

## Peering Deeper: Student Perspectives on School Well-being and Youth Engagement

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Résumé de l'article

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## PEERING DEEPER: STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON SCHOOL WELL-BEING AND YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

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### ABSTRACT

*We examined students' perspectives on well-being and youth engagement in schools using a Youth Participatory Action Research approach. Students (N = 11) trained as peer researchers and then interviewed their peers. Interviews (N = 21) were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis and six themes were developed: desire for versus reality of a healthy school, insufficient school strategies to promote well-being and mitigate harm, listening to and actioning students' ideas, diverse opportunities for student engagement, pre-conceived ideas of student capability, and importance of a support role. Through this project, we peered deeper into students' viewpoints about well-being and youth engagement in their schools.*

**KEY WORDS:** Comprehensive School Health; Participatory; School well-being; Student engagement; Youth voice

### INTRODUCTION

Schools are an ideal setting for health promotion given almost all children and youth attend school regularly. In addition to supporting academic achievement, schools have the potential to support students' holistic development, life skills, lifelong learning, and physical, mental, and social well-being (Nuefeld & Kettner, 2015; Pulimeno et al., 2020). Health Promoting Schools (HPS), also referred to as Comprehensive School Health, is an internationally recognized framework that aims to support students' educational outcomes while addressing school health in a planned, integrated, and holistic way (Joint Consortium for School Health, 2016; World Health Organization [WHO] & UNESCO, 2021). A systematic review and meta-analysis of the effectiveness of HPS on education and health attainment

revealed that HPS interventions had favourable effects for student body mass index, physical activity, physical fitness, fruit and vegetable intake, and decreased tobacco use and rates of being bullied (Langford et al., 2015). By encompassing the whole school environment, HPS addresses actions across four inter-related pillars: social and physical environment, teaching and learning, healthy school policy, and partnerships and services (Joint Consortium for School Health, 2016). In Nova Scotia, Canada, a HPS approach was adopted in 2005 as a partnership between the health and education sectors and aligns with the Joint Consortium for School Health's model (Government of Nova Scotia, 2015; Joint Consortium for School Health, 2016). Recently, Nova Scotia has updated their HPS framework to include key characteristics that impact school health and learning: school environments, health promoting policies, services and programs, teaching and learning, with key processes that are fundamental for HPS: leadership and partnerships, school community engagement, planning and evaluation (Nova Scotia Health, 2023). Nova Scotia has also recognized youth voice as a cornerstone of the HPS model as highlighted in their updated framework with specific focus to "provide meaningful, inclusive youth participation opportunities and gather diverse perspectives across the student population" (Nova Scotia Health, 2023). In practice, UpLift, a school-community-university partnership aimed to enhance HPS efforts across the province has catalyzed youth engagement practices since 2019 to ensure meaningful youth participation in school health promotion initiatives (Kontak et al., 2023a). This provincial acknowledgement aligns with broader HPS literature (Joint Consortium for School Health, 2016; Storey et al., 2016) as well as with the ratification of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which promotes the participatory right of children to have their own views, to express their views, and for their views to be duly considered (Public Health Association of Canada, 2011; Lundy et al., 2011).

In addition to a focus on youth engagement, researchers and practitioners also acknowledge that a broader approach to HPS models must be considered that can move beyond traditional aims to improve the academic outcomes and health behaviours of students (Langford et al., 2015). Thus, the language and focus of HPS has shifted to include the term well-being in recent years. Health is defined by the WHO as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" (World Health Organization, 1947, p. 1), whereas well-being is considered along a continuum from negative to positive and operationalized at either the individual or environmental level (Pollard & Lee, 2003). Well-being comprises five domains, four of which are associated with positive indicators of well-being (physical, cognitive, economic, and social) and one that is associated with negative states (psychological well-being) (Pollard & Lee, 2003). Greater well-being in children and youth is associated with high-quality peer relationships and supportive environments, and lower well-being is linked to increased exposure to psychological stress (Currie et al., 2012). In relation to the school context, primary and secondary school students in Australia described well-being and what it looks like within their school environment (Anderson & Graham, 2016). In this study, students acknowledged that well-being was linked to having rights, having a say, and having freedom of speech that led to school improvements or changes, while tokenistic opportunities for participation had negative impacts on their well-being (Anderson & Graham, 2016). Students attending schools in Hong

Kong that implemented HPS at a high-standard over two years reported improvements in health, academic performance, life satisfaction, and emotional status, collectively suggesting improved student health and well-being (Lee et al., 2006). With the evolving focus of HPS to encapsulate both indicators of health and well-being, there is a need for understanding of what well-being means within the school context, specifically from the perspectives of students (World Health Organization & UNESCO, 2021).

Locally, in Nova Scotia, each school develops a Student Success Plan annually to improve the school and positively impact the literacy, numeracy, and well-being of every student (Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2022). Well-being is described as when “students learn and adopt healthy lifestyles that support their physical and mental growth and development” (Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2022). Overall, well-being is difficult to define as individuals have different concepts and experiences of well-being (UNICEF Canada, 2019), but a common thread for children and youth, is that they wish to have a voice in defining it and crafting ways in which their well-being can be fostered and supported.

