

Service Quality, Resilience, and Social-Emotional  
Competence in Vulnerable Youth:  
What's LOVE got to do with it?

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**Abstract**

The present mixed-methods research was conducted in partnership with Leave Out Violence Nova Scotia (LOVE NS) to investigate service quality, resilience, and social-emotional competence among vulnerable youth in community-based programs. In Study 1, semi-structured interviews were used to examine youths' perceptions of adversity in their lives, along with service quality, social-emotional competence, and resilience related to their involvement with LOVE NS. Despite individual risk exposure, youth demonstrated resilience and social-emotional competence through LOVE NS. Positive service experiences were also reported. In Study 2, a focus group was conducted to involve youth in developing a quantitative questionnaire. Questionnaire data was used to explore whether service quality at LOVE NS was linked to social-emotional competence through resilience, while considering individual risks. Beyond externalizing, service quality at LOVE NS was positively linked to social-emotional competence through increased resilience. Findings suggest that community-based programs may improve social-emotional competence in vulnerable youth by facilitating resilience.

*Keywords:* social-emotional competence, resilience, risk, service quality, positive youth development, community-based programs, participatory action research, mixed-methods

April 10, 2021

## Dedication

To the many youth at LOVE NS who played a role in this research, this thesis is for you. Thank you for trusting me to tell your stories. I hope that I painted an authentic picture of your lives, both inside and outside of LOVE NS.

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## Service Quality, Resilience, and Social-Emotional Competence in Vulnerable

### Youth: What's LOVE got to do with it?

Adolescence is the developmental period spanning the second decade of life, which is characterized by a series of connected biological, psychological, and social changes (Lerner, 2005). To support successful transition into adulthood, all adolescents should have access to resources including stable, supportive relationships with caring adults, safe places, and stimulating experiences (Heinze, 2013; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). These kinds of nurturing conditions can foster positive development by enhancing youths' strengths and skills (Aviles et al., 2006), such as social-emotional competence.

Social-emotional competence is a multidimensional construct composed of intra- and inter-personal skills related to emotion regulation, relationship building, making responsible choices, and ethical and effective problem solving (CASEL, 2005). In addition to facilitating healthy development on a general level, social-emotional competence serves a protective function for children and adolescents facing significant adversity (Domitrovich et al., 2017; Elias & Haynes, 2008). Common adverse experiences in childhood include child abuse and neglect, poverty, food insecurity, family and community violence, family separation, and parental substance abuse and illness (Sacks et al., 2014). Experiencing these kinds of hardships can have negative concurrent and long-term implications for youth.

Research shows that many youth exposed to adversity struggle with internalizing issues, including feelings of depression and anxiety (Fergusson & Horwood, 2003). They are also more likely to engage in externalizing behaviours, such as aggression, delinquency, and drug use (Berzin, 2010; Fava et al., 2019; Wolitzky-Taylor et al., 2017).

These internalizing and externalizing aspects of personal risk are referred to as individual risk factors (Ungar et al., 2013b). Increased individual risk is associated with social-emotional deficits in high-risk youth. Having well-developed social-emotional skills can help youth overcome the harmful effects of adversity by enabling them to understand and manage negative emotions, make responsible decisions, and interact positively with others (Elias & Haynes, 2008). Unfortunately, youth facing significant challenges in their lives often lack access to conditions and opportunities for strengthening social-emotional competence (Dodge et al., 2009). As a result, they may experience social-emotional difficulties, which may in turn hinder development (Aviles et al., 2006).

Positive youth development (PYD) programs may provide a context within which youth facing adversity can hone social-emotional skills (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Programs operating according to PYD principles are culturally and contextually respectful and emphasize youth agency and relationship building (Lerner, 2005; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). The goal of these programs, which are typically implemented in school settings (Catalano et al., 2002), is to provide vulnerable youth with meaningful resources, such as caring relationships and empowering experiences, that they can draw from in the future to help them cope positively with adversity (Sanders & Munford, 2014). This process of adaptive coping while facing life's difficulties is known as resilience.

An ecological perspective regarding resilience theoretically contends that when PYD programs provide youth with access to meaningful resilience resources, programs can become assets that lead to better outcomes (Berzin, 2010), like social-emotional competence. Despite the overlap between PYD and resilience (Sanders et al., 2015), little

is known about the role that PYD programming may play in building resilience in vulnerable youth. PYD program research on social-emotional competence is also limited, with most researchers measuring outcomes in terms of reduced risk behaviours, such as aggression, substance use, and sexual risk behaviours (Catalano et al., 2002; Ciocanel et al., 2002). To help provide vulnerable youth with the resources necessary to reach their potential, it is important to investigate how PYD programs facilitate youths' abilities to cope positively with adversity and achieve social-emotional competence.

Developing PYD programs that effectively promote social-emotional competence in vulnerable youth requires an understanding regarding the characteristics of PYD programs that are implicated in social-emotional functioning. Research in this area is limited, with few studies looking beyond program goals and activities to consider service quality (Catalano et al., 2002). Service quality can be defined as respectful engagement practices with youth that focus on careful relationship building and empowerment (Sanders et al., 2017b). Some evidence suggests that high service quality is associated with better outcomes for vulnerable youth engaged in formal service systems, including education, child welfare, and health care (Sanders et al., 2015; 2017b; Ungar et al., 2013b), perhaps through increased resilience (Sanders et al., 2015; Ungar et al., 2013b). Yet, researchers have not examined associations between service quality, resilience, and social-emotional competence among vulnerable youth engaged in community-based programming.

Youth facing high risks struggle to access and engage in formal service systems, such as education and health care (Robards et al., 2018; Sayed, 2009). Community-based programming may thus be a more conducive means of intervening with vulnerable youth

(Bochus, 2015), making this an important area for research. Exploring vulnerable youths' service experiences in community-based PYD programs may also enhance understanding regarding why some PYD programs are more successful in promoting positive outcomes among youth exposed to adversity (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003), which is critical given conflicting evidence regarding the effectiveness of PYD programs targeting this population.

This sequential, mixed-methods research was conducted in partnership with a community organization called Leave Out Violence Nova Scotia (LOVE NS) to explore service quality, resilience, and social-emotional competence in high-risk youth engaged in community-based programming. The research can be broken down into two components, Study 1 and Study 2. In Study 1, qualitative research methods were implemented (i.e., semi-structured interviews) to examine youths' perceptions of service quality, social-emotional competence, and resilience in relation to their involvement with LOVE NS. How youth at LOVE NS experience adversity in their lives was also explored. Study 2 included both qualitative and quantitative aspects. First, a focus group was conducted wherein LOVE NS youth were encouraged to participate in the development of a quantitative survey. Quantitative data derived from the survey was then used to examine whether service quality at LOVE NS was associated with youths' social-emotional competence through increased resilience, while considering individual risk factors (i.e., internalizing and externalizing issues). Using mixed-methods facilitated deeper insight into how service quality, resilience, and social-emotional competence function in the lives of LOVE NS youth than would be possible through quantitative or qualitative data alone (Ungar, 2012).

The following chapters provide an in-depth overview of the present research. The manuscript begins with a general literature review (i.e., Chapter 2). Chapters 3 through 7 provide an overview of Study 1, which examined youths' experiences of service quality, resilience, and social-emotional development at LOVE NS, as well as their experiences of adversity in their lives using qualitative research methods (i.e., semi-structured interviews). Chapters 8 through 12 then provide an overview of Study 2, wherein mixed-methods (i.e., focus group and survey) were used to explore associations between service quality, resilience, and social-emotional competence while accounting for individual risk factors. Finally, Chapter 13 offers a general discussion, tying together findings from Study 1 and Study 2.

## **Chapter 2: General Literature Review**

### **Social-Emotional Competence in Adolescence**

During adolescence and into emerging adulthood, young people undergo changes in social-emotional functioning (Bos et al., 2019). The interpersonal skills characterizing social-emotional competence include responsible decision making, listening, perspective taking, communication, and interpersonal problem solving (Weissberg et al., 2015). Youth with well-developed interpersonal social-emotional skills have an easier time developing and sustaining positive relationships (CASEL, 2005). They are also better able to recognize emotions in others and show empathy (Weissberg et al., 2015). While interpersonal social-emotional skills help adolescents engage effectively with others, intrapersonal social-emotional skills help them function optimally on an individual level (Domitrovich et al., 2017). Intrapersonal skills include goal setting, emotion regulation, self-control, and coping (Domitrovich et al., 2017). In addition to being more aware of

their feelings, young people with strong intrapersonal social-emotional skills exert greater control over intense emotions, such as anger (CASEL, 2005; von Salisch et al., 2014). They are also more likely to set and achieve personal goals (Weissberg et al., 2015).

Perhaps not surprisingly, social-emotional competence predicts adaptive long-term functioning in young people. For example, social-emotional competence in childhood is associated with greater long-term success in school and at work. Research shows that young people with stronger social-emotional skills achieve higher test scores and grades over time (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017). In addition, they are more likely to graduate from high school, get a post-secondary degree, and obtain full-time, stable employment as young adults (Jones et al., 2015; Moffitt et al., 2010). Social-emotional competence is also linked to better long-term psychological functioning and lower levels of drug use and delinquency. More specifically, social-emotional competence in childhood predicts lower levels of emotional distress and substance abuse issues into emerging adulthood, including binge drinking and cannabis use (Jones et al., 2015; Taylor et al., 2017). Further, children with high social-emotional competence are less likely to become involved with the police or get arrested for a serious offence as adults (Moffitt et al., 2010; Taylor et al., 2017). Taken together, findings from previous studies highlight the importance of guiding young people toward social-emotional competence. Early adolescence and the transition period between adolescence and emerging adulthood may offer optimal opportunities to promote social-emotional development. These sensitive periods are characterized by high plasticity, which means the brain's ability to change in response to positive environmental experiences is



amplified (Masten, 2014a). As such, early adolescents and those transitioning into emerging adulthood may be more responsive to social-emotional learning interventions.

### **Risk, Resilience, and Social-Emotional Competence**

All adolescents are exposed to stressful experiences during their development (Arrington & Wilson, 2000). Routine stressful experiences during adolescence include an increased desire for independence, emerging sexuality, and changing academic demands (Hauser & Bowlds, 1990; as cited in Arrington & Wilson, 2000). Most young people have the resources to cope with these kinds of everyday challenges effectively; however, exposure to significant adversity may impede positive development (Berzin, 2010).

Significant adversity in childhood and adolescence refers to life experiences which are difficult, stressful, or traumatic (Wolitzky-Taylor et al., 2017). Adversity comes in many forms, including physical, emotional, or sexual abuse, neglect, poverty, community violence, and parental illness, incarceration, or substance abuse issues (Sacks et al., 2014). Research suggests that adverse experiences do not occur in isolation. Rather, they tend to pile up, with many high-risk youth experiencing multiple adversities (Adams et al., 2015; Iniguez & Stankowski, 2016). As adversities accumulate in youths' lives and increase in severity and duration, youth become more vulnerable to negative outcomes (Adams et al., 2015). As such, youth developing under adversity often experience developmental difficulties (Smyth & Eaton-Erickson, 2009).

Exposure to significant adversity is associated with social-emotional issues from childhood to adolescence (Sanders et al., 2020). Low social-emotional competence may, in turn, undermine vulnerable youths' ability to transition successfully into emerging adulthood (Aviles et al., 2006). For instance, vulnerable youth struggle to cope positively

with negative emotions, which may lead to lower academic achievement and increased mental health issues, such as depression, anxiety, and suicidal behaviour (Elias & Haynes, 2008; Vailente et al., 2011). Without the ability to regulate their emotions and interact effectively with others, vulnerable youth are also more likely to misread social situations and engage in higher levels of reactive aggression toward peers (Arsenio et al., 2009). Further, issues making safe, responsible decisions may contribute to increased risk behaviours for youth in this population (Arsenio et al., 2009; Aviles et al., 2006). Indeed, levels of teen pregnancy, involvement with the criminal justice system, and substance abuse are higher among vulnerable youth (Berzin, 2010; Hillis et al., 2004; Wolitzky-Taylor et al., 2017). Experiencing adversity at a young age can be especially worrisome because the brain is still developing (Yasir Arafat et al., 2019). Thus, compared to adults, children and adolescents are particularly vulnerable to the negative social-emotional implications of adverse experiences (Yasir Arafat et al., 2019).

Yet, not all young people facing serious risks adjust poorly. In fact, many such youth demonstrate the capacity to develop into successful, well-functioning adults (Masten, 2001). This understanding of “what goes right” with youth experiencing well-being and healthy adjustment, despite exposure to adversity, is at the core of resilience research (Tinsley et al., 2007). When research on resilience began in the 1970s, scholars viewed resilience as a stable individual trait or outcome (Masten, 2001). To date, many continue to conceptualize resilience this way (Ungar, 2011); however, there are issues associated with trait definitions of resilience. For instance, it has been shown that resilience is not stable (Masten, 2015). Just as adolescents and their lives are constantly changing, resilience changes over time (Masten, 2014b). Conceptualizing resilience as an

individual trait also carries the risk of victim blaming (Masten, 2014a). Under this perspective, young people are personally responsible for being resilient (Masten, 2014a). Youth struggling to adapt to adversity may thus be deemed inferior when, in reality, a young person's ability to demonstrate resilience under conditions of high risk relates more to the quality of their environment than it does individual motivation or "grit" (Ungar, 2011; 2015).

In response to such criticisms, definitions of resilience have become more dynamic over the years, reflecting ecological systems theories (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Masten, 2014b). Ecological resilience can be defined as a multidimensional, dynamic process of navigation and negotiation (Ungar, 2008). It is characterized by youths' ability to find their way to the resources they need, such as caring relationships or cultural identity, and negotiate for those resources to be provided in ways that make sense to them (Ungar, 2008; 2019). The principle of navigation refers to youths' decision to look for a resource (Ungar, 2008), which is in line with previous conceptualizations of resilience as an individual trait (Masten, 2001); however, it also refers to the availability and accessibility of the resource being sought (Ungar, 2008). The idea here is that being motivated to seek out environmental resources will only be beneficial for youth if those resources are available and accessible (Ungar, 2019). The principle of negotiation similarly contends that for youth to want to access resources, resources must be provided in meaningful ways (Ungar, 2008; 2019).

To help vulnerable young people become well-adjusted adults, it is imperative to identify and promote factors that help mitigate the negative effects of growing up under adversity. Research suggests that along with facilitating healthy development on a general

level, strong social-emotional competencies serve a protective function for vulnerable youth (Domitrovich et al., 2017; Masten, 2014a). For instance, social-emotional competence predicts better academic performance over time in youth facing high risks, perhaps due to emotion regulation abilities (Elias & Haynes, 2008; Vailente et al., 2011). That is, youth who are competent at managing difficult emotions may be better able to focus on academic work, despite the stressors they encounter outside of school (Elias & Haynes, 2008). Regulatory skills, such as emotion regulation and self-control, have also been associated with better mental health, more post-traumatic growth, higher resilience, and lower levels of externalizing behaviours in vulnerable youth (Hamby et al., 2018; Houck et al., 2016; Howell & Miller-Graff, 2014; Modecki et al., 2017). Interpersonal social-emotional competencies may also be protective, as skills related to the development and sustainability of interpersonal relationships have been linked to higher subjective well-being and reduced reactive aggression among youth facing adversity (Arsenio et al., 2009; Hamby et al., 2018). Improving social-emotional competence may thus be important for increasing positive outcomes in vulnerable youth. Still, vulnerable young people often have limited access to conditions and opportunities that foster social-emotional competence (Dodge et al., 2009).

### **Positive Youth Development: Theory and Practice**

Although vulnerable youths' shared hardships put them at risk of poor social-emotional development, outcomes can be determined, for better or worse, by the environments they grow up in (Aviles et al., 2006). Such environments are convoluted and include many different contexts (i.e., home, school, and community), all of which play a role in development (Aviles et al., 2009). Thus, when youth lack access to the

kinds of conditions and opportunities necessary to build social-emotional competence in one context, it is possible to promote healthy social-emotional development through another.

PYD programs may serve as one avenue to promote social-emotional competence in youth growing up under challenging circumstances (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). PYD is a developmental perspective based on the understanding that youth are “resources to be developed”, as opposed to “problems to be dealt with” (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Rooted in developmental systems theories, PYD emphasizes the potential for all youth to create change in their lives through dynamic interactions with their environments (Futch Ehrlich, 2016; Lerner, 2005). When youths’ strengths align with environmental resources, positive development occurs (Futch Ehrlich, 2016; Lerner, 2005).

Programs operating according to PYD principles are culturally and contextually respectful. They also emphasize youth agency and empowerment, as well as relationship building (Lerner, 2005; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Positive development is defined using the 5 Cs, which include competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Competence is promoted through development of a number of skills, including those which are social and emotional (Catalano et al., 2002). Although many PYD programs promote social-emotional competence and the skills which underlie it, meta-analytic studies indicate that social-emotional competence is not typically investigated as an outcome in PYD program research (Catalano et al., 2002; Ciocanel et al., 2017). In fact, studies on PYD programs fall short on measuring PYD constructs in general (Catalano et al., 2002; Ciocanel et al., 2017). Instead, they focus more on assessing risk behaviours, including conduct problems, substance abuse, and

sexual behaviour (Ciocanel et al., 2017). To better understand whether PYD programs effectively promote the outcomes they set out to achieve, it is vital that studies measure PYD constructs (Gillham et al., 2002), including social-emotional competence.

### **Service Quality**

To promote social-emotional competence in vulnerable youth through PYD programs, it is important to have a clear understanding of the components of PYD programs that are implicated in youths' social-emotional functioning. Most studies on PYD programs exclusively examine characteristics such as program goals and activities (Catalano et al., 2002). Service quality factors remain largely uninvestigated (Catalano et al., 2002). High quality programs are those in which youth are encouraged to build strong relationships with staff, feel respected and empowered, and are given opportunities to be heard through active involvement in service delivery (Sanders & Munford, 2014). These aspects align with the "Big Three" characteristics of effective PYD practices, including positive and lasting relationships with caring adults, the development of life skills, and opportunities for youth engagement and empowerment (Sanders et al., 2017b). By neglecting to account for youths' service experiences in program evaluations, researchers paint an incomplete picture of the PYD approach to working with youth, which, in theory, emphasizes creating an atmosphere of trust and respect, as well as high quality relationships with staff (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). To create a more comprehensive understanding regarding whether PYD approaches are beneficial among youth facing significant adversity, it is critical to assess service quality factors in PYD programs.

## **Community-Based Positive Youth Development Programs**

PYD theory and practice concentrates primarily on youth exhibiting normative behaviour (Lavie-Ajayi & Krumer-Nevo, 2013); however, this strengths-based perspective is also relevant to interventions with vulnerable youth (Sanders et al., 2015; Scales et al., 2006). In fact, the framework of PYD, which took reign in the 1980s, was influenced in part by resilience theories (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2016). There are several reasons why vulnerable youth may respond positively to PYD programs. First, vulnerable youth often make adult role transitions earlier than their low-risk peers (Sanders et al., 2015). Programs that emphasize personal agency may provide these youth with healthy opportunities to use their autonomy, which is a key developmental task during adolescence (Sanders et al., 2015). This strengths-based approach also provides hope to youth by acknowledging that change is possible for everyone, meaning that even youth facing adversity, who may experience increased individual risks and social-emotional deficits, can achieve social-emotional competence. Lastly, the ecological emphasis of PYD acknowledges that each youth is one-of-a-kind, thereby increasing the likelihood that interventions will respond to youths' unique needs and realities (Sanders et al., 2015). As such, PYD programs may be an effective means of intervening with vulnerable youth, helping them achieve positive social-emotional outcomes.

In theory, PYD approaches should benefit youth exposed to significant adversity (Sanders et al., 2015; 2017b); however, evidence regarding the effectiveness of PYD programs for vulnerable youth is mixed, with some research indicating greater benefits for low-risk youth (Catalano et al., 2002). Like social-emotional learning programs (Domitrovich et al., 2017), the vast majority (88%) of PYD programs are implemented

and evaluated in educational settings (Catalano et al., 2002). Interventions and research conducted in schools may exclude vulnerable young people, as youth facing significant adversity experience barriers to accessing and engaging in formal service systems, such as education and health care (Robards et al., 2018; Sayed, 2009). Research suggests that vulnerable youth feel discriminated against and alienated in formal service settings (Robards et al., 2018; Sayed, 2009). They also fear being judged negatively, making them less likely to participate (Robards et al., 2018). Taken together, school-based programs alone may be insufficient to building social-emotional competence in vulnerable youth.

According to Bochus (2015), programs delivered in community settings may help professionals intervene more effectively with youth facing adversity. Compared to school-based interventions, youth facing high risks may have an easier time accessing and navigating community-based programs. Indeed, informal, community-based programs are perceived by vulnerable youth as preferable and less stigmatizing than formal services (Bochus, 2015). Still, researchers have yet to fully examine the benefits of community-based programs targeting vulnerable youth (Bochus, 2015). To better understand whether gains can be made for vulnerable youth through PYD programs, the present research examined social-emotional competence in the context of community-based PYD programming.

One community-based organization that operates according to PYD principles to promote resilience and healthy social-emotional functioning in vulnerable youth is Leave Out Violence Nova Scotia (LOVE NS). LOVE NS is a youth-led, non-profit violence prevention and intervention organization that works with vulnerable youth in Nova Scotia, Canada. Replacing the narrative of youth deficit, LOVE NS (2016) asserts that



youth engaged in their programs are smart and caring, with the capacity to transform their lives and become leaders in their communities. Their mission is to reduce violence, build bridges, and realize potential (LOVE NS, 2016), which is in line with PYD and resilience theories (Lerner, 2005; Ungar, 2008).

LOVE NS has not been empirically studied to date. Thus, how LOVE NS' programs may support youths' journey toward reaching their potential remains unclear, as does the extent to which PYD practices are implemented in LOVE NS' programs. This is an important area of study considering the number of PYD programs currently falling short on their promises of delivering high quality programs that enhance positive outcomes in youth (Ciocanel et al., 2017; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). To expand understanding regarding the social-emotional benefits of community-based PYD programming targeting vulnerable youth, the present research examined service quality, resilience, and social-emotional competence among youth at LOVE NS.

### **Community-Based Research**

Rooted in the value of lived experience and equal partnerships, community-based participatory action research is a way of conducting research wherein community partners are included in the research process (Roche, 2009). Whereas traditional research approaches study participants as strangers (Bulanda & McCrae, 2013), studies implementing community-based participatory research methods work in collaboration with community organizations to co-create knowledge that is grounded in the lives of community members (Roche, 2009). Such studies provide a valuable approach to conducting research with youth facing adversity, as community involvement may reduce the participant-researcher power imbalance and social exclusion (Bulanda & McCrae,

2013; Pistrang & Barker, 2012). Embracing the wisdom that community members have gained through lived experience also increases the likelihood that studies will yield findings that are authentic and useful to the population they are meant to serve (Bulanda & McCrae, 2013).

