

Understanding students' experiences of well-being in secondary school: Rethinking policy and practice

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Abstract

This study seeks to explore the well-being of adolescent students, aged 13-16 years, within the context of secondary school. Adolescents have been chosen as the centre of interest for this study because research suggests that the overall well-being of adolescents is low and their happiness with school is declining. In England, indicators of adolescent well-being have consistently fallen below international averages (The Children's Society, 2024; OECD, 2022). The aim of this study is to contribute to the knowledge and understanding of how adolescent students experience well-being in schools through their own voices. This is, for those involved in education, particularly schools, to consider the relevance and effectiveness of their policy and practice around well-being.

The Brazilian philosopher and educator Paulo Freire whose teachings provide both a theoretical clarity and a practical application to matters of education, underpin this study. A participatory design was used for this qualitative research study. This involved Phase One working with ten students, from one school as co-researchers, to choose the methods and areas to be discussed during the collection of data from both student and staff participants in Phase Two of the study. The subsequent data was collected in two schools, from 33 students via focus group interviews and from nine staff via semi-structured conversations. Braun and Clarke's Reflexive Thematic Analysis was used as the analytical framework. The findings suggest that: well-being in schools is often (mis)understood as mental health, questioning how effectively schools can support student well-being; that there is a tension for schools supporting 'being' well in a performance culture which prioritises 'doing' well; that societal and hierarchical norms operating in a school have a significant impact on adolescent well-being; and that the voice and agency adolescent students have over their well-being in schools is limited.

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Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Meaning
AR	Action Research
BERA	British Educational Research Association
CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services
COO	Chief Operating Officer
CPoms	Child Protection Online Monitoring System
CYP	Children and Young People
DfE	Department for Education
DfES	Department for Education and Skills (existed until 2007)
DHSC	Department of Health and Social Care
DoH	Department of Health
ECM	Every Child Matters
NICE	National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
Ofsted	The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills
ONS	The Office for National Statistics
PAR	Participatory Action Research
PERMA	Positive emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning & Accomplishment
PSHE	Personal, Social and Health Education
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
RTA	Reflexive Thematic Analysis
SDT	Self Determination Theory
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
SMG	Senior Manager Guidance
SV	Student Voice
UEA	University of East Anglia
UN	United Nations
WHO	World Health Organisation

1 Introduction

This introductory chapter: situates the study in the context of relevant literature; introduces the theoretical underpinnings; highlights the contributions to the field; provides the aim of the research; presents the associated research questions; and outlines the structure of the study.

1.1 Context

This study was conceived just as the Covid-19 pandemic hit and at that time there was already growing disquiet about the well-being of children and young people (CYP) in England. During the subsequent five years concerns have not abated, indeed recent statistics suggest the well-being of CYP in England is at an all-time low (The Children's Society, 2024). The concern is that having a poor well-being is not good for an individual and poor well-being in childhood can have negative implications for well-being and mental health into adulthood (Allen et al., 2022; McLellan and Stewart, 2015). Adolescents, aged 13-16 years, have been selected as the centre of interest for this study because research suggests that the overall well-being of adolescents is the worst amongst CYP. Their happiness with school is declining, and poor well-being at a younger age leads to poor well-being in later life (The Children's Society, 2024). The context of secondary school has been chosen because adolescents spend a large part of their waking day in school where they will experience a number of factors impacting on their well-being, and schools have a statutory duty of care for the welfare of their students. This study is also informed by my own professional background in education.

The motivation for this study stems from my own enjoyment of schools, both as a student and as an adult, and from the realisation that sadly for many young people in secondary school this is not the case. My background as a teacher, Headteacher, and Her Majesty's Inspector of Schools has led to a professional curiosity, as to what lies behind the statistics which are reporting what amounts to a crisis in the well-being and mental health of CYP in this country. Throughout my career I have been an exponent of the importance and necessity of listening to the voices of students. This stems from the pedagogical and practical training I received whilst studying for my Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) which was very student centred. Indeed, the teachings of Jean Rudduck, a pioneer of student voice research, featured prominently in the training. What particularly resonated with me was the importance of making classroom learning enjoyable, accessible, and relevant which could only happen effectively if the opinions and perspectives of students were heard. If education is about developing a lifelong love of learning,

my education experiences have led to me to want to devote time to try to 'get under the skin' of what well-being means for adolescent students and how the educational community can best serve them. In line with my professional values, this study will have at its heart the voices of adolescent students both in the design and the collection of data. The following paragraphs discuss the main areas of debate surrounding well-being relevant to this research study.

The key factors to be critiqued include: what is well-being; how is well-being understood and experienced by adolescents themselves; what drives government guidance and policy around well-being; what influences school policy and practice in this area; and how effectively is student voice (SV) engaged with in decisions made around well-being.

The debate around how best to support CYP's well-being is dominated by the absence of a universally accepted theoretical definition of the term well-being (Alexandrova, 2017). These uncertainties surrounding the definition of well-being has led to the development of different conceptualisations, driven by different disciplines such as philosophy, psychology, and sociology (Jackson, 2013). This lack of agreement gives educationalists a problem, as operational frameworks of well-being and their subsequent strategies for action differ according to the well-being conceptualisation upon which they are based. These frameworks are implemented by health and educational settings to support their well-being strategy as well as facilitate how to measure its impact. The problem is that schools, who have a duty of care for their students' welfare, face a plethora of potentially unclear and confusing models of well-being upon which to guide their practice. This is further complicated in that most well-being frameworks have been designed by adults, thus prioritising what adults think is important, with minimal input from CYP themselves as to what they think is important (Ben-Arieh, 2005).

A second area of debate relevant to this study, centres around the legitimacy and political motivation of UK governments to intervene in the lives of CYP in the first place and how this is helping or hindering well-being (Ecclestone and Hayes, 2009). The well-being approach driven by recent UK governments foregrounds a neoliberalist approach to education (Ball, 2003; Jerrim, 2022). Well-being is seen in terms of future human capital upon which to build the nation's economic growth. This is reflected in government policy and guidance to schools which is based around intervention and prevention practices (Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) and Department for Education (DfE), 2018; DfE, 2023b). The aim of which is to ensure mental health in CYP does not worsen in adulthood and to enable positive academic outcomes for them. This justifies the need for this study because it is necessary to fully understand how adolescent students experience well-being in secondary school, to ensure schools are facilitating the

environment for well-being to flourish now and for the future. Critics of the government stance on well-being argue that it is based too much on a medical approach (Clarke, 2020) where well-being is regarded as ‘something that needs to be made better’ and it is the responsibility of the individual to develop characteristics to improve their well-being (Watson et al., 2012).

The stance of government and schools is also often predicated on what adults think is important for students’ well-being, rather than the students themselves (Bharara et al., 2019). Given the backdrop of the growing concern about CYP’s well-being, this is beginning to call into question the effectiveness of school policies and practice to support student well-being. The data suggests that rapidly rising rates of anxiety, emotional difficulties, self-harm, absence, and exclusion from school indicates adolescent well-being is a concern (Ford and Cross, 2021; OECD, 2022). Some researchers report the positive impact of student well-being programmes, such as improved self-esteem, better social and emotional skills, and improved attainment (Chaves, 2021; Tejada-Gallardo et al., 2020). Others suggest that without a clear definition and conceptualisation of well-being pertaining to education it is difficult for schools to pinpoint what is needed (Creasy and Corby, 2019). They are also critical of well-being work which premises a deficit construction of CYP’s well-being as something to be fixed and made better, encouraging a dependency on support. In the light of such concerns, current researchers are suggesting that the focus of a school’s approach needs to change and schools need to view well-being as a state, subjectively experienced, and develop the aspects of schools’ culture that will enable students to thrive (Curren et al., 2024; Willis, 2024).

Some researchers contend that a significant factor at the heart of concerns is the lack of voice and agency students have over their well-being (Lundy, 2007). Research has shown the benefits of listening to students, which has led to positive outcomes such as improved teacher-to-student relationships, better engagement, and higher attainment (Atkinson et al., 2020). Several researchers note, however, that student voice (SV) has not significantly impacted educational well-being policy and practice despite the United Nations (UN) (1989) Convention on the Rights of the Child Article 12. This Article recognises the right of CYP to be consulted in all matters that affect them and have their views taken seriously (Gallagher, 2019). The most frequent critique put forward include SV is often tokenistic with restricted by the existing school structures set up to capture SV, often not being representative of the student body (Cook-Sather, 2020a). The structures in place are mostly adult led and tend to report student views with their own adult interpretation (Gillett-Swan and Sargeant, 2019). In addition, the hierarchical power structures operating in schools prevent students from having agency (Holdsworth, 2000). The next subsection looks at the theoretical choice to underpin this study.

1.2 Theoretical Underpinning

The theoretical base of this study is the work of the Brazilian philosopher Paulo Freire. His background in literacy campaigns and popular education action groups saw him view education as the place where power and politics are given expression and the current context of the well-being debate for adolescent students can still be contested in such a space. Freire (1972, 1985, 2001, 2005, 2007, 2013, 2016, 2017) is chosen because his teachings provide both a theoretical clarity and a practical application to matters of education which support both the research design and deductive analysis of the findings for this study. He describes theory as emerging from specific contexts and forms of experience, and such understanding is necessary to critically examine the issue to inform practice. Above all his writings exude hope over despair. It is this sentiment and belief in humanity that can provide a new starting point from which to consider how best to support student well-being in schools. A full examination of Freire will take place later in the thesis (see chapter 3 - page 44 and sub section 4.3.5 - page 60).

1.3 Contributions to the Field

The ambition of this study is to provide new information and understanding to the paucity of research regarding how adolescents experience well-being in school. In addition, to specifically highlight points of divergence between students and staff to consider ‘why’ students experience well-being as they do. Adolescents have been an under researched group with regards to well-being and it is acknowledged that their state of well-being is distinct from other CYP (Clarke, 2023; Gennings et al., 2021; Jerrim, 2022). There is some consensus on the dimensions that are important for student well-being as well as research into how individual aspects of schooling, such as teaching and learning, relate to well-being. There is, however, a modicum of research conducted with adolescent students themselves as to how they experience those dimensions of well-being in the whole school context (Bharara et al., 2019; Clarke, 2023). This study also contributes to research design by using a novel approach through working with adolescents as co-researchers to decide the methods of, and areas to be explored in the data collection phase. This study has the potential to provide educationalists with a much-needed different perspective about what well-being means for adolescent students and to support educationalists in rethinking their approach through transformative policy and practice.

1.4 Research Aim

The aim of this research study is to understand how adolescent students experience well-being in secondary school. This is to provide education policy makers and practitioners with evidence to consider the effectiveness of their well-being work.

1.5 Research Questions

1. How do adolescent students define well-being?
2. What factors shape the way students experience well-being in school?
3. What factors shape the decisions schools make about how to support well-being?

1.6 Structure of Study

This study is structured in the following manner. Chapter 1 is the introduction to this study, providing a context for understanding the key issues and purpose of the research. Chapter 2 reviews the existing literature which sets this study within the current well-being debate. Chapter 3 outlines the philosophy of Freire, including how his ideas and concepts relate to the issues of debate arising from the literature review. Chapter 4 introduces the research design, methodology, and the theoretical underpinning of Freire. Chapter 5 considers the analysis of findings of the data collected. The outcomes are presented thematically and are framed by the theoretical underpinning. Chapter 6 concludes the findings, offers new knowledge and understanding, makes recommendations for further actions, highlights the challenges with the research, and ends with final remarks.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter sets out the key literature relevant to adolescent student well-being in secondary school education. It begins with a critique of the theories and conceptualisations of well-being, with a focus on the well-being of children and young people (CYP). It will also explore the role of measurement indicators in steering policy and practice around well-being. Government policy and guidance to schools around promoting and protecting well-being are reviewed in addition to schools' well-being practice with their students. It ends with an evaluation of the place of student voice (SV) and agency concerning their own well-being.

2.2 Defining Well-Being

2.2.1 Well-Being Theories and Conceptualisations

There is a raft of literature written about well-being and what it means (Alexandrova, 2017; Smith and Reid, 2018; Tiberius, 2018). However, despite this, the concept remains poorly defined (Dodge et al., 2012; Graham et al., 2016; Mercer, 2021) and under theorised (Streuli et al., 2009). It is important, as Jackson (2013) comments, to know the historical origins of well-being to provide a context of how well-being is currently understood, defined, and for the purpose of this study, applied and experienced in an educational context.

Well-being has long been debated, and different philosophical perspectives have been offered as to what well-being means (Alexandrova, 2017). Historically, philosophers have tended to categorise well-being under the main headings of hedonistic well-being and eudemonic well-being (Tiberius, 2018). The hedonistic perspective attempts to define well-being in terms of pleasure and avoidance of pain. It is associated with happiness, positivity, absence of negativity, and satisfaction with one's lot (Diener, 2006). The origins of eudemonic well-being began with Aristotle who believed that achieving well-being was more than just happiness but linked to fulfilment as a human being (Fattore et al., 2016). The eudemonic perspective thus defines well-being in terms of personal development and growth, self-realisation, and the extent to which an individual is fully functioning (Deleuze and Guattari, 1991; Ryan and Deci, 2000, 2017; Ryff, 1989).

It is largely accepted that from the philosophical ideologies outlined above, three conceptual approaches to well-being dominate the research community (Parfit, 1984). These are defined as: subjective well-being, stemming from the hedonistic perspective; desire preference and fulfilment well-being increasingly linked to eudemonic theory; and objective well-being (Tiberius, 2018). The subjective well-being approaches emphasise that well-being is affected by feelings, emotion, and mood. These approaches emphasise happiness, pleasure, enjoyment, and life satisfaction which signify that one's life is going well (Dodge et al., 2012). The desire preference and fulfilment approaches focus on attaining levels of satisfaction with one's achievements, rather than just pure pleasure (Watson et al., 2012). The objective approach does not explain well-being through individual pleasure or desire fulfilment. By contrast, well-being is defined in terms of external and universal views about 'what is good' for us to lead a 'quality' life regardless of individual desires. This includes views about health, education, social networks, and material resources such as food, housing and income (Nussbaum, 2011).

From these main conceptual approaches there have been many models of well-being developed which are used to support well-being in different contexts including education. Some models focus mainly on subjective (hedonistic or eudemonic) or objective well-being, while others are hybrid models containing aspects of both. Key models/theories which lean most to subjective well-being include Seligman's (2011) PERMA Model, alongside Ryan and Deci's (2000) Self Determination Theory (SDT). The PERMA model (Seligman, 2011) lists the elements of well-being as Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishments. In education, this model has often been used to develop a positive learning environment necessary for well-being, mental health, and academic success (Mercer et al., 2018). The SDT of Ryan and Deci (2000) highlights three basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. In education, this model has been used to understand student motivation and engagement with learning, as well as the dynamics of interpersonal relationships between teachers and students, and their impact on well-being (Liu et al., 2017).

The main models of objective well-being frequently cited include Sen's (2005) Capability Approach which describes functionings, capabilities, and agency as essential for one's well-being. Objective well-being can also be seen within Nussbaum's (2011) ten categories of well-being centred around equality and dignity. In education, these objective led models would suggest creation of an environment to enable students to fulfil their potential and empower them to make meaningful life choices. The main hybrid models, combining elements of subjective and objective well-being, include Carol Ryff's model which highlights six well-being needs of human actualisation: autonomy; personal growth; self-acceptance; life purpose; and positive

relatedness (Ryff and Singer, 1998). In addition, international governments and national agencies have developed complex models to measure well-being to help guide policy development. These include, for example, The Children's Society Good Childhood Index which is based on a subjective view of well-being and aims to identify areas or groups of children that need more support (The Children's Society, 2024). The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (2017) well-being framework is based on objective well-being indicators, whereas the UN (2015) Development Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are based on an objective list, which aims to promote economic growth and well-being. The significance of using any conceptual model of well-being for education is that the variables of well-being can be measured and hence policy and practice can be informed (Alexandrova, 2017). However, as shown, the models provide very different philosophical and psychological views of well-being, therefore what approach is selected by educationalists will take a particular view of well-being and steer such measurement, policy, and practice in that direction.

There are also generic criticisms levelled at the main models of well-being. The main criticisms of subjective models' centre around the domain of pleasure and life satisfaction being too narrow a lens through which to determine well-being. Critics argue that the measurement of subjective well-being lacks the reliability afforded to objective well-being measures if policy is to be made (Liddle and Carter, 2015). Subjective well-being models are also criticised for being based on western qualities, thus prioritising individualistic, materialistic, and hedonistic values. Such values do not necessarily reflect the lived experience or expectations of all, thereby ignoring the identities, values, and experiences of disadvantaged, oppressed, or poorer people who have differing views (Gough and McGregor, 2007; White, 2015). If subjective based well-being approaches are used in education to inform policy, practice, and measurement, they may not effectively serve the profile of adolescent students in England's secondary schools. Models of subjective well-being are complex, and this demonstrates how well-being policy and practice in schools can become muddled.

The main criticisms of objective list models of well-being contend that insufficient attention is given to how objective well-being indicators are created. Most appear to be created from a scientific and medical perspective largely for the pragmatic purposes of measuring well-being on large population data sets to predict future economic prosperity (Unterhalter, 2016). These objective list indicators can include housing conditions, literacy rates, education levels, crime rates, and poverty. Critics of objective list theories argue that they lack the personal nature and conceptualisation through which one judges their own quality of life, thus not enabling an in-depth insight into the lives of individuals (Jackson, 2013; Robeyns, 2017; Unterhalter, 2016). White

(2015) argues that there is no 'objective' reality, outside culture or society, which can be set against people's subjective, perceptions of their circumstances. There is enough evidence to suggest that the lived-in body cannot be understood in isolation from external influences and the limitation it creates in engaging fully with issues of agency, hence the ability to pursue one's own goals (Deleuze and Guattari, 1991; Deneulin, 2008; Thomas, 2009). These theories would not appear to adequately reflect the voice and agency of individuals in their own well-being. Policy makers and practitioners in schools using such models would particularly limit the role of CYP's voice and agency in their own well-being.

In summary, this section highlights the difficulties of defining well-being and therefore, the differences in understanding the meaning of well-being. Carter and Andersen (2020) argue that the seeking of well-being is a complicated and complex pursuit, as increasingly it is being used in discussions at all levels, and within literature in many different ways, with well-being changing and taking shape like a chameleon. For this study, exploration into how well-being is conceptualised in schools will have a direct bearing on how adolescents experience well-being. Therefore, the next section considers whether theories, conceptualisations, and models specifically of CYP's well-being provide a clearer understanding for this study to explore student well-being in secondary school.

2.3 Understanding and Assessing Well-Being

2.3.1 The Complexities Surrounding an Understanding of CYP's Well-Being

The implications for how CYP's well-being have been theorised, conceptualised, and measured over the last 30 years is due to significant changes in the thinking around children. This has centred around the view that a child is a 'being' in their own right. This paradigmatic shift took place in the 1990s, through development of a new paradigm, the Sociology of Childhood, recognised by James and Prout (2015). The view is of childhood being socially constructed, the child as a 'being' rather than a 'becoming', and as 'active' rather than 'passive'. Viewing a child as a 'being' recognises that a child constructs their own life through their experiences. This is in contrast to recognising that a child is a 'becoming', thus devaluing their life experiences because they are living a deficit life whilst achieving the qualities required for adulthood. There is recognition that children are knowledgeable social actors able to speak for themselves (Ben-Arieh, 2005). In addition, the 'rights-based agenda', premises a rationale for children who have a

recognised place in society (Bessel, 2009; Bharara et al., 2019). Influential in this was The UN (1989) Convention on the Rights of the Child. In Article 12 it states that every child has the right to say what they think in all matters affecting them and to have their views taken seriously. Children under Article 12 include every human being under the age of 18 (UN, 1989).

It is therefore only in the 1990's that childhood has been recognised as a distinct phase and that the well-being of children in their own right considered important, despite an abundance of literature written about childhood as a specific state (Blos, 1967; Freud, 1966). The work of mid-20th century psychologists overshadowed theorists who were attempting to ground cognitive development in children's experiences. The views of Piaget (1953), Maslow (1943), and Rogers (1977) dominated educational and mental health practices, and they believed that children inhabit phases temporarily on the way to becoming an adult. Although they recognised 'childhood', children were conceptualised as 'adults in deficit', unable to experience well-being relative to their state of childhood, because achieving self-actualisation is limited to adult knowledge and experience (Fattore et al., 2016). The significance is that CYP's well-being was not something that was recognised as distinct from adult well-being. Careful consideration, therefore, is given to the methodology for this study to reflect that the well-being of an adolescent is distinct from that of an adult and acknowledging the right of adolescents to be participants 'in', rather than passive objects 'of' research.

Although the dominant well-being theories and conceptualisations, (see section 2.3 – page 9) can apply to both adults and children, the current presiding view of CYP, as 'beings' would make such theories limiting. Firstly, subjective well-being conceptualisations which posit a positive mental state alone are not necessary or sufficient for CYP's well-being (Fattore et al., 2016; Keller, 2020; Lee Duckworth et al., 2005). This is further compounded by the distinct meanings of well-being, mental health, and mental illness being blurred and used interchangeably (Billington et al., 2022; Huppert and So, 2013). Secondly, desire-based conceptualisations require high-order thinking to inform, order, and evidence well-being fulfilment goals, which are developmental based skills that children have not yet acquired (Curren et al., 2024). This assessment of developmental capacity is grounded in the neuropsychological differences between adolescents and adults.

Applying an understanding of adolescent brain development to wellbeing programmes means we can design support that aligns with how adolescents process information and regulate emotions and behaviour at their developmental stage, rather than expecting adult-like self-control (Arain et al., 2013). The limbic system (involved in emotion, reward, and social sensitivity) is highly active during adolescence while the prefrontal cortex (responsible for planning and regulation) is still

maturing, and so wellbeing programmes should prioritise co-regulation before self-regulation (APA, 2022). In schools, this means creating environments that provide clear structure, predictable routines, and emotionally safe relationships that help young people manage arousal and stress when their internal regulatory systems are overloaded.

In practice, this translates into wellbeing approaches that emphasise emotional literacy and provides coping strategies, supported decision-making, and the opportunity to share these reflections with other students (Casey and Caudle, 2013; Khanna, Marquez, and Turner, 2025). Behaviour support should therefore focus less on punishment and more on restorative, relational responses that rebuild regulation and learning capacity. As adolescents are particularly sensitive to reward and feedback, wellbeing programmes that use strength-based approaches, encouragement, and meaningful incentives are more likely to engage them and reinforce adaptive behaviours (Khanna, Marquez, and Turner, 2025). Importantly, recognising that emotional volatility and risk-taking reflect normal brain development helps reduce stigma and supports earlier identification of genuine mental health concerns (Casey and Caudle, 2013). It also suggests that how adolescents think about what well-being means for them is likely to be in continual flux as they develop and is likely to show differences with adult conceptualisations of well-being.

Thirdly, objective well-being conceptualisations which limit the agency of CYP in their own well-being are not comprehensive enough to reflect all aspects of a child's life (Raghavan and Alexandrova, 2015). Finally, perhaps the most significant reason, is that because many conceptualisations of CYP's well-being are constructed 'by' adults they do not sufficiently recognise the input of CYP themselves (Alexandrova, 2017; Gillett-Swan, 2014). Watson et al. (2012) endorse this, arguing that a concept of child well-being determined or measured by a set of adult indicators is irrelevant without the views of children's own views and perceptions. This is because well-being cannot be understood without the knowledge of how childhood is understood as a concept and how it is socially constructed by CYP themselves (Ben-Arieh, 2005; Christopher, 1999; Cook-Sather, 2020a; Laruffa and Hearne, 2024; Raghavan and Alexandrova, 2015). It is also important to recognise that children are not a homogenous group, and well-being will be different for different age groups. Children's well-being and mental health will be affected by different factors as they develop, for example, in a young child (0-4 years of age) factors such as secure adult relationships, play, and good nutrition could affect their well-being, but for an older child (10-14) factors such as secure peer acceptance, body image are more significant (Watson et al., 2012). Also, wellbeing could be affected by other factors such as gender, ethnicity, nationality, and social class of the same age group. Laruffa and Hearne (2024) comment, students have a

nuanced knowledge of their own situation and how to improve it. Hence, for this study, it was important that the research design reflect this need for a range of specifically adolescent voices to be heard, not just young people's voices, to understand well-being from an adolescent point of view. Also, to consider alongside student views, the views of staff to explore to what extent well-being in schools is approached from an 'adult' perception of what well-being means.

Although now largely accepted that CYP has a distinct notion of well-being subjectively experienced, as with adult well-being, there is no agreement on a definition, conceptualisation, or how to measure it (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015; Watson et al., 2012). The input by CYP into research around well-being remains undeveloped with such work mainly adult led (Bharara et al., 2019; Dunlop-Bennett et al., 2019). Some well-being frameworks have been created, such as the one by Fattore et al. (2016) which involved CYP aged 8-15, but the limitations of this model are its application generically to all children. There is a paucity of work specifically around adolescent definitions and conceptualisations of well-being, in part because well-being has been led by the research paradigms that contend CYP are passive recipients of education rather than active agents (Lundy, 2007). In research from Gennings et al. (2021, p.84), adolescents and adult experts took part to propose a definition of adolescent well-being, and they defined adolescent well-being as "A multi-faceted perception of an interaction between an individual's positive feelings and external influences", calling for this definition to underpin further research. Navarro et al. (2017) used a mixed methods approach to study adolescents' perceptions of subjective well-being in America. They found that the factors affecting an adolescent's well-being were diverse and complex which warrants a more in-depth understanding. Other research involving youth has identified that their well-being is made up of many positive dimensions. These dimensions although described slightly differently and with varying importance, focus on happiness, mastery, hope, engagement, respect, and relationships (Kern et al., 2015; McLeod and Wright, 2015; Waters and Higgins, 2022).

However, Raghavan and Alexandrova (2015, p.887) note that that there are "few unifying theories that could under grid and inform these various conceptual and measurement efforts". This results in a lack of consensus around conceptualisations of well-being which is a hinderance to progress and the precision of well-being science in education (Bharara et al., 2019). This is significant for this current study because, although conceptualisations and dimensions of well-being important to CYP's well-being have been produced, there is minimal research into how these dimensions are 'experienced' by adolescents in school (Clarke, 2023). This study aims, therefore, to provide a much-needed lens through which to understand adolescent well-being in a secondary school context. This would provide secondary schools with insights into how their conceptualisations

and approach to well-being helps or hinders adolescents, but also how adolescents experience well-being in ways schools may not have anticipated.

In reflection, despite some common ground over dimensions that constitute CYP's well-being there is no consensus on a well-being definition for CYP. Using definitions, conceptualisations, and frameworks that have largely been designed by adults, may not be best way to understand CYP's well-being. This is because there are likely to be differences in the meanings that adults and children attach to well-being, attributable to differences in positioning in terms of their development stage and experiences (Fattore et al., 2016). There appears to be, at best, a limited use of adolescent voice contributing to these well-being definitions and conceptualisations, yet such well-being frameworks are used, by national and international organisations, to create indicators by which to measure CYP's well-being. Attention needs to be given to capture the voice of adolescent students. The next section considers what the measurement indicators and organisations are telling us about the situation regarding adolescent well-being.

2.3.2 The Well-Being of CYP as Viewed Through Measurement Indicators

Despite the complexities regarding a definition and framing of CYP well-being, there is still a need to know the current state of their well-being to determine whether any action is required to support them. The key is understanding what works to improve adolescent well-being which is integral to the development of effective policies to meet the commitments of global sustainable development goals for 2030, as laid down by the UN (Banati and Bacalso, 2021). In addition, as Liddle and Carter (2015) and Rees et al. (2010) argue, investment in young peoples' well-being brings benefits for them now and for the future in terms of economic, humanitarian, and social benefits for the individual and society. The argument is that to impact CYP's well-being, policy makers and practitioners require access to high quality evidence regarding the state of well-being. The evidence needs to be readily available and presented in a way that enables easy uptake, use, and monitoring (Banati and Bacalso, 2021; Martela and Ryan, 2023; Newby et al., 2022; Simons and Baldwin, 2021). This section looks at why and how measurement indicators are created, for whom and for what purpose, and what information do they present about the well-being of CYP in schools in England.

To support the emergence of an effective evidence base regarding CYP's well-being, over the last decade there has been an increased interest in what it means to be well for them. Organisations collecting data show more consistency over the domains that are considered important in CYP's

lives, that need monitoring. Recognition that well-being draws from both subjective and objective well-being conceptualisations, has led to more holistic CYP's well-being measurement frameworks (Banati and Bacalso, 2021). Increasingly, a larger number of domains are represented in measurement indicators which capture an increased amount of data around CYP's lives (Newby et al., 2022; Podsakoff et al., 2016). In 2020, the UN H6+ Technical Working Group on Adolescent Health and Well-being developed a framework of five interconnected domains, to be operationalised through measurement indexes, which include health, connectedness, safety, learning, employability, and agency (Ross et al., 2020). There are, however, limitations in the current data sets produced which can potentially hinder a precise assessment of the state of CYP's well-being. The relevance for this study, is that this could potentially curtail the impact of appropriate and effective action to improve adolescent well-being in school.

The existing measurement approaches are fragmented and the potential problem here is what Bornstein (2017) describes as the 'specificity' principle. He argues that interventions, stemming from measurement indicators, can be more successful if research recognises the specific setting and context of populations including age groups (Bornstein, 2017). In their research, Goswami (2012) found that most measurement indicators focus on the macro level, thus are not sufficiently recognising the micro factors that affect an individual's well-being. There are inconsistencies across the major survey programmes with different age ranges and topics being used for measuring CYP's well-being by different organisations (Banati and Bacalso, 2021; Newby et al., 2022). The significance for this study is that if a school's policy and practice is constructed around selecting data from only one survey and drawing upon generalised indicators, it might not fully address the well-being needs of all adolescents. This study aims to unlock the adolescent students' subjective experiences to provide a more in-depth and nuanced understanding of what affects their well-being. In so doing, it moves away from the statistical data which suggests there 'is' a problem with adolescent well-being but not 'why' and 'what' can be done about it from the students themselves.

Adolescence is regarded by many as a transitional period between childhood and adulthood, characterised by physical changes, cognitive development and behaviours which lay the foundations for future well-being (Li et al., 2018; Pollard and Lee, 2003). Avedissian and Alayan (2021) argue that the main challenge to measuring adolescent well-being is the lack of consensus and conceptualisations around its meaning. To conduct their research, Avedissian and Alayan used the Walker and Avant Method (2005), an eight-step framework, which aims to distinguish the core dimensions of a concept and then identify how to observe and measure the concept. The findings identified that the defining attributes of adolescent well-being were autonomy,

connectedness, optimism, and competency. Internal factors important to adolescent well-being included behavioural, physical, psychological, and spiritual domains. External factors important to well-being included environmental, economic, education, safety and social domains. They conclude that to reach high levels of well-being in adolescents, all domains need to be present (Avedissian and Alayan, 2021). The question for this study is how attributes and domains are effectively measured by the measurement indicators in existence and used by governments and schools to inform policy and practice.

Different organisations use different indexes to ascertain the well-being of CYP, each with a slightly different angle or motivation. In 2015, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) added to their model an evaluation of well-being which includes five well-being dimensions. The dimensions are psychological, social, physical, material, and cognitive. The OECD (2016) published their unified framework using an assessment of CYP's social and emotional skills to determine the state of CYP's well-being. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2018) have a data set of 31 measures of children's well-being within 13 domains which are appearance, loneliness, family, friends, health, time use, choice, home, safety, places to play, school, home, environment, and being listened to. These align with the national measures of well-being several of which relate to happiness. The Children's Society (2024) use the Good Childhood Index which is a short questionnaire that can be completed by children themselves and is used to determine well-being overall and in relation to ten aspects of life. These are family, friends, choice, home, health, time use, future, money and things, appearance, and school. Regarding age ranges, the WHO and the UN use 0-19 years of age but also include analysis on youth up to 24 years of age (Patton and Timmermans, 2016). Therefore, if information about CYP's well-being is presented across various domains and subsumed within other population categories, 'adolescent', for example, can appear in both the children and youth categories. It can dilute the evidence base used by policy makers and schools to inform well-being policy and practice. This is supported by the findings of Banati and Bacalso (2021) into how adolescent research evidence is mapped. They suggest that such research could benefit from age sensitive methodologies which capture the developmental science and specific lived contexts of this group, which is a gap this study aims to fill.

There have been attempts to use age sensitive methodologies to measure the well-being of CYP. The Leuven scale, developed by Laevers (2015), measures emotional well-being in early childhood offering an alternative to outcomes-based measurements (MacRae and Jones, 2020). Professionals assess the child's experience, on a 5-point scale, making observations of engagement, focus, creativity, energy and persistence. This has the effect of cultivating what

Laevers (2015) describes as an empathic understanding of what it is like to be a child. The Adolescent Well-being Scale was devised by Birlson (1981) to pick up possible depressive symptoms for children aged 7-14 and in adolescents. The scale has 18 questions relating to different aspects of a young person's life and it aims to capture their feelings and emotional state. The Gothenburg Well-being Scale is used to measure mental well-being in late adolescence and focuses on dimensions such as stability, vitality and alertness (Hitz et al., 2018). The National Adolescent Assessments Cards measurement index uses pictures and questions on cards with adolescents and professionals to assess dimensions relevant to adolescent health and well-being in education (Banati and Diers, 2016). What is relevant is that not all of the tools incorporate all the domains that researchers have found to be important to positive adolescent well-being and that different measures would tap into different developmental stages of CYP.

Most of the indicators used to measure CYP's well-being rely on adult conceptions of their needs such as financial stability. What is important to adult well-being is not necessarily the same as what is important to CYP's well-being (Rees and Main, 2016). Indeed, this perpetuates the problems discussed around the construction of CYP's well-being frameworks, by adults. Despite a larger number of domains being represented in measurement indicators focussing on CYP's lives, some commentators argue that only narrow aspects of each domain are measured. Many data collection methods being skewed towards measuring objective rather than subjective elements of well-being (Rees and Main, 2016; Watson et al., 2012). The limitation of this is that a less than comprehensive picture is recorded of how CYP are doing in their own lives, with less of a focus on 'being' than on 'becoming'.

Many measurement tools focus too narrowly on specific negative behaviour risks and outcomes (such as alcohol, drugs, and tobacco use) rather than positive indicators of CYP's development such as friendships, happiness, and fulfilment (The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine, 2019). This does in part tend to influence the direction taken by policy makers and school practitioners. The implication for CYP's well-being is that policies and practice should not solely be about programme interventions for when things have gone wrong or about the absences of negative experiences but should look to incorporate measurement of positive assets and outcomes (Avedissian and Alayan, 2021; Chaves, 2021; Patton and Timmermans, 2016). Going further, Watson et al. (2012) argue that if the basis for understanding well-being and devising well-being programmes continues to be based on measurement indicators, rather than a wider evidence base (which would include students' perceptions of their own well-being), then a schools' focus will be narrow. That is to say, well-being will become operationalised and schools

will not sufficiently recognise how they can promote a well-being environment and culture which promotes human flourishing for all.

It has been demonstrated that the quality of information collected regarding CYP well-being is often limited. Kern et al. (2015) comment on the need to go beyond generalised global measures which obscure the detail that could impact on more nuanced guidance on how to increase well-being within specific contexts. This is significant for this study because it is argued that better data is needed from adolescents themselves, particularly subjective indicators in order to inform policy makers decisions and practitioner actions in schools (Graham et al., 2016; Lundy et al., 2011; MacKenzie et al., 2011; Robinson et al., 2020; Tobia et al., 2019). It is important to note that there is a difference between ‘involving’ CYP, subjectively capturing their views, and the notion of ‘self-reporting’, suggesting that the input is subjective (Patalay and Fitzsimons, 2016). ‘Self-reporting’ can be on objective indicator as well as subjective indicators and ‘self-reporting’ can be against CYP’s measurement indicators devised by adults. Soffia and Turner (2021) explain this using the example of bullying. An objective measure would attempt to quantify the extent to which a person has been bullied, whereas a subjective measure would attempt to establish the feelings and impact associated with such bullying. Both are gathering ‘self-reported’ information but only the latter seeks to gain a subjective response. It is the subjective response from adolescents themselves in their own words which is important, where the gap in knowledge exists, and which this study aims to address.

Despite these documented differences with measurement indexes, it appears that whatever organisation or matrix is used to measure CYP’s well-being, the overall picture is one of concern and does not appear to be significantly improving. The Good Childhood Report highlights a significant decrease in CYP’s happiness since 2010 and a sustained drop in happiness with school (The Children’s Society, 2024). The report found that school, friendships, and appearance continue to be the greatest cause of dissatisfaction. It also reports that a larger percentage of children who completed the survey, 11%, have scored below the mid-point on the life satisfaction scale and are deemed to have low well-being (The Children’s Society, 2024). Data from the Department for Education (DfE) (2023e), using England’s PISA 2022 results showed that the UK’s 15-year-olds had the lowest life satisfaction out of all 27 European countries. In addition, the OECD through PISA have documented increasing school related anxiety among adolescents especially in countries with competitive academic environments (OECD, 2018, 2022). Therefore, the aim of this study is to investigate, through collaborating with adolescents themselves and discussing with staff, what is happening in schools that is contributing to the problems identified through the measurement indicators.

McKeown and Hagell (2021) note how several studies in adolescent mental health and well-being point to a 'U' shaped curve with the lowest levels reported for ages 14 and 15 years. They advise this is more likely because of social and environmental factors, such as relationships with family and peers, and the cultural norms operating at school, rather than biological changes associated with this age group - namely puberty. During the pandemic, there were large increases in the number of referrals made for CYP to mental health services. Shire et al. (2024) note the referral to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) increased from 340,000 in 2017/18 to 949,000 in 2022/23. These statistics reflect that the challenges facing adolescents are becoming more complex (Sawyer and Patton, 2018). The greater diversity in family structures, the growth of digital technologies, the extension of the adolescent period of five years due to early onset puberty and sexual awareness, and delayed employment opportunities are playing their part in the complexity (Curren et al., 2024; Sawyer and Patton, 2018). This suggests that different ways of supporting adolescent well-being demands urgent attention which this study hopes to facilitate.

To conclude this section, well-being data presents a worrying picture which shows little sign of changing. There are, however, discrepancies and limitations with the measurement indicators used to determine well-being. The main gap is the exclusion of subjective measures particularly relevant to adolescents, informed by what they think is important to capture around their well-being. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, the OECD (2017, p.19) stated that probably "the goal of education policy makers, teachers, and parents is to help children achieve the highest level of well-being possible". During the pandemic, WHO (2020) proffered that student well-being must be a top priority and called for schools to support student well-being. Despite such ambitions the differences in tools used, measurement reporting practices, and cultural framing there is agreement internationally that the adolescent phase of life has become increasingly marked by "psychological vulnerability" (Khawaja et al., 2025, p.349). Therefore, the next sections, consider and critique the policy and practices of government and schools pertaining to the promotion and protection of student well-being.

2.4 Promoting and Protecting Well-Being in Schools

2.4.1 Government Policy and Guidance in CYP's Well-Being

Concerns about the well-being of CYP have impacted upon government educational policy in the last 20 years. Policymakers have concerned themselves with early intervention and prevention efforts to ensure the instances of mental health conditions in children do not worsen in adolescence and adulthood (Humphrey and Wigelsworth, 2016). The DfE (2019) acknowledges schools have an important part to play in the fostering of good mental well-being, enabling CYP to fulfil their potential at school and be suitably prepared for adult life. CYP spend a large percentage of their time in school and therefore school has the potential to impact, positively and/or negatively, on their well-being (Reiss, 2005). This section considers the rationale behind successive governments policy and guidance to schools around well-being and mental health.

Government policy in the arena of CYP's well-being developed after a number of landmark publications. The book by Daniel Goleman entitled 'Emotional Intelligence' was a seminal text for linking emotional health and well-being (Goleman, 1996). The book, as Weare (2003, p.5) comments, "focussed attention on the links between social and emotional intelligence and educational outcomes such as learning, cognitive development, school attendance, and job success". Also deemed important was the report produced following an independent inquiry into inequalities in health, led by Sir Donald Acheson, which linked mental health to poor educational outcomes in the UK, and argued that schools have a part to play in addressing these social problems (Acheson, 1998). This led to acknowledgement in national government that students in school required increased access to social, emotional, and health support (Brown, 2018).

In 2003, The Labour Party in their drive for social justice, launched 'Every Child Matters' (ECM) for England and Wales which led to the Children's Act of 2004 (Department for Education and Skills (DfES), 2003). In outlining the five areas of policy: stay safe, be healthy, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution, and achieve economic well-being, it was a significant change to the children and family's agenda. This is because ECM brought all interested parties together to critically examine each other's views aiming to achieve better outcomes for young people through a shared multi-agency approach. Following ECM, the Education and Inspection Act of 2006 placed, for the first time, a duty on schools to promote well-being (DfES, 2006). This was followed in 2008 by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) inspection framework of indicators to measure a school's contribution to CYP's well-being (Ofsted, 2008).

Subsequent governments have continued to recognise the importance of CYP's well-being, both for children themselves and for the economic well-being and prosperity of the country but have sought to achieve this and measure it in different ways.

With the change in government in 2010, many Labour policies were abandoned, including ECM. The policy turn was towards developing characteristics in CYP that would secure a good well-being for them in adulthood, such as character and resilience, as illustrated by speeches by Conservative politicians. For example, in his speech on 'Life Chances', David Cameron (2016) advocated that work was a route out of poverty and a new way forward was needed. For young people, life chances would be improved through education, building knowledge, building character and persistence, and building opportunity. Since then, there has been an emphasis in schools on building adult attributes in young people and 'Character Education' (Hinds, 2019).

The 2024 election of a Labour government has seen CYP's well-being remain a priority. Their manifesto stated that "nothing says more about the state of the nation than the well-being of its children" (Labour Party, 2024, p.95). In a speech to the Confederation of School Trusts, Bridget Phillipson (2024), in her role as Secretary of State for Education and Minister for Women and Equalities, set out the government's plans to put well-being at the centre of its educational plans through the two pillars of 'achieving' and 'thriving'. With the word 'achieving' still included in government policy, it could be suggested that a neoliberal conceptualisation which sees the role of education as building human capital to sustain economic growth persists (Ball, 2003, 2012; Sellman and Buttarazzi, 2020). Developing character, personal qualities, and achieving academically is integrally linked to future economic growth (Spratt, 2016). It is, therefore, suggested that over time such political motivations manifested in government policy has led to conflict with the school's duty of care which has negatively impacted the well-being of many students (Clarke, 2023; Curren et al., 2024).

All English schools are under a statutory duty to promote the welfare of their students, which includes preventing impairment of children's health, development, and taking action to enable all children to have the best outcomes (DfE, 2023b). The DHSC and DfE Green Paper 'Transforming Children's and Young Peoples Mental Health Provision' (DHSC and DfE, 2018) is the response to the Department of Health (DoH) and the Department of Education's (DfE) joint 'Consultation on Transforming Children and Young People's Mental Health Provision' (DoH and DfE, 2017). This set out the vision that mental health support should be available to CYP when they need it, a Mental Health Lead in every school and college by 2025 and, multi-disciplinary health teams working in schools. Also, other government guidance supports the use of whole school approaches,

particularly around attendance and behaviour, to support the mental health of CYP (DfE, 2023a). Researchers have increasingly shown the links between the culture, ethos, and environment of a school, highlighting the major influence this has on both CYP's and adult well-being (Clarke, 2023; Mercer, 2021; Weare, 2015). Indeed, the DfE (2023a) highlighted the importance of relationships between staff and students and between students as crucial in promoting well-being through developing a sense of belonging.

Much of the guidance and policy to schools, however, continues to highlight the governments perspective on educational priorities which are framed in terms of academic performance, with adult characteristics ascribed to CYP in policy documents. Watson et al. (2012) argue, in educational policy, medical discourses often dominate. This gives authority and normalisation to a notion of well-being as an individual performance of self-management often associated with self-discipline and compliance. What is right for CYP as 'beings' and as 'becomings' does not have to be mutually exclusive and in conflict. Ross et al. (2020) discuss, adolescent well-being should be both a personal good and a good for society. This current research study, therefore, aims to discover the extent to which well-being practice in schools is determined by government ideology on the purpose of education and the consequences of this for adolescent well-being.

The DHSC and DfE (2018) in their Green Paper also talk about 'robust evidence' being the cornerstone of improving well-being and a need to understand young people's well-being. In the Green Paper (DHSC and DfE, 2018), however, there is only one reference as to where information or views have been obtained, which is ONS data. This does beg the question as to what evidence or research is being used to formulate policies, initiatives, and accountability frameworks in connection with CYP's well-being. Also, as to whose evidence or research is being used and whether that extends to include the voice of CYP. For example, a recent parliamentary briefing 'Children's well-being in schools' (Cary and Webb, 2025) lists 66 contributors, but with no CYP listed as a contributor. This resonates with thoughts about traditional education, where the knowledge of those in power, in this case the government, holds the value and the knowledge of those not in power, in this case students, holds little or no value. A similar, 'performative' approach to education can be discerned from Ofsted (2019, 2024) handbooks. Much of the policy guidance issued by government has morphed into targets, success criteria, and accountability measures. Spratt (2017, p.37) recognises this landscape and notes "as a noun, well-being becomes something that can be 'done to' children, something that can be improved or boosted, measured and recorded, rendering it ripe for a policy intervention".

In government policy and guidance documents reviewed for this study there is no consistent definition of well-being given (DfE, 2021a, 2021b). Over the course of the last 20 years the terminology changes and expands, without explanation of the changing terms and vocabulary, and with no clear definition of what each means (Carter, 2016). The terms ‘well-being’, ‘mental health’, and ‘emotional well-being’, are often used interchangeably. This is evident in government documents where it is frequently terms such as ‘resilience’, ‘character’ and ‘confidence’ that are used to describe well-being and/or mental health. It is not the fact that the dimensions of well-being are being highlighted that is the concern. It is more the likelihood that without a transparent evidence base suitably referenced, or without attention given to the different cognitive stages and related well-being needs of CYP, or that dimensions important to well-being have been chosen by adults, with limited input from CYP themselves, the effectiveness of government guidance and policy is likely to be mixed at best.

The DfE has not placed a statutory requirement on schools or academy trusts to have a standalone policy on mental health and/or well-being. Brown (2018) in her review of 90 mainstream schools noted only one secondary school had a standalone policy on mental health. This could be regarded as positive because schools can construct their own well-being approach rather than relying on material provided by outside agencies. The potential concern, however, is that government departments do provide guidance papers to schools which foregrounds their perspective and emphasis on their well-being work. To illustrate the point, the Green Paper ‘Transforming Children’s and Young Peoples Mental Health Provision’ (DHSC and DfE, 2018) lays out its aim that mental health support should be available to CYP when they need it. There are, however, tensions as to: what does the term mental health mean; is it the same for adults as children; who decides what mental health support CYP need; and when they need it. Also, the Green Paper outlines the Government aim of a ‘mental health lead’ in every school and college (DHSC and DfE, 2018). In 2023 ‘eligible’ schools were advised that they could apply for a grant to access ‘quality assured’ training to develop a whole school/college approach to mental health and well-being. This appears helpful but without compulsion, schools are not obliged to access some potentially useful material, and constraints on school budgets may have a part to play on this. Indeed, it does ask a further question if the mental health of children is of national importance why schools must be ‘eligible’ and apply to access the ‘high quality training’. This example serves to illustrate the vagueness of government guidance and policy regarding CYP’s well-being. It spotlights the challenges faced by schools in implementing an effective well-being strategy without a strong and coherent message about what CYP’s well-being means which is what this current study aims to unpick.

Over time, successive governments have not significantly recognised the ‘rights of the child’ to be consulted in matters that affect them (UN, 1989). In 2002, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, which monitors compliance with UN policy, noted its concern that CYP were not routinely consulted about matters that affect them. They urged the UK Government to do more to promote, facilitate, and monitor meaningful opportunities for participation, including in schools (Lundy, 2007). Robinson et al. (2020) scrutinised all English Education Regulations, Acts of Parliament, and Government Statutory Guidance for mainstream schools between 2002 and 2018. This was to identify implicit and explicit references to UN Article 12 and its principles (UN, 1989). Firstly, the analysis found that encouraging practitioners to take children’s views seriously is enabling. Secondly, there is a lack of emphasis on encouraging young people to express their views freely and providing opportunities for them to do so, other than verbally. Thirdly, there is little reference to inform CYP about outcomes of decisions that affect them. Finally, there is a complete lack of reference to CYP deciding whether they want to be heard. Despite positive moves in this direction to involve young people in matters that affect them, the significance is that this is a gap in the evidence base used by governments to determine the direction of well-being in schools. It is this gap of recognition by the government, that adolescents have a right to contribute their knowledge and understanding of well-being, that this study seeks to address.

In conclusion, this review of government policy and guidance demonstrates that there has been little evidence-based direction to schools on how to plan, implement, and effectively evaluate whole school well-being actions (Powell et al., 2018). Changes in government thinking and actions over time lack a clear definition and understanding of the meaning of well-being and mental health. It is contended this has made it difficult for schools to provide consistent and possibly effective support for their students’ well-being (Streuli et al., 2009; Clarke, 2020; Robinson et al., 2020). There is limited research into how educational policy relates to the development of strategies to improve young people’s well-being (Bradshaw, 2016) including the use of adolescent views. Watson et al. (2012) allude this is in part is due to a policy environment based on a presumption of shared understanding which has prevented a proper theoretical exploration of the issue. The question of the legitimacy and mandate of government to intervene in CYP’s well-being in the first place and the political motivation of such actions is also queried (Ecclestone and Hayes, 2009; Jerrim, 2022; Woodhouse, 2008). Watson et al. (2012, p.29) express concern that the “discourse of well-being reduces individual or community engagement and responsibility for being well and potentially disenfranchises individuals from their bodies and control over living well”. All this provides an unclear and unhelpful vortex for those putting CYP’s well-being policy into practice, including schools. Therefore, the purpose of this current study is to shed light on

how the government thinking, policy and guidance to schools is influencing the direction of well-being in schools for better or worse. The next section considers how schools have responded to government guidance and policy in the arena of CYP's well-being.

2.4.2 Schools' Policy and Practice in CYP's Well-Being

This section explores the main well-being approaches and practices for students adopted by schools. It discusses what informs the policy and practice operating in secondary schools and considers what helps and/or hinders schools in their pursuit of well-being for their school community.

Within the education system, schools play a key role in assisting governments to realise policy direction and targets (Coleman, 2007). In recent years, schools in England have worked hard to respond to government initiatives through the implementation of various well-being approaches and are recognised as key places to promote, implement, protect, and support CYP in their well-being (Graham et al., 2016; Weare, 2015). Schools have a duty of care to their students and by and large, determine the nature of their well-being approach. Such approaches are likely to be influenced by government and local authority policy and guidance, and increasingly by the educational stance and direction of academy trusts. Government statistics show that for the academic year 2022-2023, 80.4% of secondary schools were classified as academies or free schools, accounting for 80.2% of pupils (DfE, 2023d). Other considerations for schools include funding, costs, resources, including staffing, which are key in deciding what they can practically offer to support the well-being of their students.

Schools have implemented their well-being approaches through what is generically known as the pastoral care system. The pastoral care system in schools is the provision a school makes to ensure the physical and emotional welfare of all students, so that they develop academically and personally (Aldridge and McChesney, 2018; Baumeister et al., 2001). Much pastoral practice is based on the principles of Attachment Theory, stemming from the work of psychoanalyst John Bowlby (1969), which helps explain how the pastoral teacher-to-student relationship works. The theory arose from looking at the importance of bonds between a caregiver and child in the first months of their life to support the emotional and social development of the child (Noddings, 2015). This theory was extended in the 1990's to also look at children's relationships with non-familial care givers. The seminal work of Pianta (1992) addressed attachment relationships in a multi-caretaker environment, which extended to schools. Much of the early research around

attachment focused on pre-school and early years and it is only in the last 20 years that attention in this area has turned to teacher and adolescent student relationships, realising its potential importance to student well-being (Coulombe and Yates, 2022; Saxer et al., 2024; Zheng, 2022).

In practice, promoting and protecting the well-being of secondary schools' students can be grouped into three main approaches. The first, being whole school taught well-being programmes, applied to all students and largely based on the discipline of positive psychology (Weare and Nind, 2011). The second, being targeted programmes or specialist interventions to prevent ill-health applied to individual students who are at specific risk of mental health problems (Humphrey, 2016; Thorburn, 2020; Weare and Nind, 2011). The third, being generic school organisational policies and practice, which form part of the culture, which affect well-being and mental health (Foulkes, 2022). In her research report for the DfE, Brown (2018) noted that across all school policies, 44 percent of secondary schools were providing some form of mental health support to their students. Most statements regarding well-being or mental health referenced targeted interventions for 'individuals' displaying emotional and behavioural difficulties and generic support to 'all' students through programmes promoting self-esteem and resilience.

Since 2010, under successive governments, generic whole school approaches to well-being have been largely based on positive education programmes derived from the positive psychology well-being perspective (Kern and Wehmeyer, 2021). Positive education blends academic learning with CYP's well-being (Halliday et al., 2019). As previously discussed, the political bias of recent governments in office, have regarded CYP's well-being largely in the context of future economic prosperity (Cameron, 2016; Hinds, 2019), thereby shaping well-being as an instrumental function. Together with this, is research linking an individual's well-being at school as having an impact on their well-being and mental health into adulthood (Rees et al., 2010). There is also recognition that those disengaged from education are less able to support their own future children in meaningful education (Brown, 2018). In these ways, it could be argued that political directives and research into well-being have been reflected in the positive education approach taken by schools. Positive education focuses on the students' responsibility to develop positive emotions such as happiness, optimism, and resilience. These are considered important to secure better academic outcomes (Durlak et al., 2011), which in turn are linked with increased productivity, economic growth, and prosperity for the nation.

The positive education approach has manifested itself in schools' work in various ways (Kern and Wehmeyer, 2021; Rickard et al., 2024). Schools have timetabled programmes, courses, and activities for students which teach and train them how to feel and function at both an intra and

interpersonal level (Kern and Wehmeyer, 2021). These programmes focus on the teaching and development of aspects which are seen as fundamental to good well-being and good mental health such as, self-esteem, resilience, character, tolerance, respect, teamwork, and community responsibility. In addition, schools deliver the statutory aspects related to well-being which include citizenship, sex and relationships, health education, guidance on potential threats to health and well-being such as smoking, alcohol, drugs, mental and physical abuse, and internet harm (DfE, 2023b; DfE, 2023c; White and Murray, 2015; Yeager and Dweck, 2012). In England, school well-being programmes and activities are mainly delivered through the traditional subject curriculum, dedicated curriculum time to PSHE, form time, assembly time, and the wider curricula (White and Murray, 2015). Schools train their own staff and students, use teacher subject expertise, work with external professionals, and use ‘off the shelf’ packages developed by commercial companies to support the training and delivery of the aspects related to well-being outlined above (Weare and Nind, 2011).

There is evidence that positive education programmes, developed by adults, can bring benefits to student well-being. Several documented benefits of a positive education approach include a counter to youth depression, a pathway to life satisfaction, more creativity, improved personal learning choices, academic resilience, better social cohesion, and citizenship (Chaves, 2021; Putwain et al., 2024; Seligman et al., 2009; Waters, 2011). When such individual programmes have been measured, research has reported less anxiety, improved social and emotional skills, and higher attainment which can bring about a good sense of well-being (Halliday et al., 2019; Noble and McGrath, 2015; Thorburn, 2020; White, 2015). There is concern that such programmes may only bring about short-term benefits, such as positive feelings, better attendance, and improved anti-social behaviours, which cannot be sustained (Rickard et al., 2024). Research has shown that when the outcomes have been assessed, the subjective well-being aspects of positive education programmes, tend to have short term benefits, but focusing on well-being aspects like meaning and purpose could have longer term impacts (Tejada-Gallardo et al., 2020; Vella-Brodrick et al., 2020). Some researchers shed a note of caution on what outcomes are to be expected from positive education programmes particularly as adolescent years 14-16 years can be a time when there is a decline in mental health prompted by increased academic and social pressures (Burke and Minton, 2019). This point is echoed in other research which highlights the adverse effect of examinations on student well-being (Brown and Woods, 2022; Denscombe, 2000; Harris et al., 2015; Putwain and Symes, 2011). The argument being that maintenance of a satisfactory mental health during this time may be a more realistic outcome than improvements in mental health overall (Burke and Minton, 2019). This current study aims to explore how

adolescent students perceive the benefits to their well-being of positive based education approaches used by schools, particularly in light of the concerning statistics around students' unhappiness with school (The Children's Society, 2024).

Concern has been raised about the measurement indicators used to judge the efficacy of positive education well-being programmes, with some researchers noting there are inconsistencies in the evidence base used to support whole school well-being approaches (Bonell et al., 2019; Durlak et al., 2011; Weare, 2015). Palmer (2017) suggests that effectiveness and success is more easily achieved by smaller projects. Thus, by demonstrating positive outcomes on a smaller project an evidence base for change is created, which does not necessarily mean it can be applied to another small project or up scaled to a whole school programme. In a time when funding is limited, demonstrating positive outcomes is a vital way schools can access funding for their well-being work. There is scarcity of good quality empirical research evaluating the effectiveness of programmes promoting well-being especially in the UK (Coleman, 2007). This is supported by The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) (2008) who carried out a systematic review of social and emotional literacy programmes in the UK. They found that 90% of such programmes stated their claim of success on theoretical literature rather than on empirical evidence.

Other researchers have noted that specific skills are required by the teacher to effectively deliver positive education well-being programmes (Willis, 2024). Research by Seligman et al. (2009) and Zang and Zhang (2024) found that programmes delivered in school settings by school staff appear to be less effective than programmes led by programme developers and trained health professionals, such as psychologists and nurses. This could be because specialised knowledge and careful training, both at the initial teacher training stage and as ongoing professional development, is needed to teach well-being programmes (Graham et al., 2016). This point is reflected in a mixed methods research project carried out in Australia by Rickard et al. (2024) into the effects of positive education programmes delivered by teachers trained in positive education techniques. They found that one of the most important factors in the success of such programmes was the quality of the relationship between the teacher and the students. Students felt teachers must be knowledgeable in their subject area, trusted by students, and have the ability to facilitate whole class interactive discussions, rather than relying on individual activities based on pre-prepared work sheets (hooks, 2010; Koomen and Jellesma, 2015; Sabol and Pianta, 2012). In addition, research by Blix et al. (2024) with secondary school teachers in Ireland, found that teachers do not feel sufficiently prepared to deliver the content around mental health

programmes. Some authors question the impact of PSHE programmes delivered in isolation which do not relate to students' life experiences or sufficiently recognise the strength of the school culture in determining the societal norms (Kvist Lindholm et al., 2017).

