MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES OF HOW SERVICE LEARNING PROJECTS CONTRIBUTE TO STUDENT WELL-BEING

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ABSTRACT. The purpose of this study was to explore how teacher-practitioners in a Canadian middle school perceive students' experiences of well-being in student-led service learning projects (SLPs). Through semi-structured interviews, we explored five school practitioners' accounts of how SLPs contributed to student relating and functioning in a well-being context. The themes identified demonstrate how well-being can be deliberately integrated within curricular aspects of schooling, and how student well-being can be enhanced as well as enriched when practitioners include well-being as an aim. We conclude that although students may encounter discomfort in the planning and implementation of SLPs, they provide authentic opportunities to develop student voice and autonomy, which can make education more meaningful to them.

PERSPECTIVES DES ENSEIGNANTS DE L'ÉCOLE INTERMÉDIAIRE SUR LA MANIÈRE DONT LES « SERVICE LEARNING PROJECTS » CONTRIBUENT AU BIEN-ÊTRE DES ÉLÈVES

RÉSUMÉ. Le but de cette étude était d'explorer comment les enseignants-praticiens dans une école intermédiaire canadienne percevaient le bien-être de leurs élèves dans des « student-led service learning projects » (SLP). À l'aide d'entretiens semi-structurés, nous explorons comment les SLP favorisent les relations et le fonctionnement des élèves dans un contexte de bien-être. Les thèmes identifiés démontrent comment le bien-être peut être délibérément intégré aux aspects curriculaires de l'éducation et comment le bien-être des élèves peut être amélioré et enrichi lorsqu'on intègre le bien-être comme objectif. Nous concluons qu'en dépit de moments difficiles lors de la planification et de l'exécution des SLP, ces activités offrent des occasions réelles pour développer l'autonomie des élèves, ce qui rend l'éducation plus significative pour eux.

Keywords: well-being; service learning; student voice; student empowerment; experiential learning

Mots-clés : bien-être ; apprentissage par le service (service learning) ; voix de l'élève ; autonomisation des élèves ; apprentissage expérientiel

Across Canada, well-being is recognized as a priority area for K–12 school education. Yet, there is little agreement about what is included within the term and what is excluded, and, therefore, how well-being is to be achieved in schools. Many school divisions take up well-being through their school support teams (resources teachers, counselors, psychologists, etc.) who then lead programs that focus on improving students' mental and physical health by focusing on a selected aspect of well-being, such as through social-emotional learning initiatives, extracurricular yoga, or breakfast programs. Increasingly, well-being is separated from other curricular priorities. Yet if one of the main goals of education is to encourage the good life, then it seems necessary to inquire into curricular and pedagogical approaches that enhance well-being. Designing curriculum through a well-being lens can help connect teachers, students, and community members while also building upon students' strengths, assets, and interests. One especially fruitful area for developing curricular approaches to student well-being is experiential learning in the form of service learning projects, or SLPs.

Broadly speaking, the concept of *well-being* is normally understood as what is ultimately good for a person (Crisp, 2016). It is common for philosophers to distinguish between three substantive theories of well-being: hedonistic, desire fulfillment, and objective list theories (Parfit, 1984). Our understanding of well-being draws upon objective list theory, as developed by Soutter et al. (2011, 2012, 2014). This framework is designed for practitioners and researchers working in partnership with, or within, K–12 school education systems. Within this framework, well-being comprises an interrelated set of criteria or domains — an objective list of items. Those items are: having, being, relating, feeling, thinking, functioning, and striving (Soutter, 2011; Soutter et al., 2011, 2012, 2014). The findings of our study highlight the importance of the relating and functioning domains.

In the province of Manitoba, where this study was conducted, there is both a provincial directive as well as a desire on the part of school practitioners to develop and assess well-being initiatives in K–12 schools. A strong partnership between several stakeholders within the province has recently been established to work collectively toward the goal of well-being. The Well-Being and Well-Becoming in Schools Initiative (WB2) is a partnership between Manitoba Education, the Manitoba Association of School Superintendents, and the University of Manitoba. During its 3-year partnership (from 2017 to 2020), 11 school divisions explored well-being and well-becoming in their middle schools, designing an initiative that they hoped would improve some aspect of student well-being and well-becoming that the team identified as important within their local context (see Falkenberg, 2019, for more on well-becoming, which is a more future-oriented conceptualization of well-being). One of the participating

school divisions provided the research site for this study. The purpose of this article is to explore how teacher-practitioners of one middle school described students' experiences and perceived the impacts of the curricular well-being initiative.