Community-based participatory action research typically relies on qualitative research methods, such as focus groups and interviews. Qualitative studies have the benefit of giving voice to youths' subjective experiences and contributing to a more comprehensive understanding regarding how developmental processes function in youths' lives (Ball et al., 2009; Futch Ehrlich, 2016); however, studies relying on qualitative data alone are limited in generalizability (Ball et al., 2009). Quantitative studies are objective and rigorous. They allow for examination of complex processes and best practices, making them essential to developmental research (Larson & Tran, 2014; Nicholson et al., 2004). Still, without prioritizing youths' individual voices, quantitative research runs the risk of lacking ecological validity and repeating harmful processes of discrimination and social exclusion that vulnerable youth experience in other areas of their lives (Bulanda & McCrae, 2013).

Perhaps not surprisingly, scholars conducting research with vulnerable youth now advocate for mixed-methods studies (Jain & Cohen, 2013; Larson & Tran, 2014; Ungar, 2012). Combining qualitative and quantitative approaches allows researchers to investigate developmental processes within the context of youths' voices and experiences (Harper et al., 2007; Larson & Tran, 2014). As such, mixed-methods research capitalizes on the strengths of quantitative and qualitative approaches while simultaneously addressing their limitations. Thus, a mixed-methods approach was implemented in the

present research to examine service quality, resilience, and social-emotional competence at LOVE NS. In line with community-based participatory action research methods, the researchers worked in partnership with LOVE NS staff and youth throughout the research process to ensure that research priorities, questions, and techniques were grounded in the lives of LOVE NS youth.

A sequential format was followed in the present mixed-methods research. The research began with a qualitative component (i.e., Study 1), which was followed by a mixed-methods component (i.e., Study 2). In addition to addressing gaps in the literature regarding service quality, resilience, and social-emotional competence in vulnerable youth engaged in community-based programs, qualitative findings were used to formulate research questions and hypotheses, which were then examined using mixed-methods. The following section relates directly to the qualitative aspect of the present mixed-methods research.

### **Chapter 3: Study 1 Literature Review**

#### **Service Quality at LOVE NS**

Service quality factors, which include positive and lasting staff-youth relationships, opportunities for youth agency and empowerment, and the development of life skills, are in line with PYD theory (Liebenberg et al., 2013). These ingredients play an important role in the success of PYD programs (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003); however, PYD program research does not typically examine service quality (Catalano et al., 2002). In contrast to the underlying philosophy of PYD, some evidence indicates that the majority of PYD programs do not even strive to provide high quality programs characterized by an empowering and supportive atmosphere wherein youth feel respected

and valued (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). This may partly explain why, despite evidence regarding the effectiveness of PYD practices with vulnerable youth (Liebenberg et al., 2013), some research shows that PYD programs are more effective among youth exposed to lower levels of risk (Ciocanel et al., 2017). Exploring vulnerable youths' perspectives regarding the quality of the programs in which they are engaged is critical, as it may highlight why some PYD programs are less successful in promoting positive outcomes among this population (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003).

LOVE NS aims to deliver programming to vulnerable youth in a manner consistent with PYD principles. For instance, youth empowerment is a prominent theme embedded in LOVE NS' programming (Lekes, 2007). Through diverse programming, LOVE NS aims to align youths' strengths with positive and meaningful resources to enable youth to transform their lives (Lekes, 2007). Programs offered by LOVE NS include a Media Arts Program (MAP), Leadership Training Program, LOVE NS Mi'kmaq Programs, and LOVE NS In-School Programs. MAP is LOVE NS' entry-level program where youth, who are between ages 13 and 18 at intake, engage in group discussions and learn to communicate creatively and constructively through writing activities, sharing circles, workshops with guest speakers, and photography and media arts projects (LOVE NS, 2016). MAP offers a safe, stigma-free environment where youth can choose to talk about their experiences, or choose not to (LOVE NS, 2016). According to Sarah MacLaren, LOVE NS' former executive director, this element of choice is crucial to LOVE NS' success (LOVE NS, 2016).

Youth who do exceptionally well in MAP may be promoted to LOVE NS' Leadership Training Program. The goal of this program is to cultivate the skills,

confidence, and knowledge youth need to create meaningful and lasting change in their lives and communities (LOVE NS, 2016). Youth in the Leadership Training Program are empowered to conduct and design community outreach activities while maintaining a regular presence at MAP, serving as role models for younger youth (LOVE NS, 2016). Moreover, toward the end of the term, Youth Leaders facilitate MAP sessions themselves. Here, youth have the chance to make key decisions regarding program delivery. Encouraging youth to share their ideas and take an active role in programming is consistent with service quality practices of personal agency (Liebenberg et al., 2013).

Meaningful staff-youth relationships may be the cornerstone of high quality PYD programs (Liebenberg et al., 2013). In addition to providing youth with opportunities for empowerment, LOVE NS aims to build strong staff-youth relationships. For instance, a unique feature of LOVE NS is reflected in the availability of an on-staff registered social worker and youth workers 24 hours-a-day, seven days-a-week. In 2015-16, LOVE NS provided over 1200 hours of one-on-one support to youth outside of regular programming hours (LOVE NS, 2016). Moreover, their registered social worker checks in with all youth every Sunday and meets with youth who require extra support on Saturday mornings (LOVE NS, 2016). Supportive staff-youth relationships at LOVE NS may improve youths' capacity to cope with life's challenges (Heinze, 2013). They may also provide youth with opportunities for interpersonal connection and emotional security through caring non-familial adults, which may be especially important for youth facing adversity (Scales et al., 2006).

In order to build meaningful relationships with youth, program staff must respect youths' cultural beliefs (Liebenberg et al., 2013). Thus, high quality programs are those in

which staff members tap into cultural resources to support the positive development of ethnic minority youth (Sanders et al., 2017a). LOVE NS runs two culturally tailored MAP and Leadership Training programs with Nova Scotian Indigenous youth. Having First Nations staff from these communities, namely, Sipekne'katik and Membertou, has allowed LOVE NS to engage in a meaningful way with Indigenous communities (LOVE NS, 2016). LOVE NS' Mi'kmaq programs incorporate many cultural practices and teachings, such as smudge ceremonies, sweat lodge ceremonies, sacred fire, pipe ceremonies, talking circles, and healing prayer (LOVE NS, 2016). By focusing on the role of culture, LOVE NS creates an atmosphere of respect and worth in their work with Indigenous youth. Youth are validated individually and culturally, which increases program relevance and creates space for meaningful engagement (Ungar, 2019).

Research on PYD programs typically focuses on quantitative measures and youths' behaviour (Bulanda & McCrae, 2013). Fewer studies look into youths' subjective service experiences, thus taking a first-person approach (Bulanda & McCrae, 2013). Although researchers have yet to examine service quality at LOVE NS, in 2015-2016, organization staff worked alongside researchers from Dalhousie University to design and implement a descriptive survey for youth (Johnston et al., 2016). Findings revealed that youth feel empowered and heard through their involvement with LOVE NS. Many also reported increased access to care and support as a result of the program. It therefore appears that LOVE NS is working in empowering and culturally respectful ways to build meaningful relationships with youth. To better understand youths' service experiences at LOVE NS, the present study examined youths' perceptions of service quality practices in LOVE NS' programs. Findings shed light on whether LOVE NS provides the kind of

high-quality programming for which they strive. By prioritizing youths' voices, the current study also offered new, in-depth information regarding service quality practices in PYD programs, thereby contributing to the dearth of literature on PYD service quality (Catalano et al., 2002).

### **Social-Emotional Competence at LOVE NS**

High quality programs are those that help vulnerable youth develop the skills they need to cope positively with adversity (Liebenberg et al., 2013). Social-emotional competence is one of such skills (Ciocanel et al., 2017; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Promoting social and emotional competencies is a primary goal of many PYD programs, including LOVE NS. Yet, social-emotional competence is not often investigated in research on PYD programming (Catalano et al., 2002; Ciocanel et al., 2017). Program studies, which typically occur in schools, focus more on the reduction of risk behaviours to determine program effectiveness (Catalano et al., 2002). Limited available research suggests that PYD programs may enhance social-emotional skills in vulnerable youth (Lapalme et al., 2014); however, it should be noted that "one size does not fit all" (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2016). In other words, one program may not have the same effects on all youth, who come to programming with unique histories and experiences (Lerner, 2005; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2016). In addition, there may be differences across PYD programs that can influence outcomes (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2016). To better understand whether PYD programs promote adaptive social-emotional functioning in vulnerable young people, it is important explore social-emotional competence in different settings with different youth.

Preliminary evidence indicates that youth engaged with LOVE NS may derive social-emotional benefits from programming. Many participants in Johnston et al.'s (2016) study indicated that being involved with LOVE NS helped them learn how to cope with emotional distress, strengthened their friendships, and improved their ability to make decisions and solve problems. Although previous results are encouraging, research focusing on youths' subjective experiences was needed to tease out the intricacies regarding social-emotional development at LOVE NS. In addition to expanding on the social-emotional benefits of community-based PYD programs targeting vulnerable youth, the present study addressed gaps in the literature related to social-emotional outcomes in PYD programs.

### **Adversity at LOVE NS**

For many years, researchers have taken a deficit-focused approach to working with vulnerable youth (Gillham et al., 2002). Although PYD theory provides an alternative way of understanding vulnerable youth by focusing on their strengths, PYD does not minimize the impact of exposure to adversity (Sanders et al., 2017b). Instead, this approach asserts that vulnerable youth are more than the challenges they confront (Sanders & Munford, 2014; Sanders et al., 2017b). To effectively respond to the needs and realities of youth developing under adversity, program developers and researchers should capitalize on youths' strengths while also addressing the risks they face in their lives (Cheon, 2008; as cited in Sanders et al., 2017b).

At LOVE NS, violence is defined broadly as “anything that hurts” (LOVE NS, 2016, p.1). This broad conceptualization allows LOVE NS to consider a plethora of issues through their diverse programming, including mental health issues, poverty,



homelessness, involvement in the justice system, racism, addictions, self-harm, suicidal ideation, abuse, sexual violence, bullying and cyberbullying, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia (LOVE NS, 2016). Many youth are referred to LOVE NS through child welfare, criminal justice, and health and mental health care systems (LOVE NS, 2016). Research suggests that system-involved youth often have complex life histories marked by inconsistency, abandonment, and physical and emotional neglect (Smyth & Eaton-Erickson, 2009). They may also struggle with substance abuse, mental health issues, and other internalizing and externalizing problems (Smyth & Eaton-Erickson, 2009), making them vulnerable to negative outcomes.

LOVE NS asserts that when youth arrive at their programs, youth are highly vulnerable (LOVE NS, 2016). At present, researchers have yet to explore adverse experiences among LOVE NS youth. Given that many LOVE NS youth have experience with child welfare and criminal justice systems, they may experience internalizing and externalizing issues, such as psychological distress, aggression, delinquency, and drug use. As previously mentioned, these kinds of individual risk factors relate negatively to social-emotional competence in youth (Arsenio et al., 2009; Aviles et al., 2006). To create a more complete understanding regarding barriers to achieving social-emotional competence in youth engaged with LOVE NS, the present study examined LOVE NS youths' experiences of adversity, with a particular focus on individual risk. In line with PYD theory, LOVE NS may use findings to intervene more effectively with youth by addressing the individual risks they confront (Cheon, 2008; as cited in Sanders et al., 2017b).

## **Ecological Resilience**

Despite the adversities LOVE NS youth may be exposed to, the organization believes each youth has the potential to live a successful and enriching life. LOVE NS aims to guide youth on this journey by providing them with the tools and resources they need to do well. In other words, LOVE NS aims to promote resilience in youth.

According to Ungar et al. (2007), ecological resilience is enhanced through a set of seven interconnected protective processes, including 1) access to material resources, 2) relationships, 3) identity, 4) power and control, 5) cultural adherence, 6) social justice, and 7) cohesion. These processes, termed the seven resilience tensions, are common across cultures and contexts and interact with one another dynamically (Ungar et al., 2007). Youth demonstrate resilience by working through the processes using personal resources, as well as those afforded by their families, communities, and cultures (Ungar et al., 2007). Given that resilience is a culturally and contextually sensitive construct (Ungar, 2008), there is no preferable approach to resolving the tensions (Ungar et al., 2007). Instead, youth work through the tensions in ways that make sense to them.

When youth lack access to basic needs, such as a place to sleep, a school to attend, or food to eat, their ability to cope positively with adversity becomes increasingly thwarted (Ungar, 2019). *Access to material resources* is characterized by the availability of structural resources and basic instrumental needs, including financial assistance, education, food, shelter, clothing, medical care, and employment (Ungar et al., 2007). To successfully navigate this tension, youth must have personal resources, such as money, motivation, and transportation, to access available and accessible material resources

(Ungar et al., 2007). PYD programs can help youth in this area by providing resources, such as food and tutoring (Ungar, 2019).

The tension *relationships* is characterized by emotionally supportive, safe relationships with others (Ungar et al., 2007). Relationships play an important role in resilience throughout the lifespan (Southwick et al., 2014). Although many studies have focused on the benefits of parental relationships in predicting resilience among vulnerable youth (Masten, 2014), relationships with peers may be equally as important (Jain & Cohen, 2013). Given that many vulnerable youth lack opportunities for supportive adult-youth relationships in other areas of their lives (Heinze, 2013), staff-youth relationships within PYD programs may also be beneficial (Southwick et al., 2014). To build trusting, supportive relationships with youth, PYD program staff must show respect for youth and their beliefs (Liebenberg et al., 2013).

*Identity* refers to youths' experience of themselves as healthy, powerful, and respected, despite facing significant challenges (Ungar, 2019; Ungar et al., 2007). Youth often come to know who they are through what people in their families, schools, and communities tell them about themselves (Ungar, 2019). As such, PYD programs can assist youth in navigating this tension by helping them come to know themselves in more positive ways (Ungar, 2019). In Western culture, successful navigation of this tension is often denoted through "I" statements, such as "I am...", "I believe...", and "I feel..." (Ungar et al., 2007).

*Cohesion* is characterized by the connection between youths' sense of individual responsibility and their sense of commitment to the greater good (Ungar et al., 2007). This tension has been compared to a two-sided coin, wherein "self" and "other" coincide

equally (Ungar et al., 2007). Cohesion is related to youths' sense of belonging, which can come from a variety of places, including relationships with peers or extended family, as well as an attachment to one's religion, community, or nation (Ungar, 2019). PYD programs can help youth navigate this tension by fostering a sense of community and connection (Ungar, 2019).

*Power and control* can be defined as youths' ability to make decisions about things that are important to them and say no when potentially harmful decisions are made for them by others (Ungar, 2019; Ungar et al., 2007). PYD programs can help vulnerable youth navigate this tension by enhancing their sense of personal empowerment and giving them chances to make decisions for themselves (Ungar, 2019).

The daily practices and rituals that youth use to overcome adversity are rooted in culture (Ungar, 2019). *Cultural adherence* has two components: global cultural adherence and local cultural adherence. Local cultural adherence refers to ethnic, family, and community identification (Ungar et al., 2007). Whether youth adhere to local cultural norms may depend on whether they adhere to global culture (Ungar et al., 2007). It should be noted that adherence to global culture does not always serve as a pathway to resilience for youth (Ungar et al., 2007). Whether global cultural adherence promotes or hinders resilience depends on the manner in which cultural adherence intersects with other tensions (Ungar et al., 2007).

*Social justice* highlights the different barriers preventing vulnerable youth from coping with adversity, such as racism, sexism, homophobia, or intellectual prejudice (Ungar, 2019). These barriers can operate individually or within youths' families, communities, and cultures (Ungar et al., 2007). Youth who work through this tension

successfully are socially and culturally aware (Ungar et al., 2007). They may also stand up to oppression and engage in acts of resistance and solidarity (Ungar et al., 2007). By examining the reasons why young people struggle to do well, PYD programs can help promote social justice for vulnerable youth (Ungar, 2019).

Young people do not enter the world resilient upon birth (Ungar et al., 2013a). Instead, resilience is cultivated over time through exposure to facilitative environments (Ungar et al., 2013a). Interventions, including community-based PYD programs like LOVE NS, may enhance resilience to the extent of which they help youth access meaningful resilience resources, such as those outlined above (Ungar, 2019). In line with ecological resilience theory (Ungar, 2008), LOVE NS aims to provide youth with opportunities to feel supported, empowered, and connected through programming (LOVE NS, 2016). They also strive to help youth identify with their cultures, access material resources, develop strong identities, and address the social and cultural barriers that interfere with their ability to succeed in life (LOVE NS, 2016). Still, it remains unknown whether LOVE NS provides these resilience resources to youth in terms that make sense to them, thus promoting resilience processes (Ungar, 2008).

Research on ecological resilience is only just beginning to develop (Sanders et al., 2015). Little is currently known about the role that community-based PYD programs may play in building ecological resilience in vulnerable youth. Moreover, the ways in which resilience manifests in the lives of youth at LOVE NS has yet to be investigated. This is an important area of research, as programs that aim to promote positive outcomes in vulnerable youth may be the most effective test of ecological resilience theory (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). By exploring different settings in which resilience can be enhanced,

researchers can also uncover new protective processes (Ungar, 2012), which may contribute to the dearth of research on ecological resilience and inform future program development.

Implementing a qualitative approach to learning more about resilience processes among youth facing adversity is in line with Ungar et al.'s (2007) recommendation to acknowledge the intricacies of youths' life circumstances when examining resilience. This exploratory approach provides an in-depth understanding regarding ecological resilience among LOVE NS youth, which is important given how little we currently know about how these young people work through resilience processes. Recall that the seven resilience tensions interact with one another (Ungar et al., 2007). The process of demonstrating resilience also depends on culture and context, meaning that resilience can look different across youth (Ungar et al., 2007). As such, taking a qualitative approach to understanding resilience may be useful, as qualitative research methods support the identification of nuances and contradictions in the data (Pistrang & Barker, 2012). The present study focused on youths' perspectives regarding how resilience processes play out in their lives. Findings expand understanding regarding how youth at LOVE NS gain the resources they need to reach their potential and transition successfully into adulthood. They also serve as an important first step to understanding the pathways by which LOVE NS may work to promote resilience.

#### **Chapter 4: The Present Study (Study 1)**

Researchers currently know very little about the role that community-based PYD programs like LOVE NS may play in helping vulnerable youth overcome adversity and achieve social-emotional competence. In theory, programs operating according to PYD

principles aim to provide high quality services that promote positive social-emotional functioning (Catalano et al., 2002; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003); however, few PYD program studies have examined service quality or social-emotional competence factors. Expanding understanding regarding how social-emotional competence may be enhanced through community-based PYD programs is imperative, as without successful intervention, youth facing adversity may experience social-emotional difficulties and struggle to transition positively into emerging adulthood (Berzin, 2010; Domitrovich et al., 2017). Compared to programs delivered in formal service settings, community-based programs may offer a more effective approach to intervening with vulnerable youth (Bochus, 2015). To paint an authentic picture of the effectiveness of community-based PYD programs in enhancing social-emotional competence among vulnerable youth, researchers should also consider individual risk, given the well-established association between individual risk factors and social-emotional deficits (Arsenio et al., 2009; Aviles et al., 2006). Lastly, according to recent conceptualizations of resilience as a multidimensional process (Ungar, 2008), programs can help improve resilience by providing youth with access to meaningful resilience resources; however, much has yet to be understood regarding how resilience can be enhanced through PYD programs delivered in community settings.

By examining youths' perceptions of service quality, resilience, and social-emotional competence among youth engaged in LOVE NS' programs, the present study addressed aforementioned gaps in the literature while maintaining fidelity to youths' lived experiences. This was important given how little researchers currently know about how service quality, resilience, and social-emotional competence function in community-based

PYD programs. In the present study, I specifically aimed to examine whether LOVE NS provides high quality programming, characterized by positive staff-youth relationships, opportunities for youth decision-making and empowerment, development of life skills, and high program satisfaction. In addition, I aimed to explore whether youth gain social-emotional competence through participation in LOVE NS' programs and whether youth experience individual risks in their lives. Lastly, I aimed to examine evidence of resilience processes through Ungar et al.'s (2007) seven resilience tensions. I also examined specific barriers and pathways to resolving each tension to gain a deeper understanding regarding how resilience is facilitated. Of particular interest was whether LOVE NS' programs promote resilience in vulnerable youth.

A secondary goal of the present study was to inform the development of a quantitative questionnaire considering the experiences of LOVE NS' youth, which was implemented in Study 2. A measure grounded in youths' experiences was constructed to maximize the relevance and applicability of quantitative findings. The following hypotheses were tested:

### **Hypothesis 1**

Central to the PYD perspective is the contention that effective programs work to build positive staff-youth relationships, promote youth agency, and provide opportunities for youth to develop life skills (Lerner, 2005). These are three of the most important factors underlying service quality (Liebenberg et al., 2013). LOVE NS aims to intervene with youth in a manner consistent with PYD principles (LOVE NS, 2016). Preliminary evidence suggests that LOVE NS staff operate in empowering and respectful ways to build meaningful relationships with youth (Johnston et al., 2016). As such, I hypothesized



that youth would report positive service quality experiences at LOVE NS, characterized by close relationships with staff, feelings of empowerment, the development of life skills, and program satisfaction.

### **Hypothesis 2**

Although relevant literature is scarce, evidence suggests that PYD programs may help promote social-emotional competence in youth developing under adversity (Lapalme et al., 2014; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). In line with LOVE NS' goal to promote healthy social-emotional functioning in youth (LOVE NS, 2016), preliminary evidence suggests that youth may derive social-emotional benefits through LOVE NS' programs (Johnston et al., 2016). I thus hypothesized that youth would report increased social-emotional competence as a result of their involvement with LOVE NS.

### **Hypothesis 3**

Research shows that many youth exposed to adversity struggle with internalizing issues, including feelings of depression and anxiety (Fergusson & Horwood, 2003). They are also more likely to engage in externalizing behaviours, such as aggression, delinquency, and drug use (Berzin, 2010; Fava et al., 2019; Wolitzky-Taylor et al., 2017). To meet youths' diverse needs, LOVE NS' programs address a range of issues, some of which include mental health issues, addictions, self-harm, suicidal ideation, bullying and cyberbullying, involvement in the justice system, and violence (LOVE NS, 2016). Thus, it may be expected that youth at LOVE NS would experience individual risks in their lives. I hypothesized that youth at LOVE NS would report internalizing and externalizing problems, including depression, anxiety, delinquency, aggression, and drug use.

### **Hypothesis 4**

Lastly, despite recent advances in resilience theory, resilience is often operationalized in research as an individual trait (Ungar, 2011). An ecological perspective regarding resilience contends that resilience is a multidimensional, dynamic process that can be facilitated through positive environments (Ungar et al., 2007). I hypothesized that youth would show evidence of ecological resilience through gaining access to opportunities to build relationships, develop strong identities, experience a sense of power and control, develop a sense of belonging, access material resources, promote social justice, and encourage a sense of culture. I also hypothesized that when resilience resources were limited in youths' environments, LOVE NS would serve as a pathway to resilience by building up resources around youth.

