

IAC 2022 Symposium on  
Child & Adolescent Global Mental Health

# Attachment as a Bridge Between Worlds: Psychological Support for First Nations Youth in Canada

Omayeli Eseosa Alexandra Jemide, MA (*presenter*)

Hannah Maté, MA (*presenter*)

Anya Andrews, MA

Yi Jie (Julia) Du

Isabelle Schneider



# Dr. Miriam Steele's 'Child & Adolescent Global Mental Health' Class: Collaboration with UNYA



*Based in Vancouver, Canada, on the unceded, traditional territories of the **Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh** peoples.*

UNYA, founded in 1988, is committed to providing meaningful support and mental health resources for Indigenous youth in Vancouver, BC. **“UNYA strives to support Indigenous youth by providing a diverse continuum of advocacy, preventative and support services that respond to their immediate and long-term needs.** Today, UNYA delivers 20+ programs, with 175+ volunteers, 100 staff, and more than 300 community partners.”

[unya.bc.ca](http://unya.bc.ca)

# The Brief

We were tasked with developing a support plan for youth that are on the waitlist for **supportive services**. UNYA has a very high demand for services including their counseling and mentoring programs, resulting in waitlists that can be up to 6 months long. While they wait, their needs included:

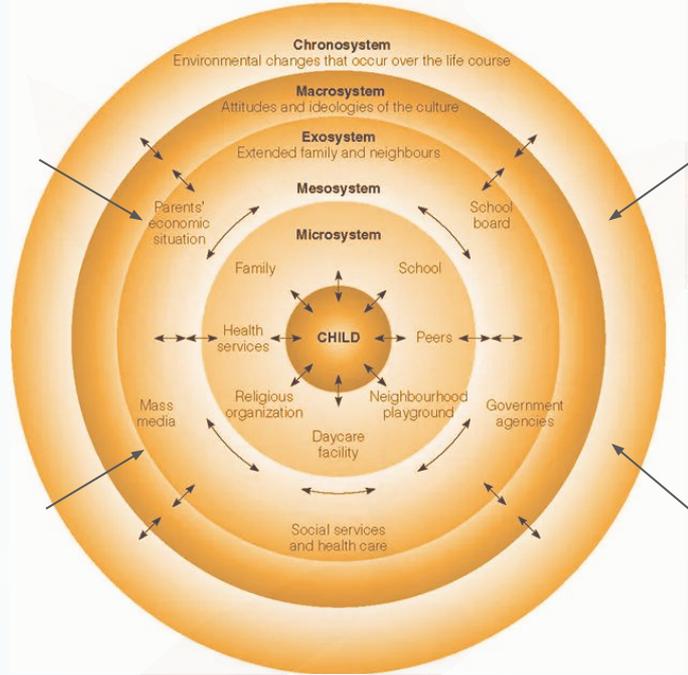
- Support combat hopelessness through relationship building
- A toolbox for processing emotions
- A safe space to go
- Immediate support in times of crisis

# Framework

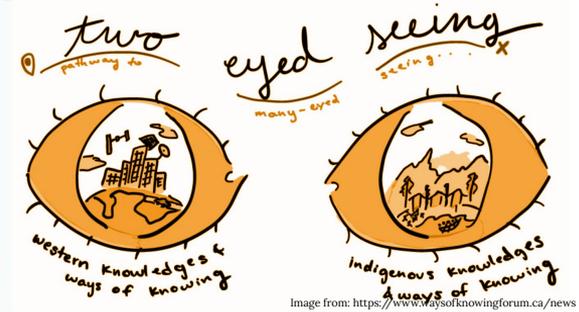


## Attachment

(Bowlby, 1969;  
Ainsworth, 1978; Steele et al., 1996)



## Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979)

