



Finding Gifts: Evaluation of the NYA:WEH Elementary Program

Prepared for
Niwasa Kendaaswin Teg

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1.0 Introduction

Niwasa Kendaaswin Teg is an Indigenous organization that provides high quality programs and services across the entire life cycle to the Indigenous population in Hamilton, Brantford and surrounding areas. Their mission is to provide services and supports in safe spaces for Indigenous people across the life cycle that are rooted in culture and language. Some of Niwasa Kendaaswin Teg's programming includes Indigenous-led child care, the Aboriginal Head Start program, Early ON Child and Family Centre, Homelessness and Poverty reduction services and supports and NYA:WEH (Native Youth Advancement With Education Hamilton) Elementary, which offers holistic programming for grade 6-8 students supporting the transition to post-secondary education. The NYA:WEH Elementary program runs in schools in both the Hamilton Wentworth District School Board (HWDSB) and the Hamilton Wentworth Catholic District School Board (HWCDSB). NYA:WEH Elementary has been providing cultural, social, and academic programs in Hamilton secondary schools since 2003, and in elementary (or middle) schools for the last six years.

The goal of NYA:WEH Elementary is to support Indigenous students in building a sense of self and a sense of belonging in the community. To do this, the program offers students access to Indigenous culture and traditional knowledge, such as through connections with elders or Indigenous professionals, as well as support for Indigenous-based education practices. Programming varies between schools to meet the needs of students at each site. The program operates in six schools in the public board and two schools in the Catholic board.

In 2019, Niwasa Kendaaswin Teg partnered with McMaster University's Research Shop¹ to collaborate on an outcomes evaluation of the NYA:WEH Elementary program. Niwasa Kendaaswin Teg was looking to engage in an evaluation of the program in a way that met their evaluation needs (e.g., evidence of successful program outcomes to secure future funding) and that also aligned with Indigenous methodologies and practices. Thus, from the outset, we determined we would place emphasis on more qualitative rather than quantitative measures to provide a rich picture of the value of the program for participants. In order to support a meaningful evaluation for Niwasa Kendaaswin Teg, the researchers from Research Shop and the key stakeholders from Niwasa collaboratively formulated three main research questions, which became our reporting outcomes. These three questions were:

1. How has NYA:WEH Elementary supported student cultural identity formation?
2. How has NYA:WEH Elementary supported community connections?
3. How has NYA:WEH Elementary contributed to strengthening student success, career planning, and access to post-secondary education?

¹ The Research Shop works with public, non-profit, and community organizations to provide plain-language answers to their research questions. The teams are composed of student volunteers and a paid part-time team lead, who collaborate with representatives from partner organizations to plan, conduct, and report on the research.

This evaluation project has been a journey that fostered many working relationships. It was also originally scoped to be a 1-year evaluation project, conducted at one school location. However, as the entire world came to a standstill with COVID-19 in the spring of 2020, so too did our ability to evaluate the NYA:WEH Elementary program. This is where relationships proved important. While the initial student research shop team had to move on after the first school year (2019/2020), the Research Shop team lead, supporting Research Shop staff, and everyone from Niwasa Kendaaswin Teg committed to the ongoing project engagement. Admittedly, there were many months that we did not know what to do, or how to do it. The program and associated data collection activities were necessarily delayed due to the temporary cancellation of in-person programming at Hamilton schools. We had to adapt our methods and timelines to suit the evolving circumstances in schools while also striving to collect data that would meaningfully capture the full value of the program. The Research Shop and Niwasa Kendaaswin Teg's commitment to our partnership and the vision for evaluation was critical for seeing this project to its conclusion. Just as the relationship between the Research Shop and Niwasa Kendaaswin Teg's was an important element of this journey, the theme of relationships was also an important identified element of our evaluation, which we will explore shortly.

This report presents the results from an evaluation that ultimately spanned three school years (from September 2019 to May 2022). During that time, we evaluated the NYA:WEH Elementary program with data collection spanning the perspectives of NYA:WEH Elementary youth advisors, teachers, and program participants across 8 elementary schools in the Hamilton region. We will begin by briefly outlining our methodology. Following that, we will present our results from our 3-year long outcomes evaluation. Lastly, we will provide a brief discussion of key takeaways and next steps.

2.0 Methodology

From start to finish, this evaluation project was guided by community-based participatory research and Indigenous re-search methodologies. According to Absolon (2011), Indigenous peoples have too often been the subjects of research, which has not allowed Indigenous methodologies and knowledge to exist. Furthermore, Indigenous people are the most studied group of people in the world and are often presented as the "other" (Absolon, 2011 p. 23), with many studies focusing on what outside researchers consider to be the negative aspects of Indigenous lives (Wilson, 2008, p. 16). This project sought to utilize Absolon's re-search methodology, which allows for the decolonizing of research and the opportunity for Indigenous peoples to lead on the design and implementation of research using Indigenous knowledge and traditions. Furthermore, this project was also rooted in community-based participatory research (CBPR). CBPR involves an approach to research where equity is created and reinforced throughout project development, data collection, data analysis, and dissemination of results (Drawson, Toombs & Mushquash, 2017).

Starblanket et al. (2019) further speak about methods of Indigenous research, explaining that “Indigenous research should always be conducted at the service of the community with Indigenous researchers. The community should pose the questions that they want answered, share in the development of the research methodology, participate openly in the data collection (or gathering), and have access to and safeguard over the data that were collected” (pg. 3). Our research process was collaborative in nature, from the design through to data collection and analysis. As a team we worked together to identify research questions, develop data collection methods and tools, check in regularly about the project’s scope and progress, and co-analyze the data. Our role was mainly to provide administrative and technical support to empower Niwasa Kendaaswin Teg to lead on the evaluation of the NYA:WEH Elementary program.