In 2005, Ben-Arieh described the dynamic shift required to involve children and youth as active participants in research about their well-being rather than only as subjects of such research. The author concluded that children and youth want to have a say, be heard, be involved in a way they find interesting (not what adults think is interesting), be involved in research that matters, be active participants in meaningful research, and believe that they can contribute to research (Ben-Arieh, 2005). This active involvement of children and youth has been conceptualized more formally as Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR), an approach that conducts research *with* youth rather than *on youth* by engaging them in different stages of the research process (Anyon et al., 2018). Facilitated through adult-youth partnerships, children and youth can be involved in different stages of research, including idea conceptualization, data collection, data interpretation, and dissemination of results (Ozer, 2017). Some reported outcomes of the YPAR approach for youth include agency and leadership, academic or career achievement, and social, interpersonal and cognitive skills (Anyon et al., 2018). YPAR is an opportunity for children and youth to actively contribute to the conditions and settings, such as their schools, that influence their health and well-being and that of their peers (Ozer, 2017). In 2021, our research group completed the first iteration of a YPAR project which aimed to understand youth perspectives on HPS and how youth were engaged in school decision-making (Kontak et al., 2022). We trained 10 youth from Nova Scotia as peer researchers who then interviewed 23 of their peers on perspectives related to HPS and youth engagement. From the interviews, it was identified that social and physical environments, including respect, support relationships, inclusivity, and design of spaces were important aspects of healthy school communities. Further, opportunities to use their voices, accessible, safe, and supportive spaces, power dynamics, and passion/interest were key factors for youth engagement in their school communities (Kontak et al., 2022). We sought to build upon this work by completing a second iteration of the YPAR project in 2022 that more specifically examined youth engagement within school well-being practices. A previous publication outlines the process of the project in detail, as well as the peer

researchers' perspectives on their experience (Kontak et al., 2023b). Peer researchers were satisfied with the peer researcher training and the support received from the research team throughout the project, and felt that they developed interview and social skills in addition to learning about others' perspectives on their healthy school communities (Kontak et al., 2023b). The purpose of this article is to outline findings from the interviews conducted by the youth peer researchers that examined students' understanding and engagement in school well-being practice across Nova Scotia.

## **METHODS**

### **Researcher's Position and Qualitative Approach**

All adult research team members upheld the underlying theoretical belief in the importance of engaging young people in research that affects their lives, and the belief that student perceptions are legitimate and highly valuable to understanding the phenomenon under inquiry. All adult authors work in academic or practical settings that aim to amplify the voices of children and youth, specifically in relation to school health promotion. This translates to a transformative paradigm that highlights collaborative research processes, disrupting power differentials, acknowledging multiple ways of knowing, highlighting social and equity issues, and advocating for an action agenda for change (Clark & Ivankova, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2016; Mertens, 2010). In practice, a YPAR approach was utilized to involve youth as active contributors and knowledge producers across different stages of the research process including development, execution, analysis, and dissemination of the research findings (Anyon et al., 2018; Kim, 2016; Ozer, 2017). We used a technique known as the 'peer researcher method' (Kontak et al., 2022, 2023b), where youth, hereafter referred to as peer researchers, were trained in research methods, including data collection through interviews and ethical research processes, in order to interview their peers about youth engagement and well-being practices in the school setting.

Adult research team members with expertise in youth engagement, school health promotion, and participatory methods facilitated the two-day training workshop, which was divided into three activities: 1) Connecting and communicating – building trust, relationships and communication among peer researchers and adult facilitators; 2) Sharing school health promotion content – content learning and interactive activities related to school health promotion; and 3) Research training and data tool development – development of knowledge related to research and ethical considerations, practice using digital recorders, interviewing peers, and co-development of an interview guide for participants. After the training, peer researchers were responsible for recruiting, administering consent forms, and interviewing their peers within a one-month timeframe using a semi-structured interview guide. Detailed information on the process of the peer researcher training is previously published (Author et al., 2023b).

### **Peer Researcher Recruitment**

Eleven peer researchers (grades 7-10, ages 12–16) were recruited to participate in a two-day, in-person training event during the summer of 2022. As shared in Kontak et al. (2023b), peer researchers were observed to be diverse in race (White presenting, N=5, Black

presenting, N=4, Indigenous presenting, N=1 and person of colour presenting, N=1), gender (girl identifying, N=6, boy identifying N=5) and resided in five of the seven geographic school regions in Nova Scotia.

Convenience sampling methods (Creswell & Creswell, 2017) were employed to recruit peer researchers for the YPAR project. Members of the adult research team recruited peer researchers by reaching out to adults who worked directly with youth on student-led school health promotion initiatives, youth serving organizations, and key contacts in and across school regions. Once youth and/or their guardian expressed interest in participating, an online or telephone meeting was held to outline the purpose of the research project and gauge interest from the youth. Besides being a student who was either entering or between grades seven to eleven in the 2021-2022 school year at a public school in Nova Scotia, Canada, there were no other inclusion criteria to be considered a peer researcher. Specific focus was placed on recruiting peer researchers who identified as African Nova Scotian or Indigenous based on an identified gap from the previous sample of peer researchers in the first iteration of the project (Kontak et al., 2022).

### **Student Participant Recruitment**

Peer researchers were responsible for recruiting peer interviewees (also referred to as student participants) using a convenience sample based on the peer researchers' contacts and student participants' willingness to participate. As for recruitment, besides being a student who was entering or enrolled in Grades 7 to 11 for the 2021-2022 school year and attended a public school in Nova Scotia, there were no other inclusion criteria for the student participants. Peer researchers were encouraged to recruit students with diverse backgrounds and experiences.