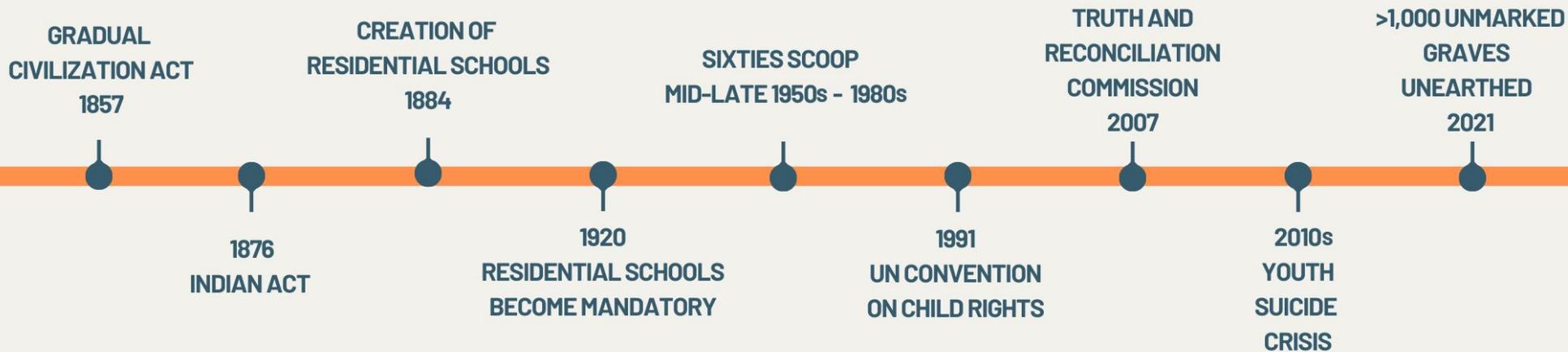


## Indigenous Ways of Knowing (Iwama et al., 2009)

# Chronosystem: Systems over Time

A BRIEF HISTORY OF SOCIO-POLITICAL EVENTS & TRAUMAS AFFECTING

## INDIGENOUS CHILDREN IN CANADA



EVERY CHILD MATTERS



EVERY CHILD MATTERS

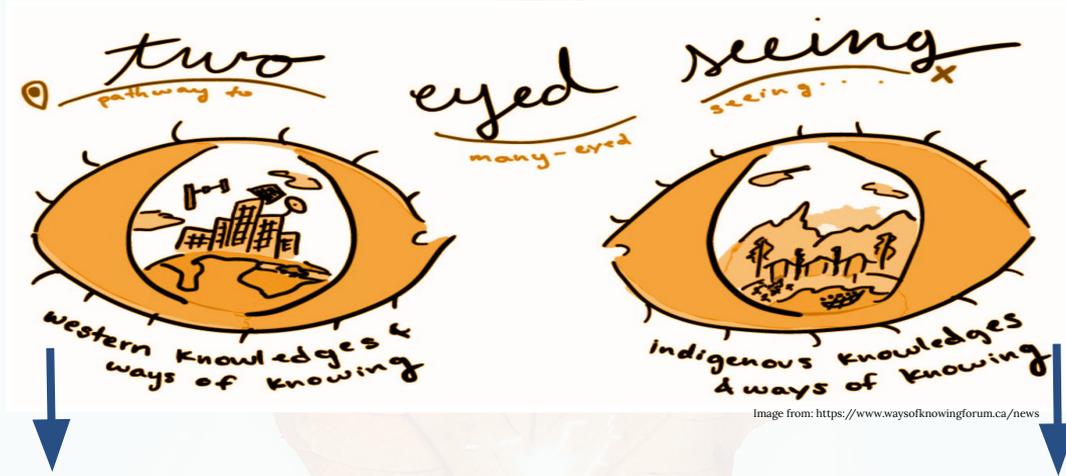


# Macrosystem: Cultural Values

Central questions at the Macro level for Indigenous youth:

- Within the context of historical oppression and disconnection of cultural meaning systems (Trickett et. al., 2009), what does it mean to **thrive**?
- How does one **live well** across two **vastly different worlds**?