2.1 Data collection

This evaluation used several methods to collect data. The main source of data came from three years of journal entries made by the three NYA:WEH Elementary youth advisors. Journal entries were the main source of data because we wanted to ensure the evaluation was built into NYA:WEH Elementary without disrupting the flow of the program itself. In addition, we felt it was inappropriate for Research Shop representatives to go into the schools as outsiders to observe and ask the students questions without having formed relationships with them. In contrast, the youth advisors already had trusting relationships with NYA:WEH Elementary students and we felt they were ideally positioned to facilitate the collection of program observations and feedback.

The journal entries made by youth advisors consisted of descriptions of weekly activities, personal reflections, attendance information, photographs of program activities, and direct quotes from students in their conversations with the youth advisor. Journal entries were typically submitted via Google Drive monthly. Other supporting tools used to gather data included three one-on-one interviews with each of the youth advisors (see Appendix A for the youth advisor interview guide), feedback surveys distributed to students at one of the participating schools, and one interview with a teacher who works at a school that hosts the NYA:WEH Elementary program (see Appendix B for the teacher interview guide). The resulting quantity of data included over 100 journal entries from youth advisors, over 30 quotes from students, over 60 relevant quotes from youth advisor interviews, over 200 photos, 19 student feedback survey responses, and over 10 relevant quotes from a teacher familiar with the program. In the next section, we describe our process of analyzing this wide range of data with Niwasa Kendassawin Teg.

2.2 Co-analysis of data

A critical part of ensuring that our research was truly collaborative and adhered to CBPR and Indigenous methodologies was co-analyzing the data with Niwasa Kendaaswin Teg staff. Researchers have noted that when it comes to meaningfully involving Indigenous communities in Indigenous research, most resort to conventional Western ways of analyzing data. These processes often exclude the Indigenous

community from making sense of the data (Starblanket et al., 2019) and employ linear rather than intuitive logic to dissect the information and discover new ideas, which runs opposite to traditional Indigenous ways of knowing (Wilson, 2008, p.119). Due to these shortcomings, an Indigenous academic developed an Indigenous data analysis method called Collective Consensual Data Analytic Procedure (CCDAP). This method is similar to other qualitative approaches to data analysis. However, a key tenet of CCDAP is the 'collective thinking mode,' which involves a negotiating process of data analysis with the Indigenous community (Starblanket et al., 2019).

More recently, the CCDAP method was adapted to be less lengthy and to leverage digital tools, such as Microsoft Excel, in organizing the analysis (Starblanket et al., 2019). This method has been named Nanatawihowin Acimowina kika-mosahkinikehk papiskici-itascikewin astacikowina, or NAKPA, from Cree translating to Medicine/Healing Stories Picked, Sorted, Stored (Starblanket et al., 2019). Guided by NAKPA, we agreed that the Research Shop team lead would conduct data pre-analysis by identifying and organizing data that provided evidence for each of our three identified evaluation outcomes. The researcher also created an 'other' category to place data that did not seem to speak to any of the three evaluation outcomes, but rather spoke to elements of program satisfaction as well as unintended positive outcomes. The Research Shop team lead also digitized the data that was collected and pre-analyzed using Microsoft Excel. Once pre-analysis and digitization was complete, the team² came together in-person to make meaning of the data together.

The co-analysis process took about five hours to complete and occurred in-person at the Biindigen Well Being Centre. This was the first time the team had come together in a non-virtual space to work together on the project since 2019. Sharing early morning refreshments and lunch felt instrumental in growing our relationship to each other just as it served to deepen our relationship with the data. For the Research Shop team lead and manager, this was the first time we had implemented a co-analysis process, which provided an opportunity to learn from the perspective of our Indigenous community partners. What began as a rather linear interpretation of the data (i.e., creation of categories of information underneath each outcome area) transitioned into using more intuitive logic from the perspective of the NYA:WEH Elementary staff, culminating with the presentation of overarching themes on a medicine wheel. Presenting themes on a medicine wheel highlighted their embedded relatedness and how the parts come together as a whole to serve NYA:WEH Elementary participants. This constituted a 'eureka' moment for our analysis (Wilson, 2008, p.119), which likely would not have been possible if the Research Shop team had analyzed the data without the community partners and using conventional data analysis methods. The medicine wheel visual will be explored in detail in the results section of this report.

² The team consisted of the Research Shop team lead and manager, as well as the Niwasa Kendaaswin Teg youth manager and all three NYA:WEH Elementary youth advisors.

3.0 Results

This section presents the results of our collaborative evaluation of the NYA:WEH Elementary program. In our co-analysis of the data, we could see how connected the outcomes were and how important these relationships were to the success of the program. In order to see the “big picture” of what NYA:WEH Elementary means for its participants, it became clear that analyzing the data through a linear process of reduction and abstraction, which is standard in evaluative research, was not intuitive to an understanding of the program and our three identified outcomes. Instead, during our co-analysis process, one of the Indigenous community partners created a program model featuring a medicine wheel (Fig. 1) that demonstrates the relatedness of themes underlying cultural identity formation (one of the outcomes) and how these themes are nested within other systems of social support³.