## **Chapter 5: Study 1 Method**

### **Participants**

The sample consisted of 18 participants (10 females, 8 males) between the ages of 16 and 31 ( $M_{age} = 24.28$ ,  $SD = 3.75$ ). Current LOVE NS Youth Leaders and alumni aged 16 and older were eligible to participate. Alumni comprised the majority of the interview subsample ( $n = 14$ ). Participants were ethnically diverse and included European-Canadian (44.44%), Indigenous (27.78%), African Nova Scotian (16.67%), and mixed-race youth (11.11%). The majority of participants either completed high school or obtained a GED ( $n = 15$ ). Many also went on to pursue higher education ( $n = 9$ ) and obtained either a degree or diploma ( $n = 5$ ). Two participants were currently attending high school at the time of the interviews. Only one participant did not have a high school diploma or GED. Most participants were employed ( $n = 15$ ), with 13 participants working full-time and two participants working part-time. In terms of living situation, participants indicated living

with a parent or guardian ( $n = 8$ ), with a romantic partner or friend ( $n = 6$ ), and alone ( $n = 4$ ).

### **Procedure**

Participants were recruited using an advertisement script posted on LOVE NS' social media accounts (i.e., Facebook and Instagram). Recruiting through social media, as opposed to using posters placed at the LOVE NS office in Halifax, was intended to make the study more accessible for alumni and youth currently engaged in LOVE NS' Mi'kmaq programs, which take place in Membertou and Sipekne'katik. Interested participants were invited to reach out to one of two specified research assistants over Facebook or by email to schedule their interview. The semi-structured interviews were audio-recorded. Participants provided informed consent prior to their participation in the interview and/or focus group. Consent forms were presented to participants in plain language and key points were reiterated verbally by trained research assistants to account for literacy issues, with a particular focus on the terms surrounding confidentiality and its limitations. Under the "Duty to Report" legislation (Children and Family Services Act, 1990), if a minor (i.e., participant under the age of 19) discloses past or present abuse or maltreatment during an interview, researchers must follow Canadian child welfare procedures to report the incident.

Acknowledging that certain topics may be emotionally triggering for vulnerable youth, participants were provided with Kids Help Phone and Halifax Regional Municipality Mental Health Mobile Crisis Team contact information. LOVE NS staff were also available on site (i.e., LOVE NS office) to support youth in the event of a crisis. Participants were compensated with a \$10 gift card for either Tim Hortons or Amazon for

their participation. Permission was obtained by LOVE NS staff members, namely Sarah and Dennis, to include their names in the manuscript. Study 1 received clearance by the Saint Mary's University Research Ethics Board and was funded by the Saint Mary's University CASE Community Engaged Research Assistance Program.

Study 1 used semi-structured interviewing to learn more about participants and their experiences with LOVE NS and identify variables to include in the Study 2 survey. The semi-structured interview is a qualitative research method that prioritizes youths' voices, which is particularly important when working with marginalized populations that often face discrimination and social exclusion (Bulanda & McCrae, 2013). Interviews took place with individual participants either in person at the LOVE NS office in Halifax or over the phone. All interviews were conducted by one of two trained research assistants. Before each interview, participants were reminded verbally by the interviewer regarding the purpose of the interview and what to expect. Confidentiality and its limitations were also outlined at this time, along with clear instructions regarding how to withdraw. Each interview was composed of 32 baseline questions. Interviews began with a series of background questions related to age, education level, employment and current living situation. This provided an opportunity for interviewers to learn more about participants. Building rapport through identification of shared experiences or hobbies also helped address power differentials by challenging the common, yet damaging practice of studying marginalized groups as strangers (Bulanda & McCrae, 2013).

The next phase of the interview included questions regarding participants' experiences with LOVE NS. See Appendix A for examples of the interview questions. The length of interviews ranged widely, from approximately 20 minutes to two hours,

depending on how much information each participant was willing to share. Interviews were conducted throughout January 2019. After the interviews were complete, audio-recordings were transcribed using a word processor by two trained research assistants.

## **Chapter 6: Study 1 Results**

### **Data Analysis**

#### ***Service Quality and Resilience***

Hypotheses regarding resilience and service quality were investigated using a mixed thematic analysis approach. Thematic analysis, a common approach used to analyze qualitative data, seeks to identify prominent themes within the data (Pistrang & Barker, 2012). Thematic analysis is typically inductive, such that themes are data driven rather than determined ahead of time (i.e., deductively; Pistrang & Barker, 2012). A mixed deductive-inductive approach fit well with the research questions regarding service quality and resilience, as it allowed the established components of each construct to play a role in the course of deductive thematic analysis, while enabling a more nuanced understanding regarding how each theme operated in youths' lives (i.e., inductive thematic analysis; Miles & Huberman, 1994; as cited in Bulanda & McCrae, 2012).

First, data were coded using a top-down, deductive, theoretical approach. Transcripts were investigated for quotes fitting into each of the four a priori service quality (relationships, agency, life skills, and satisfaction) and seven resilience (relationships, identity, cohesion, material resources, cultural adherence, social justice) themes. Themes were drawn from literature and theory described in Chapter 3. This facilitated investigation of the hypothesis that youth would report positive service quality experiences at LOVE NS, along with the hypothesis that youth would show evidence of

ecological resilience. Next, data were coded using a bottom-up, inductive, data-driven approach, which revealed a number of posteriori sub-themes. This facilitated exploration of the hypothesis that when resilience resources were limited in youths' environments, LOVE would serve as a pathway to resilience by building up resources around youth. Quotes were examined by the primary researcher to ensure that themes and sub-themes were consistent across the data. Data were also searched for quotes that contradicted each theme. Finally, data were examined within the original transcripts to make sure interpretations of stand-alone findings remained true to youths' experiences in context.

### ***Risk and Social-Emotional Competence***

To explore evidence of individual risk and social-emotional competence, data were thematically coded using a bottom-up, inductive approach. This approach resulted in a series of posteriori themes, which were generated from the data. The hypothesis that youth would report increased social-emotional competence as a result of their involvement with LOVE NS was examined via one question. That is, "How do you feel like you've changed as a result of your involvement with LOVE?". The hypothesis that youth at LOVE NS would report internalizing and externalizing problems, including depression, anxiety, delinquency, aggression, and drug use, was examined via two questions, namely, "Why did you come to LOVE?" and "What was your situation like when you first came to LOVE?". Transcripts were first analyzed separately by the primary investigator and a trained research assistant and posterior themes were independently developed, after which time a third trained researcher analyzed and compared themes. Discrepancies were identified and themes were finalized at this time. Again, quotes were examined to ensure consistency across the data.

## Results

### *Service Quality*

Table 1 shows the themes and sub-themes for service quality. Specific quotes are also shown. First, the top-down, deductive analysis resulted in four a priori themes, which were drawn from the literature on PYD service quality (Liebenberg et al., 2013): 1) *staff-youth relationships*, 2) *agency*, 3) *life skills*, and 4) *satisfaction*. Meaningful, lasting relationships, opportunities for personal agency, and life-skill development are consistent with the “Big Three” characteristics of effective PYD programs (Lerner, 2005; Liebenberg et al., 2013). These components, along with program satisfaction, operate together to encompass high service quality (Liebenberg et al., 2013). Next, the bottom-up, inductive analysis revealed two posteriori sub-themes for *staff-youth relationships*, including 1) *SOE (Staff over everything)* and 2) *show me you care*. Three posteriori sub-themes, namely, 1) *independent living skills*, 2) *coping skills*, and 3) *relationship skills* were also revealed for *life skills*. Sub-themes were not identified for *agency* and *satisfaction*. Themes and sub-themes are described in detail below.

**Table 1***Example Quotes from LOVE Youth Representing Service Quality Factors*

Theme	n (%)	Quote
Staff-youth relationships	15 (83)	
<i>SOE (Staff over everything)</i>		“Dennis wasn’t a parent, but he has the total unconditional love that a parent has for all the kids. And the unending amount of positivity is just unbelievable. Until I was graduated from the program and basically an adult, there was no flaws in Dennis.”
<i>Show me you care</i>		“They have been super supportive. They’ve been super encouraging. They helped me when I was going to [university]. They helped me get bursaries and all that stuff, and helped me when I was trying to find jobs. So many things that they support. You just don’t give stuff up like that. At all. You’d be crazy to walk away from people like that. Absolutely insane.”
Agency	11 (61)	
		“I really liked that we had the opportunity to have a voice. Because we would have a check in question and everyone would have an opportunity to share one at a time. So, everyone got to listen and everyone got to be heard.”
Life skills	14 (78)	
<i>Independent living skills</i>		“[LOVE NS’s Links Employability Program] would take people who would typically not be able to get jobs and teach them employability skills. So, things like shaking hands or building resumes or going out into the community to get certificates... I got my food handlers license through that.”
<i>Coping skills</i>		“[LOVE NS] taught me how to, like, properly cope with things. So, through writing or through taking pictures and just simply through talking.”
<i>Relationship skills</i>		“LOVE taught me boundaries and they taught me that it’s okay to be selfish sometimes when you need to be. But, they also taught me to do it in kind of, like, a gentle way, you know?”
Satisfaction	16 (89)	
		“The photojournalism project was on Thursdays and [local college] has a development room where we would take normal cameras, not digital, and we would do everything from developing our own pictures... It was crazy. It was so cool. Such a great experience.”

*Note.* Sub-themes did not emerge for agency nor satisfaction.



### ***Staff-Youth Relationships***

The theme *staff-youth relationships* represents youths' experiences of building supportive, lasting relationships with caring adults at LOVE NS (Liebenberg et al., 2013). It also characterizes youths' perceptions of program responsiveness, which is sustained by those relationships (Liebenberg et al., 2013). Sub-themes include *SOE (staff over everything)* and *show me you care*. *SOE* reflects the role staff-youth relationships play in youths' perceptions of program responsiveness at LOVE NS. *Show me you care* reflects youths' perceptions of meaningful and lasting support provided by LOVE NS staff.

***SOE (Staff Over Everything)***. Youths' experiences of LOVE NS were deeply embedded in their relationships with staff. Youth often referred to two staff members in particular, Sarah and Dennis, when discussing their experiences with the program. Youth held Sarah and Dennis in high positive regard. They were described as loving, authentic, and responsive role models to which youth were deeply emotionally attached. The strong bonds youth created with staff at LOVE NS played a critical role in facilitating program responsiveness. Youth experienced programming as tailored to their individual needs, which was made possible because LOVE NS staff were invested in learning about youth and their lives:

“Whereas [youth program] and [youth program] failed because theirs was a very cold-cut, clinical, textbook approach to psychology and welfare, it was totally divorced from the rest of the awareness of my world. So, it was hard for me to really absorb what they were saying and how to approach it. Whereas Sarah and Dennis get to know not just you, but your world and your people. So, what might work for me in my situation... might not work for another kid who doesn't have that... I've seen them tailor their approach to different people, massively, with the awareness of those situations.”

*Show Me You Care.* Staff-youth relationships at LOVE NS developed over time through consistent caring experiences. LOVE NS staff often went above and beyond to ensure youth felt supported and cared for, which was something youth both recognized and deeply valued. It made youth feel good to know they had adults in their lives they could trust to “show up” for them. For instance, many youth reflected positively on experiences in which LOVE NS staff helped them obtain stable employment, access or re-access education, and access medical services. Youth also expressed comfort in knowing that their relationships with staff would be sustained over time. Regardless of how old youth were or how long it had been since they were last active in LOVE NS’ programs, they felt comfortable reaching out to LOVE NS staff for support when necessary, knowing staff would be responsive. One youth said, “They’re always there when you need them. No matter how young you are or how old you are, what you’re going through, they’re there.”

### *Agency*

The theme *agency* represents opportunities for personal agency at LOVE NS. More specifically, it reflects youths’ experiences of being in control and making decisions regarding program design and implementation (Liebenberg et al., 2013). It also refers to youths’ perceptions of becoming empowered through their participation in LOVE NS’ programs.

Many youth described the different ways that LOVE NS empowered them to make decisions for themselves. This typically occurred through youths’ participation in program implementation and, at times, design. Close relationships with staff appeared to be central here, as leadership opportunities were tailored to each youths’ unique strengths.

For example, one youth described a situation wherein they were invited to write and recite a speech for an exhibit, whereas another helped implement LOVE NS' tutoring program. Other leadership opportunities described by youth included workshop co-facilitation, board outreach and funding meeting attendance, and co-creation of program guidelines. Through these opportunities, youth came to feel like their voices mattered at LOVE NS, which was something they appreciated. Further, as youth became more comfortable using their voices through LOVE NS' programming, some experienced a sense of inner authority wherein they felt more comfortable taking control in other areas of their lives, such as in their relationships.

### ***Life Skills***

The theme *life skills* represents the skills youth gained through their involvement with LOVE NS, which they use to handle life's challenges. Sub-themes include *independent living skills*, *coping skills*, and *relationship skills*. *Independent living skills* reflects the daily living skills youth need to manage successfully on their own as they transition into adulthood, as well as employability skills. *Coping skills* encompasses skills for dealing with challenging situations and managing stress in healthy ways. Lastly, *relationship skills* reflects the skills necessary to get along with others and create and maintain healthy relationships, including communication skills, social-emotional skills, and boundary setting.

***Independent Living Skills.*** Many youth reported gaining skills necessary for successful independent living, including budgeting, home management, and healthy living. Youth also reported that going to LOVE NS helped them prepare to enter the workforce by honing their employability skills, such as resume creation and professional

conduct. Some youth discussed the importance of learning basic professional skills, such as how to shake hands.

***Coping Skills.*** When faced with adversity, youth reported feeling better able to cope on their own because of their involvement with LOVE NS. For some youth, healthy emotion-focused coping skills were especially helpful in relieving distress. This process of adaptive coping in response to stressful situations was closely implicated in youths' resilience:

“We’ll talk situations and stuff like that and you hear the different opinions, that’s in a way setting it up from the inside out. You’ll see it in a different way and you’ll apply that, and it’s indirectly giving you little steps that you never realized that is actually making you grow until the situation calls for it. And you’re like, “Oh. I didn’t think I could handle that”, and then you’ve already handled it and it’s just like, “Woah”.”

***Relationship Skills.*** Many youth indicated that going to LOVE NS helped them develop skills for interacting positively with others and building healthy relationships. Youth reported increased communication skills through their involvement with LOVE NS, such that they felt more comfortable engaging in conversations with diverse groups of people. They also felt more confident in their ability to identify unhealthy relationship dynamics and set and enforce boundaries. Youth also reported that going to LOVE NS helped them gain social-emotional skills. For instance, some reported improved self-awareness and acknowledged taking greater responsibility for their actions due to their involvement with the program. Others felt more capable of regulating difficult emotions when interacting with others.

### ***Satisfaction***

The theme *satisfaction* represents the extent to which youth were satisfied with the programs and opportunities offered through LOVE NS. Many described programming as fun and engaging. Youth particularly enjoyed activities fostering a sense of autonomy and self-expression, such as photojournalism and writing. Many also reported high levels of satisfaction with their experiences at LOVE Camp. At camp, youth experienced a strong sense of belonging through bonding with peers to whom they could relate. They valued opportunities to be supported by peers while engaging in personal development activities:

“Camp is awesome. Both regional and national. I’ve gone to both. I went to our first ever regional and I think I went to two or three nationals. It’s such a great experience. You learn about other people, you learn about yourself, you interact with everybody, and you have fun. It’s a time to have fun, but, it’s a time to learn and a time to be who you are, and learn how to respect everybody else at the same time. It’s just great, and it’s all kinds of support and all kinds of networking in one big area. And you all have that one thing in common ’cause LOVE is the thing that holds you guys together. It’s like the glue that holds the mold. It’s great. It’s awesome. LOVE Camp is my favourite.”

### ***Summary***

Youth experienced LOVE NS as operating in empowering and respectful ways to provide high quality, responsive programming. Staff-youth relationships played a critical role in youths’ service quality experiences, as opportunities for personal agency and skill building were tailored to youths’ individual needs.

### **Social-Emotional Competence**

One question was examined to explore evidence of social-emotional development at LOVE NS: “How do you feel like you’ve changed as a result of your involvement with

LOVE?”. Youths’ responses were coded thematically using a bottom-up approach. In response to this question, 39% of youth indicated developing social-emotional competence ( $n = 7$ ). Youth indicated that they improved their capacity for managing difficult emotions and developed social skills as a result of their involvement with LOVE NS:

“I was always angry and always ready to snap, like a snapping turtle, like, just get at anybody. And then just started going there and just made me patient and calm and just let me, like, listen to everybody instead of talking about my things. I just listen now and be more patient.”

“[LOVE] helped me to be more self-aware in terms of identifying what I want and what I need to be healthy.”

As previously noted, when analyzing service quality at LOVE NS, social-emotional development also emerged as a key factor in the *relationship skills* subtheme of *life skills*. Taken together, results support the hypothesis that youth gain social-emotional competence through their involvement with LOVE NS.

### **Individual Risk**

To explore evidence of individual risk among LOVE NS youth, two questions were examined and coded thematically using a bottom-up, inductive approach: 1) “Why did you come to LOVE?” and 2) “What was your situation like when you first came to LOVE?”. As expected, youth in the sample were highly vulnerable, struggling with both internalizing and externalizing problems. When asked the questions, “Why did you come to LOVE?” and “What was your situation like when you first came to LOVE?”, *experiencing adversity* emerged as a theme for both questions. Youth reported that they were experiencing adversity in their lives, including in their living situation and personal

relationships. Internalizing (i.e., depression, anxiety, suicidality) and externalizing problems (i.e., drug use, antisocial behaviours) were also reported. Many youth recalled feeling deeply unhappy and struggling with internalizing issues, such as depression and suicidality. Others recalled engaging in risky behaviours, including drug use and delinquency. See Table 2 for specific quotes.

**Table 2**

*Example Quotes from Youth Representing Individual Risk Factors*

Theme	Question	n (%)	Quote
Experiencing adversity	1	11(61)	<p>“I was going through a rebellious and quite a depressive phase of my life at the time.”</p> <p>“I was in the hospital for attempting suicide...I was on [hospital floor] of the [hospital] in the kid’s psychiatric unit at the time and I wasn’t doing good at all. Mentally, I wasn’t doing good. Physically, I was done with everything. Emotionally, I was done with everything.”</p> <p>“I was doing drugs.”</p>
	2	9(50)	<p>“I ran into a bad situation that got me arrested and put away for a while.”</p> <p>“I used a lot. Drugs and drank and partied a lot.”</p> <p>“I was going through a time in my life where I felt rather depressed and isolated and alone... At one point I ran away from home. I was suicidal for a period of time and I attempted to take my life three times.”</p>

*Note.* 1 = “Why did you come to LOVE?”. 2 = “What was your situation like when you first came to LOVE?”.

## Resilience

Themes, sub-themes, and specific quotes for resilience are shown in Table 3. The top-down, deductive analysis resulted in seven a priori themes drawn from the literature on ecological resilience: 1) *relationships*, 2) *identity*, 3) *material resources*, 4) *cohesion*, 5) *power and control*, 6) *cultural adherence*, and 7) *social justice*. Themes represent the

“tensions” of resilience that are shared across cultures and contexts (Ungar et al., 2007).

These tensions are dynamic and work together to facilitate the process of resilience in youth (Ungar et al., 2007). Because the tensions depend on culture and context, youth may take different pathways to resilience depending on their culture and experiences.

**Table 3**

*Example Quotes from LOVE Youth Representing Resilience Tensions*

Themes	<i>n (%)</i>	Quote
Relationships	17(94)	
<i>Friends</i>		“My friends are super loyal... They’re super supportive. My friends have never not supported me. They’d never turn their backs on me. So, I think that’s why I have such a small friend group.”
<i>Family</i>		“In terms of family, I didn’t have much of a support system.”
<i>LOVE staff</i>		“Dennis was one of the first people to show me that men can support you, and it doesn’t have to be sexual and it doesn’t have to be uncomfortable, and it can be safe.”
<i>Romantic partners</i>		“He got abusive. He was verbally always knocking me down.”
Identity	18(100)	
<i>Know me, love me</i>		“I’m a pretty good person at just kind of solving a problem on my own, even before I came here. Like, I’m good at just talking things out or seeing it from a perspective all around.”
<i>Goal setter</i>		“I just want to expand my wings. Definitely, long term, I want to be able to move up within this company... See how far I can go.”
<i>It’s a process</i>		“I was incredibly needy. I was probably rather painful at times with the amount of neediness I exuded from [Sarah] and Dennis. So, I feel much more confident and independent, and I feel like that was a direct result of LOVE.”
Material resources	18(100)	
		“[LOVE NS staff member] actually helped me and stopped me from procrastinating and helped me fill out the application for the [community college] to get my high school. And then after doing that, I was able to push myself even harder because I felt motivated again.”
Cohesion	16(89)	
<i>It’s my duty</i>		“In [local community], now, we have a lot of new people. And they’re just starting out and there’s very



few leaders there now. So, I want to go there and show my wisdomness [sic] around LOVE.”

Themes	<i>n (%)</i>	Quote
<i>Somewhere I belong</i>		“What I like about LOVE is that you always have a place where you know you belong. And that’s very rare to find in a world like this.”
<i>Me and school don’t mesh</i>		“I went to [school]. These people are families. They have a little bit of money, you know what I mean? Like, the White school. So, I knew I didn’t belong there. From a very early age, I felt like I didn’t belong there.”
Power and control	14(78)	
<i>Too much power isn’t always a good thing</i>		“[Teachers] were telling me I wasn’t trying, but, I was trying so hard that I was giving myself headaches. And I really, really pushed myself. But, they just kept telling me I wasn’t trying and they made me so uncomfortable that I quit.”
<i>Cut off</i>		“I made a huge change in my life a couple years ago. I got rid of all the people I used to hang out with, trying to make more positive friendships in my life.”
<i>Healthy autonomy</i>		“I was a depressed 14-year-old. Ashamed of who I was, closed off, didn’t want to talk to anybody. As I grew up with LOVE, I found my voice. I found my confidence. I found my place in this world. And I was able to find outlets without medication to handle my depression with my anxiety. Find those ways that I can carry on everyday life and pass along to other people as I need them.”
Cultural adherence	12(67)	
<i>Me, myself, and I</i>		“I’m trying to make things happen for myself with my own businesses. Not having to rely on somebody else’s business, somebody else’s business plan, to make sure that I am living.”
<i>Indigenous pride</i>		“On Saturdays, sometimes they have sweats at [LOVE NS staff member’s mom’s] place and the tipi and whatnot. It relieves a lot of stress.”
<i>Navigating tension</i>		“That first time at camp kind of planted the seed that I deserve more. It showed me my worth. It started to show me my worth. So, that’s an experience that I’ll never forget... I wasn’t getting that kind of dialogue at home or in my friend group ’cause we grew up under certain cultures that are dysfunctional, and it took being outside the culture to understand exactly what it was and how to get through it, and how to empower ourselves to not accept that as the standard.”
Social justice	11(61)	
		“I asked the doctors to tie my tubes and they said, “No. You’re too young. You might get married and your husband might want kids. Why does my potential

future husband that may never come, why does he get  
say over what I do with my body?"