# Macrosystem: Cultural Values



- Observation, evidence, skepticism
- Individual ambition
- Productive, functioning life = good life

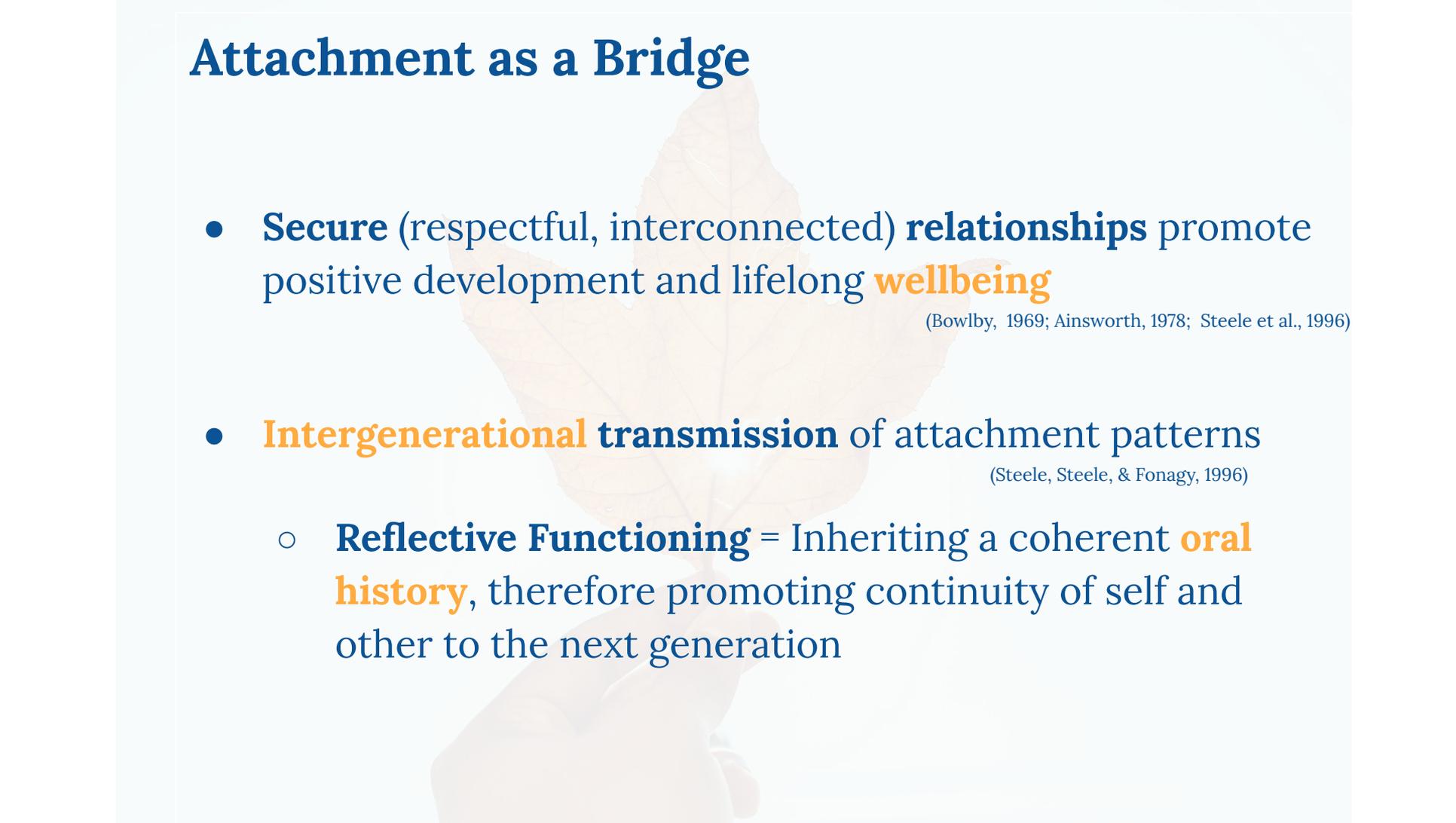
E.g., evidence-based treatments, DSM-V, psychiatry, mother-child relationship