The targeted intervention approach, the second approach suggested by Weare and Nind (2011), uses specialist interventions targeted at individuals who have been identified as requiring support. Such individual needs are often complex, and it is staff, parents, and peers noticing symptoms that raise concern because they are outside of the expectations of what would be regarded as 'normal tolerances' for a CYP. The symptoms which are likely to prompt concern could include absenteeism, school refusal, poor behaviour, withdrawn behaviour, negative attitude, poor mental, and physical health. Most secondary schools have digital monitoring systems set up to record and monitor concerns about behaviour, attendance, bullying and, safeguarding, for example, Child Protection Online Monitoring System (CPOMS). These would be alongside the multiple data sets held about students including academic performance. Targeted interventions also arise out of self-referral from a student, and it can be argued that such self-referral systems afford autonomy particularly valued by adolescents (Wilson and Deane, 2012). Schools work from their own resources, with parents, and with a range of internal and external professionals to provide a tailor-made package of support for an individual. Professionals include education welfare officers, counsellors, psychologists, therapists, nurses, and doctors.

There are concerns raised by staff in schools about the significant increase in the number of students requiring individual support and inability to access specialist support from external professionals in a timely manner (Barker et al., 2023). The 2025 Children's Commissioner Mental Health Report details a range of concerns that include: CYP's referrals to mental services have increased in 2023-2024 from the previous year; that those aged 13-15 were the largest referral group comprising 300,000 of the total of 958,200 referrals; and that the average wait time for an initial appointment once a referral has been made was on average six months. The significance is the additional load for school staff that are having to deal with issues, often supporting students with potentially complex needs on a daily basis and not just during school hours. Put together with staffing shortages (McLean et al., 2024), schools do not have sufficient personnel to meet students' needs or staff sufficiently trained to recognise and effectively support the potential complexity of those mental health needs (Dimitropoulos et al., 2022; Long, 2022). The Trade Union Congress (TUC) (2024) reported that in 2023 there were 2,100 teacher vacancies across England compared to 355 in 2010. In addition, only 50% of the required secondary school trainees in 2023 had been recruited (National Education Union, 2023).

The third approach presented by Weare and Nind (2011), is the implementation of policies and practice to create a positive learning environment and culture across the whole school, to protect student well-being. Peer harassment and bullying is seen as a major influence on the well-being of CYP (Thornberg and Delby, 2019; Wojcik, 2018). Bullying is defined as a repeated action by an individual or group with the intent to cause physical and/or emotional harm to an individual (Grigg, 2010; Olweus, 2010; Parris et al., 2020; Walton, 2004). While schools do have policies in place around peer harassment and bullying (Bond et al., 2001; DeLara, 2016; Thornberg et al., 2017; Yoneyama and Naito, 2003), research suggests differing results in terms of the effectiveness of such in dealing with bullying and thus in supporting the well-being of those affected (Hikmat et al., 2024; Wojcik et al., 2022). It is suggested that when bullying is individually led, when adults know about it, and have the skills to deal with it, the school's actions to address it are more effective (Bjerald et al., 2017; Black et al., 2010; Vreeman and Carroll, 2007; Wojcik and Rzenca, 2021). When bullying is not dealt with effectively it is largely due to a lack of understanding by the school of the influence and power of the peer culture (Pepler et al., 2009; Thomas et al., 2017). Becker's (1963) Labelling Theory articulates how peer culture can shape and determine the norms of a group. Peer cultures develop their own norms, and reinforce, normalise and sustain certain types of behaviour. Those students who do not fit within this mode would be classed as 'deviant'. This labelling as 'deviant' can lead to students being stigmatised (Goffman, 1963) for being different, which often leads to harassment and bullying (Cranham and Carroll, 2003; Hamarus and Kaikkonen, 2008).

Research explains that the behaviour of students in the classroom has a direct bearing on adolescent student well-being. (DfE, 2015; Koskela and Lanas, 2010; Lanas and Brunila, 2019). It is not just the poor behaviour of students which disrupts learning, but the school policies prescribing the ways in which behaviour is managed that can also impact on student well-being (Armstrong, 2021; Ijaz et al., 2024). School behaviour management systems which provide consistent, clear, and fair expectations built on affective relationships can develop a sense of self-esteem and belonging which are important to a positive well-being for the individual (Forsberg et al., 2021; McGregor, 2017). Conversely, behaviour management systems which do not offer this are likely to have a negative influence on both student and staff well-being (Lodi et al., 2021; Tanase, 2021; Wilson et al., 2023). This can be explained, in part, through application of Bandura's Social Learning Theory which posits that new behaviours are learnt through observing and modelling the behaviours of others, and hence in this way the management of behaviour in a classroom can have an impact on the well-being of all, not just those directly involved (Bandura, 2016).

The potential problem of such policies and practice is they tend to be considered in isolation, rather than how the underlying issues they are trying to address are situated in the wider school climate and culture. This indicates a lack of consideration and understanding of the influence on student well-being of other socio-ecological factors at play. The importance of the school culture and climate for well-being is well documented by scholars (Hascher, 2004; Hendrickx et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2021). Hascher (2004), an educational psychologist, developed a model that measures the positive and negative feelings/emotions that are experienced in an educational setting. The socio-ecological approach to well-being, including group socialisation theory and socio-ecological theory, has its foundations in the work of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979). This theory explained the interactions between individuals and their environment. In later work, Bronfenbrenner and Ceci (1994) described five systems operating in a school which are indelibly linked, and all affect a student's well-being. Two which are pertinent to this study are firstly, the micro system, which is the immediate context for the adolescent student, such as the classroom. Secondly, the macro system, which is the wider political, economic, and social processes which carry the ideologies of the school (Bronfenbrenner and Ceci, 1994). The importance of these socio-ecological systems to foster a sense of belonging as a means of promoting student well-being in school is well researched (Allen et al., 2022; Flett et al., 2023; Goodenow, 1993; Paradisi et al., 2024). In their seminal work, Rosenberg and Gara (1985) identified interpersonal mattering and societal mattering. A sense of mattering or belonging is often referred to as a need for affection between people (Maslow, 1943), the need for regard and recognition from others (Baumeister and Leary, 2017; Honneth, 2007; Pawlo et al., 2019), and relatedness to an institution (Newland et al., 2019; Roffey, 2015). If both interpersonal and societal mattering exists, CYP are more likely to develop positive beliefs in themselves and feelings of confidence, which can in turn support a positive sense of well-being (Elias et al., 2025; Somers et al., 2022).

An environment that cultivates interpersonal mattering through positive peer relationships (Butler et al., 2022; Leversen et al., 2012; Williams and Guerra, 2007) and holds no space for negative peer relationships (Hymel et al., 2015; Merrin et al., 2018; Salle et al., 2018; Swearer and Espelage, 2010; Thornberg, 2011, 2015; Wojcik and Flak, 2021), is likely to support student well-being. In addition, if an institution cultivates societal mattering through recognising the abilities and strengths of all students, not just those who demonstrate academic ability (Clarke and Platt, 2023; Dull et al., 2015; Giddens, 1991), this is likely to support student well-being. While school belongingness refers to students' subjective feelings of connectedness, social support is both the perception and actuality that someone is cared for (Foulkes, 2022; Xie and Derakhshan, 2021).

The implication for this current study is ascertaining how the well-being of adolescents is determined by the culture of the school and therefore how policies and practices, which underpin the culture, may lead to superficial assumptions and suppositions which do not fully support adolescent student well-being (Willis, 2024).

2.4.3 Challenges Schools Incur Implementing Well-Being

There is clearly a debate to be had about the effectiveness of well-being policy and practice for adolescents in secondary schools, situated in the increasing concern, about their well-being and mental health (Brown and Dixon, 2020; Norwich et al., 2022; Roome and Soan, 2019). Despite many authors being sympathetic to the position schools find themselves in, regarding implementing a well-being approach, it appears that current approaches in school are having a less than desirable impact. It is argued that the approach to well-being for adolescents needs to go beyond prevention, through positive education programmes, and beyond interventions for individuals to relieve symptoms or to prevent problematic behaviours. Researchers critiquing UK well-being policy, cite problems with the generic and targeted approach by schools which tends to perpetuate a deficit social construction of CYP (Creasy and Corby, 2019; Watson et al., 2012). The potential problem with this a deficit model is that it suggests all CYP are considered as in need of well-being intervention by adults. In fact, the use of the word 'intervention' is imbued with negative connotations, suggesting that there is a problem or a hinderance and thus intervention is needed to improve or make something better (Oades et al., 2022). It is argued that there is a need to go beyond a deficit approach to promote well-being and ensure a student can flourish in school to live a happy and fulfilling life, both in the present and the future (Chaves, 2021; Curren et al., 2024; Konishi et al., 2022).

It is important to recognise that there are challenges schools face which may limit the effectiveness of their well-being work. Several authors are critical of the fact that pastoral care roles have largely been separated from teaching and learning as an area of responsibility in school (Long, 2022; Rice O'Toole and Soan, 2022; Wilson et al., 2023). This has happened over the last 30 years, due to increasing student needs and to address the workload of teachers (Long, 2022; Rice O'Toole and Soan, 2022). The premise behind this being that teachers in the classroom should focus on teaching and learning without having to compromise academic achievement by spending undue time attending to students' emotional, behavioural, and well-being needs (Jerrim, 2022). This has marginalised the well-being and care of students within education (Biesta, 2015). Critics argue that this fundamentally fails to recognise the importance of strong/positive

adult to student relationships in the classroom for student well-being (Chory and Offstein, 2018; Dietrich and Cohen, 2021; Frisby, 2019; Price and McCallum, 2015). Indeed, some authors point out that negative teaching and learning relationships in the classroom is not a neutral situation and can actually harm well-being (Bartholomew et al., 2011, 2018; Hamre and Pianta, 2001; Vansteenkiste and Ryan, 2013, Zheng, 2022).

The lack of quality of training to enable pastoral staff to support students has been raised by some authors as detrimental to student well-being (Barker et al., 2023; Long, 2022). The benefits of pastoral care and the importance of positive teacher-to-student relationships are well-documented by researchers (Murray, 2009; Reiss and Hetherington, 2009; Roberts and Kim, 2019). Particularly noted is the importance of the care given in improving student self-esteem necessary for a positive well-being (Collins and Feeney, 2013; Lavy and Littman-Ovadia, 2011). Other researchers are critical of pastoral care which may not be well executed effectively in and through the relationships built between staff and students (Ansari et al., 2020; Jerome et al., 2009; Roorda et al., 2017), or that it is applied to all students whether they need it or not, something that does not support the agency of students in their own well-being (Cassidy et al., 2018; Hawk and Lyons, 2008; Roorda et al., 2021). There is also evidence that appropriately trained and supported staff, including non-teaching staff, counsellors, teaching assistants can support mild to moderate mental illness (DoH and DfE, 2017); however appropriate guidance, resources and access to professional development is not always available (Spilt and Koomen, 2022).

Some authors recognise that schools have no clear definition of well-being accepted by all interested parties highlighting the difficulties schools face in putting policy into practice (Cigman, 2017; Thorburn, 2020). Spratt (2016) points to five different disciplines contributing to well-being definitions and understanding in schools: medicine, psychology, social work, counselling, and philosophy. They all have a different perspective on what well-being means and therefore what approach to take. This is echoed by Ecclestone and Hayes (2009, p.374) who argue, “policy, practice and research fields in this area are conceptually incoherent, eliding very different constructs and concerns, offering extravagant, even evangelical claims for the problems their advocates perceive and the various interventions they promote, and lacking a convincing evidence base”. Indeed, a recent UK Parliament Postnote, 739 – Children’s Wellbeing in Schools, has stated that “practices that may improve well-being include psychological, social, culture and environment-based practices and physical health promotion. However, evidence around these practices is mixed and is challenging for practitioners to determine which practices to implement and how” (Cary and Webb, 2025, p.1). This confusion is illustrated by Chapman and West-Burnham (2010, p.21), who comment “education has built so many filters, dams, and gates to

control the flow of the ‘river’ that well-being has become an artificial construct... it has lost its essential integrity”.

It has been argued that to effect sustainable change, it is vital to consider what factors motivate and account for the actions of individuals and organisations, and what constrains them (Greenhalgh and Papoutsis, 2019; Weare and Gray, 2003). Many commentators and researchers suggest that the strength of the government driven neoliberal approach to education has manifested itself in several ways and accounts for the poor well-being and mental health of CYP (Brown and Carr, 2019; Camphuijsen et al., 2022; Thomas and Loxley, 2007; O’Toole and Simovska, 2022). Some, namely Ecclestone and Hayes (2009) argue against what they call the rise of ‘therapeutic education’ in a neoliberal environment, challenging the political concern with peoples ‘emotional fragility’ and therefore ‘the diminished self’. They argue that despite the good intentions around ‘therapeutic education’, it is anti-educational because it creates a curriculum of the self. This lowers educational and social aspirations by prioritising feelings over the acquisition of knowledge and academic rigor (Ecclestone and Hayes, 2009). The argument is that a positive education approach and individual interventions lower a student’s expectations which encourage attachment, a dependency on support, and limits a student’s capacity for agency and thus empowerment over their own well-being (Ecclestone, 2017). In addition, critics of ‘therapy culture’ point to the emphasis on producing individuals who are subjectively inclined to accept and adapt to the life of a neoliberal society (Boler, 1999; Furedi, 2014).

Other researchers focus on the fact that a neoliberal philosophy of well-being is linked to CYP as human capital, which focuses attention on outcomes for the future good of society at the expense of the quality of everyday life for the child (Ben-Arieh, 2012; Dunn et al., 2020; Spratt, 2016). The focus is on the student ‘doing’ well at the expense of ‘being’ well and many point to how the ‘high stakes’ examination culture is a testament to this (Curren et al., 2024; Jerrim, 2022; Sartorio and Thomas, 2022). The problem with this conceptualisation of CYP as ‘doing’ well is that the skills and competences considered to be required in adulthood may be privileged above their current interests and their own knowledge about their needs (Alexandrova, 2017; Kingdon, 2018; McLellan and Steward, 2015). Others comment for CYP to be supported with their ‘well-being’ as well as their ‘well-becoming’ that they must be active participants, rather than passive beings in need of socialisation by adults (McLeod and Wright, 2015; Spratt, 2016; White, 2015). It could be argued that adults can decide what is right for well-being, but it does beg the question as to why other nations, particularly Nordic countries, score consistently higher in CYP’s well-being indicators (WHO, 2020). It could be argued that it is because Nordic countries recognise the child as a ‘being’, They prioritise the value of childhood through student orientated school systems,

based on pedagogical models of inclusion, democracy, and equality, which leads to better well-being (Einarsdottir et al., 2015).

The role and the direction schools have taken regarding well-being has, in a large part, been driven by accountability to the government through Ofsted. Haybron and Tiberius (2015, p.713) comment, well-being in practice can turn out to be “whatever the person doing the talking believes to be the right account of well-being”. In their School Inspection Handbook, Ofsted (2019, p.56) outline that when making a judgement about ‘Personal Development’ they focus on “the dimensions of the personal development of pupils that our education system has agreed, either by consensus or statute are the most significant”. These dimensions are largely characteristics defined as necessary for successful adulthood, reflecting CYP as ‘becomings’. This has led schools to choose and implement programmes and activities where they can demonstrate success criteria to match with the Ofsted requirements around well-being. The danger is that the focus on what is measurable brings the risk that well-being becomes reduced to something that can be taught and delivered, not defined, or engaged with for its own right (Anderson and Graham, 2016; Holloway and Brass, 2018; Watson et al., 2012). This is exemplified by a study undertaken by Govorova et al. (2020) which aimed to reach a global definition of well-being across the countries assessed for the PISA 2015 report and to ascertain the impact of school on student welfare. Findings evidenced the complexity of the term, the need for further research on the issue of definition, and that school interventions do not appear strong enough to make an impact on subjective well-being, all areas that this current study aims to explore.

Schools are also constrained by resourcing, particularly in finance and staffing. Noble and McGrath (2015) note that often schools are driven to implement programmes that are cost effective, requiring little training, which can be slotted in easily to already full curricula programmes, where some form of impact can be quickly demonstrated. Powell and Graham (2017) used a mixed methods approach to research well-being policy and practice in Australian secondary schools. They found that teachers and principals decided the suitability of their well-being programmes for students primarily because they met the political requirements and/or their funding budget. Other researchers point to concerns about teachers’ own well-being in the current educational climate which constrains their capacity and effectiveness to deliver well-being programmes for others (Culshaw and Kurian, 2021; Curren et al., 2024; Oberle et al., 2018). The high levels of stress teachers and students are under because of the ‘high stakes’ test and examination culture operating in schools, where testing and examinations have significant consequences for staff and students (Curren et al., 2024). In drawing upon Heidegger’s (1977) theory of ‘enframing’, it suggests that schools are being controlled by the performance culture

dominant in schools. Qualitative research by Barker et al. (2023, p.517) into the importance of school culture in supporting students' mental health, found that "a stressed and unsupported work force are less likely to be in a position to attend to the mental health of the CYP they are working with". The continued emphasis on academic achievement which dominates the school climate does not pay significant attention to the theory and conceptualisation of how school climate and culture play an integral role in shaping the well-being of its inhabitants (Bronfenbrenner and Evans, 2000; Heidegger, 1977). As Mercer (2021, p.16) states "the ecological perspective highlights how well-being is determined by the manner in which an individual responds to the conditions and context of their lives".

To summarise, this section suggests that there is a need for schools to have a clearer, unfettered, evidence-based understanding of adolescent well-being, to better inform their policy and practice. Ecclestone and Hayes (2009, p.371) comment "it is essential to challenge claims and assumptions about well-being and the government sponsored and commercial industry that promotes them". The problem facing schools is that without clarity of what well-being means it becomes more difficult to challenge, plan for, monitor, and pinpoint actions which promote or hinder a positive sense of well-being for their students (Anderson and Graham, 2016; Soutter et al., 2014). This means that the neoliberal approach to education continues to dominate the well-being and mental health agenda of schools. As a result, these measurement indicators and accountability pressures, and the school approaches that embed them have tended to operationalise well-being. Well-being is narrowed to delivering well-being activities and programmes, through what is affordable and with staff who are not always adequately trained. This approach to well-being has neglected to sufficiently recognise the part the culture of an institution plays in well-being. Recent research in this area is gathering pace, advocating the merits of attending to the culture of a school to enable students to flourish and thrive (Curren et al., 2024; Willis, 2024). The literature in this section continues to suggest that a missing piece of the evidence base for policy makers and schools around adolescent well-being is engaging with young people themselves. It is advocated that they need to be engaged with, to provide their specific knowledge and understanding concerning their own well-being in schools. Indeed, it is their right to be consulted on matters that affect them (UN, 1989). Therefore, this current study aims to use a research design to facilitate that engagement with adolescent students. The next section considers the reality of how this works in schools in practice.

2.4.4 The Place of Student Voice and Agency in Student Well-Being

This section discusses what student voice (SV) is, evaluates the effectiveness of SV, and considers the barriers to SV impacting policy and practice around well-being in schools.

There is no single definition of SV but rather multiple and overlapping conceptualisations, often differing according to the institution (Conner, 2022). The term SV can refer to both a concept and a set of practices (Fletcher, 2014; Robinson and Taylor, 2007). SV is described by Fielding (2004) as engaging students in dialogue, discussion, and consultation on issues that concern them in relation to their subjective experiences of education. There are several helpful typologies to describe SV participation by CYP (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015; Simmons et al., 2015). One of these is Hart's (1992) Ladder of Children's Participation which describes the degrees of power in relation to student involvement and influence in decision-making processes. It outlines eight levels of involvement that range from 'nonparticipation' (levels 1-3) to the highest level which is student initiated and shared with adults (level 8). The characteristics of level 8, according to Schubotz (2020), which features co-researchers as having shared roles with adults, are the most effective way of achieving SV. The move to listening to students and the term SV came about because of the legitimacy of engaging with students views in line with the UN's Charter, the Children's Rights Movement, and the 2002 Education Act which required schools to consult with students (Lac and Cumings Mansfield, 2018). In addition, teachers realised it brought many benefits to students learning (Robinson and Taylor, 2007). The concept of SV has been interpreted and actioned by schools in different ways with a variance in the extent that students' voices are heard and acted upon.

The direction in which SV developed from the 1990s is largely through the ideas and teachings of Jean Rudduck, which were brought to the national arena through the groundbreaking work entitled 'School Improvement: What can pupils tell us' (Rudduck et al., 1996). Rudduck promoted the importance of engaging with students, hearing their voices, listening to what they say, acting on their words, and following through in ways which were different to the accepted culture and practice operating in schools (Fielding, 2007). The reason her thinking was so significant was it challenged the hierarchy; in how schools operated, their lack of understanding of the maturity and capabilities of CYP, and in how school improvement could be achieved through positive dialogical teacher-to-student relationships. As Rudduck asserts, listening to students is the most important function for thinking about how to improve schools, noting that "the deep structures of schooling" that include "assumptions about what a pupil is, have to change" (Rudduck et al., 1996, p.177). In subsequent work, Rudduck highlighted the tensions between a performative and examinations

culture, privileging individual success, and effectively developing a whole school approach to SV, built on collective values and principles weaved through the daily interactions and communications of school life (Rudduck and Flutter, 2004). Rudduck viewed SV as being most successful when students feel they are a member of the school community, they matter, and have something to offer (Rudduck and McIntyre, 2007).

The work of Rudduck foregrounded how SV developed in schools, nationally and internationally, as a way of operationalising the need to listen to CYP (Cook-Sather, 2020a; Mitra, 2018). In 2008 The Ministry of Education in Canada explicitly used the findings from Rudduck's 'engaging learners' research from 2000 to 2003 to launch an SV initiative in 800 Ontario schools to build stronger SV approaches in the infrastructure of the school system. The work of Rudduck has prompted other research based on her values and principles to explore how SV can be effective in different settings. Ferguson et al. (2011) used semi-structured interviews with elementary students in the US to look at how student decision making in the classroom could be achieved through SV. They supported the findings of Rudduck and Fielding (2006), that often SV was tokenistic rather than a fundamental change to power relations, with the more outspoken and confident students dominating the dialogue. A case study by Quinn and Owen (2014) looked at how a UK primary school could use SV effectively to engage and empower pupils through their school parliament. This was to improve students' self-esteem and sense of belonging, underlying the importance and value for the use of SV (Rudduck and Flutter, 2004). Research by Holquist et al. (2023), focused on what is meant by SV today, still finding that it is situated in the values and principles which Rudduck believed are most important to effective SV.

The case for SV is well documented with researchers suggesting listening to students can lead to positive outcomes for them such as increased satisfaction, better engagement, improved relationships, and higher attainment (Atkinson et al., 2020; Mitra and Serriere, 2012; Rudduck, 2005; Simmons et al., 2015). Parker and Levinson (2018) comment that research has shown that CYP are happier and more effective in environments where they can give their feelings about events. As they note "Education should not happen around students nor should it be performed on them; they should be active agents in a collaborative process" (Parker and Levinson, 2018, p.6). These ideas are supported by research which conclude that by SV can help CYP understand what well-being means for them (Halliday et al., 2019); the importance of CYP having a voice, being respected, having rights and agency are articulated (Duckett et al., 2010; Graham et al., 2016; Powell and Graham, 2017); and that schools can create for CYP the conditions for both negative and positive well-being (Duckett et al., 2010; Rudduck and McIntyre, 2007).

The reality, however, is that SV has not impacted English educational policy and practices regarding well-being to a great extent (Gallagher, 2019; Tisdall and Davis, 2004). The reason for this is that concerns have been raised surrounding the validity of SV and how it is operationalised (Mayes et al., 2021). Rudduck emphasised throughout her writings the importance of power relations, authenticity, and inclusion to underpin successful SV (Littlefair and Jopling, 2025). Other research demonstrates that the most significant barriers to effective SV align with issues of power, authenticity and inclusion (Bragg, 2021). These barriers indicate the hierarchical norms operating in school around power relationships limit student agency (Fraser, 2013); that how schools listen and who schools listen to is not inclusive and representative of the student body (Mayes, 2020; Smyth et al., 2014); and that there is not one collective student voice and hence there is a lack of peer recognition for SV representatives (Mayes et al., 2021).

Hierarchical norms operate in, through, and across schools, with the power resting with the adults (Gillett-Swan et al., 2025; Fraser, 2000). Fraser's (2003, 2013) theory of social justice is often applied to education to demonstrate the need for all students to participate as peers in all aspects of school life. Although the recognition by the UN, of CYP as citizens with rights, would assume a power shift from adults to CYP (Fraser, 2013; Holdsworth, 2000), this is not the case. The power imbalance in student-teacher relationships is significant in both enabling and constraining SV (Perry-Hazan, 2016; Robinson and Taylor, 2007). Reasons for this vary but the range of institutional and professional issues, often culturally and historically entrenched, can prevent dialogue, participation, and transformation (Bernstein, 1971; Brasof and Levitan, 2022; Gillett-Swan et al., 2025; James, 2007). In addition, many CYP are not aware they have rights in matters that affect them. Esteban (2022) noted that the 2011 European Communities agenda for the Rights of the Child, reported that 76% of CYP were not aware of being subjects of rights, with research with American College students also showing a distinct lack of knowledge on this aspect (Vissing et al., 2016).

Several authors stress the importance of student agency in connection with SV as a significant way to shift the discourse around CYP's well-being (Cook-Sather, 2020a; Deneulin, 2008; Moore, 2022; Qvortrup, 2014). They argue that to effect transformational change in school structures and practices, it is necessary for schools to move beyond students having a voice to a more meaningful participation. This is dependent on relationships, where the differences of identity, position, and power can be overcome. The importance of voice together with agency is expressed by Cook-Sather (2020b, p.182) who comments, "when school stakeholders connect the sound of students speaking with students having power to influence practices and analyses of education that is when SV has agency". It is important to note that SV and student agency although close are

not the same, with Holdsworth (2000) describing the gap between SV and student agency as the ability for students to exert influence in their learning context and transfer this to others. In the OECD Learning Compass planning tool, Hughson and Wood (2022) describe agency as acting rather than being acted upon, shaping rather than being shaped, and taking responsible decisions and choices rather than accepting those determined by others, particularly because adults and CYP can have different perceptions on what well-being means (Willis, 2024; Kidger et al., 2009). Another barrier to CYP having a voice is adults not recognising their inclusion, as it is unclear how many school personnel recognise that CYP have rights.

The reality is there are difficulties in students having agency in schools (Tangen, 2008). Commentators, including Baraldi (2014) note there is a tendency to overestimate the capacity of CYP to act independently, but to underestimate the potential constraints that they as social actors face in their desire to participate and act. Lundy (2007), in her research conducted through the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, found that for Article 12 to be implemented, there is a need for four factors, namely 'Space', 'Voice', 'Audience' and 'Influence'. This means that CYP must be given an opportunity to express a view, be facilitated to express their view, be listened to, and the view must be appropriately acted upon. Quennerstedt and Moody (2020) in their systematic analysis of children's rights research (1989-2019) for the UN found that opportunities for CYP to be heard are limited.

The creation of mechanisms for SV is not in itself sufficient for students to have agency (Littlefair and Jopling, 2025). The mechanisms as to how CYP participate is often in formats that reflect adult political structures but are not adapted to enable CYP to participate to their best advantage (Bessel 2009; Hickey and Pauli-Myler, 2019; Ralph, 2021). This limits both the quality and quantity of CYP engagement (Archard, 2020; Fletcher et al., 2015). In their research, Mitra and McCormick (2017) looking at the impact of SV in schools noted the poorly designed practices that are in operation. Often, practitioners and other adults in schools determine the aspects of school life where CYP are invited to voice their opinions, with little or no opportunities for students to exercise free choice. The negative perceptions of participatory frameworks open to them, such as school councils, may impact CYP's willingness to participate in the frameworks (Graham et al., 2016; McCluskey et al., 2013). In their qualitative research into youth activism in America, Taft and Gordon (2013, p.87) found that there was a strong perception, from CYP themselves that youth councils were elitist, non-representative, and functioned as a "means of social control that tame and channel youth dissent, rather than opportunities to foster youth political power". This is echoed by Westheimer and Kahne (2004) who argue that in educational settings, school councils are not merely a vehicle for students to participate and be empowered, but to produce a certain

type of 'good' citizen. In his research, through observations and interviews with pupils and staff, Thornberg (2009) found that school rules and everyday interactions over which CYP have little control, serve as a hidden curriculum which does not enable CYP to participate or question. His findings concurred with the thoughts of Rudduck et al. (2006) illustrating that schools consider pupils immature and hence ignore their perspective. Giroux (1983) considers the hidden curriculum to be a means through which students are conditioned to accept the power relationship between adults and students. Foucault discusses the notion of the role of normalisation where students remain and adhere to school routines and structures because that is what expected of them, reinforcing the view that the norms legitimise the power structures of the adults in the school (Foucault and Rabinow, 1997).

Many believe that for students, developing an agentic identity and exercising agency in the school context will rely on the recognition of them as agents by others (students and staff) within that relationship (Ben-Arieh, 2005; Schafer and Yarwood, 2009; Sutterluty and Tisdall, 2019). Honneth's (2007) concept of 'recognition' helps understand the importance of student-to-student and student-to-teacher relationships. Honneth (2007) identifies three levels of recognition: care for an individual; respect for an individual as a moral agent; and acknowledgement that a person's abilities are of value to a community, and it is these levels of recognition that are necessary for effective SV. It is argued that the ability of CYP to use their agentic capacity effectively is complex because it is not something that is inherent or possessed which can be used to act in one's own good. Several authors have expressed concern about how authentically students can speak on behalf of others (Cox and Robinson-Pant, 2006; Mayes et al., 2021; Silva, 2001). Groundwater-Smith et al. (2015) suggest that CYP themselves are acutely aware of variations in the ways in which their peers may engage in and understand a particular topic. There are many voices and school students do not have one collective voice (Briffett Aktas et al., 2025). Research by Bourke and MacDonald (2018), using SV to look at the design of school spaces, found that for SV to be effective, students valued the opportunity to speak directly to the researcher to express their views rather than through surveys. They also chime with the concerns of Rudduck and Fielding (2006) that no one voice can represent the voices of many students and the mere inclusion of student voices does not mean that they are heard or acted upon.

Schools need to think carefully about who they listen to, how they listen, and what they listen to students about (Betrand and Lozenski, 2023; Moore, 2022; Salisbury et al., 2020). This is because as Spyrou (2011, p.151) reflects, there is complexity behind the voices of CYP and their worlds are "messy, multi-layered and non-normative in character". Some schools consider they are listening to the voices of students, however in many cases, they are doing so in a tokenistic way, often

listening to only the articulate and able, or those who already possess what Bourdieu's (1973) critical theory terms 'cultural capital', such as intellect, style of speech, and dress. It is important to note that agency represents the right to use your voice or not and therefore, the participatory rights of CYP to express an opinion, remain silent, access information, and be included in the decision-making processes on matters affecting them will need to be respected (Gillett-Swan and Sargeant, 2019).

There is a recognition that voice given by students can be masked by adults interpreting and reporting findings for their audience through their own lens (James, 2007; Kubiak, 2017; Tisdall, 2015). Tangen (2008) emphasises how listening is an advanced but crucial skill to effectively access the voice of students. He highlights concerns of a researcher listening to an individual CYP's 'personal voice' within the voice of their, the researchers own narratives, and therefore the accuracy in reporting the views of CYP (Tangen, 2008). Alcott (1991) acknowledges that when voicing the opinion of others through using your own language, you may be expressing your own values and the way you see the world. Fletcher (2015) uses the term 'adultism' to describe how adults privilege their own voices in this way. In addition, Spyrou (2011) and Groundwater-Smith et al. (2015) explore silences, arguing that more attention should be given to unspoken, verbal, and non-verbal communication, as CYP express themselves in countless ways. Recent research by Willis (2024) into a vertical school environment used SV to look at the design of school spaces. They found that SV was used successfully because students chose the methods by which they would use their voice and this enabled students to share their experiences in ways that were comfortable to them. In order to address this concern, the current study adopted these observations into the research design and sought input from students on the methods they feel will best capture the voice of students and staff participants (see section 4.4 – page 61).

There is an acknowledgement of the lack of both quantitative and qualitative research which foregrounds adolescent SV in the theory, conceptualisations, and influences on their well-being (Aldridge and McChesney, 2018; Gennings et al., 2021). Gillett-Swan et al. (2025) analysed 25 years of academic research and, in 1290 articles reviewed, only 5% engaged with both students and teachers, and only 1% put one group in a consultative role. A report by Dex and Hollingworth (2012) contained findings from their rapid literature research of CYP's understanding of their own well-being and what they think influences it. They found 11 substantial UK studies that researched what children understand about their well-being in general. Their findings showed that while there were a larger number of studies which voiced views about particular elements of school well-being, they found that the weakness of these studies was the failure to recognise how age differences affect children's views about well-being (Dex and Hollingworth, 2012). This point was

also highlighted by the Children's Commissioner that there are differences between what different ages of CYP think about their well-being and should be attended to (The Children's Commissioner, 2022). This lack of SV matters if adolescent well-being is to be addressed effectively in schools because policy, practice, and measurement indicators are unlikely to be fully cognisant of the specific issues for this group. For this current study, it was necessary to ensure adolescent voices were heard by ensuring the research design enabled sufficient participation from this group.

To summarise, the literature around SV highlights a range of limitations in how SV is operationalised in schools. Without effective SV, it becomes very difficult for schools to decide well-being policy and practice or measure its effectiveness when they do not take due account of the voices of those who well-being they are responsible for promoting and protecting. To avoid a tokenistic approach, the barriers of power and agency, authenticity, and inclusion necessary for effective adolescent voice and agency need to be minimised. It is also important to recognise the nuances around CYP's voice in that it needs to be specific to different ages of CYP. There is a lack of research using SV and this can be facilitated by researchers giving platforms to CYP to explain what they know to a wider audience (Cammarota and Fine, 2008; Cook-Sather, 2020a; Mitra and McCormick, 2017). For this study, it is necessary to foreground adolescent SV within the research design methodology and data collection to best answer the research questions.

2.5 Conclusion

This extensive review of literature and the issues raised throughout, highlight the concerns about the well-being of CYP. The review suggests that the effectiveness of policy and practice by government and schools seeking to address these concerns is variable. Researchers comment that contributing factors to this variability are: the difficulties in defining well-being; well-being models and frameworks used are drawn from several disciplines; the role and reliance on using generic measurement indicators when well-being is unique to an individual; the uncertainty around the evidence base used to formulate policy and practice; the differing motivations of personnel in government and schools in addressing CYP's well-being; and the limitations around the impact of SV in this area. This study, therefore, aims to build on the work of other researchers in this field by engaging the voice of adolescent students to understand 'what' well-being means to them and how they experience well-being in school, in a fast-changing world. Collecting data from both students and staff will enable the reasons 'why' adolescents experience well-being the way they do, to be explored. A new perspective will be working with adolescents in the design of

the research methodology to extend the field of research in the well-being arena. It is hoped that through this study's findings, school personnel and teacher training institutions will have an enhanced awareness of adolescent well-being. That it will also challenge them to be bold in considering a different approach which will involve adolescents, lead to positive policy and practice changes and ultimately be transformational in improving well-being.

3 The Philosophy of Paulo Freire

The work of the Brazilian educational philosopher Paulo Freire (1921-1997) is chosen to provide the theoretical perspective and framework to underpin this study. His work presents an educational philosophy and pedagogy which can address the questions of power, knowledge, assumptions, voice, and agency which the review of literature show are at the heart of the students' well-being experience at school. Two of Freire's (2017) concepts referenced throughout his writings, namely the 'banking' model and critical pedagogy, are engaged with to provide an epistemological and ontological basis for my research design (see sub section 4.3.5 - page 60), and in the findings chapter to support the analysis of the data collected (see chapter 5 – page 85). Roberts (2007, p.505) acknowledges that Freire "left a legacy of practical and theoretical work equalled by few other educationalists in its scope and influence". The next sub-sections focus on the background to Freire, Freire's ontology and epistemology, the choice of Freire for this study, and criticisms of Freire.

3.1 Background to Freire

Freire was born in 1921 and used his early experiences of poverty and poor schooling, in Recife Brazil, to develop compassion and empathy with people suffering from 'de-humanising' class oppression and all forms of social injustice (Taylor, 1993). At university he studied law, philosophy, and the psychology of language, and his thinking continued to develop, influenced by philosophical and intellectual thought, including existentialism, Marxism and Christianity (Darder, 2021). In 1961, after his work as a teacher, he became the Director of the Department of Education and Culture for Social Services in Pernambuco, Brazil. It was here that he put his theories into practice and taught 300 sugarcane harvesters to read and write in 45 days. After which, he was supported by the Brazilian Government to lead an educational campaign to eradicate illiteracy in Brazil (Freire Institute, 2025). Following the military coup in 1964, and Freire's subsequent imprisonment and interrogation by the military junta, he lived in self-imposed exile, in Bolivia, Chile, and America from 1964 to 1980 to continue his learning. His life experiences and knowledge led to his seminal work entitled 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' which was first published in Spanish in 1968 and in English in 1970 (Taylor, 1993). Freire (2017) draws on critical theory to outline his central theme of the 'oppressed' (those without power) and the 'oppressor' (those with power) and applies it to education. He advocates that education should enable the 'oppressed' to regain their sense of humanity in order to overcome their 'oppressed condition'. Freire (1985)

describes power as being held, intentionally or unintentionally, by the ‘oppressors’ over the ‘oppressed’ in terms of structures, roles, and ideas. This limits the freedom of individuals through perpetuating a hegemonic order, thus denying the emancipation and ‘humanisation’ of the ‘oppressed’ to improve their lives and flourish. The importance of the ‘oppressed’ and ‘oppressors’ moving beyond a desire to be dominant is central to his theory and it is the task of the ‘oppressed’ to be liberated from the ‘oppressors’ (Freire, 1985). Pedagogy of the Oppressed focuses on power and the relationship between the ‘oppressors’ and ‘oppressed’. It is about social justice and how education plays a significant role in the formation of individuals and in maintaining or changing the oppressive conditions within society and schools. Darder (2021, p. ix) comments the content focuses on the shift of a “de-humanising epistemology of knowledge construction to a liberating and humanising one”. Throughout his work, Freire proposes an alternative liberatory concept of education based on critical pedagogy which would enable individuals to understand the reasons for their oppression and provide them with the agency to regain their humanity and transform their lived reality (hooks, 1994; Macedo, 2016). In 1980, Freire returned to Brazil and was involved in adult literacy programmes. From 1989 to 1991, he held the position of Secretary of Education for San Paulo and worked to put his critical pedagogy into practice to enable literacy, citizenship, and empowerment of individuals. Throughout his life, until he died of a heart attack in 1997, he wrote and co-wrote several books, articles, published conversations, and letters in which he developed and refined his educational approach in the context of changing world events and in response to criticisms of his work.

3.2 Freire’s Ontology and Epistemology

Freire (2013) believed that ‘humanisation’ was the true ontological vocation of human beings. His ontology is based on his concept of the human being as ‘unfinished’, continuously working towards ‘becoming’, and the freedom that this gives an individual to flourish. Freire (2017) believed that humans are not ‘objects’ but ‘subjects’ who can transform their reality, but they are curtailed in doing so by those who hold power. His epistemological beliefs are based on the ability of a ‘being’ to be subjective (Freire, 2013). He states that “reality is never just simply the objective drawn, the concrete fact, but is also men’s perception of it” (Freire, 1985, p.51). Thus, this approach aligns with the methodology of this study because he argues that objective reality is not a constant, but it is shaped by people’s actions, experiences, and feelings believing in an objective reality shaped by subjective experiences (see sub section 4.3.5 – page 60).

3.3 The Choice of Freire for This Study

Two main concepts of Freire's critical theory, namely the 'banking' model, and critical pedagogy, are chosen as a framework for the current study with its focus on the effectiveness of well-being education in the light of the increasing concerns about CYP's well-being and mental health. Critical theory, as defined by Freire, can be used to explore issues around power operating in educational institutions. Similarly, through his critical pedagogy, how voice can be given to the 'oppressed' and marginalised can be unpacked (Jackson, 2007). The issues for this study centre around the absence of any agreed definition of well-being and therefore how well-being is conceptualised, promoted, and protected in schools is primarily decided by those in power. Applying these two concepts of Freire enables exploration of the complexities around 'how' and 'why' the 'oppressed' (students) experience their well-being at the hands of those in power, the 'oppressors' (government, schools), and 'what' voice and agency students have over their own well-being. Through applying Freire's two main concepts of the 'banking' model and critical pedagogy in this study, it enables a way to understand how power structures maintain social injustices in schools and how they can be challenged to improve the well-being of adolescent students. In this current study, the roles of the 'oppressor' and 'oppressed' are multi-faceted and dependant on the context, as the school, teachers, and students can be both the 'oppressor' and/or the 'oppressed'.

Freire uses the concept of the 'banking' model to represent the traditional educational philosophy in which students experience their well-being. Freire asserts that what happens in school is dominated by the government, schools', and teachers' view of the world. He likens traditional education to a 'banking' model where knowledge is deposited by teachers into the minds of passive learners, like making a money deposit at a bank. It is the knowledge of the educator which holds the value; "the teacher knows everything and the students know nothing" (Freire, 2017, p.46). This way of learning 'de-humanises' students by promoting conformity, controlling thinking and actions, thus limiting critical thinking and agency. As Freire (2017, p.46) suggests, "the teacher chooses and reinforces his choice, and the students comply". This leads students ('oppressed') to accept the world as it is, which is the aim of those holding power ('oppressors'). The attitudes and practices of teachers through the 'banking' model provide a framework for understanding how the government and schools impose their view of what well-being means on their students both through their well-being focused work, and through their daily interactions with students, the argument being that this does not necessarily support the well-being of all

adolescent students because well-being policy and practice is not sufficiently rooted in the 'lived reality', the day-to day experiences of the adolescent student.

The literature review discussed how the well-being direction schools are taking is driven by the government's neoliberal philosophy. This philosophy has a focus on learning outcomes, validated through testing and examinations leading to a performance culture, where accountability frameworks measure academic success and failure (Ball, 2016). Freire was critical of neoliberalism and of its influence on education which premised training learners in the knowledge and skills required for economic globalization, but which left little space for critical thinking which could enable students to become 'subjects' and make choices about their own lives (Jackson, 2007). The 'banking' model of Freire helps to understand how the neoliberal political climate negatively impacts well-being. Through a hierarchical relationship, teachers fill the "empty receptacles" of students' minds with well-being as conceptualised by the government without an opportunity to question; "the teacher talks and the students listen-meekly" (Freire, 2017, p.46). Students are regarded as "adaptable, manageable beings" into which the 'voice' of those in authority is deposited (Freire, 2017, p.46). Through the 'banking' model, the government can ensure that the students' understanding of well-being is the one they favour and hence are less interested in changing the 'banking' model. Through the 'banking' model, operated by schools, teachers and senior leaders can integrate and inculcate students into healthy ways which are important for the future prosperity of the country. The 'banking' model, does however, limit the ability of students to think critically and to challenge what they are being told about what well-being means for them, how they experience it, and how they might transform it. For teachers, it corrodes their sensibility. Those who wish to liberate students through changing the well-being rhetoric are so influenced by the existing environment, that generates and maintains the 'banking' model, that they are unconscious of its effects (Freire, 2013, 2017). The 'banking' model, therefore, can be used to explain the context of how schools, teachers, and students are being conditioned by government narratives on well-being and have limited voice and agency to change it.

The literature review highlighted several areas of policy, practice, and school culture which affect student well-being. These included teaching and learning; behaviour management systems; PSHE programmes; pastoral care; and peer culture. Freire's concept of the 'banking' model can be applied to these areas to explain 'how' and 'why' they affect student well-being. Freire (2017) contended that the 'banking' model enforces an educator-student relationship which mirrors the attitudes and practices of an oppressive society. Drawing on examples relevant to this study, the attitudes and practices maintained and stimulated through the 'banking' model can be applied

as follows to student well-being: when deciding the content of well-being within PSHE schemes of work “the teacher chooses the program content, and the students (who were not consulted) comply” (Freire, 2017, p.46); when a student exhibits behaviour that does not meet with the schools expectations “the teacher disciplines and students are disciplined” (Freire, 2017, p.46); and when learning needs in the classroom are thwarted “the teacher is the Subject of the learning process, while the pupils are mere objects” (Freire, 2017, p.46). However, the ‘banking’ model does not accommodate Freire’s concept of ‘dialogue’ between teachers and students, which is necessary for ‘critical consciousness’ to develop to start to transform these situations. Critical consciousness is the ability to realise the political, economic and social forces that shape one’s life (Freire, 2017). Without this understanding, students are unable to recognise that their marginalised position is not a given fate but a result of unjust power structures (Freire, 2017). Thus, the ‘banking’ model provides an explanation of how students store the deposits made into them and can remain partly passive. There is an absence of opportunity for the human activity of ‘dialogue’ which would enable teachers and students to share knowledge and become co-creators of meaning around well-being. Freire (2017) viewed ‘dialogue’ as essential to ‘humanisation’, and ‘dialogue’ where words are spoken by one party is not ‘dialogue’, arguing that no one can engage in dialogue on behalf of another because their words are not ‘true words’. If, ‘dialogue’ does not happen (between student and teacher) it is not possible to develop ‘critical consciousness’ and thus understand how ‘power’ in education determines how a student experiences well-being. Without ‘dialogue’, students, staff and the wider community may come to accept the world as it is, a world where the well-being of adolescent students in schools is less than desirable and is a national concern of society.

Other scholars and researchers have applied similar Freirean concepts to frame their studies in how power operates in education. Bolin (2018) uses Freire’s views about the hierarchical nature of traditional education systems to write about the influence of neoliberalism and the lack of democracy in the US. In his research, Bolin applies Freire’s critical pedagogy in schools, to counter neoliberalism and realise individual agency to achieve social justice in American society. In her study, Matahela (2025) uses the lens of Freire’s humanising philosophy to understand why globally, nurses and nurse educators are leaving academia. Her findings demonstrate nurses experience ‘de-humanisation’ through lack of engagement, purpose, meaning, and hence feel ‘oppressed’ in a performative climate. Stern and Brown (2016) in their work, looking at depression and burnout in educators, focused on Freire’s term ‘armed love’. This love is an emotionally defiant and protective love, which teacher communities could be empowered by and use to defend the profession against the harmful effects of neoliberalism.

The literature review consistently highlights the lack of student voice (SV): in theorisations and conceptualisations of well-being; in their input into the evidence base used in well-being guidance and policy from the government; and into a school's approach and practice around well-being. Schools have set up systems and structures such as School Councils to capture SV on a range of issues that affect them, including well-being. Freire's (2017) 'banking' model of education can be used to understand how student voice and agency is constrained in schools. Critics of the SV systems and structures implemented, suggest that SV is restricted because the structures and systems are put in place by staff holding the power in schools. Adults control how SV happens, where it happens and what happens, thus the hierarchical power structure limits the empowerment of the students. Freire's 'banking' model suggests that those in power create the SV structures and systems with the purpose that students ('oppressed') can be integrated and controlled within those structures, the intention being that students remain 'objects' because they are prevented from engaging in 'dialogue' and developing their own 'critical consciousness', thus they accept the situation, and cannot become 'subjects', necessary for transformation. Freire (2017) believed that the student's freedom is restricted by 'false consciousness' when the students ('oppressed') take on, or are forced to take on, the roles and structures of the school ('oppressor'). Therefore, students perceive they are being given a 'voice' through the spaces set up for them in schools but the 'rules of engagement' are decided by the adults. Without developing the SV structures and systems to enable a vehicle for students to think critically about well-being and their own lives, such structures will not be able to contribute to changing the understanding and experiences of well-being for adolescents in these spaces. This is because the 'banking' model brings about unequal social relations which create a 'culture of silence' (Freire, 2017) that instils the 'oppressed' with a negative, passive, and suppressed self-image. A 'culture of silence' can also cause the dominated individuals, in this study the students, to accept their subservient position, so losing the means to by which to critically respond to the culture forced on them and change their situation.

The lack of effective SV, discussed in the literature review, can be critiqued using Freire's (1985) concept of critical pedagogy to understand how the 'banking' model, which perpetuates the hierarchy of power limiting SV, could be countered. This is because critical pedagogy moves beyond critical theory which identifies the power structures which are limiting SV, to consider how they may be transformed. 'Dialogue', Freire (2001) believed, is the core component of critical pedagogy, fostering communication and understanding between students and teachers, based on mutual trust, respect, and a willingness to learn from each other. Through 'dialogue', students bring their lived experiences and knowledge to aspects of school life and the 'culture of silence'

is broken because students have a voice. Roberts (1996, p.2) comments, “it changes the dynamic of over teacher control and student passiveness, and dialogue becomes a pivotal pedagogical process”. It is that through such ‘dialogue’, both teachers and students develop ‘critical consciousness’ and become aware of their lived realities. Freire is arguing that it is the ‘dialogue’ between teachers and students, which underpins conscientisation, which is the space where one’s perception of reality may change (Blackburn, 2000). Freire (2017) writes about ‘naming the world’ and this means reaching critical consciousness, through ‘dialogue’, and hence an understanding of how economic, social and political power shapes lives. Transformation comes through ‘praxis’ (Freire, 2017), which is the cycle of this critical reflection on reality followed by action to transform that reality; knowledge is only valuable when it leads to reflection and action to change things.

Applied to this study, critical pedagogy can change the authoritarian hierarchy between teachers and students which dominate the problematisation around SV and well-being. Freire’s critical pedagogy, to which ‘dialogue’ is key, provides alternative ways for schools to break the authoritative, hierarchical relationships with the government. It is only when schools recognise this that they are likely to embrace the realisation that they can become empowered and promote school environments that enable well-being to thrive. This is because the power binary of the ‘oppressor’ (schools) and ‘oppressed’ (students) is challenged and more democratic structures can be created to garner effective SV around well-being. It is important to understand that Freire was not advocating simply replacing one educational hierarchy with another, which would simply replicate the ‘banking’ model. Addressing the power imbalances is not simply reversing roles but establishing horizontal power structures which enable all (government, schools, teachers and students) to become more and become human. Freire (2001) advocates that providing students with the knowledge and skills required to expand their capabilities, as active agents, is the best way to promote well-being in a just society.

Other research has used Freire’s critical pedagogy to understand the influence of the hierarchical structures within education. Robinson and Taylor (2007) use the work of Freire to argue power is a significant factor in shaping the philosophical underpinnings of SV work and the practical assumptions made about what is possible. They contend that it is underestimated how the process of ‘dialogue’ can lead people to act in ways that makes for justice and human flourishing (2007). Salazar et al. (2024) used Freire’s concept of ‘critical consciousness’ as a tool to develop an understanding of social justice among US student service leaders. They found that the students felt greater empowerment to challenge social injustices through using Freire’s ‘critical consciousness’ discourse. Freire’s concept of ‘dialogue’ was used by Edwards (2023) to improve

the mentoring programme for marginalised students excluded from school in the UK. Edwards used a methodological approach framed by Freire's decoding model in order to create the discourse within which students could become critically conscious of their realities and the conditions in which they exist. Qualitative research in public schools in Nepal employed Freire's critical pedagogy to contextualise learning in the classroom and hence make it meaningful and relatable to the students (Khanal, 2023). Khanal's findings include that learning became organic and provided students with tools and opportunities to empower themselves and their learning

In summary, and applied to this current study, Freire's concept of the 'banking' model is relevant in providing the context in which students define and experience well-being through the unequal power balances that exist in education. His concept of critical pedagogy is relevant in providing both a theoretical and practical application to how students can have agency to change their well-being reality. These two concepts will be used in the analysis of findings chapter (see chapter 5 - page 85) to deductively analyse the data. There will also be an acknowledgement, as reflected in the methodological process of the inductive approach to the analysis, that additional concepts of Freire could also provide insight in explaining how adolescents define and experience well-being.

3.4 Criticisms of Freire

Freire's work has been criticised both during his lifetime and after his death, and it is important to reflect on how some of these concerns pertain to this study. The first criticism is that his pedagogy is too vague and generalised for educators to put into practice (Schugurensky, 1998). This view, however, does not recognise that Freire did not wish for his work to be methodically applied and believed he did not have a right to impose his ideas on others (Roberts, 2015). A second criticism is Freire's oversimplification of the complexity of relations of power. Jackson (2007) argues Freire did not give sufficient attention to the differences of people's lives and experiences and therefore to the conflicting needs of 'oppressed' groups. Freire (2017) argues that liberatory pedagogy must be forged with the 'oppressed' and therefore, through 'dialogue', all the lived experiences of the 'oppressed' would be included. However, Jackson's (2007) questions about the limitations of Freire's duality approach to power of the 'oppressed' and the 'oppressors' have validity. This is important for this study because although adolescent students are a specific population within schools, their well-being is subjective and does not suggest a homogenous group. Also, within the student group itself, structures of hierarchical power exist and some students take on the role of 'oppressors' in certain situations such as bullying. This will need to be considered when his

theoretical framework is applied to analyse the findings from this study. Thirdly, his work is criticised for being too focused on class struggle which overlooks other forms of oppression including race and gender, (hooks,1994; Jackson 2007, Schugurensky, 1998). This is because in part Freire uses Marxist teachings which focus on economic and social power to inform his earlier work. He does address these concerns later in his joint work 'A dialogue of culture, language and race' with Macedo, through recognising that other forms of struggle exist (Freire and Macedo, 1995). Fourthly, his premise that the teacher is always seen as the emancipator and on the same side as the student ('oppressed') is questioned, suggesting that the implicit power of the teacher and the limitations of the role of the teacher should be recognised (Weiler, 2003). Beckett (2013) suggests that Freire did not deny this but insisted it is the role of the teacher to facilitate the quality of 'dialogue' that will enable teachers and students to critically examine each other's views, leading to a new shared view of reality. Lastly, Bowers (1983) argues that Freire's pedagogy leads to a modernising and western style of consciousness. He also talks about Freire's moral code in interfering in the lives of others, his cultural biases towards change and progress, and problematising the rules that govern lives. In response, Roberts (1996) and subsequently McLaren (2015) suggest that Freire is not against traditions, rather the social structures, practices, and relations which force people to accept tradition rather than questioning it. Despite the criticisms, Freire's critical theory, the 'banking' model, and critical pedagogy provide a credible and viable framework to underpin this study.

To conclude, despite the criticisms and the era Freire lived and worked in, his ideas still provide a valuable lens to consider key aspects relevant to this study. These are of power, justice, and the limits and possibilities of education to change policy and practice. The work of other theorists including critical theorists have presented ideas relevant to this study's aim, including themes of power (Foucault), recognition (Honneth), and identity (Bourdieu). Freire was ultimately chosen as the main theoretical framework because of his application of critical theory through critical pedagogy. His work moves beyond the ideological and argues for collective action to bring about social transformation. Freire's utopianism is noted by McLaren (2015), who calls for a renewed optimism to educate students into a new vision for humanity. It is this dual aspect of theory and practice in Freire's work that is significant to the aims of this study. As student well-being and mental health are at an all-time low, action by those in the field of education must be transformational to significantly improve the situation for adolescent students.

4 Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the philosophical approaches, methodology, and methods used to conduct the study. It describes the research paradigm, the research design, including the integration of the theoretical framing of Freire. It explains the two phases of the research, including how the participants were selected and how the data was collected. It informs how the data was analysed and provides my reflections on whether the research design in Phase one achieved its aim. Finally, the ethical implications and issues which were pertinent throughout the study are discussed.

This qualitative research study employed a Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology. The overriding aim of this study was to understand how adolescent students experience well-being in secondary school. This was to provide educational policy makers and practitioners with evidence to consider the effectiveness of their well-being work. The following research questions were used to support the aim:

1. How do adolescent students define well-being?
2. What factors shape the way students experience well-being in school?
3. What factors shape the decisions schools make about how to support well-being?

4.2 Research Paradigm

A research paradigm is a way of looking at a problem and suggesting ways of addressing that problem. Mertens (2020, p.8) states that a research paradigm, “is composed of certain philosophical assumptions that guide and direct thinking and action”. Philosophical assumptions are based on ontology (the nature of reality) and epistemology (how what is known is known) (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994; Saldana and Omasta, 2022). Ontological positions range from realism where there is a single reality to be sought and relativism where there are multiple subjective realities to be sought (Waring, 2012). Epistemological positions range from realism where knowledge is gained through direct observation and measurement (Waring, 2012), and constructivism where the knowledge is subjectively understood by individuals and influenced by the context of their lives (Mertens, 2020).

In the context of this study, a constructivist/interpretivist epistemology and relativist ontology were chosen. This was because the assumption was that the reality of well-being for participants

and their understanding of it, is based on each individual's construction of it, whilst shaped by knowledge derived from their social interactions and lived experiences. This was supported by Freire's ontological and epistemological thoughts (see section 3.2 – page 45). In his book 'Cultural Action for Freedom' he states, "For man, the process of orientation in the world can be understood neither as a purely subjective event, nor as an objective or mechanistic one, but only as an event in which subjectivity and objectivity are united" (Freire, 1972, p.21). Several studies suggest that knowledge of how children and young people (CYP) themselves, conceptualise and subjectively experience well-being is fundamental to more effectively supporting their well-being (Arslan et al., 2021; Waters and Higgins 2022; Weare and Murray, 2004). A positivist approach, which seeks objective truths, would not have sufficiently allowed for student perspectives about how well-being is experienced in a school, because it would fail to recognise that well-being is subjectively experienced. This is important for this study because understanding how adolescents subjectively experience well-being is the research gap that this study seeks to address. In addition, key literature surrounding CYP's well-being (Ereaut and Whiting, 2008; Smith and Reid, 2018) questions the dependency and validity on measurement indicators that emphasise the measurement of objective data which leans towards positivism. It can therefore be argued, that choosing a positivist epistemology would have limited findings from this study, because as Crotty (1998) argues, positivist traditions cannot easily or as accurately predict or theorise matters that are shaped by one's own self subjectivity.

4.3 Research Design – Participatory Action Research (PAR)

PAR was chosen as the research design because it supported a constructivist/interpretivist epistemology, relativist ontology, and was a practical approach which best addressed the research aim and questions (see sections 1.4 and 1.5 – page 5). Minkler and Wallerstein (2011) note that PAR is not a research method by itself, but a constructivist epistemological orientation that highlights the importance of subjective experiences and knowledge construction and is based on critical theory.

4.3.1 Brief History of PAR

The origins of PAR began in the 1940s with the pioneering work of the social psychologist Kurt Lewin, working at the Tavistock Institute in the UK, who emphasised social change outcomes for groups through Action Research (AR). PAR has its roots in critical theory which focuses on the

hierarchical nature of power relations, social injustice, and change. Lewin contends “that social research should be guided by two aims: finding out things and making positive changes” (Lewin, as cited in Schubotz, 2020, p.98). AR as a chosen methodology slowed down in the 1950s, because critics claimed it lacked scientific rigor as it was based on subjective data (Aldridge, 2016). It re-emerged in the 1990s because, as Beresford and Carr (2016) explain, conventional research methods were not always representing adequately the interests of all groups in society. This was highlighted by the rise in social movements in the 1980s addressing women’s rights, gay rights, and environmental concerns. Lewin’s original notion of AR has over time become a broadly anti-positivist approach to social research. Researchers, Coghlan and Brannick (2014), propose there is an epistemological difference in how action researchers approach their work. They claim that action researchers work by identifying a problem within a specific context, to provide a practical solution, as opposed to providing broad and generalised knowledge around a research topic. Examples in education include where Lemon (2019) used digital photographs taken by students to investigate why and how they learn in the ways they do and then adapted pedagogical practices to facilitate the students’ learning needs.

