The Contribution of Social and Emotional Support Towards Youth Wellbeing: Coping and Resilience Among the Youth in Kampala, Uganda

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to ascertain the contribution of social and emotional support towards youth wellbeing, coping, and resilience among the youth in Kampala, Uganda. The main objective of the study is to examine the contribution of social connections to youth wellbeing. The 4W LIFT wellbeing model was used to study adolescent behaviors where mixed participatory methods were employed in collecting data. Findings reveal that adolescents' human connections to family, parents, and peers amplify their coping and resilience skills. Most participants expressed that their families have persisted in their school success in spite of financial challenges, and that alone makes them happy, loved, and appreciated. Adolescents believe that their families play an instrumental role in helping them thrive through life and contribute positively to their wellbeing. Family members should embrace their children's wellbeing from early stages of growth. Parents should prepare their children's copying and resilience skills as they prepare them for school and life outside their homes.

Keywords: Youth, Social support, Coping, Well-being, Resilience, Trauma

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1. Introduction

Uganda has the second youngest population in the world and has one of the highest unemployment rates in Sub Saharan Africa (Nyakato et al., 2021). A third of this bulging youth population lives on less than $1 a day, and 85% of them reside in rural areas (Kakuba et al., 2021). Youth education access, completion rates, and lifelong opportunities are very limited in Uganda. While 83% of the children are enrolled in primary school, the mean completion rate is 55%, and even less in rural areas, where 85% of the youth population resides. Only 22% of youth attend post-secondary school (Komakech & Osuu, 2014; Nyakato et al., 2021). Education and employment are complementary in nature, and to have a healthy, empowered, and productive youth, they should be practically, morally, and intellectually connected. Nyakato et al. (2021) highlight that connectedness and school retention are some of the most effective means to promote adolescent health, wellbeing, and thriving (Roffey, 2013).

Transitioning from childhood to adulthood is a very vulnerable time for adolescent wellbeing (Burkhart et al 2017). Adolescents face hormonal changes, including mood swings and heightened emotions, and are learning to find safe spaces to connect and interact with their peers, families, communities, and school; they require consistent emotional support, recognition, and understanding of their feelings (Roffey, 2012). It is evident that the majority of caregivers are failing to play their caretaking roles, especially during the periods when their children need their support. Many parents and caregivers grapple with conflicting priorities between their professional and parental responsibilities (Verberne et al., 2017). Research shows that social connection provides important benefits to mental health and positive human development (Datu et al., 2023). When youth are socially disconnected, they are stressed, depressed, or experiencing challenging situations that are related to a number of issues, such as bullying at school and bad relationships (Chadwick, 2014). However, positive social connections can help protect youth from the harmful effects of stress, which reduces the rampant youth suicidal incidences that are continuously reported or those that go unnoticed (Chadwick, 2014). While there are many cases of trauma experiences that go unreported by the adolescent victims due to disconnected parental care, love, guidance, and support, adolescents become fearful and threatened to report to elders and government authorities and to be blamed or judged (Greenwald, 2014; Burkhart et al 2017; Holt-Lunstad et al. 2017). Roffey (2012) indicates that when adolescents feel supported and are socially connected to family, friends, and communities, they are happier, and healthier, which reduces their incidental mental health problems compared to youths who are socially less connected (Shapiro & Margolin, 2014).

Connected relationships are built during childhood by parents, guardians, caretakers, schools, worship centers, and friends, among others (De Nutte et al., 2017). De Nutte et al. notes that children and youth therefore learn how to engage and relate with others while mimicking the behavior and emotions of those around them. This early socialization highly shapes how children understand and model relationship-forming behavior throughout their lifetime. A child who grows up in a socially disconnected environment may be mentally affected throughout their lifetime, while children who grow up in loving and supportive environments have a better capacity to engage socially and build positive relationships. An extensive body of research has focused on the importance of social relationships and feelings of connectedness in the development and wellbeing of children and adolescents. Many scholars have indicated the beneficial role of social support for youth wellbeing (De Nutte et al., 2017).