## Attachment as a Bridge

- “Inherited wisdom” (Stephens, 2000)
- “All my relations”
- Connected, integrated life = good life

E.g., Oral histories, coming of age rituals, community, grandparent-child relationship

# Attachment as a Bridge

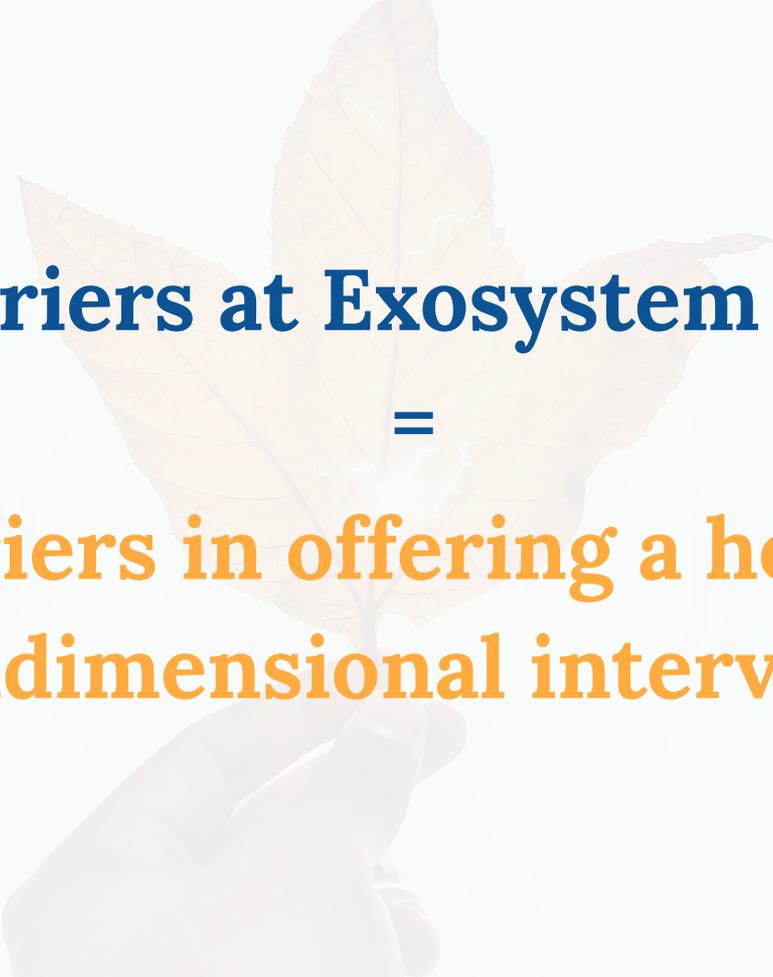


- **Secure** (respectful, interconnected) **relationships** promote positive development and lifelong **wellbeing**  
(Bowlby, 1969; Ainsworth, 1978; Steele et al., 1996)
- **Intergenerational transmission** of attachment patterns  
(Steele, Steele, & Fonagy, 1996)
  - **Reflective Functioning** = Inheriting a coherent **oral history**, therefore promoting continuity of self and other to the next generation

# Exosystem: External Environmental Influences

- **47%** of Canada's Indigenous children live in **poverty** (Beedie et al., 2019)
- Intergenerational residential school trauma = higher likelihood mental health challenges among descendants (Bombay et al., 2011; Bombay et al., 2015)
- As of February 2021, **61** Indigenous communities in Canada still faced a **water crisis** (Wilson et al., 2021)

# Exosystem: External Environmental Influences

A hand holding a leaf with a lightning bolt striking it. The background is a light blue gradient.