PAR developed from AR and both share many theoretical and conceptual roots, but PAR emphasises more the participatory nature of research (Schubotz, 2020). PAR approaches evolved around three main epistemological principles which are: that ordinary people become co-researchers; those affected by the issues being researched are considered subject experts through being given a role and some responsibility in the research process; and transformation is a key goal (Schubotz, 2020). Creswell and Guetterman (2019, p.626) comment that PAR incorporates “an emancipatory aim of improving and empowering individuals and organisations in educational (and other) settings”. As such the value for employing PAR in this study studies with students are discussed in the following sub-sections.

4.3.2 Reasons for Choosing PAR

The choice of PAR methodology for this study was firstly influenced by the rights-based agenda, which recognises that CYP have rights as defined by Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989). This Convention is ratified by all countries except the USA and recognises that children (under the age of 18 years) possess the same rights as all people. In Article 12 it confers that every child has the right to say what they think in matters affecting them and have their views taken seriously (UN, 1989). This is endorsed by findings from research into well-being involving CYP which stress the importance of having their voices heard, to develop research in the

well-being arena (Camarota and Fine, 2008; Fattore et al., 2009; Heron and Reason, 1997; Kemmis et al., 2014). Article 12 (UN, 1989) also recognises that “children have existing as well as developing competencies, membership of particular groups and contexts and agency” and emphasises “the obligations of adults to create contexts in which these rights might be enacted” (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015, p.6). This was pertinent to the choice of PAR because this research design provided students with an opportunity to exercise their right to be heard in research about their well-being, which was going to produce information about them.

Secondly, PAR was chosen because it was a methodological approach informed by achieving equality and justice. Cornwall and Jewkes (1995) argue that issues of agency, representation, and power lie at the core of methodological critiques from which the development of participatory approaches stem. It was highlighted in the previous chapter that students in schools are considered a marginalised group within the educational hierarchy. They have limited opportunities to demonstrate voice and agency on matters that affect them and, thus my research seeks to address this equality imbalance. There was a precedent for this as other researchers have used PAR methodology to expose inequality and to fight injustice both in community settings as well as educational contexts. For example, Fals-Borda (1987), who was one of the first scholars to use a PAR approach, undertook research on locally controlled development projects in Columbia. He saw his responsibility as providing evidence of the reality of the people that lived there but also working towards remedying injustice (Shamrova and Cummings, 2017). In their systematic review of studies conducted between 1968 and 2013 into school climate, achievement and well-being, Jamal et al. (2013) stress the importance of students having a voice and contributing to decision making at school to challenge the status quo. In addition, MacDonald et al. (2019) explored student well-being in alternative education in Australian Schools and conclude positively about the value of giving them the opportunity to engage in socially transformative research which can enable new learning opportunities.

Thirdly, PAR was chosen because it had the potential to be transformative by involving those affected in the discourse, as Schubotz (2020, p.12) states, the main aim of PAR is to “.... address particular social problems by using the expertise of the people who are affected by these problems within the research process”. An example of this is reflected in research by Livingstone et al. (2014), who looked at factors impeding success in school for Black students in Montreal. They found that youth participation in the research process can lead to a deeper and fuller understanding of the factors that shape students' experiences in school rather than research which ignores their voices. Research into student well-being in Australia by Halliday et al. (2019) used PAR methodology, and they reported that student involvement enabled the school to be

better informed when making decisions about what content should be included in their positive education programmes around well-being. Therefore, my study combined the rigor of academic research with a change agenda, to give policy makers and practitioners in education robust evidence to rethink their approaches to adolescent well-being in schools. This was imperative considering the bleak picture presented by the measurement indicators around student well-being (The Children's Society, 2024).

Finally, PAR had been used in several fields including social policy, health and education (Schubotz, 2020) in areas related to this study. There are very few studies, however, that have used PAR to specifically research adolescent student well-being in schools. This was relevant because researchers have stressed the need for different research designs to provide a more in-depth look into the under researched concepts of school and mental health, particularly the impact of an academic environment. These include Aldridge and McChesney (2018) who in their systematic review of 48 studies between 2000 and 2017 looking into mental health and the role of school climate, found that only two of the studies were qualitative and one mixed methods. They comment that the field would benefit from more qualitative based methods of research design because such studies would enable more understanding of how and why the school climate affects adolescents. The review of literature amplified the lack of CYP's voice in research about the general provision of well-being in schools (Demkowicz et al., 2023; Simmons et al., 2015). PAR was therefore a considered a strong methodological choice which would foreground adolescent student voice. Thus, my study, seeking evidence from both adolescent students and staff, would enable the 'why' to be fully explored. PAR has in part been shied away from because it involves working with 'vulnerable' participants and at times around sensitive issues. Ethically, in research terms, CYP are viewed as 'vulnerable', and well-being is a personal and sensitive issue. Researchers who have used PAR in these circumstances note the specific benefits of the approach. Fieldhouse (2012) used PAR in a UK study which looked at the exclusion of mental health users in feedback about mental health provision and reported the benefits of engaging with marginalised groups and overcoming institutional barriers to promote social inclusion. Woolhouse (2019) used a participatory approach, collecting data through photo elicitation, for her research on educational inclusion in the UK. She found that involving her participants in analysis helped to bridge the gap between adult researchers and child participants. Participatory techniques were used by Chowns (2008) in her collaborative inquiry using video with children facing the life-threatening illness of a parent. She found that the participatory approach enabled young people to articulate their experience and expertise on highly sensitive issues, challenging views about CYP's competence and capacity. PAR was ultimately chosen as the research design

for this study because of the broader aim of PAR to enact the rights of students to be involved in matters that affect them. As PAR targets social justice, it had the potential to transform well-being in schools, aligning closely with the purpose of this research. In addition, through choosing PAR it addressed the concerns about a lack of this type of research, which put students' views at the heart of the process. In doing so it helps to extend the field of knowledge around adolescent well-being.

4.3.3 Consideration of Other Research Designs

It could be argued that other qualitative research methodologies such as grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss (2017) and phenomenology could have been paired with my ontological, epistemological, and philosophical beliefs to answer the research questions. In PAR, however, the notion of power is fundamentally different from the hierarchical power relations in conventional research projects, where the researcher decides and orchestrates all aspects of the study. This is not just a fundamental methodological principle in how PAR projects are conducted; it is one of the core aims of PAR research itself. Cornwall and Jewkes (1995, p.1667) state the fundamental difference between PAR and other research methodologies is “it lies in the location of power in the various stages of the research process”. This study, concerned with student agency in their own well-being, thus aligned more strongly with PAR as it enabled the voices of participants to be central both in the design and objectives of the participatory approach. In comparing PAR and other approaches, Walmsley and Johnson (2003, p.10) describe the differences with PAR as “the intention to engage more effectively with participants and in ways that facilitate a more empathetic and democratic approach to research participation”. Relevant to my study were the views of other authors who highlight the issue of empowerment in using PAR, where students are heard through their own voice and not an adult constructionist interpretation of that voice (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015; Kellett, 2011; Kendal et al., 2017; Lundy, 2007).

4.3.4 Criticisms of PAR

There are criticisms surrounding the claims made by PAR methodology, particularly around whether it is truly participatory. In the last 40 years, Schubotz (2020) points to a notable shift to greater collaboration in research, specifically in PAR, but shares concern that PAR is becoming over simplified. This is supported by Shamrova and Cummings (2017, p.400), who state that the research community “has been liberally utilising the concept of PAR and thus oversimplification

of CYP's involvement and misrepresentation of their voice has become a concern for many scholars". Certainly, distribution of power is one of the greatest challenges of research methodology with CYP (Jones, 2004; Pascal and Bertram, 2009). The term PAR is applied quite loosely in some cases, but as Cornwall and Jewkes (1995) attest, just because research is labelled PAR, it does not mean it is. They argue that whilst some conventional research projects involve limited interactions with people, others achieve a high level of in-depth participation at certain stages but would not be considered participatory.

Giving a voice to participants can be criticised because this power of giving a voice is from the powerful (researchers) to the powerless (participants) (Aldridge, 2016). Kennedy (2006), for example, comments that researchers are mainly adult, and therefore their pre-existing ideological voice influences their view of children, their relationship with them, and their research perspective. This is endorsed by Robinson and Kellett (2004) who note that research studies designed by adults are in the main gathering data that the adults think is important. By not involving children in the analysis of data, researchers have the power to disregard children's knowledge and construct meanings derived from the data through an adult perspective, rather than that of children (Robinson and Kellett, 2004).

In addition, published participatory research studies, although claiming to work more collaboratively or inclusively with CYP participants, have not always demonstrated clearly and rigorously how this is achieved with reference to specific, clearly defined participatory methods and models (Aldridge, 2016; McTaggart, 1997; Tisdall and Davis, 2004). This is supported by Coghlan and Brannick (2014) who comment that sometimes anything involving clients or co-researchers is called PAR or AR which devalues the true nature of participatory work. In their study, Shamrova and Cummings (2017, p.400) described child participation "as the process of sharing decision making and participation with young people especially those under 18 years of age on the issues which affect them and their communities". The study by Shamrova and Cummings (2017) looked at PAR outcomes, using Gal's Ecological Model of Child and Youth Participation (Gal, 2017). They applied it to a research environment to collect and analyse data against it to provide evidence to support the critical conversation about PAR. Different levels of research outcomes were identified: children level research outcomes as a micro level; organisational level research outcomes as a meso level; and community level research outcomes as a macro level. In their systematic review, they chose 45 articles that had used PAR methodology. Part of their findings showed that PAR did provide positive outcomes for children, organisations, and their community. However, there were challenges in providing meaningful participation opportunities and addressing power differences between children and adults. In

another study looking at PAR research, Jacquez et al. (2013) in their systematic review, identified that only 15% of PAR projects involving CYP attempted to collaborate with them. Carr's (2012) study on service users' involvement in research showed that participation does not necessarily accommodate participants' voice or lead to change. In her research, Lundy (2018) stated that a 'gold standard' of research is not always possible due to the context of the institutional setting, but that does not mean that participation cannot be meaningful or aimed for.

I had to be mindful that this study needed to move beyond these criticisms and limitations. Just because I had selected PAR as the research design it did not mean it would automatically recognise and respect participants' voice, or necessarily lead to fair representation of their perspectives, or 'voices' in the process. To justify that this study would stand up to scrutiny as PAR, it was incumbent on myself to be clear about the ways of working. This was addressed through measuring how PAR met the needs of the participants, how it best addressed and attempted to be emancipatory, and how it was trustworthy (see sub section 4.9.5 – page 83). The significance for this study is that without it, the promise of change from the study itself would remain as Schubotz (2020, p.18) states "unfilled or unevidenced" (see section 4.7 – page 75) for how the work aligned in practice to PAR principles).

4.3.5 Theoretical Underpinnings of Paulo Freire

The chosen methodology of PAR was underpinned by critical theory and pedagogy as framed by Freire. The importance of the theoretical rationale for participatory methodology is stressed by Chevalier and Buckles (2019), hence this needed to be present to strengthen my reasons for choosing PAR. Freire (2017) argued that education, through schools becoming more democratic, should develop critical awareness of a student's reality based on a process of reflection and action, 'praxis'. In this way, students uncover their own knowledge to construct their own understanding of reality to gain consciousness of themselves and the world. When students and teachers both become 'subjects', they can critically reflect on their reality and take transformative action to change that reality. It is only then that schools will be more likely to promote contexts through which the voiceless have voice, the powerless have power, and from such spaces hope for a better world can emerge (Freire, 1985). Thereby, through myself power sharing with students as co-researchers in this study, it affirmed the Freirean principles that students are subject experts, and their knowledge is valuable and essential to the discourse around well-being. This validated my PAR approach through regarding adolescent students as agents, not 'objects', who can analyse their own situations and offer their own solutions to transform their well-being reality.

In working with the co-researcher group, the principles of Freire's 'generative themes' were applied in order to elicit the well-being issues and concerns that emerged from the lived experiences of us all. Freire's 'generative themes' shape a society at a given time representing hopes, fears, and motivations for action (Freire Institute, 2025). Through 'dialogue', examining these themes helped us as co-researchers develop 'critical consciousness' and understand our own well-being realities. Themes became a focal point for some of the dialogue with the co-researcher Focus Research Group in Phase One, allowing co-researchers to explore their context and suggest the methods and areas for discussion for data collection in Phase Two.

The critical pedagogy of Freire supported a participatory methodology because the power relationship between myself and those being researched was mediated by the inclusion of students in my research design. PAR by its nature suggests that power relations should be different to the hierarchical power relationships present in much research work. This is not just a methodological principle but a core aim of the research to empower marginalised groups. Freire (2017, p.54) states, "Authentic reflection considers neither abstract man nor the world without people, but people in their relations with the world". His concepts of 'dialogue' and 'praxis' supported the transformative intention in selecting a PAR study because critical inquiry is a form of 'praxis', a search for emancipatory knowledge in the context of action (Crotty, 1998).

4.4 Phases of this Research Study

This study had two phases. PAR Phase One involved myself as the lead researcher working in a Focus Research Group with student co-researchers from one secondary school. This group of student co-researchers decided: the methods of data collection; areas to be investigated through the data collection; and supported the analysis of the data collected. Phase Two involved the collection of data through focus groups with student participants and semi-structured conversations with staff, drawn from two further secondary schools. Schools in Phase Two were different to the PAR Phase One setting.

4.4.1 Phase One PAR – Method

This first section explains the rationale behind using the method of a focus group within the PAR Phase One research design. PAR Phase One involved the use of a focus group to gather an in depth understanding of students' perceptions of their well-being experiences within school. Focus

groups are compatible with participatory research design (Brotherson, 1994; Stewart et al., 2006). This is because they are a data collection method, but also a research strategy as they facilitate the opportunity for a group of people to investigate the perspectives held on a particular problem (Mertens, 2020). The choice of a focus group is supported by Vaughn et al. (1996, p.15) who state, “In a qualitative tradition the nature of reality is viewed as multiple views of reality, focus groups where individuals participate provides a forum where diverse opinions and perspectives are desired”. Focus groups suit the principles of PAR where knowledge is rooted in social relations and is more powerful when produced collaboratively through action (Camarota and Fine, 2008).

In their work on focus groups, Krueger and Casey (2015, p.6) point to five typical characteristics which are “a small group of people, who possess certain characteristics, to provide qualitative data, in a focused discussion, to help understand the topic of interest”. Focus groups are one of a few research techniques that involve the use of groups, others include nominal group technique, Delphi technique, brainstorming, Syntectic’s, and leaderless discussion groups. These other group research techniques were considered for this study, but they did not contain all the five characteristics or features by which to define a focus group as listed above (Krueger and Casey, 2015) which I deemed were pertinent to PAR Phase One.

It is argued that the debate about the terminology of a focus group is pointless and that a focus group is simply an umbrella term, with Morgan (1997, p.6) broadly defining focus groups as in essence, “the researcher’s interest that provides the focus whereas the data comes from the group interaction”. The use of a focus group for PAR Phase One (for the purposes of this study known as the co-researcher Focus Research Group) supported the fact that as the study was doctorate level research, I had chosen the topic of interest but enabled the involvement of students as co-researchers, which as Morgan (1997, p.18) states gave “voice to groups that would otherwise not be heard”. In the context of this study, the voice of students was heard in deciding the best methods to collect a rich set of data from their peers and staff around well-being, through deciding the areas around well-being to be investigated during Phase Two data collection, and through supporting the analysis of data. In line with PAR principles, the co-researcher Focus Research Group brought empowerment through students being heard through their own voice and not simply the voice of myself as the adult lead researcher.

Other researchers engaging with PAR methodology have used focus groups with young people and note the advantages. In their longitudinal study investigating CYP’s daily lives, Bagnoli and Clark (2010) used focus groups as a data collection tool. They found that CYP positively responded to focus group sessions, appreciating the insights they gained into their lives, the lives

of others and recognised the possibilities for social change. Mertens (2020) used focus groups when researching court access for deaf and hard of hearing people in the US and advocated its benefits for marginalised and vulnerable groups to present a collective view. Also, Anderson and Graham (2016) used student focus groups in their study into well-being in Australian Secondary Schools, reflecting that it promoted a depth of data around well-being.

Some researchers argue that the use of focus groups within a PAR design does not align with Freire's thinking. Krueger and Casey (2015) comment that Freire's use of homogeneous groups, where individuals describe their thoughts and ideas with the purpose of achieving self-awareness and social/political action, is different to a focus group. They see the focus of the group is determined by the researcher and the goal not immediate but later decided by those conducting the research. The use of a focus group method, however, did align closely with the theoretical underpinnings of Freire and PAR. This was because the use of a focus group was a way of emancipating relationships where both investigators and investigated become jointly educated about the situation impacting their lives (Freire, 2017). In this study, the co-researcher Focus Research Group provided relevant information from which to decide the data collection methods and areas to be explored in Phase Two. This endorsed the use of focus groups in a similar way to Vaughn et al. (1996), who refer to using focus groups as a precursor to the development of a research instrument.

The other method considered for, PAR Phase One, was individual interviews. Individual interviews are a way to collect data, through posing a set of formalised questions to collect information, to provide structured data, which can then be analysed (Cohen et al., 2007). The advantages of focus groups relative to individual interviews for PAR is that detailed information can be collected in a short space of time and at low cost (Acocella, 2012; Morgan, 1997; Silverman, 2017). Focus groups also have participant interaction advantages which can provide fuller and richer data than by individual interview (Hess, 1968, as cited in Stewart et al., 2006, p.46; Krueger and Casey, 2015; Lederman, 1990, as cited in Vaughn et al., 1996, p.17). This is articulated by Vaughn et al. (1996, p.16) who focus on the advantage of the interactions between the participants themselves, which are "recognised as having the potential to add depth and dimension to the knowledge gained". In a focus group, participants can clarify, extend, and provide examples (Byers and Wilcox, 1991). In his research, Fern (1982) compared individual interviews with focus groups and concluded that focus groups did not produce significantly more or better ideas than an equivalent number of individual interviews but did point to the efficiency of focus groups when time was limited.

In addition, the advantages of using a focus group method rather than interviews for PAR Phase One, enabled my analysis to be inductive because it captured the voice of the student co-researchers which was a fundamental facet of this study. Interviews can tend towards a deductive analysis which would not have been as appropriate as it would have meant more of an adult bias and interpretation which was not aligned to the participatory rationale for the design in Phase One.

The next sub-sections are focussed on the how the research was conducted in practice.

4.4.2 Phase One PAR – Sampling

This study used purposive sampling to select the co-researcher participants for PAR Phase One which is the dominant strategy for participatory research (Aldridge, 2016; Silverman, 2017). Overall, this study focussed on the well-being of students aged 13-16 years (school year groups 9,10 and 11), regarded as adolescence. As explained in the introduction to this study, adolescent students were chosen as a focus because they record poor well-being scores, for example, on The Good Childhood scales (The Children's Society, 2022). For PAR Phase One, purposive sampling was employed through selecting a secondary school and identifying students who had a specific interest in well-being and fitted the age range required. Students came from one secondary school in a rural county in England. The school was selected because the Headteacher was the only person to respond to 25 initial emails requesting support for this research. Following a face-to-face meeting with the Headteacher it was agreed that the PAR Phase One research could be conducted. The Headteacher suggested that the student Mental Health Leaders Group would be a group from which to source volunteers (Student Mental Health Leaders were an appointed position in the school). The sampling process started with an open session with all the Student Mental Health Leaders from year groups 9, 10 and 11 where I explained the research study, stressing the importance of involving the 'voice' of students. Those interested were given an Information Sheet about the research (Appendix A). Written expressions of interest from students were then invited. I had 13 expressions of interest returned (12 females and 1 male, of which 3 were from Year 11 and 10 from Year 10) and all were invited to take part in the co-researcher Focus Research Group.

Gatekeepers play an important and essential role in safeguarding the interests of their participants (Harcourt et al., 2011). Many scholars, such as Groundwater-Smith et al. (2015) have cautioned against gatekeeping children out of research purely because of potential risk and they argue that the potential benefits of participation need to be recognised. Alves et al. (2022) have

identified children's voices are often underrepresented in research due to in part ethical considerations. A balance is required because currently children are not generally viewed as equal contributors to research but as 'vulnerable' people who need protecting. The list of students invited to participate, was shared with the school to ensure there were no prior issues which would cause harm to an individual being part of the co-researcher Focus Research Group and no concerns were raised. Throughout this study, and from the beginning through the selection of participants, the ethics around student participation were acted upon. This was to ensure as far as possible the rights and preferences of participants were reflected and power issues between adults and students were minimised.

4.4.3 Phase One PAR – In Action

The co-researcher Focus Research Group finally comprised of ten students after consent forms were returned from students, parents, and the Headteacher (Appendices B, C, D). There was one male and nine females, from year groups 10 and 11, aged 14-16 years, plus me. The group met for seven sessions. A session eight was planned, for the Spring Term 2024, after the Phase Two data collection, however due to a change of staff personnel at the school the session did not take place. The sessions were conducted in school time across one academic year 2022-2023. The sessions were approximately 1hr 25 mins in duration, with sessions one to six taking place in the Spring Term 2023 over a six-week period excluding school holidays, and session seven conducted three months later in the Summer Term 2023. The table below provides an overview of the content covered in each session (Appendix E contains the detailed plans for each session). Some aspects of some sessions were recorded and transcribed, field notes written, and photographs taken of work students produced. One student withdrew from the group after session four for personal reasons, raised by the student with myself, which were subsequently passed on to the Safeguarding Staff Member as per the Schools Safeguarding Policy. The co-researcher Focus Research Group ultimately decided that the methods of data collection for Phase Two would be focus groups for student participants and semi-structured conversations for staff participants (Appendix F) and decided the areas around well-being to be explored (Appendix G). Through the ongoing activities and discussions, throughout the sessions, the group assisted with theme generation for the data analysis.

Table 1: Overview of Sessions with co-researcher Focus Research Group

Session	Overview of Session Content
1	Explain study purpose, understand the research aim, questions, exploration of key words used, ways of working and the setting of ground rules
2	Exploration of what is well-being, including for students in a school context
3	Understanding the pros and cons of different methods used to collect research data
4	Discussion around relevant questions which would best collect data for this study around student well-being
5	Individual decision making on the methods of data collection to be used in Phase Two using the work on questions in session 4
6	Collective decision making on the methods of data collection and the questions/areas to be explored in Phase Two
7	This was originally planned as two sessions, but one session was cancelled by the school due to a rearranged Sports Day so the session was condensed. It covered training in Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), coding and theme building. Reflections on Phase One
8	This was originally planned to collectively work on the data collected in Phase Two but did not take place due to a change in school personnel

4.5 Phase Two - Data Collection

4.5.1 Phase Two Data Collection– Sampling

The study used purposive sampling for Phase Two to select both student and staff participants. For data collection Phase Two, the research was conducted in two different secondary schools from an urban county in England. It was extremely difficult to find a school willing to engage in this phase of the research. If a reply was received, the responses suggested that the main two reasons for not being able to participate were staff shortages or preparing for an Ofsted Inspection. Therefore, the Chief Operating Officer (COO) of an Academy Trust, was approached, where previously I had conducted some work. The COO agreed to support the research and suggested two schools to work with, which were different to the school which I had previously been involved with. Data from student participants was collected from one school. The Headteacher asked for student volunteers for the research, after a conversation with me about the nature of the research. Students who were interested were provided with an Information Sheet (Appendix H) about the research. From this there were 41 participants after consent permissions had been obtained from both students and parents (Appendices I, J). The student participants were recruited from the age group 13-16 years and were representative of a typical school population which included a range of gender, ethnic backgrounds, and learning needs. This was because as far as possible the diversity of the collective voice of students needed to be heard. The Headteacher did act as a gatekeeper to ensure the students participating were a representative sample based on data held on those students. They also ensured there were no prior considerations with students who wished to be involved which would cause harm to an individual. In addition, the Headteacher took time to verbally explain the Information Consent Form (Appendices I, J) to some students and their parents so that they fully understood the ethical requirements of the research. This enabled more students to take part in the research and have their voice heard, because some students and their parents had found the formality and language used in the Consent Form an initial barrier to participation. The Headteacher completed a consent form on behalf of the school as students were recruited through the school (Appendix K). On the day that the data collection took place, two adults, one a member of staff and one who worked closely with the school, asked to be part of the data collection as they felt the research was very worthwhile. I agreed, to this as I felt it would not compromise the data collected from the students. All consent forms (Appendix L) were completed.

The second, different school was chosen to collect data from staff participants. The Headteacher asked for staff volunteers for the research after a conversation with myself about the nature of the research. An Information Sheet about the research was provided to staff (Appendix M). Ten staff were willing to participate with signed consent forms (Appendix N). Staff participants were representative of a range of staff roles in school, senior management, pastoral staff, teachers, teaching assistants, and administrative staff, covering different ages and genders, who worked with students and hence had a part to play in student well-being. The Headteacher acted as a gatekeeper in that all communication and paperwork was managed by the school. The Headteacher completed a consent form on behalf of the school as staff were recruited through the school (Appendix O).

4.5.2 Phase Two Data Collection – Focus Group – Students

Data collection “is the vehicle through which researchers answer their research questions and defend their conclusions and recommendations” (Mertens, 2020, p.380). Preparation for the data collection with focus groups was key to ensure a rich set of data was obtained and possible problems, advised by some researchers, avoided as far as possible (Rook, 2003; Stewart et al., 2006). Research by Rook (2003) suggests that the average response time per participant is 30 seconds or less and points to too many questions being asked in the length of a focus group discussion, limiting the depth obtained. Also, the tendency of a researcher to use direct questions in a focus group limits the type of data which can be collected. Although there were areas to explore, as decided in Phase One, I maintained a curiosity to delve further when a response required further expansion or clarification, and time was allowed for each student who wished to express their view. This meant that it was not always possible to explore every area, within every focus group, as each focus group session was timeboxed. In addition, I took on board research by Zaltman (2014) who found, most of human thought is visual, metaphorical, and emotional, and any such obvious occurrences were noted on the final transcripts.

For student participants, six student focus group meetings were held in one school, involving in total 33 students, aged 13-16 years, ten males and 23 females. On average, each focus group meeting took 30 minutes. The areas covered, informed by PAR Phase One (Appendix G), included: what does well-being mean; what happens in school that helps or hinders students' well-being; and what ‘say’ do students have in their own well-being. All the meetings were audio recorded on the researcher’s phone, initially transcribed using the UEA Microsoft TEAMS software. The resultant transcription was checked and amended against the original recording four times to

ensure accuracy and full capture of content. The final transcripts reflected the comments made in each group, they are not assigned to a particular student, and the generic term participant was used to reference a student response.

4.5.3 Phase Two Data Collection – Semi-Structured Conversations – Staff

Face to face semi-structured conversations were conducted with nine staff consisting of senior management staff, pastoral staff, external professionals, teaching staff, and support staff. On average the conversations took 35 minutes each. The areas covered informed by PAR Phase One (Appendix G) included: what does well-being mean; what happens in school that helps or hinders students' well-being; what training have you had around well-being; how is your well-being supported; and what say do students have in their own well-being. Seven of the conversations were audio recorded on my phone, initially transcribed using the UEA Microsoft TEAMS software. The resultant transcription was checked and amended against the original recording four times to ensure accuracy and full capture of content. Two conversations were recorded through my handwritten notes because the members of staff did not agree to the conversation being recorded. The final transcripts reflected the comments made, were not assigned to a particular member of staff/role, and the generic term staff participant was used to reference a staff response.

4.6 Data Analysis

4.6.1 The 'Why' of Using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA)

For this study, Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Braun and Clarke, 2022) was chosen to analyse the data of this research. Other approaches considered were content analysis, discourse analysis, and thematic analysis. It is acknowledged that these are umbrella headings under which there are different branches of that type of analysis. Any of these ways of analysing data, were compatible with analysing qualitative data and there are overlaps between them (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994; Mertens, 2020; Silverman, 2017). As a novice researcher, the use of a data analysis method that was flexible and provided guidance to carrying out the process was attractive. RTA (Braun and Clarke, 2022) was finally decided upon as it was the most compatible with the

theoretical assumptions underpinning PAR which were the constructivist interpretivist epistemology and critical theory, as framed by Freire.

Constructionism/Interpretivism, views reality and truth as produced through, language, representation, and other social processes which lead to the understanding of the world through cultural, social, and political contexts (Braun and Clarke, 2022). RTA is thus compatible with my chosen PAR methodology because RTA enabled analysis that does not seek objective truths but looks to construct meaning from participants lived experiences, in this case of well-being. RTA also aligns with critical theory as framed by Freire because RTA focuses on the reflexivity of the researcher to continually reflect on their biases and assumptions. The thinking of Freire, thus, enabled critical reflection to continually ensure the power differentials between myself and the students were minimised as far as possible. RTA has also been used by others including Aldridge and McChesney (2018) who carried out a systematic review of studies involving well-being and the school climate. They applied Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis to examine sub-constructs that were used to investigate relationships between school climate and adolescent mental health. In addition, they used pre-existing codes, from earlier research, to work into potential thematic groupings, which enabled the analysis to be both inductive and deductive (Aldridge and McChesney, 2018). Demkowicz et al. (2023) also employed RTA in their study to explore the views of CYP about general well-being provision in an educational setting. They argued that RTA allowed for a latent lens to move beyond descriptive statements about well-being to explore the underlying meanings and what may have shaped them. By doing so, this permitted a more in-depth understanding of the context, how students access those spaces, and the impact this may have had.

RTA enabled an abductive approach to analyse the data. This type of analysis is abductive because it does not provide an explanation in itself (inductive), and it is not simply a new case on what is already known (deductive) but combines both (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014). It enabled the analysis to be predominantly inductive, so it represented what the participants thought but also deductive in that it was looked at through the lens of the existing literature and theoretical framework. The deductive approach was underpinned using Freire's critical theory. This provided support and interpretation to the analysis, particularly when looking at issues of voice, agency, power, and neoliberalism integral to my research questions. Content analysis would have provided more of a sway to deductive analysis rather than inductive analysis (Cohen et al., 2007), lessening the attention which needed to be given to the authenticity of the data collected around student voice and agency.

It was necessary to consider an approach to data analysis which was compatible for analysing data from focus groups and semi-structured conversations and RTA was one such approach. Silverman (2017) talks about focus group interviews as being transcribed using standard techniques for qualitative data, namely content or thematic analysis. Whereas Wilkinson (2011) shows approaches such as discourse analysis and conversation analysis can be used in analysing focus group data. Discourse analysis was considered because of the ability of this type of analysis to focus on the finer points of language, the meaning of language, and mechanics of language (Mertens, 2020; Barbour, 2018). The focus on language for maintaining power relations student-to-teacher and how everyday conversations give meaning to social worlds aligned well with the research question 1 and 3 but less so question 2 (see section 1.5 – page 5). Although discourse analysis, like RTA, would have been compatible with the constructionist paradigm, of how realities are constructed and reconstructed through talk (Barbour, 2018), discourse analysis seemed less likely to provide a macro context in relation to the wider institutional context. As this research was focused on student well-being in the schools and research question 2 seeks to address what drives the institution's approach, a broader analysis capturing more than discourse, and the effects of discourse, seemed to be more beneficial. This was important because it would give me a wider range of findings for policy makers to discuss and part of the rationale for using PAR was its transformative nature, beyond the school. RTA also provided a discourse analysis aspect, that is attention to the importance of language, through semantic coding. Through using semantic coding in RTA, the language was captured which gave meaning in the context of the participants (Cohen et al., 2007; Patton, 2002).

In addition, the co-researchers were involved in the data analysis, not by doing it, but by understanding the principles of coding and supporting theme construction. This enabled myself to decide the codes that represented as close as possible the views and interpretations of the co-researcher participants, thereby, aligning with the PAR approach (Mertens, 2020; Mitra and McCormick, 2017; Weston et al., 2012). As such, the co-researchers were also involved in participant validation (Braun and Clarke, 2022) by supporting the theme construction in relation to their experiences, and the trustworthiness of the study was thus enhanced. In their study, Jacquez et al. (2013) found that only 54% of PAR studies involved CYP participants in data analysis. Also, Ozer and Douglas (2013) suggest that developing and utilising tools that involve CYP in the data analysis process will ultimately enable researchers to meet the democratic and power sharing values of PAR.

RTA enabled the subjectivities of the co-researchers to be recognised and made use of. This is more enhanced than in discourse and content analysis. RTA can be used by a team of researchers

and is valued in this type of PAR study because it can support data analysis through respecting the lead and co-researchers' differences and subjectivities, opening discussions that might be missed (Campbell et al., 2021). Braun and Clarke (2022, p.5) describe RTA as a six-phase method which values, "a subjective, situated, aware and questioning researcher". This endorsed the co-researcher Focus Research Group because the 'reflexive' part of RTA enabled reflection upon subjectivities. As Braun and Clarke (2022, p.14) state, "research cannot be a value neutral activity" and a researcher's (in this case researchers') positioning inevitably shapes their research and engagement with the data. The next sub-section considers how the six phases of RTA were applied to my study.

4.6.2 The 'How' of Using RTA

After the data collected had been transcribed verbatim, the six phases of RTA were used to guide the analysis of data. Analysis was approached through moving back and forth between the phases to engage thoughtfully and reflectively with the data (Braun and Clarke, 2022). Phase One enabled initial familiarisation of the data through immersion in the content by reading and re-reading the written transcripts. Immersion was also achieved through listening to the audio-recordings, and this enabled me to note when participants paused, spoke with emphasis and emotion which seemed relevant and important to understanding their well-being experiences in the context of the research questions. Phase Two involved generating initial codes from the raw data. Each time an area of interest relevant to the research questions was obtained from the transcripts, it was coded. Consideration was given as to whether an existing code aptly captured the information or whether a new code needed to be created. This systematic coding process was repeated four times, during which my codes changed and were refined, until I believed the codes, both semantic and latent, reflected the meanings that the data provided. I cross referenced the codes with my familiarisation notes and used the knowledge generated from the co-researcher Focus Research Group sessions to check the final codes covered the 'what' and 'why' about well-being gleaned from these sources. The use of an excel spreadsheet enabled easy management of the raw data and codes during the coding process to reach the final list of codes.

Phase Three began when I reached the point where I was just tweaking codes and code labels which indicated that I should move towards theme creation (Braun and Clarke, 2022). I grouped codes together to develop patterns of shared meaning around a central concept to find initial themes. Through printing out the codes on strips of paper and physically moving them around it

suited my way of learning, so I could continually reflect, debate with myself and change clusters of codes and initial themes. The early themes resembled topic summaries more than themes, hence the process saw many iterations. I finally settled on initial themes which I believed told the story around how adolescent students experienced well-being in school articulated through their voices during this research. In Phase Four, I reviewed the initial themes and this process involved going back to re-reading the raw transcript data, my familiarisation notes, the literature review and the insights from the co-researcher Focus Research Group sessions, thus ensuring the themes I had created were obtained both inductively and deductively and were relevant to the research questions. Phase Five consolidated the defining and naming of themes with my supervisors. For the final Phase Six, the themes were written up in an analysis of findings Chapter, which combined findings with analysis to reflect a coherent narrative of where adolescent students would experience well-being in schools on a daily basis. As the writing progressed, I continued to reflect this intent of my narrative, as a result, I split the theme of Relationships with Staff into two themes to distinguish between staff relationships inside and outside the classroom. This is where students perceived staff relationships which impacted on well-being, took place. The data extracts were chosen which best exemplified the point being made, with longer extracts often used at the beginning of a section to demonstrate the richness of data collected from the participant focus groups.

The following table details the six phases of RTA (Braun and Clarke, 2006) and how it pertained to the analysis undertaken in this study.

Table 2: Application of Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-step approach to thematic analysis.

Phase	Description	Process	Step Action
1	Familiarisation with the dataset	Each audio recording and two handwritten records of semi-structured conversations were transcribed using Microsoft Teams software. The transcriptions were checked four times against the audio recordings and the handwritten record for accuracy and full content coverage.	Initial thoughts about the data were noted down on paper.

2	Generating initial codes	Each transcript was initially read and anything interesting was underlined. The transcripts were then reread, and semantic and latent coding was employed to develop coding labels to capture single meanings or concepts from the data. This process was repeated twice more. Also, the topics generated through the co-researcher Focus Research Group sessions were consulted to ensure full coverage.	Each transcript was printed out on paper and text relating to the research questions was underlined. The text was then given a code which was recorded on an excel spreadsheet. A list of final codes was created using an excel spreadsheet.
3	Searching for themes	The codes were then grouped into 'like' topics to organise them into patterns of meaning. From the codes, initial themes were constructed which represented a core idea/concept. This was a process that was repeated many times before an initial set of themes was decided upon which captured the richness of the data.	The final codes were printed from the excel spreadsheet onto paper and cut out. The codes were moved around by hand to create groups and patterns of data in order to generate initial themes. The initial themes were recorded on paper.
4	Reviewing themes.	These themes were then cross referenced with the areas that had been discussed by the co-researchers Focus Research Group as relevant to student well-being in school. The themes were then cross referenced with the knowledge and understanding of the well-being topic obtained from the literature	The themes and group of codes associated with each theme were recorded on paper.

		review, and with the theoretical underpinning of Freire's teachings.	
5	Defining, and naming themes.	The coding process on one transcript was completed by my two supervisors to replicate and verify my coding practice. The themes I had created were then discussed with my supervisors, after which I finally defined and named them.	The final themes and group of codes associated with each theme were recorded on paper.
6	Involved the writing up.	The analysis of findings chapter was constructed around the themes.	The final themes and group of codes were used to write the analysis of findings chapter. Data extracts, drawn from all transcripts, were chosen to be included which best represented the argument/s being made.

4.7 Reflections on Whether PAR Phase One Achieved Participatory Objectives

It is advocated that each participatory project is unique, there is no recipe for success, and it is necessary to use common sense in organising participation within an ethical framework (McIntyre, 2007). I used a CYP Participatory Model to enable reflection as to whether the participatory approach in Phase One enabled the power imbalance, between myself and the co-researchers, to be diminished as far as possible. The Participatory Models considered were Hill's (2006) Model, Aldridge's (2016) Model, and Hart's (1992) Model. In brief, Hill's (2006, p.73) model has five categories. These categories are 'latent participation' (being present), 'active participation', 'piecemeal participation', 'segregated participation', and fully integrated participation. The model of Aldridge (2016, p.156), details participants involvement as "passive, active and transformative" and describes a participant as "an object of study, as a subject of study, as an actor of study, or as a leading participant". I chose Hart's (1992) Ladder of

Participation, to reflect on my PAR approach, which outlines eight stages of participation as shown below.

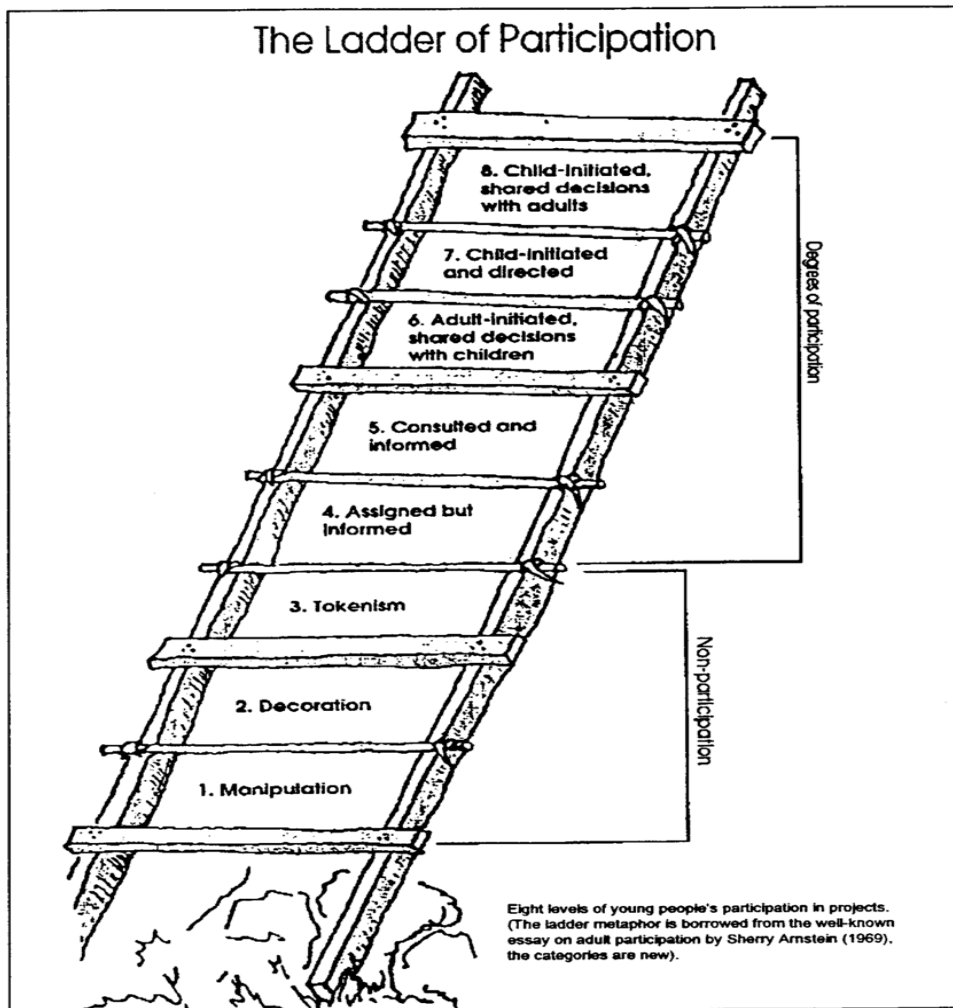


Figure 1: Hart's Ladder of Participation

Hart's (1992) Ladder of Participation was chosen because: the language used to describe CYP's involvement is clear; there is flexibility in that the top three stages can be regarded as participatory; the positionality of the lead researcher can be accommodated; and other authors have used this to judge PAR projects claims to be participatory. Researchers such as Halliday et al. (2019) used Hart's ladder to test the level of student participation in their study, which looked at the impact of a positive based education curriculum on student well-being. Others comment that "Hart's ladder can be seen as an example of having an impact and remaining relevant, albeit with many new insights being developed" (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015, p.146). The research of Smith et al. (2023) on co-production was also used to help the judgements about where to place my Phase One research on Hart's Ladder. This was because Smith et al. (2023) argue co-production can mean different things to people and is used differently in different

disciplinary contexts. For this study, their work was relevant because it aligns with their 'inside pathway' of equitable and experientially informed co-produced research. This was reflected in that students were invited as co-researchers in Phase One, because they had lived experience or knowledge essential to the research process. Also, collaborating with students in the research design aimed to achieve Freire's (2017) concept of 'humanisation' through viewing students as 'subjects' not 'objects'. The work of Smith et al. (2023) can be applied to a school setting, and they are cognisant of the challenges facing a researcher undertaking co-production in schools, where academic norms are not set up to facilitate co-production processes. They have developed principles and questions to pose to assess co-production efforts. These principles in relation to this study are now considered to evaluate where PAR Phase One was placed on Hart's (1992) Ladder.

Principle 1 considers that co-production is adequately resourced. This principle refers to remuneration which was not relevant in this case.

Principle 2 considers that power is shared through equitable partnerships which include those with relevant experiential knowledge, expertise, and assets.

This was achieved through me working with adolescent student partners who had 'lived experience' of well-being in school that was relevant to them. Ground rules were decided and agreed by the group which included how decisions would be made (Appendix P). Although the research aim and questions had been decided by me, the group was made aware how their work could influence policy and practice around well-being in the education sector. The group collectively made the decision on the methods used and the areas to be explored in Phase Two, the data collection phase. I planned what needed to be covered in the group sessions because time working as a group was finite, there was a lot to cover, and I was ultimately responsible and accountable for this research.

Within these constraints, the students often used their agency to decide the ways of working to best obtain the outcomes needed for that session. The group was allocated a room by the school for each session, and two different rooms were used in total. The students, within the constraints of size and furniture, decided the layout of the room which was conducive to the activities for that session. I found that the school hierarchical norms of ways of working were engrained. In a short space of time, it was difficult to totally eradicate the teacher-to-student relationship between myself and the group, and for students to feel they had agency without being encouraged to use it. This was highlighted in the first session when thinking about rules for the group to operate by. The students found this difficult with one student explaining that they were just usually given the

rules by the teacher, never had the chance to have an opinion, and found it difficult to think about what would be helpful (researcher field notes). The way key decisions were made by the group for Phase Two however, was as a collective, achieved through the Freirean teachings around genuine dialogue, which demonstrated an equitable sharing of power.

Principle 3 considers that different knowledge bases and contributions are respected and blended. Throughout the process, check points were used to ensure students felt their individual voice was being heard and in a way that they were comfortable to do so. This included ‘reflections’ at the beginning of each session and all students completed a midway private feedback sheet issued at the beginning of Session 5 (Appendix Q). All students responded that they felt comfortable and they had a good chance to say what they thought. In addition, students provided feedback at the end of Phase One. As one student reflected, “my views were valued and listened to by others” (Appendix R).

Principle 4 considers relationships are built and maintained on mutual, respect, dignity, and trust. This was achieved through myself in the first instance using my experiences of collaborative working and training as a teacher. This set the tone and working culture for the group maintained through establishing and adhering to ground rules for working. The relationships between all the co-researchers were respectful and trusting as these two participant comments typify, “It was good to discuss things in a group with a professional manner” and “I have learnt how to be more open minded and look into things I otherwise might have deemed irrelevant” (Appendix R).

Principle 5 considers diversity. This was partly achieved in the sense that traditionally students are a marginalised group because they are not involved in research in this way. Also, students had been given the opportunity to participate and their right not to be involved was respected.

In summary, PAR Phase One of the research did merit being participatory. After applying the judgement principles of Smith et al. (2023), the research can be placed at level six on Hart’s (1992) Ladder of Participation, ‘adult initiated shared decisions with children’. I enabled voice and agency through facilitation of genuine dialogue and decision making amongst the student co-researchers and myself, which was based on trust, dignity, transparency, avoiding tokenism. This was achieved whilst working within research governance, ethical frameworks, and hierarchical norms operating in schools. I felt that, in representing all the co-researchers in Phase Two, I obtained data on the areas the group wished to be explored. In addition, student co-researchers noted, they had benefitted from learning about the skills needed for research, developed skills of listening and communication, and felt empowered to be transformative. As one student wrote “I feel confident to talk to teachers about this topic to try and improve things” (Appendix R).

4.8 Reflexivity

Reflexivity is the position or stance the researcher takes in relation to economic, social, and political aspects of the research process (Cohen et al., 2007). As a qualitative researcher, my lived professional and personal experiences could not be kept apart from the meaning of the data collected (Creswell and Guetterman, 2019). My own positioning was that of an 'inbetweener' (Creswell, 2013; Milligan, 2016). I was an 'insider' in that I have my own subjective view of what well-being means and because of my role within the research, which in PAR Phase One was as a co-researcher in the Focus Research Group. In addition, my professional background, as a teacher, Headteacher and Her Majesty's Inspector of Schools made me an 'insider' because of my knowledge and experience of schools. I was an 'outsider' however, because, although I am a researcher, all the research participants have shaped their own reality through their experience of the school system (Patton, 2002). As the lead researcher responsible for this study, I am the observer of, and recorder of, the participants own reality. What is important was that my positionality was recognised throughout the different stages of this study. Through continually reflecting upon my potential biases, values, and assumptions, I did not try to minimise my positionality but embraced it for the benefit of the study.

To amplify this, a research journal was used to reflect on my own positionality during the research in both Phase One and Two, and throughout the coding and analysis process. Creswell (2013) alludes, a rounded view of a research topic is achieved by incorporating all voices. Indeed, my professional voice was part of the rationale for selecting the field of study in the first place and in choosing a participatory research design. I believe my knowledge and experience in the education sector enabled myself as a researcher to effectively contribute to the production and advancement of knowledge, facilitate the understanding and knowledge of my co-researchers, and communicate findings from this research to policy makers and practitioners. Thus, reflecting the sentiments of Heron and Reason (1997) who suggest, the outcome of cooperative enquiry should provide an understanding of the researchers' own practical experiences and knowledge (researchers as subjects) together with an acknowledgement of the research rights of the CYP in matters that affect them. The next section considers the ethics involved in the research for this study.

4.9 Research Ethics

It was the responsibility of myself to carry out the research according to the ethical codes of practice laid down by relevant bodies and institutions. An ethical piece of research must demonstrate rigour in the design, conduct, analysis, and reporting of the research (Cohen et al., 2007). Ethics were a vital consideration at the beginning of this study and arose at each stage of the research process. Ethical approval for Phase One and Two was sought and approved through the University of East Anglia (UEA), ensuring that this research was conducted in line with UEA policy and guidance. In addition, this research was carried out according to ethical codes of practice outlined by the British Educational Research Association (BERA) (2018).

Responsibilities of myself as the lead researcher went further than this and moral judgements were used to guide my practice. Ethics are described by Pring (2000, p.141) as “a philosophical enquiry into the basis of morals, whereas morals are concerned with what is a right way and what is a wrong way to go about things”. In addition, Groundwater-Smith et al. (2015) point out that ethical relationships are characterised by trust, respect and reciprocity. As this study was based upon PAR methodology, it was necessary to ensure that the students, working as co-researchers in the Focus Research Group were well supported, trained, and adhered to ethical guidelines and working practices. There are questions as to whether students and adults can work as ‘equals’, as adults are often in a powerful position to children but as Groundwater-Smith et al. (2015, p.39) suggest, “While it is not possible to completely efface asymmetries of power that may be attributable to status and maturity, what is essential in working with children and young people is to promote interactions that ensure justice and respect”.

4.9.1 Consent

Gaining informed consent from the participants was necessary for this study, and included students, parent/guardians of students, teachers, school staff, and the leaders of the institutions in which the research was conducted. As Cohen et al. (2007,) describe, informed consent is an essential “contractual relationship” between the “researcher and the researched”. Prior to the study, participants were provided with an Information Sheet about the study and a Participant Consent Form to sign, with the intention to ensure levels of readability and accessibility. This was an opt-in Consent Form, as students in the study were 16 years of age and under and in school. They needed to give individual consent as did their parent/guardian. In addition, as the participants were selected through schools, the Headteacher or equivalent needed to sign a

Consent Form on behalf of their institution. It was important to note that for this research, whilst it is recognised that CYP have the capacity to give “informed consent”, they also have the capacity and right to give “informed dissent” Aldridge (2016, p.36). Students had the right not to participate in this research (WHO, 2017, 2020). Once participating they were given the right to withdraw during the research up to the point the data had been anonymised. This was important because as the methodology was PAR, the data collection methods were more of a framework, the data collected unpredictable, and hence what was being consented too as a participant was a bit vaguer. Informed consent, therefore, was used as an ongoing process with the co-researcher group. This was verbal consent to the methods we used in the focus group which I recorded in my field notes. Silverman (2017, p.64) describes this as “process consent”.

4.9.2 Data Management and Storage

Participants were informed through the Participant Consent Form how their data would be managed and stored. All personal information was safeguarded according to the Data Protection Act 1998, and additions to this Act made in 2018 (Data Protection Act 2018, 2018).

Data collected was kept in my possession whilst on site and travelling between site and home. The data collected in Phase One was photographs of student work, recordings made on a mobile phone and my field notes. The data collected in Phase Two was recordings made on my mobile phone and my field notes. At home data was secured in a locked filing cabinet. Once data had been transcribed it was held on the UEA One Drive and was password protected on the cloud. At this point the original recordings were deleted. Such data was backed up on a memory stick, which was secured at home in a locked filing cabinet. Also, the data was backed up via the UEA servers after significant updates.

Written communication between myself and gatekeepers was via UEA email and stored in a specific folder on my UEA email account. Any verbal communication between myself and staff whilst on site was recorded in my field notes, which were kept in my possession whilst on site, and travelling between site and home. At home it was locked in a secure filing cabinet.

4.9.3 Anonymity and Confidentiality

To provide anonymity to participants a group number was used which refers to each final transcript. This was suggested as a preferred approach by the co-researcher Focus Research Group (researcher field notes). Participants were referred to as 'participant' for students and 'staff participant' for staff. The real names of participants or institutions were not disclosed in the final reporting. In applying rules of confidentiality, because some of the participants are the age of 16 years and under and recruited through schools, it was necessary to adhere to the Safeguarding Policies in the different institutions worked with. It was made clear to the participants that it may not be possible to keep some data collected as confidential and the term 'limited confidentiality' would be more appropriate due to safeguarding concerns. It was made explicit to both student and staff participants, about what is regarded as confidential and what would require being passed on to the relevant authorities.

4.9.4 Avoiding Harm and Bringing Benefits

As the lead researcher I was under obligation to act in ways that avoided harm (non-maleficence) and brought benefits (benefice) to the participants, and the research community. It was necessary as far as possible, to protect the mental health/well-being of all participants in both Phase One and Two. This was particularly important due to the sensitive nature of the topic being researched which was well-being. As part of this, students were provided with a safe and supportive environment in which to discuss, explore, and express opinions. Ground Rules were decided by the co-researcher Focus Research Group in PAR Phase One to support such an environment. Students were verbally debriefed at the beginning and/or end of each session in PAR Phase One, not only on the content covered but in a reminder about where they could access support about their own well-being. Within this research, gatekeepers were also responsible for maintaining the safety of their participants and their interests (Harcourt et al., 2011). This was largely through their safeguarding policies and related protocols/frameworks which as a researcher working in the school I followed. A register was taken at the beginning of each Phase One session and any absences reported to the relevant office. As schools are responsible for the welfare of their students and staff it was necessary to use their support systems after discussing potentially sensitive issues. This was particularly so if individuals were affected by the content and/or the manner, conduct, and behaviour of others in the group.

For PAR Phase One there were two named members of staff in the school, one of them was debriefed verbally, after each session I had with the co-researcher Focus Research Group. Also, as both members of staff were Safeguarding Designated Officers, any safeguarding concerns could be reported to them directly. In addition, co-researcher Focus Research Group sessions took place during the school day so if the well-being of student/s caused concern it was able to be addressed promptly through access to the school's support systems. Co-researchers were also provided with information and contact details about external sites which they could access outside of school. For Phase Two, the school's safeguarding procedures were followed. At the beginning or end of each data collection session with student and staff participants a check was made to ensure that if they were concerned about their well-being, they would know how to source internal and/or external help.

As a researcher it is also necessary to keep safe. Supervisor/s were notified of when and where my work in the field was taking place. A researcher's journal was used to note details of my journeys taken, hours worked and note any reflections regarding well-being. Through the monthly supervisor/s meetings, it was communicated how studies were progressing and supervisor/s were able to be contacted if there were immediate concerns regarding my studies and/or myself.

4.9.5 Trustworthiness

Any qualitative research needs to be evaluated for 'trustworthiness' as coined by Denzin and Lincoln (1994). Trustworthiness is assessed through the data, research process, and analysis. They assign five areas of focus for ensuring 'trustworthiness' which are credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and reflexivity (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994).

To this end, this study provided credibility through using appropriate research methods underpinned by theoretical frameworks which have been used in other comparable research studies. Through outlining the methods and providing documented evidence of the process, this study can be replicated by other researchers. Collecting data across three institutions ensured that the findings can be transferred to other contexts. Dependability was achieved through making sure the voices of the research participants were included and what they said was able to be genuine, reported fairly, and accurately. This was confirmed through checking and seeking clarity if something was not understood with co-researchers in Phase One and participants in Phase Two. It could be argued that working across three schools gave the best chance of achieving this because it negated any inferred criticism of school practice in any one school and enabled all my

participants to talk without 'fear or favour'. Finally, acknowledging my positioning, together with self-critical reflection reduced bias as far as possible.

4.10 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the philosophical approaches, methodology and methods used to conduct my study. It has described the context, the participants, how they were selected, and how the data was analysed. It considered the ethical implications and issues which were pertinent throughout this study. The next chapter focuses on the analysis of findings pertaining to the collection of data around student well-being.

5 Analysis of Findings

5.1 Introduction

This chapter considers the evidence pertinent to adolescent well-being, analysed through themes created via reflexive thematic analysis (RTA). The six themes generated include: student well-being; well-being experienced through physical and emotional safety; well-being experienced through teaching and learning; well-being experienced through pastoral care; well-being experienced through the institutional environment; and student voice and agency. Findings will be discussed primarily through the theoretical framework of Paulo Freire, with particular reference to the ‘banking’ model and critical pedagogy, with additional insights from other key researchers in the field. In the next chapter, (see chapter 6 – page 202) the findings will be concluded against the research questions.

5.2 Student Well-Being

This theme considers how well-being was defined by participants, considers the dimensions which are important to adolescent student well-being, and therefore, considers the relevance of school policy and practice around supporting students’ well-being.

5.2.1 In Pursuit of a Definition of Well-Being

Despite the amount of academic literature, debating the definition and measurement of well-being for children and young people (CYP), and finding an accepted consensus on a definition is hard to obtain (Dodge, 2012). This is because many attempts to express well-being focus on the separate dimensions of well-being rather than a definition (Alexandrova, 2017; Tiberius, 2018). Most models which define well-being for CYP are designed by adults and are therefore failing to recognise well-being from a young person’s perspective (Cook-Sather, 2020a; Rees and Main, 2016). Also, whilst there may be some common ground as to what is important to one’s well-being, young or old, well-being is a very personal thing (Robeyns, 2017; Unterhalter, 2016).

The data from this study overwhelmingly shows that both students and staff found providing a definition of well-being difficult (Focus Group 009; 012; 015; 016; Conversation 017; 019; 020; 021; 022) as typified by these responses:

Staff Participant

Yeah, it's difficult. Sorry. (Conversation 021)

Sarah Parker - Researcher

OK, first question, what do you understand by the term well-being? [pause]

Sarah Parker - Researcher

What does well-being mean? [pause]

Sarah Parker - Researcher

What would students understand by the term well-being? [pause]

Participant

...like, your mental health and how that you're doing, like, as a person. (Focus Group 012)

The pauses could indicate that student participants in the focus group did not know what to say. Student and staff participants were not asked to elaborate as to why they found it difficult to define well-being, but it could be inferred that well-being is a broad term, multi-faceted, different for everyone, and therefore providing a generic meaning is elusive. Such an argument aligns with authors who discuss the difficulties of providing a definition of well-being (Alexandrova, 2017; Dodge, 2012; Gennings et al., 2021), and that without an accepted definition or meaning of well-being it can lead to a lack of sufficient understanding as to what it is. The significance of the findings for this study is that if well-being is not sufficiently understood it becomes difficult for schools to ensure their practice is as targeted and effective as it can be (Cigman, 2017; Thorburn, 2020).