Childhood wellbeing is centered on responsible parenting (Nomaguchi, & Milkie, (2020); Baker et al (2021). However, during adolescence, friends and peers also become significant as youth start to build social and external networks (Veenstra, & Laninga-Wijnen, (2023). Although external connections may expose youth to toxic relationships and negative experiences such as bullying or social isolation, which is prevalent among youth, they build resilience and social interactions that can improve community wellbeing (Ryan, & Hurst, (2021). De Nutte et al. (2017) 'Circle of Trust' exercise indicates that the primary biological family is the most important circle of influence in an adolescent's upbringing, mainly; their mother, father, extended family figures, and peers. Muñiz-Rivas et al. (2019) note that under the primary biological family's extended care, adolescents are nurtured to do house chores (for example, cooking, washing clothes), take self-responsibility and keep track of their to-do list, such as being at school (Muñiz-Rivas et al. (2019). Adolescents treasure belonging and being in a loving relationship with their families (De Nutte et al., 2017).

A study by (Muhwezi et al., 2020) in Central and Northern Uganda revealed that life stress leads to a decrease in perceived control and an increase in helplessness, which can potentially make adolescents susceptible to negative coping. Students from Northern Uganda with low scores on accurate self-assessment and self-confidence were significantly more likely to have high stress and be susceptible to illness in this test (Muhwezi et al., 2020). Although it is probable that prolonged exposure to conflict in the north could have undermined psychosocial competence, which is a known resource for successful coping and resilience, past research elsewhere has already demonstrated the preeminent role of human resilience and capacity to thrive after extremely aversive events (Rose et

al., 2019; De Nutte et al., 2017). In Northern Uganda, the proportion of students with low susceptibility to stress related illness was significantly higher among those who scored highly on making/problem solving and coping with emotional illness. Already, a problem focused coping style was found to decrease perceived stress and increase perceived efficacy, and an emotional-oriented coping style was negatively associated with these outcomes (Muhwezi et al., 2020).

Furthermore, the study revealed that students from both regions had high levels of distress associated with negative life events, which is consistent with past observations suggesting that globally; children and young people exposed to major crises and sustained lifestyle alterations like youth unemployment, parental separations and divorce, academic stress, and belonging to single-parent families display elevated distress (Papadopoulos, (2023). For example, students from Northern Uganda had more experiences with negative war-related events (e.g., seeing dead bodies, being threatened). Past research shows that negative life events elevate negative effects and place adolescents at increased risk of negative behaviors like substance abuse (Muhwezi et al., 2020).

1.2 Problem statement

Over 10 years, the level of stress among youth has increased as highlighted by different research (Najjuka, et al., 2021). This is due to high family expectations, a lack of family and peer support, a lack of problem-solving skills, financial problems, academic stress, and environmental factors that resulted from the school closure during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ssenyonga et al., 2019). Many youth lack resilience skills to deal with their life stressors and have dysfunctional families, which are absent in supporting youth well-being and trauma, which affect individual happiness (Najjuka et al., 2021). However, individuals who have resilience are associated with positive psychological and physical health. They can deal with life stressors, have high autonomy, are good at socializing, and connect easily with others. Over time, they develop high self-esteem and happiness (Burns et al., 2011). One of the main factors that fosters resilience is happiness (Short et al., 2018). Save the Children (2020), a global charity that focuses on children's wellbeing, asked youth aged 18–24 in Northern Uganda about their experience with COVID-19, and this is what one child saidsay: "This COVID-19 has handicapped us; youth who are breadwinners like myself are no longer able to provide even basic needs like food to our families; this has sparked big family misunderstandings and domestic violence.". This background, therefore, ascertains the contribution of social and emotional support towards adolescents' wellbeing, coping, and resilience.

1.3 Objective of the Study

The objective of this study is to examine the contribution of social connections to youth wellbeing, coping and resilience among the adolescents in Kampala-Uganda.

