark, [how you] trust your response in this.

The knowledge holders who carry the responsibility for passing teachings on this hold a huge amount of power, because in asking young people to accept *these* teachings and *this* way of being, they are shaping the lineage of this knowledge. The importance of the right teacher or mentor was emphasized by one knowledge holder who shared:

> [There is the] "crabs in a bucket" syndrome ... . Some people are righteous about this ... [the right way and the wrong way to do things]. "You aren't doing it right" ... [they criticize] rather than [give] gentle teachings about how to be Indigenous ..." (*knowledge holder, young women's sharing circle).*

Criticizing one's path risks policing a young person's coming of age journey through potentially harmful interventions like lateral violence, racism, or other oppressions that work against (re) connecting youth to their teachings. Offering teachings in gentle and culturally safe ways, take for example, the drumming, beading, and singing that youth identified as being important or meaningful, can help youth to build strong foundations from which they can learn about their Indigenous ancestry and history in empowering and gentle ways in their own time.

Returning to Risling Baldy's (2018) "embodied decolonization," we can understand how coming of age ceremonies and teachings resist colonial structures that seek to reinforce a deficit-based perspective on the "performance" of being an Indigenous youth. Instead, they work to (re)connect to celebrations that strengthen relationships within themselves, their families, and their communities. Indigenous coming of age teachings, as defined by knowledge holders, Elders, and the youth who receive them, thus become spaces to disrupt the harmful narratives that are situated in discourses of inequity, subjugation, oppression, racism, and marginalization. The resistance thus is to be strong, to be healthy, to have a voice, and to be alive. This is why we must advocate for a culturally centred, safe, and appropriate coming of age for Indigenous youth. It is precisely because the enactment of these rites of passage holds within it the power to (re)write and (re)right the narrative of adolescence for urban Indigenous youth in care.

Limitations

Throughout this project, we have worked to honour narratives from all the participants who speak from their own Indigenous identities, places of residence, and families of origin. However, we recognize that the stories and conversations shared are specific to urban Indigenous youth in foster care in Victoria, BC, and are shaped by the landscape of Vancouver Island. Because coming of age teachings flow from relationships to the land, youth workshops in different territories and their subsequent findings, will be shaped by teachings informed by those landscapes and their unique histories.

In doing this work, we were made aware that the coming of age experience for Indigenous LGBTQ2S+ youth is unique. We felt that our findings did not adequately represent their voices, but we are hopeful that future work in this area will involve honouring those voices specifically and ensuring that their narratives are held up high alongside others.

Conclusion

Much of the literature on Indigenous coming of age and coming of age more generally focuses on the multi-staged transition to adulthood and the cultivation of self-identity. Our findings from the youth workshops and the knowledge holder's dinner suggest a much deeper opportunity for coming of age to be a culturally appropriate positive action initiative (i.e., intervention) for Indigenous youth. Coming of age is a natural process that all youth will pass through in one way or another

on their journey to adulthood, and the absence of guidance and wisdom can steer this initiation process towards harmful paths (Sullwold, 1998). This goes beyond a high-level understanding that connecting to culture is protective for health and wellness (e.g., Chandler & Lalonde, 1998; Reading & Wien, 2009; McIvor et al., 2009) and towards an understanding that the provision of culturally centered coming of age ceremonies and rites of passage can nurture more complex emotions such as those embedded in our findings. By celebrating and honouring youth coming of age, communities repair the *kobade,* the link in the chain that connects generations and Nations, creating healing pathways for communities across space and time.

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