Findings also indicated that the term well-being is used interchangeably with mental health. Several student and staff participants used the word 'mental health' as an alternative term for well-being or linked it strongly to well-being (Focus Group 008; 009; 012; 015; Conversation 017; 020; 022) as typified by the following response:

Participant

I feel like it's just how you feel mentally. (Focus Group 012)

When the term well-being is understood as mental health this is more than just semantics. Keller (2020) argues that well-being and mental health, whilst linked, are distinct and that one can have

a positive mental health and a low well-being and vice versa. The connection made, in this study, between the two terms may be partly due to theorists who claim that positive mental health is well-being (Huppert and So, 2013). Also, institutions and organisations relevant to the lives of CYP define positive mental health as a state of well-being (DfE, 2021b; WHO, 2022). The work of schools contributes to this through using generic approaches to support student well-being. These approaches are largely based on positive psychology which takes positive mental health as the central theme of the approach (Halliday et al., 2019; Kern and Wehmeyer, 2021). This connection is exemplified by WHO (1948, p.100) stating, “Health is a state of complete, physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”. Also, the DfE determines well-being as a noun, stating, “Well-being is a state of complete physical and mental health that is characterised by high quality social relationships” (2021a, p.2). They also comment in their guidance that schools and colleges, via their DfE (2021a) Guidance Document ‘The Well-being Charter’, should use their working definition as a basis for discussion as to what well-being means for their organisation. The Charter does not define well-being as a sole entity but links it with health, in particular mental health, and provides a framework that outlines good practice formulated by range of experts, although this does not include CYP as experts in their own well-being (DfE, 2021a).

The problem with the variance in the language used in connection with providing a definition and meaning of well-being, is it has implications for how well-being is understood, interpreted, and addressed in schools. One staff response indicated that they had used the DfE Guidance Document which suggests that well-being practice in schools could/should be linked to a definition which includes mental health:

Staff Participant

So, we have to support people in different ways. If I start with staff, we signed up to something called the DfE Well-Being Charter a few years ago and that’s a kind of framework which outlines good practice in regard to well-being in education. (Conversation 010)

Some students use the word ‘health’ or ‘physical health’ to describe the term well-being or as a word associated with well-being. This suggests that well-being is more than ‘mental health’ but ‘multi-faceted health’ for them (Focus Group 008; 009; 011; 014; 015):

Participant

Like your physical, emotional and like, your social health. (Focus Group 014)

However, the findings demonstrate that schools' prevailing view is that well-being is more about mental health. This can be understood by applying Freire's (2017) 'banking' model of education to demonstrate how the traditional power dynamics dominate the discourse around a definition of student well-being. Freire (2017) suggests that students cannot liberate themselves from oppression but require government directives to mandate inclusive environments to address their oppression and marginalisation. The government however, via the DfE, offers guidance to schools around a definition of well-being that does not include the input of CYP and so the very body that Freire suggests should be liberating children can be seen to be part of the incarceration. This is because the power of the government, exercised through depositing their view of well-being on schools through the 'banking' model, marginalises students, rendering them powerless and without agency. This is further problematic because of the accountability system, Ofsted, which is used by the government to judge school performance. The reporting by Ofsted includes a judgement on the area of Personal Well-being (Ofsted, 2019, 2024). Schools need to demonstrate their work in this area, and aligning with the guidance provided by the DfE would in their eyes appear to be logical and pragmatic. This is because anything less than a 'good' Ofsted grading potentially has negative implications for both staff and student recruitment and can adversely impact the standing of the school in the community. It can restrict a school's ability to access other opportunities provided by DfE which bring additional funding and professional development opportunities for staff such as Specialist School and Teaching School status.

A further point to consider, around the interchangeability of language and terms surrounding a definition of well-being, is that if well-being and mental health are linked, is the term mental health clear in its definition or understanding? Findings from this study suggested that, just as well-being and mental health lead to confusion, the term mental health may be also confused with mental illness. An example is around the use of the word 'anxiety' which many participants used in connection with well-being (Focus Group 011; 013; 015; Conversation 010; 016; 022). A lack of clarity in understanding the terms used brings into focus the appropriateness of the type of support to help the well-being of students. Schools could be inadvertently hindering student well-being because the support is not targeting the right need. This was evidenced by the following conversation which highlights the point that anxiety is a medical condition, requiring medical treatment, whereas being anxious is a normal feeling:

Staff Participant

So, I think there is a lot of self-diagnosis that takes place. So, I think the students, parents, yeah there is a lot of buzz words. It affects my mental health. It creates anxiety. I can't cope

with it. I need to take self-care. I want a mental health break. My mental health is not good today.

Sarah Parker - Researcher

And do you think students understand what that means?

Staff Participant

I don't think they necessarily do. So, my question back to parents is, there is a fundamental difference in my view, of someone who suffers from anxiety versus someone who has anxious feelings, because having anxious feelings is completely normal. (Conversation 017)

These findings are in tune with other authors who suggest that the term mental health and mental illness are often blurred (Billington et al., 2022; Patalay and Fitzsimons, 2016). This is significant in that, yet another term is used in association with well-being which can add another layer of confusion, distorting the boundaries between a school having a holistic approach to well-being and a medical and psychiatric approach to mental illness. Mental illness is distinct from mental health as it requires diagnosis and specialist intervention. Such support is necessary for CYP suffering distress and trauma, but supporting mental illness is not the same as supporting mental health. If mental health is a state subject to the individual, they are not suffering from a medical illness or deficiencies that need to be addressed with a medical approach. It matters that well-being, mental health, and mental illness are different and the definition of them is different as this affects how the school supports well-being, and in how students may be affected. If the terms are confused, are schools addressing or indeed measuring well-being or mental health or mental illness? Measurement indicators can make a valuable contribution to the discussion of adolescent well-being, however, for that contribution to be meaningful, measurement indicators must meet tests of reliability and validity, underpinned by an explicit definition of well-being (Podsakoff et al., 2016).

The problem is that although several students recognised that well-being is multi-faceted, the staff view was less broad with well-being tending to become subsumed into mental health. Freire emphasises the point that education is never neutral and what students are taught serves a political agenda which is imposed through the 'banking' model. In this case, schools and teachers are accountable to a system that makes them perform to meet standards, losing their integrity and 'raison d'être' (Ball, 2003). The argument for this study is that in a Freirean sense, it is not only CYP but schools who are the 'oppressed'. Freire (2017) proposes critical pedagogy as a collective

process to challenge the ‘banking’ model of education. In the scenario of this study, this can be applied to schools, who are the receivers of knowledge. This knowledge about well-being from the government, which clearly links well-being with mental health and in some instances suggests well-being *is* mental health, is subsequently ‘banked’ and applied accordingly. Through ‘dialogue’, schools need to reach a ‘critical consciousness’ to change the reality for them, and in turn to change the reality for their students in how they as schools better support student well-being (Freire, 2017). Thus, having reached a better understanding of what well-being means for their students, school leaders would be able to use their voice and agency with government representatives around a more relevant definition of well-being which could be transformational in terms of how students are supported in school.

Some authors have suggested that when students are involved in conceptualising well-being, results are often descriptions or lists of what impacts their well-being (Bourke and Geldens, 2007; Gillett-Swan, 2014; Navarro et al., 2017). Without a clear definition of student well-being this study contends that more attention needs to be paid to those very descriptions and lists focussing on what adolescent students themselves perceive as relevant and important to their well-being. In turn, these may serve as more useful to support students in what matters to them, rather than what the adults think matters to them. The next sub-section, therefore, considers the dimensions and concepts of well-being that adolescent students stated were important to them living well.

5.2.2 What Constitutes a Positive Student Well-Being

This sub-section considers what participants believe to be important dimensions of student well-being, what differences there were between student and staff perceptions, and the significance of these differences in how schools support the well-being of their students.

Student participant responses revealed that they find it easier to describe what well-being feels like rather than providing a definition, demonstrating they can describe the lived experience of what it feels like to be well:

Participant

It’s easier to know what it feels like rather than give a definition. (Focus Group 013)

This finding aligns with authors who have suggested that many attempts of expressing a definition have focused on the dimensions of well-being, aspects or features associated with a sense of well-being, rather than proffering a definition (Bharara et al., 2019; Ryff, 1989; Soutter et al., 2014).

Historically, philosophers have tended to categorise well-being under the headings of hedonistic well-being and eudemonic well-being (Tiberius, 2018). Researchers have theorised well-being as having components of the hedonistic approach such as happiness, positivity, absence of negativity, and satisfaction with one's lot (Diener, 2006). In addition, components of the eudemonic approach comprise personal development, growth and self-realisation, the extent to which one is fully functioning (Ryff, 1989). Student responses aligned with both theoretical categories of well-being. These fit the hedonistic approach:

Participant

Like how happy you are. (Focus Group 012)

Participant

They're comfortable in themselves as a person. (Focus Group 013)

Also, the eudemonic approach:

Participant

Like confidence. Like putting yourself out there. So, making new friends. Like do sports all that sort of stuff. (Focus Group 014)

Conceptualised academic models of well-being have been derived from the theoretical models of hedonistic and eudemonic well-being (see section 2.3 – page 9). Most student participants in this study emphasised positive dimensions as important to their well-being. Students cited: happiness (Focus Group 012; 013; 014); feeling comfortable (Focus Group 009; 012; 013; 014); enjoyment (Focus Group 013); confidence to engage with people and opportunities (Focus Group 014); social skills/attitude such as consideration and kindness (Focus Group 015); and positive relationships with others (Focus Group 011; 013; 014). These responses are in line with researchers who identify that CYP's well-being is made up of many positive dimensions (Kern et al., 2015; McLeod and Wright, 2015; Moore, 2022). Although the use of dimensions, described slightly differently by different authors, make it hard to draw comparisons between research studies into well-being (Keller, 2020), the dimensions students mentioned in this study are akin to those cited as important in other well-being research with CYP. These are dimensions such as happiness, engagement, hope, respect, and relationships (Graham et al., 2016; Navarro et al., 2017; Parker and Levinson, 2018; Waters and Higgins, 2022).

The dimensions of well-being mentioned by students included factors like feelings, tastes, emotion, and mood, suggesting that well-being is subjectively experienced:

Participant

How you feel. (Focus Group 015)

Participant

Like your emotions. (Focus Group 013)

Although students in this study, in line with other research, identified common dimensions relative to well-being, they highlight it is also 'how' these dimensions are internalised and experienced by an individual which provides the subjectivity around well-being. Christopher (1999) notes that the individual determines their own standards of well-being against which to compare their life, which will be different for each individual, and hence well-being is unique to an individual as highlighted by this Focus Group dialogue:

Sarah Parker - Researcher

Do you think you every one of you has the same view of well-being or would that be personal to you and could be different?

Participant

Yeah, very different.

Participant

It would be very different. So, everyone gets brought up differently, with like a different back story if you know what I mean.

Participant

Everyone has different ways of living and stuff, so everyone's well-being would be different.

Sarah Parker - Researcher

Yeah.

Participant

I also think its dependent on the situation you are currently in and what you have just come out of.

Sarah Parker - Researcher

Right. Yeah. So, it can change over time. Is that what you're saying?

Participant

Yeah. The definition is fluid. (Focus Group 014)

When attention turns towards the staff responses, there are some differences as to what they believe is important to student well-being. Interestingly, staff were a lot less likely to comment on the positive dimensions of well-being than the students, commenting more on negative dimensions, particularly how such dimensions are reflected in students' presenting behaviours. Behaviours that do not align with school norms are viewed as concerning and hence, used as evidence that students have a poor well-being, as suggested by the following staff response regarding attendance:

Staff Participant

So, the focus [of well-being] is predominately on attendance Because we do think lack of education or lack of attendance can mean a form of neglect. It's educational neglect. (Conversation 017)

The findings demonstrate clarity from students about what the important dimensions of well-being are, but there are key differences to the ones staff deem are important. This is significant because it goes a long way to possibly explain why there is a mismatch between the work schools undertake to support student well-being and the limitations of its effectiveness. Also, what arose from the data, is that students perceive that staff do not understand student well-being and how bad it can be (Focus Group 008; 009; 013), as typified by the following student response:

Participant

I don't really think that teachers or staff see it like students see it and students see it a lot worse and staff, I don't think they see it as well. (Focus Group 009)

This aligns with authors who argue that there are likely to be differences in the meaning that adults and CYP attach to well-being (Alexandrova, 2017; Ben-Arieh et al., 2005; Fattore et al., 2016; Watson et al., 2012). The responses demonstrated that a meaning of well-being devised without involving CYP may not be the best way to understand CYP's well-being (Cook-Sather, 2020a; Watson et al., 2012). This was endorsed by both students and staff:

Participant

I think they just like try and do what's happening now [in terms of well-being], because they can try and help but they don't really know, 'cause they're adults aren't they. (Focus Group 013)

Staff Participant

I would like to think so [in relation to having the same understanding of well-being as a student] but I think it is sometimes hard for an adult to relate to how a child feels. (Conversation 020)

In response to this difference in understanding, some researchers stress the importance of a multi-informant approach to address inconsistent results between CYP's views of their own well-being, and parents and teachers' views of CYP's well-being (Tobia et al., 2019). They recommend that as self-reporting has validity, there is a place for teacher proxy reports feeding into research into relationships and behaviour of a student. Ben-Arieh et al. (2012) advocates that the study of adolescent well-being should take account of living conditions and objective measures of their well-being, perceptions, evaluations and aspirations of their own lives, and the perceptions, evaluations and aspirations of other relevant social agents including parents and teachers. Others argue that adolescent views should only be taken with due weight and should not prevail on every issue (Gennings et al., 2021; Lundy et al., 2011). Also suggested by MacKenzie et al. (2011), would be that experts should only be consulted in addition to the relevant population whose well-being is being considered, which is the basis of co-production work. Applying these views suggests that adult experts should be consulted at the research design stage and adolescents at the data collection stage. This is because consulting experts first enables better insight and understanding into the responses given by CYP (Lundy et al., 2011).

This study would strongly argue against this 'adult experts first approach' as the findings demonstrated significant differences in how students and staff perceive the dimensions important for student well-being. As schools are hierarchical by nature, such an approach would allow the predominant view of the adults to prevail. Students would be reduced to commenting on adult derived concepts and models of well-being which is highly likely to limit students' voice and agency in their own well-being. All students have similarities and differences in their shared histories that impact on their views and should be explored (Ben-Arieh et al., 2012). Watson et al. (2012) observe that educational discourses around well-being tend to lessen individual responsibility for well-being. As seen in student responses, having autonomy over your own well-being is seen as important, as was being able to feel you have voice and 'agency' over decisions affecting you:

Participant

They're happy [reference to someone perceived to have a good well-being] and do what they want to do. (Focus Group 013)

Participant

You're feeling comfortable to vocalise your opinions and like your state. (Focus Group 014)

The view that CYP know more about their reality than their teachers is supported by Beckett (2013), but he adds that teachers have the language to understand it. Also, by Giroux (1983) who notes that education should recognise the experiences children bring to school, in their own 'voices'. In turning to the thoughts of Freire (2001), he believed that teachers must study and be competent in their field. Firstly, competent in understanding that students and adults are likely to have differences in what they view as important to students in well-being. Secondly, that teachers should be competent in understanding 'what' those differences are. This can be achieved through Freire's critical pedagogy where through 'dialogue' the 'oppressor'/'oppressed' relationship can change and be potentially more helpful in supporting student well-being. Freire (2017) talks about 'context' describing the foundations of liberative teaching as valuing and acknowledging a CYP's lived experience and teachers learning from those they teach. This sentiment is noted by one staff participant:

Staff Participant

I think for me it's things like, if I'm in a meeting with a parent and a child, and I can see the child is quite despondent. And they are not as engaging as they would normally be. Understanding what's happening at home and what we're seeing in school and trying to figure out what are the variables that are affecting the well-being. (Conversation 017)

Consideration is given in the next sub-section to how schools understanding of well-being influences their approach through policy and practice.

5.2.3 What Informs a Schools' Approach to Well-Being

Staff in schools are responsible for implementing policy and practice around well-being, and their understanding and interpretation of what well-being means for students will most likely prevail. Many authors argue that the range of constructs associated with well-being and the diversity of dimensions has led to a bewildering evidence base upon which schools set their policy and

practice (Diener, 2006; Weare, 2015). Several researchers suggest that any definition of well-being reflects the discipline or academic field one is working in (Humphrey and Wigglesworth, 2016; McLeod and Wright, 2015). This study contends that this is where much of the problem lies because the dominant conceptualisation, used by schools to understand what well-being means, seems to be based upon a medical model where well-being is seen as an absence of something. Staff in this study are working in the field of education, yet the staff meaning of well-being is derived more from the stance of health and medical professions. The significance is that in the medical arena there is much less debate about the positive determinants of a good state of health and more on the challenges of a health condition that need to be addressed (Lee Duckworth et al., 2005). Staff working in schools have been exposed to language and understanding of well-being linked to mental health or mental illness, and it is therefore not surprising that a medical orientation has been adopted in policy and practice around well-being (Billington et al., 2022). The result is that students view well-being as something in deficit, something to be supported, and something they need help with, as reflected in this Focus Group dialogue:

Sarah Parker (EDU - Postgraduate Researcher)

Talk to me about the various things that go on that you think support your well-being?

Participant

I don't know what they're called. You know the people that you can, like, talk to that are like...

Participant

Pastoral.

Participant

I don't know who they are. They're like, 4 women,

Participant

Deputy heads?

Participant

I'm not sure....

Participant

No, no. The people who actually help us, I've forgotten.

Participant

They're, like, mental health... Yeah. Mental health practitioners.

Participants

Yeah. They're the people that came in, for the well-being ambassadors.

Sarah Parker (EDU - Postgraduate Researcher)

Are they school staff or are they people who come into school, do you think?

Participant

Come into school.

Sarah Parker (EDU - Postgraduate Researcher)

Come into school. Yeah. And are they here all the time or would you have to make an appointment?

Participant

I don't think they are here all the time.

Participant

You'd have to make an appointment. (Focus Group 008)

What is also significant is that when the generic question was asked about what happens in school that supports well-being, most students began responding with well-being was something that required support from others:

Sarah Parker - Researcher

So, can you talk to me about the things that happen in school that support student's well-being? What is going on?

Participant

There's a lot of like life coaches and like therapists, like different like people that are specialised in different things to help people that have different needs.

And I think the school normally can, but for most people, they can tell when someone needs it or they can ask for it to get the help they need.

Sarah Parker - Researcher

OK. So, the school would sort of see what's going on and suggest it or an individual person could ask for that. Yeah. OK. Anything else? [pause] (Focus Group 012)

If the prevalent staff view in schools is that of viewing well-being from a medical standpoint, as something that needs to be made better through addressing the negatives, practice may not be inclusive or as effective in focussing on the well-being for all. Freire (2017) warns, if there is no or limited understanding of the reasons for behaviour and distress (in this case well-being) there would certainly be harm. The medical model of mental illness, which seeks to identify a problem, diagnose the problem, and provide medical treatment to the problem is not appropriate for the

vast majority of students in schools. Many will have no issues, and some may have mental health issues which affects their well-being, but not a mental illness (Billington et al., 2022). Freire believes a situation needed to be fully understood before an attempt can be made to address it. (Freire and Macedo, 2005). This student response agreed with that sentiment:

Participant

I don't know. I feel like everyone sort of has like a different definition of what it is. So other people might say different things and other people might say similar things. (Focus Group 012)

The problem with the dominance of this medical model is that it does not align with students' perceptions because they recognise the positive dimensions of well-being, whereas more staff recognise the negative dimensions of well-being. In addition, staff participants view certain behaviours as symptoms of a negative well-being which need to be supported, addressed, and improved. In a Freirean sense, this suggests there is a lack of staff and student engagement with, or opportunity to engage in, a process of mutual learning where both teachers and students contribute to construction of knowledge. Freire's (2017) critical pedagogical approach, with its focus on 'dialogue' exploring what well-being means, could lead to a better understanding and approach to adolescent student well-being.

Freire's concept of 'dialogue', between staff and students, can be applied to consider the effectiveness of the positive education approach delivered by schools. Many students (Focus Group 008; 009; 012; 013; 014) referenced well-being and mental health aspects delivered through Personal, Social and Health Education programmes (PSHE). Some students, however, thought more should be done in this area (Focus Group 008; 009). It was particularly noted that experts from outside the school were beneficial to support in-house school programmes. This was because often they had 'lived experiences' which provided a well-being context:

Participant

I think it's better when they have like sometimes, they'll bring someone in and they'll share their experience with that issue.

Sarah Parker - Researcher

Right. OK.

Participant

That's kind of better because you can kind of see, like a genuine real side of it rather than just being taught it.

Sarah Parker - Researcher

How often do you get these people coming in?

Participant

Rarely.

Participant

Yeah.

Participant

Not very often.

Participant

Once or twice a year maybe. (Focus Group 013)

In line with the student's thoughts, staff commented on the use of worksheets and lack of training with PSHE delivery, which highlights concern over the effectiveness of prevention-based strategies favoured by schools, such as Seligman's (2011) PERMA theory (Conversation 021; 022). Freire sought to strike a balance between the traditional function of the teacher, directive teaching through the 'banking' model and dialogic teaching in which CYP self-teach and become advocates of justice against structural oppression (Shor and Freire, 1987). The following evidence showed how crucial interaction between staff and students is as a starting point to understand well-being and increase knowledge:

Participant

Because they're not living in that position, so they don't know what it feels like.

Participant

No because they could have like a rough idea of it but not like actually know what it is.
(Focus Group 013)

Freire (2017, p.73) advocates that the 'oppressed' without dialogue "... accept the passive role imposed on them" and "... the more they tend simply to adapt to the world as it is and to the fragmented view of reality deposited on them". In this case, schools would need to employ critical

pedagogy through creating the spaces for critical conversation around well-being. Students can then engage in meaningful discussion, voice their opinions, and challenge the assumptions that staff have around student well-being.

The problem here, for those seeking to support well-being in schools, is that well-being is not a neutral term. It lacks its own adjectives that describe a presence or absence of a state, and it lacks the opportunity to be prefaced with an adverb to imply a spectrum of state. If well-being as a noun is compared with happiness, you can be happy or unhappy, but you cannot be unwell-being. You can be on a spectrum of happiness, for example, very happy but you cannot be very well-being (Keller, 2020). The reason this is significant for this study is that a subjective state of a student is more difficult for a school to support, because it is based on emotions, feelings, and mood which are very individual. Well-being as a state is difficult to measure because it is a nebulous term (Simons and Baldwin, 2021). It is potentially easier to support a narrative of well-being that holds the view of student well-being as objective and tangible, that can be fixed or made better. This narrative renders a reliability of measurement upon which to formulate policy, practice, and demonstrate your accountability to those holding the power (Liddle and Carter, 2015).

With staff focused more on negative dimensions of well-being and the associated behaviour risks it becomes easier for well-being in schools to become operationalised. This means that well-being becomes defined as something that can be measured so that it can be observed and quantified. This is evidenced by the following staff responses where well-being is in deficit, an intervention is needed by an adult to ‘deal’ with it and make it better, with the implication that the effectiveness of the intervention on improving well-being can be measured:

Staff Participant

I think there are some clear areas of well-being where’s there’s clearly something not right with the students and they need help, whatever it is and whatever is the appropriate intervention. (Conversation 018)

Staff Participant

So, I think with this school, I think the main two ways that the students are able to get their well-being dealt with would be through the councillor and the behaviour mentor. (Conversation 020)

Operationalising well-being as something that can be measured serves the educational appetite for performativity (Ball, 2012; Sellman and Buttarazzi, 2020). Performativity creates a culture that praises what can be measured and ignores what cannot be measured, even though it might be

important. The danger for students on the receiving end of such measurement of well-being is that “Measuring well-being like a pathology limits ambitions to surviving and not becoming unwell with no ability to ensure thriving” (Simons and Baldwin, 2021, p.984). Such an operationalised approach to well-being has prompted some authors to comment that the resultant therapeutic language and culture in schools around well-being is inappropriate and is not conducive to enabling well-being for all students (Ecclestone and Hayes, 2009). Thomas and Loxley (2007, p.55) propose that diagnosis and intervention confine the child in a “cocoon of professional help”. There is a growing body of literature regarding the extent to which well-being should inform day to day practice in schools (Brown and Dixon, 2020; Norwich et al., 2022). This is because the current approach of schools to addressing well-being is possibly inadvertently causing more harm, because well-being has become something to be fixed and a goal, in itself (O’Toole and Simovska, 2022).

5.2.4 Conclusion

The analysis of findings from the participants indicate there is no clear definition of well-being. Conceptualisations and models of well-being are often linked to health, particularly mental health, and sometimes the term well-being is undifferentiated from mental health, often regarded as one and the same. This has implications for how well-being is understood by schools which will inform their policies and practices.

All participants found it easier to describe what they felt constituted well-being. The findings from the students indicated that well-being is subjective, containing elements of both hedonistic and eudemonic well-being, positive dimensions are most relevant to their well-being, and these include happiness, enjoyment, and feelings of satisfaction. The findings show that there are differences in staff perceptions of student well-being, with staff viewing well-being as less subjective and more objective. Staff perceive well-being more as an absence of negative dimensions, identified by them through presenting behaviours, and there is less focus on the importance of positive dimensions. This again has implications because student well-being is being determined by others; staff, who prioritise an objective approach to well-being, decide what is best for students. Ultimately this does not effectively support the students view of well-being which is subjective and determined by them.

It appears that well-being in schools has become something to be operationalised, is viewed as being in deficit, is something to be made better, and where improvements can be easily measured. The following student thoughts encapsulated this:

Participant

I think there's a sense of well-being, people think that it's like a, a thing which can be controlled, but I don't think you can directly like, I think, it just depends on the person and some people you can help but I think other people where as much as you try helping them, they won't get better with that help they need to do it by themselves. You know, I think the idea of well-being, it's not like a set guideline, it's a really different thing for everyone.
(Focus Group 014)

The next sections will consider how students experience well-being through the climate of a school environment.

5.3 Well-Being Experienced Through Physical and Emotional Safety

This section considers the importance of feeling physically and emotionally safe to student well-being. This will be explored through the positive and/or negative impact of student-to-student relationships on student well-being. Particular attention will be given to the impact of bullying, how bullying is understood, and the effectiveness of school policy and practice around bullying. Many of the student focus groups referenced bullying as a particularly significant negative influence upon student well-being.

5.3.1 How Do Positive Relationships Impact Well-Being

The importance of having friends in secondary school has been identified as a positive dimension of well-being (Leversen et al., 2012). In their study, Butler et al. (2022) looked at how supportive relationships can be a key protective factor against poor mental well-being and found that children with low peer support in school are six times more likely to experience low mental well-being. The data from this study concurred with similar findings indicating that student-to-student friendships can affect well-being in both a negative and positive way, as this Focus Group dialogue illustrates:

Sarah Parker - Researcher

Yeah. OK. OK. Other things that go on that help or support well-being or don't help and support well-being?

Participant

Friendships. They can be like brutal if you've had an argument or they can help you get better and help your well-being.

Sarah Parker - Researcher

Yeah.

Sarah Parker - Researcher

What do you think tends to happen more the helpful bit or the other bit?

Participant

I think it depends what kind of friends you have.

Participant

Yeah.

Participant

Like 'cause, if you get into sort of a bad friend group, they're probably not gonna be that supportive and they'll gonna stress you out more. But if you've got like, good, like, decent friends, then they'll help you and support you.

Sarah Parker - Researcher

Right. And how do you know that those friends are going to be of the supportive type? It's tricky navigating all that.

Participant

Well, you have to get to know them first, which will take a bit of time. And if they like lie, they're not trustworthy, then you'll sort of get the idea they're not a good influence on you.

Sarah Parker - Researcher

Yeah, ok. So, it's about building that over a period of time.

Participant

Yeah, so you know you can trust them. (Focus Group 013)

This follows the sentiments of other researchers who have found that student-to-student connectedness built on trust and help is key to students' self-esteem and well-being (Bradshaw, 2016). Self-esteem is viewed as important for positive relationships because high self-esteem is associated with confidence, trust, and emotional stability important for relationship building. Williams and Guerra (2007) found that CYP who perceived their friends as trustworthy, caring, and helpful have significantly lower incidences of bullying.

Staff indicated they deal with friendship issues between students and these issues are becoming more prevalent:

Staff Participant

I think some students are kind to each other, but I think the majority are not. Yeah, I think the majority are not. (Conversation 020)

Staff Participant

There are more friendship problems to sort out now. Students fall out more over everything. (Conversion 021)

What is interesting is that staff were less likely to suggest that creating the conditions for friendships to occur and be sustained is an active responsibility of the school. This suggests a lack of knowledge about the importance of student-to-student relationships to well-being. This is not only in their own right but as a protective measure against factors which can lead to a negative well-being such as peer harassment and bullying. It could also indicate that staff do not see this as their responsibility unless students are experiencing a 'deficit' in friendships when they would likely intervene:

Staff Participant

You know I'm lucky, I've got some really good students in my form. Some of them I know I've overheard them asking their peers for help. (Conversation 018)

What is evident from the student responses is they spoke more about the negative rather than positive effects of student-to-student relationships on their well-being. This could be because humans are psychologically more influenced by negative information in most domains of their life, rather than positive information (Baumeister et al., 2001). It could be argued, however, that negative influences from peers or adults do have a more significant effect on students' well-being, as this staff response suggested:

Staff Participant

I can educate as much as I can but if you have a negative comment that goes against it from outside the school building it undoes all of that work (Conversation 018).

The next sub-section now gives particular attention to the negative aspects of student-to-student relationships, particularly the impact of harassment and bullying on student well-being.

5.3.2 How Do Negative Relationships Impact Well-Being

The data indicates that bullying is referred to by students as one of the major ways student-to-student relationships negatively affect student well-being. (Focus Group 008; 009; 011; 013; 014). Authors have described bullying as an action that is repeated over time to inflict physical and/or emotional harm on an individual (Olweus, 2010; Walton, 2004). Definitions which focus purely on the characteristics of the one doing the bullying, the perpetrator, and the one on the receiving end, the victim, are criticised. This is because it is argued that such definitions do not fully encompass a contextual, sociological, and ideological understanding (Swearer and Espelage, 2010). Many regard bullying as a social process where an individual in a less powerful position is deliberately harassed or excluded by other students (Thornberg, 2015).

Bullying can be defined as direct or indirect. Direct bullying can be classified as physical and verbal. Indirect or relational bullying can include actions such as gossiping, spreading rumours, silent treatment, and destroying reputation, which negatively affects student well-being (Wojcik, 2018). This Focus Group dialogue testified to this:

Participant

People would be happier because there would be if, as the school had better well-being compared to here, I feel. Yeah, people would be more happy. Somethings actually go around that that makes people actually feel more upset, like bullying sometimes or teasing.

Participant

Rumours.

Participant

Yeah, rumours.

Participant

I feel like everyone would be a lot more confident because they don't have to be conscious about people making fun of them.

Sarah Parker - Researcher

Is that something that you think is affected by social media?

Participant

Yeah.

Participant

I don't use social media, but I do feel like I am being judged much for a lot of things. The examples not for me, but like people, like what they wear like, how they act and in certain situations.

Sarah Parker - Researcher

And do you think that different from when you started school, you know has that sort of been something that you've noticed increasing? Has it always been there?

Participant

Increasing. (Focus Group 009)

Cyberbullying occurs in virtual forms, such as through social media platforms and texting (Thomas et al., 2017). Some argue that cyberbullying problematises the notion that bullying is an action that is repeated because something can be posted once to the victim but can be shared online by numerous others (Grigg, 2010). Although there are similarities and differences in the conceptualising of bullying and cyberbullying, the general outcome for those individuals on the receiving end is harm to well-being and mental health (Parris et al., 2020).

Bullying is detrimental to student well-being because if unchallenged it can lead to experiences of sadness, loneliness, lack of self-worth, leading to anxiety and depression (Wojcik and Flak, 2021). High self-esteem is linked to a positive sense of well-being because it gives you a sense of worth, confidence, and coping skills to face challenges. The evidence from students shows overwhelmingly that bullying has a negative influence on student well-being and mental health (Focus Group 009; 011; 013; 014). The following response indicated the type of problems that can occur which include non-attendance at school and depression:

Participant

But like [for] some people bullying others can really impact their mental health and well-being. They can like, not come into school, make them, like, really depressed and upset. (Focus Group 011)

This reflects the findings of researchers who have linked the impact of bullying to well-being in CYP. In their study, Wojcik and Flak (2021) conducted face to face interviews with victims, and

they found that students who are subjected to bullying at school depicted themselves as unpopular, unhappy, and unsafe. Others have found that the long-term impact of bullying can lead to anxiety, depression, absenteeism, substance abuse, suicidal ideation, and lower academic standards (Bond et al., 2001; DeLara, 2016).

5.3.3 Why Bullying Occurs

Individual led perspectives consider the influence of an individual's characteristics on bullying (Thomas et al., 2017). As this staff response demonstrated:

Staff Participant

I think it comes down to what was peer on peer, child on child abuse, like those basic things not, not just physical abuse ... mental well-being, bullying, name calling. That basic stuff. You know, children can be absolutely brilliant creatures and then you can have that the most horrible elements explored through your this and you're that. (Conversation 018)

There are different theories posited offering explanations as to why bullying occurs. In their critical review of key theoretical frameworks around bullying Thomas et al. (2017) found that it is both systems led and individually led. System led perspectives are derived from social ecological theory and group socialisation theory and consider the influence of the environment, family, school, peer, and community on bullying (Swearer and Espelage, 2010). In this current study, most student responses alluded to systems led perspectives, particularly describing how peers play a significant part in shaping the behaviour of individuals leading to harassment and bullying (Focus Group 009; 011; 014). This Focus Group dialogue explains how systems led bullying operates:

Participant

I'd say bullying mostly happens because like most of the kids in our Year, we're like stereotypes. Like you'd even be like popular or quiet or a geek or like that.

Sarah Parker - Researcher

Is that names that students would give to other students?

Participant

Yeah. That's how others would think so that oh I can't go talk to them be friends with them, because they're popular and they'll take the mick out of me.

Participant

Yeah. And I can't go near them, 'cause they're over there.

Participant

They would talk behind my back.

Participant

They're too popular. So, I can't go near them. That's why it gets complicated because you can't open up. It's like, oh, I'm popular. I can't talk to you because you're a geek.

Participant

Yeah

Sarah Parker - Researcher

Right. OK.

Participant

So, like, say, like, popular girls are over there? You'd be like, oh, I'm not going to go near them because they're going to say things about me and talk about me.

Sarah Parker - Researcher

So, who decides? Using your vocabulary, who are the popular girls? The geeks? Who makes that decision?

Participant

It's all like, generally who you hang out with. Like, I don't really know. It's like all who you hang out with.

Participant

Yeah. So, like if you're the group of, like, girls and boys who hang out by like, our year 9 area. Yeah. And like, you're really loud in class and have those TikTok followers and stuff like that, that basically makes you like Queen Bee. Kind of. But like, if you're quiet, you care about studying and you want to do well with tests, not like geeks, but like, people who don't want to be really be outgoing.

Participant

You're quiet.

Participant

It affects your self-esteem and not as well. (Focus Group 011)

What is highlighted here is that social norms are created among students at school. If you do not fit the dominant and preferred student stereotype, you may be subjected to harassment and bullying which can negatively affect your well-being, as typified by other student responses:

Participant

And I also feel there's like it's a bit of a stereotype as well because if you like, if you like want to go and get help and people might see you as like you're weak or you're like weak minded or something and you'll end up getting bullied or something like that. (Focus Group 014)

Participant

If you don't have a phone, you get bullied for it as well.

Participant

Like loads. (Focus Group 014)

This is supported by research which claims bullying is a consequence of non-conformity and deviance from those socially accepted norms which have been decided by the dominant peers (Cranham and Carroll, 2003). As Kvist Lindholm et al. (2017) found in their ethnographic study into peer relationships in Swedish secondary schools, societal norms are decided by the students. This is because when social, emotional, and learning behaviour skills are taught in isolation, through personal and social education programmes, students operate through their own social codes and routines. Bullying and harassment is linked to a significant element of intolerance in peer culture at schools. This social construction of a deviant peer can be associated with stigma theory as defined by Goffman (1963), and labelling theory as defined by Becker (1963). Stigma is the core concept of understanding the consequences of labelling. When an individual is labelled as deviant, they violate the taken for granted norms or normative standards of the social group, culture, or society. This socially constructed differentness in everyday life at school is then used to justify bullying and harassment (Thornberg, 2011).

Student participants explained labelling, that once they were labelled it is difficult to escape the label, and hence by implication the harassment and bullying, as this Focus Group exchange revealed:

Sarah Parker - Researcher

Yeah, right. So what? Being labelled?

Participant

Yeah. If you're like a little bit different, if you're not, if you don't like care about school. No, if you care about school. If, like you don't hang out, if you don't do this, you're a weirdo and like just because, like, you don't do this specific thing. I feel like 'popular' people want to be so 'popular' that they are pressured into doing things.

Participant

Things that they don't want to do. They don't like.

Sarah Parker - Researcher

So, once you've got that label, you're then kind of having to live up to that label.

Participant x 3

Yeah. (Focus Group 011)

Even those who do not actively participate do not want to socialise with the victim because of the social pressure if they do (Hamarus and Kaikkonen, 2008). This is significant because studies have shown that peers are present in the majority of bullying episodes and the bully's behaviour is more likely to continue if there is an audience implicitly or explicitly supporting the bully (Pepler et al., 2009; Thomas et al., 2017). A study by Thornberg and Delby (2019) looked at the reasons given by Swedish students aged 13-15 years, who witnessed bullying, as to why it occurs. They suggest that "the main concern of those who engage in bullying is to gain and maintain a higher social status. Victims in turn were socially constructed as different and wrong and were connected with a low status position" (Thornberg and Delby, 2019, p.142). Others suggest that students create and participate in their own peer culture based on power. They determine the relationship guidelines, rules, rewards, and punishments (Wojcik, 2018). This is confirmed by research into bullying in Japanese schools. Contrary to teachers' understanding, bullying is not a specific behaviour conducted by extraordinary children but the behaviour of ordinary children.

Ordinary children using social processes of group inclusion and exclusion which negatively impacts the well-being of the victims (Yoneyama and Naito, 2003).

Investigating the impact of social media on students' well-being is beyond the scope of this study, however, it is worth noting that some student responses indicated how social media can be a boost or a deterrent to their well-being (Focus Group 008; 011; 013; 014; 015) in line with findings from other research (Bettmann et al., 2021; Schneider et al., 2017). Staff also noted the impact of social media on students' well-being (Conversation 019; 020; 021). What is relevant to this study is that schools need to recognise the potential of social media to exacerbate harassment and bullying and therefore focus on how students can manage the use of social media. As these student responses suggest:

Participant

I don't use social media, but I do feel like I am being judged much for a lot of things. The examples not for me, but like people, like what they wear like, how they act and in certain situations. (Focus Group 009)

Participant

So, if you take everything you see on social media literally, I think it does have a negative impact....but I think if you take it more with a grain of salt and understand what is going on it would be better. Schools could help with how to manage it. (Focus Group 014).

The data collected highlighted that very few staff respondents provided an explanation for bullying which can be placed into the theoretical frameworks of bullying, which centre on peer culture.

Staff comments reflected that it is mainly direct bullying which occurs. They do not explicitly refer to the social construction of bullying as student responses did, as indicated in the following exchange:

Staff Participant

Yeah. I encourage them to keep their hands to themselves as well.

Sarah Parker - Researcher

What do you mean?

Staff Participant

Obviously, sometimes they push each other and stuff like that, but they're only messing about, but sometimes that banter crosses the line to bullying. (Conversation 016)

What is at play here can be explained by drawing on the critical theory of Freire (2017). Bullying is about power relationships and there is much in Freire's writing where he discusses the concept of power, and how power creates and reinforces oppression. The evidence in this study has shown that a preferred social identity is marginalising many students and affecting their well-being. Thus, oppression is happening by peers who hold the power, and through using methods akin to Freire's 'banking' model, they are imposing their view which is privileging certain identities (the 'popular' student stereotype) above others. Freire's (2017) concept of 'critical consciousness' is the ability to perceive one's own social reality in a new way, identify power structures and 'de-humanising' conditions that upheld unjust positions. Therefore, many students in this study have perceived their own social reality and recognised the reasons behind why bullying is leading to well-being harm and have reached a state of 'critical consciousness'. Some students are beginning to identify the power structures operating within their peer group, which are valuing and validating certain identities above others within the student body, which are leading to this harmful well-being situation. The problem is that not all students will perceive the situation needs to change because it looks different for each student dependant on their social positioning. Unless all students engage in 'dialogue' to recognise each other's lived experiences, and all, or a critical mass, reach 'critical consciousness', transformational change is unlikely to be effective (Freire, 2017). The result being the hierarchical peer structures operating through the 'banking' model will remain which have been shown to cause well-being harm to many students. Also reflected is Freire's (2017) concept of 'false consciousness' where the 'oppressed' initially want to become like the 'oppressors'. In this case, some students aspire to be in the powerful group which is the preserve of the 'popular' students, however by participating in this approach they reproduce the hierarchies that will simply continue to marginalise other students, negatively affecting their well-being:

Participant

Like everyone wants to be like popular. (Focus Group 008)

Walton (2004, p.32) advocates that there should be "a critical examination of concepts such as 'safety' and 'bullying' -words that have become common currency in educational discourse". Indeed, Freire (2017) talks about the educators creating the conditions for students to understand their reality. This could be achieved through his critical pedagogy where 'generative themes' such as bullying, harassment, identity, and stereotypes are used to start a 'dialogue' about what those

words mean to both students and staff. Applying Freire (2017) to this study, suggests that such discourse is not being used as an opportunity for teachers to speak to the students about what they understand by the generative themes, thus imposing their views through the 'banking' model. It is rather a 'dialogue', in which the views and assumptions of both teachers and students are explored, that is required. Therefore, it is up to the schools, as Freire suggests, to provide students with the language and tools to confront the inequalities produced in the system. Freire (2017) strongly argued that teachers need to be working with the students to develop a political understanding of the world, because knowing the reasons for why 'things are as they are' enables action. This is only possible, however if the schools are sufficiently aware of the inequalities in the system. The evidence from staff suggested a limited understanding of the extent of bullying compared to the students:

Staff Participant

Yes. Generally, students are pleasant to each other, the majority of students, I would say are kind to each other. You do get the odd things where people will fall out and say nasty things. (Conversation 016)

Teachers need to be educated in how systems of oppression are perpetuated by language and behaviour exhibited in the school climate and then can work to understand the dominant gender stereotypes which students mobilise to hurt their peers (Kumashiro, 2002). The lens of Freire was used by Rhone (2008) in her study of bullying behaviours in American schools. The findings show that developing a 'critical consciousness' with those that have been marginalised through social positioning empowered them to create better educational experiences for themselves through improved social outcomes.

To recap, the findings showed that bullying exists in schools, it has a negative impact on student well-being, and the reasons for bullying are complex. As Walton (2004) notes, no one theoretical framework can explain in its entirety why bullying occurs. What needs to be sufficiently recognised is what Thornberg et al. (2017) found in their research, which is, students considered being bullied one of the worst experiences for them at school. The next question for this study to investigate, therefore, is what schools are doing to address bullying as it has been shown to be a key factor in negatively affecting student well-being.

5.3.4 The Effectiveness of Schools in Addressing Bullying

The measures deployed by schools to address bullying are classified as universal measures. These universal measures are aimed at all students and are preventative by their nature. Such strategies, noted by student participants, reference communications delivered by staff through assemblies and form time. The messages include consideration in how you interact with people and do not be a passive bystander when bullying is taking place:

Sarah Parker - Researcher

OK, yeah, thank you. Anything you do in form time? or PSHE-type lessons?

Participant

Yeah, we have PSHE. We don't do much on mental health, but I think there is some topics. We do a bit in form, just looking out for people, even if you think they're happy, that they might not be, just, like, looking out for people.

Sarah Parker - Researcher

Right, OK.

Participant

Sometimes assemblies do that as well, and they talk about being kind to other people, or something like that.

Sarah Parker - Researcher

In those assemblies, is it your teachers running those, or do outside people come in?

Participant

Our teachers.

Sarah Parker - Researcher

Your teachers, yeah.

Participant

In form, like, we have, like, SMSCs, [social, moral, and community] which they can vary of what we do each morning, but, like, some mornings it's just about, like, how you act, and, like, don't just be horrible to people for, like, no reason. And if you see someone,

like, who's getting, like, picked on or something, just say something about it, don't just, like, watch. (Focus Group 008)

Staff also referred to the supervision of students in social time to prevent bullying from taking place:

Staff Participant

We're out supervising them all every break and lunch time. We are monitoring them very closely with what they're doing. (Conversation 016)

The fact that students commented that bullying is present suggests that the preventative actions taken by schools, such as those described above, are not effective in eradicating bullying. Student responses strongly indicated the main reason for this is that bullying is not fully understood by schools, in all its forms, from both the perpetrator and recipient point of view. This explains why the actions taken by schools do not always have the desired outcome in countering bullying:

Participant

I know that once someone is like bullying you and like you've had enough of it, and like you stick up for yourself, because you need to stick up for yourself, because you're not just gonna do it. And then we get in trouble for sticking up for ourselves and like, I understand like you shouldn't say awful things. But if they're like doing it every single day and like you want to stand up for yourself, you want to say something back, and then you just get in trouble for it. (Focus Group 011)

Participant

And I feel like bullying should be raised more because you don't know what someone's going through at home because they could be getting, like, bullied at home. So, you always have to be that extra careful before you say something, I think before you speak. In case it could hurt someone's feelings. (Focus Group 011)

These responses are given credence by Wojcik et al. (2022) who found in their study into bullying from the victim's point of view, effective intervention is only possible when the bullying process is understood and tackled from different perspectives. If understanding bullying is crucial to the effectiveness of a school's actions to address it, the burning question is why is there a limited understanding by schools around bullying and the implications of it for students' well-being? An explanation is that the evidence base schools use to understand bullying is flawed. Three points that arise from the data collected for this study are proffered by way of explanation. They are: that

bullying is not always reported by students, so the school does not have a full picture of bullying upon which to decide strategy; schools monitoring and tracking systems around bullying mostly focus on the 'what', 'when', and 'who' of bullying and do not delve sufficiently into the 'why'; and generally students are not positioned so that their voice around bullying and its impact upon well-being is listened to, let alone heard.

Schools mainly understand what bullying is happening from what is reported to them. The evidence shows that there is mismatch between students and staff as to what bullying is reported. Student responses indicated that bullying is not always reported to staff in schools because of fear of reprisal and getting help reinforces a perceived negative stereotype of being weak which can lead to more bullying:

Participant

Some people get scared to go to them (teachers) Because, like in a way, you think it might get worse because the person who's like being mean or something. You think if they get told off, they're just going to keep on doing it sometimes. So, you go a teacher and say what's happened and then they just say you say to them like I don't want my name to be brought up. Which sometimes it isn't possible not to bring up your name. (Focus Group 011)

Participant

And I also feel there's like it's a bit of a stereotype as well because if you like, if you like want to go and get help and people might see you as like you're weak and you'll end up getting bullied or something like that. (Focus Group 014)

Or that there is no point in reporting bullying because the consequences for the perpetrator would not make a difference to them and the bullying would continue:

Participant

I feel the school just doesn't do enough about bullying. I know they try their hardest, but I feel like sometimes they need to, instead of just telling them off, giving them isolation, it's not going to make a difference. (Focus Group 011)

In contrast to the student responses, schools were of the assumption that bullying would be reported. Staff responses indicated that students would come and tell them about bullying or harassment, or unpleasantness:

Staff Participant

I don't know, I'd like to think that if the students have an issue, they would come and say that.

Sarah Parker - Researcher

Yeah.

Staff Participant

Nine times out of ten they definitely do. There is always someone turning up at the door. So, I would say yeah. They know I have an open-door policy. If they need me, need anything they come to the office.

Staff Participant

I would like to hope so. That is what I would say. I cannot guarantee that they would, but I would like to hope so. (Conversation 016)

These findings are echoed in other research which suggests that when students raise bullying, they are not treated seriously, are silenced, or exposed to retaliation after intervention (Wojcik et al., 2022). However, findings from this study run counter to those of other researchers who found that bullying victimisation in most situations gets better if adults know about it and react (Bjereld et al., 2017; Black et al., 2010). A study by Wojcik and Rzeńca (2021) looked at bullying from the point of view of the victim and considered the barriers and facilitators for asking for help if being bullied. They note that perception of available support such as a trusted teacher, belief they can help, confidentiality, and ease of reporting are key in facilitating a bullying disclosure. However, official channels were often distrusted as too apparent and obvious, including computer-based bullying reporting systems and post box style depositing systems. Student responses in this study concurred with the stigma of reporting concerns which applied to 'anonymous' systems as well:

Participant

There is quite a lot of stigmatism that is hard to tackle, so the school has anonymous post boxes and emails and apps you can use to contact them. But I don't think they are used as often as they do because of that stigma. (Focus Group 014)

Findings indicate school tracking systems to monitor patterns and trends of bullying in schools requiring intervention, focus on 'what' is happening rather than the 'why'. Bullying is seen in isolation rather than its wider implications, including its negative impact on student well-being. Bullying data tends to focus on number of occurrences and type of occurrence; any tracking

system will only be as effective as the data put in and evidence showed an under reporting of bullying:

Staff Participant

Knowing the children are happier, we track their behaviour for learning scores. So, you know there's a real positive engagement you don't get, we've got very low bullying and harassment figures. We track wherever incidents are going on and patterns and you know, stuff like that. So, I think I think feedback from students has been a lot more positive than it has been. (Conversation 010)

Staff Participant

We track and monitor. (Note: Researcher shown a Tracking and Monitoring System for Attendance). Sometimes things improve but sometimes they go backwards again. We always have to keep an eye on things. (Conversation 022)

The perils of scientific analysis are referred to by Freire (2001), and he is critical of analytical approaches that mechanise knowledge and as such lessen it. That, in essence, is what is presented in these tracking and monitoring systems, an incomplete knowledge, that school leaders are using to inform their interventions into bullying. There is an absence of other sources of information to complete a comprehensive picture to tackle bullying including student voice (SV), as these responses suggested:

Participant

I think that once there's like bullying going on, I think it might be hard, but I think you need to sit down and talk face to face and tell them how you feel because if you're going to do it in the playground, yeah, they're going to be like, I don't care. (Focus Group 011)

Sarah Parker - Researcher

OK. Thank you. Have you ever spoken to a teacher in school about your thoughts on how dealing with bullying could be made better?

Participant x 4

No. (Focus Group 011)

Listening to SV goes beyond asking about bullying per se but it is crucial to engage with students to tackle the perspective that bullying is linked to the process of social positioning in schools. Schools not fully understanding bullying and basing their policies and strategies on the

understanding they have, is contributing to the concern students have about the negative impact of bullying on their well-being. The most effective programs are those that focus on dealing with bullying at the level of the individual, using targeted interventions for victims and bullies concentrated on teaching social skills, often demonstrating a significant reduction in bullying (Vreeman and Carroll, 2007). Sadly, pooled evidence from the effectiveness of universal school-based preventative interventions reveals only modest reduction in bullying victimisation and perpetration. Walton (2004) comments, generic school policies related to bullying which do not sufficiently address the underlying issues of school climate and culture will enable bullying to exist. The following staff conversation attests to this through explaining that an extra-curricular club run by staff to support well-being led to bullying for those students involved by some of their peers. This was because attendance at the club was not considered 'appropriate' to the social identity required for peer acceptance:

Staff Participant

Year X boys come to the X Club...We do activities and we talk. I listen to what they say. How they feel because they get bullied because they're doing X Club ...So they talk about that.

Sarah Parker- Researcher

Why are they bullied?

Staff Participant

Most of the X are men.

Sarah Parker - Researcher

Is it X or is it boys X?

Staff Participant

I think it's both. I think that some of these people feel that they should be out, sort of like, having play fights like them or playing football... So there's, there's a bit about stereotypes there, it's football, it's fighting. (Conversation 021)

The relevance for this study is that what schools are failing to recognise sufficiently is that the school culture and climate play a part in bullying and well-being. Researchers have highlighted the importance of a positive school climate in combatting the effects of both bullying and cyberbullying (Salle et al., 2018; Merrin et al., 2018). What also needs to be considered is the impact of bullying on the well-being of other students, not directly involved. Parris et al. (2020) in

their study, looking at peer aggression in American High Schools, reported that students who witness incidents of bullying report decreased comfort and safety at school and increased feelings of stress.

Schools need to consider the impact of bullying on all parties involved because of the negative impact upon the student body as a collective (Thornberg, 2011). In Freire's (2017) terms, the bullied, the bully, and the bystander are all 'de-humanised', and in oppressive relationships by bullying taking place, as supported by a student response:

Participant

Sometimes we see bullying happening, but people don't help because we are scared it may happen to us. (Focus Group 009)

Indeed, going back to Freire (2017) and critical pedagogy, the evidence from student participants shows they are recognising the impact of the school culture through developing ways to counter the negative ideologies:

Participant

You don't have to be hurtful.

Participant

It's really not cool to be mean. (Focus Group 011).

However, students still report the link between well-being and bullying and/or harassment. This study advocates that to be effective, anti-bullying work needs to be firmly embedded in all aspects of a school's work, underpinned by a clear theoretical rationale to break down the barriers and minimise the power differentials between teacher-to-student and student-to-student. These are, as Freire (2017) argues, the structural components exercised via the 'banking' model that wield the power, 'de-humanising' students, coercing them to fit the school's policy and practices around bullying. The concept of 'dialogue' Freire (2001) repeatedly references could be used to look at how misperceived social norms and oppressive relationships are created and transmitted within a school community. This extends to the point that some students accepted that bullying is part of a school's culture:

Participant

And like obviously you're gonna get bullying in every school you go to like, no, school's perfect. (Focus Group 011)

Discussion needs to involve all stakeholders but be driven by the school to create the conditions for community engagement. Group norms and dynamics that increase the sense of community, and a sense of belonging reduce the risk of bullying happening in the first place. Individuals develop a sense of care and respect for their peers and power differentials are minimised (Hymel et al., 2015). In their mixed methods study, Hikmat et al. (2024) looked at the impact of Finnish anti-bullying programmes, and they found that both prevention focussed and victim focussed programmes are needed in school. Key though is the training for teachers, support for students, and the involvement of the community in addressing bullying. “Policies that support evidence-based approaches will help create safer school environments and support children’s emotional well-being” (Hikmat et al., 2024, p.11).

5.3.5 Conclusion

This section concludes that peer relationships can be both a positive and negative influence on adolescent well-being. Students state that peer friendships built on trust and support are a foundation for positive well-being because they facilitate the positive dimensions of well-being which they cite as important. The implications, however, of weaker peer relationships is that well-being is negatively affected. Particularly significant is the negative impact of peer harassment and bullying on student well-being because it makes them unhappy, isolated, depressed, and leads to absenteeism from school. Whilst staff recognise this negative impact, the problem is a clear disconnect in how students view the extent of peer harassment and bullying and the impact of strategies to address it. The staff perception is that harassment and bullying is largely individually led, which neglects the theorisation that bullying can also be systems led. What students identify as more prevalent is widespread systems led harassment and bullying, where the dominant students, the ‘popular’ students are deciding the socially accepted norms and social codes that operate in schools. Students refer to being labelled and stereotyped. If you do not fit the accepted norm or choose not to adhere to these social codes it is highly likely to lead to non-acceptance, harassment, bullying, and marginalisation which has a significant detrimental effect on well-being.

Students also illuminate the negative pressure on their well-being of once given a label having to live up to the expectations that accompany the persona associated with that label, even if over time that begins to conflict with the identity you wish to have. Staff do not appear to appreciate how the power of social norms operating in school dominate the school culture or the importance to well-being of having an accepted social standing amongst your peers. What also appears to be

little understood by staff is how school culture, policy, and practice supports and sustains social norms as well as social identities that are valued or not within the school community. Students were clear that this social positioning in student relationships, is often endorsed by staff in schools through their language and actions which value certain characteristics and types of students above others. The harsh reality is that schools themselves are partly culpable for fuelling the conditions that can either positively or negatively impact a student's well-being.

5.4 Well-Being Experienced Through Teaching and Learning

This section focuses on teaching and learning relationships in the classroom environment and their contribution to students' well-being. In deciding upon a structure for this section, a multi-dimensional well-being model designed by Hascher (2004) was considered as it places student well-being into a school environment and could be adapted to echo the classroom. The model, however, does not sufficiently extend to understanding the nuances of the teacher-to-student relationship in the classroom and the impact on student well-being. It is that relational aspect with teachers in the classroom that the data from this study highlighted is important to students' well-being, which appertains more to eudemonic well-being. Instead, Ryan and Deci's (2000) Self Determination Theory (SDT) will be used to underpin the discussion around how well-being is experienced in the classroom. The building and maintenance of positive relationships fulfils a basic human need contributing to psychological development and well-being (Ryan and Deci, 2000). SDT identifies three psychological needs of relatedness, competence, and autonomy as important to well-being. Eudemonic well-being is linked to SDT because it is conceptualised as feeling, functioning, optimism, emotional stability, positive emotions, and vitality (Huppert and So, 2013). It should be noted that in this study, the word teacher is extended to encompass all adults in the school context who work with students. This is particularly significant because in secondary schools students come into contact not just with their classroom teachers, so the impact of their relationships with a range of adults needs to be considered.

5.4.1 How Are Well-Being Needs Supported in the Classroom

This sub-section considers how the relationship between teacher and student in the classroom affects well-being. The SDT framework will enable examination of student perceptions of teachers' interpersonal styles in the classroom, how this relates to the satisfaction and frustration

of their psychological needs, and how relationships in the classroom ultimately contribute to both student and staff well-being.

Findings from this study, together with other research, highlight that students characterise a positive well-being as being safe, happy, respected, fulfilled, and healthy (Anderson and Graham, 2016; Frisby, 2019). The classroom environment is crucial for encouraging and enabling learners to experience such positive feelings and teachers' relational behaviour with students has a significant role to play in this regard (Noddings, 2012; Price and McCallum, 2015). The profession of teaching is depicted by Stern and Brown (2016, p.337) as an "affective field", translated as teachers needing a significant level of social and emotional intelligence to support students' learning and well-being needs. hooks (2010) also connects teaching with emotions, believing that teachers need to demonstrate emotional intelligence and awareness to create an environment where students can develop their own sense of 'being'.

In line with SDT, the student responses from this study demonstrated that the psychological needs of autonomy, competency, and relatedness, enabled through ongoing interactions with others, are important to their well-being. This Focus Group dialogue about the learning climate in the classroom conveys this:

Participant

You could have somebody that's like really nice and they, like, make your day and it's all they make you so happy and laugh and stuff. And you could also have people that just make you really miserable. So, it's like, depends on who you're talking to, I guess.

Sarah Parker - Researcher

And is that students and staff?

Participant

Yeah, both I guess so. Yeah. I mean if you get on with the teacher more than another teacher, like, you'll go. If you're happy about going to a class because you'd like the teacher then then, like, be more excited to go there, but if you hate the teacher already, you're just gonna hate going in there every day.

Sarah Parker - Researcher

OK. Thank you.

