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What builds student capacity in an alternative high school setting?

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Good mental health is a learning enabler for adolescents, demonstrating a reciprocal relationship between mental health and learning outcomes. This article describes a Canadian participatory action research partnership between students, staff and a nurse researcher working together to explore student capacity-building experiences at an alternative high school. Fourteen themes including the importance of supportive healthy relationships within the school environment demonstrated what was happening that built capacity in students. We found that when students' voices were nurtured and they participated in school decision-making processes, a sense of capability resulted; often extending into long-term positive effects. Research outcomes were shared with key decision-makers including the Board of Education Trustees.

Keywords: participatory action research; adolescents; alternative schools; capacity-building; mental health promotion

Introduction

The important connections between mental health, health promotion and students' educational experiences are now recognized. DeSocio and Hootman (2004) completed an integrative review of the literature to examine the state of children's mental health and its impact on school success. They found that frequent school absences, school behaviour problems and academic difficulties are potential indicators of emerging mental health problems in students. Additionally, academic performance is significantly affected by symptoms such as poor concentration, irritability, low self-esteem and other indicators of depression, anxiety or other issues; demonstrating a bidirectional relationship between school performance and students' mental health (DeSocio and Hootman 2004). Without intervention, these issues that deteriorate school performance could negatively affect students' future education, employment and even their family roles (Powers et al. 2011).

When mental health promotion is facilitated in students, schools benefit from outcomes that include student academic accomplishments (Kutcher 2011). The positive connection between academic achievement and students' social and emotional competencies has been demonstrated repeatedly through research (Daly et al. 2006). Additionally, interprofessional partnership approaches between schools and community agencies show promise in addressing the mental health of

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students and the associated prevention of school failures (Poole 1997; Weist, Ambrose, and Lewis 2006).

Nevertheless, there is a caution that must be added about the focus of this evolving body of research. Even though the connections between mental health, health-promoting programmes and school successes may be clear, the underlying assumptions of many studies reflect an individualized, deficit-focused approach to understanding mental health. Weare (2002) identified a new paradigm of mental health that stresses the root causes of mental ill-health arise from social, not individual, origins. As Cockburn agreed, there is a larger, more systemic problem at play that should direct our attention elsewhere. For example, how are students perceived and treated by society? Even though some changes have occurred, young people's voices are often stifled, their participative involvement in the public spaces of a democracy is seldom considered and, furthermore, '... the onus should not be put on young people to change to suit [their] surroundings but the surroundings must change to suit the young people' (Cockburn 2007, 454). Research studies could explore environments and contexts that have contributed to mental health promotion in students. The intent of this article is to share the substantive findings of a research project that explored what built student capacity in an alternative high school setting.

A deeper understanding of capacity-building school experiences may contribute to an expanded understanding of what environments promote adolescents' mental health; and a desire for this formed the impetus for our research project. The intent of this research was not to identify or prevent mental illness (thus perhaps furthering the problematization or medicalization of adolescence); rather it was to understand what was happening in a democratic school environment that treated its students as citizens – how did this promote their mental health? In this article I describe a Canadian interprofessional partnership between school students, staff and a university-based nurse researcher working together on a participatory action research (PAR) project to explore student capacity-building situations and experiences. I discuss the project design, our research findings (including exemplary focus group quotes), share a poem written by one of our research team members that encapsulated the meaning of the research findings, and identify dissemination strategies our team used to share our findings. Although 14 themes arose that helped us understand what promotes capacity development in adolescents in this setting, the most important messages were that supportive healthy relationships nurtured students' voices; and when students participated in important school decision-making processes in an inclusive, welcoming environment, their sense of confidence and capability expanded. These 'real-world' experiences led to emotional growth and a sense of success (academic and personal).