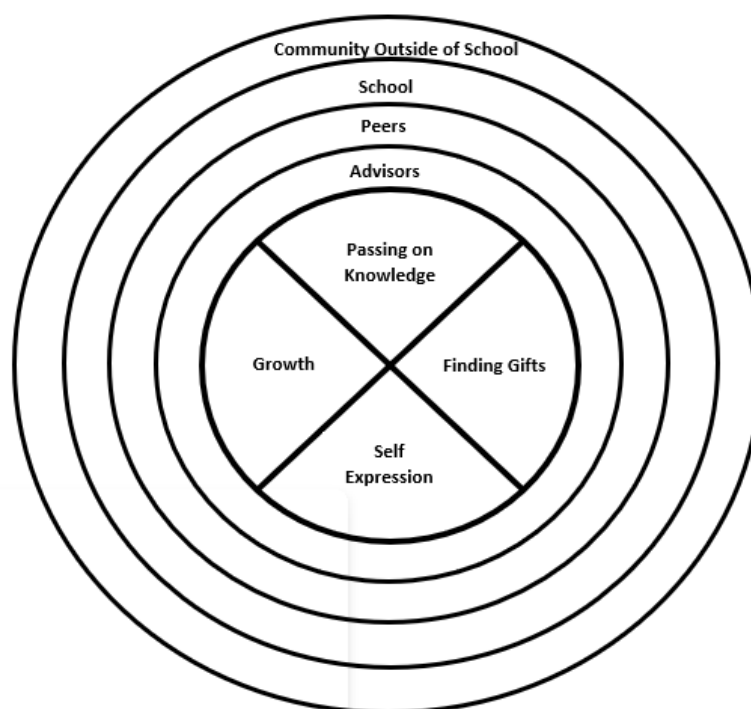


Fig. 1 – Program model represented as a medicine wheel

The medicine wheel in the centre of the diagram, which is rooted in Anishinaabe teaching, depicts the four subthemes relating to cultural identity formation. We will discuss each subtheme individually in the results for this outcome. However, it's important to highlight that each subtheme is related to the other. For instance, the subtheme of “finding gifts,” which relates to participants discovering new skills and capabilities (e.g., sewing), enables greater self-expression through the creative expression of these gifts, greater growth through the application of what they've

³ This model is similar to and inspired by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which highlights the importance of various levels of social systems in how children learn and develop.

learned, and the passing on of knowledge of these gifts to friends and family. Outside of the medicine wheel are various circles representing the second outcome, i.e. connections that NYA:WEH Elementary theoretically fosters to provide a positive context for learning and development.

The outcomes medicine wheel is an exploratory model that represents our understanding of the first two target outcomes of the program (cultural identity and community connections), which were the clearest themes from our data. We will first present findings related to these two outcomes. Following, we will briefly explore our findings for the third outcome: student success, career planning and post-secondary aspirations. We will also highlight findings relating to an unintended outcome of the program: support for student’s mental and emotional wellbeing. Finally, though this was not originally within scope of the evaluation, we present findings relating to program satisfaction as we discovered a wealth of information underlining the appropriateness and effectiveness of the program in facilitating positive outcomes for students.

3.1 Outcome #1 – Cultural Identity

The first outcome we identified for evaluation was participants’ Indigenous cultural identity formation. The youth advisors who administer the NYA:WEH Elementary program do many cultural related activities with students. These include traditional skills like beading, corn husk dolls, and moccasin making. In addition, the youth advisors share knowledge with students about traditional practices like burning sage. It became clear from the abundance of data that the NYA:WEH Elementary program has a strong positive impact on students’ cultural identity formation. Cultural identity formation is positioned at the centre of the program model and involves the interrelated subthemes of Finding Gifts, Self Expression, Growth, and Passing on Knowledge (Fig. 2). We elaborate on each of these themes below.



Fig. 2 – Medicine Wheel (Cultural Identity Outcome)

3.1.1 Finding Gifts

The first theme in the Eastern portion of our medicine wheel is titled *Finding Gifts*. From our analysis, we identified *Finding Gifts* as relating to students developing skills, building self-esteem, and finding things they are good at. It is also about gaining knowledge of Indigenous culture, history, and people. Throughout our data we saw evidence of students *Finding their Gifts*. There were dozens of anecdotes from students alluding to their enjoyment of traditional skills, such as sewing and moccasin making, as well as the confidence they gained from participating in these activities. For example, one youth advisor noted that “for some students, this was the first time seeing real moccasins, not the kind that is sold in stores.” She further noted that students “loved the moccasin making and learning about the different types of moccasins there are.” Other journal entries from the youth advisors highlight a sense of self-efficacy that students developed from creating something new. For instance, one youth advisor noted that one of her students produces excellent work when focused, and that “she doesn’t realize what she’s capable of until she sees the finished product.” Another advisor discussed her students’ sense of accomplishment in making traditional moccasins: “When the moccasins were completed, they couldn’t believe it. Couldn’t believe that we started with a piece of leather and when finished they fit their own feet.”





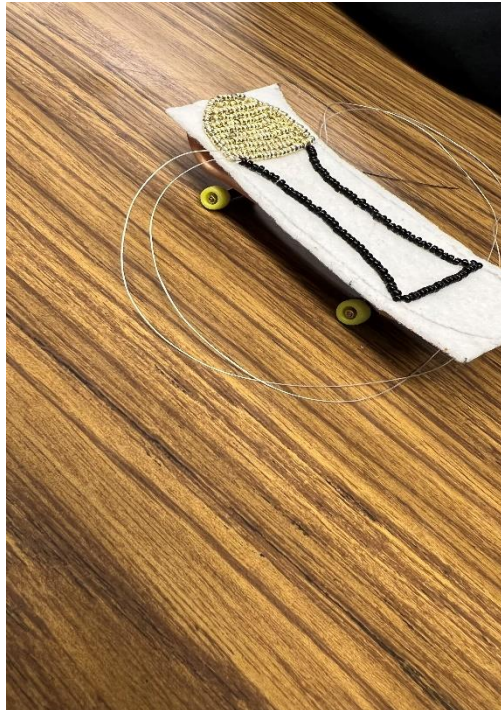
Students expressed being proud about the things they created with the NYA:WEH Elementary program. Many of the traditional crafts that students complete with the NAY:WEH program took time, concentration, and patience. Students acknowledged this, and in turn were proud and excited about their accomplishments when finishing projects. One student was quoted, “this is hard work, but worth it!” Another said, “this is so cool, hard, but it’s challenging in a good way.” Another student told their advisor that he gave his corn keychain to his mom and told her “he was proud because he made it from start to finish.” Student pride in their work was also a theme in the student feedback survey. Nearly all participants (16/18) indicated they “Strongly Agree” or “Agree” with the statement, “I take pride in the work that we complete in the program.”