Participant

Teachers are really different

Sarah Parker - Researcher

In what way?

Participant

Some you can trust, you like going to lessons because they are fun, but you learn and people don't mess around much because the teacher like gives respect.

Participant

How the teachers deal with students if they get something wrong. How they treat them definitely effects their well-being if they shout at them and make them feel bad. There's definitely a different approach to maybe talking with them and sitting them down and saying what you did wrong, how to improve next time.

Sarah Parker - Researcher

Right. OK.

Participant

Yeah. I agree with that.

Sarah Parker - Researcher

What are teachers doing that helps a good learning environment in the classroom?

Participant

Interesting stuff to do and they like encourage you, like they care.

Participant

They mark your homework. (Focus Group 015)

These findings resonate with Freire (1972), who comments on qualities essential to the 'progressive teacher', qualities which will support the well-being of students. Teachers do not often espouse these qualities within the 'banking' model of teaching, where the teacher-to-student relationship is narrative in character. The qualities of a 'progressive teacher', however, include humility, tolerance, confidence, and wisdom. Applied to this study, these are the type of qualities participants identified as a prerequisite for enabling their SDT psychological needs of

competence and autonomy to be met by the teacher in the classroom. Other researchers have identified teacher-to-student relationships in the classroom as critical to well-being as they help make learners feel safe, connected with others in the educational space, valued, and hence motivated to achieve positive results (Aldridge and McChesney, 2018).

As hooks (2010) also comments, the relationship between teacher and student needs to be built on trust over time. This includes a willingness to support students experiencing complex emotions, such as guilt, blame, and feeling unsafe. The word ‘trust’ was repeatedly used by students when they talked about positive relationships with teachers:

Participant

So, I feel like your form tutor as you can trust them because they know you. (Focus Group 011)

Participant

There’s like places like student voice. And then you can always talk to teachers you trust. (Focus Group 014)

These student comments, related to SDT, concur with researchers who have shown that a high-quality teacher-to-student relationship is characterised by closeness and simultaneously by low conflict (Koomen and Jellesma, 2015; Sabol and Pianta, 2012). In their meta-analysis, Roorda et al. (2017) emphasise how a close, warm, and low conflict relationship supports a positive correlation with student well-being, learning engagement, and academic performance. Teachers’ behaviours which enable mutual respect, trust, warmth, and little conflict are seen to be important in the relationship with students (Aldridge and McChesney, 2018). This is because these behaviours encourage and stimulate successful interactions between teachers and students, thus, supporting students’ well-being through satisfying their need for emotional and interpersonal support (Xie and Derakhshan, 2021), as recognised by this staff response:

Staff Participant

That's about, you know, even handing back a piece of work in a timely way. So, you're kind of building those relationships and modelling what you expect really. That's been a whole body of work though, that's taken years and years. (Conversation 010)

Some research studies, however, report that negative aspects of the teacher-to-student relationship have a stronger influence on school engagement and well-being than positive aspects (Baumeister et al., 2001; Hamre and Pianta, 2001). When the teacher-to-student relationship does not meet the students’ SDT psychological needs of autonomy, competence,

and relatedness, the student may feel inferior, a failure, experience loneliness and alienation, which negatively affects their well-being (Bartholomew et al., 2011).

Ryan and Deci (2000) argue that the social context can support or thwart an individual's perception of the three basic SDT psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness being met. In the context of a school classroom in simple terms, if the psychological needs are satisfied this will lead to student well-being, but if the psychological needs are frustrated this will lead to student ill-being. The interpersonal skills of a teacher can be seen on a continuum from enabling autonomy, being supportive, through to highly controlling. A teacher demonstrating skills of autonomy include providing opportunities for initiating activities with a meaningful rationale, active listening, and acknowledging student perspectives. A teacher demonstrating controlling skills include ignoring student perspectives, pressurising students to think and act in particular ways, and making students feel they have no choice but to comply with the standards of the teacher (Baumeister et al., 2001). The importance to well-being of having needs satisfaction met by the teacher is articulated below:

Participant

Teachers would probably be quite involved with the students and asking them quite a lot of questions about how they are and stuff. And there'd be a way which the students could quite easily talk to the teachers about things they want to change in school. (Focus Group 013)

The added significance of SDT for this study, is that the absence of need satisfaction fulfilment in the classroom through the relationship with the teacher, does not necessarily have a neutral impact on the well-being of the student. As some researchers argue, need frustration and need satisfaction are not opposites as they are distinct, conceptually different, and relate to separate well-being or ill-being outcomes (Bartholomew et al., 2018; Vansteenkiste and Ryan, 2013). Research has shown that autonomy, support, and control can co-exist in the classroom (Vansteenkiste and Ryan, 2013). The classroom social context can foster or be antagonistic towards the satisfaction of students positively and/or negatively affecting their well-being. Therefore, an absence of factors in a classroom which can be a negative influence on students' psychological well-being needs, such as a teacher being authoritarian, does not necessarily mean students have high psychological well-being, as they are distinct concepts (Bartholomew et al., 2018).

The relevance of this is the quality of the teacher-to-student relationship, which requires the teacher to enable student needs satisfaction whilst thwarting student needs frustration. Freire's

(2017, p.44) 'banking' model of education would suggest that the "narrative character" of the teacher-to-student relationship is unlikely to thwart needs frustration. The 'banking' model makes it difficult for quality relationships to develop because it does not allow for the skills of the teacher to create an ethically driven learning environment which enables needs satisfaction, important for student well-being. Freire (2001, p.64) comments "the struggle to bring dignity to the practice of teaching is as much a part of the activity of teaching, as is the respect that the teacher should have for the identity of the student, for the student himself or herself and his or her right to be". In applying Freire to this study, it suggests that the teacher is key to a student's well-being experience in the classroom and needs to develop the skills and qualities required to effectively support student well-being, whilst understanding the negative consequences for student well-being through not possessing them. There is much research regarding the qualities and skills successful teachers possess to encourage needs satisfaction (Frisby, 2019). However, there is less research on what barriers there are to teachers having these skills or consistently executing these skills, which if not present can lead to student needs frustration (Bartholomew et al., 2018; Zheng, 2022).

The connection between the teacher-to-student relationship on the well-being of the student is often realised, but the psychological well-being of the teacher/educator is often ignored (Vansteenkiste and Ryan, 2013). These responses referenced the demands on the well-being of staff and highlighted the potential lack of policy and practice to support and protect them, which is evident in other professions:

Staff Participant

Because I'm trying to protect them [staff] and say there has to be the line. Because, at what point are you having your life? So, for their [staff] well-being I'm going to do that. I'm faced with a school of people that are so committed to these young people and their well-being and safety that when they get that call in, it's almost impossible for them given because they see those children every single day. It's different as a therapist you see that child for 15 minutes a week. It's a very different boundary than when you're there all of the time with these relationships it's very difficult then, to say we're not going to respond to you because it's the holidays. (Conversation 010)

Staff Participant

Obviously, it's quite tough, we have had some provision from a counsellor. Well, we've had one session since September, [now January] but then like obviously I've got like my head of year who I can speak to. I've got a line manager who was in before. (Conversation 016)

Several authors have explored the reasons why the relational role between teacher-to-student can thwart a student's psychological needs (Dunn et al., 2020). This can be attributed to an absence of understanding of the role of a teacher, assumptions about the qualities teachers need to have, and the positioning of the teacher. In their work, Camphuijsen et al. (2022) discuss the emotional rules of empathy, calmness, kindness, and compassion that implicitly a teacher has to have, the lack of training and support to develop these instructional and interpersonal skills of the teacher, the performance culture teachers work in, and the limited agency of teachers.

Likewise, Dunn et al. (2020) discuss the societal norms and performance accountability that can negatively affect teachers' well-being through neglecting the emotional nature of the teaching profession. In their research, Stern and Brown (2016) point to the 'see saw' of the empowering emotions of hope and the disempowering emotions of despair that teachers experience working in the neoliberal context of education. This can lead to detachment and burnout, emotional depletion, and erosion of coping mechanisms which in part has led to the exodus of teachers leaving the teaching profession. In their Teacher Labour Market report, McLean et al. (2024) note that 78% of all staff are feeling stressed and there was a 44% increase in those who intend to leave the teaching profession between 2021-22 and 2022-23. The following staff response outlined that tension between teaching and learning and supporting well-being:

Staff Participant

And there's also the tension, isn't there between actually, you've got that role to support well-being. It's part of your role. But also, if too much is taken up with that in the lesson it means that the teaching and learning is not progressing as you would like which then starts to have an impact for other people. (Conversation 018)

Freire's (2017) lens can once more be applied here to recognise the impact of the performance culture, delivered through the 'banking' model of education that devalues teaching. Freire (2017) stresses the importance of teachers avoiding 'de-humanisation', caused by the 'banking' model, which leads to emotional detachment from teaching because it maintains an 'oppressed'/'oppressor' relationship. Freire (2017) characterises self-depreciation as a trait of the 'oppressed', applied to this study it is the teachers who are 'oppressed' by the accountability system they are working in. They internalise the feelings brought about by working in such a system and believe they are not doing the best they can for the students' well-being and hence feel worthless and powerless themselves. This was reflected by staff (Conversation 010; 016; 018) as typified by this response:

Staff Participant

I have often thought that school's work on the basis of like a lot of goodwill, but I am only paid six and a half hours a day, but I'm here from seven till five. Yeah, and I'm doing six-seven hours on Sunday. And that isn't just that's not woe is me. That is the reality of the situation. I can't maintain that for a long period of time. So, does more need to be done? Yes, more needs to be done. Can a school do everything? No, they can't. I as an individual cannot do everything for that student. (Conversation 018)

The research of Sartorio and Thomas (2022) into Higher Education in the UK, grew out of concerns of the difficulties of teaching in the current education climate. They refer to teachers “danger of despair at the prospect of trying to influence forces such as globalisation or neoliberalism” (Sartorio and Thomas, 2022, p.1). They used Freire’s concept of critical thinking in the context of planning and review to embed reflective practice, to provide both teachers and students with the tools to develop their own agency and so be empowered to challenge the neoliberal culture. They cite the “message of hope for agency to flourish” (Sartorio and Thomas, 2022, p.2). The staff comment below reflected this sentiment suggesting that working in a neoliberal culture could be different:

Staff Participant

And I think if we just had more love and understanding for just another person, another child. (Conversation 018)

In summary, the importance of the teacher-to-student relationship is characterised through a teacher’s ability to meet the needs satisfaction of the students. Teachers enable students’ psychological well-being needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness to be met through the quality of the teaching relationship in the classroom. What has been demonstrated is that teachers’ own psychological needs, which enable them to meet students’ well-being requirements in the classroom, are often overlooked. The effects of working in a performance and accountability culture loom large. As has been discussed the negative aspects of the teacher-to-student relationship appear to have a stronger influence on student well-being than positive aspects. The next sub-section considers how students’ psychological well-being needs are thwarted in the classroom.

5.4.2 Behaviour and Discipline in the Classroom

This sub-section considers how the behaviour of both students and teachers in the classroom affects the well-being of all students. Attention is given to how well the motives behind disruptive behaviour are understood by schools and therefore, the impact of school disciplinary approaches on the classroom well-being climate for both students and teachers.

For the purposes of this study, disruptive behaviour is defined as any behaviour by an individual or group of students which impedes the teaching and learning happening in a classroom. Secondary school is regarded as a time when student behavioural engagement in the classroom stagnates or declines (Wang et al., 2021). Students in this current study commented that behaviours exhibited by students in the classroom can negatively affect their well-being. Their reasons being that such behaviours are distracting, unpleasant, and disruptive to their learning as this Focus Group dialogue explains:

Participant

I think in my class, a lot of people are very like distracting. Like, I understand that you're not always going to concentrate. You're always going to concentrate more because you enjoy that more. But like, sometimes people can say, like, inappropriate, horrible stuff like, be horrible to teachers and you're just trying to sit there and learn. Sometimes I can be talking, distracting, I understand that, but sometimes it can get too like mad and like I feel like if you have a sub teacher as well, like, you're obviously going to act differently in front of a sub teacher because that's what children do.

Participant

Yeah, you're not going to focus as much.

Participant

But like, sometimes I find it hard to focus because like everyone in my class is just like shouting, screaming.

Participant

And I'm so like, in my form, I'm speaking on other students' behalf. But like, in my form, I only have about five people who are, like, good, respectful, supportive, but like with the boys and like. If you were the girl and say like, you can't really open up to them kind of thing and like when you walk into a classroom and it's really noisy. I just want to do my work in a

quiet place, where like everyone is able to work without all the stuff going on. So, I'll get, like, my ears will really hurt, and then I'll have to leave a class because I can't concentrate or focus and I get overwhelmed, like, quite easily. And then, like, if it's like with the movement times because it's so like crowded, I feel really claustrophobic. And then, like, not sure what to do. And like, you know, you have people screaming and shouting, and then if your class is like, distracting and like really noisy, everyone will get in trouble and like there's this one teacher. And she had a right go at our class.

Sarah Parker - Researcher

So, what I think what I'm getting from this is that other people's behaviour, which then causes possibly a reaction from the member of staff as well.

Participant

And then she takes it out on everyone. (Focus Group 011)

To help teachers prevent and manage such disruptive behaviour, is to understand the complex reasons why misbehaviour occurs. Most of the student responses alluded to peer processes and the peer culture operating in the classroom as a reason for the disruptive behaviour which impacts their well-being:

Participant

I feel like everyone would be a lot more confident because they don't have to be conscious about people making fun of them. (Focus Group 009)

Several writers have described the classroom as a social system where different social actors operate through social norms influenced by the teacher and students (Lanas and Brunila, 2019). Peer related social networks can help or hinder student well-being and are highlighted as being particularly influential in the learning environment (Hendrickx et al., 2016). The argument being that due to the peer culture operating in the classroom, student behaviour is not a matter of choice which teachers assume it is. Rather, it is the result of the pressure students feel to conform to the societal norms expected around their behaviour placed on them by their peers. It is important for teachers to acknowledge this and work to counteract a negative peer culture. As Lanas and Brunila (2009) note, students have to continually work out how to become credible, not only in the eyes of their teacher but their peers as well. This involves balancing contradictory demands related to one's habitus, conduct, speech, and even emotions. Such demands can lead to a decreasing sense of well-being as indicated by the following responses:

Participant

But I know with me I'm quite a loud person. Like I'm confident and like, that's my personality. And then I can like, be loud. I'm annoying. And then like when this popular girl, she's like shouting in middle class, walking out. She's like, cool and popular. But then when I'm like, because I'm loud and that, like, I'm annoying. But then, like, someone else will do it and they're like, so cool. (Focus Group 011)

Participant

Not being understood from your point of view. Sometimes teachers don't understand where you're coming from. (Focus Group 013)

In addition, students are clear that teachers' behaviour in the classroom, specifically 'how' they deal with student disruptive behaviour, affects the well-being of others. This dovetails with research which shows how teachers treat students affects how students affect each other, because they model the teachers' behaviour (Chory and Offstein, 2018; Dietrich and Cohen, 2021). This suggests that students perceive poor execution of behaviour management skills by the teacher as a negative influence on their well-being. Students reported being negatively impacted when the teacher blames and issues consequences for all students when the poor behaviour is due to a few perpetrators:

Participant

Yes, because we'll get in trouble by the teacher, the whole class even if it's just like two boys at the back distracting us, from the teachers and then everyone will get a behaviour point or in trouble. (Focus Group 011)

Participant

And like, you know, you have people screaming and shouting, and then if your class is like, distracting and like really noisy, everyone will get in trouble and like there's this one teacher. And she had a right go at our class. (Focus Group 011)

The 'banking' model of Freire provides an understanding of the context of how teachers exercise their power through their management of behaviour and the potential negative effects on students. He states, "There is also a certain kind of greed, an almost unbridled lust for giving orders, that create negative reactions and a totally incompatible climate for the exercise of true authority" (Freire, 2001, p.86). His thoughts are reflected in the following dialogue which

emphasised the power imbalance in the teacher-to-student relationship and lack of regard for the student:

Participant

Like, if someone's having a conversation, being very loud, the whole class is to stay back 5 minutes. Like, I know that I've stuff after school, and I know other people have other stuff after school and we can't always stay behind. When you try explaining, I cannot physically stay after school because I had something going on. They say I don't care. (Focus Group 011)

Applied to this study, the 'banking' model is enabling the teachers to be authoritarian and thus demonstrating arrogance and a lack of humility. Through adopting Freire's (2001) critical pedagogy, creating the conditions for 'dialogue' and listening to students' lived experiences, teachers would learn that adolescents believe they are not respected, not listened to, and have no agency to explain their point of view over the unfair consequences given to them because of the disruptive behaviour of others. Therefore 'naming the world' (Freire, 2017) and understanding the reality would be the start of action to transform the de-humanising situation for both students and staff.

Many of the student participant responses aligned with researchers who have suggested reasons why students engage in disruptive behaviour which include: peer group processes (Hendrickx et al., 2016); students lack influence (Koskela and Lanas, 2016); and perception of behaviour management and rules as unfair and or inconsistent (Thornberg, 2015). Tanase (2021) suggests that students misbehave because they seek power and attention, but this was not directly commented on by students in this study. What might be feasible to infer from their responses is that through exhibiting disruptive behaviours students are challenging the power held by the teacher, because they believe they have limited agency to achieve this through other options open to them. Thus, they are mirroring the ways in which many teachers exert control and influence in the classroom through attempting to hold the balance of power in the relationship. As Bandura (2016), in his social learning theory, notes behaviour only occurs within the context of relationships. His four-stage theory of modelling contends that individuals learn by replicating the behaviours of others, by observation and imitation of others, rather than by direct experience alone. In their research, Koskela and Lanas (2016) show that students are expected to demonstrate initiative and independence, but in ways which operate in line with the normative culture in school. Students, are thus, regurgitating the existing power relationships in the classroom and in this case, the relationships between students, and teacher-to-student.

Student responses demonstrated the value they place on the teacher managing disruptive behaviour appropriately. This is through discreet one-to-one conversations, clear explanations, dignity, and recognising students as individuals:

Participant

People be able to like freely express who they are and like not have to worry about if it's against the rules or something. And then if they got say, they got judged for it like a teacher would sort that out without making the kid feel that they can't be who they are. (Focus Group 013)

What has been ascertained through the students in this study is that when given the opportunity, students can analyse their social contexts to give reasons for disruptive behaviour occurring. Applying Freire (2017), it is up to the students (the 'oppressed') to lead the liberation of themselves and the teachers (the 'oppressors') to reject the 'banking' model approach to behaviour management to restore humanity to both parties. Freire (2016, p.12) states "... the first condition for being able to accept or reject one form or another of manifesting change is being open to the new, to the different, to innovation, to doubt. These are the attributes of a democratic mentality that we very much need...". Applied to this study it is a prerequisite for Freire's (2017) critical pedagogy which through 'dialogue' would see both adolescent students and teachers reach 'critical consciousness' and together build a different behaviour management approach. This would be based on social justice, reflecting students as 'beings', which does not compromise the authority of the teacher, nor the well-being of either group. This would be in line with Article 12 of the UN (1989) Convention, which recognises the right of CYP to be heard.

Teacher relationships and a teacher's disciplinary style are found to be essential protective factors contributing to adolescent well-being. This is supported through research by Wang et al. (2021) in their follow up to a longitudinal study looking at the impact of school climate on adolescent social and emotional health. They found that a highly supported, structured, and emotionally safe environment is associated with better well-being outcomes, including encouraging better attendance. Indeed, the students in this study are not advocating for no discipline in the classroom but the construction of a learning environment in which they can safely learn:

Participant

...I just want to do my work in a quiet place where like everyone is able to do their work without all the stuff going on. (Focus Group 011)

Applying Freire to this study suggests that the well-being of adolescents is dependent on teachers in the classroom having authority, whilst not being authoritarian which is feature of the 'banking' model. As Freire (2001, p.83) states, "authoritarianism and freedom with no boundaries are ruptures in the tense harmony between autonomy and freedom. Only in these practices where authority and freedom are found and preserved in their autonomy (that is in a relationship of mutual respect) can we speak of a disciplined practice as well as a practice favourable to the vocation 'to be more'". Therefore, teachers need to use their authority to curtail the unlimited freedom of students to behave as they wish, to create the democratic and emotionally safe conditions that are conducive to all students being able to learn freely uninhibited by others.

The question for this study is, is it the disruptive behaviour in the classroom that affects well-being and/or the ineffective discipline strategies to deal with the complexities underlying the disruptive behaviour that affects well-being? The student responses indicated that it is not just the behaviour itself, but what follows next, the disciplinary strategies used to address it, which for many students can cause negative well-being. This is supported by Ijaz et al. (2024) in their review of Disciplinary Behaviour Management Strategies in secondary schools. They found that it is the type of behaviour management strategies which can affect student well-being positively or negatively. What, therefore, can be gleaned about the approaches to school discipline that are facilitating the students' well-being concerns?

Poor behaviour is seen as a current concern in schools nationally and this is not new (Lanas and Brunila, 2019). Traditionally, the favoured response of schools to what they regard and define as poor and unacceptable behaviour has been a 'manage and discipline' approach (Armstrong, 2021). A 'manage and discipline' approach is typically one where behaviour is managed through a deficit approach. The focus being on what a person has done wrong and applying a consequence for that wrongdoing. This is indicated through the clear logical series of steps described below, when a student has used a phone in the lesson which is against the school rules:

Staff Participant

And it's my, it's my fault that I've asked them to come off their phone. You see, they don't see the fact that the school rule says you're not allowed on your phone. You've made a phone call. I've asked you stop. But I'm the one that's at fault. And then everything that follows from that, like trying to have a restorative conversation is to say 'this is what you did. This was the impact. The consequence is this'. We don't want to do that again because if we do that again, we then have a sanction. We then do it again. We've had that

conversation. We were really clear it and now you have to follow our consequences.
[student] I'm not doing that consequence. (Conversation 018)

This exchange would represent Freire's (2017) concept of the 'banking' model of education, where what is being deposited by the teacher, the consequence for behaviour, is detached from the reality of why the student engaged in the disruptive behaviour. There is little opportunity for the student to explain why they engaged in said behaviour. They have become in Freirean terms, 'spectators' and not 'creators' in their own reality, as they have limited agency to explain themselves. Through applying Freire's (2017) theory of 'traditional education' where power is maintained through the 'banking' model it demonstrates that the school systems and structures are shaping the culture to maintain power over students through promoting the dominant voice of the school, but as the staff quote hinted at, it is also shaping the actions of the teacher which are 'de-humanising'. Freire (2001, p.48) states "what is important in teaching is not the mechanical repetition of this or that gesture, but a comprehension of the value of sentiments, emotions and desires". In the context of this study, it means that generic behaviour management systems, described by participants, which focus on consequences of misbehaviour adversely affect the well-being of both the individual involved and the teacher because such systems appear unable to sufficiently understand the causes of misbehaviour.

Schools have persisted with a 'manage and discipline' approach because teachers can be trained in it and it provides a consistency of approach across all classrooms which can bring benefits for both students and teachers (Forsberg et al., 2021). The problem is that this may not sufficiently recognise the importance of the relational aspect of teaching and well-being when the teacher is expected to follow rigidly the organisational practices of discipline. In their study looking into discipline strategies used in Italian schools, Lodi et al. (2021) found that punitive practices that control and manage student behaviour often make disciplinary problems worse. In addition, they intensify racial, gender, and socio-economic differences within the school population. Such uniform practices allow little space for individuality on the part of the teacher. This restricts the chances to respond to the needs of the individual which can improve the well-being of the student themselves, other students and the teacher in the classroom (Wilson et al., 2023). Thus, uniform practices can create an impasse or 'stand-off' between the teacher's wishes and the student's wishes. Freire (2016, p.8) explains this by discussing the strength of the intent by both the teacher and the student by stating "A will without limits is a despotic will, one negating of other wills and ultimately negating of itself. Such is the illicit will of 'owners of the world', who selfishly and arbitrarily can only see themselves". As the following staff response indicated, a teacher following

the school line without understanding the reasons for the behaviour, makes the norm of a well-behaved student difficult even impossible for some to deliver:

Staff Participant

As a professional, you don't want to lose the power to teach, because where does it start? I don't want to come into your class at the time the bell rings, I want to come 10 minutes later. What's the problem? I don't want to have my books on the table. I'll get them out when I want to. It becomes this game all the time and I think this is where you hear things all the time about how behaviour is managed and things like that. (Conversation 017)

Furthermore, this illuminates that what needs to be better understood is that a disruptive behaviour climate in the classroom exacerbates the emotional resilience of the teacher which leads to poor well-being for not only the students but teachers as well (Oberle et al., 2018). This does not only impact teacher resilience in the classroom but leaves the 'resource' of a teacher depleted which can impact teaching and other student care related activities (Armstrong, 2021):

Staff Participant

The schools are not schools anymore. They're not just educators. They need to be therapists, social workers, teachers, police. It's hard. Yeah, I mean it's a lot. (Conversation 010)

Over time, there have been many attempts to solve the concerning problem of behaviour in schools. As Lanas and Brunila (2019, p.682) observe, the response to concerns about school behaviour has been to "invent innumerable interventions, management strategies, methods, implementation programmes, tools tips, guidelines, and prosocial curricula". There is research to suggest that strategies based on restorative justice principles, such as respect, responsibility, and repair, have been successful in reducing disruptive behaviours in school and hence improve student well-being (Lodi et al., 2021). Much of the literature shows the numerous ways in which teachers can manage behaviour better, but there is a lack of how teachers might analyse and understand behaviour. When a student's disruptive behaviour is viewed as the student's problem, a lack of self-control, and as a teacher's problem, lack of management and control of the classroom, the discourse around behaviour will not move on sufficiently. This is because such a view inhibits teachers' opportunities to fully understand the causes of behaviour and decide upon appropriate and effective discipline strategies which would better support the well-being of all students (McLeod and Wright, 2015). It is not fully appreciated that adolescent student behaviour is linked to their development stage and how they process information, regulate their emotions

and behaviour will be different to adults (Arain et al., 2013). In her study McGregor (2017) observed that the debate around school engagement showed a difference between teachers and youth workers. Teachers drew on individual responsibility for success or failure, related to notions of youth deficit. Youth workers recognised the economic and social pressures that shape students' lives and made this relevant and central to their work. Changing the discourse around disruptive behaviour needs to happen in the school community and the promise of this was highlighted by the following responses:

Staff Participant

But I think there is a lot in terms of well-being for us. There are the signs like to me I'm thinking about things like, you know, how if I'm noticing a dip in mood or behaviour or an escalation that takes place in trying to look past the presenting behaviour and understand the function of it. But I feel like that is more to do with my background....I feel I'm more a tuned to that because of the fields that I worked in before. (Conversation 017)

Staff Participant

So, if your Head is going to be somebody that is compassionate and able to think about you know, young people in a different way, not in a behavioural way necessarily, but all behaviour has meaning. Let's think about what that meaning is, what's happening here? Why is this happening? If you've got a Head that can think in that way, they become the thinking mind for the school and the children. (Conversation 010)

This change could start with Initial Teaching Training courses. The DfE (2015) reported variability in teacher training programmes and specifically mentioned behaviour management as an area for improvement. The point that the discourse around student behaviour needs to change is endorsed by Butler et al. (2022). Their study considered the impact of three sources of support, adult at home, adult at school, and peer at school on students' well-being. One of their findings suggested that a trauma informed approach in school can be beneficial to understand how students' adversity can affect learning and behaviour in the classroom. Thus, providing teacher and peer support to overcome adversity rather than the traditional punitive approach to misbehaviour. This was reflected in a staff response:

Staff Participant

We did a lot of training on trauma informed. What that looks like. What that term is. Because we have got a lot of staff that have worked here a very long time.....and it was very much like, students didn't used to be like that. I don't know why they are like that. And

there wasn't much of an understanding that actually they've experienced a lot of stuff in their generation. (Conversation 010)

A possible reason for schools sticking with the 'manage and discipline' approach is the high stakes schools are operating in. Teachers have limited time to build relationship with students which would help to minimise disruption to learning and support well-being of all in the classroom. This is because teachers are delivering a content heavy curriculum and there is a pressure for teachers and the school to achieve academically. Their academic performance is publicly scrutinised through School Performance Tables (DfE, 2025) and can influence recruitment and retention of both staff and students. One staff participant referred to 'fighting the machine' implying the influence of a performative culture negates quality time to build relationships to support students' well-being:

Staff Participant

You don't address the root cause; we address the symptoms. We do; we do. We've seen these things out. Here we go. Oh, yeah. It's not that bad, but we're not actually getting down to the real problem that is with that child. And that's it's all very well having, you know, DfE well-being charter and like we know that's our focus and we'll make sure. But do we actually dig down as much as we can?But you are fighting against that wider machine all of the time. (Conversation 018)

In short, conceptions of young people's disruptive behaviour are shaped by the ever-increasing emphasis on measurement and efficiency in education (Lanas and Brunila, 2019; McGregor, 2017). Conceptions are that student well-being is most often perceived as 'doing' well through acquisition of knowledge, skills, competency, and simply attending. The performative culture with its emphasis on measurement and accountability has placed pressure on schools to produce the 'right' sort of student and possibly the 'right' sort of teacher. Some authors have identified that teachers feel isolated and they try to hide any difficulties with classroom management. This is to present an image of success because the alternative is failure (Culshaw and Kurian, 2021).

It seems that schools are facing more challenging behaviour. Simply enforcing the same discipline strategies are not making a significant difference to classroom behaviour and as demonstrated well-being of both students and staff is negatively affected. An impasse has been reached through not sufficiently understanding the reasons for misbehaviour and repeatedly applying the same deficit behaviour management strategies. As a result, the relationship between teachers and students is breaking down. Freire (2017) writes about the relationship between the dominator and dominated reaching a breaking point and that's when the dominated move towards liberation. In

this study, it appears that more students are rebelling against classroom discipline through their own disruptive behaviour or through questioning the validity of behaviour management techniques which do not serve their well-being needs. That is to say that the relationship between student and teacher important to their well-being in the context of behaviour management is breaking down:

Sarah Parker - Researcher

Is there that level of opposition to authority and rules?

Staff Participant

I would say that's becoming more prevalent and increasing. You know the boundaries have always been pushed, but the boundaries seem to be pushed a lot further and a lot harder and seemingly by more students. (Conversation 018)

Using the concept of recognition as a core concept of social justice, it can be that discipline in the classroom can be understood as a form of institutionalised subordination, a violation of the child's justice (Ijaz et al., 2024). Through recognising the individuals within the system this can provide an alternative view to the dominant discourses of 'manage and discipline' approaches. New 'manage and discipline' approaches may simply embed the school hierarchies deeper through putting in place the same type of behaviour management systems which just replicate Freire's (2017)' banking' model of education, continuing to exacerbate the problem of challenging behaviour. Through recognition of the individual, as a 'subject' not an 'object', this may enable students to have agency in the classroom through respectful relationships which will better support the well-being of all. Both student and staff participants have confirmed through their responses that the current system of how discipline is managed in the classroom often falls short of effectively supporting learning and well-being. In addition, much of this fails to reach the principles of social justice such as dignity, access, equity, and participation (Elkadi and Sharaf, 2023) which most schools would wish to uphold.

5.4.3 Conclusion

Teacher-to-student relationships can facilitate both positive and negative dimensions of adolescent well-being. In the classroom, students highlight that their well-being is enhanced by their psychological learning needs being satisfied. They place value on trusting teachers, having choice over learning methods, being encouraged and supported to learn, being given feedback on

their work in a timely manner so that they can improve, and feeling that the teacher cares and is interested in them as individuals. Experiencing poor behaviour by other students and the discipline strategies used by teachers to address behaviour often adversely affects their well-being. In essence, this is because their learning needs are frustrated. Students particularly reference a negative classroom experience as when they are distracted by the behaviour of others and teachers' methods of discipline are ineffective in enabling a purposeful learning environment. Adolescents feel unfairly being given class blame and consequences for the actions of a few, not feeling respected by the teacher, and feeling they have no agency to explain how they feel about what happens in the classroom impacts them negatively.

What again is highlighted in this section by students is the relevance of the peer culture operating in the classroom which can affect their well-being. Student responses challenge the presupposition held by most staff by explaining that behaviour is not always an individual choice, rather that it is a pressure to conform to the societal norms and behave in a way that is accepted by your peers. This could conflict with the expectations you have of yourself, of your teacher, and of the school. Both students and staff believe that behaviour and discipline methods can compound the issue of poor behaviour and such methods do not sufficiently understand and address the reasons for it. What has been illustrated is that it is assumed that teachers inherently have the qualities and skills to enable learning needs satisfaction in the classroom, yet the evidence has suggested that insufficient attention is given to teachers' own well-being needs which is key to teachers effectively supporting students' needs satisfaction in the classroom. The salient point that schools need to understand is that if need satisfaction is not met, the effect on well-being is not neutral, and can indeed be negative, because need satisfaction and need frustration are not opposites and relate to different well-being outcomes.

This study contends that perhaps the missing underpinning theoretical concept to well-being in the classroom is Freire's (2013) critical pedagogy where relationships between teachers and students are built through 'dialogue' and then 'praxis'. This would be transformational, to push back against the all too dominant 'banking' model which maintains the performance culture operating in secondary schools. There were signs in the evidence that such action is happening is to transform teaching and learning relationships in the classroom and beyond to support the well-being of all. As this staff participant articulated:

Staff Participant

So, what we recognised early on, I think, was that children feel happy in places where the adults treat them with respect and kindness, and they nurture them. So, we totally

revamped our behaviour policy, and we brought something in called discipline with dignity. That, you know, essentially wherever you are, whatever you do, you should do it in a dignified way. And that's about communication. So you're kind of building those relationships and modelling what you expect really. That's been a whole body of work, though that's taken years and years. (Conversation 010)

5.5 Well-Being Experienced Through Pastoral Care

This section further considers the importance of the teacher-to-student relationship for student well-being through the pastoral care delivered outside of the classroom. It is to be noted that students use the term teacher when it can also be a non-teacher adult supporting them outside of the classroom such as a counsellor, administrative assistant, or form tutor. This section uses Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969) to explore the pastoral relationship teacher-to-student outside of the classroom.

Attachment Theory is explained, in the context of this research, where the adult provides a safe and secure environment in which students are supported through stressful situations they face.

5.5.1 The Pastoral Care Relationship

As previously discussed, the meanings of well-being, mental health, and mental illness are intertwined and it is not always clear whether students when referencing pastoral support do so in connection with mental health, or mental illness, or well-being. It is not possible for this study to untangle the relevance of the type of pastoral support given to these distinct concepts; however, students do value the quality of the adult-to-student relationship provided in times of emotional need.

Students spoke positively about the pastoral support provided by adults in school that helped their well-being. The adults that students noted provided help, were trained safeguarding staff and pastoral staff, namely Form Tutors and Heads of Year (Focus Group 008; 012). Student participants also referred to support provided in school by external professionals. Most frequently mentioned were professionals such as mental health practitioners, therapists, and counsellors (Focus Group 008; 009; 012). The dialogues suggested that students regard the relationship with adults as important to their well-being because they provide individualised support on a one-to-one basis and group support through activity clubs:

Participant

Well, we have a few of, like, safeguarding teachers, we've got some, like, higher up teachers that you can just go speak to. There's, like, I think there's different activities you can go do at lunch.

Sarah Parker - Researcher

What sort of, sorry to interrupt, what sort of activities would there be at lunch, do you think?

Participant

I think there's a club called X

Participant

Yeah.

Participant

You can do, there's, I think, Miss X a few of the teachers in there, you'd make something, like, it's different every week.

Sarah Parker - Researcher

Right, OK.

Participant

You can go and talk to people.

Sarah Parker - Researcher

Or do some activities?

Participant

Yeah crafts.

Participant

We also have, like, counselling and all that, where you can just talk to, like, a professional about your mental health, and then they can just help you get through it and all that.

Sarah Parker - Researcher

And would you have to make an appointment for that?

Participant

Yeah, you usually ask Miss X if you want an appointment with that person or something.
(Focus Group 008)

In addition, the importance of a space outside of the classroom, where you can feel safe and talk to a teacher or adult about your well-being, or just have some 'time out' to manage your emotions was frequently mentioned:

Participant

There are sort of safe spaces. People go to pastoral and they're like, sitting there for a bit and just like rekindle. (Focus Group 009)

The responses inferred that students value being cared for by someone as important to their well-being and the word 'trust' was often mentioned as important to that caring relationship:

Participant

Yeah. Like, I always talk to this teacher about what I'm going, through my anxiety and that, and this is the person, I know I trust. If it's someone else I like, have to have, like a lot of trust in this person to open up and I'm sure lots of other people struggle to open up as well. And that's why I feel like it's nice to have like some teachers that you trust more.
(Focus Group 011)

Furthermore, students noted that positive relationships with the adult caring for them, whether it be their form tutor, teacher or a pastoral lead, specifically led to feeling comfortable. This aligns with research which suggests closeness is one of the most positive aspects of teacher-to-student relationships that are important to adolescents and hence their well-being (Hamre and Pianta, 2001; Murray, 2009):

Participant

If I'm more comfortable with a teacher, I'll just go and ask them. If I'm, like, less comfortable, then maybe not. (Focus Group 015)

Participant

I think generally people would want to go to someone they have more of a relationship with. They'll feel like more comfortable like talking about it rather than someone who's just like, called, like a safeguard lead, and then you just go and talk to them, right. (Focus Group 012)

However, some student respondents highlighted that not being close with the adult you spoke to can be a positive thing:

Participant

I would say some, like, it's a bit of a mix. If it's like someone you don't know. And they don't know anything about. It's just, like, different point of views, so you had, like, an argument and they don't know, like, the people, like the background of it, it is sometimes like easier to get a different point of view. (Focus Group 011)

These findings chime with authors who recognise the importance of caring in relationships between teacher and student (Zheng, 2022). Research has repeatedly shown that relationships, in any context, which typically comprise the feeling that someone cares for us are among the best predictors of well-being at the daily level (Reiss and Hetherington, 2009). In education, caring has been recognised as a core element for creating and maintaining effective teacher-to-student relationships (Noddings, 2015). Caring allows teachers to acknowledge and respond to their students' needs and feelings and provide them with security and emotional support which is important for a positive well-being (Roberts and Kim, 2019; Spilt and Koomen, 2022). The findings from this study also demonstrated the importance staff place on the caring aspect of their role to support students' well-being needs:

Staff Participant

So sometimes it's about, you know, right people in the right roles. You've got to, I feel like you need to have your own motivation as a professional. Needs to include wanting things to be better and your care for that individual has to supersede. (Conversation 017)

The next sub-section takes a closer look at how caring is experienced by students in school through the framework of Attachment Theory.

5.5.2 Attachment Principles – A Help or Hindrance to Student Well-Being?

It is generally accepted that the implementation of attachment principles can improve students' well-being. Saxer et al. (2024, p.2) argue that "Attachment Theory is found to be the strongest theoretical and empirical support regarding the development of teacher-to-student relationships". When Attachment Theory is fully understood and executed well it can complement the psychological needs of autonomy, competency, and relatedness of Self Determination Theory (SDT). SDT is based upon the premise that these psychological needs are

essential for personal development and hence well-being (Ryan and Deci, 2017). Attachment Theory is characterised by a sense of realistic competence and a basis of trust in oneself and in others. This contributes to an ability to explore opportunities, develop, and cope with difficulties and adversities (Collins and Feeney, 2013). In their study, Lavy and Littman-Ovadia (2011) found that individuals with secure attachment, resulting from responsive and sensitive caring, demonstrated higher self-esteem and higher well-being. This in turn led to improved academic achievement and better social and emotional functioning in interpersonal relationships.

Attachment Theory has two functions in supporting well-being, safe haven function and secure base function (Bowlby, 1969). Safe haven function is described as the caregiver's ability to support the child that is distressed. Here, the caregiver's role is to help an upset child regulate feelings of insecurity and stress, to restore feelings of emotional security. Secure base function is described as a child's drive for autonomous exploration of the environment through the promotion of their sense of emotional security. In their systematic review, covering three decades of research into Attachment Theory, Spilt and Koomen (2022) confirm the role of the secure base and safe haven functions in teacher-to-student relationships which promote children's emotional security at school. It is the responsibility of the teacher to facilitate both functions to the benefit of the student. Spilt and Koomen (2022) also found that the conceptualisation and assessment of teacher-to-student relationships holds largely, but not completely, across different development phases, cultural contexts, measurement methods, and stakeholders. This means that the use of Attachment Theory can confidently be applied to this study as an examination of the adolescent student-to-teacher relationship in a secondary school setting.

The student responses in this study focussed on the support element of the teacher-to-student relationship when they have emotional needs, particularly when they have anxiety. This concurs with the safe haven function of providing support to a student when a student is upset, distressed, or needs help. This is further illustrated by the following student responses which emphasised that sometimes being heard, rather than action being taken, is important to them and their well-being:

Participant

If you know the teacher and they know the students, it might not be as easy, but it could be like more comforting.

Sarah Parker - Researcher

Yeah. Thank you.

Participant

Yeah, definitely. I feel like I find it easier to talk to like a teacher I trust more. Because I know that they, if I don't want them to go somewhere and tell someone else, they won't. Whereas, if you don't know them, you don't know whether they will or not. Because sometimes you just want to talk to them and let your emotions out without anything happening.

Sarah Parker – Researcher

OK, so I think that goes back to, that it's just different reasons and different responses.

Participant

Yeah.

Participant

Yeah, because I know a few teachers in school that personally, like outside of school. So, if I was ever feeling like, nervous or upset, I would always go to them first because, like, I trust them and I know them more. But like, sometimes, obviously I trust every teacher. But if there's a teacher that I didn't really know. I didn't really trust. I'm. I'm just talking to them. I feel quite embarrassed and like, guilty talking to them because I don't know them. They don't know me. Like I would feel more safe, like crying in front of a teacher that I know, so then they know how to help me because they've seen me before and they know how to deal with like, anxiety or something. (Focus Group 011)

This is contrary to much of the research which suggests that the safe haven function becomes less important in early adolescence than the safe base function (Ansari et al., 2020; Jerome et al., 2009). As Roorda et al. (2021) in their research identified, adolescents need a safe haven less than younger children because they need less emotional support from an adult. This is because as an adolescent's self-regulation ability develops, the need for adult caregivers to preserve feelings of security may diminish. Other scholars have suggested that the structure of a secondary school environment when students have several relationships with teachers makes a safe haven function less easily obtained, so students look to other ways to support their well-being (Spilt and Koomen, 2022). Vulnerable students, however, may need support because their self-regulating ability is relatively limited which may lead to more excessive support seeking dependency, or other maladaptive coping strategies such as self-harm (Watson et al., 2012). The difficulty here is, who is deciding who is 'vulnerable'? Indeed, the evidence, already discussed from this study has

shown that adults in school view well-being as something in deficit, as something to be fixed, deeming students as vulnerable and in need of support. As Watson et al. (2012) notes, schools have tended to perpetuate the belief that ‘all’ students need adult support. Research suggests, however, that vulnerable students are specifically students at risk, namely because of their disadvantaged economic backgrounds and because of their Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) (Roorda et al., 2021). Students who cannot rely on teachers as a safe haven are likely to experience more feelings of insecurity and spend more time regulating these feelings of insecurity leading to problems of focus and frustration (Watson et al., 2012).

When the work of Freire (2017) is applied here, the critical point regarding Attachment Theory is, does it represent an ‘oppressor to oppressed’ relationship? This is likely because societal norms dictate that a teacher-to-student relationship up to age 16 in England is a compulsory one. Therefore, ‘care’ as one of the principles of Attachment Theory can be seen as an example of Freire’s (2017) ‘banking’ model of education as teachers are depositing their ideas about what ‘care’ is and how ‘care’ should be experienced onto their students. As Freire’s (2017, p.46) ‘banking’ model explains, “the teacher chooses and enforces his choice, and the students comply” with the implication being that students accept and adapt to how ‘care’ is delivered and they have little opportunity to develop their agency to decide how the teacher-to-student relationship, in terms of care and support, can best serve their well-being needs. This was suggested by a student participant through the use of the word “pressured” when talking about the teacher-to-student relationship:

Participant

Some people might not want to share that like how they feel with the teacher? 'cause they see them every day and they might feel like they might get a bit, like, pressured over it. And maybe, like they'd think like talking to somebody who wasn't a teacher. Maybe like a therapist. But who doesn't work with a school would be better to talk to. (Focus Group 014)

This study demonstrates that students clearly felt the importance of the safe haven aspect in terms of supporting their well-being more than the research suggests they should. One reason for this could be that CYP’s development, including adolescence, has been delayed because of the impact of Covid-19 and students are requiring teacher support provided by the safe haven stage for longer. Also, Coulombe and Yates (2022) suggest that the need for attachment security increases when adolescents experience stressful life events which could include the impact of Covid-19. This is supported by some staff who commented on the delayed development of students as a result of the impact of Covid-19:

Staff Participant

Obviously as an SMG (Senior Manager Guidance) we do a lot of work with students, a lot of like mentoring with students, we are trying to encourage resilience. There seems to be, I think probably since Covid if I'm honest their resilience is quite low. (Conversation 016)

Staff Participant

So, and that's all part of their development. And I and, I think that (reference to time out of school and Covid) that is just like a massive impact on their emotional well-being. (Conversation 016)

An alternative view could be that teachers are responding to a crisis and induced need perhaps enforced by the social impact of Covid-19 rather than themselves. The term 'Covid Generation' was used by one staff participant (Conversation 010) when speaking about both the increase in numbers of students needing and seeking support. Staff also recognised the need for different ways of supporting students because of what had happened during Covid-19. This support reflected love and care:

Staff Participant

They were you know out on the streets, they were, they were violent and they were abusive.....X [reference to a named person] taught us that you had to wrap them up with that love and that care. (Conversation 010)

Or another reason might be there is an emphasis on a therapy culture in schools which treats well-being as a medical condition which needs to be made better, thereby creating and encouraging dependency on adult support. The impact of dependency is indicated by the student response below, suggesting normalisation is that students depend on the support from their teachers:

Participant

[Answer given - to what a school where students had positive well-being would be like]. I feel like it would be quite, like, a happy place. And I think, think teachers wouldn't be as open to hear people's, like, thoughts and opinions, because if everyone's well-being is just OK, I don't think anyone, any teachers are going to have, like the way of talking to students. Like, where at this school, where people do struggle a bit, teachers do help a lot. And I just think if it was a perfect school, with everyone happy all the time and that, I feel like it'd be too perfect. And teachers wouldn't be so perfect. (Focus Group 008)

This is not just an expectation that support is available 'if' needed but an expectation that support 'is' needed. In Freirean terms, this again aligns with his traditional view of education whereby the teacher is deciding that students need care support, enforcing their choice on the student, and the student is accepting the deposit of care. In this case, through the 'banking' model, it is the actions of the teacher that encourage dependency, but the students have the illusion of agency created by the action of the teacher. Students believe they need support for their well-being because this is the view they are told by the educators. They accept passively what they are told, and because there is no space for 'dialogue', 'critical consciousness' is not reached, and the students are unable to consider their position from a different perspective. Students are 'oppressed' because they adapt to the situation, rather than seek to change this dependency on support.

Ecclestone (2017) is highly critical of well-being practices that premise an 'attachment-based approach' and undermine individual agency in a neoliberal society. Such approaches are viewed as not empowering, leading to students having lower expectations of themselves which encourages a dependency on teacher support. As Spilt and Koomen (2022) additionally note, three decades of studies have not grabbed hold of the CYP's perspective regarding dependency. They argue that dependency has only relatively recently been relooked at, as a conceptualisation within Attachment Theory. They describe two types of dependency which are emotional dependency and development dependency. Emotional dependency is a chronic and over excessive proximity of support, as evidenced below:

Participant

....but then after you've asked for help and like you have like a constant source of someone helping you, then like it's a lot easier because like, you just talk about your problems to them and they won't like, judge you. (Focus Group 015)

Freire (2007, p.45) discusses how the 'banking' model leads to the 'fatalism' of the 'oppressed' and he states, "tired and anesthetised in need of everything, they are easy prey for aid and assistance policies, that further immerse them in a mind narrowing daily existence ...which in assisting the needy, those precluded from being, must never *assistencialize* them". These beliefs of Freire can be employed to explain why some students liked the constant source of help provided by adults. The more students are internalising the attitudes and ways of the school, that they need help because their well-being is in deficit, the more they are become emotionally dependent on that support, distanced from themselves, and thus are denied the agency over their own well-being needs. This study suggests that whilst schools continue to operationalise well-

being as something that needs to be fixed for all students, it is compromising the nature and value of care in affective relationships.

It is argued that developmental dependency is a more appropriate type of instrumental dependency support. It could be argued, this is because the adult is providing support, but also guidance as to how students can support their own emotional needs. This prevents an over and unnecessary reliance on dependency from adults (Roorda et al., 2021). 'Care' is described by Noddings (2012) as an ethical practice. In this sense, 'ethical care' manifests itself as a series of interactions, a need is expressed, the adult attends, responds, and finally there is a response from 'the cared for'. In contrast when 'care' is not ethical, Noddings (2012) describes it as 'virtue care'. This is where care is given based on 'assumed needs' rather than 'expressed needs'. This would align with the view of therapeutic education that 'virtue care' is encouraging emotional dependency and not sufficiently recognising or embracing developmental dependency to allow for student autonomy in their own well-being. Research by Cassidy et al. (2018) argues, that attachment security is strongly linked to pro social behaviour. Confidence in one's ability to manage one's own distress can contribute to a sense that one has the capacity to act on behalf of others. As Freire (2017, p.67) comments, "many political and educational plans have failed because their authors designed them according to their own personal view of reality, never once taking into account (except as mere objects of their actions) the men-in-a-situation to who their program was ostensibly directed". Applying Freire to the context of this study would require educators to think critically about, despite their good intentions, how their actions delivered through the 'banking' model encourage emotional dependency. Persisting with using the 'banking' model of education will not enable the conditions that allow students' agency over their own well-being. This is because any new approach in this system is another deposit made by the hierarchy and students still have to fit with adult assumptions about how their well-being is to be supported. This is reflected in the following response which demonstrated the treatment of students in Freirean terms as 'objects' rather than 'subjects' in their own lives:

Sarah Parker - Researcher

What I'm trying to get at is obviously there's a lot of choices being made in school to support student's well-being. Do you get to know why those choices have been made or do they just happen?

Participant

They just happen. Yeah. (Focus Group 012)

Hence, the question for schools to deliberate is, how to provide a safe haven function for those when they need it, whilst ensuring a safe base function operates? This is so students can move beyond emotional dependency on the safe haven function provided by teachers and develop the knowledge and skills to have agency over their own well-being. The nature, assumptions and quality of the teacher-to-student relationship appears to be instrumental in driving the effectiveness of the support given. Freire's critical pedagogy provides a possible way forward. Freire (2017) is of the strong opinion that it is the educators who need to facilitate the transformation of authoritarian relationships and in this case, the vertical relationship to a horizontal one between teacher and student. Through facilitating 'dialogue' together an understanding can be reached, and a new teacher-to-student relationship is formed which counters the 'banking' model. Through 'dialogue', Freire (2017, p.52) states, a new term emerges "teacher-student with students-teachers" and they jointly become responsible for a process that can best support student well-being, as this participant recognised:

Staff Participant

Its re-established this is a relationship between two people. It's an equal relationship. It's not you dictating. It's not me dictating. It's actually us working together. (Conversation 017)

This will enable the students to consider their own position and how it can be changed rather than be defined as 'a silent society' and hence 'de-humanised' (Freire, 1985). As other research shows, the teacher's capacity to establish a safe environment and of involving students in decision making are important for how students perceive their amount of and type of caring (Hawk and Lyons, 2008). The evidence from students showed this is needed:

Participant

I know some people who did reach out to teachers, but we're told, oh, you know, it's fine. Don't worry. It's going to be great. You're going to do well. And then they just sort of go. Oh, OK. Thanks. Positivity is great. But like I need a little bit more. (Focus Group 015)

The researcher Khanal (2023) demonstrated how the framework of Freire could be adapted to apply to the pastoral care relationship. His qualitative research in public schools in Nepal uses Freire's critical pedagogy to contextualise learning in the classroom and hence make it meaningful and relatable to the students. His findings include that learning became organic and provided students with tools and opportunities to empower themselves and their learning. For this study, Freire's critical pedagogy could be used with students in a pastoral care relationship.

This would enable the importance of the safe base function to be understood to reduce the emotional dependency and move towards developmental dependency, enabling students to have agency over their own well-being.

Additionally, the safe base function could be provided through a whole school environment and culture as an alternative to the emphasis on pastoral care. However, it must be acknowledged that this is to be achieved in the context of education today where there are barriers schools face in providing effective pastoral care. Several staff participants spoke about lack of appropriate specialist resource, such as Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and a school Police Liaison Officer, which hands the responsibility to schools who may not have the appropriate skilled staff to support students' well-being needs (Conversation 010). There was also so a lack of funding to employ staff resulting in staff being increasingly stretched to support the amount of need (Conversation 010; 016; 017). However, school leaders through policy and practice, can create the conditions for the secure base function by providing the school climate where students feel safe to be themselves, explore, and establish their own identity. This in turn could enable limited pastoral support resources to be targeted effectively where there is a diagnosed need. Research by Sartorio and Thomas (2022) used Freire's 'praxis', to research how teaching in UK Higher Education Institutions could progress in a neoliberal society, to enable personal development, agency, and freedom. This approach could be applied here to schools so that educators can think critically about their role in the pastoral care process to ensure that dependency does not become inevitable:

Staff Participant

I think it's getting lost. It comes down to culture and building that culture and love and respect. (Conversation 018)

5.5.3 Conclusion

Adult-to-student relationships experienced outside of the classroom through the pastoral care system, play a very important part in adolescent students' well-being. Students value high quality, stable, close, and caring pastoral relationships, both from school personnel and external professionals, who support them in times of emotional need. What is apparent from this research, which runs counter to other evidence in the field, is that adolescent students still need adults to foster their emotional security, through secure and safe attachment principles within a protective environment. What has emerged is that one-on-one pastoral care outside the classroom is seen

by both students and staff as something that ‘most’ students need, seemingly perpetuating the medical model approach to well-being, where something is in deficit and needs to be made better. The system of one-to-one pastoral care outside of the classroom appears to be normalising the concept of emotional dependency for most students and is encouraging an unnecessary and over reliance on it. The problem here is that dependency is happening at the expense of students being supported yet encouraged to develop and learn through experiencing the social context of the school; thus, being denied the opportunity to develop a sense of agency to cope with adversity necessary for their current and future well-being.

Whilst some students undeniably need ongoing longer-term support, for mental health and mental illness concerns, this is not the case for all. It could be argued that the quality of support which schools can give is stretched because schools are not sufficiently differentiating support according to need, because of time, lack of funding, and lack of trained staff. What is also apparent is that both staff and students imply that well-being and being supported with your well-being is mainly confined to something which happens outside of the classroom rather than implicitly through teaching and learning relationships in the classroom. The questions then become: What is care? Where is care found in a school? And how can care be experienced to best support student well-being? The next section, therefore, focuses on how the school institutional environment supports the care and well-being of students through ‘mattering’.

5.6 Well-Being Experienced Through the Institutional Environment

This section considers the wider institutional environment and how students experience well-being in school (Konishi et al., 2022). School climate is crucial, “its character can affect pupils’ academic achievement, teachers’ working conditions and the well-being of everyone at school” (Forsberg et al., 2021, p.379). It represents the quality of relationships between teacher-to-student and student-to-student, order, rules, discipline, a sense of school safety, and belongingness for the whole school (Durlak, 2015). Research links a positive school climate with students’ well-being at school (Aldridge and McChesney, 2018; Newland et al., 2019).

Bronfenbrenner and Ceci’s (1994) socio-ecological model can be used to show how mattering is communicated in a school. The model includes the micro system which represents the most intense and direct levels of personal interaction and has the greatest influence on a person. Classrooms and one-to-one work between an adult and student would constitute a micro system. The preceding sections, which focussed on teaching and learning and the pastoral system,

demonstrated the importance of the micro system in school, particularly through the affective relationships students form with their teachers and peers. Bronfenbrenner and Ceci's (1994) model also includes the macro system which represents the cultural ethos of an institution, including large gatherings, communal spaces, policies and practices, rules and organisation. This section considers the importance of mattering through the macro system and the broad relationship students have with the school as a whole institution.

5.6.1 Testing and Examinations

This sub-section considers 'who' matters in testing and examinations, as students cited this as a constant presence in their lives at school which impacts their well-being. Attention is given to the impact of the high stakes performative school climate on well-being for both students and teachers.

The OECD conducted a survey, involving 72 countries and 540,000 students aged 15-16 years, and found that on average 66% of students reported feeling stressed about poor grades and 55% of students felt anxious about school testing even when they felt prepared (OECD, 2017). These findings are endorsed by students in this study who report that test and mock examinations are a significant cause of stress and affect their well-being (Focus Group 008; 014; 015). The stress and the reasons for the stress are discussed in this Focus Group dialogue:

Sarah Parker - Researcher

Anything else that helps or hinders well-being in school?

Participant

Testing in schools. Examinations and tests.

Participant

Oh, they stress me out [said with emphasis]

Participant

We just had our mocks, and I've seen a lot of friends and classmates have a decline in positive well-being. Not eating properly. Not positive mental health. Staying up.

Sarah Parker - Researcher

Yeah. I was just going to say, what is it about the mocks that has caused that? Just talk through it.

Participant

It's the pressure on what we get in these mocks are going to affect our predicted grades. These are predicted grades are going to go to our colleges based on these predictive grades the colleges are gonna give us an offer. Any lower predicted grades than they expect. So, colleges have a set predicted grades that they expect some colleges expect sevens, eights, nines. And if you don't get them in the mocks that affects your predicted grade from your previous mock. It will lower your predicted grade. And if the colleges don't like that, they will not consider your application.

Sarah Parker - Researcher

So, it's the knock on, the exams, the grading the estimated grade?

Participant x3

Yeah

Sarah Parker - Researcher

Right ok.

Participant

It's like a lot of pressure for just like two weeks.

Participant

Yeah. And it's crammed into two weeks. GCSEs are two months. So, you don't have three exams in one day or two exams in one day, it's spread over three months, but these two weeks our mocks are crammed into. We have two exams, three exams every day and some people take extras, so they have extra exams as well and its more pressure.

Participant

It's just more pressure.

Sarah Parker - Researcher

Yeah.