Located in rural southern Manitoba, a team of middle school teachers, resource specialists, and school administrators developed and implemented student-led SLPs aimed at providing opportunities for students to increase their sense of belonging, leadership, problem-solving skills, agency, and connection to community both inside and outside of the school. To give students opportunities to grow in these areas, the WB2 team worked with carefully selected English Language Arts classroom teachers to plan, organize, and implement an SLP that the students themselves believed would increase the well-being of their community. We explore five school practitioner accounts describing how the SLP contributed to student relating and student functioning in a broader well-being context. The themes studied through the practitioner accounts help us understand how student-led SLPs can contribute to students' interpersonal connections and engagement in school, and, more broadly, how curriculum designing with students' well-being in mind can positively contribute to student well-being in school.

LITERATURE REVIEW

What follows is a review of the pertinent literature on adolescents' well-being frameworks, student voice and agency, and SLPs.

Adolescents' well-being frameworks

Well-being is a contested concept for adults and perhaps even more so when applied to the case of children (Bagattini & Macleod, 2015; Gheaus et al., 2019; Moore et al., 2004; OECD, 2009; UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2007). While notions of well-being are increasingly of interest to policymakers and educators in the public K–12 system, there is little agreement on what constitutes a flourishing life and how well-being should be understood and approached in schools (Gheaus, 2018; Gilman et al., 2009; Lopez, 2011; Macleod, 2018; Seligman et al., 2009). Furthermore, research examining how well-being is defined and applied in educational policy and curriculum development is limited (Brighouse et al., 2016; Soutter, 2011; White & Waters, 2015).

Because different theories of well-being provide various accounts of what is ultimately good for a person (and why), it is useful to distinguish between three substantive theories of well-being. As mentioned, hedonistic, desire fulfillment, and objective list theories are the three theories of well-being commonly referenced (Magnusson & Krepski, in press; Crisp, 2016; Parfit, 1984). *Hedonistic* theories characterize well-being as the balance of pleasure over pain,

where pleasure can be understood to include a range of positive feelings and mental states, while pain can be understood to include a range of negative feelings and mental states. *Desire fulfillment* theories, deriving from a utilitarian tradition, conceive of well-being as the fulfillment of a person's desires, such that what is ultimately good for a person is getting the things they want (whatever they happen to be). Desire theories and hedonistic theories overlap in that we desire to experience a range of pleasurable mental states, but desires are not limited to only pleasurable states. Lastly, *objective list* theories of well-being hold that what is ultimately good for a person is to be in possession of particular goods, such as health, love, family, friendship, leisure, knowledge, freedom, fulfillment, and many others. For many people, objective list theories are most consistent with our intuitions about well-being. For example, if you ask a friend "What makes a person's life go well?," chances are they will respond with a list of items rather than identifying a singular determinant of well-being, such as pleasure or desire-fulfilment.

Well-being is often related to flourishing. Flourishing comes from a eudemonic (i.e., conducive to happiness) tradition — which takes the form of an objective list — and emphasizes striving toward excellence or a good life as an individual and a citizen (Keyes & Simoes, 2012). In the case of children, notions of striving toward excellence and citizenship can be extended to developmental growth, achieving one's goals, personal fulfillment, and developing healthy relationships (Brighouse et al., 2018). Objective lists also lend themselves more readily to measurement and accountability, which is a key advantage for research endeavours and implementation in systems, such as schools. For these reasons, and others listed below, we take an objective list approach to well-being in this study. Though we have chosen the framework developed by Soutter and colleagues, other important contributions to the well-being literature exist that also inform our understanding of well-being in schools.

Particularly relevant to SLPs in schools, Sumner's (2010) notion of well-being (from the desire fulfilment tradition) attends to both subjective and relational well-being. In Sumner's view, subjective well-being is defined as the meanings that individuals "give to the goals they achieve and the processes in which they engage," while relational well-being is "the extent to which people are able to engage with others in order to achieve their particular needs and goals" (Sumner, 2010, p. 1067). In the context of school SLPs, it seems reasonable to say that students experience well-being when they ascribe meaning to their educative goals and processes. Sumner's relational well-being, then, may refer to student experiences of engagement with others (e.g., their peers, teachers, school, and community members) to achieve one's own learning needs and goals. Accordingly, students are / feel well if they find meaning in the process of learning, which includes setting and meeting goals as well as working with others in the process of meeting those goals.