Lastly, program anecdotes and observations provide evidence of cultural learning. One youth advisor documented their experience with supporting a young girl who expressed interest in learning more about the Indigenous side of her family. This student communicated the importance of her cultural heritage and expressed interest in returning to the program next year so that she could continue to explore this aspect of her identity. Evidence of cultural learning was also noted by a teacher who was interviewed about the program. Speaking about one of her Indigenous students who participates in the NYA:WEH Elementary program, she explained, “he was able to get in touch with his family history, learn a lot more about his culture, which has been a really important experience for him.”

3.1.2 Self-expression

Moving to the South, the next subtheme was *Self-expression*. *Self-expression* is understood as students having the freedom to put their own identity into what they are doing. Throughout our evaluation we heard stories from advisors about how students brought their unique selves into the work they did at NYA:WEH Elementary. For



example, one advisor found that a lot of students particularly enjoyed drawing characters and that they modelled many of the characters from their own self-portraits. They then created unique backstories for these characters. Another student had the idea of beading himself grip tape for his “tech deck finger board,” demonstrating creative self-expression. Other students used NYA:WEH Elementary activity materials as symbolic representations of their relationships and values. For instance, youth advisors noted that students used the beads in the beading activity to represent people they cared for as well as personal goals they had set for themselves. Another example of *self-expression* was when one student added her own unique hair and outfits she wears to school onto her corn husk doll.



Another element of *self-expression* that was noted throughout the evaluation was the ways students, of all cultures and backgrounds, were making connections to their own families, histories, and culture. Youth advisors journaled frequently about how their students would reflect on stories, traditional skills, and other cultural practices offered throughout the program, which encouraged them to open up about their own stories and traditions. For instance, when one youth advisor was talking about sacred Indigenous medicine, several students discussed the use of sacred plants and medicines in their own families, such as sweetgrass, sage, and tobacco. One advisor noted that “Indigenous students had a sense of pride and wanted to share with the class what they knew about what I was teaching.” Another advisor noted that students, during craft work, stepped up and demonstrated different ways of doing the crafts based on their own knowledge of the activity. For example, as one youth advisor noted, one student was eager to demonstrate his competence at beading, which he had learned from family members:

He came over to me and began asking questions. “What are you doing? Are those beads? I like to bead, I know how”. After he asked his questions, he asked if I was Native, I told him yes, he said “really, I am too!” a bit excited. I asked if he wanted to look at my beads and he did. He wanted to make something, and he chose to make a wristlet key chain. He shared with me that his brother is a lot older, and his girlfriend showed him how to bead and he beads with her sometimes when he visits. As he sat, he was very focused on what he was doing and had his colours picked out. He looked up at me and said, “you know beading takes a lot of patience,” it sure does buddy and look at you go...you’re quick. “Yeah, it’s because I know how,” he said proudly (Youth advisor, excerpt from journal entry).

Similarly, a subset of non-Indigenous students who joined in on the program also demonstrated self-expression by connecting elements of Indigenous culture to their own culture. One advisor discussed this, stating “students of different cultures take pride in

finding similarities in ceremony and medicines. Also, with their own craft work they have shown me different ways to do certain things”.

3.1.3 Growth

Next, in the Western section of the medicine wheel, is the *Growth* subtheme. We refer to *Growth* as evidence of the students learning something and applying it to their lives, as well as growing their relationships with others. The advisors witnessed students learning about Indigenous culture and practices, thinking critically about the material, and applying new skills and knowledge in their personal lives. For example, students demonstrated comprehension of the morals embedded in Indigenous stories by helping to teach other students. One advisor discussed this, explaining:

We also watched the "All Things Corn" Slideshow, and students all participated and answered questions about the video and corn. [A student] wanted to know if everyone in the village was jealous or envious of the girl because she was so beautiful, and [another student] further explained that it was more to show that you can be the most beautiful one around but must still have a good mind, be kind, and respectful to others. It was nice to see this come from another student. Showed me that they're understanding what we're teaching them. Makes me proud. (Youth advisor, excerpt from journal entry).

Students also demonstrated their growth in understanding how to apply the teachings they received from the NYA:WEH Elementary program. During lessons about the wampum, one advisor made the following observation:

Today I visited the 6A class to do some wampum teachings and make some wampum necklaces. It went really well. I asked the students, after the slideshow, what they can do to help take care of the land. The answers I got were awesome! "We can honor the treaties of the indigenous peoples, because we all share the land and need it to survive". "We can recycle, and use a compost, and make sure we don't take more food than we need to not waste". (Youth advisor, excerpt from journal entry).

When asking the students what it means to be selfish and vain, another advisor noted the student's response: "it's like one of the seven grandfather teachings, is humility, and that means everyone is equal, like no one is better than anyone else." These anecdotes suggest the students are internalizing cultural stories and finding meaning in them.



Lastly, we also perceived growth in terms of students opening up to others in the program. For instance, the teacher we interviewed stated there's "just so much laughter [that] also comes from the program, which is really good because we've got a lot of our really um closed kids, quiet kids who have really been able to come out of their shell when attending the NYA:WEH Elementary program." In addition, this teacher identified growth in students' knowledge of Indigenous teachings by the way they applied this knowledge in the classroom: "in the classroom they were doing a unit, and his hand was shooting up every 5 minutes; he knew every answer, and he wasn't afraid to share his knowledge because he had learned it all in a safe space. That was really rewarding for him"

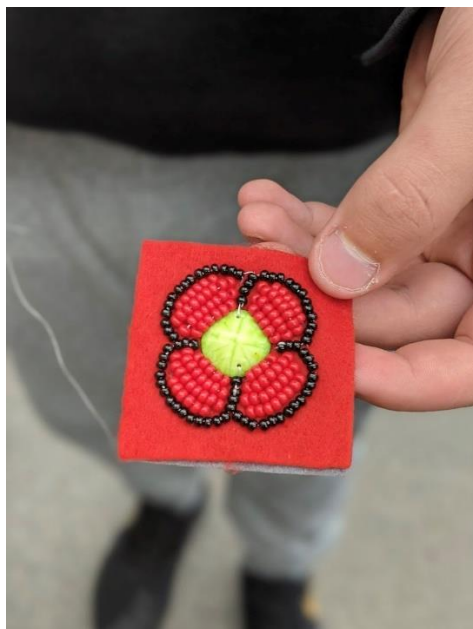
3.1.4 Passing on Knowledge

The final subtheme, in the Northern section of the medicine wheel, was *Passing on Knowledge*. Here, we define *Passing on Knowledge* as students sharing what they know (i.e., sharing their *Gifts*) with others. One way participants *Passed on Knowledge* was to their teachers and peers. For example, one student learned how to plant strawberry plants from the youth advisor, and as time went on, this student "took on a huge leadership roll and called on her fellow classmates to pick a plant and showed them how to plant it and care for it" (Youth advisor, excerpt from journal entry).