How the project evolved

Mutual curiosity arising from the findings of a previous PAR project that examined student successes and positive mental health outcomes at a Canadian alternative high school led to the development of a second high school–university research partnership. Alternative high schools are schools of choice, where students who do not thrive in a traditional educational paradigm can attend. These environments are often small school settings, with smaller class sizes, and provide an individualized pace

for learning (De La Ossa 2005; Powell 2003). Overall, the goal of many alternative schools is to reduce the dropout rates for youth by providing a humanistic approach to education (De La Ossa 2005). The alternative school in this project additionally provided a democratic learning environment where students were involved in school policy setting and practiced decision-making in areas except those related to curriculum (which was driven by provincial standards) (Lind 2007). The school philosophy embraced the Native American Circle of Courage framework that incorporates the concepts of belonging, mastery, independence and generosity to guide school activities and daily interactions (Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Van Bockern 2002). The Circle of Courage approach focuses on fostering self-esteem in students and provides a unifying theme of positive culture-building for education programmes (Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Van Bockern 2002).

This school was publicly funded, administered by the local public Board of Education. It offered 10 learning centres (classrooms), an art room and a gym. As a school of choice, students could be referred (often by a guidance counsellor at another school) or could self-refer. Prospective students were required to prepare an application for admission, provide two letters of reference, attend an information session, and be interviewed by a panel of students and staff. The school had a continuous intake process, with applications accepted at any time. On-site staff included administration and support staff, teachers and one guidance counsellor.

In the previous project completed in this school, the research team examined stories of students making a difference in their school (Lind 2007, 2008). Capacity-building school experiences arose as a key concept in understanding what promotes adolescents' mental health. Although more recent rhetoric calls for increased participation of youth in decision-making to help guide practitioners' health-related work with their communities (Ferguson, Kim, and McCoy 2011) and the need to address social contexts (Szymanski and Carr 2011), there are particular challenges with including the voices of children and adolescents (Dallago et al. 2010; Jolly, Weiss, and Liehr 2007; Terry and Campbell 2001). In many environments little advancement appears to have occurred. In addition, it is unclear whether building the participatory capacity of adolescents is included in this newer movement, and if so, what the effects are upon adolescents (Mitra and Gross 2009; Thomson and Gunter 2006).

Experiences where adolescents' perspectives are included in decision-making have been insufficiently studied (Ferguson, Kim, and McCoy 2011; MacDonald et al. 2011) and must go beyond tokenistic measures (i.e. inviting one adolescent to sit on a decision-making committee consisting of adults) or minimal impact opportunities (i.e. a student council where decision-making is limited to areas such as planning social events) (Mitra and Gross 2009). DeFur and Korinek (2010, 19) raised the issue at the heart of the matter, stating '... but we must be willing to hear what students might say' and must be truly committed to honouring student voices in school programme improvement. Dallago et al. (2010, 42) agreed, suggesting most initiatives are adult-driven and the involvement of youth, '... amount[s] to little more than manipulation in which youth have no real power or control'.

Checkoway et al. (2003, 298) posed a thought-provoking question relevant from a mental health promotion viewpoint: 'What would happen if society viewed young people as competent citizens?' However, as Cockburn (2007, 447) stated: 'When children and young people communicate their ideas and viewpoints in public, their voices are often met with patronisation [*sic*] or simply not listened to'. Anecdotal

evidence and the findings of the previous research project suggested something different was happening in this school – so how was this alternative school environment achieving the task of listening to young people’s voices in a way that was meaningful and capacity-building? I was curious about what was going on in this environment that led to the stories we heard in the prior project, so in partnership with members of the school I developed another research project to identify capacity-building situations and experiences to further our understanding of what promotes capacity development in adolescents in an alternative high school setting.

For the purposes of this project, capacity-building was understood as a process: something that promotes one’s ability, feeling capable, ‘stepping up to the plate’; activities that improve one’s ability to realize goals. Adolescent capability and capacity may be connected to their sense of worth, feeling visible, belonging in society and sense of personal power to contribute to change; rendering capacity-building a key mental health promotion strategy. Capacity may additionally affect readiness and ability to learn (Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Van Bockern 2002), concepts of particular interest to school staff.