Following in the objective list tradition, social science disciplines generally focus on objective economic factors (e.g., levels of poverty), educational factors (e.g., test scores), and social factors (e.g., family structure and divorce rates) when analyzing children's well-being (Bagattini & Macleod, 2015, p. ix). Originally intended to monitor child survival (Ben-Arieh, 2008), child well-being indicators have focused on threats (Moore et al., 2004). While a narrow focus on ill-being is helpful to develop new understandings about harm reduction, these approaches present an incomplete view of overall child well-being.

The broad political, social, civic, and individual aims for public education warrant a more interdisciplinary approach to conceptualizing well-being in schools. An objective list approach is both popular (i.e., Max-Neef, 1991; Nussbaum, 2011; Seligman, 2011) and appropriate for the educational context since schools — and the individuals within schools — are part of an interconnected, complex, and dynamic social system (Bronfenbrenner, 1996; Fenwick, 2009; Osberg & Biesta, 2010). Consistent with Sumner's (2010) utilitarian emphasis on subjective and relational well-being, we take well-being to be comprised of a multi-domain, interrelated set of criteria for student flourishing and well-being. Building upon research and findings that consider well-being in the context of the school environment, Soutter et al. (2011, 2012, 2014) established a well-being discourse specifically designed for practitioners and researchers within the K–12 school system. As already mentioned, of the seven domains identified in Soutter's framework (Soutter, 2011; Soutter et al., 2011, 2012, 2014), the focus of the present study on student well-being highlights the relating and functioning domains.

Considered a "well-being asset," the *relating* domain represents "relationships, and includes the interpersonal connections experienced, felt and aspired, and which influence experiences, emotions, thoughts and choice of actions" (Soutter et al., 2014, p. 505). Within the relating domain, student well-being is enhanced through feeling connected to other people, the quantity or quality of interpersonal relationships, experiencing a sense of place within the physical and socio-cultural context, and how a student's sense of meaning is created, disrupted, or challenged through events (Soutter, 2011; Soutter et al., 2011, 2012, 2014).

The *functioning* domain, on the other hand, is considered a "well-being action" and "explores the activities, behaviours and involvements individuals experience and with which they are engaged" (Soutter et al., 2014, p. 508). Students who are functioning extend beyond themselves and are driven by both interest as well as the expectations of others, which may be characterized as persistence, determination, self-direction, or demonstrating optimal functioning. Students whose well-being is enhanced through functioning are sometimes described as operating in flow, which connotes high interest and

high challenge (Csikszentmihalyi & Schneider, 2000; Gilman et al., 2009; Seligman et al., 2009). As stated by Soutter et al. (2014), and corroborated by our findings, the functioning and relating domains are connected.

In summary, Soutter and colleagues' conceptual framework is a useful analytical tool to assess and explore the phenomena of student relating and functioning when participating in an SLP in middle school. Further, this model can be used and adapted as a communication tool to help researchers and practitioners identify what select domains and categories mean to them and their unique context. In the findings section, we explain how we interpreted both the relating and functioning domains for the specific educational context under study.

Student agency and voice

Underpinned by the notion that student voice and agency contribute positively to well-being, the SLP in this study is unique in that it was planned, designed, and carried out by middle school students themselves with little to no direction from their teachers. Self-determination theory illustrates the value of student autonomy in schools. The theory shows how congruence between one's basic needs and core values spurs individual agency that results in overall well-being (Hui & Tsang, 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2002). According to Van Ryzin et al. (2007), students who find their learning environment supportive of their needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness will enjoy greater engagement in learning. Both self-determination and self-governance were supported throughout the particular SLP processes in this study. Self-determined behaviour refers to "volitional actions that enable one to act as the primary causal agent in one's life" (Wehmeyer, 2005, p. 117), while self-governance consists of acting in accordance with what we care about, "whether these commitments are to persons, relationships, ideals, values, or even things" (Mullin, 2007, p. 540). In other words, acting autonomously is acting on the basis of what we value. However, autonomous action is not always available to children and adolescents, who tend to align their actions according to what the adults in their lives value.