Another advisor spoke about a similar scenario, explaining that she had a student who started the program shy and reserved, and would rely heavily on the advisor to help her complete activities. As time went on, the student appeared to gain confidence in her abilities and now teaches their peers how to do crafts. Numerous anecdotes from the journals highlight how participants would create artwork for their teachers. As one advisor noted, “Teachers seem surprised by their work. Especially the kids that seem ‘troubled.’ [Student] is shy but takes pride in knowing how to create beautiful things.”

In addition to sharing their knowledge with teachers and peers, youth advisors also highlighted that many students were so proud of their work in the NYA:WEH Elementary program that they often gifted their work to family members.



For example, one student stated he was going to show his mom [his work] when he is finished and “she’ll probably want to keep it.” A youth advisor also commented that “some [students] have even taken it upon themselves to make some for teachers and/or family members”. Another advisor shared that one of her students gave his corn keychain to his mother, and “he told her that he was proud because he made it from start to finish.”

3.2 Outcome #2 – Community Connections

The second outcome we evaluated was community connections. Evaluating community connections concerned evidence that NYA:WEH Elementary strengthened community support networks for students, both within and outside the school. Under normal circumstances, a key activity of the NYA:WEH Elementary program is to invite local Indigenous community members into schools to present about community supports available to students in the Hamilton area. Due to COVID-19 restrictions and challenges, this part of the program did not happen as usual. However, when analyzing our data, we saw evidence of community connections in other ways. Visualizing this, we surrounded our medicine wheel (which represents outcome #1 – cultural identity), with layers of relationships representing *community connections* (Fig. 3).

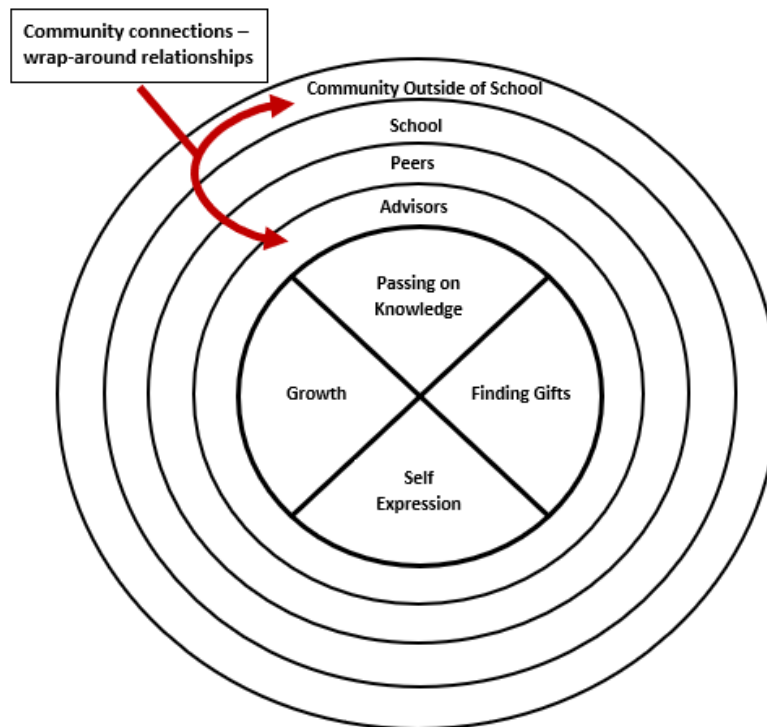


Fig. 3 – Layers of community connections facilitated by the NYA:WEH Elementary program

We saw evidence that NYA:WEH Elementary supports relationships between students and each of these layers (e.g., students and advisors), but also between layers (e.g., advisors and teachers). We elaborate on these relationships below.

3.2.1 Relationship between Students and Advisors

The relationship students have with their NYA:WEH Elementary youth advisors emerged as an important aspect of the program and its impact on students. Students expressed the support and trust they had with youth advisors. One student was heard telling other students, “Miss Sarah is the best. If you are ever feeling sad or just need to cry, you can come and see her. She will help you out and give you good advice.” Another student said, “if you ever have a problem, Miss Sarah is there for you”. The youth advisors also identified the importance of their relationships with students. One youth advisor explained that an important part of their role is being a caring and consistent adult for the students, stating, “knowing that someone in the school is connected to the program is beneficial, and knowing they can go to someone”. During our teacher interview, the importance of student relationships with the youth advisors also surfaced:

She’s [youth advisor] great at just building relationships with the kids. I see a lot of really strong relationships being built through the NYA:WEH Elementary program here that can lead to some really good skill-building, just the educational aspect of learning different cultures and also knowing they have a caring adult in the school and knowing they have an exciting, safe, warm place to come (Teacher, excerpt from interview).

3.2.2 Relationships between Students and their Peers

Another significant relationship was between students and their peers at school. Youth advisors often spoke about the close relationships students in the NYA:WEH Elementary program built with each other. For instance, one advisor explained: “they follow direction so well and also look out for each other. They’re all such a great team. When one or two fell behind a bit, the other students would jump in and help right away. It’s so amazing to see the teamwork they exhibit.” The program is also fostering relationships between non-Indigenous and Indigenous students. In some of the programs, non-Indigenous students would join in on lessons and activities, which an advisor discussed as a positive aspect of the program because it is “creating allies” and allowing for cultural exchange.