Background literature

Building the capacity of individuals or communities has been called a means to achieve health promotion and an end in itself, predicated on a foundation of community development and empowerment (Labonte and Laverack 2001). Effective participation is a key foundation of community capacity-building but may be particularly difficult in environments where practitioners exert power over others through the imposition of expert roles (Labonte and Laverack 2001), such as those seen in many school environments. However, as Simovska (2004, 164) suggested: ‘The role of the school in the development of young people’s capacities and competence to take active part in embracing, maintaining and building on the democratic transformation is invaluable’. Additionally, there has been a recent shift from focusing on youths’ deficits to focusing on their strengths to create positive outcomes and growth for youths (Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Van Bockern 2005; San Martin and Calabrese 2011). Key concepts important in the process of health promotion in schools include participation, democracy, and equity; with participation in decision-making important in developing students’ capacity to assume responsibilities for their own lives (Matthews and Limb 2003; Simovska 2004) and develop resiliency (Brooks 2006). One focus of alternative school programmes is to develop resiliency in students by providing them with opportunities for meaningful involvement, caring relationships and shared decision-making (Powell 2003), congruent with health promotion concepts.

Schools have long been considered key partners in health promotion, but in Canada it has only recently been recognized that schools provide an important vehicle through which mental health promotion can occur (Kutcher 2011). The most recent Public Health Agency of Canada report on the health of young people agreed with the importance of viewing schools as settings for health promotion, and of focusing on the quality of the school experience (more so than on academic achievement), concluding that schools are the most consistent positive influence for youth health: ‘Assets at the school level are consistently and strongly associated with positive health behaviours and outcomes’ (Boyce, King, and Roche 2008, 144). Simovska (2004) discovered that students’ capabilities came forth when they were

given opportunities and support from their teachers. However, ‘... building a culture of participation, where children and young people feel that their views and opinions are actually being listened to, is hard to achieve’ (Cockburn 2007, 447), especially as many adults have difficulty letting go of the power that positions them at an advantage relative to young people (Matthews and Limb 2003). These insights are not new; in 1993 Benard suggested that important school engagement strategies include providing students with opportunities to participate in meaningful roles and activities in their schools. This may be very difficult to achieve in a societal context where children are perceived not as current citizens, but as future citizens; and democracy is taught about, but not enacted, in schools (Cockburn 2007). Bresman, Erdmann, and Olson (2009) agreed, stating that schools which are completely managed by adults do not teach democracy to students. Even worse, ‘If children know that no one is listening and that their views do not count, their interest is thwarted and they enter adulthood with low expectations of meaningful involvement’ (Matthews and Limb 2003, 175), thus potentially extending negative effects into their adult mental health and participatory capacity. A recent Canadian report supported by the Public Health Agency of Canada described the importance of emotional health in young people, the sometimes life-threatening outcomes of mental health problems, and the extension of those problems into adulthood (Boyce, King, and Roche 2008).

Vieno et al. (2005) studied democratic school climates and the student sense of community in a quantitative cross-sectional research design. They discovered that the way in which students and teachers related to each other was an important factor for students to develop a sense of community in their schools and that a democratic school climate was a moderate to strong predictor of student development of a sense of community, a critical factor in adolescents’ well-being (Vieno et al. 2005). They were unable to determine the stability of the effects of a school democratic climate on students, and recommended future longitudinal studies along with a focus on more detailed information about school characteristics in future research.

Albeit a small and non-generalizable research design, this research project targeted developing an in-depth view of how capacity was being built in students in one school. Through the participation of student alumni in focus groups, it additionally provided reflection from former students who had graduated between one and 25 years ago.