2. Literature Review

A study by De Nutte et al. (2017) revealed the prominent role played by the primary biological family in the upbringing of adolescents, particularly the biological mother. The adolescents' relationship with their single most important caregiver appeared to be interactional, with support given and received by both relational partners. Spiritual support was also reported to play a great role in the upbringing of children and youth. In most societies around the world, mothers take on most of the caregiving responsibilities (Wood & Eagly, 2002). Belle and Benenson (2014) argue that mothers are considered to be of paramount importance because of the support they provide and their role in facilitating and supporting other relationships for their children's wellbeing (Whitlock et al., 2014). Children's physical, emotional, and social well-being depends to a great extent on the networks of relatives and friends in their social worlds. Children's connections with parents, siblings, grandparents, and other kin, peers, and non-kin adults provide critical resources such as information, material assistance, affection, physical comforting, empathetic listening, assistance in problem solving, and reassurance of worth (Ben-Arieh et al., 2014).

An extensive body of research (Whitlock, et al. 2014; Kiuru et al 2020; Webster, et al 2021; Muhwezi et al., 2020) has focused on the importance of social relationships in the development and well-being of children and adolescents. One of the core contracts in social relationships is the social support that is given and received in the context of these relationships (De Nutte et al., 2017). Scholars have indicated the beneficial role of social support for people's well-being. As such, two major models have been suggested to explain this beneficial role: the main-effect model and the buffering model. The main-effect model posits that social support has a positive effect on well-being regardless of the presence of stress, while the buffering model suggests that social support can protect people from the potential harmful effects of stress (Cohen & Syme, 1985). Regarding the buffering effect of social support in situations of prolonged collective violence, research has indicated the protective role of social support in children's coping (Betancourt & Khan, 2008). For example, in their study of former child soldiers in Sierra Leone, Su, et al. (2021) found that social support was associated with high levels of prosocial behaviors, especially in combination with community acceptance and school retention.

However, studies in northern Uganda exploring the beneficial role of social support have found differing results. A few studies have suggested that social support may be insignificant in buffering the effects of trauma on emotional wellbeing (Haroz et al., 2013; Klasen et al., 2010). The authors reported that perceived social support did not significantly reduce depression and anxiety symptoms among a sample of displaced adolescents in the Acholi region. It has been suggested that these divergent findings on the role of social support in post-war settings may be due to the impact of collective violence on social relationships and networks (De Nutte et al., 2017).

According to Wong (2010), two important aspects of positive psychology are to promote and enhance positive factors such as positive emotions and traits and also to protect against and decrease the impact of undesirable life events. Protective factors that can assist an individual in being resilient can be found within the individual, family, community, culture, and society. A high level of wellbeing results from many factors, including overcoming negative life experiences and developing resilience. Everly (2009) hypothesized that an individual's ability to have low or high resilience may be related to either being happy or regretful. To foster resilience, one must be able to deal with stress effectively because adversity is bound to happen at some point in every person's life. Being resilient promotes health and happiness. Everly argued that happy individuals are more likely to view life events more positively and are better able to cope with stressful life events than unhappy individuals. Wong (2010) similarly stated that resilient individuals view negative life events positively and hopefully. How well a person copes with negative life experiences is positively related to their happiness. The main characteristic of happiness is being able to overcome adversity quickly.

Blanch flower & Graham (2021). assumed that subjective well-being, along with other factors, contributes to resilience, which helps people avoid burnout. Individuals with high well-being will be more resilient. A study by Yu, (2021).) among university students revealed that individuals who have a high level of happiness will have a higher potential in resilience, while individuals who have a lower level of happiness will have a lower potential in resilience.

Resilience is the competence to overcome stress accompanied by adequate psychological and physical functioning (Khodabakhsh, S., & Ahmadi, S. 2020). According to the American Psychological Association (2020), resilience is the ability to confront trauma, high levels of stress, tragedy, or disaster. For example, chronic severe health problems, environmental stress, or social relationship problems all cause stress to our psychological systems that may require us to adapt. Recent studies have emphasized the role of resilience and its positive contribution to adjustment in the face of difficult conditions. Resilience is considered one's capacity to recover in the face of stressful situations (Davidson et al., 2020). Based on this definition, individuals must first face risky situations. Risks, considered an increase in the possibility of unfavorable consequences or stress-causing agents, are defined as the beginning of a serious situation or factors increasing the possibility of the stress experienced. (Enes & Tahsin, 2016). Biological, psychological, social and cultural factors interact and all play a role in how one responds to risk or adverse experience (Southwick et al., 2014). Considering that youth and adolescents' lives include many risk factors, it may be said that individuals' resilience characters play an important role in schools and communities as they connect with each other.