3.2.3 Relationships between Advisors and the School

It was noted by all advisors, as well as the teacher we interviewed, that the NYA:WEH Elementary program has created a “community within the school.” For instance, the teacher we interviewed discussed the impact of the presence of the program at their school:

“You see these little eyes in the window wanting to join and wanting to know what’s going on, and then when students are bringing their creations home or the things that they’ve worked on, it’s like that ‘wow’ factor throughout the school... so really just always building on the school community is what I see the NYA:WEH Elementary program doing here”.



NYA:WEH Elementary’s consistent presence in schools has allowed the program to reach students beyond the grades formally involved in the program. Youth advisors noted that younger students are excited about the program because they see their older siblings in the program. Greater student awareness of the program throughout the school may serve to increase its future demand.

NYA:WEH Elementary youth advisors are also a support for non-Indigenous teachers in the school. Youth advisors discussed how they are often invited into classrooms to support teachers with teaching about Indigenous knowledge, culture, and practices. This strengthens the wider school community by improving educators’ knowledge of Indigenous culture and history, i.e. “filling the gap of Indigenous teachings,” so that they have greater capacity to incorporate these teachings into the mainstream classroom. This idea was supported by the teacher we interviewed, who discussed how the NYA:WEH Elementary workers were an important source of knowledge about culturally appropriate supports and resources in the community: “It was really great learning for me as a professional and also really great to know where to connect students to and also, if needed, to connect families to various community resources that the NYA:WEH Elementary workers seem to have some specialized knowledge of”.

3.2.4 Relationships between Students and Community Outside of School

Finally, the NYA:WEH Elementary program shows evidence of supporting students building relationships with their community outside of the school. For instance, advisors noted that some students are connecting with their peers in the program as well as the youth advisors outside of school. One youth advisor explained, “students that don’t usually hangout together outside of school will now hangout together because they are both in NYA:WEH Elementary. This turns into a community.” The program also fosters community connections outside of the school by introducing community resources to students and their families, such as the Hamilton Regional Indian Centre. One way this was done was by inviting teachers and families to the Hamilton Native Centre Conference, where agencies were able to share resources and information for all involved.

3.3 Outcome #3 - Student Success, Career Planning and Post-Secondary Aspirations

The final outcome we evaluated was student success, career planning, and post-secondary aspirations. NYA:WEH Elementary youth advisors made efforts throughout the school years to talk to their students about the transition from middle school to high school. From the data, it was unclear to us how many students engaged in these conversations. As seen in Figure 4, there seemed to be a divide between the students on who perceived having conversations with advisors about plans for high school and college.

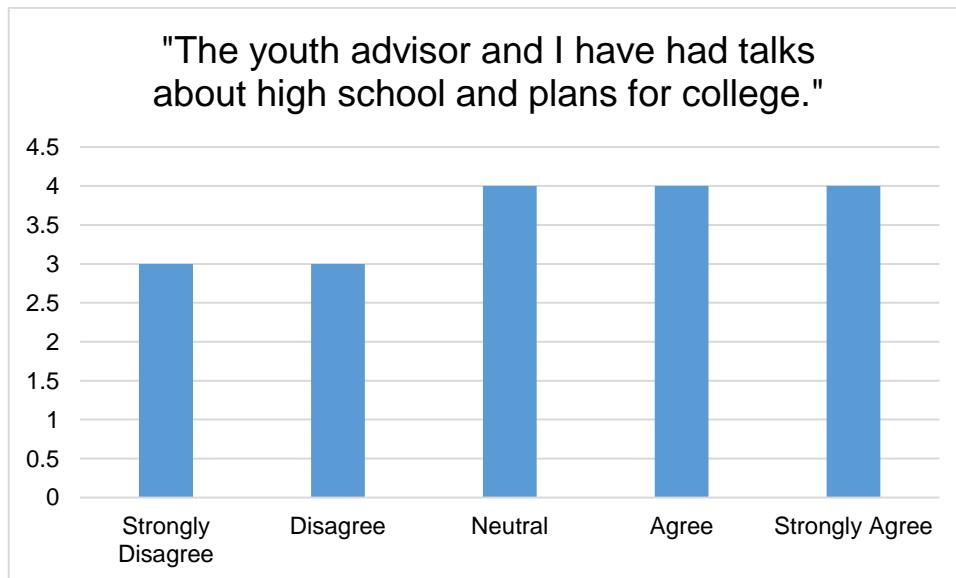


Fig. 4 – Student survey response to the statement, “The youth advisor and I have had talks about high school and plans for college.”

Advisors noted that they had most high school conversation with grade eight students, who would be transitioning to high school next year. As the teacher we interviewed noted, “they’re having a lot of open conversations about what next year might look like, even conversations about graduating, and what did elementary school meant to them and those kind of things.” The advisors noted that many of the students said they were nervous about transitioning to high school. However, knowing that the NYA:WEH Elementary program operates in high schools provided many students with relief knowing that they could continue to receive support through the program. One advisor described this, explaining that one of her students “seemed excited to hear that [NYA:WEH was in all high schools], and was more excited to hear that they have their own classrooms in high schools.” Another advisor explained that, “lots of students get upset because they don’t think NYA:WEH Elementary is in high school, but they get excited when I tell them NYA:WEH Elementary is in high school.”

NYA:WEH Elementary youth advisor’s also discussed helping students apply lessons they learned in NYA:WEH Elementary to help them work through their nervousness about the transition to high school. For example, one advisor recalled explaining to a student, “it can be scary, but it’s always nice to challenge. And bring this back to the bead work and how students think they can’t do it, but they overcome this and can do the bead work. This is the same with high school.”