### **Materials**

A semi-structured interview guide was developed in collaboration with the peer researchers during the two-day training and consisted of three overarching sections including: 1) Health and well-being in schools: What does it mean? 2) Youth engagement in health and well-being initiatives: How does it work? and 3) Youth engagement in health and well-being initiatives: What are the benefits? The guide (Appendix 1) was paired with a one-page summary of key points, such as the purpose of the research, risks and benefits of participating, approximate length of interviews, and safety concerns. Example questions include: What does health and well-being in the school mean to you? How is your opinion on health and well-being heard at school? Why is it important to ask young people what they think about their health and well-being?

### **Data Collection**

Peer Researchers were provided with printed versions of the interview guide, as well as consent forms to give to the student participants. Interviews were conducted in-person by peer researchers, audio-recorded on a digital recorder, and ranged from 20-60 minutes. Peer researchers provided the consent form to their interviewees and their guardian to review

and sign prior to participation. All consent forms, digital recorders, and time sheets were mailed back to the research team via prepaid pre-addressed envelopes.

### **Ethical Considerations**

This project was approved by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Board at Dalhousie University, Nova Scotia, Canada [2022-5998] prior to training the peer researchers and conducting student participant interviews. Student and guardian consent was obtained for both groups. Peer researchers received a stipend for their participation in the role to recognize their contribution at \$13.50/hr (CAD), which was slightly above the provincial minimum wage at the time of the training and interviews. Peer researchers were paid in two installments, once directly after the peer researcher training, and again after all interviews were completed and they participated in a focus group related to their experience in the YPAR project. Peer researchers were paid for all hours committed to the project including training and time dedicated to practicing and conducting interviews. Student participants were provided a \$15 (CAD) gift card following the interviews to thank them for their time.

### **Data Analysis**

Upon return of the audio-recorders to the adult research team, audio-recordings were uploaded to a private OneDrive folder on the University server, transcribed verbatim, and all data and quotes were de-identified. All interviews were imported and analysed in NVivo 12 Qualitative Software Program (Lumivero, 2023) by JCK. Data were analyzed through reflexive thematic analysis using an experiential lens with coding ranging from latent to semantic meanings (Braun & Clark, 2021). Reflexive approaches to data analysis are inherently subjective and involve the researcher reflecting on their assumptions and how this may shape the research findings. Specific attention was paid to acknowledging the differences in who collected the data (peer researchers) versus who analyzed the data (adult research team member). To ensure the interpretation, and sharing of power was amplified, a data interpretation workshop with the peer researcher team was held online in the Spring of 2023 once preliminary analysis was completed. The data interpretation workshop provided the opportunity for the peer researchers to review, reflect on, and inform the study's findings. Detailed information on the data interpretation workshop can be reviewed in Kontak et al. (2023b).

To ensure trustworthiness (i.e., credibility, dependability and transferability) throughout the research process, in-depth training was provided for the peer researchers and supplementary resources were provided to them during their time practicing and conducting interviews to enhance credibility. Credibility was further improved through co-development of the interview guide and review of preliminary analysis with the peer researchers. Additionally, a detailed overview of the peer researcher process was developed and published for dependability purposes, as well as effort made to recruit a diverse group of peer researchers and student participants to aid in transferability of the research findings. Also, active reflection of the adult research teams' position of power was continuously practiced, including integrating strategies to mitigate power dynamics during training such as community agreements, facilitation activities, holding the training in a neutral setting,

regular debrief sessions with team members, and ongoing reflection of how our own perceptions of youth voice impacted the research study.

## RESULTS

In total, 21 participants (Grades 7-11) from five of seven school regions in the province were interviewed for the study. Of the 21 students, 7 identified as a boy, 13 identified as a girl, and 1 identified as non-binary. Race and ethnicity of the student participants were not collected. Six interconnected themes related to school well-being and youth engagement were developed from the interviews: (1) Desire for versus reality of a supportive school environment; (2) Insufficient school strategies to promote well-being and mitigate harm; (3) Listening to *and* actioning students' unique opinions and ideas; (4) Diverse and non-traditional opportunities for youth engagement; (5) Pre-conceived ideas of student capability; (6) Importance of a support role. Some direct quotes from participants have been edited for grammar and clarity.

### 1. Desire for Versus Reality of a Supportive School Environment

There was agreement among student participants that school health and well-being are connected to a school environment where students feel safe and welcomed through various mechanisms, strategies, and resources for inclusion and comfort. As explained by one participant, "It would look very positive and welcoming. And it would make you feel very positive and excited...everyone would be very caring, and everyone is including everybody. So, you're not nervous or being left out." However, a few participants shared that while their current school environment elicited such feelings of safety, this ideal often was juxtaposed with issues of bullying, racism, and homophobia that were described in their realities. As shared by one student, "The biggest well-being challenges and problems at my school would be mostly just bullying, like all types of racism, homophobia, sexism, and just making fun of people for doing absolutely nothing." Acts of physical and verbal violence were shared in various forms, such as bullying, teasing, fights and "slurs" that provoked feelings of worry and fear: "...a lot of times I'm constantly worried that...some kid's going to think that I'm the wrong...they're going to think that somebody else is me and then they're going to attack me. Which I'm afraid of." Participants also voiced that limited action is taken to reduce harm even when it has been identified. As indicated by a participant: "There's a lot of just straight up just rude people everywhere. They'll do like anything, like, to put you down. And like, the community isn't really like, exactly involved." The acts of violence shared ranged in scope from clearly evident to more subtle micro-aggressions with students sharing personal experiences of physical and verbal acts that they had witnessed or experienced. As one student shared:

There's this new white girl from somewhere in Canada...She got tons of friends by the end of the month. And I have like, two or three friends by the end of the month. And I'm like, okay, it's definitely because of my race because they're not talking to me...I'm still kind of like, confused...Like, is it because I'm Black? And because I'm an introvert? Like, I don't get it. Why don't people want to talk to me?