Research approach and questions

Issues a community is interested in and invested in studying will be relevant for them and appropriate for using research partnership designs (Lindsey and McGuinness 1998). PAR has gained significant credibility for informing nursing practice where issues of importance to individuals or communities provide opportunities for nurse–community partnerships in exploring, learning, addressing issues and co-creating healthier futures (Morton-Cooper 2000; Stringer and Genat 2004). The objective of this research was to identify and explore capacity-building situations and experiences in students to further an understanding of what promotes capacity development in adolescents. Developing a clearer understanding of student capacity in an alternative high school setting is an important step towards improving student mental health and wellness strategies.

Research questions included the following:

- (1) What does capacity-building mean to students and staff at the alternative school?
- (2) What school experiences have the students found to be capacity-building?
- (3) What student–teacher relationships promote capacity-building?
- (4) What role does a school democratic process play in student capacity-building?
- (5) What strategies do students and staff feel would be effective in promoting student capacity?

Research design

PAR is a form of action research with liberatory and participatory goals, addressing issues of empowerment, capacity-building, power, process, control and negotiation (Gibbon 2002; Noffke 1997). A main theme of action research is enacting social change through a transformative empowering action orientation (Henderson 1995; Heron and Reason 1997; Lurey and Griffin 2002). The dual agenda of interrogating the meaning of democracy and social justice, at the same time as one acts to alter the social situation, shapes the potential of action research (Noffke 1997). As a capacity-building process, PAR is therefore uniquely suited to a community's exploration of their own research question.

In this research design, the principal investigator becomes a facilitator (Piran 1998), assisting the participants in developing and conducting their own research so the research is co-owned. For example, the research questions and data collection strategies for this project were developed in partnership with adults and adolescents at the school. A group of adults (principal, teachers and principal investigator) and students (aged 15–18) worked together as research collaborators/partners making decisions through PAR cycles of planning, acting and reflecting to conduct the project to answer the research questions.

Methodological rigour was established in this qualitative research by assessing for attentiveness, empathy, carefulness, sensitivity, respect, reflection, conscientiousness, engagement, awareness and openness (Davies and Dodd 2002). The development of a relational ethic that demonstrated valuing and respect for the collaborators' inclusion in the decision-making and interpreting process was crucial (Lind, Anderson, and Oberle 2003). A focus on the research process, rather than just on research outcomes, is a PAR imperative, so important principal investigator tasks included the development of trust through honesty, genuineness, consistency, reliability, demonstrated caring, inclusion of self as a person, and inclusive involvement of the other collaborators to build the integrity of this study.

Challenges in a participatory action research process

A number of challenges may occur in a PAR research process. First, the ethics of PAR states that if a researcher wants to study persons, she or he needs to be in a mutual relationship with them (Heron 1996). Mutual trust and interest in research takes a lot of time and effort to develop. In this case, trust had been established during the first research project and, sparked by its outcomes, mutual interest arose to pursue a second project. The beginning development of a partnership for the conceptualization of and interest in this research project began many months before-

hand, and guided the development of the proposal. Co-participant relationships must be egalitarian, but forming alliances across classes and roles where unequal power is a factor (Seng 1998) (such as in a school environment) or that would challenge traditional child and adult role expectations provides additional potential barriers to be overcome. PAR researchers are called upon to be open and potentially vulnerable – professional humility is necessary to allow nurses to recognize clients' expertise and rights to make decisions (VanRyn and Heaney 1997). A group may find it difficult to work with a nurse researcher without being unduly influenced by her interests and authority (Dickson 2000) so the nurse must be mindful of the possibility for unintentional coercion. PAR's dialogue views talking as occurring between equal partners, distinguishing it from other health research (Dickson 2000). However, an equal partnership concept is naive in PAR, as it does not consider historical, societal or political values or norms that may preclude equality. How attainable is the goal of equality within a traditional top-down adult-driven hierarchy? PAR is also aimed at change and can be perceived as a threat to the *status quo* because changing organizations implies challenging existing power relations (Williamson and Prosser 2002).