Although we did not review any qualitative data specifically relating to post-secondary education plans, we reviewed some evidence that youth advisors engaged students in discussions about, and in some cases shaped, their future goals. The following are some quotes from students discussing with their youth advisor or teacher what they may want to do in the future:

“I like designing clothes. I think about making clothes for my job” (Student).

“I think I want to become an anime artist and make characters like this for work. It would be fun” (Student).

“I am not too sure what exactly kind of art I want to focus on, but I do know I want to get into Glendale High School to explore my options there” (Student).

“I think I could sell these things, I think I could be an authentic beader” (Student).



As the teacher we interviewed stated, “just knowing that they feel a sense of pride with what they’ve created with the NYA:WEH Elementary program is a really big aspect to their future goals.”

3.4 Unintended Outcome: Student Mental and Emotional Wellbeing

An unintended outcome we discovered during our analysis was the impact the program had on students’ mental and emotional wellbeing. Advisors and the teacher we interviewed noted that students seemed “more calm” and “engaged” when participating in the NYA:WEH Elementary program. One advisor explained, “this is the first time [beading] with this class, as they can be a bit rambunctious with the more students that come down. Beading seemed to calm them down a bit more than anything we have worked on in the past.” Another advisor further explained that this sense of calmness was especially important for the older students. She explained, “I have probably seen most changes in the grade eight students than any other. They are used to a fast-paced world and when we are beading or sewing, it was a constant reminder for them to slow down and take pride in whatever it is they were creating.” The teacher we interviewed described a moment where a NYA:WEH Elementary advisor was able to work one-on-one with a student who was acting out: “Yesterday I had a student in distress and she was able to take them aside and do some cultural calm-down things with them, which

was a really welcomed experience and great experience for that student ... when he came back, just his personal mood, his affect was different.”

The program also is evidenced to have positively affected students’ mental health. One advisor noted that mental health is a particular challenge at one of their schools, and because of this, she teaches students to use cultural activities to cope with their mental health. During our interview with a teacher, she discussed this program feature for students: “I’ve noticed a lot of students, it’s kind of their safe space to be themselves, which can transfer over to the classroom a little bit ... just an overwhelming sense of calm for them ... just a sense of peace, and they’re able to bring that to their classroom.”

3.5 Student Program Satisfaction

Although assessing program satisfaction was not initially in the scope of our evaluation, we encountered a lot of data relating to students’ positive perceptions of the program. For instance, in the student feedback survey, when asked about their overall experience, 14/18 of the respondents said their experience was “Excellent” and the other four students said their experience was “Great.” Furthermore, as seen in Table 1, students highly rated their enjoyment of the program, the knowledgeability of their advisors, the safety of the environment, their pride in their work, the applicability of what they learned outside of school, the preparedness of the advisors, and the level of support from the advisors.

Table 1. Responses to likert scale questions regarding various elements of program satisfaction.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Weighted Average
I enjoy the program.	0	0	0	5	13	4.7
The youth advisor is knowledgeable about the culture.	0	0	2	1	15	4.7
The youth advisor has provided a safe space for all students.	0	0	0	1	17	4.9
I take pride in the work that we complete in the program.	0	0	2	4	12	4.6
What we learn in NYA:WEH Elementary can also help me outside of school.	0	0	2	8	8	4.3

The youth advisor comes in prepared for the planned activities.	0	0	0	5	13	4.7
I feel supported by the NYA:WEH Elementary youth advisor.	0	0	1	3	14	4.7

Nearly all students (16/18) on the survey reported they would like to join the program again next year (with the other two students saying ‘maybe’), and, when asked if they would like anything changed about the program, the only feedback was to extend the program duration (e.g., more than once a week and for a full class period).

Our qualitative data also yielded evidence of program satisfaction. Youth advisors noted that many students told them they wish they could do the NYA:WEH Elementary program every day, and wished each advisor was at their school full-time. The teacher we interviewed shared similar stories, noting, “I think they’d stay all afternoon.” This teacher also made the following comment about the program’s success and their hope to see the program expanded:

I think if we could open it up to more grades that would be amazing. I know right now it’s very open to grades 6, 7, 8; again, I have a little guy in grade 4 who, while [youth advisor] is here, will meet individually with her, which thank goodness she’s been there to be a support person for him, because that has impacted his success at school so much and his personal beliefs and experience and identity. So that would be my only thing, if it was more frequent and opened up to more grade (Teacher, excerpt from teacher interview).

The teacher also shared the high level of anticipation that students have for the program, as evidenced by this quote:

A lot of them, like I said, they count down the days to Thursday and Friday when they know she’s [youth advisor] on-site and they know they’re going to have an experience ... If she’s ever away, absent for any reason, it’s like we have to put signs up and announcements. It’s a really sad moment in the school when [staff]’s unavailable. That shows the impact she’s made on our school and the students she supports (Teacher, excerpt from teacher interview).

Various quotes from the student survey, though brief, additionally highlight enthusiasm for the program:

“Thursdays are the best because it’s NYA:WEH!”
(Student)

“Yay! NYA:WEH is back!” (Student)

4.0 Key Takeaways and Next Steps

This report presented findings from a three-year long collaborative evaluation project between Niwasa Kendaaswin Teg and McMaster’s Research Shop. Our purpose was to support Niwasa Kendaaswin Teg in conducting a meaningful and community partner-led evaluation of the NYA:WEH Elementary program using a participatory approach. There are two major contributions of this research: 1) The use of a research methodology informed by community-based participatory and Indigenous re-search methodologies, and 2) The co-collection and co-analysis of data relating to the program’s outcomes.

Partnering with Niwasa Kendaaswin Teg staff was integral to the success of this project. Involving the organization’s stakeholders in scoping the evaluation outcomes ensured our research was relevant, and involving frontline staff (i.e., the youth advisors) ensured data collection was appropriate and embedded in the relationships these staff already had with program participants. Additionally, using the NAKPA method (Starblanket et al., 2019) to co-analyze the data helped to increase the validity of our findings by incorporating the views of NYA:WEH Elementary program staff, who helped make meaning of the data. We recommend that future evaluations of the NYA:WEH Elementary program, should they occur, also be grounded in a participatory approach and Indigenous re-research methodology.