Students alluded to a similar pattern of aspiration versus current experience when discussing how the physical environment affected student health and well-being. Some students shared the important connection between physical infrastructure and well-being, for example, “I think the school is actually pretty good and well-being, like, the classrooms are all nice. And there's always clean hallways, clean cafeteria, and like everything is sanitized, and the teachers do all sorts of good,” while other interviewees yearned for more focus on healthy spaces and places within their school environments such as the importance of outdoor learning spaces, “We have an outdoor classroom. But like, we don't use it a lot because it's on the other side of the soccer field from my school.” Despite the presence or absence of supportive physical infrastructure in their school, the participants voiced the importance of the physical environment for their well-being:

I feel like there are some students that can't be in a regular school classroom ... if they had more inclusive areas, which I know they're starting to do now with indoor, outdoor classrooms, like common areas and stuff ... like a nice space for students to just go and relax and stuff..

## **2. Insufficient Strategies to Promote Well-being and Mitigate Harm**

Student participants consistently shared their concerns that the strategies used to mitigate harms, like bullying, violence and disrespect from peers and staff, were not sufficient and harm could continue to perpetuate as the employed strategies rarely solved the issue. Students also voiced the opinion that these current strategies used to minimize acts of bullying and violence do not lead to realistic and long-term change due to lack of consequences or appropriate mechanisms. This was readily apparent, despite bullying being considered, “One of the biggest problems,” yet another participant indicated, “...it just kind of sits there and keeps happening and people overlook it.” As shared by a participant in further detail:

...from my point of view, what my school is currently doing is ... if someone gets in a fight, they'll suspend them for one day, which honestly isn't even that much of a punishment because most people don't even want to be in school. Also, the people that are getting suspended, their parents, most of the time, just genuinely don't care. I guess instead of constantly suspending them for a longer amount of time, do something else ... take them to a guidance counselor or something. Actually, do something about it, instead of just being lazy and suspending them.

There were mixed opinions on the role that suspension plays in addressing consequential behaviours, but it was largely viewed as a ‘band-aid’ approach to a wider issue that should be dealt with using further supports and resources. Rather than creating actionable strategies to reduce harm and promote well-being and safety, students indicated that these acts of physical and verbal violence were becoming normalized within their school community. In relation to harmful verbal behaviour, such as slurs and teasing, a student indicated that, “Nobody's stopping you. Nobody's telling you to stop. Nobody's, like, teaching you about the past of it. That's the problem.”

Another common short-term approach shared was the use of posters, and printouts to help promote well-being, yet there was a common narrative among participants that “...there's only so much posters and the posts can do,” and that the use of educational print materials fall short of sparking actionable change – “...It's just like, they're kind of doing it to do it, because they have to, like, they don't ever really back it up, you know.”

### **3. Listening to *and* Actioning Students' Unique Opinions and Ideas**

A common thread across participants' interviews was the lack of action taken when youth opinions were shared. As stated by a participant, “Honestly, adults – the people that work at my school, are very good at acting like they're going to do something and then ignoring your request, especially the person we're supposed to go to if we want something like that.” Further, students consistently shared that there are minimal changes made if (or when) their opinions about well-being were gathered. Some participants shared different strategies that schools take to gather student input, such as surveys, polls, and being part of a student council, but various participants indicated that these mechanisms did not connect to whether or how their perspectives were being used to drive change in the school community. For example, some students identified minimal action taken from surveys:

Things that they do to promote well-being would be ... surveys that they do ask all the students questions ... like, do you feel welcome in the school? Do you have anyone to talk to? If certain people put "no", they don't actually do anything to help with that.

### **4. Diverse and Non-traditional Opportunities for Youth Engagement**

Participants indicated that there were inconsistent opportunities for them to be involved in well-being activities in their different school communities, with some sharing that there was a lack of resources and options to get involved: “What makes it hard? There's not enough opportunities to get involved. If you want to do something, like, you can't find a way to help.” Several participants shared that sports teams and extra-curriculars are the main well-being initiatives in their school community: “Because we don't really have many clubs. And the only things we do have are sports. And some students aren't very interested in sports. So, that may make them feel like they don't belong in a club or sport.” Although sports were viewed as a great option for some students to be more physically active, there were fewer options available outside this traditional offering. One participant shared that students may feel left out if they are not interested in sports: “...and the other activities are sports and some students don't like sports, so they might feel excluded, and that it's not fun to be in school.” Beyond sports, participants' knowledge of well-being clubs and activities were largely limited to clubs related to LGBTQ+ rights and cultural clubs, such as groups related to BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) experiences. Although these were shared as positive and necessary opportunities within the school community, there were minimal well-being opportunities that focused broadly on well-being or general health promotion programs and initiatives. As shared by a participant, “We have the Mi'kmaq group that we're talking about, and the LGBTQ+ support group. I would like to see honestly more groups for just, I feel like

just groups for people to get together and just hang out.” A viewpoint shared by a few students was the apprehension of joining a club related to a specific population for fear of allyship stigma. For example, one participant shared when discussing the LGBTQ+ club at their school that...

if you're part of the Project Rainbow club... like some people just think, oh, you're automatically like this, or you're automatically that ... they kind of ... gradually make fun of you for being part of that club... I feel like I would want to do it, but I'm not a part of...