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*Note.* Sub-themes not revealed for material resources and social justice.

The bottom-up, inductive analysis revealed four posteriori sub-themes for *relationships*, including 1) *friends*, 2) *family*, 3) *LOVE staff*, and 4) *romantic partners*. Three posteriori sub-themes were uncovered for *identity*, including 1) *know me, love me*, 2) *goal setter*, and 3) *it's a process*. For *cohesion*, three sub-themes, 1) *it's my duty*, 2) *somewhere I belong*, and 3) *me and school don't mesh*, were revealed. *Power and control* resulted in three sub-themes, including 1) *too much power isn't always a good thing*, 2) *cut off*, and 3) *healthy autonomy*. Lastly, three sub-themes were uncovered for *cultural adherence*, namely, 1) *me, myself, and I*, 2) *Indigenous pride*, and 3) *navigating tension*. Themes of *access to material resources* and *social justice* did not result in posteriori sub-themes. Themes and sub-themes are described in detail below. Specific barriers and pathways to resilience are also discussed.

### ***Relationships***

The theme *relationships* represents youths' experiences of negotiating for relationships characterized by feelings of emotional support, intimacy, and safety (Ungar et al., 2007). Sub-themes represent the areas in youths' lives in which relationships occurred, including *friends*, *family*, *LOVE staff*, and *romantic partners*. Sub-themes serve as pathways to resilience when youth successfully negotiate for supportive and safe relationships. Barriers to resilience occur when youth experience unsafe or unhealthy relationships.

***Friends.*** Many youth accessed positive relationships through peers. Most youth reported having a few positive and supportive long-term friendships rather than a large

network of friends. Their friendships were characterized by depth, unconditional support, and caring. Youth expressed comfort in knowing that their friends would be there for them “through thick and thin,” and often relied on strong friendships to overcome adversity in their lives. One youth said:

“No matter what, or how long we haven’t talked, we always just pick up where we’ve been. And, especially over the last year, where I was really, really sick... they were my back bone. Even though I push people away, they were like my back bone. So, that definitely strengthened a lot of my friendships and I definitely couldn’t have made it through the last year without them.”

Although most youth enjoyed positive peer relationships, some experienced unhealthy relationship dynamics within their peer groups, particularly in the past. Youth described previous situations in which peers and people they considered to be friends treated them poorly and bullied them. Many also struggled to develop meaningful friendships growing up. Without friends to lean on during tough times, these youth felt isolated and alone. For some of those struggling socially, going to LOVE NS helped them develop and maintain positive friendships. Youth reported building lasting connections with peers within LOVE NS and other regions.

***Family.*** Family relationships were complex for youth. Although many reported positive family relationships overall, an even higher number reported family relationships characterized by distrust and instability. In addition, those negotiating for positive relationships through family members often experienced negative family dynamics simultaneously. Parental relationships were particularly convoluted. Youth cared deeply for their parents; however, their emotional and physical needs often went unmet growing up. A large number of youth recalled previous experiences of neglect, abuse, and parental

addiction issues. Many also experienced their parents as emotionally unavailable and unsupportive.

Youth often struggled in developing healthy attachments to their parents because their needs for security and care were consistently overlooked. For some youth, these difficulties continued into late adolescence and emerging adulthood. Others reported that as they got older, they were able to repair estranged parental relationships. Interestingly, data portrayed a pattern wherein positive family dynamics increased over time, yet negative family dynamics remained stable.

***LOVE Staff.*** Many youth accessed positive relationships through LOVE NS staff. Youth and alumni alike felt emotionally close to staff at LOVE NS, particularly Sarah and Dennis. They also expressed appreciation in knowing that if they needed support, they could count on LOVE NS staff to meet their needs. In many cases, youth used relationships with LOVE NS staff as a way to compensate for unreliable relationships with caregivers and work through past trauma. To this sample of vulnerable youth, LOVE NS meant feeling safe to assume the role of a child, trusting that staff members would assume those of reliable adults. In the most basic sense, then, LOVE NS meant family. To illustrate this point, many youth used the words “family” and “home” when describing their experiences with LOVE NS. For some, the sense of family facilitated through relationships with LOVE NS staff was a critical part of the program: “What keeps me coming back to LOVE is, they were a family when I needed a family.”

***Romantic Partners.*** Few youth accessed positive relationships through romantic partners. On the contrary, one third of youth experienced toxic and abusive dynamics within previous romantic relationships. Some reported being abused physically and

emotionally. Others recalled being cheated on and having their trust betrayed. Despite engaging in toxic romantic relationships in the past, no youth reported being involved in an unhealthy romantic relationship at present. Thus, while romantic relationships may have served as a previous barrier to resilience, they do not appear to interfere with youths' resilience today.

### ***Identity***

The theme *identity* represents youths' positive and stable sense of self (Ungar et al., 2007). It also reflects youths' judgements regarding personal strengths, weaknesses, aspirations, and values. Sub-themes include *know me, love me, goal setter*, and *it's a process*. *Know me, love me* reflects youths' self-concept, wherein youth know themselves well and experience themselves as healthy. *Goal setter* reflects youths' expectations for the future, including their professional and personal goals. Lastly, *it's a process* reflects the ways in which youths' self-concepts changed over time as they began to know themselves more positively.

***Know Me, Love Me.*** Youth knew themselves well, which was evident in their descriptions of their strengths, weaknesses, beliefs, and values. Interestingly, youths' perceptions of themselves were highly diverse. Each youth reported unique opinions and values based on their personal experiences. One exception to youths' diverse belief systems centered on the importance of close relationships. Many youth reported valuing authentic, meaningful connections with others. They prioritized supportive relationships wherein they were free to be themselves, knowing they would be accepted.

Not only did youth know themselves well, they knew themselves positively. Youth embraced the lessons they learned through growing up under challenging

circumstances and thought highly of themselves. They often described themselves as confident, capable, and open-minded. Some also identified themselves as mature and acknowledged having more wisdom and experience than others their age.

**Goal Setter.** Almost all youth reported positive goals and aspirations, particularly related to career development, pursuit of higher education, and becoming financially secure. When youth pictured their lives in 10 years, they saw themselves leading successful professional lives. They described plans to save money, pay off debt, and purchase homes. Some reported planning to own their own businesses. Others aimed to move up in the companies they already worked in or quit their current jobs and go back to school.

In the future, youth also reported wanting to maintain an active presence within their communities through volunteer-work and advocacy. Some even aspired to implement their own youth programs someday.

**It's a Process.** Despite having positive views of themselves currently, this was not always the case for some youth. When youth reflected on their past experiences, fewer youth described themselves in positive terms and more youth described themselves negatively. For instance, many youth indicated that in the past, they were closed-off and judgemental. Some also viewed themselves as insecure and emotionally vulnerable: "I'm literally my own worst enemy. I pick on myself so much because that's who I was. That's who I was growing up, until I saw myself." Taken together, data portrayed identity development as an ongoing process. For many, the process of getting to know themselves in more positive terms was facilitated through their participation in LOVE NS.

### ***Material Resources***

The theme *material resources* represents youths' experiences negotiating for material resources, such as education, employment, food, shelter, and medical services (Ungar et al., 2007). Evidence of resilience is demonstrated when resources are made accessible to youth in relevant ways, such that youth are motivated to access them (Ungar et al., 2007).

The majority of youth reported accessing material resources, such as employment, education, food, shelter, and medical services. They were able to find jobs, go to school, and receive medical attention when necessary. They had somewhere safe to lay their head at night and they had food to eat. While material resources were accessible for most youth, the process of negotiating for them was often complex and their availability unstable. Almost three quarters of youth indicated struggling to access education, shelter, or food at some point. When youth reflected on their past experiences, approximately 40% indicated being homeless, 20% remembered being hungry, and 50% struggled to stay in school.

Youth understood the importance of having access to material resources, and when they were unavailable growing up, youth often came up with unconventional ways to get what they needed to survive. For the majority of those who struggled, LOVE NS played a critical role in their ability to access material resources. Many youth reflected positively on the free meals LOVE NS provided. Some even identified free food as their motivation to come to LOVE NS in the first place. For these young people, having a meal at LOVE NS was sometimes the difference between eating dinner or going to bed hungry. Youth also indicated that LOVE NS helped them access employment by providing

programming that taught employability techniques, such as resume creation and how to shake hands properly, and helped them find jobs. Further, they reported that staff at LOVE NS helped them access or re-access education by providing tutoring and helping them fill out applications.

### ***Cohesion***

The theme *cohesion* represents youths' sense of belonging and responsibility for others (Ungar et al., 2007). Sub-themes include *it's my duty*, *somewhere I belong*, and *me and school don't mesh*. *It's my duty* reflects youths' sense of responsibility for others and desire to make a difference in their communities. *Somewhere I belong* reflects youths' experience of belonging through LOVE NS. Lastly, *me and school don't mesh* highlights the barriers youth experience in developing a strong sense of belonging in education settings. Successfully balancing personal interests with others' and experiencing a strong sense of connection to people or places serve as pathways to resilience for youth. Barriers to resilience include low sense of belonging and the inability to balance one's own interests with the greater good.

***It's My Duty.*** Many youth reported feeling a sense of responsibility for others, particularly for family. Interestingly, some alumni participants felt obligated to take care of their parents. These parentified youth sometimes perceived themselves as "doing better" than their parents and felt personally responsible for compensating for the resources missing in their parents' lives. One youth said, "I love my mom to death. I love her. But, I live with her now because she's like a child. She can't function as an adult and you don't see that as a kid."



Youth were also invested in the greater good of their communities. For instance, those with more life experience indicated a sense of responsibility for younger youth at LOVE NS. They took pride in being role models at LOVE NS and enjoyed opportunities to pass on their knowledge and experience. Youths' sense of duty toward their communities was particularly striking when it came time for them to choose a gift card as compensation for participating in the present study. Rather than choosing a gift card for themselves, some youth requested that the card be donated to someone in need, such as younger LOVE NS youth or the homeless.

***Somewhere I Belong.*** Many youth reported experiencing a strong sense of belonging facilitated through their involvement with LOVE NS. The feeling of connection youth experienced through LOVE NS was critical to their well-being. It made youth feel good to be part of a community that accepted and validated them. The sense of belonging youth gained from LOVE NS was particularly noteworthy given that many had not been actively involved in LOVE NS' programs for some time. Despite "moving on", these young people remained strongly connected to LOVE NS.

***Me and School Don't Mesh.*** One area where some youth struggled to develop a sense of belonging was school. Youth described themselves as not "meshing" with school. Often, youths' experiences and life circumstances were different from those of their peers. When they compared themselves to others, some youth reported feeling less than, which made them feel like an outsider. For others, low sense of belonging stemmed from negative interactions with teachers and peers. Being treated poorly by peers and teachers at school created a learning environment wherein youth felt disrespected and unsupported. As often occurred in youths' home lives with their parents, youths' needs

were overlooked at school, which led them to believe that getting an education was not “for them”.

### ***Power and Control***

The theme *power and control* represents youths’ experiences of being in control of what happens in their lives (Ungar et al., 2007). Sub-themes represent how experiences of power and control play out in youths’ lives according to them, including *too much power isn’t always a good thing*, *cut off*, and *healthy autonomy*. *Too much power isn’t always a good thing* characterizes what happens when having too much power becomes a potential barrier rather than a pathway to resilience, such as when youth leave school prematurely. *Cut off* reflects youths’ experiences of gaining a sense of power and control through limiting contact with toxic peers and romantic partners. Lastly, *healthy autonomy* reflects youths’ experiences of gaining opportunities to use their autonomy positively at LOVE NS.

***Too Much Power Isn’t Always a Good Thing.*** Youth were accustomed to making important life decisions on their own. Yet, increased power did not always serve as a pathway to resilience. For instance, some youth described situations wherein they chose to drop out of school. Youths’ decisions to leave school were often embedded in themes of *cohesion* and *access to material resources*. Some youth felt unmotivated to pursue an education because their intellectual and emotional needs were not being met at school. Others perceived poverty and lack of material resources as barriers to their accessing education and chose to leave because they had more pressing issues to focus on. Still, others left school simply because they could not envision themselves being successful

there. In other words, they did not feel like school was a place they belonged (see *me and school don't mesh* sub-theme of *cohesion*).

***Cut Off.*** Some youth were previously involved in abusive romantic relationships and toxic friendships (see *romantic partners* sub-theme of *relationships*); however, as youth developed stronger identities, they became less comfortable being treated poorly by others. Many experienced a sense of power and control through walking away from unhealthy relationships with peers and romantic partners. Youth often reported “cutting people off” to better themselves as they got older, particularly when relationships were not in line with their values and how they viewed themselves.

***Healthy Autonomy.*** Youth valued having opportunities to think and make decisions for themselves. Many reported experiencing a sense of control at LOVE NS through leadership opportunities, group discussions, choices in program activities, and participation in program implementation. Through these experiences, youth were able to learn how to use their autonomy in positive ways, which is something they felt carried over into other areas of their lives:

“There’s definitely a lot of experiences and opportunities that you get through LOVE that contribute to your growing as a person. Plus, we do a lot of life skills I guess you could say. Like, how would you go about this situation? How would you go about that situation? And sometimes they’re super tricky and we kind of talk it out and get different opinions here and there, and then we kind of come to a consensus right at the end. So, it’s like, you’ll hear something that maybe you didn’t think about before and that kind of broadens your mind a little bit, because you’re like, ‘Oh. I didn’t think of it that way. Alright, that’s definitely something I’ll consider’. We do a lot of things like that, so that really helps. You just kind of bring it with you everywhere you go and apply it to different things... They kind of set the stage for you.

They help you do that. Like, if you can't do it by yourself, they'll help you get to that point and then they'll let you take the stage.”

### ***Cultural Adherence***

The theme *cultural adherence* represents youths' experiences of identifying with and embracing global and/or local cultural beliefs, values, and practices (Ungar et al., 2007). Sub-themes, including *me, myself, and I*, *Indigenous pride*, and *navigating tension*, reflect how cultural adherence is implicated in resilience processes. *Me, myself, and I*, represents youths' identification and adherence to individualistic culture, which prioritizes independence and individual uniqueness. *Indigenous pride* represents youths' ethnic cultural identification through adhering to Mi'kmaq beliefs and practices. Lastly, *navigating tension* reflects youths' experiences of cultural adherence when local and global cultural norms are at odds with one another. Resilience can be either undermined or facilitated by cultural adherence, depending on how it interacts with other tensions (Ungar et al., 2007).

***Me, Myself, and I.*** Many youth strongly identified with individualistic culture. Youth valued independence and strived for personal growth. They also appreciated opportunities to express themselves and believed in the importance of personal choice. One youth said, “I've learned that everybody has a journey they're facing. Nobody's raised the same as you. They're not fortunate, or unfortunate, like you. So, you can't really judge.”

Resilience, as experienced by youth, was sometimes described in individualistic terms, with a strong focus on independence and self-reliance. Yet, prioritizing self-reliance in the face of adversity appeared to serve as a barrier to resilience for some

youth. Rather than leaning on others for support, these youth preferred to work through their problems alone. Interestingly, many youth valued gaining access to support through relationships (see *know myself, love myself* sub-theme of *identity*), despite putting pressure on themselves to “do it all” on their own. Some acknowledged pushing people away even though they knew they needed help, indicating that adherence to individualistic culture may be maladaptive when it fosters extreme independence.

***Indigenous Pride.*** Some youth reported ethnic cultural adherence. Youth with strong ethnic cultural identities were primarily Indigenous. These young people took pride in their cultural heritage and actively engaged in Indigenous cultural practices, such as sweats, beading, powwows, and naming ceremonies. Often, Indigenous youth described gaining access to opportunities to engage in cultural practices through LOVE NS’ Mi’kmaq programs.

***Navigating Tension.*** Youth reported experiences of tension when local cultural norms within their families and communities clashed with broader cultural expectations. In these situations, youth demonstrated resilience by challenging local norms, which appeared to undermine youths’ access to material resources, positive relationships, and strong identities. For instance, one youth embedded themes of *cultural adherence* with *power and control* when they reflected on the normalization of teen motherhood within their community in relation to their decision not to date during their teen years: “Everyone from there, there was no goal setting, besides getting pregnant, and that’s just not the life that I wanted. Not at that age, anyway.” By going against community norms surrounding teen pregnancy, this young person took control of their narrative and likely created more opportunities for their future.

Some youth reported that going to LOVE NS helped them identify and address maladaptive local cultural norms outside of the program. Youth reported engaging in conversations about taboo topics at LOVE NS, such as domestic abuse and mental illness, which helped them stand up to hurtful and oppressive dynamics that had been normalized in their communities. Here, *cultural adherence* intersected with *power and control* to promote youths' resilience.

### ***Social Justice***

The theme *social justice* represents the prejudice experienced by youth personally and within their communities, as well as youths' experiences of standing up to oppression and fighting for social equality (Ungar et al., 2007).

Many youth reported experiences of prejudice and discrimination personally and within their communities. Experiences were diverse and rooted in racism, homophobia, sexism, and prejudice against disability and mental illness. Youth were passionate about bringing awareness to the social justice issues they faced. Some fought for social equality through advocacy work, whereas others planned to design and implement programs for youth in their communities. Often, it was youths' personal experiences which motivated them to stand up for change. Rather than let their hardships get the best of them, youth turned their suffering into motivation to build a stronger future for others, linking themes of *social justice* and *power and control*.

### ***Summary***

Despite growing up under challenging circumstances, youth found ways to access resilience resources, including positive relationships, strong identities, experiences of power and control, a sense of cohesion, material resources, cultural identification, and

experiences of social justice. For youth, resilience was closely tied to relationships with others. Youth negotiated for access to positive relationships through LOVE NS staff and, to a lesser extent, friends. Relationships built at LOVE NS facilitated feelings of belonging in youth, which, along with their commitment to the greater good, contributed to youths' sense of cohesion. Over time through their involvement with LOVE NS, youth also developed strong individual identities characterized by healthy self-perceptions and aspirations for the future. As their sense of self-worth increased, youth experienced a sense of power and control through choosing to end toxic relationships. Making decisions and their sharing opinions at LOVE NS also contributed to youths' experience of control in their lives. Youth found ways to access material resources, such as food, shelter, education, and employment. For Indigenous youth, cultural adherence through LOVE NS' Mi'kmaq programs played an important role in resilience. Youth also demonstrated resilience by challenging unhealthy local cultural norms. Lastly, some youth navigated their way to social justice by engaging in advocacy work to bring awareness to social justice issues they faced, such as racism, sexism, homophobia, and prejudice against mental illness.

### **Chapter 7: Study 1 Discussion**

Until now, LOVE NS has not been empirically studied. Thus, little is currently known about which program “ingredients” may play a role in fostering positive outcomes for youth. PYD theory indicates that effective programs are those providing high quality programming, characterized by positive staff-youth relationships, opportunities for youth agency, and the development of life skills (Lerner, 2005). Many such programs aim to promote social and emotional competencies in youth (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003);

however, rarely do PYD program studies assess youths' service quality experiences or social-emotional development (Catalano et al., 2002; Ciocanel et al., 2017). In addition, the manner in which community-based PYD programs may influence resilience processes for vulnerable youth remains under-investigated. By exploring the ways in which youth perceive service quality and program outcomes at LOVE NS, as well as evidence of risk and resilience in their lives, this qualitative study aimed to address gaps in the literature related to service quality, resilience, and social-emotional competence in community-based PYD programs. A secondary goal was to inform the development of a quantitative survey rooted in the experiences of LOVE NS youth.

I hypothesized that youth would report positive service quality experiences at LOVE NS, characterized by close relationships with staff, feelings of empowerment, the development of life skills, and program satisfaction. I also hypothesized that youth would report increased social-emotional competence as a result of their involvement with LOVE NS. Regarding individual risk, I hypothesized that youth at LOVE NS would report internalizing and externalizing problems, including depression, anxiety, delinquency, aggression, and drug use. Lastly, regarding resilience, I hypothesized that youth would show evidence of ecological resilience through gaining access to opportunities to build relationships, develop strong identities, experience a sense of power and control, develop a sense of belonging, access material resources, promote social justice, and encourage a sense of culture. When resilience resources were limited in youths' environments, I further expected that LOVE NS would serve as a pathway to resilience by building up positive resources around youth. Findings supported hypotheses regarding service quality, social-emotional competence, and resilience. The hypothesis that youth would report



internalizing and externalizing problems was partially supported. Youth in the sample reported experiencing depression, anxiety, delinquency, and drug use when they joined LOVE NS; however, they did not report engaging in acts of aggression.

In line with previous findings (Johnson et al., 2016), this study suggests that LOVE NS provides high quality programming to vulnerable youth, which may foster positive social-emotional development. Findings also indicate that despite experiencing internalizing and externalizing issues, youth at LOVE NS have access to positive resilience resources. Many studies on resilience have defined resilience as a stable individual trait (Ungar, 2011); however, research now suggests that resilience is multidimensional and dynamic (Ungar, 2008). This study supports ecological resilience theory (Ungar, 2008) by demonstrating that for this sample of vulnerable youth, resilience is a dynamic process facilitated through different aspects of youths' environments, including LOVE NS. Findings suggest that community-based PYD programs can indeed serve as resilience resources for vulnerable youth (Berzin, 2010).

### **Service Quality and Social-Emotional Competence at LOVE NS**

As expected, youth reported positive service quality experiences at LOVE NS, characterized by strong relationships with staff, feelings of empowerment, the development of life skills, and program satisfaction. At LOVE NS, youth felt empowered to make decisions for themselves. Consistent with literature indicating that vulnerable youth respond favourably to programming in which they have control over structure and facilitation (Edwards et al., 2016; Ward & Parker, 2013; Zimmerman et al., 2011), youth in this study appreciated opportunities to feel heard through participation in program design and implementation. Findings support the contention that youth-led programs may

hold promise for increasing engagement and satisfaction for vulnerable youth (Bulanda & McCrae, 2013). Through their involvement with LOVE NS, youth reported developing a number of life skills, including those underlying healthy social-emotional functioning. For instance, youth improved their emotion regulation, self-awareness, responsibility, and communication skills at LOVE NS. In line with expectations, findings suggest that LOVE NS may promote social-emotional competence in youth.

The experience of trusting and supportive relationships with staff played an important role in service quality experiences for this sample of vulnerable youth. Consistent with previous research (Bulanda & McCrae, 2013; Ward & Parker, 2013), youth valued opportunities to feel cared for by adults they could rely on. Staff-youth relationships at LOVE NS also facilitated program responsiveness. Because staff were invested in learning about youth and their lives, they were able to tailor opportunities for personal agency and skill building to youths' individual needs. Findings are in line with previous research linking the relationship building and personal agency components of service quality (Liebenberg et al., 2013). They also provide support for literature suggesting that strong relationships with staff members can help facilitate empowerment and life skill development, as youth feel safe communicating their needs, sharing their experiences, and engaging in program activities (Liebenberg et al., 2013; Sanders et al., 2017b).