Yet, at the same time, most young people both want and need "independence and self-determination" in order to develop a sense of belonging, gain new experience and skills, build relationships, and increase their own agency (Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2010, p. 23.). Students' perceived autonomy in the classroom can lead to more positive academic outcomes (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). Lopez (2011) argues that education practitioners — such as teachers, school counselors, psychologists, and support staff (including educational assistants, social workers, etc.) — must examine the environment and rules of the school with the goal of giving students as much autonomy as possible and removing unnecessary constraints on freedom. The kinds of autonomy offered

to students also matters. Educators must be challenged to think about student participation beyond the safe and traditional school council model (Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2010).

The concept of student voice depends on the relationship that exists in a particular context between "voice" and "agency" or "action" (Holdsworth, 2000, p. 357). "Voice" signals having a legitimate perspective and opinion, being present and taking part, and/or having an active role "in decisions about and implementation of educational policies and practice" (Holdsworth, 2000, p. 355). According to Betzler (2015), enhancing the capacity for student voice and autonomy involves encouraging students to exercise their own rational capacities. Students with voice are viewed by teachers as active decision-makers, who demonstrate efficacy by making choices based on their preferences (Betzler, 2015). It is a challenge for educators and educational leaders to widen student involvement and create authentic opportunities for participation and student voice. Nevertheless, students must be given their own time and space to consider and communicate their opinions. Furthermore, student voice is only protected when conditions ensure that students are not simply endorsing what adults want them to say. The SLP examined in this study is a special case of a curricular approach that creates space in one school context for students to exercise their self-determination, self-governance, autonomy, and voice, which can in turn impact their overall well-being.

Service learning projects

Service learning projects (SLPs) can be defined as a "form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs, together with structured opportunities designed to promote student learning and development" (Dumas, 2002, p. 249). While there is a paucity of research that analyzes the experiences of K–12 students with SLPs in Canada, some studies conducted in other countries demonstrate the SLP's connection with students' well-being, learning, and attitude.

For instance, Allison et al. (2015) observed the influence of an SLP on students' health and well-being through five main themes: context, responsibility, coping, building relationships, and life after their projects. Situated outdoors and in a different setting than other school activities, students involved in the SLP expressed enjoyment and observed how learning became more meaningful and engaging for them. The SLP created space for experiential experiences, which enabled students to see the long-term impacts of their actions not only on themselves but on individuals with whom they related throughout the project. The novel context also provided students with the opportunity to take on different types of responsibilities so as to "achieve something that would not be possible within a school or home context" (Allison et al., 2015, p. 12), thus enhancing their sense of autonomy by realizing they were capable of doing

things they did not know they could do before. As the qualitative data of the study evidenced, participants developed coping strategies to deal with the emotions that arose with challenges they faced in the process, thus increasing their sense of achievement, confidence, and resilience. Moreover, because achievements were not just accomplished individually but with peers, students' relationships with one another were improved and strengthened. Allison et al. (2015) also observed how the SLP enabled students to develop new relationships with fellow classmates, teachers, and staff members, and how students often commented that teamwork was pivotal to their success — for example, "if we weren't in a group together, people would have stopped" (p. 11).

The connection between students' well-being and their relations with others was also noted by Fair and Delaplane (2015) in a study of 31 second graders who visited two retirement facilities on a monthly basis as part of an SLP. The authors sought to examine the ways in which the SLP influenced students' relationships with older adults. The SLP not only provided students with the opportunity to develop relationships with a group they had not interacted with before, but, by doing so, students were also able to debunk preconceptions and stereotypes previously held about older adults (Fair & Delaplane, 2015). Students developed a better understanding of the challenges the older adults faced and expressed how the SLP allowed reciprocity between these two groups: older adults being able to (re)learn about childhood and students making the elderly happy (Fair & Delaplane, 2015).

In Bonati's (2018) study, students from a media arts class and a special education class from the same high school worked together in an SLP. Eight of the 29 students involved in the project were identified as having moderate to severe intellectual disabilities. The purpose of the SLP was to develop a recipe book that would be distributed to other high school life skills programs and care facilities for adults with dementia. In that project, both groups of students worked collaboratively on activities that were based on their skills and interests, which led to enjoyable and positive relationships. One of the highlights of the SLP was that it was an innovative opportunity for students with disabilities to provide support for others. Students reported feeling highly motivated with the project "because they were helping others in the community" (Bonati, 2018, p. 149).