Positive emotions, such as joy, interest, contentment, and love, are known to foster resilience (Llenares et al., 2020). Although prior studies demonstrate that resilient individuals tend to be more graceful and have happier dispositions, the relationship between resilience, gratitude, and happiness has not been sufficiently studied among young people. It should be hypothesized that gratitude is positively associated with a sense of happiness and resilience, that happiness is positively associated with resilience among youth, and that gratitude moderates the relationship between happiness and resilience. In a study by Llenares et al. (2020), "*Gratitude Moderates the Relationship Between Happiness and Resilience*," it was hypothesized that happiness is positively associated with resilience among young people and that gratitude moderates the relationship between happiness and resilience. Findings revealed that happiness significantly predicted resilience, accounting for 9% of the variance. Thus, happiness and gratitude both predict resilience.

Social support is frequently used in much social-psychological and social-educational research that emphasizes the importance of social relationships among community members. It includes interpersonal and intergroup interactions. Tomas et al. (2020)) highlights the importance of social support in educational transition for promoting wellbeing and a smooth transition among students across ages, cultural identities, and educational levels. Social support and connection transpire from multiple sources, including parents, teachers, close friends, classmates, and school. Extensive past studies suggest that there is a strong association between perceived social support and students' wellbeing. For instance, Owusu-Ansah, (2020) found that social support reduces stress levels and depression among people with challenging behaviors.

In the literature, sources of social support fall mostly into three categories: family, friends, and others. It is stated that these people (mother, father, spouse, lover, friends, family, teachers, relatives, neighbors, and experts) are the sources that an individual turn to when she or he experiences problems or stress (Enes & Tahsin, 2016). It should also be noted that the social support provided is classified as emotional, instrumental and informational. A study by Llenares et al., (2020) revealed the powerful influence of parents and social connections. The study highlighted the importance of the student-parent relationship because it was found that students who communicate and discuss school-related issues and problems with their parents are happier and tend to have higher levels of self-dependence. This factor contributes to students' emotional well-being (Owusu-Ansah, 2020).

3. Methodology

Research methods were participatory in nature, where participants would gather upon invitation on February 11-13th, 2021 and September 6th-14th 2021. Eight months later, in May 2022, the youth gathered for follow-up interviews. Participatory research methods were selected as the primary methods because engaging with children's experiences and perspectives is beneficial from an analytical as well as ethical perspective, as children are usually the best source of information on their daily activities (Salekin et al, 2018). They can provide reliable information on other aspects of their lives. Research with children in developing countries using participatory approaches has been promoted for more than a decade as a powerful tool for exploring children's diverse perspectives on specific issues that reflect their particular social position. These studies are frequently planned as a way to give voice to vulnerable and otherwise invisible groups (Camfield et al., 2009). Participatory methods included interviews, field notes, engagement with art, as well as the completion of validated surveys and open-ended survey questions. The pretest and posttest survey included the Multidimensional Student Life Satisfaction Scale (Huebner & Gilman, 2002) and the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (Connor & Davidson, 2003). The surveys were designed in partnership with the *University of California, San Diego, IRB project number 210931*. The survey had closed-ended questions that focused on participants' views on different aspects of themselves and their experiences.

3.1 Participants

Twenty-five youth from Kamwokya, Uganda, who were affiliated with the Africa Education & Leadership Initiative, a non-governmental organization serving youth in the region, were recruited for this research study. Each of the youth had accepted an invitation to participate in an out-of-school club called The Wellbeing Club. A parent/guardian informational meeting was held to provide study information to parents and guardians. Parents and guardians were assured that their children could still participate in The Wellbeing Club, even if they did not consent to participate in the research. All 25 parents assented and all youth participants consented. Compensation included household goods, such as soap, and school supplies totaling about 25 U.S. dollars. Youth participated in six full-day workshops. The youth ranged in age from 11 to 19 years old. 72% were girls, and 28% were boys. 98% of these youth participants were secondary scholars, and 2% attended primary school. While the majority of the participants resided in Kamwokya slums, others resided on the outskirts of Kamwokya in Kampala district, which provided a diverse group of participants. Most youth in this study group resided in families that struggled with the provision of their basic needs, especially food insecurity and access to affordable education.