Taken together, findings suggest that LOVE NS operates in accordance with PYD principles to promote social-emotional development in vulnerable youth; however, further investigation is necessitated to determine whether service quality practices at LOVE NS are associated with improved social-emotional functioning.

## **Risk and Resilience at LOVE NS**

Youth in this study were highly vulnerable. Upon being referred to LOVE NS, their lives were characterized by pain and hardship. Many specifically reported histories of adversity surrounding their living situation, personal relationships, mental health, and antisocial behaviours. Unfortunately, these kinds of hardships are common among youth engaged in secondary and tertiary violence prevention interventions (Office of the Surgeon General, 2001), as well as those involved in formal service systems (Smyth & Eaton-Erickson, 2009). Given that LOVE NS youth are often referred to programming through service systems such as child welfare, criminal justice, and education, this study likely included multi-system youth. As such, findings here are not surprising.

As expected, youth reported struggling with internalizing and externalizing problems (i.e., individual risk) when they came to LOVE NS. Looking back, youth were in a great deal of emotional pain stemming from environmental challenges, such as instability at home and school. They specifically remembered feeling depressed, anxious, and alone. Consistent with research linking childhood adversity to suicidality (Enns et al., 2006), some youth in this study reported previous attempts to end their lives. With limited coping skills, youth also recalled acting out by engaging in risky behaviours, such as drug use and delinquency. Findings here provide support for the notion that individual risks are often symptoms of environmental risks that youth cannot control (Sanders et al., 2015).

Contrary to expectations, youth did not report engaging in acts of aggression. Research shows that among youth exposed to significant adversity, drug use and delinquency often coincide with aggressive behaviour (Sommer et al., 2017). Exposure to significant adversity is also associated with heightened aggression (Fava et al., 2019), as

is involvement in violence prevention programming (Reidy et al., 2017). Despite present findings, it is difficult to conclude that LOVE NS youth do not engage in aggression. Indeed, youth in the study were not asked about their aggressive behaviour directly. In line with evidence indicating that adolescents are more often identified as bullies through peer nominations relative to self-reported bullying, it is possible that compared to aggression reported by peers, instances of self-reported aggression are less common among youth (Branson & Cornell, 2009). Thus, youth in this study may have struggled more to recall acts of aggression spontaneously as compared to delinquency and drug use.

Despite growing up under challenging circumstances, youth found ways to access resilience resources, including positive relationships, strong identities, experiences of power and control, a sense of cohesion, material resources, cultural identification, and experiences of social justice. Importantly, when youth struggled to gain access to resilience resources within their families, schools, and communities, LOVE NS offered protection by providing youth with meaningful opportunities to work through resilience processes. For instance, because youth in this sample often led chaotic and unstable home lives, many struggled for reliable access to material resources, including employment, education, food, and shelter. When material resources were inaccessible to youth, LOVE NS stepped in to help. For example, because each LOVE NS program involves sharing a meal (LOVE NS, 2020), youth experiencing food insecurity indicated that they had access to healthy meals. LOVE NS also tuned into the barriers preventing youth from accessing employment and education by teaching employability skills and providing tutoring services. As such, youth were able to find jobs and access or re-access education. To youth in this study, things like this made a difference. Findings exemplify the

importance of attending to youths' lives outside of the program to determine which resources are missing and find ways to compensate for them (Heinze, 2013; Nicholson et al., 2004).

LOVE NS also played a critical role in youths' experiences of positive relationships. Most youth enjoyed positive peer relationships, which they relied on to overcome life's challenges; however, for those struggling socially, LOVE NS played an important role in their ability to develop and maintain positive relationships with peers. At LOVE NS, youth also gained opportunities for emotional intimacy and attachment with reliable, supportive adults, which was something they did not always have at home. Through their experiences of caring and supportive relationships at LOVE NS, youth came to associate LOVE NS with terms such as family and home. The family atmosphere at LOVE NS instilled a sense of belonging in youth, which youth deeply valued. It made youth feel good to be part of a community that accepted and validated them. Findings illustrate the importance of relationships built outside of the home for youth facing adversity (Bulanda & McCrae, 2013; Grych et al., 2015; Southwick et al., 2014).

While youth in this study gained a sense of cohesion through their involvement with LOVE NS, they remained disconnected from school. As often occurred in their home lives with their parents, youths' needs and realities were overlooked at school, which led them to believe that getting an education was not "for them". In line with claims that vulnerable youth often begin making important life choices independently at a younger age than their peers (Sanders et al., 2015; 2017b), a number of youth in this study made the decision to leave school before graduating. Findings are consistent with literature indicating that although characteristics such as poverty, racial barriers, family

and community stress, and learning disabilities all function as barriers to education for young people (Coalition for Juvenile Justice, 2001), little work is being done to address these issues. Given that the vast majority of PYD programs in general (Catalano et al., 2002), and social-emotional learning programs specifically (Jones et al., 2017), occur in schools, findings here are concerning. For vulnerable youth, intervening in school settings alone may be insufficient to fostering social-emotional competence. Rather, community-based programs may serve as a more effective means of helping vulnerable youth build their social-emotional skills, guiding them to a bright future (Bochus, 2015).

Youth in this study experienced a sense of power and control through choosing to leave school; however, it is unlikely that leaving school prematurely enhanced resilience. For youth in Canada, dropping out of high school is associated with a wide range of negative outcomes, including unemployment, poverty, incarceration, and health issues (Stuit & Springer, 2010). At the same time, staying in school may have undermined resilience for youth in this study by reinforcing negative identities and low self-competency beliefs over time. For resilience to be facilitated, resources must be provided in relevant and meaningful ways so as to enhance youths' motivation to negotiate for them (Ungar, 2008). This was not taking place within the education setting, making it difficult for youth to successfully navigate their way to education regardless of whether they stayed in school. Findings highlight the importance of fostering respectful and contextually sensitive school atmospheres wherein vulnerable youth feel a sense of membership.

At LOVE NS, youth learned how to use their autonomy in positive ways, which was closely implicated in their experience of resilience. Having opportunities to speak up

and make decisions for themselves at LOVE NS helped youth feel a sense of control in managing their lives outside of the program. The tone of empowerment at LOVE NS also helped youth with negative internalized identities come to know themselves as healthy and capable. As youths' sense of self-worth improved, they began weeding out relationships that did not reflect their values and how they viewed themselves, which further contributed to their sense of power and control over their lives. Findings highlight the ways in which resilience tensions interact with one another to predict positive functioning. They also support research indicating that empowering youth through including them in the development and implementation of program content can contribute to better outcomes (Sanders et al., 2017b). Indeed, for this sample of vulnerable youth, having opportunities to use their voices at LOVE helped them transform their lives, which is in line with LOVE NS' mission (LOVE NS, 2016).

Within the extant literature, culture is the least studied component of resilience (Southwick et al., 2014; Ungar, 2008). Present findings regarding culture support the contention that resilience can be either undermined or facilitated by cultural adherence, depending on how it interacts with other tensions (Ungar et al., 2007). For instance, youth in the sample strongly identified with individualistic cultural norms, such as independence, personal choice, and freedom of expression. Although resilience was often described in individualistic terms, adhering to individualistic cultural norms served as a barrier to resilience when youth put pressure on themselves to work through their problems independently and pushed others away. Maladaptive cultural norms within youths' communities also interfered with resilience by undermining access to material resources, positive relationships, and strong identities. Youth demonstrated resilience here

by challenging local cultural norms, which were often rooted in social justice issues. This process was facilitated through programming at LOVE NS, as open dialogue surrounding taboo topics helped youth recognize and stand up to hurtful dynamics that had been normalized in their communities.

In recent years, scholars have established that cultivating a strong cultural identity is associated with increased resilience for ethnic minority youth (Ungar et al., 2007). In line with calls for more culturally sensitive interventions for vulnerable youth (Nicholson et al., 2004; Ungar et al., 2007), LOVE NS runs culturally tailored Mi'kmaq programs for Indigenous youth in Nova Scotia. Indigenous LOVE NS youth in this study took pride in their cultural heritage and actively engaged in Indigenous cultural practices through LOVE NS' Mi'kmaq programs. Findings suggest that LOVE NS may promote strong cultural identities through culturally tailored programming.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

Qualitative participatory action research methods can empower vulnerable youth by allowing them to share their stories and opinions, knowing they will be heard and substantiated (Harper et al., 2007). Beginning with qualitative data that prioritizes youths' experiences also helps ensure that findings derived from subsequent quantitative study designs are relevant and useful (Ungar & Liebenberg, 2011). Thus, taking into account youths' voices was a major strength of the present study. Findings support the idea that PYD programs can be effective with vulnerable youth when implemented in community settings. Still, there are limitations to this study.

First, youth participating in this study were self-selected. The semi-structured interviews included youth who were 1) comfortable sharing their experiences with an



interviewer and 2) able to access the material resources necessary to participate, including phone access for those who participated by phone or transportation to the LOVE NS office in Halifax for those completing an in-person interview. As such, results may be biased according to the experiences of higher functioning youth (Ball et al., 2009), thereby limiting generalizability. It is also possible that some youth felt uncomfortable answering sensitive interview questions (Howell & Miller-Graff, 2014). Differences in willingness to open up about sensitive topics may be reflected in the length of time it took to interview each youth, with some interviews lasting up to two hours and others approximately 20 minutes. If the experiences of these youth differed meaningfully from those who participated and offered substantial information, present findings may not offer a complete representation of youth functioning.

Another limitation of the current study focuses on the qualitative nature of the data. For instance, findings suggest that LOVE NS provides high quality programming to vulnerable youth; however, youth were not explicitly asked about the potential social-emotional benefits of empowering and respectful service quality practices at LOVE NS. To better understand how service quality practices at LOVE NS are connected to youths' social-emotional functioning, it is important to examine the link between service quality and social-emotional competence directly. In addition, most participants in this study were not currently involved with LOVE NS. Instead, they were alumni. It is thus possible that some participants relied on knowledge surrounding current perceptions to characterize past experiences, which may interfere with the quality of data collection (Beckett et al., 2001). Study 2 addressed these limitations by including an exclusive

sample of active LOVE NS youth to examine the link between service quality and social-emotional competence.

Findings from this study indicate that LOVE NS youth have pre-existing internalizing and externalizing problems when they arrive at programming. Given that internalizing and externalizing issues are associated with social-emotional problems and more negative service quality experiences among vulnerable youth (Arsenio et al., 2009; Jones et al., 2015; Li et al., 2011; Moffit et al., 2010; Taylor et al., 2017), examining the association between service quality and social-emotional competence without accounting for individual risk may paint an inaccurate picture of the experiences of youth at LOVE NS. Effectiveness of community-based PYD programs targeting vulnerable young people may not be fully interpreted. Findings regarding the adverse experiences of LOVE NS youth thus supported the decision to consider psychological distress, drug use, and delinquency as possible covariates for Study 2.

Youth in this study did not report engaging in aggressive behaviour; however, evidence suggests that drug use and delinquency are positively associated with aggression (Sommer et al., 2017). Acts of aggression are also more common among youth exposed to adversity (Fava et al., 2019), as well as those involved in violence prevention programming (Reidy et al., 2017). If levels of aggression among LOVE NS youth are quantitatively comparable to those of delinquency, drug use, and psychological distress, or if aggression is negatively related to social-emotional competence, as has been demonstrated in recent research (Maciejewski et al., 2019), it may be important to control for aggressive behaviour to gain a more accurate representation of the association

between service quality and social-emotional competence. As such, aggression was considered as a possible covariate in Study 2.

Many studies on resilience continue to define resilience as an individual trait (Ungar, 2011). By demonstrating that LOVE NS youth gain access to resilience resources through facilitative environments despite exposure to adversity, the present study provided support for ecological resilience theory (Ungar, 2008). Findings support the importance of assessing resilience ecologically in Study 2. In addition, although youth in this study reported gaining access to resilience resources through participation in LOVE NS' programs, the current study was unable to determine which program "ingredients", such as service quality, are implicated in youths' resilience. Moreover, the study could not provide quantitative support for the processual nature of resilience. To account for these limitations, the mediating role of resilience in the association between service quality and social-emotional competence was explored in Study 2.

## **Conclusion**

This study served as an important first step to examining service quality, resilience, and social-emotional competence in LOVE NS youth. Youth demonstrated evidence of resilience through the seven resilience tensions (Ungar et al., 2007). Further, when resources were missing from youths' lives, they experienced LOVE NS as a critical component facilitating resilience processes. Results are in line with literature on the relevance of PYD programs for helping vulnerable youth fulfil basic needs (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003), many of which are not met outside of programming (Masten, 2001). In addition to characterizing resilience as a multidimensional, dynamic process rooted in youths' individual experiences, findings contribute to a more comprehensive

understanding regarding how vulnerable youth at LOVE NS cope with adversity. Results also exemplify the importance of examining resilience ecologically, supporting the inclusion of an ecological measure of resilience for Study 2.

## **Chapter 8: Study 2 Literature Review**

### **Service Quality**

For many years, researchers and professionals alike have worked to identify the critical components of PYD programs (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2016). Despite the fact that at its core, PYD advocates for supportive relationships, youth agency, and opportunities for skill building, most studies have ignored contextual factors and focused exclusively on program goals and activities (Lapalme et al., 2014). Youths' service quality experiences remain under-investigated (Catalano et al., 2002). Without a solid idea regarding which program components are essential for promoting positive development, it is difficult to determine how PYD programs work to support youth (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2016). Lack of clarity here also prevents researchers from interpreting mixed findings regarding the effectiveness of PYD programs targeting youth exposed to adversity (Catalano et al., 2002; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2016). To address these issues, researchers need not only ask "does it work", they must also ask "why" (Granger, 2010; as cited in Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2016).

Limited available evidence points to the importance of examining *how* programs are delivered to youth facing adversity. For instance, research examining links between service quality and positive outcomes for vulnerable youth engaged in multiple formal service systems, including mental health, juvenile justice, child welfare, and educational systems, suggests that when youth consistently experience services as empowering and

respectful, they enjoy concurrent and long-term benefits through increased well-being and resilience (Sanders et al., 2015; 2017b). These gains hold even while controlling for internalizing and externalizing problems (Sanders et al., 2015; 2017b). Importantly, the number and type of services that vulnerable youth receive are not associated with positive outcomes (Sanders et al., 2015; 2017b). This suggests that service quality may play a critical role in bolstering outcomes for youth facing adversity (Ungar et al., 2013b). Still, it remains unknown whether findings extend to youth engaged in community-based PYD programs. Recall that vulnerable youth often face barriers to accessing and engaging in formal service systems (Robards et al., 2018). According to the literature, community-based programs may be a viable approach to intervening with vulnerable young people (Bochus, 2015), making this is an important area of research.

### **Service Quality and Social-Emotional Competence**

Evidence indicates that professionals should draw on PYD principles in order to help youth overcome adversity (Sanders et al., 2015; 2017b). Still, little is known about the role service quality may play in improving outcomes for vulnerable youth engaged in community-based PYD programs (Catalano et al., 2002), and researchers have yet to investigate the association between service quality and social-emotional competence among this population. In fact, many studies on the effectiveness of PYD programs do not examine social-emotional competence in general (Ciocanel et al., 2017). This is problematic given that “competence” is one of the 5 Cs of PYD, with over 80% of PYD programs aiming to promote social competence in particular (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). To help determine whether PYD programs are successful in achieving the outcomes for which they strive (Gillham et al., 2002), the present study examined the

association between service quality and social-emotional competence for vulnerable youth in PYD programming.

Achieving social-emotional competence is beneficial for all young people (Durlak et al., 2017); however, having strong social-emotional skills may be especially important for youth facing adversity, as these skills can protect youth against the negative effects of risk exposure (Domitrovich et al., 2017). Although previous research is scarce, studies on program atmosphere suggest that the manner in which PYD programs are delivered to vulnerable youth may be implicated in social-emotional functioning. Like service quality, the atmosphere of a program reflects the extent to which a program encourages supportive relationships with staff, operates in culturally appropriate ways, and empowers youth to make choices and take responsibility (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). A qualitative systematic review by Lapalme et al. (2014) revealed that cultivating an empowering program atmosphere characterized by supportive and caring relationships exceeds participation in skill building activities when it comes to improving factors related to social-emotional competence, such as personal relationship competencies, self-control, problem solving, and decision-making. These findings are in line with related research suggesting that service quality, but not service use history, predicts overall adaptive functioning among vulnerable youth involved in multiple formal service systems (Sanders & Munford, 2014; Sanders et al., 2015; 2017; Ungar et al., 2013b). Taken together, previous research highlights the importance of working with vulnerable youth in empowering and respectful ways (Sanders & Munford, 2014). To better understand whether service quality practices are related to social-emotional competence for youth facing adversity, the link between service quality and social-emotional competence was

explored in this study. Findings can inform future program evaluation studies, which, as previously mentioned, are currently known to ignore service quality factors (Catalano et al., 2002).

### **Resilience**

PYD theoretically contends that community-based PYD programs may lead to better outcomes for vulnerable youth by cultivating access to supports and opportunities that will help youth thrive under adversity (Sanders & Munford, 2014). Resilience, defined ecologically, is consistent with PYD approaches, which both have roots in systems theories (Lerner, 2005). Both approaches emphasize the bidirectional relationship between youth and their environment. They also advocate for the ability of all young people to create change in their lives through enhancing resources, strengths, and competence (Lerner, 2005; Masten, 2014a). Moreover, in line with “The Big Three” components of effective PYD programs, building positive relationships with practitioners and providing youth with opportunities for healthy development are important aspects of resilience theory (Sanders et al., 2017b; Ungar et al., 2007). It may thus be speculated that an ecological perspective of resilience would fit well with interventions implementing PYD practices (Sanders et al., 2015).

According to ecological resilience theory, resilience should mediate the link between service quality and adaptive functioning (Ungar, 2008). Results from cross-sectional studies show that service quality is positively associated with resilience, which then bolsters positive outcomes for vulnerable youth engaged in multiple formal services (Sanders et al., 2015; Ungar et al., 2013b). Resilience may thus act as a mediator in the link between service quality and positive outcomes, lending further support to processual

definitions of the resilience construct (Ungar et al., 2007). On the contrary, longitudinal evidence suggests that although youth receiving multiple high-quality services do enjoy more positive outcomes over time, resilience is not implicated in this process (Sanders et al., 2017b). To further investigate whether resilience facilitates the link between service quality and positive outcomes for vulnerable youth, I examined whether resilience functions as a mediator in the association between service quality and social-emotional competence in the present study. By shedding light on the process by which community-based PYD programs may enhance social-emotional functioning, this study helped address questions regarding why PYD programs work, or do not. This is important, as most studies examining PYD programs do not currently assess mediation (Gillham et al., 2002).

### **Chapter 9: The Present Study (Study 2)**

Little is known regarding the association between PYD program service quality and social-emotional competence in youth facing adversity. While some studies have linked PYD service quality factors to improved outcomes among youth engaged in multiple formal service systems (Sanders & Munford, 2014; Sanders et al., 2015; 2017b; Ungar et al., 2013b), researchers have yet to explore whether service quality is linked to social-emotional competence for vulnerable youth engaged in community-based PYD programs. Compared to formal services, informal PYD programs delivered in community-settings may be a more promising way of intervening with vulnerable youth (Bochus, 2015). Examining the characteristics of community-based PYD programs that are implicated in positive social-emotional outcomes in youth facing adversity is thus imperative given that without successful intervention, youth facing adversity may



experience social-emotional difficulties and struggle to transition successfully into adulthood (Berzin, 2010; Domitrovich et al., 2017).

To increase awareness regarding the ways in which community-based PYD programs may enhance social-emotional functioning in vulnerable youth, the present study aimed to examine whether service quality at LOVE NS is related to social-emotional competence for youth, while considering individual risk factors (i.e., internalizing and externalizing issues) as potential covariates. While cross-sectional studies indicate that high service quality may promote positive outcomes in vulnerable youth through increasing youths' resilience (Sanders et al., 2015; Ungar et al., 2013b), recent longitudinal findings suggest otherwise (Sanders et al., 2017b). Thus, another aim of the study was to clarify the role of resilience in the association between service quality and social-emotional competence among youth facing adversity. Whether resilience mediates the link between service quality and social-emotional competence among youth at LOVE NS was explored.

### **Hypothesis 1**

Studies show that receiving high quality services can enable vulnerable youth to achieve better outcomes, even while controlling for risk (Sanders et al., 2015; 2017b; Ungar et al., 2013b). Previous qualitative research also suggests that factors related to service quality, such as supportive staff-youth relationships and an empowering atmosphere, predict enhanced social-emotional skills for low- and high-risk youth engaged in PYD programs (Lapalme et al., 2014). Thus, I expected that service quality would be positively associated with social-emotional competence for youth at LOVE NS, while considering individual risk factors.

**Hypothesis 2**

Despite evidence suggesting that resilience is unrelated to service quality (Sanders et al., 2017b), I expected that service quality would be positively associated with resilience for youth, beyond individual risk. This hypothesis is consistent with literature linking PYD and resilience theories (Sanders et al., 2015), as well as a series of cross-sectional studies examining the association between service quality and resilience (Sanders et al., 2015; Ungar et al., 2013b). The hypothesis is also derived from findings in Study 1, showing that youth may gain access to resources underlying both service quality and resilience processes through their involvement with LOVE NS.

**Hypothesis 3**

In similar contrast to findings regarding the role of resilience in the association between service quality and positive outcomes (Sanders et al., 2017b), I expected that resilience would function as a mediator in the link between service quality and social-emotional competence among youth at LOVE NS, beyond individual risk. This hypothesis is consistent with current conceptualizations of resilience as a dynamic, multidimensional process by which young people access resources that allow them to cope positively with adversity (Ungar & Liebenberg, 2011), as well as previous cross-sectional research (Sanders et al., 2015; Ungar et al., 2013b). This hypothesis is also derived from Study 1 findings indicating that resilience is ecological and dynamic, as youths' resilience increased over time through interactions with facilitative environments, including LOVE NS.

## Chapter 10: Study 2 Method

Results from Study 1 were reviewed with LOVE NS' staff in May 2019 and collectively used to inform the design of the focus group and quantitative questionnaire implemented in this study. In June 2019, I prepared a written proposal for LOVE NS staff regarding Study 2 and LOVE NS' staff provided their input regarding the suitability of the proposed quantitative questionnaires during another meeting.

### Participants

#### *Focus Group*

The subsample for the focus group consisted of 10 LOVE NS Youth Leaders and alumni. LOVE NS Youth Leaders and Alumni ages 16 and above were invited to participate. Current LOVE NS Youth Leaders comprised the majority of the subsample ( $n = 9$ ). Demographic information (i.e., age, gender, ethnicity) was not obtained.