Montgomery et al. (2017) analyzed how an arts-based SLP, which was focused on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948), could promote an ethic of care among kindergarten students who were attending an American school. In the SLP, teachers exposed the children to topics related to social issues and human rights in education through literacy-integrated social studies lessons. The students were then invited to create fabric banners that would be sold to raise money so that a school in El Salvador could buy books.

Based on the interviews, the authors noted how students were able to recognize their privileges, develop empathy, and enhance their desire to help. Additionally, the students often responded as a collective "we," indicating their feeling of connectedness with each other in the project. Their sense of pride and happiness seemed to be associated with the opportunity to help others and seeing the positive impact of their actions. As with the other studies described above, Montgomery et al.'s analysis demonstrates the positive impacts that an SLP can have on students, relationships, and well-being overall.

METHODS

As stated by Atkinson (2000), the purpose of educational research is not merely to provide answers to the problems of the next decade, but to inform discussion among practitioners, researchers, and policymakers about the nature, purpose, and content of school education. It is in this spirit of moving forward the discussion about educational practices for well-being that this study attempts to understand and explore the relationship between SLPs in middle school (Grades 5–8) and student well-being. To gain insight into the perspectives and experiences of practitioners who are responsible for school-wide and classroom-based decision making, the research model chosen for this study was a qualitative research approach using semi-structured interviews. As noted by Huby et al. (2011), qualitative interviews are particularly useful when there is a desire to obtain an in-depth appreciation of an issue, event, or phenomenon of interest in its natural real-life context.

Purposive sampling was used to recruit five teachers and educational leaders who, after giving their informed consent, were interviewed individually either in-person or online. Each interview took on average 45 to 50 minutes, and all were audio recorded. The interviews focused on (a) how the SLP was designed by the students, (b) the roadblocks and challenges that the teacher and the students were anticipating or had faced thus far, (c) what kinds of curricular practices students had been engaging in while developing their projects, and (d) how the teachers perceived the connections between the SLPs and well-being. The interviews were manually transcribed, and the participants were given the opportunity to check the transcriptions for accuracy, adding, deleting, or changing wording to best fit their intentions. Participants' names were removed from the transcription and a pseudonym attributed to each of them. In order to protect participants' confidentiality, we also removed any specific names (e.g., the school's). The research was approved by the Education and Nursing Research Ethics Board at the University of Manitoba.

An appropriate form of coding semi-structured interviews is structural coding (Guest & MacQueen, 2008). The structure of these codes matched the framework offered by Soutter et al. (2011). We individually highlighted perceived evidence of functioning and relating in the transcripts. Then, we

compared all sets of coding to identify overlaps. Quotes that we all identified as relevant were then selected for further analysis. Based on the selected quotes, a conceptualization for each domain was developed, which was then used as a tool for consistency and coherence in order to filter selected quotes (presented below).

Our study sought a level of transferability, aptly captured by Tracy (2010), such that "readers feel as though the story of the research overlaps with their own situation and they intuitively transfer the research to their own action" (p. 845). Our findings are necessarily limited, though, to the perceptions and observations of students' behaviours as reported by five school practitioners, which represented one of the study's limitations. Participants' statements also represented their perceptions of students' experiences, not students' firsthand experience itself. However, we worked to ensure that validity (trustworthiness) and reliability (consistency within itself) were supported in the study. We view our participants as parts of a complex system; each participant possesses self-awareness (Cohen et al., 2000), including the ability to think strategically in an interview setting. The school practitioners interviewed intentionally presented their reflections and ideas in ways consistent with the stated aims and goals for the SLP. For instance, participants reported numerous ways in which the SLP positively contributed to students' sense of agency and connectedness.

Over the past several decades it has been repeatedly demonstrated that researchers often find what they expect to find (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998). With respect to qualitative interview design and the interpretation of results, researcher subjectivity and bias are always present. Our triangulation and research group discussions throughout the data analysis phase helped mitigate these concerns. Finally, while findings in this study are context- and person-specific, these limitations do not detract from the overall purpose of contributing to the discussion on schooling approaches with well-being in mind.