Participants gathered and engaged with their peers for five days while at the same time being introduced to the well-being curriculum. The curriculum is composed of 11 modules or topics based on the 4W LIFT wellbeing model (DiPrete Brown & Dahlquist, 2019; DiPrete Brown et al., 2023; Vatne Bintliff et al., 2018). The wellbeing model illustrates (i) the four components of wellbeing, which are lifelong health, human connections, freedom and safety, and thriving, and (ii) the dimensions of well-being include: freedom from harm, personal safety, care for the earth, basic needs, fair and just community, engagement, belonging, mutual care, purpose, voice, and expression, and growth and flourishing; (iii) the spheres of influence, including family, peers, relationships, local, environment, state, and global; (iv) the influences of self, i.e., identity, time, space, and culture. During the training and research, participants' communication, behaviors, experiences, and body language were always observed, recorded, and referred to whenever a change was noticed.

3.2 Data Analysis

The handwritten survey responses were entered into a password-protected Excel spreadsheet, and then uploaded to SPSS for data analysis. For each survey, the researchers conducted a paired-samples t-test to analyze participant change over time from pre-Club to post-Club.

We deductively coded the interviews and field notes to themes of family relationships, belonging, and peer connectedness. Connectedness is defined as the "degree to which individuals or groups are socially close, interrelated, or share resources" (CDC, 2013a). We specifically coded deductively for these codes due to the COVID-19

pandemic and lengthy school closures. We wondered if peers within and outside of the Club, as well as family, were acting as protective factors for participants in the midst of a time of fear and isolation. The international team met to discuss themes of family engagement that ran throughout the post-Club interview, the 6-month follow-up interview, and field notes. Codes that were present at post-interviews were able to be tested and followed up with during the 6-month interviews (Maxwell, 2013). Validity was enhanced through intensive long-term involvement of five 8-hour full-days with the youth engaged in deep discussions and art activities, followed by post-interviews and 6-month interviews (Becker and Geer, 1957) and rich data that was detailed and varied. We also triangulated the data by using a variety of methods such as both quantitative, qualitative, and participatory (Fielding & Fielding, 1986) We were able to observe student voices about the importance of family and peer engagement in their lives through the following codes: COVID-19 Impact and Connectedness, Family, and Home Environments.

4. Results and Discussion

While engaging participants in research, it was observed that most of them preferred human connections as their strength among the components of well-being. During one of the artistic activities, participants engaged in a human connection activity in the form of a web. Participants gathered in a circle while using a ball of yarn to connect to each other as they passed questions to each other; whoever answered or responded would hold on to the yarn and pass out the other part to the peer. In the end, most of the 25 participants revealed that they needed their families to thrive, and a web-like network was formed as the facilitator engaged them in details of how dimensions of well-being are helpful in our daily lives. Participants were thrilled with the power of human connections and loved how connections are interconnected within the community. They shared their experiences about how humans are not islands and affirmed that we all need each other to thrive and live positively in our societies.

Part of The Wellbeing Club curriculum includes time for students to participate in talking circles which are sometimes referred to as peacemaking circles or sharing circles. Talking circles are an instructional approach inspired by healing circles held in traditional indigenous practices among First Nations people in Canada as well as Native American tribes (Mehl-Madrona, 2007). Circle processes are also used in many different ways within Africa including the Maasai of Kenya, meeting spaces in Tanzania, and the San of South Africa (Dieckman, 2023). Although the practices differ across cultures, we taught students as an educational practice with the goals to encourage using voice and expression, build empathy

skills, and build a sense of community belonging (Pranis, 2005). In our talking circle, participants sit in a circle following a specific routine using a talking piece, an object selected by the community. Our practice is when a person has the talking piece it is their turn to share and when they do not have the talking piece it is their turn to listen. Participants take turns as the talking piece is passed around the circle. Adolescent participants in the talking circle shared how human connection within their family and friendships is vital in their lives; a participant observed, "*I wonder if I can live for a day without my mother, she is all that I have, and she is the reason I have to be purposeful in my academics. I want to make her happy, and her happiness is my happiness too.*"