Sarah Parker – Researcher

You were nodding. Well, I think most people were nodding. (Focus Group 015)

Their comments align with researchers who demonstrate that academic performance is a major cause of stress and detrimental to well-being for students (Brown and Woods, 2022; Denscombe, 2000). Students in this study further explained a range of reasons why tests and mock examinations are a cause of stress. They indicated that the pressure they experience is from parents, peers, and teachers. The pressure from parents manifests itself in a sense of failure and letting people down if they do not do well:

Participant

Yeah. I was going to say. Maybe your family pushes you a bit because like, if you don't get the desired grade, then you might let them down. You might feel like really disappointed in yourself because of it. (Focus Group 015)

Participant

It probably depends on the assessment. Like if it's a test or just a small exam in like a subject, then maybe they'll be less pressure from your parents. But there's still that pressure of trying to do well. So, you've done well overall. (Focus Group 014)

This pressure of examination success, not doing well, fear of failure, diminishes self-esteem, and confidence, which are key to well-being (Gennings et al., 2021). Student responses concur with societal norms around academic success; that is success or failure in examinations is perceived to be linked to the prospect of doing well, or not, in the future. Putwain and Symes (2011) note the pressure on doing well because of the consequences of failure of not doing well. This is clearly articulated by students who described the knock-on effect of mock examinations and why there is stress around them, because ultimately, they are deciding the direction and success of your future:

Participant

'Cos like you're just thinking about failure all the time. There's loads of pressure on you and thinking about what going to happen if you like don't succeed. (Focus Group 014)

Students expressed slightly different reasons for the pressure they feel from peers as from parents. They reflected failure is due to your standing and the academic expectations of you held by your peer group. This is another example of Bourdieu's (1973) social capital, whereby a student's worth in their peer networks is judged on their academic ability, as this Focus Group dialogue explains:

Participant

I feel like also you get pressured by like everyone as well, because if you don't do like as good as somebody else and you can get like compared to them and you're like always meant to get like the best you can, and that you might have failed. (Focus Group 014)

Participant

Well, I also think if where it's like if you're typically academic and then you fail a test there's like a social pressure from other students and where you feel kind of like targeted by them because you've scored badly.

Sarah Parker - Researcher

Your peers or anyone?

Participant

Like your friends and peers in school. (Focus Group 014)

These comments suggest that your identity is determined by your academic ability. Giddens (1991) identifies that academic work is a significant contributor to well-being as it constitutes part of a person's identity, alongside gender, and race. Examination stress and pressure to achieve causes a challenge to a student's well-being because it measures one student against another. A student's identity is therefore formed or altered publicly through their academic performance which can cause high levels of stress and challenge to well-being (Giddens, 1991). The study of Clarke and Platt (2023) into the effect of high stakes testing on children found that academic performance is an indicator of self-worth. This concurs with Freire (2017) who characterises lack of self-worth or self-depreciation as a trait of the 'oppressed' who internalise the opinions of others and believe they are worthless, reflected by the following student response:

Participant

If you're expected to do like good or bad on the test. And I said bad because like if you're expected to do bad then everyone will like 'out you' if you know what I mean. (Focus Group 014)

Peim and Flint (2009) delve deeper and discuss how assessment has become the systematic representation of a student's 'being'. They suggest a student's identity is defined by the system of grading because they are perceived to reside within a particular assessment category. Indeed, a kind of truth is revealed about the student, but only one truth, and other truths about the student

are concealed. They perceive that assessment is the most important thing that defines a student. The students' 'being' is integrally linked to assessment as this student explained:

Participant

If you're like, quiet and that you're studying a lot, people are going to expect you to be like really nerdy and always do well on tests. But like, if you're popular and you want, you still want to do well in school, people are going to think you're not popular because you, because popular people only don't care about school, they only care about looks. (Focus Group 011)

Students also spoke about the pressure that came from teachers to do well. The comments suggest that the teachers' emphasis on 'doing' well has a detrimental effect on students 'being' well. This is because the expectation is that preparation for examinations takes precedent over other aspects of their lives that students feel are vital to their well-being, as this Focus Group dialogue demonstrated:

Participant

I think there is an element that people put the pressure on themselves as well, so when it comes to, say GCSEs, because it's, I think it's over, like stressed by teachers. I think it causes students to then become stressed, which then makes them not have time for things that make you have good well-being, and they just naturally decline which actually makes it worse for themselves. (Focus Group 014)

Participant

It's like mentioned a lot that you have to keep working if you want to get the best possible results that you can. So, it's like you're just cutting out all of the other like daily life and routines ,and it just makes it very, not depressing, but it just makes it very...

Participant

Draining.

Participant

Draining, right.

Participant

Yeah, monotonous. (Focus Group 014)

The pressure from teachers is also evident in that there is an expectation that students will attend additional revision sessions to prepare for their examinations. Whilst some students felt that extra revision sessions run by the teacher are helpful for their studies, most felt this negatively impacted their well-being because they have limited time to recharge their batteries:

Participant

And then and then also then you do them at break time and lunch time somewhere as well. But more specifically lunchtime. Which is good because you don't have to, like, give up any of your spare time. You can go. You can come into school at normal time. Leave at normal time. But that could be a negative thing, because like normally lunchtime is a time for you to just kind of wind down for like 40 minutes. So ,like if you do more work for like the final two periods you could still be like stressed out. (Focus Group 015)

Research by Harris et al. (2015) into school climate, found that young people describe the need to sacrifice their own enjoyment to keep up with academic demands. Interestingly findings from this study showed there is a mismatch between what the school teaches students about how to manage stress, and the reality for students which is the teachers' mantra to work and revise:

Participant

In PSHE [Personal, Social, Health Education] we've covered like a lot about well-being and stuff and things that can affect your well-being and how to if you're if you feel like you're quite low and like how to help you get back.

Sarah Parker - Researcher

Yeah. Are there any examples of some of the things that you've covered or activities that you've done to help?

Participant

Like taking time for yourself? Self-care. Going on walks or like just going out, but not going out, but like exploring and like taking time for yourself. (Focus Group 012)

In this case, the useful content around stress management cannot be used effectively by students to support their well-being because they are not encouraged to take up the opportunities, as preparation for examinations takes precedence. This also demonstrates that the penchant for positive education programmes delivered by schools have limited impact when taught in isolation. Kvist Lindholm et al. (2017) found that effective PSHE education is achieved when content is presented in a way that enables students to relate it to their own experiences and

interests. A reason for the mismatch could be because the identity of teachers is formed through a school climate of 'doing' well. This encourages teachers to advise their students to prioritise time spent on academic learning rather than time for other activities which facilitate students 'being' well.

Students indicated that the quality of the relationship between student and teacher during testing and examination times can both help and hinder their well-being. Particularly valued was having a relationship with your teacher which enabled students to have a voice to express how they are feeling, be listened to, and supported. Also, teachers practically helping by marking revision work and thus engaging with the students' learning was seen to support well-being (Focus Group 008; 013; 014; 015).

Conversely, without such strong student-to-teacher relationships, students felt powerless and left alone with their negative feelings about examinations which adversely affected their well-being:

Participant

It's just being the anxiety of having to revise properly because they tell us we have to revise, and obviously that's true, but one wonders whether you've done enough or whether you haven't, so I spend quite a lot of my time worrying if I've done enough or not. I think that affects a lot of people. If they don't know if they've done it right or if they've done it wrong, or if they haven't done enough. (Focus Group 015)

Students also report the pressures from mock examination timetabling, which can last for two weeks with up to three examinations a day (Focus Group 015). This aligns with research from Sung et al. (2016) who notes how examination congestion and timetabling issues affect student well-being. The timing and intensity of mock examinations are different in each school and students in this study recognise the importance of preparation for the actual examinations. This is highlighted by student participants who are resigned to the constraints schools are working under with regards to delivering a content heavy curriculum within a short period of time and they do not think the timing pressures can be alleviated. Thus, perpetuating the conditions which are detrimental to their well-being:

Participant

There is not enough time in the school year...We'll still be learning science work up until....two weeks before are exams I think it is. And there's not enough resource in schools to be able to change it significantly. (Focus Group 015)

Clearly most students in this study felt that examinations affected their well-being negatively. Although other research has indicated that for some students getting good grades enhances their well-being (Konishi et al., 2022). Motivation theories refer to the setting of performance goals and mastery goals, and how they lead to different learning approaches which achieve success (Dull et al., 2015). Some authors have argued that more understanding of this in schools can better support those students who are vulnerable and not motivated by examination performance (Roome and Soan, 2019). This view, however, does not support a neoliberalist outlook which promotes academic success above other success, such as in sport and in the arts (Brown and Carr, 2019). It also posits non-academic achieving students as vulnerable, in deficit, and needing support with their studies. There is insufficient understanding that for some, success other than academic is more important to satisfy their well-being self-realisation needs. The following quotes reflected the differences in student and staff perception about the extent of autonomy students have over additional academic support:

Staff Participant

And I don't think, don't quote me on this because I'm not actually sure on this, whether it's, it's actually set in stone that they have to attend [revision sessions] I'm not sure. (Conversation 019)

Sarah Parker (EDU - Postgraduate Researcher)

So we're saying so some of it you choose, but for some subjects there might be a bit of encouragement, persuasion that this would be good for you?

Participant

Heavily implied.

Sarah Parker (EDU - Postgraduate Researcher)

Yeah.

Participant

In one of my subjects I was told we have to go.

Participant

We have to go.

Participant x2

Yeah. (Focus Group 015)

Drawing on the work of Freire (1985) to interpret the evidence from this study, it is possible to understand how self-actualisation and well-being for many students is not being realised through the current schooling system with the emphasis on academic achievement. For many students, an education system enacted through the 'banking' model, that prioritises and 'deposits' the view of academic achievement above personalisation, is 'de-humanising'. This is because implicit in the 'banking' model of education is the assumption that a person is merely in the world, not of the world, and the person is an 'object' controlled by the views of others holding the power, not an active 'subject' who has freedom and agency over their destiny (Freire, 2017). As Freire (2001, p.22) advocates, "...I cannot avoid a permanently critical attitude toward what I consider to be the scourge of neoliberalism.... and its inflexible negation of the right to dream differently, to dream of utopia". Participants in this study explained, school priorities of academic success do not enable them the freedom to reach self-actualisation in ways that they feel are important to them and thus their well-being. In such an oppressive exam focussed school environment it is very difficult for students to think critically, fulfil their potential, and achieve 'humanisation' to change their well-being experience. This is reinforced by Matahela (2025) who in her study, uses the lens of Freire's humanising philosophy to understand why globally, nurses and nurse educators are leaving academia, because they experience 'de-humanisation' and hence feel a sense of oppression. Stern and Brown (2016), in their research used Freire's ideas about 'armed love', as a 'praxis' based effect, as a way to build community engagement and activism to counter the burnout and depression educators feel working in a neoliberal culture.

The pressure felt by students through parents, peers, and teachers suggest that a sense of belonging is particularly necessary to students during testing and examination periods. Belonging is a basic human need where individuals seek to initiate and maintain positive and meaningful social relationships (Baumeister and Leary, 2017). The difficulties in not belonging can translate in feelings of isolation, depression, anxiety, and negative behaviours towards others (Baumeister and Leary, 2017). Considering educational settings, Goodenow (1993, p.80) defines belonging as "the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included and supported by others in the school social environment". At the school level, student-to-teacher relationships, student-to-student relationships, and teacher instructional practice are seen by students in this study as fundamental for developing a sense of belonging leading to an improved well-being

during testing and examination phases. As other researchers have found when investigating the significance of belonging to students in school, it impacts students' well-being by helping them feel secure (Allen et al., 2022).

As has been evidenced through student responses in this study, there are some clear ways in which schools can alleviate some examination stresses and hence contribute to a better sense of well-being for students. These include ensuring positive caring teacher-to-student relationships, better organisation of assessments, and enabling the time and space for other activities important to the students' well-being to continue alongside examination preparation. Freire's (2017) critical pedagogy again can provide the context for how marginalised people, in this case students within the testing and examination context, may transform their reality. He emphasises that students, if given the opportunity, have the agency to explain the barriers that hinder their choice of possibilities, namely the barriers to their well-being during said testing and examinations. Other researchers have highlighted the relevance of Freire's critical pedagogy to positive student-to-teacher relationships within the current educational context. In their study, Quarmby and Luguetti (2023) use the theoretical framework of Freire to examine pedagogical practices in sport. They conclude that mutual trust and respect between student and teacher create a safe pedagogical environment and a sense of belonging for students.

Whilst it can be argued that short bursts of stress can be beneficial, examination stress can have a negative effect on well-being and thus precipitate the development of anxiety and depression (Denscombe, 2000). The effect on well-being for some students can extend beyond the period of testing. This is because they still feel they must work because of the pressure to do so has become a constant in their lives. As this response shows:

Participant

You feel like this is so important. Like it consumes you. When we finished last mocks. I just remember feeling like so lost because the last like month I just spent revising and then doing the exams and revising and like stressing over them and then they were done. I was like what do I do now. I kept stressing. (Focus Group 015)

This suggests that schools need to think differently to support students' well-being, provide suitable strategies that work, enabling students to benefit from what they have in place. This is because research indicates that schools can help students during times of academic pressure. Weare and Gray (2003) note that educational achievement and a decrease in health risks has been directly associated with stress management techniques. The OECD (2017) comments that providing opportunities to improve young people's academic and stress related coping abilities

during examination times should be a target for schools. Some authors refer to the need for schools to support students with ‘academic buoyancy’ which is defined as one’s capacity to recover from minor educational adversity (Putwain et al., 2024). In their study, Putwain et al. (2024) found that ‘academic buoyancy’ relates positively to students’ adaptive ways of coping with examination stress. Given that buoyancy is something that is malleable, interventions to strengthen it can be highly beneficial for students experiencing challenges, adversities, or academic stressors. Their findings show that building ‘academic buoyancy’ kept a sense of perspective, agency, and reduces catastrophising and rumination around failure (Putwain et al., 2024). It can be argued that all this is simply addressing symptoms rather than the root cause of testing and examination stress for students. The next sub-section, therefore, considers the reasons why pressure is placed on students to do well academically which for most negatively impacts their well-being.

5.6.2 Who Benefits From a Performance Culture?

The school climate is predominantly a high stakes performative environment (Ball, 2003). Performativity is described as “a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as a means of incentive, control and attrition to change” (Ball, 2003, p.216). The problem for student well-being in a performance culture is the tension for schools between supporting students’ well-being, now a statutory requirement from the DfE (DfE, 2021b), whilst being judged on the quality of academic outcomes (Ball, 2003; Clarke, 2023; Jerrim, 2022). Such a performative environment which at its centre is a high stakes examination places an emphasis on ‘doing’ well. This was highlighted by the following Focus Group dialogue describing the climate schools are working in and why examination success is important for schools:

Sarah Parker – Researcher

In terms of the exams, what do you think is the motivation for this from the school in putting so much into the exams? What's their reasons?

Participant

They want us to get the best possible results that we can.

Participant x2

Yeah. Yeah.

Participant

Mmm.

Participant

Not just for us, but for their kind of reputation in exams as well, but there's it's not necessarily just they want you to do well because it's there like it's their subject and they sort of well, the Maths department, all of the people did bad. So that means they've done bad as well. So, it affects them.

Sarah Parker - Researcher

So right, by association?

Participant

Yeah.

Participant

Yeah, the school has the English Baccalaureate programme so also they want to try and rank as high in that as possible.

Sarah Parker - Researcher

So, what's that? Is that you have to do 5 certain subjects, is it?

Participant

It's English, Maths, a language, science. They want to try and score the highest.

Sarah Parker - Researcher

Right. OK.

Participant

I do think, there's that kind of pressure in school. That if they know everyone does really bad at something. They're going to get a lower ranking.

Sarah Parker - Researcher

Right? OK. And why do rankings matter to the school?

Participant

It makes them look good.

Participant

Reputation.

Participant

Yep, it makes more people wanna come here and get their education.

Participant

And there's profit in it. [laughter]

Sarah Parker – Researcher

Yeah. No, it's alright. I'm not making any judgements.

Participant

Yeah, more funding.

Participant

Which is understandable. (Focus Group 014)

Schools are judged through league tables and inspections, which as well as judging academic outcomes, judge progression routes to Russell group universities. Despite Woodhouse (2008) suggesting that the majority of League Tables fail the normal tests of reliability and validity including statistical validity, a school's focus is to satisfy the academic demands through its examination outcomes. As such, a performativity culture which controls, compares, and incentivises schools, is counter to the well-being narrative of 'being' well (Ball, 2003; Navarro et al., 2017; Roome and Soan, 2019).

These concerns are reflected by a staff participant's reference to the existence of a performative culture in schools and the negative impact it has on them as professionals:

Staff Participant

I've worked a lot in in my previous role of integrating students into different types of schools in different areas across X. And you know, I've observed lots of classes and everything too. And I think there's frustration amongst professions which I think there is that and this is that, you know, there's the work that there's a lot more requirements on a

member of staff now. In terms of monitoring, targeting, writing, it all takes time, doesn't it?
(Conversation 017)

Some scholars argue that schools' well-being strategies are undermined by a performativity culture (Culshaw and Kurian, 2021; O'Toole and Simovska, 2022). This is because subjective well-being and self-realisation are restricted to academic performance, which neglects the fact that self-realisation can mean something different for different individuals (Bonell et al., 2019; Brown and Carr, 2019). A school culture with an emphasis on 'doing' well falls short in recognising that well-being is subjective and does not enable students to develop a 'self-realisation' of what is significant to them. It only enables self-actualisation for those who fit the profile of academic achiever (Bonell et al., 2019; Jerrim, 2022). As identified earlier in this section, both students and teachers are caught up in this performative culture of 'doing' well as the strategies to support 'being' well play second fiddle to the dominance of the performative culture. Biesta (2014) argues that when education is privileging qualification to the point of indoctrination, children are subsumed into an educational machine and are not empowered to be subjects of their own lives rather the objects of instruction, as this student suggested:

Participant

I know a lot of people who would spend their evenings just feeling guilty that they weren't doing revision, but they had nothing to do, the mocks were finished. They're allowed to go out and watch telly. They're allowed to be with their friends, but they still felt I have to go home. I have to do revision. I'm not doing something. I'm not being active because it's been drilled into them. They go home; they work then they sleep. (Focus Group 015)

This study exposes the reality for many schools, that the performance culture in operation is having a direct negative impact on the well-being of many adolescents. This is because as Ball (2003, p.220) notes "we become uncertain about the reasons for actions. Are we doing this because it is important, because we believe in it, because it is worthwhile? Or is it being done ultimately because it will be measured or compared". Freire (2001, p.93) in several of his writings addresses the politicisation of schools and talks about "the fatalistic philosophy of neo-liberal politics" and "... how human interests are abandoned whenever they threaten the values of the market". Freire's concepts of 'dialogue' and 'critical consciousness' could be applied here in that teachers need to perceive their reality in a new way and identify the power structures and 'de-humanising' conditions that upheld the unjust positions; thus as Freire (2017) advocates, they 'name the world' to realise how political power works, enabling them the ability to act in an

informed way. Teachers must not succumb to a performance culture but restore the humanity of themselves and their students, using their agency to create a better well-being culture.

Heidegger's (1977) concept of 'enframing' and critique of technology can be used to enhance understanding of how the performance culture operates in schools. Education has been 'enframed' through technology, by way of assessment, and the culture of efficiency and performance. The identity of education is formed through assessment and represented through empirical data ranked, ordered, categorised, and graded. This identity presides over the identity of the people within it, its leaders, teachers and students, because education is institutionalised and all individuals have their identity shaped by the institution. This helps understand why a student's identity is linked to academic prowess and a teacher's identity is linked to securing that academic prowess. 'Enframing' is about control and this control constricts the possibilities of 'being' as it privileges 'doing'. In their research with teachers, Holloway and Brass (2018) found that neoliberalism had taken the subjectivity out of teaching, resulting in a new kind of teacher whose identity is created and valued through markets, management, and numerical performance indicators. In this study, students experience well-being through the well-being of the institution, the institution's well-being is linked to assessment and performance, and this is driven by national education policy and directives. Hence, Heidegger's (1977) concept of 'enframing' can be used to understand why a performative culture does not support subjective well-being for students nor teachers.

In summary, it has been shown that the heavy emphasis on testing and examinations does not support the majority of students' well-being. This is due to the pressure students feel of failure when they do not live up to the performative expectations normalised by parents, peers, teachers, and the school. A school dominated by a performative climate upon which its identity is formed does little to support and promote the well-being of the students and staff within it.

5.6.3 Does "Mattering" in School Matter?

This sub-section considers how school rules and organisation impact student well-being. Mattering is multi-faceted and different theorists and researchers define and operationalise it differently. Rosenberg and Gara (1985), in their seminal work on mattering, identified two dimensions of mattering which are interpersonal mattering and societal mattering. Societal mattering encompasses the actions of the school upon the school culture and climate which can make a difference to whether a student matters or not. As Paradisi et al. (2024) explain, the

connection between mattering and well-being can be seen through the lens of positive psychology, which shows how mattering in the whole school context can promote a positive well-being. In contrast mattering can be seen from a deficit perspective where not mattering can lead to a lack of well-being.

There is a lack of direct responses from students about their thoughts on whether they felt they mattered to the institution and how this affects their well-being. However, through some of their comments on school rules it could be inferred that they do not always feel valued by the institution (Focus Group 008; 009; 013; 014), as this Focus Group dialogue suggests:

Sarah Parker – Researcher

And in terms of sort of rules and routines, how do they affect well-being, how things are structured and organised in the school?

Participant

Well in the winter we're not really allowed, like we're not really allowed in school, so we have to stay outside at break and lunch.

Sarah Parker - Researcher

Does that affect people's well-being?

Participant

Sometimes if it's like really, really cold and we can't go inside, then it's like quite bad.

Sarah Parker – Researcher

OK. Yeah. Thank you.

Participant

Well, you know that you're not allowed to wear jewellery and stuff. Like people like to express their selves and it's kind of not really allowed.

Sarah Parker – Researcher

Do you think if people could not have uniforms in schools and wear, you know, jewellery and have the hair done how they wanted, do you think that would be helpful?

Participant

Yeah, because some people might be more confident when they have extra accessories or have their hair in different ways, like it might make them feel more confident. And then when school's restricting it, that would reduce their confidence.

Participant

And I don't see why it's a problem having jewellery because it's not really distracting anyone.

Sarah Parker – Researcher

So, leading on from that point. So, when anything is put in place to do with well-being, do the students get explained to, why these things are in place, why these things are necessary, why these things are happening?

Participant

Not really. We just say it's the wrong stuff. [Talking about uniform]

Participant

Yeah.

Sarah Parker - Researcher

Right.

Participant

We've just got to follow it.

Participant

We just get told like it's part of the uniform. We are allowed one pair of earrings and then other than that it's no jewellery. You can only have like natural colours in your hair.

Sarah Parker - Researcher

Right. So, nobody would explain - and this is the reason why these things are in place.

Participant x3

No.

Participant

They say it's a distraction sometimes but It's not really a distraction.

Participant

Nobody really looks at your jewellery.

Sarah Parker – Researcher

No, but that would be a word used. It's a distraction.

Participant x2

Yes. (Focus Group 013)

Messages about mattering come from societal norms, experiences, and interpersonal relationships operating within a school (Elias et al., 2025). Thus, a student's perception of their mattering is highly related to their experiences within the school context. As they spend a significant amount of time at school, this impacts their identity, sense of meaning and purpose, and is integral to a sense of well-being. In their systematic review of studies into mattering and well-being, Paradisi et al. (2024) found that an individual's perception of being important to the institution increased achievements, including those of an academic nature, and lessened the intent to be disengaged or engage in anti-social behaviour. Elias et al. (2025) highlight the fact that mattering is everywhere with events, experiences, faces, sounds, music, art, pictures, and language contributing to the dimension of mattering.

Some authors stress the link between identity and mattering (Flett et al., 2023). Rosenberg and Gara (1985) stress the link between having a coherent identity and a positive well-being and mental health, noting that in the absence of a positive identity, a negative identity will be sought. Elias et al. (2025) argue that students with well-being and mental health concerns often have a troubled sense of their own identity and sense of purpose.

One can matter in ways that are pro-social, individualistic, or anti-social. Many have sought to matter at the expense of others or at least to interpret mattering as one-upmanship. Schools often replicate that structure creating implicit or explicit hierarchies, encouraging competition at the lower levels of those hierarchies. Therefore, students will be distracted with that competition and less likely to threaten existing power structures of power and privilege. It could be that school can inadvertently be encouraging this through recognition of some students' achievements over others. This is evident in how academic success and sporting success were seen by the students as particularly valued:

Participant

It's always the sporty ones (who get mentioned in assemblies). (Focus Group 009)

Participant

It seems like teachers want most students to go to university and it gets difficult when you say you don't want to go. (Focus Group 014)

As Freire (2017, p.69) writes, “often educators and politicians speak and are not understood because their language is not attuned to the concrete situation of the people they address. Accordingly, their talk is just alienated and alienating rhetoric”. Thus, in Freirean (2017) terms, this is another example of how power operates in schools as his thoughts about ‘alienation’ can be applied to students who feel they do not matter because the school’s message perpetuates domination of a certain type of student. Through the ‘banking’ model students internalise the values and behaviour of their ‘oppressor’, the school, leading to a sense of powerlessness to change the situation in order that they matter.

Studies looking at the school environment have demonstrated the links between mattering and well-being. A study was conducted by Somers et al. (2022), focussing on mattering, on the academic lives of American high school students. They found the promotion of mattering yielded mental health benefits and positive behaviours towards academic work. Additionally, Flett et al. (2023) in their study with adolescents in Chinese schools, found that mattering as a protective resource enhances well-being experiences and academic successes.

What is clear is that schools believe students matter:

Staff Participant

I think because it comes from above and about, you know, everyone is here to do their best for the kids. And all the staff are just really lovely. They all want the same thing. I think. (Conversation 016)

It can be argued that through changing the school policies to meet students’ needs, the school is demonstrating that students’ matter:

Staff Participant

For example, we had a no ‘make up’ rule but we have now changed that to you can wear a bit of ‘make up.’ We had advice from CAMHS because a student they were working with had said it helps their identity - ‘I feel safe’, ‘I feel like me’. They were used to wearing ‘make up’ at home and during lockdown. TIKTOK was a big influence on students. (Conversation 022)

Some staff held the view that rules were necessary exactly because the students mattered and they wished to provide a structured environment to support students' development and well-being:

Staff Participant

Yes, so school is the place where sometimes the first time there's boundaries where you're not the adult, you are the child in school, you know you don't have the responsibility or having to take care of the whole family or you haven't had to. It's so some of these young people are going through so much at home that school can't be so unstructured and so free willed. There needs to be some level of consistency for them, whether that be in the form, staff, or rules or expectation. (Conversation 017)

However, the impasse is that at times the rules and organisation suggest to students that they do not always matter. As Roffey (2015) explains, the language used surrounding rules is often of a deficit nature which does not encourage a sense of belonging. This might be because the rationale for the rules are not made clear to students. This is reflected in several student participants responses who do not perceive the reason rules exist are sufficiently explained by the school (Focus Group 008; 013; 014; 015).

There is also the perception that some of the rules do not seem appropriate for schools today, either in reflecting the workplace demands students will face, societal norms in behaviour, and financially for the parents, as staff participants reflected:

Staff Participant

We have moved from having zero – tolerance on some things. We prioritise well-being for students and try to work with students and parents. (Conversation 022)

Staff Participant

Yeah. I'm, I'm just thinking of uniform policies. I'm thinking of makeup policies. Are our uniform standards out of date because most students in state schools will not go into an employment where they have to wear a full blazer and tie because the nature of working in our society has changed. I was having this conversation with a colleague the other day. Are we really fighting the right battles? If a girl has longer lashes on, is that the battle? It's not the right things, but then there are caveats, so those long nails are not appropriate for playing football or basketball. You can't. There's certain games where if you're going to make contact, you can hurt yourselves, as an example. Does uniform need to change? I'd

probably say so. Has our economic climate changed for parents to be able to afford uniform? Yes, it has. That's just one area. (Conversation 018).

If schools could consider the rapid changes taking place in the current world and thus 'what matters' to adolescent students, and act on this, it may in turn help adolescents feel they 'do matter' and bring about an increased sense of well-being.

In summary, the findings show that despite schools clearly believing that students matter, this is not fully reciprocated by the students feeling that they matter to the school. What is difficult for schools is having the knowledge and understanding of how all the socio and ecological influences can impact student well-being. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) model recognises that socio-ecological systems are dynamic, change over time, and people have different experiences within the system. Where students are marginalised which effects their well-being, it has less to do with social and emotional skills, or academic ability, or sense of purpose, but more to do with societal norms about their social value or mattering (Pawlo et al., 2019). They conclude that very few educational professionals are making concerted, coordinated, continuous attempts to inspire a sense of purpose, and communicate pro societal mattering which would have a significant impact on student well-being.

5.6.4 Conclusion

A sense of mattering to the school positively or negatively affects how students experience well-being. How the school is communicating explicitly and implicitly whether students feel they matter to the school is important. What is shown is that testing, examinations, rules, and organisation do not always reflect to the students that they matter to the school. Most students experience of frequent testing, preparation for examinations, and examinations themselves has a significant negative effect on their well-being because they feel pressure from parents and the school to do well. This pressure manifests itself in a sense of failure because they are letting other people down and the feeling that poor results will limit their future educational and employment opportunities. The emphasis schools place on academic performance is often seen by students as more important than other skills and attributes.

The identity of a student is entwined with their academic abilities because this is what the school values, communicated, by their words and actions. Students feel pressure from peers if they do not perform in line with the expectations of their academic ability and in line with how peer culture determines you will perform in line with your peer constructed social identity. The pressure to 'do

well' instigates a flurry of interventions and extra sessions, often compulsory if a student is perceived not to be 'doing' well. This in turn disrupts the natural rhythms of a student's life, taking away their agency over the things that they feel are important to their well-being.

Students express the importance of positive respectful caring relationships between teacher and students and schools enabling them to choose what is important for their well-being alongside examination preparation. Interestingly, students recognised the pressure of 'doing' well that teachers and schools face, alarmingly more than teachers recognised the pressures of 'doing' well on students. This could be because a high stakes testing culture is now normalised in schools and staff are passive recipients of this situation. What also emerged from the evidence is that the effects of testing and examinations on students' well-being is not confined to short periods of time, it is a constant in students' lives. As early as Year 7, repeated testing is apparent and is often explained to students as necessary for students to secure good GCSEs (researcher field notes). As students indicated the unrelenting pressure of 'doing' well academically is potentially moving well-being from a temporary poor state to longer term concerns with mental health and mental illness.

Although staff think and demonstrate that students' matter, through the language, action, rules, and organisation of the school, adolescent students do not always believe they matter and it impacts on identity, feelings of self-worth, and engagement. As has been reflected in the evidence, the balance in schools seems to be weighted in the favour of viewing students through a deficit lens of mattering in the social, emotional or academic domains. Students indicate that frequent use of such deficit language and practice have been shown to be more likely demotivating than encouraging, thus reducing students' sense of possibilities in their own minds for a positive well-being. Although, there are some very early green shoots of promise that schools understand and promote the importance of mattering the overwhelmingly conclusion is that schools do not.

5.7 Student Voice and Agency

This section focuses on student voice (SV) and the place it occupies in well-being. There is no agreed theorisation or conceptualisation of SV. Conner (2022) comments that the term SV has different meanings depending on the institution. In this study, it is discussed in terms of the structures a school has put in place, such as school councils, with mechanisms and boundaries to engage with and hear the voice of students. In their work, Robinson and Taylor (2007) argue that

for SV practice to be ethical, four core values need to be present. These are: a conception of communication as dialogue; the requirement for participation and democratic inclusivity; the recognition that power relations are unequal and problematic; and the possibility for change and transformation. In their study, Holquist et al. (2023) found two core components necessary for effective SV: 'structures' and 'relationships' within schools. The following sub-sections will explore the structure component of SV through discussion of the intent of the SV systems and structures set up by schools. The relationship component will be explored through discussion around which students have access to participate in SV structures and how well do SV representatives represent other students. The section will conclude with discussion on the nature of power relationships between adult and student and how transformative SV is.

5.7.1 The Intent of Student Voice Structures

The most frequently mentioned systems and structures that exist to operationalise SV are School Councils, SV Groups, leadership roles such as Form Captains, Prefects, Head Girls, Head Boys, and Mental Health Ambassadors (Focus Group 008; 009; 010; 011; 012; 014; 015; 016). These structures are adult designed roles/spaces designated for SV to happen. In addition, a few staff mentioned the use of feedback strategies such as questionnaires, surveys, and Instagram posts. (Conversation 010; 019; 020; 022) as a way of capturing SV. There is a lack of clarity about the theorisation of SV (Atkinson et al., 2020; Fielding, 2004; Simmons et al., 2015). This aligns with the majority of student responses from this study which are unclear about the purpose and intent of SV as reflected in this Focus Group dialogue:

Sarah Parker – Researcher

If there was a generic issue about, you know, we'd like to see this in well-being or we'd like this put in place. Do you have school councils or any routes where that sort of thing could be raised?

Participant

I think so [said hesitantly]

Participant

I think we have school councils, but I don't really see them.

Sarah Parker - Researcher

So, you don't see the people or don't see what they do, or both?

Participant

Both.

Participant

Both.

Sarah Parker - Researcher

Right. So how do students view the Student Council?

Participant

What is the student council? Like student voice or something?

Participant

I think so.

Sarah Parker - Researcher

Some schools, I don't know about here, some schools have student councils where the students are representing the students. So, students could put what they want to the student council, who then have meetings with staff so anything like that?

Participant

I don't think the school council does actually anything.

Participant

Yeah, they don't.

Participant

Yeah, I don't think so.

Participant

Normally we normally pick them like I think once a year, but they don't really do anything in our classes. They don't have to leave lesson to in order to speak as a group whereas like other schools might do. (Focus Group 009)

Some student views did align more with scholars who argue the intent of SV is about changing educational policy and practice (Rudduck, 2005). The implication from the students is that by providing information about the feelings and experience of students around well-being, the school climate and culture could change:

Participant

Well, like you can tell them like ideas you have like for the school to make it like more comfortable for you to be there or like something. And now I think they have meetings or something and they discuss what everyone else has been saying. (Focus Group 012)

Participant

Um, because a lot of students here have quite similar backgrounds and other bits. And sometimes people, like, can understand what's going on and the SV they just help people and other teachers, like, understand what some people are going through. And it helps people to speak up a bit. (Focus Group 008)

The staff view bore more resemblance with authors who have suggested that the focus of SV is about helping students develop social and economic competencies, social awareness, and responsible decision making (Holquist et al., 2023):

Staff Participant

Yeah, we have the SV, which is really important because it's them and their say. And obviously we have the senior leadership team that work alongside them and there's lots of things that where we encourage the students to take responsibility for their well-being. (Conversation 019)

Staff Participant

SV enables our students to develop leadership skills which will help them in life. (Conversation 022)

Staff Participant

I think SV has been good has been it's also about how to motivate the students, like clubs has really come to them forefront this academic year. You know, getting them things that we I thought would be behind in terms of motivating the students to have access to those opportunities. They then think it's cool to do that. It's changing the dynamic. So, SV is great. (Conversation 017)

In their research, Mitra and Serriere (2012) talk about SV as an 'insider approach' or an 'outsider approach'. An 'insider approach' is about operating SV within the school governance structures to effect change. An 'outsider approach' questions those governance systems and structures recognising them as structures of oppression and a barrier to effective SV work. The findings above, could suggest that staff are operating SV from an 'insider approach' whilst students are anticipating the 'outsider approach' to transform their experience of well-being in school. Critiques of SV have highlighted how SV practices may be co-opted by schools to reinforce oppression rather than focus on social justice (Holquist et al., 2023; Mayes, 2020). In Fraser's (2013, p.164) framework of social justice, "parity of participation" is placed as centre stage. Therefore, if schools are deciding the type of structures through which to channel SV, an 'insider

approach', this cannot fulfil the principles of social justice because it limits the voice and agency of students. As Fielding (2004, p.302) warns student voice practices which are entirely designed by managers can "redescribe and reconfigure students in ways that bind them more securely into the fabric of the status quo".

In Freire's (2017) 'banking' model there is an aspect of his view of education which supports the idea that schools are reinforcing their oppression through trying to integrate students into the systems and structures they have devised for SV. In this way, they can 'manage' their intended outcomes for SV. He does accept, however, that staff could be doing this knowingly or unknowingly. When Freire (2017, p.47) talks about the 'oppressed', he does not see them as living outside society but living inside the structures which the 'oppressors' have set up to make them "beings for others". Through ensuring conformity, this prevents them from becoming 'subjects' in their own lives. Applied to this study, Freire (2017) suggests that schools should not integrate students into the SV structures they have devised but transform the structures and create spaces so students can think critically, becoming 'beings' for themselves. This study recognises the well-intentioned efforts of teachers but casts light on the fact that they do not realise they are possibly 'de-humanising' their students by stunting their voice and agency through the very structures they have put in place for SV to operate.

So, although it can be argued that the outcome of SV structures set up by schools may be one of reinforcing oppression of SV, there is no suggestion, from the data collected, that this is the intention of school staff. What is evident in the staff responses is a lack of what Freire (2001) describes as 'knowing'; that is being curious and open to further learning about the purpose of SV structures in place. Also reinforced in the exchange below is there are 'official' structures set up, implying that voice is only listened to in spaces sanctioned by the school:

Staff Participant

They had this, they had this student.... I can't remember what it was called and in that it was a group and, in that group, there were representatives on every year, like a sort of council or forum. People from every year. I think it was. Oh, yeah. I remember, it was one person from every form group. So, every form had a representative, one representative. And they would meet up. I don't know. Once a month or whatever. And they will talk about what issues that they have from year 7 to year 11. I haven't heard of it in this school.

Sarah Parker - Researcher

And what role would the adults have in this?

Staff Participant

There would be an adult there, but I don't know anymore. It was official. It was well known, it was co-ordinated. But I don't think they have it here. (Conversation 020)

To summarise, there are systems and structures in place where the voice of the students can be listened to. The difference between staff and students centres around a lack of clarity about the purpose of SV. Students view SV structures as way to effect change for themselves as 'beings', whilst most staff focus more on students 'becoming', and developing the skills required for adulthood. The question becomes, despite these differences in intent, how well these structures can ascertain the students' views regarding well-being which can be used to influence policies and practices. As Freire (2017) asserts, on systems and structures operating in schools, it is clear that although individuals may be conditioned by such things, it does not mean that individuals need to be determined by them. The next sub-sections, therefore, explore the effectiveness of the systems and structures in representing SV.

5.7.2 Who Has Access to Participate in Student Voice Structures

The previous sub-section demonstrated that the voice of students is predominately obtained through the systems and structures, such as student councils and leadership positions, set up by adults. When SV is discussed in terms of such systems and structures, some argue this has restricted and undermined SV (Smyth et al., 2014). Students are disconnected or disempowered from these school systems and thus marginalised (Mayes, 2020; Ralph, 2021). In their research into the constructs of SV, Holquist et al. (2023) found that the majority of students feel they have few opportunities to have an input into decision making in classrooms and schools. This sub-section considers the extent to which students have access to participate in those SV systems and structures set up by schools. Consideration is given to how student representatives are chosen and what qualities and characteristics are looked for in those that represent the students. The relevance for this study being, how democratic and inclusive is SV in representing the student body in matters that affect them? (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015; Moore, 2022; Rudduck and Fielding, 2006; Spyrou, 2011).

Some student positions, such as Form Captains are elected by their peers (Focus Group 008; 012). Students selecting their own form representatives would suggest they have a certain amount of democracy and choice over who represents them; however, it depends on who stands, what manifesto they present, and how the vote is taken. If this is put together with how students

talked about stereotyping, the licence to vote for a representative of whose stereotypical peer group you are not part of, without a secret ballot, would bring into question how democratic and inclusive the representation of SV is. As Schafer and Yarwood (2009) observe, the interpersonal power relationships between students are as significant as the power relationship between student and adult. As one student stated:

Participant

Sometimes you just vote the same as everyone else. It's usually the popular ones who get to be Form Captains. (Focus Group 008)

Most leadership positions, such as Prefects, Head Girl, Head Boy, and Mental Health Ambassadors are appointed by staff, sometimes through an application process (Focus Group 008; 009; Conversation 022). Those appointed by adults are not always endorsed by their fellow students as this Focus Group dialogue indicated:

Sarah Parker – Researcher

OK. Even if it was something that wasn't personal to the individual, you know their personal well-being, but something that was a good well-being idea generally for the school that still wouldn't go through, people would still not want to go through that route.

Participant (x2)

No.

Sarah Parker – Researcher

Why not?

Participant

Maybe the people on it

Participant

It's always the same people who get picked

Participant

Yeah, the teacher's pets, who never get into trouble.

Participant

I know my friends have wanted to be on it, but they never get picked. It's always the same people but yeah different people would be good because different things might happen. (Focus Group 009)

If staff are selecting students to SV structures and systems through an application process, this firstly limits access to those who possess the skills to access the application process. As

Bernstein (1971) comments, children of lower social classes are disadvantaged in having their voice heard because of their orientation to language and narrative which is not privileged by the pedagogical communities of the school. This is further borne out by more recent research which has found that opportunities for marginalised young people to have opportunities to contribute to decision making are lacking. This is because of their colour, race, gender, and SEND (Brasof and Levitan, 2022; Mitra, 2018). Students having literacy skills was seen by Freire (2017) as fundamental to them having a voice because it provides a way of 'reading the world' including the ability to locate oneself within the broader social and cultural context of the world. Such skills are a prerequisite for enabling marginalised students to have the opportunity to participate in SV structures and to position them, so their voice is heard in matters that affect their well-being. Research by Reynolds (2007) applied Freire's methods to improve literacy amongst adolescents in the US, through challenging teachers to include the lives of their students in their teaching of literacy. The results suggested that student literacy improved which is an initial step in developing their critical agency.

Secondly, if teachers are selecting the representatives, it enables adults to privilege their view on who should represent the students. The findings showed a disparity between whom the students think should hold such SV positions and the qualities and characteristics they perceived staff looked for. The student responses indicated that to hold such student leadership positions, qualities such as kindness, caring, and being supportive are important. Student responses reflected that it is more likely that a certain type of student will be appointed by staff, including 'being known' to the school, possessing leadership qualities, and being well-behaved:

Sarah Parker - Researcher

And how do they get chosen?

Participant

I think you just have to apply for it, and, like, I think you've just got to be someone who's kind and caring, really, to become head boy or head girl.

Participant

And like, when they apply, you've got to put what you're good at and, obviously, you've probably been at this school for ages and they know if you're a good leader and, yeah.

(Focus Group 008)

To understand the differences as to why students and staff perceive the qualities for SV representation differently, Bourdieu (1973) who wrote about power in educational settings offers a view. Bourdieu's theory of the different forms of capital, economic, cultural, and social, explain the different ways of how power can be enacted. He talks about linguistic codes and the language that people from different social classes possess. He explains that students with a linguistic code, like that transmitted by the school, will be most likely to achieve in that school. It appears for this study, that these are likely to be the students that the schools choose to listen to and involve in SV work as they speak the same language as the school. Other research has indicated that students feel that the participatory structures set up to represent students are often elitist, not representative, and set up as a means of social control (McCluskey et al., 2013; Taft and Gordon, 2013). This point is endorsed by Robinson and Taylor (2007) who discuss the institutional exploitation of student involvement and the preference of school staff of selecting particular and more powerful voices that align with them. They see this as staff ensuring the 'wrong' voices are not heard which could challenge the status quo or direction of travel by the school. This view was borne out in the conversations with staff who regard maturity as a necessary prerequisite for engaging in the SV practices, systems, and structures designed by the school to facilitate SV:

Staff Participant

The voice seems to be having my right to my opinion and therefore it will be accepted... I think there's the level of personal maturity I think is, I would say probably slower than what I've noticed a few years ago. (Conversation 018)

Staff Participant

It's an accepted way that everyone knows about and you have the respected and mature students able to represent others. (Conversation 022)

This is significant in that it suggests maturity limits student access to represent SV, as adults are deciding what level of maturity is acceptable to be able to represent the student body. The Cambridge Online Dictionary describes maturity, as a noun, meaning, the quality of behaving mentally and emotionally like an adult (Cambridge University Press, n.d.). How can an adolescent who is a 'non-adult being', in a different developmental stage where emotional regulation is still maturing, be expected to converse as an 'adult being'? There was some acceptance by staff that students are 'beings' in their own right and should have a voice:

Staff Participant

So, if your Head is going to be someone that is compassionate and able to think about young people in a different way, not in a behavioural way necessarily but all behaviour has meaning your emotions aren't dismissed.... (Conversation 010)

However, the dominant subjective view of staff clearly inferred that being disruptive and having poor behaviour are seen as issues to be dealt with, reflecting a lack of maturity. The onus being on the student to conform to the accepted ways in school to get their voice heard. Staff also want their own voice reinforced through the voice of the child and to them this represents maturity:

Staff Participant

So... It's like, let's have a conversation. Let's have a discussion. Let's equip you with the skill to hear both sides of the story. To be able to express your opinion without it being disruptive because no one's going to engage with that. (Conversation 017)

Staff Participant

I think there has to be, I think from the child point view there has to be better self-regulation to be able to want to engage with some of the extras that we have. (Conversation 018)

Holquist et al. (2023) found that most students feel they have few opportunities to have an input into decision making in classrooms and schools. Drawing on the work of Freire (2001, 2017), this represents the 'banking' model where there is a lack of staff and student engagement with, or opportunity to, engage in a process of mutual learning, which facilitates genuine communication leading to understanding and transformation. Freire sought to strike a balance between the traditional function of the teacher, directive teaching as an approach to education, and dialogic teaching in which CYP self-teach and become advocates of justice against structural oppression (Shor and Freire, 1987). This study has shown there is an absence of dialogic teaching over the most appropriate SV representatives to best represent the students. In a Freirean sense, this type of 'dialogue' involves respect and that it should not be one person acting on behalf of another but rather people working together. Critics of structural oppression, argue that without 'dialogue' involving conflicted voices, silenced voices, and critical voices, there is no social justice (Bragg, 2021). This has implications around the extent to which school SV structures can be representative of the student body.

In this study, the discussions between staff and students crucial to well-being appears to happen in restricted SV spaces accessed by a privileged few. Freire (2017) believed it is not the teacher having a voice that is the issue, but the authoritarian nature of that voice which represents the

wider education system, where the interests of some groups are favoured above others. The evidence demonstrates that staff do have a voice which is authoritarian in nature and they are using it to police SV by largely deciding which students are appointed to be on certain SV groups or hold leadership positions. Teachers by implicitly or explicitly promoting or dismissing some students access to representative roles, would indeed prevent the possibility of critical agency of the student body through such SV activities. The danger is that, as Freire (2017) advocates, unequal social relations create ‘a culture of silence’ which not only makes students passive but removes the opportunities through the SV structures put in place for them to respond to the well-being policy and practice forced on them by staff. The reality of that ‘danger’ is highlighted below:

Participant

I don't think the school council does actually anything.

Participant

Yeah, they don't.

Participant

Yeah, I don't think so. (Focus Group 009)

To summarise this sub-section, what is apparent in this study is that: you can only engage in SV in spaces designated by adults; engage if you have the requisite literacy skills; engage if you are appointed by adults; and engage if adults deem you are mature enough to participate, otherwise your access to SV is severely limited. If staff only enter into dialogue with those they already relate to, and where they wish to relate to them, it is unlikely that SV systems will result in significant improvement in the lives and experiences of many adolescent students, including their well-being.

5.7.3 How Authentically Do Students Represent the Voice of All Students?

This sub-section considers how authentically students in representative positions can speak on behalf of all students. Several scholars have taken up this point advocating that young people developing an identity and exercising agency relies on the recognition of them as agents, not only from staff but by other students (Ben-Arieh, 2005; Sutterluty and Tisdall, 2019). Others have discussed if identity is individual, how can a such a diverse group as students have one SV identity (Silva, 2001)? Therefore, consideration is given to what extent students are recognised as agents by other students and what support students are given by the school to enable them to fully represent their peers around well-being.

The data highlighted there are limitations around student recognition of their peers in representative positions. This has brought into focus that it is difficult for any student to speak on behalf of other students, especially around well-being related issues. Students reported that they would not use the SV systems and structures because there is a lack of confidentiality between student and student:

Participant

They have got a programme like that, but nothing really happens with it because I don't think people have the confidence to go to speak to them.

Sarah Parker - Researcher

To other students?

Participant

To other students

Sarah Parker - Researcher

Right. Why would they not have the confidence?

Participant

Because people just share like they've said and what they want to happen.

Participant

Lack of confidentiality.

Sarah Parker - Researcher

Lack of confidentiality by whom?

Participant

The students who talk about it to other students or pass it to teachers. (Focus Group 014)

This echoes other research which suggests the conditions need to be right for student agency to happen. Just because schools have positioned students as agents in SV, as they have the situated knowledge, it does not necessarily follow that students' representatives are recognised or trusted to speak for others to change practice (Cook-Sather, 2020a; Silva, 2001). Students in this study did not feel their views are always listened to or taken forward by their peers.

Sarah Parker - Researcher

OK. Yeah. And what does student voice do then?

Participant

I'm not quite sure what they do.

Participant

Yeah, they don't really do much to be honest as I said before.

Participant

Yeah, as I said before it, they don't really do much. They say that the teachers say you can do this, this and this, but sometimes you don't actually do anything or much for like actual students, they just represent us and not really do anything. (Focus Group 009)

Participant

They do have student councils and things like that, but they should bring it (reference to bullying) up more. Like it's not dealt with enough, I don't think. (Focus Group 011)

A study by Cox and Robinson-Pant (2006) looked at trust between student representatives and the broader student cohort. They found that SV is affected by student representatives deliberately imposing their own views and not listening to peers. This links to the previous section where it is argued that those appointed to positions of leadership by staff often possessed what Bourdieu (1973) describes as cultural capital. Cultural capital can be explained as the accumulation of symbolic capital that is recognised and legitimised by others. Therefore, students engage in dialogue which aligns more with the discourse the school wants to hear, hence protecting the school's own position, as this response suggested:

Participant

They'd have to see someone that's in it. I am on the School Council and sometimes the students just agree with the teachers because it's easier and it's what they want to do anyway. We do have meetings about what the students bring up. Like one recently was about the clothing. (Focus Group 012)

Hence, this is partly why students do not trust that other students have the voice and agency to represent them in matters that affect them, including around well-being. In their study in a primary school, Mayes et al. (2021) conclude that student representatives must be challenged to question their own assumptions about voice, privilege, and power in relation to other students, in order to

authentically, and transparently represent them. If this challenge is to come from the non-student representatives Freire (2017) points out that there is a 'fear' attached to asking questions because questions can be seen as a challenge to authority. Hence, not asking the question is another form of oppression which maintains the status quo in that SV is not fully representing the student body. Fraser's (2007) political social justice model is flexible and can be used here to look how SV can tackle such social injustice within schools. Fraser (2007) writes about how social justice is focused on the expectation and ability to contribute to one's work either in quantity or quality. It is therefore important to identify if people have upheld their responsibilities and made positive contributions without discrimination. As Briffett Aktas et al. (2025) suggest, educational institutions need to recognise diversity and provide opportunities for all groups a person may identify with to be represented. There were no participant responses in this study which suggested how social justice principles are applied to enable fair and equitable representation of the whole student body.

Another reason for students not trusting others to represent their voice is that students recognise that students are not a collective group although they are often viewed as such by staff. As Fielding (2004) explains, the presumed homogeneity of SV sidelines the subjectivities amongst all students. Throughout this study students have perceived these subjectivities, recognised they have different views, and therefore they question how others could represent them:

Sarah Parker - Researcher

And why do you think that is? Well, why do people think people might not be telling the student voice group or group of people?

Participant

I feel like they would tell, like a trusted, like friend or a teacher, not really like a random school voice person.

Sarah Parker - Researcher

OK. Even if it was something that wasn't personal to the individual, you know their personal well-being, but something that was a good well-being idea generally for the school that still wouldn't go through, people would still not want to go through that route.

Participant (x2)

No. (Focus Group 009)

Hence, when Freire (2017) talks about the foundations of liberative teaching through critical pedagogy as a way to value and acknowledge a CYP's lived experience, this can be achieved through his concept of 'dialogue'. In this study, his work can be contextualised in that if the student-to-student relationship is such a place of 'dialogue', leading to 'praxis', SV could be more effective, as evidenced by the comments about bullying:

Participant

I think that once there's like bullying going on, I think it might be hard, but I think you need to sit down and talk face to face and tell them how you feel because if you're going to do it in the playground, yeah, they're going to be like, I don't care.

Participant

Yeah.

Participant

But if you are sitting there in a room like this, and you're talking about it to them and you're actually saying how you feel about it to them, there might be some understanding.

Participant

It might be better.

Participant

A lot of time they have stuff going on themselves which impacts it.

Participant

If they're angry with that, they will take on someone else, so if you do have a conversation and then just sitting down, they might start opening up. (Focus Group 011)

In his work, Freire does not account or offer much about the 'oppressed' student-to-student relationship which, for students in this study, is highly significant for their well-being. He is perhaps too trusting of the collegiality that binds the 'oppressed' (students) together against the 'oppressor' (teachers), rather than recognising the disruptive and toxic forces between students which has been continually highlighted through most of the themes raised in this study. Therefore, Honneth's (2007) concept of 'recognition' is more useful to help understand the student-to-student relationship. Honneth (2007) identifies three levels of recognition: care for an individual; respect for an individual as a moral agent; and acknowledgement that a person's abilities are of value to a community. Recognition is an essential component for any group to operate because it

depends on the encouragement and affirmation that arises from social recognition (Ralph, 2021). This study shows that student recognition is lacking for SV groups, as this extract illuminated:

Participant

We've got SV.

Sarah Parker - Researcher

Yeah. What do they do?

Participant

We don't really know, right. [laughter – embarrassed]

Sarah Parker - Researcher

Right, OK.

Participant

I didn't think there was one. [laughter]

Sarah Parker - Researcher

Ok. Does anyone have any intel about student voice? Some people didn't know but some people knew they existed. How did you know?

Participant

There's a picture of them on the wall. (Focus Group 013)

Taking this further, Fraser (2000) looked at recognition based on status. In the context of this study, if SV representatives are not recognised as representatives by their peers or misrecognised by their peers, this is social subordination. This prevents them and the SV structures being effective to represent students around well-being. What is brought into focus is that students are using their agency 'not' to go through the established SV structures but are talking on a one-to-one with a trusted adult to get their voice heard concerning their well-being:

Participant

Yeah, teachers are always there, if you are struggling, you can always go to them and they will help. (Focus Group 008)

Participant

Generally, people would want to go to someone they have more of a relationship with. They'll feel more comfortable about talking about it. (Focus Group 012)

These observations are supported by Anderson and Graham (2016) in their well-being research in schools. They noted that whilst students in primary school reported that their well-being is positively linked to them having a say, secondary school students preferred to use the systems to report a problem or speak to an adult to get support with their well-being. Researchers are, thus, suggesting that individual voice in well-being is more clearly observed than collective voice and students are more confident in using individual voice (Duckett et al., 2010; Graham et al., 2016). The implications of this are that well-being for all, which is linked to the school culture and climate, is less likely to be discussed and acted upon. As already discussed in this chapter, positive professional relationships with staff are seen as one of the most significant factors in positively supporting students' well-being. So why wouldn't a student speak to an adult on well-being issues affecting them as an individual, rather than use other SV systems and structures in place? It also is important to understand that agency represents the right to use your voice or not (Gillett-Swan and Sargeant, 2019) and in this case it is 'not' through the SV representatives, which could also be regarded as a form of resistance.

What is also evident is the lack of training students have for their representative roles. This impacts negatively upon students' ability to represent other students and diminishes their agency. Archard (2020) advocates that CYP need guidance and training to facilitate their expressions and opinions. Schools have not appeared to give due weight to developing the generic training or specific training required to support student representatives in their roles:

Sarah Parker - Researcher

What do the Mental Health Ambassadors do?

Staff Participant

It is early days [they had been in post for 5 months which is over a third of a school year] and they are awaiting their training. Well-being and what we are facing now is so new and is there a 'blueprint' anyway? People are just finding their way through. (Conversation 022)

SV can impact agency by increasing students' ability to articulate what they think, giving them identities as the makers of change and allowing their ideas and feelings of leadership to develop (Mitra 2018). Just being given an opportunity to use your voice however is not enough, you must be trained to both access and carry out that opportunity. To re-imagine what that voice can actually do, can provide the agency that can be transformative for students around well-being.

Students need to learn how to effectively use their voice and there is a tendency to overestimate the capacity for students to use their voice (Baraldi, 2014; Tangen, 2008). A study conducted by Moore (2022), in one secondary school, looked at introducing a student led committee on voice and agency. He concludes that it would be essential to conduct some form of leadership training to ensure students understood how to conduct meetings and organise agendas in a way to enable them to conduct business effectively. Linked to this concept of training, Fletcher et al. (2015) look at how students can be shown how to use surveys, focus groups, and interviews so the voice of who they are representing can be ascertained. In addition, Caetano et al. (2020) call for improved training for students to understand perspectives of their peers. Without such skills or limited skills how are students expected to represent the student body, particularly in the conventional systems and structures with a consensus on rules of engagement set up by whom, the adults.

To sum up, this sub-section suggests that students do not see the student representatives on SV structures set up by the school as effective in representing their voice on well-being matters. The reasons for this are they do not trust that their views will be listened to, understood, or kept confidential. Instead, they are preferring to use their agency to have their voice heard in other ways, not through the SV systems and structures set up by the school, but particularly through discourse around well-being with a trusted teacher. This could in part be down to the fact that schools have not created the necessary conditions for SV to be effective and have underestimated the constraints SV representatives face in support others. This will be considered in the next sub-section.

5.7.4 The Power Dynamic Between Student and Adult

This sub-section considers the power relationships between adult-to-student and the extent to which this enhances or hinders SV. Consideration is given to the role adults play in the SV structures.

The student and staff comments strongly suggested that adults play a key part in the structures set up to garner SV. It appears that many structures and systems involving students are linked to a teacher who has responsibility for that particular aspect of SV, as indicated:

Sarah Parker (EDU - Postgraduate Researcher

So if, you and your friends had an idea about something that you thought, actually, I think this would really help student well-being in the school, I think, this could be made better by doing X, Y and Z. How could you get your voice heard?

Participant

You could probably go talk to someone about it, like a teacher, or like the head teacher.

Sarah Parker (EDU - Postgraduate Researcher)

Right. Yeah.

Participant

And like say to them what you want changed. Then maybe they'll do something about it.