FINDINGS

In this section, we present the most fitting illustrations of how, from the perspectives of school practitioners, each of the functioning and relating domains were conducive to students' well-being within the context of SLP projects that were designed and implemented by students in Grades 7 and 8. During our interviews, the teacher-participants focused mostly on giving examples from three of the participating classrooms' approaches to the SLP. One class arranged to frequently visit, and provided recreational activities for, residents at a local long-term care facility; another class focused on giving back to the neighbours who lived closest to the school (in acknowledgement of the extra noise and mess that can accompany living close to a middle / senior level school) through activities such as baking and snow shoveling; and a third class

was still in the process of conducting a community-needs assessment, working in small groups on a variety of projects.

Functioning

As stated above, Soutter et al. (2014) described the functioning domain as a "well-being action," being descriptive of the way in which activities, behaviours, and involvements are experienced. We considered students' functioning as contingent upon one or both of the following:

- the subject determining an experience has a high quality (we define "quality" as being meaningful in nature; something that is actively pursued by an agentic person, that is, pursued with agency); and/or
- a subject's departure from common behaviours, as observed by others or noted by the subject themselves, for the sake of contributing to their own well-being and/or the well-being of others.

The teacher-participants emphasized how the SLP projects were not only designed by students themselves but were also led by them.

> We did a lot of brainstorming. That took a long time for them to come to an idea that they had all thought in to, and they all cared about, and all felt that they could be included with. So that's when they came up with the combination of baking and shoveling so that the ones who didn't really like the idea of baking really felt that they could do really well in the shoveling and vice-versa and so everyone felt that they could be involved in some meaningful way. (Lauren)

> They [the students] become really responsible about the time because it's their project. As we tell them all the time, "It's your project, it's not mine. I'm just here to support you when you need help but we wanna see if you can do it." (Una)

Students were identified as functioning more independently within these projects, making decisions in all aspects of the process from design to implementation with little to no input from their teachers. The teacher-practitioners were surprised by the students' expression of agency over their SLP projects, which was unexpected in comparison to other teacher-led curricular projects.

> What we're noticing from afar is that certain people are stepping up, taking on leadership roles within the groups of kids. Like, in one group they broke up into three different projects and are at varying stages of it. And they've come across [a] roadblock and they've had to re-group and re-focus and some kids went to some other groups. So, there's been a lot of, I think, self-checks and seeing what they're interested in, where they want to go with it all, but just in the way that they even speak with each other and listen to what other people's ideas and stuff are is pretty interesting. To see grade eights doing that … because they don't often necessarily take time to listen to what their classmates have to say, right? (Stan)

Oftentimes, students themselves seemed to become aware of their own perceived agency.

> One of the aha moments was that they didn't actually need teachers' help to do a lot of things. And then what I said was that for me, I'm like, "Well, I'm actually doing a lot of behind the scenes that they don't notice." That was kind of my thought process. But [it was] also cool that they felt that they were able to accomplish something independently, be able to be a problem-solver on their own rather than having an adult always alongside them trying to help them out and kind of waiting for that adult's answer to jump in. They were able to work through things and figure out that they could do things without having a teacher over their shoulder helping them along. (Lauren)

Although the teacher may have done the background work to set up the curricular space for the project to occur, the students recognized that they had the opportunity to direct the learning.

One way in which the departure from students' common school behaviour was evidenced was in their eagerness to participate in the SLP, which even led to higher attendance rates, as from Ezra, who attested that she "had attendance issues with students," or Una's observation on students' choosing to do extra homework:

> My attendance on those days, I never had kids miss. Never. I had one child miss because they had a dental appointment, and the mom drove them there afterwards and met us. (Ezra)

> I know with Ezra's class last year, they had to make time work for the students to be able to go out to [a] long term care home. The kids decided that they would do a set amount of time of extra homework to make up for it because they were worried that they wouldn't get through all the curriculum. I mean, the teacher wasn't worried but they were. And so, they had made that negotiation as part of what they talked to her about. It's really, the kids will negotiate anything, it's pretty impressive. (Una)

The students were the ones to set up a homework plan, clearly prioritizing the time they could spend with the residents of the long-term care home but finding solutions to "make up," as Una described, for missed time in regular classes. Innovative and agentic behaviour was further observed by participants through students' curricular tasks, in particular the literacy practices in which they engaged to support their SLP plans.

> They did a lot in terms of creating specific texts for specific audiences. So, what I find is that we do a lot of writing in class but it doesn't often have an authentic audience, which I'm trying to work to change a bit. But with this [SLP] they definitely did. They wrote a letter that they sent to the food bank, and they created a presentation that they used to ask the vice-principal for money for the project. So, they had very authentic audiences which I think was really cool for them, to see that their writing had a point beyond just giving it to me. (Lauren)

Students' behaviour was also perceived to contribute to the well-being of others, especially by listening attentively, taking leadership roles, and encouraging one another.