#### *Survey*

The subsample for the survey consisted of 30 LOVE NS youth between the ages of 14 and 25 ( $M_{age} = 18.14$ ,  $SD = 3.15$ ). Youth identified as male ( $n = 12$ ), female ( $n = 16$ ), and Two-Spirited ( $n = 1$ ), with one youth preferring not to report their gender. Only youth currently engaged with LOVE NS were eligible to participate. At the time of study, 36.7% of participants reported being involved with LOVE NS for three years or more, 40% had been involved for one to two years, and 13.3% had been involved for less than one year. Youth attended LOVE NS programming in Halifax ( $n = 16$ ), Membertou ( $n = 9$ ), and Sipekne'katik ( $n = 5$ ). The majority of participants reported attending a LOVE NS activity at least once a week on average ( $n = 27$ ). Although most participants identified as straight (63.3%), many identified as LGBTQ+ (bisexual: 20%; pansexual: 6.6%; gay:

3.3%; queer: 3.3%), with 3.3% identifying as other. The sample was ethnically diverse and consisted of Indigenous (43%), mixed-race (25.7%), White (16.7%), and Black (10%) youth, with one youth not responding.

## **Procedure**

### ***Focus Group***

The focus group took place at the LOVE NS office in Halifax in January 2019 following Leadership Program. The focus group was facilitated by myself and another trained research assistant. Participants were recruited through word-of-mouth at LOVE NS. Study 1 interview participants were also invited to participate by interviewers at the conclusion of each interview. Procedures surrounding consent, participant support, and compensation followed those outlined in Study 1 (see Chapter 5 for a full description).

Participatory action research methods aim to empower marginalized research participants by including them in various phases of the research process (Roche, 2008). In line with a participatory action approach, a focus group was facilitated to include participants in the development of a self-report questionnaire, which was implemented in the second phase of the present study to assess youths' attitudes and behaviours related to their experiences with LOVE NS. During the focus group, participants were asked to provide their opinions regarding what the questionnaire should look like (i.e., format and length), which topics should be included, and how it should be administered to youth. Participants were also asked to share which topics they would be uncomfortable seeing on the questionnaire. Example topics, such as resilience, service quality, drug use, self-harm, sexual abuse, family, and happiness were reviewed. Facilitators explained constructs,

such as resilience and service quality, in plain language to ensure participants' comprehension. The duration of the focus group was approximately 30 minutes.

### *Survey*

Data collection began midway through November 2019 and ended in December 2019. To ensure an exclusive sample of current LOVE NS youth, the study was not advertised publicly. Rather, participants were recruited through a private LOVE NS Facebook group where a study link was posted. Findings from the focus group revealed that youth aimed to develop a survey shedding light on the benefits of participating in LOVE NS' programs. As such, outcome variables included in the survey were strengths-based. Regarding possible topics of exploration, youth in the focus group expressed an interest in resilience and service quality factors, as well as social-emotional competencies, including coping skills, self-awareness, decision-making skills, and relationship skills. Youth also expressed an interest in looking into academic achievement, social support, and belonging, along with individual risk factors, such as depression, anxiety, impulsivity, rule breaking and aggressive behaviour, and substance use. They reported being uncomfortable with the prospect of answering questions about sexual assault and self-harm.

To sustain attention and prevent respondent fatigue, youth in the focus group requested that the survey take approximately 20 minutes to complete. Findings are consistent with evidence suggesting that participants respond more positively to shorter scales (Liebenberg et al., 2013). Researchers acknowledged that designing a survey rooted in youths' perspectives would require a balanced trade-off between number of variables included and survey length. Not all possible topics of interest could thus be

included in the survey; however, short scales were used where possible to maximize the number of topics explored. The final survey included nine questionnaires measuring factors, some of which were beyond the scope of the present study, such as program participation, service quality, resilience, psychological distress, externalizing behaviours, psychological well-being, social-emotional competence, prosocial behaviour, and openness to diversity. In line with youths' recommendations regarding sexual assault and self-harm, these variables were not assessed. The entire survey included 131 items and took approximately 30 minutes to complete.

When asked what the survey should look like, youth indicated a preference for online administration. Thus, each participant was asked to complete a self-report online survey. Youth in the focus group did not express a preference regarding whether the survey was to be completed alone or in the presence of a trained research assistant. To reduce socially desirable responding, the survey was designed to be completed independently. Participants provided informed consent online before participating. To increase youth engagement (Hawke et al., 2018) and address power relations, the study's purpose and terms surrounding consent, confidentiality, and withdrawal were explained to youth via a brief video, as well as in writing at the beginning of the survey. Communicating consent through video can help minimize the participant-researcher power imbalance by accounting for literacy issues (McInroy, 2017). Given that participants completed the survey on their own and trained researchers were not available to clarify issues surrounding consent, facilitating youths' understanding regarding the terms of the research was critical.

All survey participants were provided with Kids Help Phone and Halifax Regional Municipality Mental Health Mobile Crisis Team contact information. Participants were entered into a draw to win one of ten \$25 gift cards for Tim Hortons or Amazon. Study 2 received clearance by the Saint Mary's University Research Ethics Board and was funded by the Saint Mary's University CASE Community Engaged Research Assistance Program. As this study was part of a larger project, only the measures described in the section below were of interest for purposes of this thesis.

### ***Survey Measures***

***Individual Risk.*** To assess individual risk, internalizing and externalizing problems were considered. To measure internalizing problems, participants completed the 6-item Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K6; Kessler et al., 2002). The K6 is a brief screening tool that assesses the frequency of non-specific psychological distress during the past 30 days (Kessler et al., 2002). Examples of questionnaire items include “Hopeless” and “So depressed that nothing could cheer you up”. Although originally developed for use with adults, the K6 has demonstrated strong reliability and construct validity among adolescent samples (Peiper et al., 2015). Participants responded to items on a 5-point scale, ranging from 0 = *Never* to 4 = *All of the time*, with higher scores indicating increased psychological distress. The internal consistency of the measure showed excellent reliability ( $\alpha = .92$ ).

Externalizing behaviours were measured using the physical aggression, delinquency, and drug use sub-scales of the Problem Behaviour Frequency Scale (PBFS; Farrell et al., 2016). The PBFS assesses adolescents' frequency of victimization, aggression, drug use, and non-violent delinquency within the past 30 days. The PBFS has

demonstrated good construct validity in previous research (Farrell et al., 2016). Examples of questionnaire items include “Hit or slapped another kid” (physical aggression; 5 items;  $\alpha = .82$ ), “Used marijuana” (drug use; 5 items;  $\alpha = .85$ ), and “Damaged school or other property that did not belong to you” (delinquency; 5 items;  $\alpha = .66$ ). Items were rated by participants on a 6-point frequency scale, ranging from 1 = *Never* to 6 = *20 or more times*, with higher scores indicating greater problem behaviours.

***Service Quality.*** Service quality was assessed through an adapted version of the Youth Satisfaction Survey (YSS-13; Liebenberg et al., 2013). The YSS-13 was adapted from the full length YSS (Bunk et al., 2000) and includes 13 items that consider youth service satisfaction and the extent to which service experiences are consistent with PYD principles. Items in the YSS-13 measure personal agency (4 items), staff respect, relational ability, support (7 items), development of life skills (1 item), and overall satisfaction (1 item). Examples of original questionnaire items include “I helped choose my services” (agency), “Staff respected my beliefs” (staff relationships), “I am now better able to cope when things go wrong” (life skills), and “Overall, I am satisfied with the services I received” (satisfaction; Liebenberg et al., 2013). The principal investigator customized the YSS-13 in the present study for use with youth who are currently involved with LOVE NS. For example, the item “I helped choose my services” was adapted to “I help choose my services at LOVE”. Participants responded to items on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 = *Strongly disagree* to 5 = *Strongly agree*. A global assessment of service quality was of interest in the present study. Thus, an average score across the 13 questionnaire items was calculated for each participant. Higher average scores of the 13



items indicated receiving higher quality services. Internal consistency of the YSS-13 was excellent ( $\alpha = .92$ ).

**Resilience.** To identify the presence of resilience processes, participants completed the simplified version of the Child and Youth Resilience Measure-Revised (CYRM-R; Jefferies et al., 2019). The CYRM-R is a 17-item culturally and contextually sensitive measure of youth resilience, which was originally piloted in 11 countries (Ungar & Liebenberg, 2011). The CYRM-R's factor structure can change across contexts according to differences in youths' lives and experiences (Ungar & Liebenberg, 2011). As such, studies on ecological resilience most often consider resilience as a single factor (Sanders & Munford, 2014; Sanders et al., 2015; 2017b; Ungar et al., 2013b). Examples of questionnaire items include "My caregiver(s) really look out for me" and "I am treated fairly in my community". Participants responded to items on a 3-point scale, ranging from 1 = *Not at all* to 3 = *A lot*. To obtain a global assessment of resilience, an average score across all 17 items was calculated for each participant. Higher average scores overall were indicative of higher resilience. Internal consistency of the CYRM-R was excellent ( $\alpha = .93$ ).

**Social-Emotional Competence.** Social-emotional competence was measured using the 25-item Social-Emotional Competence Questionnaire (SECQ; Zhou & Ee, 2012). The SECQ assesses youths' self- and other-awareness and responses in a variety of settings, including family, school, community, personally, socially, and ethically (Zhou & Ee, 2012). The SECQ has five sub-scales, including self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship management, and responsible decision-making. Examples of questionnaire items include "I understand why I do what I do" (self-awareness;  $\alpha =$

.78), “If a friend is upset, I have a pretty good idea why” (social awareness;  $\alpha = .81$ ), “I stay calm when things go wrong” (self-management;  $\alpha = .86$ ), “I try not to criticize my friends when we quarrel” (relationship management;  $\alpha = .65$ ), and “When making decisions, I take into account the consequences of my actions” (responsible decision-making;  $\alpha = .85$ ). Items were rated by participants on a 6-point frequency scale, ranging from 1 = *Not at all true of me* to 6 = *Very true of me*. Given that a global assessment of social-emotional competence was of interest in the present study, an average score across all 25 items was calculated for each participant. Higher average scores overall were indicative of greater social-emotional competence. Internal reliability of the SECQ was excellent ( $\alpha = .92$ ).

## Chapter 11: Results

The hypothesized model was conceptualized based on the theory of ecological resilience (Ungar, 2008), which was presented in Chapter 2. According to the model, receiving empowering and respectful services (i.e., service quality) is associated with increased social-emotional competence through its association with resilience, while controlling for risk. First, preliminary analyses were conducted to identify possible individual risk variables to account for as covariates and to support the theoretical decision to collapse across the subscales for social-emotional competence. The individual risk variables considered in preliminary analyses included delinquency, drug use, aggression, and psychological distress. Following preliminary analyses, data were analyzed to determine whether underlying multiple linear regression assumptions were met. Lastly, model fit was assessed and parameters were estimated through a series of hierarchical regressions and the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2013).

### **A Priori Power Analysis**

Statistical power refers to the likelihood of finding an effect if an effect is there to be found. A power of .80 or higher is recommended (Cohen, 1965). When statistical power is low, the probability of making a type II error is increased. A priori power analysis was conducted using G\*Power 3 (Faul et al., 2009) to test both the bivariate correlation and linear multiple regression  $R^2$  increase using a two-tailed test, medium effect size ( $r = .30$ ;  $f^2 = .15$ ) and an alpha of .05. To test the bivariate correlation, results revealed that a total sample of  $n = 82$  was sufficient to achieve a power of .80 as recommended. To test the linear multiple regression  $R^2$  increase, results revealed that a total sample of  $n = 55$  was sufficient. Thus, the sample ( $n = 30$ ) was not of sufficient size to detect effects at a power of .80. According to Button et al. (2013), low power can have implications for detecting genuine effects. That is, underpowered studies are more likely to yield false negatives. They further argued that when studies with low power do detect a genuine effect, the amplitude of that effect is more likely to be inflated. For instance, in cases wherein the genuine effect is medium sized, only those underpowered studies which overestimate the amplitude of the effect will incur significance. Button et al. (2013) stated that this may interfere with the process of replication, as replication studies will likely demonstrate smaller effect sizes. As such, both null findings and effect sizes surrounding significant findings in the present study should be interpreted with caution.

### **Preliminary Analyses**

Preliminary analyses were conducted to identify covariates and support the theoretical decision to collapse across subscales for the social-emotional competence measure. To explore associations between study variables, bivariate correlational analyses

were conducted. Bivariate correlation assumes that variables are normally distributed (Field, 2018). Violation of this assumption invalidates confidence intervals and significance tests in small samples, unless bootstrap confidence intervals are interpreted (Field, 2018). Bootstrapping is a statistical procedure which draws between 1000 and 5000 repeated random samples of the observed data with replacement (Field, 2018). Confidence intervals are then derived from the sampling distribution of scores. As such, bootstrapping can be useful when data violate distributional assumptions, such as normality.

For a complete overview of normality testing, see Appendix F. Social-emotional competence and psychological distress were approximately normally distributed. Aggression, delinquency, and drug use were positively skewed and leptokurtic, whereas service quality was negatively skewed and leptokurtic. Resilience was negatively skewed. Given the lack of normality in many of the variables, bootstrap confidence intervals were interpreted to determine the significance of associations. According to Field (2018), robust procedures, such as bootstrapping, are preferable over data transformation for addressing non-normality.

To support the decision to collapse across subscales for social-emotional competence, bivariate correlational analyses were first conducted between social-emotional competence subscales themselves and then between social-emotional competence subscales and other primary variables (i.e., service quality and resilience). All associations were revealed to be in the expected direction. With the exception of the association between resilience and social awareness, effect sizes ranged from medium to large. Self-awareness was significantly positively associated with social awareness ( $r =$

.59, 95% BCa CI [3.6, 7.5]), self-management ( $r = .50$ , 95% BCa CI [.28, .72]), relationship management ( $r = .43$ , 95% BCa CI [.06, .73]), and decision-making ( $r = .64$ , 95% BCa CI [.34, .84]). Social awareness was significantly positively associated with relationship management ( $r = .41$ , 95% BCa CI [.07, .72]). Social awareness was also positively associated with self-management ( $r = .33$ , 95% BCa CI [-.03, .66]) and decision-making ( $r = .40$ , 95% BCa CI [-.02, .78]); however, these associations did not reach significance. Self-management was significantly positively associated with relationship management ( $r = .55$ , 95% BCa CI [.22, .77]) and decision-making ( $r = .64$ , 95% BCa CI [.40, .86]). Relationship management and decision-making were also significantly positively associated ( $r = .72$ , 95% BCa CI [.43, .88]).

Service quality and resilience were both significantly positively associated with self-awareness (service quality:  $r = .37$ , 95% BCa CI [.09, .68]; resilience:  $r = .51$ , 95% BCa CI [.17, .75]), self-management (service quality:  $r = .43$ , 95% BCa CI [.21, .64]; resilience:  $r = .53$ , 95% BCa CI [.17, .77]), relationship management (service quality:  $r = .55$ , 95% BCa CI [.39, .75]; resilience:  $r = .56$ , 95% BCa CI [.23, .81]), and decision-making (service quality:  $r = .44$ , 95% BCa CI [.22, .71]; resilience:  $r = .69$ , 95% BCa CI [.46, .86]). Service quality and resilience were also positively associated with social awareness; however, these associations did not reach significance (service quality:  $r = .32$ , 95% BCa CI [-.02, .66]; resilience:  $r = .10$ , 95% BCa CI [-.25, .49]). Recall that while internal consistency was good for social awareness, self-management, and responsible decision-making, and adequate for self-awareness, it was questionable for relationship management. When the sub-scales were collapsed and scores were averaged across a single measure of social-emotional competence, internal consistency was

excellent. To maximize reliability and avoid increased risk of type I error across multiple tests, further analyses used the aggregate social-emotional competence measure. This decision was further supported by the aforementioned correlations, as well as a lack of theoretical motivation to consider subscales separately.

To identify potential covariates, bivariate correlational analyses were conducted first between individual risk factors themselves and then between individual risk factors and other primary variables (i.e., social-emotional competence and service quality). Results revealed that drug use was significantly positively associated with psychological distress ( $r = .35$ , 95% BCa CI [.08, .61]) and aggression ( $r = .69$ , 95% BCa CI [.03, .91]), but not delinquency ( $r = .18$ , 95% BCa CI [-.13, .74]). Delinquency and aggression were significantly positively associated ( $r = .51$ , 95% BCa CI [.14, .30]). There was no significant association between delinquency and psychological distress ( $r = -.07$ , 95% BCa CI [-.37, .46]), nor psychological distress and aggression ( $r = .14$ , 95% BCa CI [-.10, .44]).

Of particular interest were the significant negative associations between social-emotional competence and both aggression ( $r = -.35$ , 95% BCa CI = [-.63, -.05]) and delinquency ( $r = -.49$ , 95% BCa CI [-.68, -.26]). Social-emotional competence was significantly associated with neither drug use ( $r = -.28$ , 95% BCa CI [-.59, .16]) nor psychological distress ( $r = -.27$ , 95% BCa CI [-.73, .21]). As such, drug use and psychological distress were removed from subsequent analyses. Aggression and delinquency were significantly negatively associated with service quality (aggression:  $r = -.41$ , 95% BCa CI [-.84, .08]; delinquency:  $r = -.29$ , 95% BCa CI [-.85, -.08]). A primary interest of the study was to explore the role of service quality in understanding resilience

and social-emotional competence. Given that delinquency and aggression were positively associated with one another and negatively associated with service quality, delinquency and aggression were combined to produce an aggregate score of externalizing behaviour, which was entered as a covariate in subsequent analyses. It should also be noted that as a model includes more variables, sample size should increase accordingly to maintain adequate study power to detect an effect (Field, 2018). Thus, combining the two risk variables into a single measure of externalizing also maximized power, which was important given the small sample size.

Descriptive statistics for the variables included in subsequent analyses are reported in Table 4. Missing data ranged from a low of 0% for service quality and resilience to a high of 3.3% for social-emotional competence and externalizing. According to Shafer (1999), when less than 5% of data is missing, analyses are unlikely to be biased. Still, Little's (1988) test of missingness was conducted to determine the pattern of missingness and highlight possible bias influencing the data. Results revealed that data were missing completely at random (MCAR). This means that missing values were not associated with relevant variables and there were no patterns in the data (Bennet, 2001). Given that data were MCAR and missing values were rare, missing values were replaced with the mean of the non-missing values for each variable.

**Table 4**  
*Descriptive statistics*

Measure	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	Range	
				Min	Max
Externalizing	1.29	.45	1.10	1	6
Service quality	4.57	.58	4.48	1	5
Resilience	2.54	.41	2.62	1	3
SEC	3.24	.47	3.28	1	6

*Note.* *N* = 30. *Mdn* = median, SEC = social-emotional competence

Bivariate correlations and their corresponding bias corrected and accelerated 95% confidence intervals are reported in Table 5. Of interest, social-emotional competence was significantly positively associated with resilience and service quality. Resilience and service quality were also significantly positively associated, while externalizing was significantly negatively associated with service quality and resilience.

**Table 5**  
*Correlations and 95% confidence intervals among study variables*

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Externalizing	1			
2. Service quality	-.49*	1		
	[-.84, -.13]			
3. Resilience	-.10	.35*	1	
	[-.50, .30]	[.15, .64]		
4. SEC	-.55*	.52*	.54*	1
	[-.76, -.24]	[.29, .74]	[.25, .77]	

*Note.* *N* = 30.

SEC = social-emotional competence

Bias corrected and accelerated 95% confidence intervals using 1000 bootstrap samples for each correlation are reported in square brackets. \* indicates significance.



## **Assumption Testing**

### ***Linearity***

In regression, dependent variables are assumed to be linearly related to all predictor variables (Field, 2018). Visual inspection of the scatterplots of associations between social-emotional competence and externalizing, service quality, and resilience indicated that each predictor variable was linearly related to social-emotional competence. Linearity was further supported through inspection of the residual scatterplots and partial plots for externalizing, service quality, and resilience.

### ***Homoscedasticity***

Homoscedasticity assumes that the variance of the residuals around the regression line are the same across different levels of the independent variable (Field, 2018). When this assumption is violated and variances are unequal (i.e., heteroscedasticity), confidence intervals and significance tests are nullified. Visual inspection of the residual scatterplot for social-emotional competence indicated that the assumption of homoscedasticity had been met.

### ***Normally Distributed Errors***

Multiple linear regression assumes that residual errors are normally distributed with a mean of zero. In other words, differences between predicted and observed scores should hover around zero and differences substantially exceeding zero should be rare (Field, 2018). Violation of this assumption invalidates confidence intervals and significance tests in small samples, unless bootstrap confidence intervals are interpreted.

The residual histogram and normal P-P plot indicated that the distribution of errors was normal. Thus, the assumption of normally distributed errors was met.

### ***Multicollinearity***

Multicollinearity is characterized by a strong association ( $r > .80$ ) between multiple predictor variables (Field, 2018). If predictor variables are highly correlated with one another, variability in  $bs$  increases across samples, which means that  $b$  coefficients in the sample may not be representative of those in the population (Field, 2018). In addition, it limits the amount of overall variance in the model because individual predictors account for little unique variance, making it difficult to ascertain each predictor's influence (Field, 2018). In addition to reviewing the correlation matrix for high associations between predictors, multicollinearity can be detected using the tolerance statistic (Field, 2018). According to Bowerman and O'Connell (1990), tolerance values of below .10 are cause for concern (as cited in Field, 2018). No substantial correlations ( $r > .80$ ) between predictors were revealed in the correlation matrix, suggesting the absence of multicollinearity. The respective tolerance values for externalizing, service quality, and resilience were .77, .77, and .87, also indicating that the assumption of no multicollinearity had been met.

### ***Outliers***

Outliers are scores that differ considerably from the data's predominant trend (Field, 2018). Whereas a univariate outlier refers to a single extreme case, multivariate outliers refer to cases that are unusual in their combination of scores (Field, 2018). It is important to detect outliers because their presence can interfere with the representativeness of the model.

To identify multivariate outliers in the sample, Mahalanobis distance was calculated. Mahalanobis distance considers the distance of cases from the average scores of any predictor variables, with high values being problematic (Field, 2018). Results revealed no cases with a distance score exceeding the critical value of  $\chi^2(4) = 14.86$ ,  $p = .001$  for social-emotional competence, indicating no multivariate outliers in the sample. Subsequent analysis of the standardized residuals revealed no significant univariate outliers ( $z > 3.30$ ; Field, 2018).

When a case pulls the regression solution to itself, it is referred to as a univariate outlier in the solution (Field, 2018). The smaller the sample size, the more likely it is that outliers will impact the model parameters. Univariate outliers in the solution can be detected through inspection of Standardized DFFit, Standardized DFBeta, as well as Cook's Distance values. DFBeta refers to the difference between a parameter estimates using all cases and that which is estimated when a particular case is excluded (Field, 2018). On the other hand, DFFit refers to the difference between predicted values for a case when the model is estimated including or excluding that case (Field, 2018). Standardized DFFit and Standardized DFBeta values exceeding 3.30 indicate cases that have a substantial influence on the model parameters. Cook's distance can also shed light on whether specific cases unduly influence parameters of the model. Cook's distance assesses a case's overall influence on the model (Field, 2018). Values exceeding 1 indicate that a case has a substantial impact on the model's ability to predict all cases (Cook & Weisberg, 1982; as cited in Field, 2018). Standardized DFFit and Standardized DFBeta values were all below three in either direction and Cook's Distance values were all below one, suggesting that no individual cases were unduly influencing the model.