**Barriers at Exosystem level**

=

**Barriers in offering a holistic  
multidimensional intervention**

# Mesosystem

Cultural identity, “**community self-determination and vitality**” are resilience/protective factors against mental health risk (Boska et al., 2015, p. 364)

UNYA’s central strength: **fostering healthy, integrated, and interdependent connections between biopsychosocial markers of wellness**

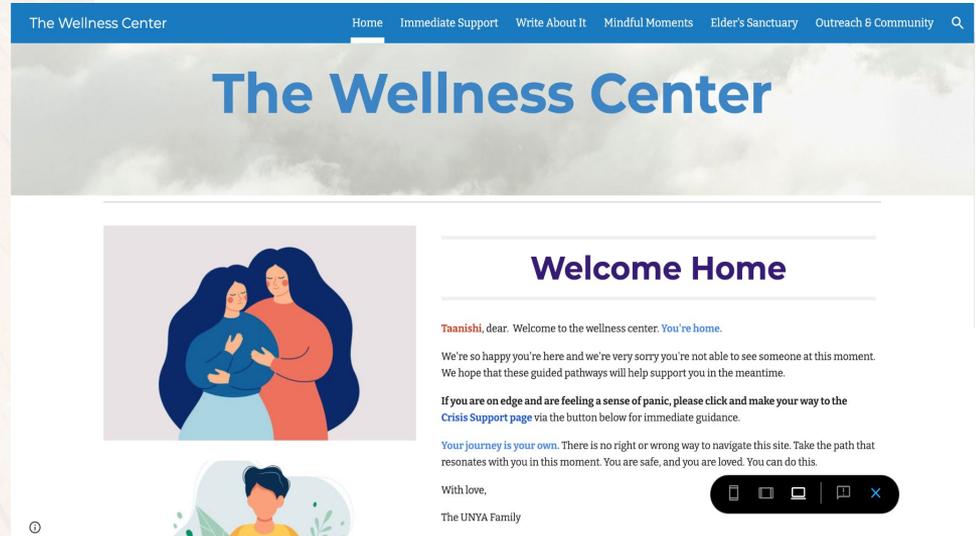
- **Intergenerational Continuity:** Indigenous ways of knowing (ancestral & communal knowledge) are a tool to preserve culture, heal intergenerational trauma.
  - **Cedar Walk Program:** A trauma informed, harm-reduction focused alternative education program centering Indigenous teachings, knowledges, and perspectives.
  - Multi-generations at UNYA

# Microsystem: Final Deliverables

- TNS intervention is at the heart of the UNYA youth's ecological system (microsystem level)
    - **Direct service**
    - **Emphasis:** Building connections, creating a secure base, combatting hopelessness
  - Virtual Wellness Center
  - Fighting for transportation rights to ensure youths ability to easily access onsite facilities
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# Virtual Wellness Center

- **Crisis Corner**
  - UNYA as secure base/safe place
- **“Write About it”**
  - Journaling for emotional regulation, reflective functioning opportunity
- **Mindfulness Moments**
  - Mental health tools for coping
- **Elder’s Sanctuary**
  - Cultural, intergenerational continuity and storytelling
- **Outreach & Community**
  - Building community connections



# Transportation as a Human Right

17 December 2021

**Dean Rear**

*General Manager of Financial Services*

Metro Vancouver  
400 - 287 Nelson's Court  
New Westminster, BC V3L 0E7

Dear Mr. Rear,

We are a team from The New School for Social Research in New York City partnering with the Vancouver based mental health organization, UNYA. UNYA, the Urban Native Youth Association, is a non-profit organization dedicated to providing immediate and long-term mental health support for Indigenous youth (Aboriginal, Metis, Inuit, First Nations, Status, Non-Status) in the urban setting. The organization focuses on diverse and culturally grounded support in the form of advocacy, preventative care, and healing with practices rooted in the Indigenous communities of Vancouver, B.C.