Students also shared their interest in clubs and activities to build leadership skills and to make change in their school environments: “like clubs where they listen to what you want and then do stuff.” Although there were mixed reviews of student council committees, many participants yearned for opportunities where adults would listen and action their ideas. As indicated by a participant:

...also I would love to have things like UpLift where someone comes into the classroom and actually listens to the kids, where we get to decide what happens and we, you know that thing where we went around and we asked students what they would like for their school, I think that would be great because I personally heard very good ideas that I think would make a lot of difference.

Beyond leadership opportunities, participants indicated an interest in well-being activities related to learning real-world, practical skills, such as coding, cooking, or healthy eating programs:

Clubs and activities I would like to see in my school? ...like an HTML coding club would be pretty cool ... actual realistic things that you need to learn in a school club. Like how to pay your taxes, how to pay your mortgage, how to build a house.

## **5. Pre-conceived Ideas of Student Capability**

Most student participants were confident and aware that their opinions were unique, important, and of value – “It's important that a school knows what the young people think. Because then the changes can actually be what needs to change instead of what the adults think needs to change.” Students recognized these perspectives as different compared to their adult counterparts and may be more relevant and novel based on their age and generational experiences. One participant shared the following about mental health and well-being:

I feel like for the older generations, mental health is more suppressed. And in the newer generation, it's more acceptable and coming up more. I feel like younger minds would be clearer about it, and know what is right and wrong about it, in their well-being.

Though students recognized the differences in their perspectives, they had the perception that adults and the school did not take their opinions seriously due to their age and perceived maturity level. As articulated by one participant:

One of the hardest challenges to be involved in decision making would be just because we're kids, they don't really think our, like, opinions fully matter. Like we're being serious about certain things. And just because we're kids they don't want to take us seriously because 'oh, they're just kids. They don't know what they're talking about.' But like, we do, for the most part, not all the time, but for the most part.

This viewpoint may also be connected to the lack of action students have seen from their adult counterparts when their opinions are sought, creating a cycle of insecurity in using their voice and uncertainty as to whether adults care to listen:

I think what gets in the way of students being involved in decision making, like related to the school and health and well-being is adults at our school and our communities thinking that we don't care about what's happening in our lives or in our classes, when we really do and that they need to involve us more in the decisions that...they're making for our lives at this point, because it's deciding what's gonna happen to our future and they think it doesn't matter as much as we do, I think.

Power dynamics can also hinder students in using their voice, despite knowing it is valuable, due to the perception of their social position in the traditional hierarchy of the school setting, for example:

Okay, so like, what's gets in the way? Well, probably because we are only students. Like, it's kind of weird if we just marched in, like, what's it called, the building - like the school board. Like if we just marched in ... at a random school board meeting. I don't feel like we'd be that much help. Like it has to go through so many other people...

Lastly, some formal policies and procedures developed to protect student safety can inadvertently impact students' perceptions of their capability to be involved in decision-making. For example, one participant described the impact that consent forms had on their decision-making power:

My opinion is not overly heard, unless I, you know, march into a meeting or during a certain Club, which you need ... your parents' consent for, and even then I have friends in that club that tells me that nothing gets done.

COVID-19 policies were also an example of a safety protocol put in place that impacted students' perceptions of their ability to have a voice:

...with COVID. It made everything way more strict... And I just feel like, you didn't really have a decision. You just had to go along... Like, I totally get why the rules were in place... But we honestly didn't have, like, a decision. We were just told to do this.

## **6. Importance of a Support Role**

Adults and peers who helped to support and encourage students to be part of health promotion initiatives in their school were integral for youth engagement, as shared by student participants. In practice, participants shared how supportive adults helped to guide and facilitate students through decision-making processes related to well-being initiatives, as well as actively listening to student's needs:

So I think adults can help students be more comfortable by more just sitting back and watching the conversation and maybe steering the conversation so that it stays on point sometimes, but you know, maybe an adult can start the conversation, like getting a bunch of students in a room.

Participants shared that a trusting relationship with adult supporters was vital for engaging in dialogue related to well-being, yet students were not always comfortable opening up to adults in positions of authority:

I think I could feel more comfortable in school, or safer, by just like I'm having people I can rely on and talk to which there are a few people. But sometimes it's just hard to like, be open to a teacher be like, share your feelings if you're not that comfortable with them.

Although participants shared mixed views on their relationships with adults, some shared that they are more comfortable with 'younger' adults as they have a better understanding of where the students' feelings are coming from. When explaining their relationships with adults in the school, a participant shared, "Feel like you'd go to the younger person more than you'd go to like, let's say like an older staff member...who's like, still kind of teaches the same way they did like 20 years ago..." Another participant stated,

With being more comfortable with staff, it's all about like, relationships. You know, because if you have like, a good relationship with your teachers, or if like, you have a good relationship with like, one of the teacher assistants or something like that goes a long way.