(Focus Group 013)

Staff Participant

There would be an adult there ...(Conversation 020)

This shows that students rely on that adult to then represent their views at a higher level. This questions the validity of why adults are involved in SV structures and to what extent adults are representing the SV or their own interpretation of that voice. The issue here is that students are in a hierarchical system of power and whilst they may discuss topics pertinent to fellow students, what they discuss is at the behest of the teacher in charge of the group:

Staff Participant

So, we've got a student voice group. So obviously we feed in quite a lot of different things via that. (Conversation 010)

The teacher is also in a position to interpret what has been said and decide what will be taken forward to the next level, or if indeed it will. Thus, the students are dependent on someone else believing what they say is important enough to be taken to the next level:

Participant

I mean I'm like student voice and nothing happens like we're supposed to like get told stuff and then we refer it, but there's no meetings or anything anymore. (Focus Group 009)

In their research, Rudduck and McIntyre (2007) found that most pupils wanted to believe school is there for them but actually it is there for their teachers. In his ethnographic study in a secondary school, Ralph (2021) looked at how students have their voice heard and found that the adult voice is all too dominant in SV structures. He states that "when an institution does not credit individual experiences and when organisations fail to acknowledge the voice of groups or when society is organised on the premise that a superior rationality has ultimate validity, voice is undermined"

(Ralph, 2021, p.178). His findings were reflected in this study through the words 'in charge' which implied the dominance of the teacher:

Participant

In school we have, like, SV. So, people can talk to like the teachers like, who's in charge.
(Focus Group 015)

Bragg (2021) contends that voice can be undermined through simply not valuing voice or by obstructing alternative narratives. Recent scholastic writings have built on this idea and have suggested that this dominance of adults in SV could be seen as a form of oppression or 'adulthood' (Mitra, 2018; Salisbury et al., 2020). 'Adulthood' is described by Fletcher (2015, p.7) as an "addiction to the attitudes, ideas and beliefs and actions of adults". This concept was reflected in a discussion, which took place in the co-researcher Focus Research Group, where they spoke about student experiences in running a Mental Health Day for students in school. They lamented that the teacher decided what would be happening on the day, even overriding the students on many aspects. They, [the students] ended up sorting out the number of refreshments required rather than representing the voice of the students as to what activities would be beneficial to their mental health (researcher field notes).

When applying Freire (2005) to power relationships between adults and students, he writes about breaking down traditional barriers whilst making it clear that each should remain distinct in their roles and responsibilities. A teacher, he believed, has responsibility to point students to different points of view including that of their own. To a certain extent this view was reflected in a staff response:

Staff Participant

You can still get something across without, you know, sometimes what happens is frustration meets frustration and the response and then you're not de-escalating. Someone has to de-escalate, so which probably is the adult in most cases, and an adult must be able to do this and not take everything personally. So if you've got a good relationship and the foundations are strong, you should be able to have a conversation.... Its re-established this is a relationship between two people. It's an equal relationship. It's not you dictating. It's not me dictating. It's us working together. (Conversation 017)

However, more often the indications were that Freire's (2017) 'banking' model of education was in operation which serves the interests of the 'oppressors' through maintaining the hierarchical control operating in schools. The teachers involved in SV structures use the 'banking' model to

maintain their power to control the thinking and behaviour of the students and students passively accept their role, limiting their voice and agency. It is the teachers voice which dominates the SV dialogue and as Freire (2017, p.61) makes clear, 'dialogue' which does not involve all parties is not a "true word" because no one can say a "true word" for, or on behalf of others. Staff perceive themselves to be holding the higher position of power and most students cooperate with this, because they internalise these societal norms and accept the situation of how SV operates as inevitable. Attempts to challenge the teacher's power are mostly futile:

Staff Participant

But you know, I often think in my head about, you know, if they knew what little power or control we had, like lots of it, is an illusion. It's an illusion of control. (Conversation 018)

Staff Participant

I think they know that they can't go beyond what they are expected. They do know that. The only thing is that sometimes they're trying to push it a little bit. You know it's my right to do this or my right to do that. I can't think of any example right now, but I think they do know that they have to remain within you know what the expectations of the school are,But they know they can't go beyond, you know, just because it's not expected of them. (Conversation 020)

The significance is how can SV operate effectively in schools where the positioning of students within school is to operate in normative ways as prescribed by the adults (Perry-Hazan, 2016; Thornberg, 2009). Continued belief in this power dynamic by adults, 'adulthood', prevents students being positioned as change agents to counter the normative ways of operation between adults and students (Fielding, 2004; Holquist et al., 2023). However, Freire (2017) believed that critical pedagogy, 'dialogue' and 'praxis' is essential to transformation and drawing on Marxist theory, thought that some groups will always play a more powerful role in shaping how we understand ourselves and shape the world. He comments that those in power are seldom motivated to radically alter the conditions for inequality that benefit them (Freire, 2017).

Critics of the Freirean analysis of power believe that his view is limited. If you are 'oppressed', you must be against the 'oppressors'; you are either marginalised or not. Other theorists and scholars have expanded definitions and understanding of power and Foucault's is more helpful to understand 'adulthood'. Foucault has a more complex theorisation of power which contends that power inhabits all social processes but is not in itself a negative force and says that voice is located in the structures and relations of power (Macey, 2004). That it is found in the interactions between people and between people and objects, which include institutions. Applied to this

study, it would suggest that having adults in positions of authority does not mean, in itself, that this will prevent SV and agency on well-being.

If positioning by adults and students is critical to the effectiveness of SV, the question then becomes, should SV be seen as a restructuring of the student-to-adult relationship? At no point in the data collection work was there evidence that staff do not have the interests of their students' well-being in their minds or disagreed with the concept of SV. The discussions encountered a workforce working incredibly hard, stretched in both time and resources, which have not lost sight of their core purpose to care for and educate their students. However, the hierarchical nature of schools is so deep rooted that perhaps staff believe they are enabling SV, but in reality, that voice is not an authentic voice. Operating in such an intense performative culture it is difficult for SV to thrive. Targets and accountability take priority over people. As Fielding (2004) noted, over 20 years ago, when students become objects of our professional work rather than agents of co-learning, there is little creativity.

This sub-section demonstrates that the power dynamic between student and adult operating in SV structures is more likely to hinder SV as the structures are too dependent on adult voice. Adults are holding the power in deciding what students will be able to give their voice on and whether that voice is heard beyond the representative SV structures. Student representatives do have opportunities to use their voice and be listened to but because of the power relationships which favour adults, students have limited agency to further that voice. However, as Robinson and Taylor (2007) pronounce, it is not the listening that is important, it is what is done with the information that is important. This will be considered in the following final sub-section.

5.7.5 The Responsiveness of the School to Student Voice

As a resume, the main headlines from this section are that the systems and structures set up to deliver SV are in fact limiting SV and agency. This is because the purpose of what such mechanisms are trying to achieve is not clearly defined, access to sit as representatives marginalises some students, students have muted confidence that other students can represent their views well enough, and adults voice and agency dominate the discourse in SV spaces. Gillett-Swan et al. (2025) observe there is often a disconnect between seeking voice (methods) and doing something meaningful with the perspectives shared (influence). This final sub-section considers, in light of the aforementioned limitations, to what extent have schools have been

responsive to the voice and changes desired by students through the SV structures around their well-being.

There were no consistent views from student participants about what SV has achieved for student well-being. What is notable is that, during the focus group discussions for this study, often student participants would be silent or use hesitant language as if searching for answers to give the researcher, indicating they are not clear on what has been achieved by SV, as this Focus Group dialogue emphasises:

Sarah Parker - Researcher

OK, so in terms of can you give any examples of anything, not necessarily about well-being, but anything that has gone to the student council, the student council has sorted something out and then it's come back to you, students said this, we've taken it forward now this has happened.

Participant

That's never happened.

Participant

No.

Participant

No. I think it's like gone to the school council. Then it's never been dealt with.

Participant

Or you never hear. (Focus Group 011)

Much of what was reported was performative, not transformational. Several students spoke about uniform changes for females (Focus Group 009; 012; 015) but it was unclear as to the actual role of SV structures in this. Some of the examples given were intended to help the well-being of people beyond the school, for example bringing in food for foodbanks and this was being facilitated by the school through the Headteacher:

Participant

Absolutely we're doing. We're doing like a charity thing at the moment where like we're bringing in food for a food bank X Trust. Where we're bringing in food for a food bank. And

then at the end of next week, I think our headteacher will take all of the food to the food banks, so they have food for the winter. (Focus Group 015)

Whilst there are some examples of how SV has been channelled into action resulting in change to well-being practice, such examples are sparse. The following example demonstrated how students have used their voice around what the school could do to support their well-being, which is through the introduction of different ways of reporting well-being concerns:

Staff Participant

One of the things they spoke about was how they disclose and they don't always want to do that in person. So, this year...we brought in a digital platform so they can message if they need help. (Conversation 010)

Most of the evidence strikes a chord with authors who have used the word 'tokenistic' to describe SV activities in school (Cook-Sather, 2020a; Mayes, 2020). Robinson and Taylor (2007) argue that schools are listening to pupils for reasons of accountability rather than to get a genuine view. This was confirmed by Halliday et al. (2019), who found none of the students, teachers, or school administrators interviewed for their study described SV practices that are intended to be transformative. Salazar et al. (2024) used Freire's theory of 'critical consciousness' as a tool to develop an understanding of social justice among US student service leaders. After student work around social injustices concerning immigration, the researchers found that the students felt greater empowerment to challenge social injustices through using Freire's 'critical consciousness' discourse.

There was very little obtained about how responsive schools had been to the suggestions made by students around well-being. What is ascertained is more about 'tweaking' policy rather than transforming policy. This is evidenced by a staff response about make up:

Staff Participant

As students were used to wearing make up at home and during lockdown. We looked at our policies and considered whether they needed changing.....make up is now light touch from no makeup at all. (Conversation 022)

Freire (2017) has used the term 'false generosity' which would suggest that the school is providing opportunities through SV structures to make changes, so the adolescent students feel they have agency, when in fact the school retains the power because transformational opportunities do not materialise. It is only when the students recognise what is happening that they can begin to

change what Freire (2017) would term their 'lived reality' and be awakened to the possibilities of SV structures to transform the well-being of the student community. There was, however, no evidence from the data to suggest that schools are deliberately providing 'false generosity' to the students. Responsiveness to SV is lack lustre but not seemingly deliberately so.

The wider educational context a school finds itself in can limit authentic adolescent voice and agency. This is because a performative culture driven by forces outside of school is hierarchical, a form of control and limits democratic freedoms (Ball, 2012). This can be understood by applying the concepts of Freire's (2017, p.58) 'banking' model, he states "any situation in which some individuals prevent others from engaging in the process of inquiry is violence. The means used are not important; to alienate human beings from their own decision- making is to change them into objects". Applied to this study it is where schools and teachers are accountable to a system that as Freire (2017, p.46) argues "chooses and enforces their choice" on students, making them perform to meet standards, losing their integrity, and the ability to listen and act on issues raised through SV structures. Neoliberalism stands in opposition to his views which favour cooperation and communication over self-interest. Freire through his writings in the last century attests to the performativity culture in education that UK schools are still facing today. Recent scholars have continued to refer to the teaching of Freire to frame current issues around a lack of democracy in schools which can be applied to SV. Bolin (2018) writes about neoliberalism and the lack of democracy in the US. He has used Freire's ideas about education in schools, which counter neoliberalism, as a way to realise individual agency to achieve social justice in American society. Recognising their own reality, and thus rethinking their approach, could be the starting point for schools to re consider how SV systems and structures can move from the performative to the transformative.

5.7.6 Conclusion

This section concludes that adolescent students would rather address any well-being concerns they have directly with a trusted adult. Schools, therefore, need to consider the place and viability of SV systems and structures to support adolescent well-being, if that is the way they are intending to genuinely and transparently listen to SV over well-being matters. Bragg (2021, p.41) neatly explains, "greater attention to the vital relationality between subjects and infrastructure, the material and the affective can help understand the differences that matter in student voice".

This study strongly suggests that SV is limited and this is because there is little theorisation of SV to explain why the SV structures in place have been set up, access to participate is restricted which marginalises the voice of all students, and the power dynamic, student-to-student and student-to-adult, hinders authentic voice and agency. Whilst there are examples of how SV has improved well-being practice, they are mainly performative. There is little evidence of how SV has been transformational, in making a significant contribution to promoting the well-being of the students. The following chapter will draw conclusions from the analysis and discussion of the data findings, generated from this chapter, to address the research questions posed by this study.

6 Study Conclusion

This study set out to investigate the mounting concerns society has about student well-being, specifically adolescent well-being. It achieved this by discussing adolescent students' views on what well-being means for them and how they experience it in secondary schools. Through collecting the views of staff, it enabled further insights into why students experience well-being as they do. The wider research aim of the study was to provide the education community with fresh evidence with which to re-think their approach, policy, and practice around well-being to serve students more effectively. This final chapter concludes the findings of this study against the original aim and research questions and provides recommendations for future studies as well as school practices. It offers reflection on the challenges faced during fieldwork and ends with my final remarks.

6.1 How do adolescent students define well-being?

Literature suggests there is no agreed definition of student well-being, and this study concurs with that. In the absence of a definition, the term well-being is most frequently linked to mental health with well-being and mental health often regarded as one and the same. This is further complicated when the distinction between mental health and mental illness is often blurred. It appears that well-being does not have its own identity anymore because the term has been so often mis-defined and misunderstood by the various agencies invested in student welfare. This study demonstrates that, for students, it does matter. Losing sight of what well-being means is detrimental to how well-being is understood, actioned, and experienced in schools.

This study argues that without a clear and unambiguous definition, meaning, and conceptualisation of adolescent student well-being, governments and schools are tending to approach well-being and mental health as the same. They focus primarily on treating mental health rather than supporting well-being. The problem with this is that students articulate that a positive mental health on its own is not necessarily sufficient for them having a positive well-being. This study contends that schools are addressing mental health issues and/or mental illness at the expense of some aspects of well-being. In particular, those aspects of well-being that adolescents cited were important to a positive well-being, such as being happy, feeling comfortable, enjoyment, having confidence, and social skills.

The evidence supports the prevailing view within the literature that well-being and/or mental health is addressed by schools through 'prevention' and 'intervention' approaches. Schools' 'prevention' work appertains to all students and is delivered through form time activities, assemblies, and Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) lessons. In line with the accepted view of most researchers, this study supports the thinking that for students, well-being is subjectively experienced. It could be argued that schools are supporting such a subjective conceptualisation of well-being through their positive education programmes. This study has suggested, however, that positive education approaches alone do not best support students' well-being. This is largely because: they focus on what adults' think is important for students; they are delivered out of context; delivered by staff who are not always sufficiently trained in the material they have to deliver; and by staff who do not necessarily have affective relationships with students.

The 'intervention' work of schools with targeted individuals around well-being and/or mental health appears to be necessary for some students, but not all. This reason for this is because well-being and mental health are being viewed as the same thing; both staff and students' view any form of unhappiness, or anything that sets back the quality of a student's life, as a mental health issue. This then needs 'intervention', instead of considering whether it is a 'normal' social and emotional response temporarily affecting the state of well-being. Schools are therefore disproportionally viewing any set back as a mental health problem. This study attests that this is a potential barrier to the well-being of many adolescents in school. Through their actions in the name of 'care', schools are exacerbating well-being concerns through treating many student concerns as a mental health issue. These interventions assume the need for support, which encourages an over dependency, which denies students sufficient agency over their own well-being.

This study brings into sharp focus the fact that schools are not sufficiently comprehending 'how' adolescent students experience well-being dimensions, important to them, in the school context. This study has provided a unique insight from students themselves that their experiences of well-being are situated in the everyday experiences and interactions they have through the socio-ecological climate of the school. Student well-being lays firmly rooted in relationships, the quality of teaching and learning, organisation and routines, and their sense of mattering to the institution. This study has revealed that the societal and hierarchical norms operating in school through these areas are very influential because of the negative impact they are wielding on adolescent well-being. This is highly significant because schools appear to be constructing policy and practice in key areas of school life on shared assumptions, without effectively engaging with students, thus

potentially comprising their well-being. Through operationalising well-being as something to be dealt with, schools are missing the point that well-being is a fluid state, affected by mood and feelings, cannot be controlled, rather than focusing on enabling a climate where well-being can flourish unencumbered.

6.2 What factors shape the way students experience well-being in school?

The literature poses the dilemma of the concern over children and young people's (CYP's) well-being as demonstrated through measurement indicators, against the effectiveness of current educational policy and practice addressing this concern. This study strongly suggests that the choices schools are making regarding their well-being approach is at best hampering student well-being and at worst unintentionally exacerbating student well-being. Firstly, this is because the choices schools are making are driven by the government through the Department for Education (DfE) who have their own vision and agenda regarding student well-being, which does not sufficiently align with the view of adolescents. Secondly, the government proffers a neoliberalist view of education, where education is important for the future health and prosperity of the nation. This conceptualisation influences the approach schools take with their well-being work which promotes a prevention for all strategy through psychological based positive education programmes and targeted interventions for those considered in well-being deficit. Thirdly, schools align their work to the accountability systems of the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) through an over reliance on objective numerical measurement to measure and hence demonstrate their success in a range of areas. These measures are not always age sensitive or sufficiently capturing the lived experience of adolescents. Such data can be regarded as limiting in their use to schools in guiding their well-being work for adolescent students.

This study has highlighted that the choice of addressing well-being through a preventative positive education approach, which emphasises building attributes of resilience, confidence, self-esteem, and teamwork is falling short. This is because when well-being is taught as content, with no engagement with that content, it fails to recognise that well-being is what you feel, built through your own experiences, and how to feel cannot be taught or instilled in you by others. In addition, the interventionist approach whilst needed by some, for many is operationalising well-being as something in deficit that needs to be fixed. Having a positive mental health is dominating the discourse in schools around student well-being and thus dominating the choices made in the

schools' approach. This study strongly suggests that this approach is placing too much importance on students having to feel mentally well rather than facilitating and promoting their well-being.

Secondly, the high stakes performative culture operating in school also impacts the choices schools are making. This study aligns with other research which has referenced the tension between schools supporting the welfare of their students and striving to achieve the academic outcomes upon which schools are judged through the accountability systems in place. This is highly consequential because a performative culture, constantly reinforced by staff where academic achievement, through language and actions of 'doing' well, takes precedence over 'being' well. This is failing to recognise the subjective nature of well-being and that 'doing' well only supports those students for whom self-actualisation is accomplished through academic success. This study has signalled that students and staff feel subsumed into this culture of 'doing' well at the expense of 'being' well. They seem resigned to the situation with little sense of empowerment to change the situation which is having a negative impact on the well-being of both staff and students. As this study continues to illuminate without a clear agreed definition of adolescent student well-being and how students experience well-being, schools are not sufficiently informed as to what well-being means. Their ability, therefore, to challenge, to argue, or implement a potentially more effective well-being approach is thus highly restricted.

Thirdly, schools' choices are compounded by a shortage of resources in both monetary terms and trained school staff to appropriately support adolescent students. Schools are at the forefront of supporting students presenting with social and emotional needs. Without trained personnel it is difficult for school staff to ascertain whether they are dealing with temporary negative feelings affecting adolescents' well-being or mental health illness which needs clinical diagnosis and action. A reduction in capacity and timely support from outside agencies means schools are at the forefront of trying to deal with complex needs that they are not trained to deal with, reflecting that the majority of these needs are being ascribed as mental health concerns. Schools are being placed in an unenviable and unsustainable position. It could be argued that their responsibility for the welfare of their students is being abused by the government and other agencies who are allowing schools to be at the forefront of 'dealing' with this well-being/mental health crisis. Schools operating with limited professional boundaries which govern other agencies who work with young people, together with their limited capacity, means that schools are being failed as much as the students are.

6.3 What factors shape the decisions schools make about how to support well-being?

The discourse around SV structures in well-being literature argues that SV has not been significantly engaged with to contribute to an understanding of what well-being means for young people, or to contribute to policy and practice around student well-being in schools. The findings of this study support those claims and concludes that SV is at best performative and not transformational, in making a significant contribution to improve the well-being of adolescent students in school. Through putting adolescent students' voice at the heart of this study, it has moved the debate on, providing relevant and current insight to policy makers and practitioners, about distinct differences between what adolescents say well-being means for them and how that well-being is impacted by their school experiences.

The contribution of this study firstly challenges the assumptions that SV structures are an effective way to obtain the voice of students. The reasons for this are there is little theorisation of SV structures to explain why they have been set up, access to participate is restricted which marginalises the voice of all students, and the power dynamic, student-to-student and student-to-adult, hinders authentic voice and agency. Secondly, this study questions the assumption that SV structures will be able to provide the vehicle for voice and agency around well-being for the student body as it is so subjective to the individual. The evidence strongly suggests that adolescent students would rather address any well-being concerns they have directly with a trusted adult.

In addition, what this study has also found is that students are able to give considered opinions and possible solutions to some aspects of policy and practice which affect their well-being. Thus, the overwhelming conclusion from this study is policy makers and practitioners need to develop accepted ways of engaging with their students through creating the conditions for all to have, and believe they have, a genuine voice and agency, together with adults, around student well-being. Without this the adolescent student well-being picture in school will remain bleak.

6.4 Recommendations

The recommendations are framed through the posing of an initial question which is intended to commence the conversation around well-being both within and between policy makers in government, practitioners in schools, students in schools, and teacher training institutions. Pointers are provided specifically for policy makers and practitioners as they are at the forefront

of where adolescent students experience their well-being. These recommendations should be engaged with in the spirit of the teachings of Freire. If these recommendations are merely accepted, as in the 'banking' model of education, (Freire, 2017) where knowledge is deposited into minds and not critically engaged with, no movement can happen. Instead, it is hoped that these recommendations will be read in the context of the whole of this study (the object) and will challenge thinking, leading to dialogue, discourse, and action (by the subjects). As Freire comments "studying is a form of reinventing, recreating, rewriting: and this is a subject's not an object's task" (Freire, 1985, p.2).

What does well-being mean for students in secondary school?

A clear definition and meaning of student well-being should be established which is distinct from the meaning of mental health and the meaning of mental illness. Such a definition or meaning should be appropriate for education and thus divorced from the influences of health institutions. A definition should not be approached with a deficit mindset, but one that focuses on positive forms of well-being. It should be recognised that students are not a homogeneous body, reflecting that adolescents need their own nuanced definition and meaning of well-being. It is essential that adolescents must be involved in meaningful dialogue around what well-being means for them, not what staff think it means for them, so that schools can effectively target their well-being work.

How does the school culture affect the well-being of the school community?

Schools should discuss with students how they experience well-being, and this should happen across the age ranges. There are differences around the importance students place on aspects of their well-being as they transition through the school system, which recognises critical points in their development, for example, transitioning from primary to secondary school, examinations, and planning for life after school. Schools need to think beyond standalone policy, practices and curriculum delivery to interrogate how well-being is created and experienced by both adolescents and staff holistically within the school environment. Discussions should centre around the socio-ecological aspects of a school climate such as organisation, relationships, teaching and learning, behaviour, and discipline, as well as mattering. These discussions should explore how these areas are underpinned by the peer culture, societal, and organisational norms operating in all aspects of school life. Schools should facilitate the conditions for these discussions to take place without 'fear' or 'favour' and to encourage curiosity from both sides.

What is ‘care’ and how is it experienced by students in secondary school?

Schools need to consider how ‘care’ is conceptualised, operationalised, and what is meant by ethical ‘care’. Through discussions with adolescents about what ‘care’ means, where ‘care’ happens in school, how is ‘care’ experienced, and who is responsible for ‘care’, a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between care and well-being could be ascertained. Through exploration of ‘care’ as feelings, behaviours, actions, and relationships, schools would be better placed to consider how caring can best support the well-being of the school community.

Is evaluation used to inform and empower or is it used to control and inspect?

Policy makers need to consider ‘who’ is benefitting from a performance culture. Schools should reflect on the purpose for collecting data and the purpose of measurement indicators to ascertain the benefits of doing so. Key questions to consider are the ‘what’, ‘why’ and ‘how’ around using data to inform policy, practice, and actions around well-being. Schools need to reflect whether collecting, measuring, and analysing data around well-being is adding to the concerns that there is a well-being problem. If there is a need identified for data collection and analysis, consideration should be given to the type of content which will form an appropriate empirical base from which to drive actions which must include adolescents as experts in their own lives.

To what extent is education expediting ‘doing’ well rather than facilitating ‘being’ well?

Whilst the current examination system cannot be changed by schools alone, schools need to reflect on the part they play through considering who are assessments and exams for, the school or the student? Schools then need to work with the school community to understand how they can alleviate examination stresses and hence make a positive contribution to a better sense of well-being. Through engaging with adolescents and understanding the impact of ‘doing’ rather than ‘being’ well could be transformative for the well-being of both students and staff.

In reality whose interests does student voice serve?

The government bodies involved in education must actively include students as experts when considering guidance and policy documents to schools. Schools need to understand what ‘voice’

means and what ‘agency’ means for an adolescent student and how they can embody those conceptualisations throughout the school climate. Schools need to enter into dialogue with adolescents about the best ways of obtaining authentic voice and be open about how they can facilitate appropriate spaces for that voice to be heard. Consideration needs to be given as to whether the traditional systems and structures set up to enable student voice are fit for purpose, particularly around well-being. A democratic school culture which encourages and values all voices could positively serve the well-being interests of both students and staff better.

6.5 Challenges

This study posits that the challenges of engaging with schools to conduct research in this space is a possible limitation to future research in this area. Seeking initial interest from schools to work with their students as co-researchers and finding schools wishing to participate in the data collection takes persistence and time. A constant champion in a school is required who believes in improvement, has the power to influence change, and can support the bureaucracy of the required paperwork and organisation. If the personnel changes and the newly assigned person has no investment in the project, it can hinder the original intention and premise of the research.

In this study, the data collected from students was not analysed by gender or ethnicity, accessing this type of data in the future might prove fruitful for further research around how well-being is experienced by adolescents in schools, however this should not deflect from the power and agency which was demonstrated by groups of students coming together to discuss a common interest simply as ‘beings’.

6.6 Final Remarks

In my final contemplation on this study, I contend it has contributed to existing knowledge by providing fresh evidence to the field to understand how adolescent students experience well-being in school. As my aim intended, I hope it will provide the necessary impetus for those in positions of power and/or influence to have the courage to rethink their policy and practice around well-being. Through putting adolescent students’ voices at the heart of this research, particularly through the design, it has enabled their agency to be actioned, which has so often been missing in participatory studies. What has been powerful is the situating of adolescent student views about well-being alongside those of staff. It has highlighted the points of common ground but has

laid bare that a school's approach to well-being is often unrealised because of the assumptions made by adults about the 'what', 'why', and 'how' of adolescent students' well-being.

I have used the concepts and thoughts of Paulo Freire and applied them fairly to interpret the evidence gathered from this research. He provided me with a clear lens through which to explore the concepts of 'power', 'voice' and 'agency' which underpin this study. It was also useful to draw on other theoretical concepts to further understand some of the responses provided by participants. It is also important to recognise the belief that school leaders had in this research, through their generosity in allowing myself access and time with their students and staff. In addition, thanks to leaders and all staff involved for facilitating and supporting the administration and organisation necessary for this research to take place. A final expression of gratitude goes to my fellow co-researchers, students, and staff participants. Without their commitment, willingness to engage, and insightful contributions this study simply would not have materialised.

As a society we are experiencing rapid change. It is apparent that the 'old ways' of doing things and the hierarchical systems and structures of power which perpetuated and maintained the 'old ways' are being challenged. We are living in different, fast-moving times, and therefore continuing to espouse those 'old ways' of doing things, as regards adolescent well-being in schools, will not bring the benefits that are urgently required. There are glimmers of hope that schools are beginning to think differently about what well-being means, but this needs to be in the psyche of everyone involved in education. The message for all educationalists to embrace is delivered by Freire (2016, p.4) who states " ... one of the most urgent qualities we must forge within ourselves in the passing days – one without which we could hardly be more or less on a par with our own times or able to understand teenagers and the young – is that of critical intelligence, a never 'somnolent' but always wakeful capacity for comprehending the new".

My last thought, formed through working with the perceptive young people in this study, is that perhaps it could all be much simpler. If well-being is understood less through reviews, measurement indicators, and policy documents, but more through how we relate to each other as human beings, perhaps it could just better support the well-being of us all. As this final student quote epitomises:

Just be nice. We just need to be nice. (Focus Group 011)

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8 Appendices

8.1 Appendix A – Information Sheet Co-Researchers Phase One

Expression of Interest Information Sheet about Research Project on Well-being

Who is carrying out the study?

The study is being carried out by Sarah Parker who is a doctoral research candidate in the School of Education and Lifelong Learning, at the University of East Anglia.

What is the study about?

The study is about student well-being and what well-being means to young people.

What will the study involve for me?

The study will involve you working as a team of Co-researchers with myself as the Lead researcher. You will work in a small group of students from years 9, 10 and 11. The students will come from your school. Meetings will be held in school time. (NB. EXACT INFORMATION WILL BE PROVIDED WHEN FINALISED WITH THE SCHOOL). At the beginning of the study, you will be trained in the skills of carrying out research, which all researchers have to do. You will then help to decide the methods (ways) which will be used to collect data (information) about well-being, from other participants (other people in the study). You will then work on how the data collected can be analysed (understood) and how these findings can be shared with other students and staff. It is likely that you will be required for approximately 10 hours over 2 full school terms of one school year, probably the Autumn and Summer Terms

What are the benefits of taking part?

The benefits in taking part in this study are, for you, that you will receive training in research skills that may be helpful for your own studies and forthcoming examinations. You will have the chance to develop skills such as communication, problem solving and leadership which may be beneficial to you now or in the future. There will be the opportunity to meet other students and discuss issues which are relevant to you. Hopefully it will be something you enjoy being involved in.

The wider benefits of taking part in this study are that the findings about well-being can hopefully be used by schools and other educational institutions. This will help schools and

others in deciding the policy and practices around well-being which can bring the best benefit to students

What are the risks of taking part?

Aside from giving up your time, I do not expect that there will be any risks or costs associated with taking part in this study. However, as the focus of this study is student well-being, you may wish to talk with someone about your own well-being or that of someone else in the group. You will be provided with information about who you can talk to in school and out of school to support you.

What next?

If you would like to be considered for the role of Co-researcher, please complete an Expression of Interest Slip. You can get these slips from – (TO BE COMPLETED WHEN SCHOOL ADVISE WHERE)

8.2 Appendix B – Consent Form Student Phase One

Sarah Parker

Postgraduate Researcher
Doctoral Candidate

11.5.22

Faculty of Social Science

School of Education and Lifelong
Learning

University of East Anglia

Norwich Research Park

Norwich NR4 7T1

A study about student well-being

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

What is this study about?

You are invited to take part in a research study about young peoples' well-being and what schools can do to support well-being. You have been invited to participate in this study because you expressed an interest in working with myself as a co-researcher and have now been selected to take part. This Participant Information Sheet tells you about the research study. Knowing what is involved will help you decide if you want to take part in the study. Please read this sheet carefully and ask questions about anything that you don't understand or want to know more about.

Participation in this research study is voluntary. By giving consent to take part in this study you are telling us that you:

- ✓ Understand what you have read.
- ✓ Agree to take part in the research study as outlined below.
- ✓ Agree to the use of your personal information as described.
- ✓ You have received a copy of this Participant Information Sheet to keep.

Who is running the study?

The study is being carried out by Sarah Parker who is a doctoral research candidate in the School of Education and Lifelong Learning, at the University of East Anglia.

This study will take place under the supervision of Dr. Kate Russell, Kate.Russell@uea.ac.uk, 01603 592924

This study is self-funded.

What will the study involve for me?

The study will involve you working as co-researchers with myself as the lead researcher. You will work in a small focus group of students from years 10 and 11. The students will come from your school. Meetings, for Phase 1 of the research will be held in school time, on Monday afternoons from 1.55pm-3.20pm, for the second half of the Spring Term 2023. Phase 2 of the research will take place in the second half of the Summer Term 2023, dates and times to be arranged at a later date. At the beginning of the study, Phase 1, you will be trained in the skills of carrying out research, which all researchers have to do. You will then help to decide the methods (ways) which will be used to collect data (information) about well-being. In Phase 2, you will then work on how the data collected can be analysed (understood) and how these findings can be shared with other students and staff.

Audio recordings of the meetings will be taken, together with written field notes by myself as the lead researcher (field notes can be used by researchers to help them record things that may be useful for their research). In addition, I will photograph any visual work produced in the co-researcher meetings.

How much of my time will the study take?

It is likely that you will be required in Phase 1 for approximately 8-10 hours in total across the second half of the Spring Term 2023.

Do I have to be in the study? Can I withdraw from the study once I have started?

Being in this study is completely voluntary and you do not have to take part. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your, or your school's, current or future relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia now or in the future.

If you decide to take part in the study, you can withdraw your consent up to the point that your data is fully anonymised (that means that when the information you have given cannot be identified as being given by you). You can do this by putting this in writing to myself as the lead researcher or speaking to myself as the lead researcher.

What are the consequences if I withdraw from the study?

You may leave the focus group at any time if you do not wish to continue but it will not be possible to withdraw your comments once the group has started, as it is a group discussion.

Although every effort will be made to protect your identity, you may be identifiable in publications due to the nature of the study or results.

Are there any risks or costs associated with being in the study?

Aside from giving up your time, we do not expect that there will be any risks or costs associated with taking part in this study. However, as the focus of this study is student well-being, you may wish to talk with someone about your own well-being or that of someone else in the group. You will be provided with information about who you can talk to in school and out of school to support you.

Are there any benefits associated with being in the study?

The benefits in taking part in this study are, for you, that you will receive training in research skills that may be helpful for your own studies and forthcoming examinations. You will have the chance to develop skills such as communication, problem solving and leadership which may be beneficial to you now or in the future. There will be the opportunity to meet other students and discuss issues which are relevant to you. Hopefully it will be something you enjoy being involved in.

The wider benefits of taking part in this study are that the findings about well-being can hopefully be used by schools and other educational institutions. This will help schools and others in deciding the policy and practices around well-being which can bring the best benefit to students.

What will happen to information provided by me and data collected during the study?

Your personal data and information will only be used as outlined in this Participant Information Sheet, unless you consent otherwise. Data management will follow the Data Protection Act 2018 (DPA 2018) and UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR), and the University of East Anglia's Research Data Management Policy.

The information you provide will be stored securely and your identity will be kept strictly confidential, except as required by law. Study findings may be published. Although every effort will be made to protect your identity, there is a risk that you might be identifiable due to the nature of the study and/or results.

Study data may also be deposited with a repository to allow it to be made available for scholarly and educational purposes. The data will be kept for at least 10 years beyond the last date the data were accessed. The deposited data will not include your name or any directly identifiable information about you, but there is a risk that you might be identifiable due to the nature of the study and/or results.

What if I would like further information about the study?

When you have read this information, Sarah Parker, sarah.e.parker@uea.ac.uk, will be available to discuss it with you further and answer any questions you may have about the study.

Will I be told the results of the study?

You have a right to receive feedback about the overall results of this study. This will be at the end of the study when the data has been analysed and the findings from the study are known. You will receive a summary of this information through a meeting at school or through an information sheet which can be emailed or posted to you.

What if I have a complaint or any concerns about the study?

If there is a problem, please let me know. You can contact me via the University at the following address:

Sarah Parker

School of Education and Lifelong Learning

University of East Anglia

NORWICH NR4 7TJ

Sarah.e.parker@uea.ac.uk

If you would like to speak to someone else, you can contact my supervisor:

Dr. Kate Russell, Kate.Russell@uea.ac.uk, 01603 592924

If you are concerned about the way this study is being conducted or you wish to make a complaint to someone independent from the study, please contact the Head of Education and Lifelong Learning, Dr. Yann Lebeau, Y.Lebeau@uea.ac.uk.

How do I know that this study has been approved to take place?

To protect your safety, rights, wellbeing and dignity, all research in the University of East Anglia is reviewed by a Research Ethics Body. This research was approved by the UEA Ethics Committee.

What is the general data protection information I need to be informed about?

According to data protection legislation, we are required to inform you that the legal basis for processing your data as listed in Article 6(1) of the UK GDPR is because this allows us to process personal data when it is necessary to perform our public tasks as a University.

Our processing of your personal data will be based on Article 9(2)(j), which relates to archiving, research and statistics purposes, and Schedule 1, Part 1(4) of the DPA 2018, which relates to research.

In addition to the specific information provided above about why your personal data is required and how it will be used, there is also some general information which needs to be provided for you:

- The data controller is the University of East Anglia.
- For further information, you can contact the University's Data Protection Officer at dataprotection@uea.ac.uk
- You can also find out more about your data protection rights at the [Information Commissioner's Office \(ICO\)](#).
- If you are unhappy with how your personal data has been used, please contact the University's Data Protection Officer at dataprotection@uea.ac.uk in the first instance.

OK, I want to take part – what do I do next?

You need to fill in one copy of the consent form and return it to your school main office in the sealed envelope provided by 16.2.23 Please keep the letter, information sheet and the second copy of the consent form for your information.

Further information

This information was last updated on 3.02.23

If there are changes to the information provided, you will be notified by further written communication to yourselves

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (First Copy to Researcher)

I, [PRINT NAME], agree to take part in this research study.

In giving my consent I state that:

- I understand the purpose of the study, what I will be asked to do, and any risks/benefits involved.
 - I have read the Participant Information Sheet, which I may keep, for my records, and have been able to discuss my involvement in the study with the researchers if I wished to do so.
 - The researchers have answered any questions that I had about the study and I am happy with the answers.
 - I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary and I do not have to take part. My decision whether to be in the study will not affect my relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia now or in the future
 - I understand that I may leave the focus group at any time if I do not wish to continue.
 - I understand that personal information about me that is collected over the course of this project will be stored securely and will only be used for purposes that I have agreed to. I understand that information about me will only be told to others with my permission, except as required by law.
- I understand that the results of this study may be published. Although every effort will be made to protect my identity, I may be identifiable in these publications due to the nature of the study or results.

I consent to:

Audio-recording YES ☐ NO ☐

Written field notes YES ☐ NO ☐

Photography of visual work YES ☐ NO ☐

The data collected in this study may be deposited with a repository to allow it to be made available for scholarly and educational purposes. Although every effort will be made to protect my identity, I may be identifiable in this due to the nature of the study or results.

I consent to: Deposit of data in a repository YES ☐ NO ☐

Would you like to receive feedback about the overall results of this study?

YES ☐ NO ☐

If you answered **YES**, please indicate your preferred form of feedback, school address/email:

☐ Postal: _____

☐ Email: _____

.....

Signature

.....

PRINT name

.....

Date

8.3 Appendix C - Consent Form Parent Phase One

Sarah Parker

Faculty of Social Science

*Postgraduate Researcher
Doctoral Candidate*

School of Education and Lifelong
Learning

11.5.22

University of East Anglia

Norwich Research Park

Study about student well-being

PARENTAL/GUARDIAN INFORMATION STATEMENT

What is this study about?

Your child is invited to take part in a research study about **young peoples' well-being and what schools can do to support well-being**. Your child has been invited to participate in this study because they expressed an interest to be involved and were then selected to take part. This Participant Information Statement tells you about the research study. Knowing what is involved will help you decide if you want to let your child take part in the study. Please read this sheet carefully and ask questions about anything that you don't understand or want to know more about.

Participation in this research study is voluntary. By giving consent to take part in this study you are telling us that you:

- ✓ Understand what you have read.
- ✓ Agree for your child to take part in the research study as outlined below.
- ✓ Agree to the use of your child's personal information as described.
- ✓ You have received a copy of this Participant Information Statement to keep.

Who is running the study?

The study is being carried out by Sarah Parker who is a doctoral research candidate in the School of Education and Lifelong Learning at the University of East Anglia.

This study will take place under the supervision of Dr. Kate Russell, Kate.Russell@uea.ac.uk.

This study is self-funded.

What will the study involve for my child?

The study will involve your child working as a co-researcher with myself, as the lead researcher, together with other student co-researchers. This research group will likely be made up of 6-12 students aged 14-16 from your child's school. Meetings for Phase 1 of the research will be held in school time, on Monday afternoons from 1.55pm – 3.20pm for the second half of the Spring Term 2023 at your child's school. At the beginning of the study, Phase 1, your child will be trained in the skills of carrying out research. They will then help to decide the methods which will be used to collect data about well-being from other participants. In Phase 2 they will then decide how the data collected can be analysed and how the findings from the study can be shared with other students and staff. Phase 2 will take place in school time in the second half of the Summer Term 2023, dates and times to be decided at a later date.

Audio recordings of the meetings will be taken, together with written field notes by myself as the lead researcher. In addition, I will photograph any visual work produced by your child in the co-researchers' meetings.

How much of my child's time will the study take?

It is anticipated that for Phase 1 your child will be required for approximately 8- 10 hours across the second half of the Spring Term 2023.

Does my child have to be in the study? Can my child withdraw from the study once they have started?

Being in this study is completely voluntary and your child does not have to take part. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your child's or your current or future relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia now or in the future.

If you decide to let your child take part in the study and then change your mind later (or they no longer wish to take part), they are free to withdraw from the study at any time and, you can withdraw your consent up to the point that your child's data is fully anonymised. You can do this by putting this in writing to myself as the lead researcher. You will then be asked to sign a form and return it to your child's school, which shows you have changed your mind and you do not wish your child to participate in the study anymore.

What are the consequences if my child withdraws from the study?

Your child may leave the focus group at any time if they do not wish to continue but it will not be possible to withdraw their comments once the group has started, as it is a group discussion. Although every effort will be made to protect your child's identity, they may be identifiable in publications due to the nature of the study or results.

Are there any risks or costs associated with my child being in the study?

Aside from your child giving up their time, we do not expect that there will be any risks or costs associated with taking part in this study. However, as the focus of this study is student well-being, your child may wish to talk with someone about your own well-being or that of someone else in the group. They will be provided with information about who they can talk to in school and out of school to support them.

Are there any benefits associated with my child being in the study?

The benefits for your child taking part in this study are, that they will receive training in research skills that may be helpful for their own studies and forthcoming examinations. They will have

the chance to develop skills such as communication, problem solving and leadership which may be beneficial to your child now or in the future. There will be the opportunity to meet other students and discuss issues which are relevant to young people today. Hopefully it will be something they will enjoy being involved in.

The wider benefits of your child taking part in this study are that the findings about well-being will hopefully be used by schools and other educational institutions. This will help schools and others in deciding the best policy and practices around well-being which can bring the best benefit to students.

What will happen to information provided by my child and data collected during the study?

Your child's personal data and information will only be used as outlined in this Participant Information Statement, unless you consent otherwise. Data management will follow the Data Protection Act 2018 (DPA 2018) and UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR), and the University of East Anglia's Research Data Management Policy.

Your child's information will be stored securely, and their identity will be kept strictly confidential, except as required by law. Study findings may be published. Although every effort will be made to protect your child's identity, there is a risk that they might be identifiable due to the nature of the study and/or results.

Study data may also be deposited with a repository to allow it to be made available for scholarly and educational purposes. The data will be kept for at least 10 years beyond the last date the data were accessed. The deposited data will not include your child's name or any directly identifiable information about your child, but there is a risk that your child might be identifiable due to the nature of the study and/or results.

What if we would like further information about the study?

When you have read this information, Sarah Parker, sarah.e.parker@uea.ac.uk, 07906 424637 will be available to discuss it with you further and answer any questions you may have about the study.

Will my child be told the results of the study?

You and your child have a right to receive feedback about the overall results of this study. This will be provided through an information sheet which can be emailed or posted to you.

What if I have a complaint or any concerns about the study?

If there is a problem, please let me know. You can contact me via the University at the following address:

Sarah Parker

School of Education and Lifelong Learning

University of East Anglia

NORWICH NR4 7TJ

Sarah.e.parker@uea.ac.uk

If you or your child are concerned about the way this study is being conducted or you wish to make a complaint to someone independent from the study, please contact Dr. Kate Russell, Kate.Russell@uea.ac.uk, or the Head of Education and Lifelong Learning, Dr. Yann Lebeau, Y.Lebeau@uea.ac.uk.

How do we know that this study has been approved to take place?

To protect your safety, rights, wellbeing and dignity, all research in the University of East Anglia is reviewed by a Research Ethics Body. This research was approved by the UEA Ethics Committee.

What is the general data protection information my child needs to be informed about?

According to data protection legislation, we are required to inform you that the legal basis for processing your data as listed in Article 6(1) of the UK GDPR is because this allows us to process personal data when it is necessary to perform our public tasks as a University.

In addition to the specific information provided above about why your child's personal data is required and how it will be used, there is also some general information which needs to be provided for you:

- The data controller is the University of East Anglia.
- For further information, you can contact the University's Data Protection Officer at dataprotection@uea.ac.uk
- You can also find out more about your child's data protection rights at the [Information Commissioner's Office \(ICO\)](#).
- If you are unhappy with how your child's personal data has been used, please contact the University's Data Protection Officer at dataprotection@uea.ac.uk in the first instance.

OK, I am happy for my child to take part – what do I do next?

You need to fill in the consent form and return it to your child's school in the sealed envelope provided by 16.2. 23 Please keep this letter/ information sheet and a copy of the consent form once signed will be returned to you for your information.

Further information

This information was last updated on 3.2.23.

If there are changes to the information provided, you will be notified by further written communication from myself.

This information sheet is for you to keep

PARENTAL/GUARDIAN CONSENT FORM (First Copy to Researcher)

I,[PRINT PARENT'S/GUARDIAN'S NAME], consent to my child [PRINT CHILD'S NAME] participating in this research study.

In giving my consent I state that:

- I understand the purpose of the study, what my child will be asked to do, and any risks/benefits involved.
- I have read the Parental/Guardian Information Sheet and have been able to discuss my child's involvement in the study with the researchers if I wished to do so.
- The researchers have answered any questions that I had about the study and I am happy with the answers.
- I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary and my child does not have to take part. My decision whether to let them take part in the study will not affect our relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia now or in the future.
- I understand that my child can withdraw from the study at any time.
- I understand that my child may leave the focus group at any time if they do not wish to continue. I also understand that it will not be possible to withdraw their comments once the group has started, as it is a group discussion.
- I understand that the results of this study may be published. Although every effort will be made to protect my child's identity, they may be identifiable in these publications due to the nature of the study or results.

I consent to:

Audio-recording of my child YES ☐ NO ☐

Written field notes of my child YES ☐ NO ☐

Photographing visual work produced by my child YES ☐ NO ☐

The data collected in this study may be deposited with a repository to allow it to be made available for scholarly and educational purposes. Although every effort will be made to protect my child's identity, they may be identifiable in this due to the nature of the study or results.

I consent to: Deposit of data in a repository YES ☐ NO ☐

Would you like to receive feedback about the overall results of this study?

YES ☐ NO ☐

If you answered **YES**, please indicate your preferred form of feedback and address:

☐ Postal: _____

☐ Email: _____

.....

Signature

.....

PRINT name

.....

Date

8.4 Appendix D - Consent Form Headteacher Phase One

Headteacher/Principal CONSENT FORM (First Copy to Researcher)

I,[PRINT NAME], consent to my school
..... [PRINT NAME] participating in this research
study.

In giving my consent I state that:

- I understand the purpose of the study, what my school will be asked to do, and any risks/benefits involved.
- I have read the Information Sheet and have been able to discuss my school's involvement in the study with the researchers if I wished to do so.
- The researchers have answered any questions that I had about the study and I am happy with the answers.
- I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary and my school does not have to take part. My decision whether to take part in the study will not affect our relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia now or in the future.
- I understand that my school can withdraw from the study at any time.
- I understand that my students may leave the co-researchers focus group at any time if they do not wish to continue. I also understand that it will not be possible to withdraw their comments once the group has started, as it is a group discussion.
- I understand that the results of this study may be published. Although every effort will be made to protect my schools identity, they may be identifiable in these publications due to the nature of the study or results.

I consent to:

Audio-recording of my students	YES ☐	NO ☐
Written field notes of my students	YES ☐	NO ☐
Photographing visual work of my students	YES ☐	NO ☐

The data collected in this study may be deposited with a repository to allow it to be made available for scholarly and educational purposes. Although every effort will be made to protect my school's identity, they may be identifiable in this due to the nature of the study or results.

I consent to: Deposit of data in a repository YES ☐ NO ☐

Would you like to receive feedback about the overall results of this study?
YES ☐ NO ☐

If you answered **YES**, please indicate your preferred form of feedback and address:

[ETH2122-1923]

☐ Postal: _____

☐ Email: _____

.....
Signature

.....
PRINT name

.....
Date

[ETH2122-1923]

8.5 Appendix E – Session Plans for Co-Researcher Group Phase One

Co-Researcher Focus Group – Phase One – Session 1 - x Room x- 1.55pm – 3.20pm - 6.3.2023

Introduction

Register

Welcome and Introductions

Brief overview of the Research Study including PAR Methodology

Purpose of Co – Researcher Focus Group

Reminder of right to withdraw at any stage of the Focus Group – caveat - that any work produced which has already been anonymised would not be withdrawn

Further questions, comments, thoughts

Activities

Setting of ground rules for Focus Group

Co-Researchers to be given 2 exemplars of ground rules for groups and to reflect on other ground rules for groups they have been part of in order to produce a list of ground rules for the Co-Researcher Focus Group

Co – Researchers to increase their knowledge and understanding about the research topics of well- being and agency

Lead Researcher to lead session using Freire’s generative themes to explore what key words in research questions mean – i.e., well – being, articulate, choice, experience, voice, and agency

Co -Researchers to consider what the term well – being means individually, then share thoughts as part of pair or trio. Choice of how they present their thoughts

Feedback to whole group from pair/trio work

Co-Researchers to get used to speaking to group, being audio recorded, transcripts produced

Use of field notes if appropriate.

Reflections

Recap on what achieved this session – content and manner of working

Thanks and Thoughts for next session

Anyone welcome to stay behind if wish to discuss anything

Signpost Co – Researchers to safeguarding/support in school and externally re the research or if affected by the research

Co-Researcher Focus Group – Phase One – Session 2 – x Room x- 1.55pm – 3.20pm - 13.3.2023

Debrief

Register

Recap on content covered in previous session

Reflections on previous session

Plan for this session – content and manner of working

Reminder on Ground Rules

Further questions, comments, thoughts

Activities

Co – Researchers to increase their knowledge and understanding about the research topics of well- being and agency

Co – Researchers to pull out themes around well- being from looking at transcripts from Session 1 – which detail their first thoughts around well – being

Scribe and whiteboard to compile list of themes and frequency

Lead Researcher to lead session using Freire’s generative themes looking at words that have emerged from transcripts and their meaning to researchers – to include power

Activity – imagination - to consider what a ‘perfect school’ would look like as regards well-being – using all senses – sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste

Co – Researchers to present their ‘perfect school’ through their choice from post it notes on a board, written means, or verbal means

Co – Researchers to feedback to group and their work captured through photography of it if written or audio recording if verbal, plus use of field notes if appropriate

Reflections

Recap on what achieved this session – content and manner of working

Thanks and Thoughts for next session

Anyone welcome to stay behind if wish to discuss anything

Signpost Co – Researchers to safeguarding/support in school and externally re the research or if affected by the research

Co-Researcher Focus Group – Phase One – Session 3 - x Room x- 1.55pm – 3.20pm - 20.3.2023

Debrief

Register

Recap on content covered in previous session

Reflections on previous session

Aim/Plan for this session – content and manner of working

Reminder on Ground Rules

Further questions, comments, thoughts

Activities

Co-Researchers training on methods of data collection for research projects

Overview of methods of data collection provided by Lead Researcher

Co – Researchers to decide method/s of working – to provide all the group with information on research methods of data collection and examples of actual research using this method of data collection and to provide all the group with pros and cons for the methods

Co – Researchers group discussion after previous activity

Use of field notes if appropriate

Reflections

Recap on what achieved this session – content and manner of working

Thanks and Thoughts for next session

Next Steps with the research to be discussed with co-researchers including their views on whether ‘analysis’ to be undertaken over shorter session/s or day session/s

Anyone welcome to stay behind if wish to discuss anything

Signpost Co – Researchers to safeguarding/support in school and externally re the research or if affected by the research.

Co-Researcher Focus Group – Phase One – Session 4 - x Room x-

1.55pm – 3.20pm - 27.3.2023

Debrief

Register

Hand out students/ parental consent slips

Recap on content covered in previous session

Reflections on previous session

Aim/Plan for this session – content and manner of working

Reminder on Ground Rules

Further questions, comments, thoughts

Activities

Feedback from one of the Co-Researchers who had volunteered at the last session to pilot a Touring Map of the School, as a possible method of data collection

Co-Researchers to consider the research questions 1 and 2 in depth and provide responses to what they consider to be important to those questions, from a CYP perspective. Leading to thoughts about questions to be asked in data collection phase

Research Question 1 – How do young people articulate /engage in discourses of and experience well-being?

Research Question 2 – What agency do young people have in school to improve their well-being?

Co – Researchers to decide how they wish to conduct this activity

Activity to be captured through recording or photograph of work dependent on Co-researcher activity choice, plus field notes if appropriate

Reflections

Recap on what achieved this session – content and manner of working

Thanks and Thoughts for next session

Anyone welcome to stay behind if wish to discuss anything

Signpost Co – Researchers to safeguarding/support in school and externally re the research or if affected by the research. NB – School 2- week Easter Holiday coming up

Co-Researcher Focus Group – Phase One – Session 5 - x Room x-
1.55pm – 3.20pm - 17.4.2023

Debrief

Register

Collect students/ parental consent slips

Brief written Feedback Slips on first 4 sessions to be completed

Recap on content covered in previous session

Reflections on previous session

Aim/Plan for this session – content and manner of working

Reminder on Ground Rules

Further questions, comments, thoughts

Activities

Co – Researchers to make individual decision on methods of data collection for Phase Two – for all participants. This Individual View to lead into List View for Session 6

Co-Researchers to revisit possible data collection methods. Reminder of types of data collection methods through information sheet and discussions from Session 3

Further discussion, on from Session 3, around pros and cons of different data collection methods now with our specific participants in mind and the specific questions that need to be asked/ answered. Emphasis on the best methods to collect the richest data set for our research

Training Activity on the use of a visual stimulus for data collection. Question - What is it like to live in East Anglia? Verbal response. Co -Researchers to then select 4 pictures from a selection of impressionist and post - impressionist paintings. Then answer

question again – What is it like to live in East Anglia. Discussion around implications for data collection

Co -Researchers to write anonymously their individual, 1st and 2nd choices for data collection methods for both participants in Phase Two and explain their choices

Photographs of work, plus field notes if appropriate

Reflections

Recap on what achieved this session – content and manner of working

Thanks and Thoughts for next session

Anyone welcome to stay behind if wish to discuss anything

Signpost Co – Researchers to safeguarding/support in school and externally re the research or if affected by the research.

Co-Researcher Focus Group – Phase One – Session 6 - x Room x-

1.55pm – 3.20pm - 24.4.2023

Debrief

Register

Collect parental consent slips and two outstanding student slips

Recap on content covered in previous session

Reflections on previous session

Plan for this session – content and manner of working

Reminder on Ground Rules

Further questions, comments, thoughts

Activities

Co-Researchers final decision on methods of data collection to be decided for Phase Two – for all participants. Individual views from last session combined into list view

Discussion around list view – NB. further discussion around ‘interviews’ and ‘conversations’ for staff participants

Training on questions - through information sheet entitled ‘Developing Questions for Focus Groups’

Co – Researchers contribution on questions/areas to explore that are important to ask participants for Phase Two and areas important to explore drawing on themes/ideas from previous sessions

Scribe, whiteboard and field note to compile list of questions/areas to explore, plus field notes if appropriate

Reflections

Recap on what achieved this session – content and manner of working

Thank you for participation to date in Phase One

Next Steps with the research including whether ‘analysis’ to be undertaken over shorter session/s or day session/s

Anyone welcome to stay behind if wish to discuss anything

Signpost Co – Researchers to safeguarding/support in school and externally re the research or if affected by the research.

Co-Researcher Focus Group – Phase One – Session 7 - x Room x-
1.55pm – 3.20pm - 5.7.2023

Debrief

Register

Ensure all student and parental consent slips have been returned (via X).

Recap on content covered in previous session

Reflections on previous session

Plan for this session – content and manner of working (NB – The initial plan was for 2 sessions – 3.7.23 & 5.7.23 focussing on Data Analysis but due to strike action on 5.7.23 and subsequent movement of sports day from 5.7.23 to 3.7.23 – only 1 session to run on 5.7.23 as year 10 in school even though a strike day).

Reminder on Ground Rules

Further questions, comments, thoughts

Activities

Co-Researchers to receive very brief overview of analysis – using Braun and Clarkes (2022) Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Group training on how to code using ‘Practice Transcript’

Individuals to work through ‘Practice Transcript’ pulling out anything interesting /worthy of note – initial codes

Group discussion around initial codes selected

Paired exercise using paper and ‘post-it notes’ to put codes into possible themes

Group discussion around initial themes selected from practice transcript plus reference to general work on well-being

Individual reflection on how their co-researcher positionality might have reflected their coding/themes

Co-researchers reflections on our work/sessions

Photographs of work produced plus field notes if appropriate

Reflections

Recap on what achieved this session – content and manner of working

Signpost Co – Researchers to safeguarding/support in school and externally re the research or if affected by the research.

Thanks to all co-researchers for this session and reminder that the analysis session will take place when data collected by lead researcher and date/time confirmed with school

8.6 Appendix F – Methods of Data Collection Phase Two

Session – 5 - Phase One - Co researcher Focus Research Group – Individual Views on Data Collection Methods for Phase Two from Students.

Co-researcher

Drawing for younger students – easier for people to express themselves

Group conversations for older students – can have more of an insight of the subject

Co-researcher

I think that focus group conversations is the best option for young adults /teenagers – having a voice to give an opinion on things that are discussed. It gives teenagers time to express their opinions but this can depend on the time that is given.

Co-researcher

Year 10-11 having a survey. I think a survey would allow those who want to be anonymous but be able to put what they want with reasoning

Co-researcher

I think working in a focus group is a good method for students and having conversations because you can speak to more people in a short amount of time and get a wider range of views.

Co-researcher

I think that my favourite method are talking in a group because then everyone has a view and an opinion and everyone's listened to

Co-researcher

I think that students would respond best to painting /creative methods the most because art is a peaceful activity which doesn't necessarily involve talking as most students feel uncomfortable talking to an adult

Co-researcher

Creative methods for a younger group but talking in social groups for older ones

Co-researcher

Group conversations will get teens talking and discussing well-being and will get good information, ideas and answers, like this group has done.

Co – researcher

I feel methods such as dance or drama are rather abstract and would make it difficult to convey an accurate message. Interpretations vary from person to person and the original idea could easily be mistranslated. I think these methods would be inappropriate or awkward for an older age group and time consuming. In my opinion questionnaires seem fitting as they are not intrusive or time consuming

Phase One - Co researcher Focus Research Group – Individual Views on Data Collection
Methods for Phase Two from Staff

Co-researcher

Interviews, staff are used to interviews, in a Focus Group, may be hesitant to give their views

Co-researcher

Questionnaires – because many do questionnaires a lot and give their opinion. Also I think that if the questionnaires included a wide range of questions given to staff members, then there would be a variety of responses and opinions.

Co-researcher

I think for teachers having a survey would mean less time spent/wasting their time and they can take only 5 minutes to fill the survey with either just tick boxes or tick boxes and reasoning

Co-researcher

I think for staff interviews may work well. I think this because it is one to one, however it depends if the staff have the time to give up to take part. I believe you should give staff the questions in advance so you don't have to take up as much time letting them know about this on the day. This also gives them time to prepare

Co-researcher

I think for staff a conversation would work fine, for its almost relieving to feel like you're having a productive conversation rather than on the spot interviewed.