4.1 COVID-19 Impact and Connectedness

One of the themes that emerged from our coding process and analysis was the theme of connectedness. Participants discussed the dimensions of wellbeing that closely correlate with human connection, which are enjoyment, belonging, and mutual care. Participants engaged in a series of activities that, in most cases, would reflect on each dimension and how it is either a strength or a weakness/challenge. Most of the participants agreed that the dimension "engagement" was more of a challenge because this research was conducted during the COVID-19 lockdown where schools were closed and there were restrictions limiting movement. One participant revealed that "*I feel I have lost my friends. I miss my schoolmates. If it weren't for this gathering, I don't remember when I last met peers and engaged in a fruitful discussion. Though I am home with my family, I feel lonely sometimes. There are stories you can't be free to share with your family, and my peers contribute much to my wellbeing and overall happiness.*" Even though this particular participant was happy at home, there was something that he missed, and that was his peers. For one to feel well engaged, they needed their entire life cycle not only family members but friends and peers as well.

Another participant responded, saying, "*I sometimes get drained and cheated when I know that a person I call my friend, one I share my secrets with, has gone behind me and shared them with someone else. I sometimes feel I should not share my issues with anyone; I would rather be quiet than regret my engagement.*" This portrays how difficult it is for the youth who backbite each other. Almost all the participants agree that this is a challenge because not every peer is a genuine friend. It was observed that genuine friends facilitated feelings of happiness.

Mutual care was one of the dimensions that participants highly valued because they saw it as both a challenge and

a strength. One participant observed; "*I love my parents so much. They have made me who I am, but they have failed to realize that I am old and I need my space; I need to decide when to visit and when to come home. They are just too strict about life.*" Another shared, "S*ometimes I feel that my parents do not love me. They are very sensitive to trivial matters. Sometimes coming home late from checking on a friend makes my parents scold me. I know I have to respect them, but sometimes they are just too much to deal with.*"

4.2 Family and Home Environments

Within the circle there were diverse experiences with parents and family as one respondent recounted, *"I love my auntie. She has sacrificed enough for me, and I owe her much. I have no problem with her telling me the routine of when I should be home.* Whereas another said*, "My parents are so tough. Even playing with the immediate neighbor is trouble, I sometimes feel like running away from home. This, however, does not make me hate my parents, they are just over protecting me."*

Although some students felt that parents were too controlling, others shared that their parent support and encouragement has a positive impact on their overall wellbeing and their ability to reach their goals. One student admitted, "*If not for my parents' strictness, I would have dropped out of school.*" This highlights the importance of parent support in regard to dropout prevention. Another spoke about the expectations that their family set on encouraging future success within the family. "*I am the

first born of my 5 children. Every time my parents insist that I am the head of the family and I must focus on studies, that my success will motivate my siblings to stay on course."

Finally, adolescent participants also expressed deep appreciation for their home environments. One youth said, *"I am happy at home; I feel peaceful, and my parents give me time to figure out what to do, how, and when. That has made me think critically and creatively."* Another shared, *"I feel I have the best family ever. We love each other and support each other."*

The above quotations reveal that participants appreciate and love the strictness and toughness of their parents and guardians, but they feel it should not be extreme. They feel they are mature people who should be brought to the table of discussion and decision making in the home for happiness and positive wellbeing.

4.3 Quantitative Results

Survey results on the MSLSS also showed that satisfaction with their families was high both before and after The Wellbeing Club (see Table 1). Satisfaction with friends was also high before and after The Wellbeing Club, but overall, satisfaction with family was higher than satisfaction with friends. Quantitative results also show that on the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale, the resilience of the youth increased slightly.