Students also shared that confiding in other peers or having friends involved in well-being initiatives was helpful for engagement as they may feel more comfortable discussing or working with their classmates over adults: "I think if students were in charge, it would be more like I don't know how to say it, but like...it's like your peers doing it, so it's not like as an adult, sometimes students feel...less pressured or whatever around their peers."

Further, specific perspectives were shared by participants on the importance of supportive adults in roles related to mental health. Students viewed adults in roles such as a guidance counsellor or a resource teacher as integral to their well-being as they provide an avenue for formal support, services, and resources: “We’re lucky because at our school, we have like the resource teachers and our teachers at our school are very, very nice people. And they’re very understanding as well. Like, I feel like...we have a pretty good foundation.” However, students also voiced the desire for more confidentiality from formal mental health supports and that more resources are needed for private conversations where students can confide in adults. As articulated by one participant,

I would like to see a place where students can go and they can actually talk to a counselor or a responsible adult, and it stays between them one on one and that adult can actually help that student and maybe refer them to actual help if they need it.

## **DISCUSSION**

Student voice is considered a core component of the HPS model (Canadian Healthy School Standards, 2021; Storey et al., 2016). As such, this study aimed to understand student perspectives related to well-being and youth engagement in the school context. To do so, we used a YPAR approach to engage youth as peer researchers to enable them to interview their peers. From the peer-to-peer interviews, six themes were developed from student’s perspectives on their well-being and engagement practices in a school setting: 1) Desire for versus reality of a supportive school environment, 2) Insufficient school strategies to promote well-being and mitigate harm, 3) Listening to *and* actioning students’ unique opinions and ideas, 4) Diverse and non-traditional opportunities for youth engagement, 5) Pre-conceived ideas of student capability and 6) Importance of a support role.

### **School Well-being and Engagement Practices**

Overall, the research findings emphasised a strong interconnection between well-being and youth engagement within the school context, a result that is well-aligned with the broader literature on the topic (Anderson & Graham, 2016; Fattore et al., 2009; Graham et al., 2017). Specifically, related research suggests that the most important precepts of child and youth well-being in schools are a sense of belonging, positive relationships with adults, and opportunities for students to have decision-making responsibilities (Anderson & Graham, 2016; Fattore et al., 2009; Graham et al., 2017). We found participants indicated their well-being was mainly facilitated through supportive social and physical environments, with a consensus that trusting relationships with adults and peers were needed for their well-being to flourish, especially related to mental health supports. A central focus on relationships is referenced in similar research (Anderson & Graham, 2016; Coombes et al., 2013; Kuurme & Carlsson, 2010; Powell et al., 2018), including Powell et al.’s (2018) article summarizing students’ views on the meaning of school well-being from a national study in Australia. They emphasized the importance of students’ relationships with themselves, teachers, friends, peers and significant others, as key to their well-being (Powell et al., 2018).

Beyond supporting the concept that relationships are central to the interconnection between school well-being and engagement, our study highlighted a specific tension between students' desire for well-being and engagement, and the practical reality of actioning these concepts. This aligns with a continued, and well-known challenge within HPS literature that the implementation of best practices into action can be immensely difficult and complex (Storey et al., 2016). This research provides insight into targeted areas of focus that students believe could make a difference in operationalizing these concepts into practice including reconfiguration of power dynamics for student capability to be perceived as valuable by both adults and students, redevelopment of well-being practices that move beyond traditional opportunities (i.e., sports), and reimagining mechanisms for student engagement that are more sufficient than current practices. For example, some participants indicated student councils did not genuinely engage and action student voice; a narrative also found in other research studies (Anderson & Graham, 2016; Holdsworth & Blanchard, 2006). Diversity in notions of how the concept of well-being can be enhanced in schools is understandable due to the concept being facilitated through multiple facets including students having a say, being listened to, having rights and being respected (Anderson & Graham, 2016).

Additionally, our research highlights the interplay between internal factors of well-being (e.g., student and adult perceptions) versus external factors (e.g., current strategies and supports). Although our research directly asked questions about well-being and youth engagement in relation to HPS, other studies that focused more on individualistic factors have found cognitive well-being, including self-regulation, motivation, and happiness, are important facets of well-being (Coombes et al., 2013; Kuurme & Carlsson, 2010; Pollard & Lee, 2003). The interplay between internal and external conditions of well-being is reiterated by Kuurme & Carlsson (2010), noting that school well-being is "created by environmental conditions, the nature of situations and also by internal emotional experiences" (p. 73). Regardless of the focus of analysis, a common theme across research related to youth well-being is that they want to have a voice in defining it, and it is integral for research to consider how school well-being can be fostered and supported at the individual, social, and environmental level.

### **Engaging Youth Voice throughout the Research Process**

Meaningful engagement of youth, both as co-researchers and as participants, was essential to our study's credibility and supports the need for greater advocacy for youth voice. This ideology comes from the paradigm shift that children and youths' perceptions of their reality are considered legitimate when understanding well-being and its various components (Ben-Arieh, 2005; Fattore et al., 2009). Ben-Arieh (2005) shared that placing youth voice in the centre of inquiry is novel and required to understand the complex picture of children's well-being beyond solely quantitative indicators. Although adult-centred measures of well-being to objectively monitor different outcomes in children's lives have played a necessary role in advocacy efforts (Ben-Arieh, 2005), there is a need to dive deeper into the nuances of well-being and in a holistic manner. This argument is also true in the case of measuring youth health and well-being in the school setting, with conventional methods to examine youth perspectives often captured through adult-developed health behaviour surveys (e.g., Public