As for the program outcomes, our analysis suggests NYA:WEH Elementary supports students’ cultural identity formation in four interconnected ways:

- Finding gifts: Discovering new cultural skills and knowledge and developing a sense of self-efficacy and self-esteem through their accomplishments.
- Self Expression: The incorporation of students’ unique identities into the program activities and the making of connections to their family culture and history.
- Growth: Demonstrated understanding of new cultural skills and knowledge through application to students’ lives and worldviews.
- Passing on knowledge: Sharing what is known (i.e., their “gifts”) to others.

This outcome appears to be the most obvious source of value for participating students with potential interest to schools through the transfer of positive learning attributes (e.g., self-confidence) into the classroom.

Our analysis provided some evidence that NYA:WEH Elementary is achieving its second outcome: fostering community connections. Most of our evidence suggested NYA:WEH Elementary has strengthened connections within the school community, particularly between students and advisors, students and their peers, and advisors and the school. Evidence of external community connections centred around connections

between students, advisors, and peers outside of school time, as well as the introduction of community resources to students, families, and teachers, such as the Hamilton Regional Indian Centre and the Hamilton Native Centre Conference. Though COVID-19 prevented many program activities from happening, future iterations of the program could seek to bring in more external community members and service representatives to foster greater connections between participating students, schools, and Indigenous social and cultural supports available in Hamilton.

We found mixed evidence for the last outcome: student success, career planning, and post-secondary aspirations. This was possibly due to disruptions caused by COVID-19, such as the cancellation of in-person activities and inability to bring in guest speakers. While our data suggests youth advisors had impactful conversations with grade eight students in the program about the transition to high school, we did not find evidence that students specifically discussed plans for post-secondary education. We found some evidence that the program may have inspired the future goals of some students, particularly those envisioning themselves in creative fields akin to the cultural art and craft activities facilitated in the program. In the absence of future disruptions caused by COVID-19, we recommend that NYA:WEH Elementary programs facilitate greater access to post-secondary education planning activities, such as field trips to local colleges and universities and guest speakers from these institutions, to provide more opportunities for students to strengthen their post-secondary aspirations.

An unintended positive impact of the program was the perceived positive impact on students' mental and emotional well-being. Preliminary evidence from advisors and teachers suggest the program has a calming affect for participants that transfers over to the classroom. In addition, we saw evidence of youth advisors teaching cultural coping mechanisms for negative emotions, perhaps adding to students' ability to self-regulate. Positive impacts on students' mental health should formally be considered for future evaluations and factored into the value proposition of the program.

Lastly, though evaluating program satisfaction was not in the original scope of this project, we found extensive evidence that students are satisfied with nearly all elements of the program, including the activities, advisors, the safety of the environment, and the relevancy of what they're learning. Most students rated their experience as "excellent" on the feedback survey, while interviews with teachers and advisors and journal reflections draw importance to the strong relationships between students and advisors, who appear to facilitate a safe environment for learning, growth, and cultural self-exploration. Indeed, it is the relationships the NYA:WEH Elementary program develops within schools that seems to underpin its outcomes. These relationships – between students, advisors, educators, and the Hamilton community – should continue to be developed and emphasized as the program seeks to grow and expand.

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Appendix A: NYA:WEH Elementary Youth Advisor Interview Questions

Logistics:

1. What is your role?
2. How long have you been apart of the program?
3. What is your favourite part of being/working in this program?

Cultural Identity:

1. Tell me about what kinds of activities you did connected to cultural identity?
2. How did students respond?
 - a. Tell me about what kinds of things you noticed? Could give specific examples of students.

Community Connections:

1. Tell me about the activities and things you did that were connected to community connections (i.e. introducing students to an Indigenous community, fostering community, talking to students about who they can go to for support)? Could give specific examples of students.
2. How did students respond?
 - a. Tell me about what kinds of things you noticed?

Post-Secondary/Future Dreams:

1. Tell me about the activities and things you did that were related to post-secondary education, future careers and dreams? Could give specific examples of students.
2. How did students respond?
 - a. Tell me about what kinds of things you noticed?

Other Important Themes:

1. From your perspective, were there any factors, including the pandemic, that disrupted or inhibited students' participation in the NYA:WEH Elementary program? Please explain.
2. Do you have any other thoughts about NYA:WEH Elementary and the students that participate in the program?
 - a. Is this something that's needed/fills a gap in the educational system?

Appendix B: Teacher Interview Questions

NYA:WEH Elementary Program General:

1. How long have you been a teacher at [school]?
2. What grade(s) do you teach?
3. What do you know, if anything about the NYA:WEH Elementary program? Please explain.
4. You've been selected for an interview as a teacher who has students participating in the NYA:WEH Elementary program. Could you please give me an overview of what their participation looks like (or has looked like)?
 - a. How long have these students been participating in the NYA:WEH Elementary program?

Outcomes Evaluation:

1. Since participating in the program, have you noticed any changes in your students?
 - a. Have you perceived any changes in behaviour, attitude, well-being, focus, communication, etc.?
2. Have you noticed any changes in the students' identity or sense of self? If so, what has that looked like?
 - a. Have any of the students talked about their indigenous identity?
3. Are you aware of any students having access to new connections or resources in their community? If yes, please elaborate.
4. Have you noticed any students talking about their future aspirations or career goals? If so, what have they been saying?

Other Themes:

1. From your perspective, were there any factors, including the pandemic, that disrupted or inhibited your students' participation in the NYA:WEH Elementary program? Please explain.
2. Do you have any other thoughts to share about the availability of an Indigenous student support program at your school?
 - a. Is this something that's needed/fills a gap in the educational system?
 - b. How, if at all, does this program support the educational experience of students?