Co-researcher

Interviews-suitable for most, easy access and clear results

Co-researcher

Interviews, so as not to be influenced by higher ups, anonymous

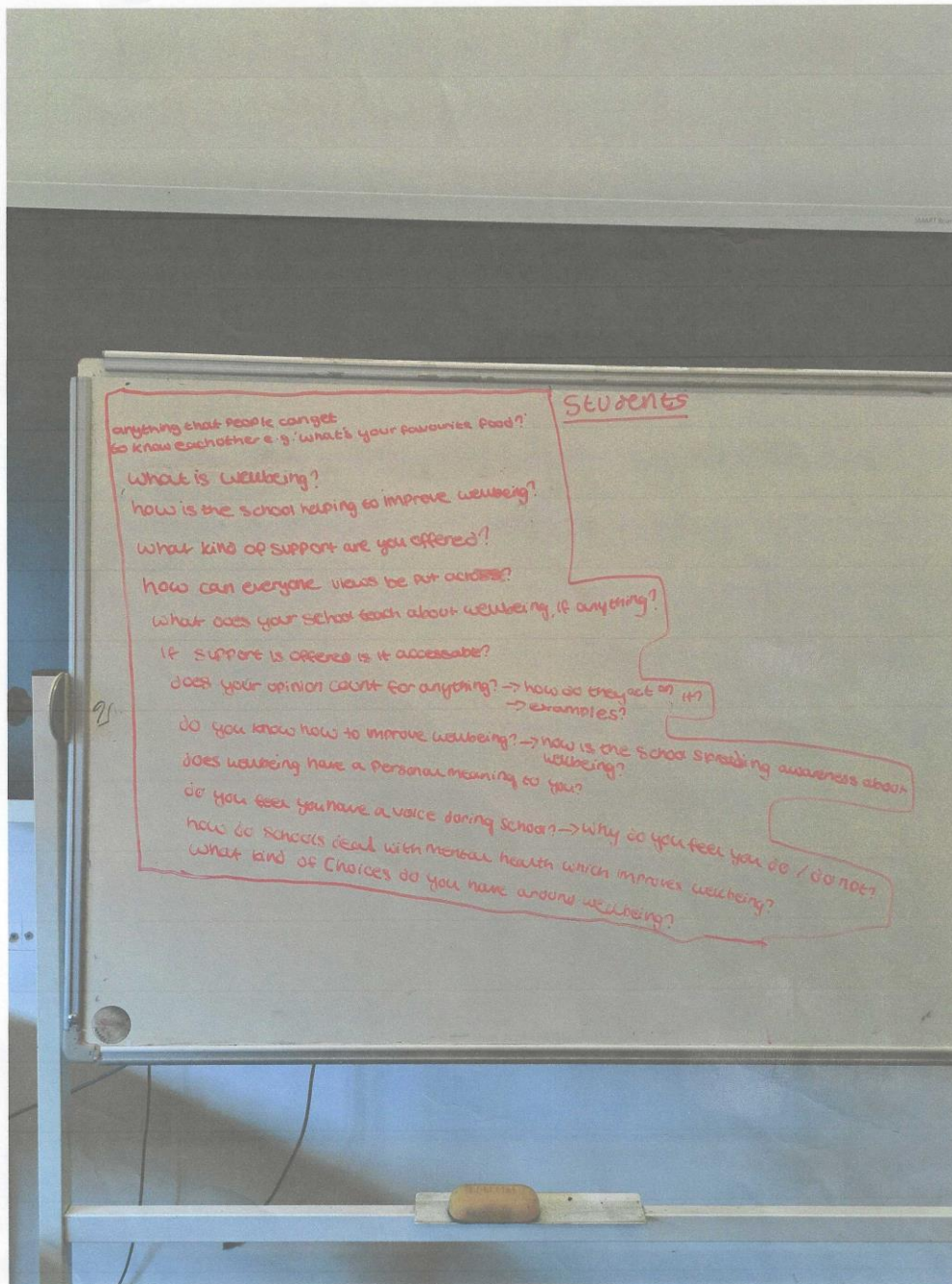
Co-researcher (NB – noted in researcher field notes)

A conversation would help get more ideas about things because people feel they can explain more and discuss things rather than in an interview when you answer quickly and sometimes can't explain what you want. The relationship is better

Co-researcher (NB – noted in researcher field notes)

Conversations because they are less strict than interviews and staff might feel more relaxed and give better ideas

8.7 Appendix G – Areas / Questions to be Explored Phase Two



Staff

What kind of training are you offered? → does it work? → how do you know?
→ why aren't you provided with it?
→ what do you think should happen?

How does the school spread awareness to staff?

What do you do to improve people's wellbeing?

Do you feel the school offers enough support outside lessons/clubs? → if not then why?

Where do schools get their ideas from? → staff, other schools, Ofsted, the government, higher bodies,
Church of England, SLE, governors

How does the school's support effect certain things?

Is there anything else you can do to improve people's wellbeing?

Do staff get a voice in the vision?

What difference do you feel is made towards students wellbeing?

Do you feel your wellbeing is being supported?

Do you think students are heard → what ways?
→ why not?

Areas to explore using questions generated from Co-Researcher Focus Group (questions correspond to handwritten questions from photograph)

AE – Area/s to explore Q – Original question from photograph

For Students

- ***AE- What is a definition of well-being; What does well-being mean; What words can be used that mean/describe well-being***

Q-What is well-being?

Q-Does well-being have a personal meaning for you? (NB- collective meaning to be explored)

- ***AE -How does the school help well-being. What goes on in school which helps well-being***

Q-What kind of support are you offered?

Q-If support is offered, is it accessible?

Q-Do you know how to improve well-being?

Q-What choices do you have around well-being?

Additional probes from co-researchers summarised – variety of people; form tutor; safeguarding team; pastoral team; and are you encouraged to talk.

Q-How is the school helping to improve well-being?

Q-What does your school teach about well-being if anything?

Q-How do schools deal with mental health around well-being?

Additional probes from co-researchers summarised – PSHE – booklets, power points, skills sessions; assemblies; training of teachers; support available; relationships with peers; well-being activities; relationships with teachers; option choices, exams; and rules.

- ***AE -How does the school hinder well-being, what goes on in school that does not help well-being***

Additional probes from co-researchers summarised – PSHE – booklets, power points, skills sessions; assemblies; training of teachers; support available; relationships with peers; well-being activities; relationships with teachers; option choices, exams; and rules.

- ***AE – How do students have their say/ voice in school; In what ways does this happen/not happen; What changes have happened because of student voice***

Q-How can everyone's views be put across?

Q-Does your opinion count for anything and how do they act on it – examples?

Q-Do you have a voice – how do you feel you do?

For Staff

- ***AE- What is a definition of well-being; What does well-being mean; What words can be used that mean/describe well-being***
- ***AE -How does the school help well-being. What goes on in school which helps well-being***

Q-What do you do to improve people's well-being?

Q-Do you feel the school offers enough support outside lessons, clubs? If not why?

Q-What difference do you feel is made towards students' well-being?

- ***AE -How does the school hinder well-being, what goes on in school that does not help well-being***
- ***AE – How do students have their say/ voice in school; In what ways does this happen/not happen; What changes have happened because of student voice***

Q-What difference do you feel is made towards students' well-being?

Q-Do you think students are heard, in what ways, why not?

- ***AE- What training do you have to support student well-being***

Q- What kind of training are you offered, does it work, how do you know, what do you think should happen?

Q-How does staff spread awareness to staff of well-being?

- ***AE-How is staff well-being supported***

Q-Do staff get a voice in well-being?

Q-Do you feel your well-being is being supported?

- ***AE- What evidence do schools use to base their well-being work on? Why/ How do they make their decisions about their well-being work***

Q-Where do schools get their ideas from?

Q-How does the school sponsors affect certain things?

8.8 Appendix H – Information Sheet Students Phase Two

XXX Guidance Sheet Regarding Support with Doctorate Research

My name is Sarah Parker and I am a doctoral student at UEA. Below I provide a brief outline of my research and the participants I am looking to collect data from – as agreed in principle with XXX.

The ambition of this research is to provide an insight into the concerning picture of Children and Young People (CYP) well-being, as suggested by the measurement indicators, through understanding how well-being is experienced by CYP themselves and to consider whether schools can work in different ways with CYP to improve CYP well-being.

My methodology is Participatory Action Research and for Phase One I worked with a co-researcher group of Year 10 and 11 students from a school in XXX. They decided the methods of data collection from both student and staff participants for Phase Two and the questions they would like to be asked/explored.

Therefore, for Phase Two, I need to work with students from one/two schools and with staff from a different school(s) to the students. Any applicable combination of school usage which works for you is fine.

Therefore, I am looking for student participants from Year 9, 10 or 11:-

- Working in a minimum of 8 focus groups
- With 4-6 students in each focus group
- Minimum total number of students required is 32.

Each focus group will meet once for 20-30 minutes to explore the topic of collective student well-being with myself as the researcher.

They would be providing data for the following research questions:-

- How do young people articulate/engage in discourses of and experience wellbeing in Secondary Schools?
- What agency do young people have in school to improve their own well-being?

Also, I am looking for 12 staff participants:-

- From a range of roles – leadership, pastoral, teaching and support staff
- From a different school/s to the student participants
- Minimum total number of staff required is 12

Each staff participant to have a 20-30 minute one-to-one semi-structured conversation with myself as the researcher, to discuss the topic of student well-being.

They would be providing data for the following research questions:-

- What choices are schools making in respect of young peoples' well-being?

- How do schools enable student voice in their well-being work?

The research must be completed by the end of the Autumn Term 2023. Therefore, the suggested timescales to visit the school(s) to collect the data are between November 20th to December 2nd. I am flexible about the number of school visits but ideally no more than four visits as I live in XXX. I am prepared to stay overnight locally if an early start is helpful or to facilitate consecutive days.

All the research has received the required ethical approvals from UEA, and it will be necessary for me to obtain written consent from the Trust/Headteacher for any school involved, student participants, their parents/guardians, and staff participants as part of this process (copies of Consent Forms attached)

If you need more information, please do not hesitate to get in touch -
Sarah.E.Parker@uea.ac.uk

8.9 Appendix I – Consent Form Student Phase Two

Sarah Parker

Postgraduate Researcher
Doctoral Candidate

19.10.23

Faculty of Social Science

School of Education and Lifelong
Learning

University of East Anglia

Norwich Research Park

Norwich NR4 7T1

A study about student well-being

STUDENT PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

What is this study about?

You are invited to take part in a research study about young peoples' well-being and what schools can do to support well-being. You have been invited to participate in this study because you expressed an interest in this study and have now been selected to take part. This Participant Information Sheet tells you about the research study. Knowing what is involved will help you decide if you want to take part in the study. Please read this sheet carefully and ask questions about anything that you don't understand or want to know more about.

Participation in this research study is voluntary. By giving consent to take part in this study you are telling us that you:

- ✓ Understand what you have read.
- ✓ Agree to take part in the research study as outlined below.
- ✓ Agree to the use of your personal information as described.
- ✓ You have received a copy of this Participant Information Sheet to keep.

Who is running the study?

The study is being carried out by Sarah Parker who is a doctoral research candidate in the School of Education and Lifelong Learning, at the University of East Anglia.

This study will take place under the supervision of Dr. Kate Russell, Kate.Russell@uea.ac.uk, 01603 592924.

This study is self-funded.

What will the study involve for me?

The study will involve you meeting in a focus group of 4 – 6 students with myself. You will be answering questions and discussing the subject of well-being for young people in school. The students in the focus group will come from your school. You will meet as a focus group once during school time for approximately 20 -30 minutes.

Audio recordings of the meetings will be taken, together with written field notes by myself as the lead researcher (field notes can be used by researchers to help them record things that may be useful for their research).

How much of my time will the study take?

It is anticipated that you will be required for approximately 20 – 30 minutes in total during school time in the Autumn Term 2023. The exact date and time will be arranged by myself in consultation with the school.

Do I have to be in the study? Can I withdraw from the study once I have started?

Being in this study is completely voluntary and you do not have to take part. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your, your parent/guardian's, or your schools current or

future relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia now or in the future.

If you decide to take part in the study, you can withdraw your consent up to the point that your data is fully anonymised (that means that when the information you have given cannot be identified as being given by you). You can do this by putting this in writing to myself as the lead researcher or speaking to myself as the lead researcher.

What are the consequences if I withdraw from the study?

You may leave the focus group at any time if you do not wish to continue but it will not be possible to withdraw your comments once the group has started, as it is a group discussion.

Although every effort will be made to protect your identity, you may be identifiable in publications due to the nature of the study or results.

Are there any risks or costs associated with being in the study?

Aside from giving up your time, we do not expect that there will be any risks or costs associated with taking part in this study. However, as the focus of this study is student well-being, you may wish to talk with someone about your own well-being or that of someone else in the group. You will be provided with information about who you can talk to in school and out of school to support you. (Out of School - Childline – Tel. 0800 1111 and Website www.childline.org.uk and Young Minds – Website www.youngminds.org.uk)

Are there any benefits associated with being in the study?

The benefits in taking part in this study are, for you, that there will be the opportunity to meet other students and discuss issues which are relevant to you. Hopefully it will be something you enjoy being involved in.

The wider benefits of taking part in this study are that the findings about well-being can hopefully be used by schools and other educational institutions. This will help schools and others in deciding the policy and practices around well-being which can bring the best benefit to students.

What will happen to information provided by me and data collected during the study?

Your personal data and information will only be used as outlined in this Participant Information Sheet, unless you consent otherwise. Data management will follow the Data Protection Act 2018 (DPA 2018) and UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR), and the University of East Anglia's Research Data Management Policy.

The information you provide will be stored securely and your identity will be kept strictly confidential, except as required by law. Study findings may be published. Although every effort will be made to protect your identity, there is a risk that you might be identifiable due to the nature of the study and/or results.

Study data may also be deposited with a repository to allow it to be made available for scholarly and educational purposes. The data will be kept for at least 10 years beyond the last date the data were accessed. The deposited data will not include your name or any directly identifiable information about you, but there is a risk that you might be identifiable due to the nature of the study and/or results.

What if I would like further information about the study?

When you have read this information, Sarah Parker, sarah.e.parker@uea.ac.uk, will be available to discuss it with you further and answer any questions you may have about the study.

Will I be told the results of the study?

You have a right to receive feedback about the overall results of this study. This will be at the end of the study when the data has been analysed and the findings from the study are known. You will receive a summary of this information through a meeting at school or through an information sheet which can be emailed or posted to you.

What if I have a complaint or any concerns about the study?

If there is a problem, please let me know. You can contact me via the University at the following address:

Sarah Parker

School of Education and Lifelong Learning

University of East Anglia

NORWICH NR4 7TJ

sarah.e.parker@uea.ac.uk

If you would like to speak to someone else, you can contact my supervisor:

Dr. Kate Russell, Kate.Russell@uea.ac.uk, 01603 592924

If you are concerned about the way this study is being conducted or you wish to make a complaint to someone independent from the study, please contact the Head of Education and Lifelong Learning, Dr. Yann Lebeau, Y.Lebeau@uea.ac.uk.

How do I know that this study has been approved to take place?

To protect your safety, rights, wellbeing and dignity, all research in the University of East Anglia is reviewed by a Research Ethics Body. This research was approved by the UEA Ethics Committee.

What is the general data protection information I need to be informed about?

According to data protection legislation, we are required to inform you that the legal basis for processing your data as listed in Article 6(1) of the UK GDPR is because this allows us to process personal data when it is necessary to perform our public tasks as a university.

Our processing of your personal data will be based on Article 9(2)(j), which relates to archiving, research and statistics purposes, and Schedule 1, Part 1(4) of the DPA 2018, which relates to research.

In addition to the specific information provided above about why your personal data is required and how it will be used, there is also some general information which needs to be provided for you:

- The data controller is the University of East Anglia.
- For further information, you can contact the University's Data Protection Officer at dataprotection@uea.ac.uk
- You can also find out more about your data protection rights at the [Information Commissioner's Office \(ICO\)](#).
- If you are unhappy with how your personal data has been used, please contact the University's Data Protection Officer at dataprotection@uea.ac.uk in the first instance.

OK, I want to take part – what do I do next?

You need to fill in one copy of the consent form and return it to your school. Please keep the information sheet and the second copy of the consent form for your information.

Further information

This information was last updated on 19.10.23.

If there are changes to the information provided, you will be notified by further written communication to yourselves.

This information sheet is for you to keep

STUDENT PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (First Copy to Researcher)

I, [PRINT NAME], agree to take part in this research study.

In giving my consent I state that:

- I understand the purpose of the study, what I will be asked to do, and any risks/benefits involved.
 - I have read the Participant Information Sheet, which I may keep, for my records, and have been able to discuss my involvement in the study with the researchers if I wished to do so.
 - The researchers have answered any questions that I had about the study and I am happy with the answers.
 - I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary and I do not have to take part. My decision whether to be in the study will not affect my relationship, my parent/guardian's relationship or my school's relationship with the researchers anyone else at the University of East Anglia now or in the future
 - I understand that I may leave the focus group at any time if I do not wish to continue.
 - I understand that personal information about me that is collected over the course of this project will be stored securely and will only be used for purposes that I have agreed to. I understand that information about me will only be told to others with my permission, except as required by law.
- I understand that the results of this study may be published. Although every effort will be made to protect my identity, I may be identifiable in these publications due to the nature of the study or results.

I consent to:

Audio-recording YES ☐ NO ☐

Written field notes YES ☐ NO ☐

The data collected in this study may be deposited with a repository to allow it to be made available for scholarly and educational purposes. Although every effort will be made to protect my identity, I may be identifiable in this due to the nature of the study or results.

I consent to: Deposit of data in a repository YES ☐ NO ☐

Would you like to receive feedback about the overall results of this study?

YES ☐ NO ☐

If you answered **YES**, please indicate your preferred form of feedback, school address/email:

☐ Postal: _____

☐ Email: _____

.....

Signature

.....

PRINT name

.....

Date

8.10 Appendix J - Consent Form Parent Phase Two

Sarah Parker

Faculty of Social Science

*Postgraduate Researcher
Doctoral Candidate*

School of Education and Lifelong
Learning

17.10.23

University of East Anglia

A Study about student well-being

Norwich Research Park

PARENTAL/GUARDIAN INFORMATION/CONSENT FORM

What is this study about?

Your child is invited to take part in a research study about young peoples' well-being and what schools can do to support well-being. Your child has been invited to participate in this study because they expressed an interest to be involved and were then selected to take part. This Participant Information Statement tells you about the research study. Knowing what is involved will help you decide if you want to let your child take part in the study. Please read this sheet carefully and ask questions about anything that you don't understand or want to know more about.

Participation in this research study is voluntary. By giving consent to take part in this study you are telling us that you:

- ✓ Understand what you have read.
- ✓ Agree for your child to take part in the research study as outlined below.
- ✓ Agree to the use of your child's personal information as described.
- ✓ You have received a copy of this Participant Information Statement to keep.

Who is running the study?

The study is being carried out by Sarah Parker who is a doctoral research candidate in the School of Education and Lifelong Learning at the University of East Anglia.

This study will take place under the supervision of Dr. Kate Russell, Kate.Russell@uea.ac.uk.

This study is self-funded.

What will the study involve for my child?

The study will involve your child meeting in a focus group of 4 – 6 students with myself. They will be answering questions and discussing the subject of well-being for young people in school. The students will come from your child's school. They will meet as a focus group once during school time for approximately 20-30 minutes.

Audio recordings of the meetings will be taken, together with written field notes by myself as the lead researcher (field notes can be used by researchers to help them record things that may be useful for their research).

How much of my child's time will the study take?

It is anticipated that your child will be required for approximately 20-30 minutes in total during school time in the Autumn Term 2023. The exact date and time will be arranged by myself in consultation with the school.

.

Does my child have to be in the study? Can my child withdraw from the study once they have started?

Being in this study is completely voluntary and your child does not have to take part. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your child's, your, or your child's school current

or future relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia now or in the future.

If you decide to let your child, take part in the study and then change your mind later (or they no longer wish to take part), they are free to withdraw from the study at any time and, you can withdraw your consent up to the point that your child's data is fully anonymised. You can do this by putting this in writing to myself as the lead researcher. You will then be asked to sign a form and return it to your child's school, which shows you have changed your mind and you do not wish your child to participate in the study anymore.

What are the consequences if my child withdraws from the study?

Your child may leave the focus group at any time if they do not wish to continue but it will not be possible to withdraw their comments once the group has started, as it is a group discussion. Although every effort will be made to protect your child's identity, they may be identifiable in publications due to the nature of the study or results.

Are there any risks or costs associated with my child being in the study?

Aside from your child giving up their time, we do not expect that there will be any risks or costs associated with taking part in this study. However, as the focus of this study is student well-being, your child may wish to talk with someone about their own well-being or that of someone else in the group. They will be provided with information about who they can talk to in school and out of school to support them. (Out of school – Childline – Tel. 0800 1111 and Website www.childline.org.uk and Young Minds – Website www.youngminds.org.uk).

Are there any benefits associated with my child being in the study?

The benefits for your child taking part in this study are, that there will be the opportunity to meet other students and discuss issues which are relevant to young people today. Hopefully it will be something they will enjoy being involved in.

The wider benefits of your child taking part in this study are that the findings about well-being will hopefully be used by schools and other educational institutions. This will help schools and others in deciding the best policy and practices around well-being which can bring the best benefit to students.

What will happen to information provided by my child and data collected during the study?

Your child's personal data and information will only be used as outlined in this Participant Information Statement, unless you consent otherwise. Data management will follow the Data Protection Act 2018 (DPA 2018) and UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR), and the University of East Anglia's Research Data Management Policy.

Your child's information will be stored securely, and their identity will be kept strictly confidential, except as required by law. Study findings may be published. Although every effort will be made to protect your child's identity, there is a risk that they might be identifiable due to the nature of the study and/or results.

Study data may also be deposited with a repository to allow it to be made available for scholarly and educational purposes. The data will be kept for at least 10 years beyond the last date the data were accessed. The deposited data will not include your child's name or any directly identifiable information about your child, but there is a risk that your child might be identifiable due to the nature of the study and/or results.

What if we would like further information about the study?

When you have read this information, Sarah Parker, sarah.e.parker@uea.ac.uk will be available to discuss it with you further and answer any questions you may have about the study.

Will my child be told the results of the study?

You and your child have a right to receive feedback about the overall results of this study. This will be provided through an information sheet which can be emailed or posted to you.

What if I have a complaint or any concerns about the study?

If there is a problem, please let me know. You can contact me via the University at the following address:

Sarah Parker

School of Education and Lifelong Learning

University of East Anglia

NORWICH NR4 7TJ

sarah.e.parker@uea.ac.uk

If you or your child are concerned about the way this study is being conducted or you wish to make a complaint to someone independent from the study, please contact Dr. Kate Russell, Kate.Russell@uea.ac.uk, or the Head of Education and Lifelong Learning, Dr. Yann Lebeau, Y.Lebeau@uea.ac.uk.

How do we know that this study has been approved to take place?

To protect your safety, rights, wellbeing and dignity, all research in the University of East Anglia is reviewed by a Research Ethics Body. This research was approved by the UEA Ethics Committee.

What is the general data protection information my child needs to be informed about?

According to data protection legislation, we are required to inform you that the legal basis for processing your data as listed in Article 6(1) of the UK GDPR is because this allows us to process personal data when it is necessary to perform our public tasks as a university.

In addition to the specific information provided above about why your child's personal data is required and how it will be used, there is also some general information which needs to be provided for you:

- The data controller is the University of East Anglia.
- For further information, you can contact the University's Data Protection Officer at dataprotection@uea.ac.uk
- You can also find out more about your child's data protection rights at the [Information Commissioner's Office \(ICO\)](#).
- If you are unhappy with how your child's personal data has been used, please contact the University's Data Protection Officer at dataprotection@uea.ac.uk in the first instance.

OK, I am happy for my child to take part – what do I do next?

You need to fill in the consent form and return it to your child's school. Please keep the information sheet and the second copy of the consent form for your information.

Further information

This information was last updated on 19.10.23.

If there are changes to the information provided, you will be notified by further written communication from myself.

This information sheet is for you to keep

PARENTAL/GUARDIAN CONSENT FORM (First Copy to Researcher)

I,[PRINT PARENT'S/GUARDIAN'S NAME], consent to my child [PRINT CHILD'S NAME] participating in this research study.

In giving my consent I state that:

- I understand the purpose of the study, what my child will be asked to do, and any risks/benefits involved.
- I have read the Parental/Guardian Information Sheet and have been able to discuss my child's involvement in the study with the researchers if I wished to do so.
- The researchers have answered any questions that I had about the study and I am happy with the answers.
- I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary and my child does not have to take part. My decision whether to let them take part in the study will not affect our relationship or my child's school relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia now or in the future.
- I understand that my child can withdraw from the study at any time.
- I understand that my child may leave the focus group at any time if they do not wish to continue. I also understand that it will not be possible to withdraw their comments once the group has started, as it is a group discussion.
- I understand that the results of this study may be published. Although every effort will be made to protect my child's identity, they may be identifiable in these publications due to the nature of the study or results.

I consent to:

Audio-recording of my child YES ☐ NO ☐

Written field notes of my child YES ☐ NO ☐

The data collected in this study may be deposited with a repository to allow it to be made available for scholarly and educational purposes. Although every effort will be made to protect my child's identity, they may be identifiable in this due to the nature of the study or results.

I consent to: Deposit of data in a repository

YES ☐ NO ☐

Would you like to receive feedback about the overall results of this study?

YES ☐ NO ☐

If you answered **YES**, please indicate your preferred form of feedback and address:

☐ Postal: _____

☐ Email: _____

.....

Signature

.....
PRINT name

.....
Date

**PLEASE RETURN THIS SIGNED COPY TO YOUR
CHILDS SCHOOL**

8.11 Appendix K - Consent Form Headteacher Phase Two

Sarah Parker

Postgraduate Researcher
Doctoral Candidate

19.10.23

Faculty of Social Science

School of Education and Lifelong
Learning

University of East Anglia

Norwich Research Park

Norwich NR4 7TJ

United Kingdom

A study about student well-being

HEADTEACHERS INFORMATION / CONSENT FORM FOR STUDENT PARTICIPANTS

What is this study about?

Your school is invited to take part in a research study about young peoples' well-being and what schools can do to support well-being. This Information Statement tells you about the research study.

Participation in this research study is voluntary. By giving consent to take part in this study you are telling us that you:

- ✓ Understand what you have read.
- ✓ Agree for your school to take part in the research study as outlined below.
- ✓ Agree to the use of your school's information as described.
- ✓ You have received a copy of this Information Statement Sheet to keep.

Who is running the study?

The study is being carried out by Sarah Parker who is a researcher in the School of Education and Lifelong Learning at the University of East Anglia.

This study will take place under the supervision of Dr. Kate Russell, Kate.Russell@uea.ac.uk

This study is self-funded.

What will the study involve for your school?

The study will target students aged between 13–16 years of age. The study will involve your students meeting in a focus group of 4 – 6 students with myself. Students will be answering questions and discussing the subject of well-being for young people in school. The students will come from your school. They will meet as a focus group once during school time for approximately 20-30 minutes.

There will also be an 'Information Sheet' about the study for both students and parents/guardians/carers and Consent Forms for them to sign which I will send out through whichever mechanism you or your staff suggest is the most appropriate.

Audio recordings of the meetings will be taken, together with written field notes.

How much of my students' time will the study take?

It is anticipated that students will meet as a focus group for approximately 20-30 minutes during school time in the Autumn Term. The date and time to be negotiated with you to minimise disruption to students' core learning.

Does my school have to be in the study? Can my school withdraw from the study once it has started?

Being in this study is completely voluntary and you do not have to take part. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your school's current or future relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia now or in the future.

What happens if I change my mind?

If you decide to take part in the study and then change your mind later, you are free to withdraw from the study at any time and, you can withdraw your consent up to the point that your school and students' data is fully anonymised. You can do this by putting this in writing to myself as the lead researcher. You will then be asked to sign and return a form which shows you have changed your mind and you do not wish to participate in the study anymore.

Are there any risks or costs associated with my school being in the study?

Aside from giving up your time, we do not expect that there will be any risks or costs associated with taking part in this study. I propose to work alone with the students and will have a DBS check in place. I will work within your safeguarding requirements for visitors to the school. I would require a safe space to work with students, which would enable discussions to be private, which would need to be on the school premises. However, as this study has a focus of well-being, it will be necessary for myself to work in line with your safeguarding protocols and policies for students. Also, to have the name of the appropriate person in your school to contact, should I have any concerns regarding the well-being of any student/s taking part.

Are there any benefits associated with being in the study?

The benefits for your students taking part in this study are, that they will have the opportunity to meet other students and discuss issues which are relevant to young people today. Hopefully it will be something they will enjoy being involved in.

The wider benefits of your school taking part in this study are that the findings about well-being will hopefully be used by schools and other educational institutions. This will help schools and others in deciding the best policy and practices around well-being which can bring the best benefit to students.

What will happen to information provided by the school and data collected during the study?

Your school's data and information will only be used as outlined in this Participant Information Statement, unless you consent otherwise. Data management will follow the Data Protection Act 2018 (DPA 2018) and UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR), and the University of East Anglia's Research Data Management Policy.

Your information will be stored securely and will be kept strictly confidential, except as required by law. Study findings may be published. Although every effort will be made to protect your school's identity, there is a risk that it might be identifiable due to the nature of the study and/or results.

Study data may also be deposited with a repository to allow it to be made available for scholarly and educational purposes. The data will be kept for at least 10 years beyond the last date the data were accessed. The deposited data will not include your school's name or any directly identifiable information about your school but there is a risk that your school might be identifiable due to the nature of the study and/or results.

What if we would like further information about the study?

When you have read this information, Sarah Parker, sarah.e.parker@uea.ac.uk, mobile 07906 424637 or my supervisor, Dr. Kate Russell, Kate.Russell@uea.ac.uk, will be available to discuss it with you further and answer any questions you may have about the study.

Will my school be told the results of the study?

You will have a right to receive feedback about the overall results of this study.

What if I have a complaint or any concerns about the study?

If there is a problem, please let me know. You can contact me via the University at the following address:

Sarah Parker

School of Education and Lifelong Learning

University of East Anglia

NORWICH NR4 7TJ

Sarah.e.parker@uea.ac.uk

If you are concerned about the way this study is being conducted or you wish to make a complaint to someone independent from the study, please contact Dr. Kate Russell, Kate.Russell@uea.ac.uk or ,the Head of Education and Lifelong Learning, Dr.Yann Lebeau, Y.Lebeau@uea.ac.uk.

How do we know that this study has been approved to take place?

To protect your safety, rights, wellbeing and dignity, all research in the University of East Anglia is reviewed by a Research Ethics Body. This research was approved by the UEA Ethics Committee.

What is the general data protection information I need to be informed about?

According to data protection legislation, we are required to inform you that the legal basis for processing your data as listed in Article 6(1) of the UK GDPR is because this allows us to process personal data when it is necessary to perform our public tasks as a University.

In addition to the specific information provided above about why your data is required and how it will be used, there is also some general information which needs to be provided for you:

- The data controller is the University of East Anglia.

- For further information, you can contact the University's Data Protection Officer at dataprotection@uea.ac.uk
- You can also find out more about your data protection rights at the [Information Commissioner's Office \(ICO\)](#).
- If you are unhappy with how your school data has been used, please contact the University's Data Protection Officer at dataprotection@uea.ac.uk in the first instance.

OK, I am happy to take part – what do I do next?

Having received this information, you need to fill in one copy of the consent form and return it to myself. Please keep the information sheet and the second copy of the consent form for your information.

.Further information

This information was last updated on 19.10.23.

If there are changes to the information provided, you will be notified by further written communication from myself.

This information sheet is for you to keep

HEADTEACHER CONSENT FORM FOR STUDENTS (First Copy to Researcher)

I,[PRINT NAME], consent to my school
..... [PRINT NAME] participating in this
research study.

In giving my consent I state that:

- I understand the purpose of the study, what my school will be asked to do, and any risks/benefits involved.
- I have read the Information Sheet and have been able to discuss my school's involvement in the study with the researchers if I wished to do so.
- The researchers have answered any questions that I had about the study and I am happy with the answers.
- I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary and my school does not have to take part. My decision whether to take part in the study will not affect our relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia now or in the future.
- I understand that my school can withdraw from the study at any time.
- I understand that my students may leave the focus group at any time if they do not wish to continue. I also understand that it will not be possible to withdraw their comments once the group has started, as it is a group discussion.
- I understand that the results of this study may be published. Although every effort will be made to protect my schools' identity, they may be identifiable in these publications due to the nature of the study or results.

I consent to:

Audio-recording of my students

YES ☐ NO ☐

Written field notes of my students

YES ☐ NO ☐

The data collected in this study may be deposited with a repository to allow it to be made available for scholarly and educational purposes. Although every effort will be made to protect my school's identity, they may be identifiable in this due to the nature of the study or results.

I consent to: Deposit of data in a repository YES ☐ NO ☐

Would you like to receive feedback about the overall results of this study?

YES ☐ NO ☐

If you answered **YES**, please indicate your preferred form of feedback and address:

☐ Postal: _____

☐ Email: _____

.....

Signature

.....

PRINT name

.....

Date

8.12 Appendix L – Consent Form Staff Phase Two

Sarah Parker

Postgraduate Researcher
Doctoral Candidate

19.10.23

Faculty of Social Science

School of Education and Lifelong
Learning

University of East Anglia

Norwich Research Park

Norwich NR4 7T1

A study about student well-being

STAFF PARTICIPANT INFORMATION/CONSENT FORM

What is this study about?

You are invited to take part in a research study about young peoples' well-being and what schools can do to support well-being. You have been invited to participate in this study because you expressed an interest in this study and have now been selected to take part. This Participant Information Sheet tells you about the research study. Knowing what is involved will help you decide if you want to take part in the study. Please read this sheet carefully and ask questions about anything that you don't understand or want to know more about.

Participation in this research study is voluntary. By giving consent to take part in this study you are telling us that you:

- ✓ Understand what you have read.
- ✓ Agree to take part in the research study as outlined below.
- ✓ Agree to the use of your personal information as described.
- ✓ You have received a copy of this Participant Information Sheet to keep.

Who is running the study?

The study is being carried out by Sarah Parker who is a doctoral research candidate in the School of Education and Lifelong Learning, at the University of East Anglia.

This study will take place under the supervision of Dr. Kate Russell, Kate.Russell@uea.ac.uk, 01603 592924

This study is self-funded.

What will the study involve for me?

The study will involve you meeting with myself for a semi-structured conversation. You will be answering questions and discussing the subject of well-being for young people in school.

Audio recordings of the meetings will be taken, together with written field notes by myself as the lead researcher (field notes can be used by researchers to help them record things that may be useful for their research).

How much of my time will the study take?

It is anticipated that you will be required for approximately 20-30 minutes in total during school time in the Autumn Term. The exact date and time will be arranged in consultation with yourself and the school.

Do I have to be in the study? Can I withdraw from the study once I have started?

Being in this study is completely voluntary and you do not have to take part. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your, or your schools, current or future relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia now or in the future.

If you decide to take part in the study, you can withdraw your consent up to the point that your data is fully anonymised (that means that when the information you have given cannot be

identified as being given by you). You can do this by putting this in writing to myself as the lead researcher or speaking to myself as the lead researcher.

What are the consequences if I withdraw from the study?

You may leave the conversation at any time if you do not wish to continue. You can have all of your data removed from the study at any point, except it will not be possible to withdraw your data once your data has been analysed.

Although every effort will be made to protect your identity, you may be identifiable in publications due to the nature of the study or results.

Are there any risks or costs associated with being in the study?

Aside from giving up your time, we do not expect that there will be any risks or costs associated with taking part in this study. However, as the focus of this study is well-being, you may wish to talk with someone about your own well-being or that of someone else. You will be provided with information about who you can talk to in school and out of school to support you.(Out of school – Mind - Website www.mind.org.uk and NHS – Website www.nhs.uk – NHS Telephone - 111)

Are there any benefits associated with being in the study?

The benefits in taking part in this study are, for you, that there will be the opportunity to discuss issues which are relevant to young people today. Hopefully it will be something you enjoy being involved in.

The wider benefits of taking part in this study are that the findings about well-being can hopefully be used by schools and other educational institutions This will help schools and others in deciding the policy and practices around well-being which can bring the best benefit to students.

What will happen to information provided by me and data collected during the study?

Your personal data and information will only be used as outlined in this Participant Information Sheet, unless you consent otherwise. Data management will follow the Data Protection Act 2018 (DPA 2018) and UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR), and the University of East Anglia's Research Data Management Policy.

The information you provide will be stored securely and your identity will be kept strictly confidential, except as required by law. Study findings may be published. Although every effort will be made to protect your identity, there is a risk that you might be identifiable due to the nature of the study and/or results.

Study data may also be deposited with a repository to allow it to be made available for scholarly and educational purposes. The data will be kept for at least 10 years beyond the last date the data were accessed. The deposited data will not include your name or any directly identifiable information about you, but there is a risk that you might be identifiable due to the nature of the study and/or results.

What if I would like further information about the study?

When you have read this information, Sarah Parker, sarah.e.parker@uea.ac.uk, will be available to discuss it with you further and answer any questions you may have about the study.

Will I be told the results of the study?

You have a right to receive feedback about the overall results of this study. This will be at the end of the study when the data has been analysed and the findings from the study are known.

You will receive a summary of this information through a meeting at school or through an information sheet which can be emailed or posted to you.

What if I have a complaint or any concerns about the study?

If there is a problem, please let me know. You can contact me via the University at the following address:

Sarah Parker

School of Education and Lifelong Learning

University of East Anglia

NORWICH NR4 7TJ

Sarah.e.parker@uea.ac.uk

If you would like to speak to someone else, you can contact my supervisor:

Dr. Kate Russell, Kate.Russell@uea.ac.uk, 01603 592924

If you are concerned about the way this study is being conducted or you wish to make a complaint to someone independent from the study, please contact the Head of Education and Lifelong Learning, Dr. Yann Lebeau, Y.Lebeau@uea.ac.uk.

How do I know that this study has been approved to take place?

To protect your safety, rights, wellbeing and dignity, all research in the University of East Anglia is reviewed by a Research Ethics Body. This research was approved by the UEA Ethics Committee.

What is the general data protection information I need to be informed about?

According to data protection legislation, we are required to inform you that the legal basis for processing your data as listed in Article 6(1) of the UK GDPR is because this allows us to process personal data when it is necessary to perform our public tasks as a University.

Our processing of your personal data will be based on Article 9(2)(j), which relates to archiving, research and statistics purposes, and Schedule 1, Part 1(4) of the DPA 2018, which relates to research.

In addition to the specific information provided above about why your personal data is required and how it will be used, there is also some general information which needs to be provided for you:

- The data controller is the University of East Anglia.
- For further information, you can contact the University's Data Protection Officer at dataprotection@uea.ac.uk
- You can also find out more about your data protection rights at the [Information Commissioner's Office \(ICO\)](#).
- If you are unhappy with how your personal data has been used, please contact the University's Data Protection Officer at dataprotection@uea.ac.uk in the first instance.

OK, I want to take part – what do I do next?

You need to fill in one copy of the consent form and return it to your school. Please keep the information sheet and the second copy of the consent form for your information.

Further information

This information was last updated on 19.10.23

If there are changes to the information provided, you will be notified by further written communication to yourselves.

This information sheet is for you to keep

STAFF PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (First Copy to Researcher)

I, [PRINT NAME], agree to take part in this research study.

In giving my consent I state that:

- I understand the purpose of the study, what I will be asked to do, and any risks/benefits involved.
 - I have read the Participant Information Sheet, which I may keep, for my records, and have been able to discuss my involvement in the study with the researchers if I wished to do so.
 - The researchers have answered any questions that I had about the study and I am happy with the answers.
 - I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary and I do not have to take part. My decision whether to be in the study will not affect my relationship, or my school's relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia now or in the future
 - I understand that I may leave the conversation at any time if I do not wish to continue.
 - I understand that personal information about me that is collected over the course of this project will be stored securely and will only be used for purposes that I have agreed to. I understand that information about me will only be told to others with my permission, except as required by law.
- I understand that the results of this study may be published. Although every effort will be made to protect my identity, I may be identifiable in these publications due to the nature of the study or results.

I consent to:

Audio-recording YES ☐ NO ☐

Written field notes YES ☐ NO ☐

The data collected in this study may be deposited with a repository to allow it to be made available for scholarly and educational purposes. Although every effort will be made to protect my identity, I may be identifiable in this due to the nature of the study or results.

I consent to: Deposit of data in a repository YES ☐ NO ☐

Would you like to receive feedback about the overall results of this study?

YES ☐ NO ☐

If you answered **YES**, please indicate your preferred form of feedback, school address/email:

☐ Postal: _____

☐ Email: _____

.....

Signature

.....

PRINT name

.....

Date

**PLEASE RETURN THIS SIGNED COPY TO THE RESEARCHER-
SARAH PARKER**

XXX Guidance Sheet Regarding Support with Doctorate Research

My name is Sarah Parker and I am a doctoral student at UEA. Below I provide a brief outline of my research and the participants I am looking to collect data from – as agreed in principle with XXX.

The ambition of this research is to provide an insight into the concerning picture of Children and Young People (CYP) well-being, as suggested by the measurement indicators, through understanding how well-being is experienced by CYP themselves and to consider whether schools can work in different ways with CYP to improve CYP well-being.

My methodology is Participatory Action Research and for Phase One I worked with a co-researcher group of Year 10 and 11 students from a school in XXX. They decided the methods of data collection from both student and staff participants for Phase Two and the questions they would like to be asked/explored.

Therefore, for Phase Two, I need to work with students from one/two schools and with staff from a different school(s) to the students. Any applicable combination of school usage which works for you is fine.

Therefore, I am looking for student participants from Year 9, 10 or 11:-

- Working in a minimum of 8 focus groups
- With 4-6 students in each focus group
- Minimum total number of students required is 32.

Each focus group will meet once for 20-30 minutes to explore the topic of collective student well-being with myself as the researcher.

They would be providing data for the following research questions:-

- How do young people articulate/engage in discourses of and experience wellbeing in Secondary Schools?
- What agency do young people have in school to improve their own well-being?

Also, I am looking for 12 staff participants:-

- From a range of roles – leadership, pastoral, teaching and support staff
- From a different school/s to the student participants
- Minimum total number of staff required is 12

Each staff participant to have a 20-30 minute one-to-one semi-structured conversation with myself as the researcher, to discuss the topic of student well-being.

They would be providing data for the following research questions:-

- What choices are schools making in respect of young peoples' well-being?
- How do schools enable student voice in their well-being work?

The research must be completed by the end of the Autumn Term 2023. Therefore, the suggested timescales to visit the school(s) to collect the data are between November 20th to December 2nd. I am flexible about the number of school visits but ideally no more than four visits as I live in XXX. I am prepared to stay overnight locally if an early start is helpful or to facilitate consecutive days.

All the research has received the required ethical approvals from UEA, and it will be necessary for me to obtain written consent from the Trust/Headteacher for any school involved, student participants, their parents/guardians, and staff participants as part of this process (copies of Consent Forms attached)

If you need more information, please do not hesitate to get in touch -
Sarah.E.Parker@uea.ac.uk

8.14 Appendix N – Consent Form Staff Phase Two

Sarah Parker

Postgraduate Researcher
Doctoral Candidate

19.10.23

Faculty of Social Science

School of Education and Lifelong
Learning

University of East Anglia

Norwich Research Park

Norwich NR4 7T1

A study about student well-being

STAFF PARTICIPANT INFORMATION/CONSENT FORM

What is this study about?

You are invited to take part in a research study about young peoples' well-being and what schools can do to support well-being. You have been invited to participate in this study because you expressed an interest in this study and have now been selected to take part. This Participant Information Sheet tells you about the research study. Knowing what is involved will help you decide if you want to take part in the study. Please read this sheet carefully and ask questions about anything that you don't understand or want to know more about.

Participation in this research study is voluntary. By giving consent to take part in this study you are telling us that you:

- ✓ Understand what you have read.
- ✓ Agree to take part in the research study as outlined below.
- ✓ Agree to the use of your personal information as described.
- ✓ You have received a copy of this Participant Information Sheet to keep.

Who is running the study?

The study is being carried out by Sarah Parker who is a doctoral research candidate in the School of Education and Lifelong Learning, at the University of East Anglia.

This study will take place under the supervision of Dr. Kate Russell, Kate.Russell@uea.ac.uk, 01603 592924

This study is self-funded.

What will the study involve for me?

The study will involve you meeting with myself for a semi-structured conversation. You will be answering questions and discussing the subject of well-being for young people in school.

Audio recordings of the meetings will be taken, together with written field notes by myself as the lead researcher (field notes can be used by researchers to help them record things that may be useful for their research).

How much of my time will the study take?

It is anticipated that you will be required for approximately 20-30 minutes in total during school time in the Autumn Term. The exact date and time will be arranged in consultation with yourself and the school.

Do I have to be in the study? Can I withdraw from the study once I have started?

Being in this study is completely voluntary and you do not have to take part. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your, or your schools, current or future relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia now or in the future.

If you decide to take part in the study, you can withdraw your consent up to the point that your data is fully anonymised (that means that when the information you have given cannot be identified as being given by you). You can do this by putting this in writing to myself as the lead researcher or speaking to myself as the lead researcher.

What are the consequences if I withdraw from the study?

You may leave the conversation at any time if you do not wish to continue. You can have all of your data removed from the study at any point, except it will not be possible to withdraw your data once your data has been analysed.

Although every effort will be made to protect your identity, you may be identifiable in publications due to the nature of the study or results.

Are there any risks or costs associated with being in the study?

Aside from giving up your time, we do not expect that there will be any risks or costs associated with taking part in this study. However, as the focus of this study is well-being, you may wish to talk with someone about your own well-being or that of someone else. You will be provided with information about who you can talk to in school and out of school to support you.(Out of school – Mind - Website www.mind.org.uk and NHS – Website www.nhs.uk – NHS Telephone - 111)

Are there any benefits associated with being in the study?

The benefits in taking part in this study are, for you, that there will be the opportunity to discuss issues which are relevant to young people today. Hopefully it will be something you enjoy being involved in.

The wider benefits of taking part in this study are that the findings about well-being can hopefully be used by schools and other educational institutions This will help schools and others in deciding the policy and practices around well-being which can bring the best benefit to students.

What will happen to information provided by me and data collected during the study?

Your personal data and information will only be used as outlined in this Participant Information Sheet, unless you consent otherwise. Data management will follow the Data Protection Act 2018 (DPA 2018) and UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR), and the University of East Anglia's Research Data Management Policy.

The information you provide will be stored securely and your identity will be kept strictly confidential, except as required by law. Study findings may be published. Although every effort will be made to protect your identity, there is a risk that you might be identifiable due to the nature of the study and/or results.

Study data may also be deposited with a repository to allow it to be made available for scholarly and educational purposes. The data will be kept for at least 10 years beyond the last date the data were accessed. The deposited data will not include your name or any directly identifiable information about you, but there is a risk that you might be identifiable due to the nature of the study and/or results.

What if I would like further information about the study?

When you have read this information, Sarah Parker, sarah.e.parker@uea.ac.uk, will be available to discuss it with you further and answer any questions you may have about the study.

Will I be told the results of the study?

You have a right to receive feedback about the overall results of this study. This will be at the end of the study when the data has been analysed and the findings from the study are known. You will receive a summary of this information through a meeting at school or through an information sheet which can be emailed or posted to you.

What if I have a complaint or any concerns about the study?

If there is a problem, please let me know. You can contact me via the University at the following address:

Sarah Parker

School of Education and Lifelong Learning

University of East Anglia

NORWICH NR4 7TJ

Sarah.e.parker@uea.ac.uk

If you would like to speak to someone else, you can contact my supervisor:

Dr. Kate Russell, Kate.Russell@uea.ac.uk, 01603 592924

If you are concerned about the way this study is being conducted or you wish to make a complaint to someone independent from the study, please contact the Head of Education and Lifelong Learning, Dr. Yann Lebeau, Y.Lebeau@uea.ac.uk.

How do I know that this study has been approved to take place?

To protect your safety, rights, wellbeing and dignity, all research in the University of East Anglia is reviewed by a Research Ethics Body. This research was approved by the UEA Ethics Committee.

What is the general data protection information I need to be informed about?

According to data protection legislation, we are required to inform you that the legal basis for processing your data as listed in Article 6(1) of the UK GDPR is because this allows us to process personal data when it is necessary to perform our public tasks as a University.

Our processing of your personal data will be based on Article 9(2)(j), which relates to archiving, research and statistics purposes, and Schedule 1, Part 1(4) of the DPA 2018, which relates to research.

In addition to the specific information provided above about why your personal data is required and how it will be used, there is also some general information which needs to be provided for you:

- The data controller is the University of East Anglia.
- For further information, you can contact the University's Data Protection Officer at dataprotection@uea.ac.uk
- You can also find out more about your data protection rights at the [Information Commissioner's Office \(ICO\)](#).
- If you are unhappy with how your personal data has been used, please contact the University's Data Protection Officer at dataprotection@uea.ac.uk in the first instance.

OK, I want to take part – what do I do next?

You need to fill in one copy of the consent form and return it to your school. Please keep the information sheet and the second copy of the consent form for your information.

Further information

This information was last updated on 19.10.23

If there are changes to the information provided, you will be notified by further written communication to yourselves.

This information sheet is for you to keep

I, [PRINT NAME], agree to take part in this research study.

In giving my consent I state that:

- I understand the purpose of the study, what I will be asked to do, and any risks/benefits involved.
 - I have read the Participant Information Sheet, which I may keep, for my records, and have been able to discuss my involvement in the study with the researchers if I wished to do so.
 - The researchers have answered any questions that I had about the study and I am happy with the answers.
 - I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary and I do not have to take part. My decision whether to be in the study will not affect my relationship, or my school's relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia now or in the future
 - I understand that I may leave the conversation at any time if I do not wish to continue.
 - I understand that personal information about me that is collected over the course of this project will be stored securely and will only be used for purposes that I have agreed to. I understand that information about me will only be told to others with my permission, except as required by law.
- I understand that the results of this study may be published. Although every effort will be made to protect my identity, I may be identifiable in these publications due to the nature of the study or results.

I consent to:

Audio-recording

YES ☐ NO ☐

Written field notes

YES ☐ NO ☐

The data collected in this study may be deposited with a repository to allow it to be made available for scholarly and educational purposes. Although every effort will be made to protect my identity, I may be identifiable in this due to the nature of the study or results.

I consent to: Deposit of data in a repository YES ☐ NO ☐

Would you like to receive feedback about the overall results of this study?

YES ☐ NO ☐

If you answered **YES**, please indicate your preferred form of feedback, school address/email:

☐ Postal: _____

☐ Email: _____

.....

Signature

.....
PRINT name

.....
Date

**PLEASE RETURN THIS SIGNED COPY TO THE RESEARCHER-
SARAH PARKER**

8.15 Appendix O - Consent Form Headteacher Phase Two

Sarah Parker

Postgraduate Researcher
Doctoral Candidate

5.12.23

Faculty of Social Science

School of Education and Lifelong
Learning

University of East Anglia

Norwich Research Park

Norwich NR4 7TJ

United Kingdom

A study about student well-being

HEADTEACHERS INFORMATION / CONSENT FORM FOR STAFF PARTICIPANTS

(1) What is this study about?

Your school is invited to take part in a research study about young peoples' well-being and what schools can do to support well-being. This Information Statement tells you about the research study.

Participation in this research study is voluntary. By giving consent to take part in this study you are telling us that you:

- ✓ Understand what you have read.
- ✓ Agree for your school to take part in the research study as outlined below.
- ✓ Agree to the use of your school's information as described.
- ✓ You have received a copy of this Information Statement Sheet to keep.

(2) Who is running the study?

The study is being carried out by Sarah Parker who is a researcher in the School of Education and Lifelong Learning at the University of East Anglia.

This study will take place under the supervision of Dr. Kate Russell, Kate.Russell@uea.ac.uk

This study is self-funded.

(3) What will the study involve for your school?

The study will target teachers and staff carrying out a range of school-based roles. The study will involve teachers and staff, from your school, meeting on the school site for a one- to- one semi-structured conversation with myself. Staff will be answering questions and discussing the subject of well-being for young people in school.

There will also be an 'Information Sheet' about the study for staff and Consent Forms for them to sign which I will send out through whichever mechanism you suggest is the most appropriate.

Audio recordings of the semi-structured conversations will be taken, together with written field notes.

How much of my staff' time will the study take?

It is anticipated that the one- to- one semi structured conversation will last from 20- 30minutes in the Autumn/Spring Term 2023/24. The date and time to be negotiated with you and your staff to minimise disruption to themselves and students' core learning.

(4) Does my school have to be in the study? Can my school withdraw from the study once it has started?

Being in this study is completely voluntary and you do not have to take part. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your schools current or future relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia now or in the future.

(5)What happens if I change my mind?

If you decide to let your school take part in the study and then change your mind later, you are free to withdraw your school from the study at any time. You can do this by putting this in writing to myself as the lead researcher. You will then be asked to sign and return a form which shows you have changed your mind and you do not wish your school to participate in the study anymore. If you withdraw your consent, any data collected up to that point will be included as part of my research but no further data would be collected.

(7) Are there any risks or costs associated with my school being in the study?

Aside from giving up your time, we do not expect that there will be any risks or costs associated with taking part in this study. I propose to work alone with the staff and will have a DBS check in place. I will work within your safeguarding requirements for visitors to the school. I would require a safe space to work with staff, which would enable discussions to be private, which would need to be on the school premises. However, as this study has a focus of well-being, it will be necessary for myself to work in line with your safeguarding protocols and policies for staff. Also, to have the name of the appropriate person in your school to contact, should I have any concerns regarding the well-being of any staff taking part.

(8) Are there any benefits associated with being in the study?

The benefits for your staff taking part in this study are, that they will have the opportunity to discuss issues which are relevant to young people today. Hopefully it will be something they will enjoy being involved in.

The wider benefits of your school taking part in this study are that the findings about well-being will hopefully be used by schools and other educational institutions. This will help schools and others in deciding the best policy and practises around well-being which can bring the best benefit to students.

(9) What will happen to information provided by the school and data collected during the study?

Your school's data and information will only be used as outlined in this Participant Information Statement, unless you consent otherwise. Data management will follow the Data Protection Act 2018 (DPA 2018) and UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR), and the University of East Anglia's Research Data Management Policy.

Your information will be stored securely and will be kept strictly confidential, except as required by law. Study findings may be published. Although every effort will be made to protect your school's identity, there is a risk that it might be identifiable due to the nature of the study and/or results.

Study data may also be deposited with a repository to allow it to be made available for scholarly and educational purposes. The data will be kept for at least 10 years beyond the last date the data were accessed. The deposited data will not include your school's name or any directly identifiable information about your school but there is a risk that your school might be identifiable due to the nature of the study and/or results.

(10) What if we would like further information about the study?

When you have read this information, Sarah Parker, sarah.e.parker@uea.ac.uk, mobile 07906 424637 or my supervisor, Dr. Kate Russell, Kate.Russell@uea.ac.uk, will be available to discuss it with you further and answer any questions you may have about the study.

(11) Will my school be told the results of the study?

You will have a right to receive feedback about the overall results of this study.

(12) What if I have a complaint or any concerns about the study?

If there is a problem, please let me know. You can contact me via the University at the following address:

Sarah Parker

School of Education and Lifelong Learning

University of East Anglia

NORWICH NR4 7TJ

Sarah.e.parker@uea.ac.uk

If you are concerned about the way this study is being conducted or you wish to make a complaint to someone independent from the study, please contact Dr. Kate Russell, Kate.Russell@uea.ac.uk or ,the Head of Education and Lifelong Learning, Dr.Yann Lebeau, Y.Lebeau@uea.ac.uk.

(13) How do we know that this study has been approved to take place?

To protect your safety, rights, wellbeing and dignity, all research in the University of East Anglia is reviewed by a Research Ethics Body. This research was approved by the UEA Ethics Committee.

(14) What is the general data protection information I need to be informed about?

According to data protection legislation, we are required to inform you that the legal basis for processing your data as listed in Article 6(1) of the UK GDPR is because this allows us to process personal data when it is necessary to perform our public tasks as a University.

In addition to the specific information provided above about why your data is required and how it will be used, there is also some general information which needs to be provided for you:

- The data controller is the University of East Anglia.
- For further information, you can contact the University's Data Protection Officer at dataprotection@uea.ac.uk
- You can also find out more about your data protection rights at the [Information Commissioner's Office \(ICO\)](#).
- If you are unhappy with how your school data has been used, please contact the University's Data Protection Officer at dataprotection@uea.ac.uk in the first instance.

(15) OK, I am happy to take part – what do I do next?

Having received this information, you need to fill in one copy of the consent form and return it to myself. Please keep the information sheet and the second copy of the consent form for your information.

(16) Further information

This information was last updated on 19.10.23.

If there are changes to the information provided, you will be notified by further written communication from myself.

This information sheet is for you to keep

8.16 Appendix P - Group Rules for Co-Researcher Group Phase One

Ground Rules for our Focus Group *Set by Focus Group Session 1*

Listen actively and attentively

Ask for clarification if you do not understand

Do not interrupt one another

Challenge but be respectful

Critique ideas not people

Offer opinions

Respect that not everyone will wish to give an opinion on everything discussed

Avoid put downs, even humorous ones

Take responsibility for the quality of the discussion

Build on one another's comments and work toward a shared understanding

Speak from your own knowledge

If you are offended by anything said acknowledge it immediately

Consider anything said or produced as strictly confidential to the group

If decisions are made - the majority view will count – although the decision will try to incorporate the views of the minority as far as possible

8.17 Appendix Q - Mid-way Feedback from Co-Researcher Group Phase One

Focus Group Session 4 – Mid-way Feedback

Written Feedback from Co-Researchers

How have you felt about being part of the Focus Group to date?

Please tick as many of the responses as you would like

I feel comfortable

It is enjoyable

I don't get to contribute as much as I would like

Some people do most of the talking

I have a good chance to say what I think

Are there any other questions you would have liked to have been asked?

8.18 Appendix R - End Feedback from Co-Researcher Group Phase One

Co -Researcher Focus Group – End Feedback

Comments from student Co Researchers on what they have /have not gained from the Focus Group Sessions. These are typed ,from a photograph, as written on the back of the practice transcripts by co-researchers.

- Communication skills. Being more open-minded and looking into things I otherwise might have deemed irrelevant.
- Critical thinking; communication; collaboration; teamwork; observational skills, research skills.
- Learned more about research and gathering a wide range of information and opinion. Discussing things in a group with a professional manner.
- I benefitted by speaking more to others and finding out other different opinions about well-being.
- I have benefitted by this by getting more knowledge of wellbeing and seeing different views. I have also learnt problem solving skills and how to break down different ideas.
- I feel I have been benefitted by this research project by learning about the skills needed to fulfil an article/ report of a study.
- I feel confident to talk to teachers about this topic to try and improve things.
- New techniques of research; communication; finding out how others feel and how similar things affect their wellbeing; collaboration; teamwork.
- My views were valued and listened to by others