Table 1: Quantitative Results

Scale	Pre-survey M(SD)	Post-survey M(SD)
MSLSS_ Family[1]	5.33(0.59)	5.34(0.64)
MSLSS_ Friends[1]	4.70(0.74)	4.75(0.97)
Connor Davidson Resilience Scale[2]	28.86(5.26) *	31.09(5.61) *

[1] scores range from 0-6
[2] scores range from 0-40
*p<.05

Although the pre and post satisfaction with family remained high immediately after the Club 5.34 (0.64), when participants were interviewed six months later, they shared that The Wellbeing Club facilitated greater communication skills between the adolescent and their family members. Without prompting, many students reported that one effect of their experience in the club is that they had strengthened their bonds with their parents and siblings and were more likely to go to them for advice

when dealing with stressors. Importantly, the Wellbeing Club allowed youth to "*understand... the people [they] live with,*" and some even stated that, through the club, they improved the way with which they treated and interacted with their parents and siblings.

Friendships were moderately high on both the pre and post MSLSS 4.70 and 4.75. The near similarity in results surprised us, as the students reported in interviews that The

Wellbeing Club helped them to form new friendships during a time of stress and loneliness from the pandemic. The scale, however, does not ask about new friendships, instead line items include, "*I have a bad time with my friends*", "*My friends are great*", "*My friends help me if I need it*", "*My friends treat me well*". It is unclear, also, whether participants were considering their pre-club friendships versus their club friendships. In their six-month follow up interviews students shared that they felt that they were able to be a leader in their friendships and were able to communicate with their friends and offer support if their friends were getting into arguments. They felt that they had become mediators whose listening skills had improved as well as their ability to "know what to say" if a friend was in need of support. These results also do not touch upon the stressor that students communicated in talking circles about being able to trust their friends. Thus, the MSLSS may not have captured some of the concerns that youth shared about their friendships, nor did it capture the skills that they learned that they now bring into their friendships post-club. As we progress with new cohorts of adolescents and families, we are working to find survey instruments that could better represent friendship quality.

The findings showed that human connections made a strong contribution to adolescents' well-being by enhancing a sense of control, increasing resilience and facilitating participation. Respondents were uplifted by exchanging emotional and practical support; they gained self-esteem, knowledge and confidence, thereby increasing their control over their situation through the talking circles. Regarding resilience, we conducted a paired samples t-test to compare the responses to the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale before and after The Wellbeing Club. There was a significant increase ($p<.05$) with the pre-survey mean of 28.86 and post-survey mean of 31.09; $t(21)$ = 2.58, p = 0.017. Through participatory methods, including interviews, talking circles, and youth projects such as the transcript of their participation in a radio podcast, we have qualitative evidence that confirms the club positively impacted their resilience because it allowed them to engage more fully in their community and that in the club their confidence grew through the dimension of "voice and expression". Because participants felt that they had skills to better advocate for themselves and their peers, they reported feeling stronger in the use of their own coping strategies, such as taking deep breaths, serving others to increase their own feelings of fulfillment and purpose, and using the arts to facilitate feelings of calm. These were all strategies practiced in the club but participants reported still using them 6 months later.

4.1 Discussion

The primary purpose of this study was to ascertain the contribution of social connection and happiness to youth wellbeing. The study findings indicated that human connections was the preferred strength by the adolescents who participated in this study. Respondents strongly believed that human connections are vital to their wellbeing as it's an engine to maneuver through school life and today 's challenges. This correlates with other research that highlighted the impact of social relationships on physical health (Holt & Steptoe, 2022, Orben et al., 2020, Harris & Orth, 2020; Clair et al., 2021). People with strong family ties tend to have lower blood pressure, better immune system function, and reduced risk of chronic diseases. One prominent study, the Framingham Heart Study, found that social connections were as important as diet and exercise in predicting overall health and longevity (Velagaleti et al., 2020). Some of the respondents however believed that parents and caregivers need to reduce the strictness and give adolescents time to plan and decide what is better for their wellbeing. There is scanty of studies on the effect of parents' toughness and children's wellbeing and behavior.