> So I just stepped back and watched and listened and stuff. And he was very much taking up the leadership role and a secondary leadership kind of role I'd say, encouraging people to listen and speaking up when there's silence kind of thing. Even though the girl that was there who's very well-spoken, kind of a shy girl, was leading the meeting. (Stan)

Students had opportunities to take on different functioning roles within large or small groups during the SLP process, which connects with the findings from our second domain of relating.

Relating

Drawing upon evidence from this study, we specified students' relating as contingent upon one or both of the following:

- active efforts to engage with other people or places that extend beyond immediate and comfortably familiar contexts, and/or
- the agentic expression of making meaning through new or pre-existing interpersonal connections and communications.

Participants observed how the SLP enabled students to take notice of and foster their connections with the broader community and not just with their classmates, which was a major goal of the WB2 leadership team of this division.

> So, they started to make a more, a greater connection with community and the people around them. Whether it's their own school, whether it's their close-knit community, whether it's a global community, whatever. I think that's always kind of the goal and the purpose is for them to make connections and for them to strive to constantly better themselves. (Ezra)

> We're definitely seeing kids engaged in helping out within the school, within the community, at varying levels of success with it. So, I think even having them focusing on helping other people is huge, right? (Stan)

> And that's part of the reason that we want to make sure that we're making community connections, because that's a piece that can be sometimes tricky in a smaller town, because if you weren't here at the start, it's easy to feel that you don't have a spot that fits in. (Una)

The participants noticed how engaging in an SLP promoted opportunities for students to intentionally focus on a variety of connections and relationships, some that were already established and others that were new. Connection with the community was fostered through literacy practices such as reading, writing, speaking, and listening, which further enhanced students' sense of belonging. Students showed how they were making meaning through communication designed to make connections with others.

> So connecting with the community, writing different emails and letters to different parts or areas in the community. And then looking at what their current relationship with people living around the school and what could be improved with that. (Lauren)

> And it's definitely improved a lot of the kids' feeling of belonging, which always helps with that well-becoming piece, feeling like you are part of a group, and feeling that you are connected and that there are other people in the community that you are attached to. Like last year when they were going to the senior homes, suddenly they were thinking about what it's like to be isolated, and why are [the residents] put in these positions, and it really kind of opened up their eyes to like, how much bigger the world can be, you know? (Una)

One of the teacher leaders was particularly impressed with the personal agency that was being fostered through student-directed, collective letter writing:

> For them to see themselves as being part of something bigger than them, bigger than just their class, kind of thing, connecting them to something that is worthwhile, can definitely change their intrinsic value of themselves. But even to see themselves being able to write a letter, right? Where they probably wouldn't be able to do it totally on their own, but they're seeing that they're part of chipping in with ideas and if the environment is suitable enough then they feel confident enough to add ideas … They are writing a letter today. So that's huge. Even students who maybe have a healthy self-esteem sometimes people don't understand that they doubt themselves with that kind of stuff too. And it can reaffirm that, "Hey, I knew how to write a letter but this is nice to go through this process and see that I'm not alone with maybe some of my doubts about myself." (Stan)

Participants also observed how the shared curricular experience of engaging together in the SLP greatly contributed to students' ability to collectively make meaning.

> They really build for well-becoming and that's one of the connections I really see between all of those ELA [English Language Arts] skills that we have on the list, but often kind of get lost sometimes because we're doing a novel study. Not that I don't think that some novels are useful as a class, 'cause I think they do a good job in bonding a class together and giving a common experience for everyone to talk about. But not in the same way as this project does for the class, right? It gives them a common experience to talk about and to be able to discuss and to be able to compare situations to. (Una)

Participants noticed how one student in particular demonstrated an active pursuit of encouraging other classmates' sense of worth and confidence, and not just of her closest friends, but of the entire class.