### ***Summary***

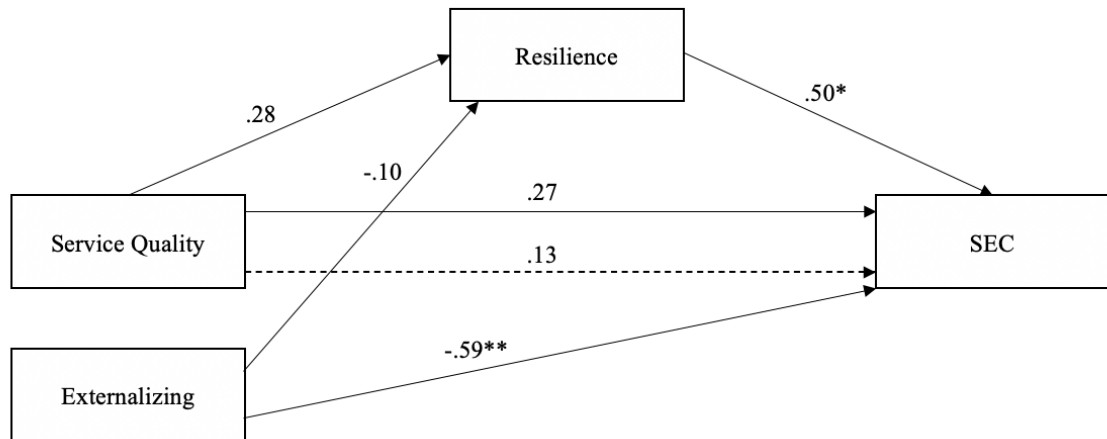
Multiple linear regression assumes linearity, homoscedasticity, normality, no multicollinearity, and no outliers. Despite analyses showing that all statistical assumptions were met, power was low due to the study's small sample size ( $N = 30$ ). To minimize the likelihood of type II error, bootstrap confidence intervals and significance values were interpreted in subsequent analyses. In line with central limit theorem, bootstrap distributions more closely resemble the distribution of the population from which the sample was taken (Field, 2018). This process increases the representativeness of parameter estimates, which can help reduce the risk of type II error resulting from small sample size.

### **Mediation Analysis**

Multiple hierarchical linear regression and the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2013) were used to test whether the association between service quality and social-emotional competence was mediated by resilience, while controlling for externalizing (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1.**

*Model of Associations Between Externalizing, Service Quality, Resilience, and Social-Emotional Competence*



*Note.* SEC = social-emotional competence.

Statistics are standardized regression coefficients. The dotted line represents the direct effect (Path C prime).

\* $p < .01$ , \*\* $p < .001$

A series of multiple hierarchical linear regressions were conducted to test the C, A, B, and C' paths. First, the C path predicting social-emotional competence from service quality was tested. Externalizing was entered as a control variable in Block 1. Service quality was entered in Block 2. Externalizing explained 30.3% of the variance in social-emotional competence,  $F(1, 28) = 12.15, p = .002, R^2 = .30, Adjusted R^2 = .28$ . Engaging in externalizing behavior was significantly negatively associated with social-emotional competence,  $b = -.58, t = -3.49, p = .001, 95\% \text{ BCa CI } [-.84, -.27]$ , which represented a large effect size ( $R = .55; Adjusted R = .53$ ). Service quality accounted for an additional 8.8% of variance in social-emotional competence beyond externalizing,  $\Delta F(1,27) = 3.78, p = .065, \Delta R^2 = .09, Adjusted R^2 = .34$ . Beyond externalizing, service quality was

positively associated with social-emotional competence,  $b = .27$ ,  $t = 1.94$ ,  $p = .083$ , 95% BCa CI [-.04, .73]; however, this medium sized effect,  $\Delta R = .30$ , did not reach statistical significance.

Second, the A path predicting resilience from service quality was tested. Again, externalizing was entered as a control variable in Block 1 and service quality was entered in Block 2. Externalizing explained 1% of the variance in resilience,  $F(1, 28) = .31$ ,  $p = .583$ ,  $R^2 = .01$ , *Adjusted R*<sup>2</sup> = -.02. Engaging in higher levels of externalizing was associated with reduced resilience,  $b = -.10$ ,  $t = -.56$ ,  $p = .583$ , 95% BCa CI [-.69, .25]. This association was non-significant and represented a small effect size ( $R = .10$ ; *Adjusted R* = .14). Service quality accounted for an additional 12% of the variance in resilience beyond externalizing,  $\Delta F(1,27) = 3.67$ ,  $p = .066$ ,  $\Delta R^2 = .12$ , *Adjusted R*<sup>2</sup> = .07. While controlling for externalizing, service quality was positively associated with resilience,  $b = .28$ ,  $t = 1.92$ ,  $p = .080$ , 95% BCa CI [.05, .85], which represented a medium effect size ( $\Delta R = .34$ ); however, this effect did not reach significance.

Third, the B path predicting social-emotional competence from resilience while accounting for externalizing and service quality was tested. Externalizing and service quality were entered as control variables in Blocks 1 and 2, respectively. Resilience was entered in Block 3. Resilience accounted for 17% of the variance in social-emotional competence beyond externalizing and service quality,  $\Delta F(1,26) = 9.63$ ,  $p = .005$ ,  $\Delta R^2 = .17$ , *Adjusted R*<sup>2</sup> = .50. While controlling for externalizing and service quality, resilience was significantly positively associated with social-emotional competence,  $b = .49$ ,  $t = 3.10$ ,  $p = .005$ , 95% BCa CI [.17, .92], which represented a medium to large effect size ( $\Delta R = .41$ ).

Lastly, the C' path predicting social-emotional competence from service quality while accounting for externalizing and resilience was tested. Externalizing and resilience were entered as control variables in Blocks 1 and 2, respectively. Service quality was entered in Block 3. The overall mediated model, including externalizing, resilience, and service quality, accounted for 55% of the variance in social-emotional competence,  $F(3, 26) = 10.75, p < .001, R^2 = .55, Adjusted R^2 = .50$ , which represented a large effect size ( $R = .74; Adjusted R = .71$ ). Thus, resilience was a significant partial statistical mediator of the association between service quality and social-emotional competence while controlling for externalizing. The association between service quality and social-emotional competence was reduced after adding resilience to the model ( $b = .13, t = 1.01, p = .391$ ). After accounting for resilience, service quality accounted for a reduced amount (1.8%) of variance in social-emotional competence,  $\Delta F(1, 24) = 1.02, p = .323, \Delta R^2 = .02$ . This indirect effect of resilience was significant using bootstrapping with 1,000 samples ( $b = .14, 95\% BCa CI [.01, .58]$ ).

### **Post-hoc Power Analysis**

Without determining the power of a statistical test, it is not possible to determine whether lack of power threatened a study's internal validity, even when a priori power analyses are conducted beforehand (Onwuegbuzie, 2003). Indeed, a priori analyses use a priori estimates and therefore characterize the power to detect a hypothesized effect rather than an actual effect. Post-hoc power analyses have been recommended in addition to a priori power analyses for statistically non-significant findings (Cohen, 1965; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2004). By determining whether a study had inadequate power through post-hoc analysis (i.e., power < .80), one can determine whether internal validity

was threatened (Fagley, 1985). If power is determined to be low, it suggests that null findings may be ambiguous and the study worth replicating (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2004). Results can permit researchers to interpret non-significant findings more meaningfully and inform the quality of future replication studies (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2004).

Service quality was significantly associated with neither resilience, nor social-emotional competence in the current study. Post-hoc power analysis was conducted using G\*Power 3 (Faul et al., 2007) to test the linear multiple regression  $R^2$  increase using a two-tailed test and an alpha of .05. Regarding the association between service quality and resilience ( $n = 30$ ), results revealed a post-hoc statistical power estimate of .42 for detecting the observed effect ( $\Delta R = .30$ ). Regarding the association between service quality and social-emotional competence ( $n = 30$ ), results revealed a post-hoc statistical power estimate of .53 for detecting the observed effect ( $\Delta R = .35$ ). In both cases, power estimates represent low statistical power for detecting the observed medium effect sizes.

## **Chapter 12: Study 2 Discussion**

Little is known about how programs delivered in community settings promote social-emotional competence in youth developing under adversity. Although research suggests that building supportive staff-youth relationships and creating an empowering atmosphere in PYD programming may foster social-emotional skills (Lapalme et al., 2014), scholars have yet to investigate the association between service quality and social-emotional competence for vulnerable youth engaged in community-based PYD programs. Theoretically, resilience should mediate the link between service quality and social-emotional competence (Ungar, 2008). Indeed, studies have shown that vulnerable youth



achieve better outcomes when receiving high quality services (Sanders et al., 2015; 2017b; Ungar et al., 2013b), perhaps due to the bolstering effect service quality has on resilience processes (Sanders et al., 2015; Ungar et al., 2013b). Yet, the role of resilience in the association between service quality and positive outcomes for youth involved in community-based programming has remained unexplored until now.

To address the dearth of literature on the potential social-emotional benefits of community-based PYD programs targeting vulnerable youth and provide further support for an ecological model of resilience, the present study examined associations between service quality, resilience, and social-emotional competence among youth involved with LOVE NS. Of particular interest was determining whether resilience mediates the link between service quality and social-emotional competence, while considering individual risk factors. Findings helped provide a more comprehensive understanding of PYD program characteristics that may help youth develop social-emotional competence under adversity (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2016). They also highlight the possible relevance of community-based PYD programs for vulnerable youth.

I hypothesized that service quality would be positively associated with both resilience and social-emotional competence, while accounting for individual risk. I also hypothesized that the positive association between service quality and social-emotional competence, while accounting for individual risk, would be mediated by resilience. Findings supported the hypothesis that resilience would play a mediating role in the association between service quality and social-emotional competence; however, hypotheses that service quality would be positively associated with resilience and social-emotional competence beyond the influence of individual risk were not supported.

The present study provides a critical first step in examining the potential for service quality practices to promote social-emotional competence in vulnerable youth through increased resilience, providing further support for an ecological model of resilience (Ungar, 2008). In line with previous cross-sectional studies (Sanders et al., 2015; Ungar et al., 2013b), findings exemplify the value of considering service quality in future PYD program research by demonstrating that while controlling for externalizing behaviour, service quality practices at LOVE NS are positively associated with social-emotional competence in youth through increased resilience. It indeed appears that when PYD programs work alongside youths' resilience resources, positive outcomes, including social-emotional competence, may be realized (Berzin, 2010).

### **Mediation**

Although mediators often go unaccounted for in intervention research (Gillham et al., 2002), the concept of mediation is central to PYD theory and practice, as it allows researchers to examine processes behind adaptive functioning (Larson & Tran, 2014). As such, a notable strength of the present study related to the examination of resilience as a possible mediator in the association between service quality and social-emotional competence among youth at LOVE NS. While service quality was directly associated with neither resilience, nor social-emotional competence beyond externalizing behaviour, service quality was indirectly linked to higher social-emotional competence through increased resilience. Results here suggest that while accounting for externalizing behaviour, resilience mediates the association between service quality and social-emotional competence among vulnerable youth engaged in community-based PYD programming. Findings support ecological resilience theory, which characterizes

resilience as a multidimensional and dynamic process facilitating positive outcomes (Ungar, 2008). Under this perspective, the manner in which program staff work with vulnerable youth through community-based PYD programming is important because empowering and respectful staff-youth interactions can promote youths' social-emotional competence by enhancing their ability to cope positively with adversity, which is consistent with previous cross-sectional research (Sanders et al., 2015; Ungar et al., 2013b). Thus, although service quality practices do not appear to play a direct role in resilience and social-emotional competence, they are implicated in social-emotional functioning indirectly. Findings may speak to the importance of including service quality measures in future PYD program studies, which, as previously mentioned, are currently known to ignore service quality factors (Catalano et al., 2002).

### **Service Quality, Resilience, and Social-Emotional Competence**

Service quality, as experienced by youth at LOVE NS, was positively correlated with resilience and social-emotional competence for youth in the present study; however, contrary to expectations, these associations did not remain significant after accounting for externalizing behaviour in the mediation model. It thus appears that beyond the influence of externalizing behaviour, service quality on its own is implicated in neither resilience, nor social-emotional functioning. Recall that the key elements of service quality, which focus on relationship building, youth agency and empowerment, and the development of life skills, are consistent with the "Big Three" characteristics of effective PYD programs (Liebenberg et al., 2013). Given the accumulation of evidence linking PYD practices to resilience processes and positive outcomes among vulnerable adolescents (Heinze, 2013; Liebenberg et al., 2013; Sanders & Munford, 2014; Sanders et al., 2015; Ungar et al.,

2013b), including social-emotional competencies (Lapalme et al., 2014), findings here are surprising. Perhaps the service quality factors that are associated with enhanced resilience and social-emotional functioning at lower levels of externalizing do not directly benefit youth engaging in higher levels of externalizing behaviours, such as aggression and delinquency.

Some studies have shown that as individual risk factors accumulate in youths' lives, resilience is thwarted and youth struggle to achieve positive outcomes (Sanders et al., 2017b; Ungar et al., 2013b). Aggression, drug use, and delinquency in particular have been linked poor social-emotional competence (Jones et al., 2015; Taylor et al., 2017). The present findings suggest that receiving high quality community-based programming may not directly supersede the impact of individual risks on youths' ability to cope positively with adversity and achieve optimal social-emotional outcomes. Findings provide some support for the notion that PYD interventions are less effective among youth facing significant adversity (Ciocanel et al., 2017). It should be noted, however, that previous research points to the complexity in associations between service quantity, service quality, risk, resilience, and positive outcomes for vulnerable youth. Studies show that youth with higher levels of individual risk engage in an increased number of formal services (Sanders et al., 2017b; Ungar et al., 2013b). When service quality is consistently high, youth retain benefits over time in terms of increased resilience and well-being; however, when service quality is inconsistent across services, youth struggle to do well (Sanders & Munford, 2014). This means that even when one program operates in empowering and respectful ways with vulnerable youth, if youth perceive an additional

service provider as unsupportive and disrespectful, outcomes will remain negative (Sanders & Munford, 2014).

Given that many LOVE NS youth are referred to the organization through child welfare, juvenile justice, and educational systems (LOVE NS, 2016), it is likely that youth in the present study were engaged in multiple services. Recall that youth facing adversity often experience formal service systems as discriminatory (Robards et al., 2018). The present study did not account for youths' service quality experiences outside of LOVE NS. Thus, youth at LOVE NS may have inconsistent service use experiences, which may partially explain why associations between service quality and both resilience and social-emotional competence were non-significant. Indeed, some youth in Study 1 indicated participating in multiple youth programs, while preferring LOVE NS. Further research is necessary to explore how individual risks, patterns of service use, and service quality interact to predict resilience and social-emotional functioning in vulnerable youth. To gain a more authentic understanding regarding the link between service quality and social-emotional competence for youth in this population, researchers should also control for service quality experiences in interventions across different levels of youths' social ecologies.

Discrepancies between past and present findings regarding the social-emotional benefits of receiving high quality services may also stem in part from methodological disparities between studies. Meta-analytic research indicating that service quality practices, such as cultivating supportive relationships and engaging youth in activities that build life skills, are implicated in positive social-emotional development for low- and high-risk youth has relied on data derived from qualitative studies (Lapalme et al., 2014).

Although qualitative research is advantageous in many ways (Pistrang & Barker, 2012), it has been criticized by some as biased and thereby uncredible (Anderson, 2010). At the same time, quantitative studies relying on “off-the-shelf” measures may not speak to the needs and realities of vulnerable youth (Bulanda & McCrae, 2013), which could make them a poor fit for assessing social-emotional functioning among this population. To learn more about how service quality may be implicated in social-emotional competence for youth facing adversity, continued investigation using a variety of methodologies is necessitated.

### **Risk and Resilience**

Externalizing behaviour and resilience were the only two factors directly associated with social-emotional competence in the present study’s mediation model. In line with studies linking externalizing behaviours, including aggression and delinquency, with deficits in social-emotional functioning (Arsenio et al., 2009; Maciejewski et al., 2019; Taylor et al., 2017), youth experiencing increased levels of externalizing behaviour were less likely to demonstrate high social-emotional competence in this study. On its own, externalizing behaviour exerted a strong effect on social-emotional competence, accounting for 30% of the variance in social-emotional functioning. Findings exemplify the importance of considering individual risk factors in understanding social-emotional functioning for youth facing adversity.

Recent meta-analytic research suggests that the association between externalizing problems and social-emotional functioning is reciprocal, making it tricky to understand the direction of the effect (Hukkelberg et al., 2019); however, it has been argued that interventions aimed toward enhancing social-emotional functioning should also address

externalizing issues (Hukkelberg et al., 2019). Consistent with previous cross-sectional findings (Sanders et al., 2015), service quality was negatively associated with externalizing behaviour in the present study. Yet, studies investigating the long-term benefits of service quality for vulnerable youth show that receiving high quality services does not predict reductions in individual risk over time (Sanders & Munford, 2014; Sanders et al., 2017b). To develop and implement successful PYD programs aimed at improving social-emotional functioning in youth facing adversity, additional research may look into the PYD program components that are implicated in individual risk longitudinally.

In contrast to the association between externalizing behaviour and social-emotional competence, resilience and social-emotional competence were positively related in the present study, such that youth with increased resilience resources demonstrated better social-emotional functioning. Resilience was entered at the final step of the model. Thus, the borderline large effect of resilience on social-emotional competence was found while controlling for externalizing behaviour and service quality. The amount of variance in social-emotional competence accounted for by resilience beyond these factors (17%) indicates that, although externalizing contributes to social-emotional competence, resilience may play a crucial role. Resilience may thus be a key factor to improving social-emotional competence in youth exposed to adversity. Consistent with the notion that capitalizing on youths' resilience resources helps youth attain better outcomes (Berzin, 2010), an effective way to improve social-emotional functioning in vulnerable youth may hinge on the ability of program staff to pinpoint when resilience resources are absent in youths' lives and find ways to make up for them.

Intervening in a manner consistent with youths' needs, which is a component of high service quality (Liebenberg et al., 2013), will require program staff to take a deeper look into youths' school, community, and family lives (Nicholson et al., 2004).

Prevention research and practice rarely consider factors beyond the individual (Gillham et al., 2002; Lapalme et al., 2014); however, qualitative findings from Study 1 show that taking an ecological approach to understanding youth is something LOVE NS does effectively. This process may hinge on staff-youth relationships, as the relationships that LOVE NS staff build with youth may help staff learn about youths' contextual resources, thereby enabling staff to tailor programming to youths' individual needs (Sanders et al., 2017b). Findings support previous research indicating that meaningful staff-youth relationships can provide youth with a chance to build on their strengths and skills through increased engagement and empowerment (Liebenberg et al., 2013).

### **Implications**

The present study highlights resilience as a partial mediator in the association between service quality and social-emotional competence for vulnerable youth engaged in community-based PYD programming. This means that when program staff work with youth in empowering and respectful ways to build meaningful relationships and provide opportunities for the development of life skills, youth may experience better social-emotional functioning due to increased resilience resources. Findings may have implications for community-based interventions targeted toward improving social-emotional functioning in youth facing high risks. For instance, most social-emotional learning interventions and PYD programs are implemented in school settings (Catalano et al., 2002; Domitrovich et al., 2017); however, consistent with literature on the barriers



preventing vulnerable youth from accessing formal service systems, such as education and health care (Robards et al., 2018; Sayed, 2009), qualitative findings derived from Study 1 indicate that for vulnerable youth who lack feelings of belonging and safety at school, interventions delivered in other contexts may be more appropriate. By shedding light on the characteristics of community-based programs (i.e., service quality) that may play an indirect role in improving social-emotional competence in vulnerable youth, the present study helped clarify how interventions delivered outside of the school setting may enhance social-emotional functioning. This is important because it provides youth who may lack the right conditions to develop social-emotional competence at home and school with the opportunity to build social-emotional skills in community programming (Elias & Haynes, 2008). To guide professionals toward developing PYD programs that best serve youth facing adversity, future research should directly explore whether community-based programming confers social-emotional advantages over school-based programming. Whether the positive social-emotional implications of community-based PYD programs translate to other settings, such as school and home, should also be considered.

Researchers' interest in identifying the characteristics of programs that improve outcomes in vulnerable youth dates back decades (Liebenberg et al., 2013). Yet, studies on PYD programs often ignore service quality factors (Catalano et al., 2002). In line with research uncovering service quality benefits for vulnerable youth receiving multiple government mandated services (Sanders & Munford, 2014; Sanders et al., 2015; Ungar et al., 2013b), findings from the present study suggest that the manner in which program staff work with youth facing significant adversity matters. Perhaps this explains in part why some studies have found PYD programs to be less effective among vulnerable youth

(Ciocanel et al., 2017), as evidence suggests that most PYD programs do not focus on creating a supportive environment wherein youth feel valued and empowered (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Should further longitudinal research support the potential for service quality to influence social-emotional functioning through increased resilience, strategies devised toward improving service quality practices for program staff may have significant implications for vulnerable young people accessing community-based PYD programming. Educational efforts that raise staff awareness regarding the importance of service quality practices may be advantageous, as may be implementation of processes holding program staff accountable for providing high quality programming.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

This was the first study to examine whether service quality is associated with social-emotional competence in vulnerable youth through increased resilience. Findings may guide PYD program developers toward enhancing positive social-emotional outcomes for youth exposed to adversity by shedding light on the process by which service quality may be implicated in social-emotional functioning for vulnerable youth engaged in community-based programming (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998); however, several limitations should be noted. First, data were correlational. Implementing a cross-sectional study design is an effective and low-cost approach to investigating novel ideas (Hamby et al., 2018); however, the correlational nature of the data prevents inferences of causality from being made. Though I hypothesized that service quality is the theoretical causal variable impacting social-emotional competence through resilience, further longitudinal investigation is needed to disentangle the processes by which service quality, risk, resilience, and social-emotional competence are intertwined. Longitudinal studies

will also account for differences in resilience and social-emotional processes over time. This is important, as resilience and social-emotional competence are both perceived to be dynamic (Bos et al., 2019; Sanders et al., 2017a). Thus, just because service quality factors are linked, or not linked, to resilience and social-emotional competence at one point in development, does not mean patterns will remain stable (Howell & Miller-Graff, 2014).