Health Association of Canada, 2010; Veugelers & Fitzgerald, 2005). Thus, the involvement of peer researchers in co-developing data tools, conducting interviews, and interpreting data gives a level of credibility to the findings in this study that may be absent from traditional methods of data collection (Hawke et al., 2018; Jennings et al., 2006). Additionally, participatory and creative methods can access the multifaceted layers of young people's well-being in connection to their greater environment, as well as enhance the trustworthiness of young people's perspectives related to school settings (Heath & Walker, 2012). Particularly, the peer researcher approach is useful for understanding the complex concept of well-being and youth engagement in the school setting by promoting open-ended discussion, and addressing power dynamics between adults and students by having youth rather than adult-researchers interview participants. It is important to pay attention to the ethical implications posed by "the exploitative potential" (Heath & Walker, 2012, p. 11) of involving young researchers to gain data from their peers which otherwise may be "off-limits" to adults (Heath & Walker, 2012, p. 11). Ensuring that peer researchers and interviewees are well-versed in the consent process and aware of the use of the research findings is critical for the ethical conduct of this research. Compensating participants for their time and expertise, as done in our study, may help limit risk of exploitative research practices.

### **Implications of the Research**

The implications of this research are three-fold. First, this research provides an in-depth understanding of how well-being can be facilitated and operationalized in the school-setting through listening to and actioning student perspectives. Second, the engagement of student voice allowed a deeper understanding of ways to foster positive relationships, implement novel and effective mechanisms for prevention of harm-related behaviours, and expand well-being opportunities beyond traditional activities like team sports. Third, our findings indicate a need to further listen to children and youth, consider their rights, and focus on their best interests (as articulated by themselves) when making decisions; this is recommended by a recent report on the well-being of children and youth in Nova Scotia (Department of Pediatrics & Healthy Populations Institute, 2022), as well as the growing body of literature related to how to genuinely engage students in school health promotion (Beck & Reilly, 2017; Bruun Jensen & Simovska, 2005). This study provides novel knowledge on the social and environmental factors that facilitate well-being practices in the school setting based on the perspectives of students.

Locally, this research is strategically connected to the UpLift Partnership that aims to actively catalyze current HPS efforts in the province. Specifically, UpLift engages education and health sectors across Nova Scotia to help enhance the student engagement efforts within the HPS model (Kontak et al. 2023a). With this connection, the research will directly inform and contribute to the continued development, implementation, and evaluation of local HPS initiatives at the provincial and regional level through various mediums including presentations of findings, embedment within ongoing capacity development initiatives, and informing the development of resources to advance youth engagement in HPS.



### **Strengths and Limitations**

The strengths and limitations of this process are touched on in-depth in previous publications outlining the peer researcher method used, as well as limitations from the first iteration of the project (Kontak et al., 2022, 2023b). Thus, we will speak more directly to the strengths and the limitations specific to this second iteration of the project. First, learnings from the first round of data collection using the peer researcher method led to adaptations that strengthened the process, including intentional recruitment of a more diverse sample of peer researchers, as well as enhancing the engagement experience through co-developing the interview guide with peer researchers, and holding a data interpretation workshop. Involving peer researchers in the data analysis process was integral to enhancing our engagement practices as children and youth are often left out of this stage of the research process (Shamrova & Cummings, 2017). Second, expanding the focus to well-being in the school environment rather than only focusing on the term 'health' helped to broaden the scope of our findings from our previous publication (Kontak et al., 2022).

In relation to limitations, although the peer researcher method may be less complicated and lengthy compared to other participatory methods such as photovoice (Lile & Richards, 2018), a shorter-time period is also viewed as a concern as it may have impacted the competencies gained by the peer researchers, their ability to adequately conduct the interviews and the quality of feedback they were able to provide to the preliminary findings. Most interviews were comprehensive and provided a rich data source; however, there were a few that were shorter than expected, where further instruction on prompts could have been emphasised. Further, it was out of scope of this study to examine differences related to demographics including gender, and geographic location. This was also inhibited due to not collecting demographic data related to race/ethnicity from student participants. Further, although the peer researcher process encourages youth involvement in the research process with distinct focus on dismantling power dynamics, guardian consent was still required for the peer researchers and interviewees to take part in the study. The requirement of guardians to give consent for their children impacts their autonomy and is potentially paradoxical to the human rights of participatory practices (Public Health Association of Canada, 2011). In future research we aim to work with our institutional REB to align more readily with the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (Government of Canada, 2019) that does not have an age minimum for the consent process, yet is more dependent on ensuring the participants have competencies to understand the risk and benefits of their research participation, as well as their rights regarding confidentiality and anonymity (Chabot et al., 2012; Ritterbusch, 2012). However, we recognize that requirements of consent vary across different health and education sectors and this may depend on system barriers outside of our control. Lastly, although it was a strength and our purpose to focus on youth voice, a perspective that has largely been underutilized in qualitative school health and well-being research, other perspectives of the school community including teachers, staff, and community partners are vitally important when advocating for and implementing change related to HPS efforts.