> The class worked fairly well together as a team, encouraging, they brought out strengths. There was one point where people were feeling kind of down about it and one of the girls I have in my class, she took upon herself to write a letter to each person saying what everybody's strengths were, and she personalized

> them all by having their names on the top. It was really special and she was like "we might think we can't do it but this person is a leader, and this person has good ideas, and this person can write well." And it was really cool and she included everybody in that, and was really able to turn some people's perceptions of how we were doing around a little bit, which was cool. (Lauren)
>
> When I read it, I almost teared up and I asked her if she could … write one [class letter] that just said "Dear 7-O," and just have everything on it, so I had that one up on my board. Yeah, it was really cool and she was out of the room when everybody got it, just by chance, and so they were reading it over and they were, "Wow, this is really cool." And they all clapped for her when she came in. (Lauren)

Not only did the SLP contribute to relating to others beyond the classroom community, but it also enhanced opportunities to actively engage within their more immediate network of relationships.

DISCUSSION

This study sought to explore the perspectives of five school practitioners who were part of a student-led SLP in Manitoba. In the interviews, participants commented on characteristics and elements of the SLP and how they perceived the SLP's connection to student well-being. In the following sub-sections, we discuss findings of this research.

Education through a well-being lens

When we situate this study within the bigger picture of the research on well-being in schools, we believe the teachers' perceptions of the SLP approach within this Canadian middle school demonstrate how well-being can be deliberately integrated within the curricular aspects of schooling. We are not arguing that organizing classroom learning time through an SLP model ought to be an end in itself or that it will invariably lead to improved student relating or functioning. Rather, we believe that well-being can become part of an overall commitment to prioritizing student flourishing within a school. The school we studied already had multiple levels of focus on student well-being, including extracurricular activities, student support services, and even a well-being day organized with other community resources in mental and physical health. The WB2 project represented a step beyond extracurricular programming or one-off theme days towards a sustained, student-led learning experience.

Developing a student-led project requires more time than projects that are initiated and implemented by teachers — which is something that may cause concerns for teachers who feel pressure to cover mandated curricular outcomes. However, our research demonstrated how well-being occurs through processes, and especially processes (versus products). As Una observed, student-led processes offered opportunities for students to experience "authentic frustration" and "to know that's normal." Teachers observed that by facing

roadblocks, students developed their resiliency, feeling better about themselves than if the teacher had facilitated everything for them.

Student voice and autonomy: Reconceptualizing success

Student agency (voice and autonomy) was a fundamental component in our conceptualization of both the functioning and relating domains. It was noticeable in the interviews; teachers often had to make an active effort to step back and allow students to lead their projects and make decisions on their own. On many occasions, participants commented on how students' struggles could have been solved quickly by the teacher, but instead they gave students time and space to work these out on their own. As our literature review shows, rather than merely behaving in the ways that adults may want them to, when students' voices become the steering wheel, school processes become more meaningful to them. Teachers were surprised to observe how students became more engaged with their schooling during the SLP, which we infer was due to students feeling a greater sense of agency. Our study indicates that when an idea comes from students themselves, their sense of accountability is enhanced and they actively seek to pursue the idea.

Embracing discomfort

The other component evidenced in our conceptualizations of the functioning and relating domains was the departure from common behaviours / contexts and consequent development of new relationships. Teachers observed that the shared experiential experiences allowed students to connect with each other in ways they had not before. For example, one participant observed how a shy student led one of the meetings; also, they noticed how students were (surprisingly) listening to, and acknowledging, one another's opinions during the meetings.

The opportunity to explore new relationships allowed students to discover and develop new skills, which teachers believed enhanced their sense of self-worth. For example, writing to authentic audiences (e.g., the vice-principal) required effort and rethinking their writing practices. Moreover, the opportunities to connect with their community in ways they had not done before (e.g., going to a seniors' home) allowed students to see the positive impact they can make in people's lives. This was also observed in the classroom, for example, with the student who spontaneously wrote individual cards to each student commenting on the strengths they brought into the project. By embracing the discomfort of stepping out of familiar patterns and relationships, students were able to develop skills and relationships that enhanced their well-being.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrated how well-being can be pursued as an aim of education — not only as a by-product but as a process. Through empowering

students, the SLP allowed students to develop new skills and enhance their self-worth.

A future direction for our own or others' research could include exploring the perspectives of not only the teachers but the students who are involved in the curricular experiences that have been designed to enhance their well-being; such research could help identify how students themselves perceive their well-being through the SLP. We also see potential for exploring how teachers and students perceive other domains of well-being that comprise part of Soutter et al.'s (2011) framework for adolescent well-being, namely, having, striving, thinking, feeling, and being.

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