Participants

There were two layers in this research design. First, we built a research team at the school by inviting staff and students who had already worked on the initial design of this research project (which had occurred in the previous school year) to become the team carrying out the project. Our research team composition included eight people: the school principal, two teachers, four students and me (the outside academic researcher). All of the research team members were volunteers. The student members' backgrounds were not explored as a part of this study, but some shared that they were living independent of their families. We commenced working as co-researchers throughout the project, making decisions together during weekly lunch-time team meetings at the school. Both teachers and two of the original student members of our team were even able to continue in dissemination decision-making and presentations that lasted into a third year.

The second layer of participation included recruiting participants to be involved in focus groups and individual interviews. These participants were recruited from the school population (past or present), by word of mouth, by announcements at school meetings, or by invitational letters.

Methods and data collection

This PAR design used an appreciative inquiry lens. Appreciative inquiry is the strengths-based philosophy and research method that directed data collection. Appreciative inquiry is a method of change (Whitney and Trosten-Bloom 2003) focused not only on problems but also upon building from the best experiences and knowledge a group has, to inform and strengthen the future in an empowering process. Appreciative inquiry was used for interview construction and focus group planning completed by our research team, directing us to specifically look for the instances and examples of students stepping up to the plate and developing capacity. We used our five research questions as guides to help decide what questions to ask in our focus groups. In brainstorming sessions, our research team developed 50 possible

focus group guiding questions. After much discussion and debate, we narrowed down our choices and voted on the top five questions to use, which then became the basis for our focus group interview guide. The intent of the focus group questions was to elicit participants' stories, thoughts and understandings of which situations, experiences, circumstances, school processes and relationships have built capacity in students; to answer our research questions. These final five questions were developed for student focus groups (and modified accordingly for staff and parent focus groups):

- (1) What changes have you seen in yourself since coming to [this school]?
- (2) How is [this school's] democratic process connected to student accomplishments?
- (3) What aspects of the school help you develop leadership skills in belonging, generosity, independence and mastery?
- (4) How has your relationship with your mentor [assigned teacher-mentor] or mentee group [group of mentored students with that teacher-mentor] helped you?
- (5) If you were going to sing a song about an epic journey at [this school] what would it be?

The fifth question led to blank looks or giggles in a number of the focus groups, with some participants starting to hum the tune for a popular song they thought would exemplify the school. In a parent focus group, participants suggested song titles such as 'I Did It My Way', 'Lean On Me', and 'A Nutty Place'; student focus group suggestions included 'I Won't Back Down', 'Bohemian Rhapsody', and 'We're All Family'. Staff focus group suggestions included 'It's a Wonderful World' and 'Staying Alive'. In an alumni focus group one participant suggested the song would be about constant change (for the good), and another suggested it would be a song about the feelings of connectedness the school elicited in students. By itself, this focus group question did not appear to add additional insights to help answer our research questions; however, at times it sparked a conversational direction that included storytelling that exemplified an epic journey, captured in the subsequent research themes.

A number of probing sub-questions were developed (i.e. tell me more about that; how did it feel?), along with a final question asking whether we had missed anything or whether there was another question they wished we had asked. As the formally prepared researcher, I viewed my role as a facilitator of the decisions our research team made throughout the project. In this case, I acted as secretary, collecting and tallying the votes, and crafting the final focus group guide. I also acted as a trainer: as we progressed through the stages of our research project, I trained my co-researchers as a way of enabling them to take on aspects of the project they were interested in (i.e. co-conducting a focus group, assisting in analysing transcripts).

Research process

The research was carried out over two school years, starting in February of the first year with weekly, noon, one-hour meetings of the research team to plan, act and reflect on the research process. We suspended meetings for the summer in June, regrouped and continued our weekly meetings the following September. Research

process decisions were made at those meetings, ranging from deciding upon questions to use in our focus groups to analysing our data and deciding upon dissemination strategies.