## CONCLUSION

In summary, this research study provides novel insights into understanding how well-being and youth engagement are conceptualized and facilitated in the school environment from the perspective of students. Further, this study peers deeper into student perspectives through a YPAR approach that used a peer researcher model to train students to interview their peers about well-being and youth engagement in schools. By broadening the understanding of the HPS model to encompass the concept of well-being, a multi-faceted and complex concept, this study provides further understanding on how different components of the school environment promote or hinder students' well-being practices. As student voice is increasingly recognized as an important factor in implementing the HPS approach, this project provides applicable information to help advance the development and implementation of meaningful student engagement. This study also can serve to inform researchers who may wish to use a peer researcher method as a mechanism to engage youth across the research process. Lastly, these findings will be relevant to local HPS initiatives in Nova Scotia, Canada as the province shifts towards using the term 'well-being' more readily across school communities to encompass both social and physical factors that support student growth and development.

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**BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE:**

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**Julia C. Kontak** (she/her) is a PhD in Health Candidate and an Emerging Scholar at the Healthy Populations Institute, Dalhousie University. Julia's research interests are focused on how to create supportive environments for health and well-being, particularly as it relates to children and youth. Specifically, her doctoral research focuses on the school setting to understand the process of student engagement in Health Promoting Schools (HPS). She uses participatory co-design methods to engage participants as partners including children and youth across the research process. She is also a Research Associate at UpLift, a school-community-partnership that aims to catalyze and support HPS efforts across Nova Scotia.

**Hilary A. T. Caldwell** is a CIHR Health System Impact Fellow with the Healthy Populations Institute at Dalhousie University and the Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. As a graduate student in Kinesiology at McMaster University, Hilary conducted research about physical literacy, physical activity, and fitness across childhood. Currently, Hilary is researching how schools and communities can support children and youth's physical activity, health, and well-being.

**Rena Kulczycki** is a facilitator, program designer, and consultant living in the unceded ancestral territory of the Mi'kmaq people. They have over 30 years of experience as participant, designer and trainer in youth engagement, community development, and systems change initiatives. Along with self-directed learning, this experience-based training informs their work as the Provincial Youth Engagement Coordinator for the UpLift Partnership, contributing expertise in Youth Engagement practices, project and research design and resource development. Rena works primarily in community-based projects, applying trauma informed and anti-oppressive lenses while facilitating processes to move groups and projects towards their goals.

**Camille Hancock Friesen** is a congenital cardiothoracic surgeon who has been in practice for more than 20 years and currently is appointed as Professor in the Department of Cardiovascular & Thoracic Surgery at University of Nebraska Medical Center. She is a consultant pediatric cardiothoracic surgeon at Children's Nebraska. Dr. Hancock Friesen's clinical and research interests include moving upstream of complications in congenital cardiac surgery, youth vascular biology, and systems-level approaches to health and well-being in children and youth. She is co-lead of the UpLift Partnership with Dr. Sara Kirk.

**Sara F. L. Kirk** is a Professor of Health Promotion, School of Health and Human Performance, and the past Scientific Director of the Healthy Populations Institute, Dalhousie University. Her research explores the creation of supportive environments for chronic disease prevention. She is the co-lead of the UpLift Partnership, a school-community-university partnership to support youth engagement in the Health Promoting Schools approach in Nova Scotia.

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## **Appendix 1: Interview guide for student participants**

1. What grade and school are you going into this fall?
2. What gender would you identify yourself as?

### **1. Health and well-being in the school: What does it mean? (about 10 min)**

*In this project we want to know what health and wellbeing in the school means to you.*

3. What does health and well-being in the school mean to you?
  - *What does it look like?*
  - *What does it feel like?*
  - *What is happening?*
4. How do people act in a healthy school community?
5. What does your school do to promote well-being? What would you like to see?
6. What are the biggest health and well-being challenges and problems at your school?
  - *How are they being solved?*
  - *And how would you solve it?*
  - *How can young people help solve it or what can they do to solve it?*
7. How do you or could you feel more comfortable and safer in your school?
8. What would you like people in your community to know about your school? How is your community involved?

### **2. Youth Engagement in Health and Well-being Initiatives: How does it work?**

*It is important to ensure young people are part of making schools healthier places. This next section is to find out **how this works and how you think it should work.***

9. How is your opinion on health and well-being heard in the school? If it's not heard, how would you want it to be?
10. What clubs or activities are in your school related to health and well-being? What clubs or activities would you like to see in your school?
11. What gets in the way of students being involved in decision-making related to school health and well-being?
  - *What are the challenges of being involved?*
  - *What makes it hard to be involved?*

12. How would you improve how students are involved in decision-making related to school health and well-being?

- *What kind of support would make it easier to be more involved in decision making?*
- *What inspires you and your peers to get involved?*

13. How can adults help students feel more comfortable being involved in decision-making related to health and well-being?

14. If students, were in charge, what would decisions related to health and well-being be look like in the school?

- *What does it look like?*
- *How would it be done?*
- *What would the focus be?*

### **3. Youth engagement in health and well-being initiatives: What are the benefits?**

*There are many benefits for having young people involved in school health and wellness decision making. We want to know from your perspectives what these benefits are.*

15. What do you think are the benefits of having youth involved in health and well-being decisions in schools?

- *For students?*
- *For teachers and staff?*
- *For the school?*

16. Why is it important for schools to ask young people what they think about their school health and well-being?

17. Describe an ideal school, where you feel like your ideas for a healthy school environment are respected and lead to positive changes.

- *What is your role?*
- *What are adults doing?*
- *How often are you part of it?*
- *Who else should be there?*
- *What does the physical environment look like?*

### **Closing (approx. 5 min)**

18. Is there anything else you'd like to add?