Future longitudinal research may also examine whether service quality predicts program participation in PYD programs. Evidence suggests that vulnerable youths' satisfaction with and participation in programming is closely connected to their experiences of empowerment, positive relationships with staff, belonging, and support for efficacy (Heinze, 2010; Sabarnatum & Klein, 2006). It may be hypothesized, then, that youths' commitment to remaining engaged in community-based PYD programs would depend in part on youths' service quality experiences. Indeed, many PYD programs do not meet goals related to creating an empowering and supportive program atmosphere (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Perhaps not surprisingly, up to 50% of programs struggle to keep youth involved for more than a few months (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). If vulnerable youth with negative service quality experiences do not attend programming, they may miss the opportunity to work through resilience processes and attain social-emotional competence. PYD program studies considering service quality factors are relatively uncommon (Catalano et al., 2002). Thus, to gain a more comprehensive understanding regarding service quality benefits for vulnerable youth in community-based PYD programs, researchers should take a closer look at how service quality practices are implicated in program attendance and commitment.

The length of time youth spend in PYD programming plays a role in program outcomes (Catalano et al., 2002). Research suggests that to build positive, lasting staff-youth relationships and create an empowering program atmosphere, programming should run for at least one school year (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Analyses in the current study did not account for how long youth had been involved with LOVE NS; however, just under 15% of the sample had been involved in LOVE NS' programs for less than one year. Given that vulnerable youth often have complex histories characterized by instability and abandonment, it is especially important for program staff to show youth that they can indeed be trusted not to give up on them. Once youth feel safe, they may begin to engage in programming; however, this process likely takes time. Thus, additional research should explore the ways in which time may interact with service quality to predict resilience and social-emotional competence in vulnerable youth. Findings could have important implications for program development.

Another limitation of the present study relates to sample size. First, given that the present study was underpowered due to the small sample size, differences in findings according to demographic factors were not explored. This is limiting because patterns of risk, resilience, service quality, and positive outcomes may be experienced differently by youth of different ages, genders, sexual orientations, and perhaps most importantly, cultures (Cicchetti & Rogosch, 2002; Sanders et al., 2015; 2017b). As such, it may be unreasonable to expect that service quality would influence social-emotional competence in the same manner for all youth. For instance, ethnic minority youth face higher levels of risk than ethnic majority youth (Ungar et al., 2013b). Ethnic minority youth may also have poorer service use experiences (Ungar et al., 2013b), suggesting that services are not

always delivered in culturally meaningful ways. Interestingly, when ethnic minority youth do receive high quality services, they experience higher resilience and better outcomes over time than their ethnic majority peers (Sanders et al., 2017b). This is because ethnic minority youth have access to important cultural resilience resources within their families and broader communities (Sanders et al., 2017a), which can be harnessed through empowering and respectful interactions with service providers (Sanders et al., 2017b). Findings speak to the importance of implementing studies with larger sample sizes so as to allow for analyses of sub-groups. Such studies will shed light on whether the process by which service quality is associated with social-emotional competence for vulnerable youth varies for youth of different backgrounds and demographic characteristics.

As previously mentioned, underpowered studies are more likely to yield false negatives (Button et al., 2013). As such, null findings regarding the associations between service quality and both resilience and social-emotional competence should be interpreted with caution. Indeed, both effect sizes were medium. According to Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2004), null findings derived from underpowered studies may be ambiguous and the study is therefore worth replicating. Subsequent research should therefore include an appropriate sample size so as to determine whether non-significant findings are meaningful. Lastly, participants in this study were self-selected and the survey relied on self-report data. Although quantitative data were collected online such that youth did not need to interact with researchers face-to-face, which may have made response bias less likely, response bias may still be present in quantitative findings (Howell & Miller-Graff, 2014). Further, the sample was comprised entirely of youth engaged with LOVE NS.

Thus, findings reflect the experiences of youth engaged in one specific community-based organization. This limits generalizability.

To gain a better idea regarding why service quality may indirectly enhance social-emotional competence in vulnerable youth, future research should look into whether individual service quality factors enhance resilience. According to Ungar et al. (2013), strong staff-youth relationships may be the key ingredient of service quality that helps vulnerable youth attain positive outcomes. This makes sense, given that having access to supportive relationships with caring, competent adults is one of the strongest predictors of resilience and adaptive functioning for youth developing under adversity (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). Youths' experiences of service quality and resilience in the present study were deeply embedded in the relationships they built with LOVE NS staff, which is in line with previous research suggesting that strong staff-youth relationships may serve as a context from which youth may feel empowered to develop life skills, such as social-emotional competence.

Although service quality practices were not directly associated with improved social-emotional competence in Study 2, youth reported gaining social-emotional benefits through their participation in LOVE NS' programs in Study 1. Additional research may continue to explore whether alternative program components, such as participation in program activities, are directly associated with social-emotional competence among vulnerable youth engaged in community-based PYD programming. Findings will expand understanding regarding how program staff can work effectively to improve social-emotional competence in vulnerable youth. Future studies may also consider whether working in empowering and respectful ways to build meaningful relationships with

vulnerable youth predicts PYD outcomes beyond social-emotional competence, such as well-being, confidence, and academic or cognitive competence. This is an important area of research given that most studies on PYD programs focus on risk reduction rather than enhancement of positive outcomes, which lies at the root of PYD (Catalano et al., 2002).

### **Conclusion**

Findings from the present study have important implications for understanding the ways in which community-based programs may develop social-emotional competence in youth facing significant challenges. Results suggest that resilience may indeed mediate the association between service quality practices and social-emotional competence. This means that through building positive, lasting relationships with youth and creating a program environment in which youth feel empowered to build life skills, community-based PYD programs may enhance social-emotional competence in vulnerable youth by making it easier for youth to cope with challenges that come their way in life. Findings have implications for informing programs delivered in community settings targeted toward improving social-emotional outcomes in vulnerable young people. They also have implications for guiding future longitudinal research toward examining whether community-based service quality practices lead to increased social-emotional competence over time through increased resilience.

### **Chapter 13: General Discussion**

Without intervention, young people facing adversity may struggle to adjust socially and emotionally (Elias & Haynes, 2008; Jones et al., 2015; Sanders et al., 2020). As such, poor social-emotional competence may interfere with youths' abilities to transition successfully into adulthood, making it imperative to provide vulnerable youth

with opportunities to develop social-emotional skills. The goal of the present mixed-methods research was to learn more about the ways in which vulnerable youth may cope positively with adversity and develop social-emotional competence through community-based PYD programs. Findings can be used to help program developers and staff work more effectively with youth facing adversity (Sanders et al., 2017b).

Despite the benefits of mixed methods studies incorporating both quantitative and qualitative data (Ungar, 2012), research on PYD programs often neglects youths' experiences and opinions regarding programming (Bulanda & McCrae, 2013). Quantitative measures that are developed without consideration for youths' voices may not speak to the realities of vulnerable youth, which can limit the real-world significance of quantitative findings (Ungar & Liebenberg, 2012). Thus, a major strength of the present study focuses on the use of participatory action mixed-methods to explore the role that community-based programs may play in enhancing vulnerable youths' ability to cope positively with adversity and develop social-emotional competence. Involving youth in the research process is in line with PYD's emphasis on meeting youth where they are and listening to what they have to say (Nicholson et al., 2004). It is hoped that through including youth in establishing the terms of the research, the present study encapsulated a more genuine representation of LOVE NS youths' lived experiences, including their challenges and triumphs (Roche, 2008).

Overall, findings in the present two studies suggest that community-based PYD programs may offer a useful space to strengthen social-emotional competence in youth exposed to high risks. Qualitative findings suggest that youth experience meaningful relationships with LOVE NS staff characterized by trust and ongoing support. They also



perceive the environment at LOVE NS as empowering and respectful, offering opportunities for them to develop their strengths and skills, such as social emotional competence. Youth were vulnerable and struggled with internalizing and externalizing problems; however, they were able to demonstrate resilience through participation in LOVE NS' programs. Quantitative findings help explain more by showing that even while controlling for externalizing behaviour, youths' service quality experiences are indirectly associated with social-emotional competence through resilience. Findings suggest that not only does LOVE NS operate according to PYD principles to provide high quality programming to vulnerable youth, but that these practices may have indirect social-emotional benefits. The conclusion that PYD approaches are less effective for youth facing high risks (Catalano et al., 2002) may thus be an oversimplification.

As previously mentioned, the ecological nature of resilience has yet to be fully investigated (Sanders et al., 2015). Qualitative findings indicate that youth in this study gained access to resilience resources through different contexts, including LOVE NS. As such, resilience appears to be multidimensional, which is consistent with ecological resilience theory (Ungar, 2008). Qualitative findings also indicate that for this sample of vulnerable youth, resilience changes over time. Whereas many youth struggled to access resilience resources in the past, such as positive identities and supportive relationships, they were able to demonstrate resilience over time through participation in LOVE NS' programs. Findings support current conceptualizations of resilience as a dynamic process. A processual definition of resilience was further supported in Study 2, wherein quantitative findings revealed resilience to facilitate the association between service quality and social-emotional competence. Taken together, the present research provides

support for ecological resilience theory (Ungar, 2008) and highlights the role that community-based PYD programs may play in enhancing resilience for vulnerable youth.

Findings may have important implications for those working with vulnerable youth. First, recall that most PYD and social-emotional learning programs are implemented in educational settings (Catalano et al., 2002; Domitrovich et al., 2017). Intervening through schools may exclude vulnerable youth because youth developing under adversity often struggle to access and engage in school-based services (Sayed, 2009). Findings from the present studies support the idea that intervening in community settings may be an effective way of increasing social-emotional competence for youth in this population (Bochus, 2015). This may be because community-based PYD programs like LOVE NS have the ability to intervene at different levels of youths' social ecologies to promote resilience. Indeed, present findings show that once individual risk is accounted for, resilience may be a key factor to improving social-emotional competence in vulnerable youth. Future researchers and professionals respectively aiming to examine and nurture positive development in youth exposed to adversity may thus benefit from considering resilience ecologically; however, additional longitudinal research is necessary to further explore the ways in which resilience is connected to social-emotional functioning for youth facing high risks.

This research may also have implications for LOVE NS. First, findings can be used to help LOVE NS continue adapting programs to fit youths' needs. Staff-youth relationships appear to play a particularly important role in LOVE NS' ability to help youth access meaningful resilience resources. At the heart of these relationships lies a strong bond characterized by mutual trust and respect, as well as a sense of understanding

(Bulanda & McCrae, 2013). LOVE NS may continue encouraging program staff to be there for youth, both physically and emotionally. Because vulnerable youths' lives do not operate on a nine-to-five schedule, continuing to invest resources into supporting youth outside of traditional work hours may also help youth LOVE NS youth get the help they need when they need it (Smyth & Eaton-Erickson, 2009). This is something that LOVE NS currently prioritizes through the availability of an on-staff registered social worker, whom is there to provide support to youth 24 hours-a-day, seven days-a-week (Leave Out Violence Nova Scotia, 2016). LOVE NS may also invest more time and resources into creating one-on-one mentoring opportunities, wherein caring, competent adults can help youth to navigate challenging situations effectively (Smyth & Eaton-Erickson, 2009).

As a non-profit organization, LOVE NS' success and sustainability hinges on their ability to secure external funding from the government, as well as other foundations and corporations (Smylie, 2014). Empirical study has the potential to help organizations like LOVE NS secure funding by supporting organizational claims regarding program implementation and impact (Smylie, 2014). Yet, whether LOVE NS' programs support youths' journey toward reaching their potential has remained unclear until now, as has the extent to which PYD practices are implemented in LOVE NS' programs. In addition to contributing to the dearth of research on the benefits of community-based PYD programs for youth facing adversity, the present research increased understanding regarding program implementation at LOVE NS by providing insight into youths' service experiences. The research also shed some light on program impact by highlighting how resilience and social-emotional processes may be facilitated through LOVE NS'

programs. Taken together, findings may enhance LOVE NS' ability to secure future funding and continue providing high-quality programming to vulnerable youth.

### **Conclusion**

Findings from the present mixed-methods research indicate that when young people lack the kinds of opportunities necessary to achieve social-emotional competence, community-based PYD programs, such as LOVE NS, may provide an avenue through which social-emotional skills can be developed (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). When staff work to build supportive, lasting relationships with youth and listen to them, as occurs at LOVE NS, youth indirectly experience higher social-emotional competence through increased resilience, even when engaging in externalizing behaviours. Resilience may thus be a key factor to improving social-emotional competence in youth exposed to adversity. In other words, when community-based programs successfully help vulnerable youth find their way to meaningful resilience resources, they may give youth what they need to develop social-emotional competence and thrive in life (Elias & Haynes, 2008; Ungar et al., 2013a).

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## Appendix A

### Semi-Structured Interview Questions

#### **Demographic/Rapport Building Questions:**

- What is your name?
- How was your day?
- How old are you?
- Do you mind telling me how you identify? (racially, if asked for clarification)
- What is your education background? What level/grade of school are you currently in/have completed? (High school? College/University?)
- Do you currently have a job? If so, where?
- What is your current living situation?
- Are you comfortable telling me about your family? Who are you close to?
- Tell me about your closest friends. How would you describe your friend group?
- Are you currently in a romantic relationship?
- What does a typical week look like to you? What do you do on any average weekday?  
How about weekends?

#### **Experience with LOVE Questions:**

- Why did you come to LOVE?
  - Was there a particular reason you are comfortable telling me about?
- What was your situation when you first came to LOVE (i.e., work, living, romantic relationships, family)
  - Did you have a job? If so, what job?
  - Were you in school? If so, where? What grade level?

- What was your friend group like at the time? Describe your closest friends back then.
- Were you in a romantic relationship at the time? Do you mind describing what that relationship was like?
- Who were you living with?
- Do you mind describing your family dynamic at the time?
- How did you learn about LOVE?
- How long have you been involved with LOVE?
- Are you currently involved with LOVE? What does that involvement look like?
  - Did you form connections/ build a social network from LOVE? How often do you still interact with these connections?
  - How often do you participate in LOVE activities/events?
  - How often do you come to the LOVE office?
  - Why do you keep coming back to love? That is, why do you continue to be involved with LOVE? (only if still involved with program)
- Do you feel you have changed as a result of your involvement with LOVE? If so, how?
- Has your experience while in LOVE affected the way you interact with friends?
- What do you like most about LOVE?
- Tell me a story about a positive experience with LOVE?
- Have you ever had any negative experiences with LOVE? If so, do you mind telling me about it?
- Can you think of any ways LOVE could be improved?

**Future Plans Questions:**

- What do you hope to be doing in the future?
- Are there any lessons that you learned from LOVE that you still use today? If so, what are they?
- Is there anything you would like to add about yourself or your experience with LOVE that hasn't yet come up?
- We are offering \$10 gift cards for Starbucks or Tim Hortons to everyone who participates in these interviews. Could you provide an email address so we can send one to you?

Thank them for their time and for the valuable information they shared. Ask if they have any questions.

Tell them about part 2 – the focus group where youth alumni and leaders will help select questions to be included on a questionnaire that will measure youth's experiences with LOVE Nova Scotia – how LOVE Nova Scotia influenced the lives of the youth involved.

Invite them to participate in part 2.



## Appendix B

### Individual Risk Measures

#### Psychological Distress

Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K6; Kessler et al., 2002)

Never	A little of the time	Some of the time	Most of the time	All of the time
0	1	2	3	4

During the past 30 days, about how often did you feel...

1. Nervous
2. Hopeless
3. Restless or fidgety
4. So depressed that nothing could cheer you up
5. That everything was an effort
6. Worthless

#### Physical Aggression, Delinquent Behaviour, and Drug Use Problem Behaviour Frequency Scale (Farrell et al., 2016)

In the last 30 days, how many times have you?

	(1) Never	(2) 1-2 times	(3) 3-5 times	(4) 6-9 times	(5) 10-19 times	(6) 20 or more times
<b>1. Hit or slapped another person</b>						

	(1) Never	(2) 1-2 times	(3) 3-5 times	(4) 6-9 times	(5) 10-19 times	(6) 20 or more times
<b>2. Thrown something at another person to hurt them</b>						
<b>3. Threatened to hit or physically harm another person</b>						
<b>4. Shoved or pushed another person</b>						
<b>5. Threatened someone with a weapon (gun, knife, club, etc.)</b>						
<b>6. Stolen something from another person</b>						
<b>7. Snuck into someplace without paying such as movies, onto a bus or subway</b>						

	(1) Never	(2) 1-2 times	(3) 3-5 times	(4) 6-9 times	(5) 10-19 times	(6) 20 or more times
<b>8. Written things or sprayed paint on walls or sidewalks or cars where you were not supposed to</b>						
<b>9. Taken something from a store without paying for it (shoplifted)</b>						
<b>10. Damaged school or other property that did not belong to you</b>						
<b>11. Drunk beer (more than a sip or taste)</b>						
<b>12. Drunk wine or alcohol coolers (more than a sip or taste)</b>						

	(1) Never	(2) 1-2 times	(3) 3-5 times	(4) 6-9 times	(5) 10-19 times	(6) 20 or more times
<b>13. Smoked cigarettes</b>						
<b>14. Drunk liquor (like whiskey or gin)</b>						
<b>15. Used marijuana (pot, hash, reefer)</b>						

## Appendix C

### Service Quality Measure

Youth Satisfaction Survey (YSS-13; Liebenberg et al., 2013) – Adapted for LOVE

Strongly Disagree /-----/-----/-----/-----/ Strongly Agree

1            2            3            4            5

How much do you agree with each statement?

Note: When we say “services” we mean programs, supports, and/or activities.

1. Overall, I am satisfied with the services I receive at LOVE
2. I help choose my services at LOVE
3. The people helping me at LOVE stick with me
4. I feel like I have someone to talk to from LOVE when I am in trouble
5. I am able to ask for what I want at LOVE
6. At LOVE, I receive services that are right for me
7. I can get services at LOVE when I need them
8. LOVE is easy to get to
9. Staff at LOVE respect my family’s beliefs
10. Staff at LOVE speak to me in a way that I understand
11. Staff at LOVE are sensitive to my cultural/religious/spiritual background
12. Because of LOVE, I am now better able to cope when things go wrong
13. LOVE provides the services I need

## Appendix D

### Resilience Measure

Child and Youth Resilience Measure- Revised (CYRM-R; Jefferies et al., 2018)

Not at all /—————/—————/ A lot

1                      2                      3

To what extent do the following statements apply to you? There are no right or wrong answers.

1. I get along with people around me
2. Getting an education is important to me
3. I know how to behave/act in different situations (such as school, home, and church)
4. My parent(s)/caregiver(s) really look out for me
5. My parent(s)/caregiver(s) know a lot about me (for example, who my friends are, what I like to do)
6. If I am hungry, there is enough to eat
7. People like to spend time with me
8. I talk to my family/caregiver(s) about how I feel (for example, when I am hurt or sad)
9. I feel supported by my friends
10. I feel that I belong/belonged at my school
11. My family/caregiver(s) care about me when times are hard (for example, if I am sick or have done something wrong)

12. My friends care about me when times are hard (for example, if I am sick or have done something wrong)

13. I am treated fairly in my community

14. I have chances to show others that I am growing up and can do things by myself

15. I feel safe when I am with my family/caregiver(s)

16. I have chances to learn things that will be useful when I am older (like cooking, working, and helping others)

17. I enjoy my family's/caregiver's cultural and family traditions

## Appendix E

### Social-Emotional Competence

Social Emotional Competence Questionnaire (SECQ; Zhou & Ee, 2012)

Not at all true of me /-----/-----/-----/-----/-----/ Very true of me

1            2            3            4            5            6

To what extent do the following statements apply to you?

#### **Self-Awareness**

1. I know what I am thinking and doing
2. I understand why I do what I do
3. I understand my moods and feelings
4. I know when I am moody
5. I can read people's faces when they are angry

#### **Social Awareness**

1. I recognize how people feel by looking at their facial expressions
2. It is easy for me to understand why people feel the way they do
3. If someone is sad, angry, or happy, I believe I know what they are thinking
4. I understand why people react the way they do
5. If a friend is upset, I have a pretty good idea why

#### **Self-Management**

1. I can stay calm in stressful situations
2. I stay calm and overcome anxiety in new or changing situations



3. I stay calm when things go wrong
4. I can control the way I feel when something bad happens
5. When I am upset with someone, I will wait till I have calmed down before discussing the issue

### **Relationship Management**

1. I will always apologize when I hurt my friend unintentionally
2. I always try and comfort my friends when they are sad
3. I try not to criticize my friends when we quarrel
4. I am tolerant of my friends' mistakes
5. I stand up for myself without putting others down

### **Responsible Decision-Making**

1. When making decisions, I take into account the consequences of my actions
2. I ensure that there are more positive outcomes when making a choice
3. I weigh the strengths of the situation before deciding on my action
4. I consider the criteria chosen before making a recommendation
5. I consider the strengths and weaknesses of the strategy before deciding to use it

## Appendix F

### Normality Tests

A Shapiro-Wilk test was non-significant for social-emotional competence ( $p = .546$ ), indicating normality. Visual inspection of the associated histogram, normal Q-Q plot, and box plot indicated that social-emotional competence scores were approximately normally distributed, with a skewness of  $-.10$  ( $SE = .46$ ) and a kurtosis of  $-1.03$  ( $SE = .89$ ). In terms of individual sub-scales, a Shapiro-Wilk test was significant for self-awareness ( $p = .005$ ), social awareness ( $p = .034$ ), relationship management ( $p = .005$ ), and decision-making ( $p = .013$ ), indicating non-normality, and non-significant for self-management ( $p = .101$ ), indicating normality. Visual inspection of the histograms, normal Q-Q plots, and box plots indicated that self-awareness, social awareness, and decision-making were somewhat negatively skewed, with respective skewness' of  $-.88$  ( $SE = .43$ ),  $-.90$  ( $SE = .43$ ), and  $-.68$  ( $SE = .43$ ), and respective kurtoses of  $-.05$  ( $SE = .83$ ),  $.40$  ( $SE = .83$ ), and  $-.35$  ( $SE = .83$ ). Relationship management was platykurtic, with a skewness of  $-.22$  ( $SE = .43$ ) and kurtosis of  $-1.24$  ( $SE = .83$ ). Self-management was normally distributed, with a skewness of  $-.46$  ( $SE = .43$ ) and a kurtosis of  $-.82$  ( $SE = .83$ ).

A Shapiro-Wilk test was significant for aggression ( $p < .001$ ), delinquency ( $p < .001$ ), drug use ( $p < .001$ ), service quality ( $p < .001$ ), and resilience ( $p = .019$ ), indicating non-normality. Non-normality was further supported through visual inspection of the histograms, normal Q-Q plots, and box plots. Aggression, drug use, and delinquency were positively skewed and leptokurtic, with respective skewness' of  $1.94$  ( $SE = .46$ ),  $1.43$  ( $SE = .46$ ), and  $2.89$  ( $SE = .46$ ), and respective kurtoses of  $3.20$  ( $SE = .89$ ),  $1.31$  ( $SE = .89$ ), and  $9.56$  ( $SE = .89$ ). Service quality was negatively skewed and leptokurtic, with a

skewness of -1.77 ( $SE = .46$ ) and a kurtosis of 2.73 ( $SE = .89$ ). Resilience was somewhat negatively skewed, with a skewness of -.88 ( $SE = .46$ ) and a kurtosis of -.05 ( $SE = .89$ ).