Our research team completed 10 focus groups and two individual interviews over the two school years. I trained my co-researchers, and a number of them (teacher and student members) co-led focus groups with me or with our research assistant (a graduate student). In the first year of the project we completed three focus groups with current students, two with staff, three with student alumni, and two individual interviews. Individual interviews were originally planned as an adjunct to assist in extending or elaborating on focus group themes, by offering a follow-up interview to individuals involved in the focus groups. Our initial plan had been to complete eight focus groups and up to six individual follow-up interviews, but the individual interviews did not result in adding further depth to the focus groups, nor were they popular with potential participants, and so a decision was made to devote our remaining time and resources to gathering data solely through focus groups. In the second year we completed two more focus groups with parents. We found it particularly difficult to recruit parents for focus groups, until we hit upon a winning strategy suggested by the principal. Near the beginning of the second school year, the school held a 'meet the teacher' night for new and returning students' parents. We set up a booth in the main corridor with information about our research project and that evening recruited enough parents to hold two focus groups.

Data analysis

Data analysis was completed using Kvale's (1996) method of reading transcripts thoroughly to gain an overall impression, returning to specific passages relating to the research questions, making deeper interpretations of specific statements, and working out metaphors to capture the material. Themes arose that were compared across transcripts. Interpretive analysis was used to give meaning to the data, make sense of social situations by generating explanations for what was happening, make inferences, develop insights, attach significance, refine understanding, draw conclusions and extrapolate lessons (Hatch 2002). The integrity (Watson and Girard 2004) of data analysis was enhanced by the participation of the student and staff research team members in creating and negotiating understandings, reflecting on the credibility of the findings and in understanding the practical relevance of the findings.

I developed a guide with data analysis steps, to help train my research team members for the process involved in the analysis. However, early in the data collection process I realized that the volume of raw transcript material would be very large (totalling almost 500 pages). This proved to be an impractical volume for my co-researchers to read and attempt to extrapolate data from; especially as involvement in research was new to almost all of my team members. They each had other full-time responsibilities (as a student or staff member). I also realized that some transcripts included conversations that mentioned one of the research team members by name (as they were members of the school community), thus providing a potential dilemma with anonymity or confidentiality of data. To address both of these potential issues, and with the permission of all team members, I completed the initial analysis of all of the transcripts, extrapolated data/quotes that helped to answer our research questions and compiled sections of transcripts into initial theme categories

labelled 'A' to 'N'. This resulted in a more manageable 38 pages of data for research team members to help further analyse. In the meeting where we began their involvement in the data analysis, we first reviewed the analysis guide, and as we were having a struggle trying to decide how to divide up the typed research data sections, I decided to just place them in the middle of the table and said 'help yourself'. This seemed to work well. Each member took a few sections and started reading. For the remainder of that team meeting we discussed the quotes that stood out for team members, they began writing notes in the margins of the text and their initial fears about data analysis began to dissipate. In subsequent meetings, we shared material with each other, discussed the emerging themes in depth, made changes to themes and completed further interpretive work. Each team member's deepening involvement and excitement became tangible in our weekly research meetings. At the end of the project, one student team member compiled his overall interpretation of the research findings into a metaphor-rich poem (shared later in this article).

Research findings

Through the analysis of focus groups and interviews 14 themes arose that demonstrated what was happening at the school that built capacity in students. These included a school environment that supported and promoted healthy relationships (between staff and students, and between students), caring, challenges and risk-taking, safety and security, non-judgemental, unconditional acceptance, student engagement in issues, shared power with staff, freedom with responsibility, success (academic and character-building), maturing experiences, adulthood preparation, mentoring, and critical thinking skills. An example of non-judgemental, unconditional acceptance was accepting students for their intrinsic value as a human being; one's value is not based on one's appearance. In this environment, a student who 'cross-dresses' would be as accepted as a student who dresses along more traditional gender-lines. These themes are addressed throughout the following sections, which are organized as responses to each research question. Exemplary quotes from focus groups are included.

What does capacity-building mean to students and staff?