As you might be aware, UNYA, owing to its Indigenous, youth-focused approach, does not qualify for adequate governmental financial support. Regardless, UNYA works tirelessly to ensure the mental health of Indigenous youth based in Vancouver – an issue that has become particularly pressing during the lockdowns. The need for reliable mental health services has, thus, risen greatly. At the same time, consistent funding has been increasingly scarce owing in large part to the financial fallout of the pandemic.

A major effect has been the increasing length of waitlists struggling youth are placed on when seeking mental health services. In an attempt to provide those on the waitlists with immediate help, we from The New School have partnered with UNYA to develop a program that enables youth on the waitlists to access immediate and stable forms of support. We believe that it is of the utmost importance that the affected youth do not feel abandoned and know that their struggle is being seen.

Some of the programs we have devised, rely on the physical infrastructure (and the consistent access thereto) UNYA provides. For many youth, however, UNYA's central office location is not easy to get to. **The lack of affordable public transportation impedes Indigenous youth's access to community centers and necessary services: an issue that directly impacts youth's participation in UNYA's various support systems and programs.** Already now, it has been observed that the Indigenous youth are prone to resort to hitchhiking to attend important appointments, which poses a major threat to their safety.

Therefore, community centers such as UNYA try to fill in the gaps where accessible transportation is lacking by stretching resources, staff time, and organizational capacity. Volunteers and members of UNYA have been using their personal time to assist the youth to get to appointments and other important places due to insufficient transportation accessibility services, but this, of course, is in no way a sustainable solution.

We write to you today, with a humble request for your support for youth on UNYA's waitlist by lowering the cost of a monthly unlimited 3-zone bus fare from \$181.00 to the concession fare of \$57.30. For the run of this intervention, this would apply for only 13 individual youth for the duration of their waitlist period (3 months). In the particular case of these Indigenous youth, they require systems that will allow them to receive the support offered by UNYA. Thus, it is especially vital for them to have reliable access to these transportation services.

If you should choose to aid us in these efforts, we would be monitoring the effects your generosity has on the youths closely. Should this project prove fruitful, we at The New School would be especially honored to establish a long-term cooperation between Metro Vancouver and UNYA so as to ensure the continuous support of the mental health and healing process amongst Indigenous youth – an undertaking Metro could surely and rightfully should be proud of.

Section 3 (a) of the BC Human Rights Code states that its purpose is "to foster a society in British Columbia in which there are no impediments to full and free participation in the economic, social, political and cultural life of British Columbia." Section 3 (b) of the BC Human Rights Code states that it is the purpose of government "to promote a climate of understanding and mutual respect where all are equal in dignity and rights." The realization of dignity for Indigenous youth is also the purpose of the project we from The New School and at UNYA are engaged in. **It is with great hope that we look towards you becoming a part of the support system we are creating for these young people.**

We look forward to hearing from you.