As De Nutte at al (2017) notes, the primary family provides a secure and nurturing environment for adolescents to express their feelings, seek guidance, and receive emotional support. This support is crucial for adolescents' mental and emotional well-being. Primary data collected in this study affirms this literature as participants denoted their parents as being key contributors supporting their academic goals and their day to day lives. One participant expressed, "*I wonder if I can live without my mother, she is all I have and a reason I have to be purposeful in my academics.*" Another respondent stated that "*I am the first born of my 5 children, every time my parents insist that I am the head of the family and i must focus on studies, that my success will motivate my siblings to stay on course, my parents love and reminders not only help me to focus on my academic journey, but it's the engine to my entire wellbeing, those words of love and advise, help me cope with day to day challenges.*"

Adolescents furthermore revealed that joy, happiness and contentment were the major attributes learnt from their families that encouraged them to cope with school and peer pressure. This agrees with (Llenares et al., 2020) who indicates that positive emotions, such as joy, interest, contentment, and love, are known to foster resilience. Participants revealed that support and encouragement from their parents and families increased resilience levels and were able to cope with adolescents' stress and other concerns. "*If it wasn't for my mother's toughness, I support and courage, I wouldn't have made it to where I am, I*

derive my joy and happiness from my family members, I always look forward to the closure of the term so that i go home and see my siblings, parents and enjoy their company."

Our study revealed that youth wellbeing is impacted by their friendships. Friends can be a positive source of support and connection, and participants missed their school friends greatly during the COVID-19 lockdowns, contributing to loneliness and isolation during that time. During the Wellbeing Club, participants also shared the benefits of positive human connections and the best qualities of a good friend. This activity is important because it helps youth to identify who to relate with based on their personalities and character. For example, in this study, trustworthiness was deemed to be an important aspect of friendships. Youth could benefit from discussions that help them learn more about their values so that they can form friendships that are in line with their values and support their wellbeing. This finding is supported by research in social and developmental psychology about the increase in importance of friendships during adolescence and how much these friendships contribute to wellbeing during this developmental stage (Vitaro et al., 2009).

Finally, this study shows that human connection is a key element of resilience. Participants discussed how their connections with others, especially their family, helped them overcome barriers and remain motivated to succeed. During the post survey interviews, respondents revealed that they were averagely able deal with disaster of school closure, help their families to cope with high levels of stress, engage their peers to confront volatile scenarios during the pandemic which is in agreement with (American Psychological Association 2020, Southwick et al., 2014) who summarizes that resilience is the ability to confront trauma, high levels of stress, tragedy, or disaster. Quantitative results show that participants' resilience increased slightly from before to after the Club, indicating that resilience may be malleable under certain circumstances. Future research should investigate the processes that underlie change in resilience for Ugandan adolescents so that programs such as The Wellbeing Club can be delivered in ways that maximize growth in resilience and wellbeing.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

Human connections is a great strength identified by adolescents in Kampala. Adolescents believed that relationships with their families play a vital role in both their daily lives, academic journey and wellbeing. Resilience starts from home as caring begins at home.

Resilience is built by strong parents who guide and intervene in their children's lives. Positive relationships within the family contribute significantly to a youth's well-being. A supportive family environment provides a sense of belonging, security, and stability. Healthy friendships and peer support are also essential for emotional development. Positive peer relationships can offer understanding, encouragement, and shared experiences.

Social and emotional support contribute to the development of effective problem-solving skills among the adolescents. Youth who have a strong support system are better equipped to handle challenges and find constructive solutions. Supportive relationships provide a foundation for the development of adaptive coping strategies. These may include positive reframing, seeking social support, and engaging in activities that promote relaxation and stress reduction.

Social and emotional support help youth build resilience by fostering adaptability in the face of adversity. Learning to navigate challenges and setbacks is essential for long-term well-being. Positive support systems contribute to the development of self-efficacy—the belief in one's ability to overcome obstacles. This belief enhances resilience and empowers youth to face difficulties with confidence.

In summary, social and emotional support are integral components of youth well-being, contributing to their coping mechanisms and resilience. Building strong support systems within families, peer groups, and communities can positively influence the emotional health and overall life satisfaction of young individuals.

5.2 Recommendations

We recommend that supportive social emotional relationships should be strengthened from homes to community and educational institutions because they provide a foundation for the development of adaptive coping strategies. Positive relationships within the family, community and educational institutions should be maintained and reinforced for human connections and health relationships contribute significantly to a youth's well-being and resilience. Further research should be conducted in Uganda to examine the relation between social emotional support and students' participation and concentration in the classroom and their career progression. Further studies are recommended on the role parents play in influencing their children's careers.

Engaged Learning Changemaker Faculty Fellows program.

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