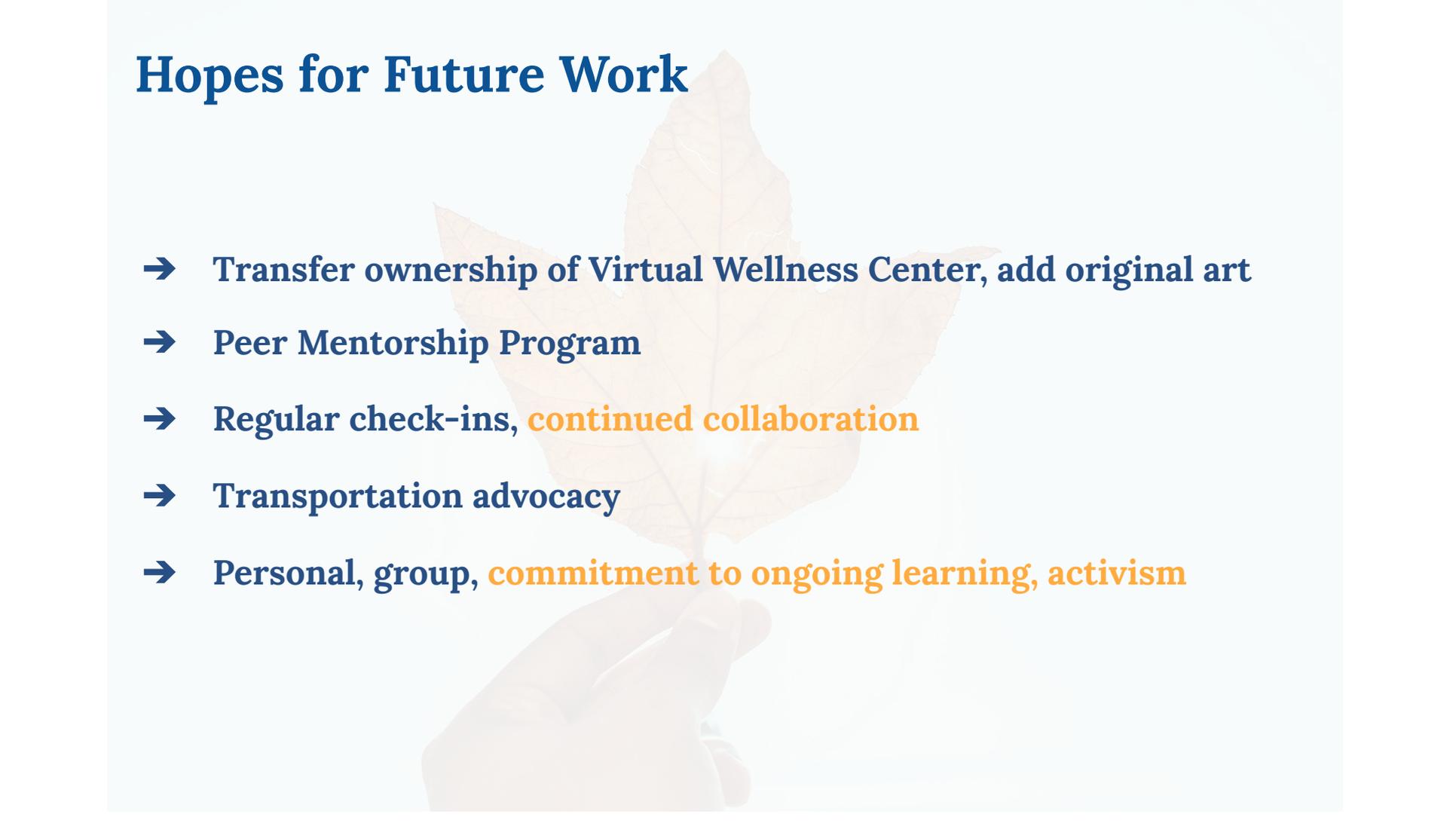
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Anya Isabel Andrews, Isabelle Schneider, Julia Du and Omayeli Eseosa Alexandra Jemide

**The New School & UNYA Partnership Team**  
*Clinical Psychology Department*

The New School for Social Research  
16 E 16th Street  
New York, NY 10003

# Hopes for Future Work

A hand holding a large, light-brown leaf against a light blue background. The leaf is positioned in the center, with its stem pointing downwards towards the hand. The background is a solid light blue color.

- Transfer ownership of Virtual Wellness Center, add original art
- Peer Mentorship Program
- Regular check-ins, **continued collaboration**
- Transportation advocacy
- Personal, group, **commitment to ongoing learning, activism**

# Resources



<https://rb.gy/mxk7fx>

# Acknowledgements

- **Dr. Miriam Steele**
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- **Student co-collaborators:**

**Anya Andrews, Isabelle Schneider, & Julia Du**

For more information or to get involved in supporting the 'Child & Adolescent Global Mental Health' course & student projects, please contact:

**Hannah Maté - [mateh676@newschool.edu](mailto:mateh676@newschool.edu)**

**Thank you!**

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