The understanding of capacity-building was closely tied to emotional growth in students, suggesting that environments which support emotional growth and development provide a necessary grounding to take on life's challenges and experience successes (Daly et al. 2006). Kutcher (2011) identified the importance of adolescents' mental health as a key foundation for personal, family, community and civic well-being with short-term and long-term benefits at all levels of society. Our research data suggested many ways in which emotional growth is fostered in students: through experiential learning, discovery of one's own limitations (self-discovery), maturing experiences, being treated with respect, developing self-confidence, learning to take responsibility for oneself and risk-taking in a safe environment. Risk-taking was understood to include challenges that took a student out of her or his comfort zone; for example, to speak publicly and express an opinion on an issue at a whole-school assembly. A school environment in which students felt safe to speak up and express their opinions without fear of ridicule or

judgement was a prerequisite for students feeling able to ‘become themselves’, to express their differences from others. ‘This is just a good place to blossom and like, find yourself. And you really find who you are in this school, and what you’re about and what you believe in’ (student focus group). This in turn built confidence to seek out new challenges: ‘... and if I am feeling good and people got faith in me and I’ve got faith in myself, I can do anything ... and that’s what [this school] taught me ...’ (student focus group). Ultimately, capacity-building meant having been given the tools to prepare for adult life, and this was described as being prepared to live life in the ‘real world’ after school. This was viewed as much more valuable than having lived in a more sheltered world of a traditional school environment where students could express opinions but could not influence outcomes in those environments – they would not have felt as prepared to participate in the real world following school completion. Confidence to take on life’s challenges resulted from a combination of having experienced others believing in them and encouraging their involvement, along with the opportunity to influence school decision-making. This felt like real adulthood preparation.

What school experiences have students found to be capacity-building?

In general, Canadian school settings are recognized as having a positive association with many adolescent health behaviours and outcomes (Boyce, King, and Roche 2008). Specific school experiences built student capacity in this study. Examples included school meetings where students had the chance to take part in debate and discussions in a democratic environment:

... people recognize that the first time a student gets up [at the school meeting] and talks is a watershed moment ... [even] giving a bouquet ... that’s still something major for the students to do something publicly. And so, that can kinda break the ice for the student and increase their confidence to doing [other] things ... (Staff focus group)

School trips were additionally cited as events where leadership opportunities presented themselves and helped students mature and feel empowered.

Supportive healthy relationships were found to be one of the most important components of student capacity-building: ‘[Students] find ... such a positive atmosphere and that everybody appreciates and celebrates their successes that they become really confident and competent, academically as well, that they didn’t think was possible in another school’ (staff focus group). The school provided a safe place to develop mutually supportive relationships. These included relationships between students, mentors (each student was assigned a specific teacher-mentor), teachers and peers. Personal, ‘human’, caring relationships where teachers were perceived to be approachable were key and at times were described as having created turning points in students’ lives. This is not a new concept; indeed many authors have discussed the importance of student–adult relationships where students feel they belong, where they are cared about and valued as a human being (Boyce, King, and Roche 2008; DeSocio and Hootman 2004; Vieno et al. 2005). These are key characteristics that predict a sense of community (Vieno et al. 2005), and in the case of this research project contributed to an evolving sense of capacity in the students. A school environment where students feel respected by the adults, listened to and valued is very important. An environment where teachers ‘walk their talk’ was of

crucial importance to students, as the reliability and integrity of staff helped build trusting relationships with students.

We found that students also learned to build their self-confidence and self-image through reflection and self-discovery. This in turn led to students taking more interest in and ownership over their education; described as a maturing experience we called ‘freedom with responsibility’. This theme was seen multiple times throughout the focus groups. Students were quick to point out that although they enjoyed many freedoms at school (i.e. regarding setting their own goals, choosing which courses they could take, flexibility in when they could complete their courses) there were many responsibilities attached (such as non-productivity or non-attendance could lead to loss of privilege to continue attending the school).

What student–teacher relationships promote capacity-building?

Boyce, King, and Roche (2008) suggested teachers who create a supportive environment for their students are more likely to have students who are satisfied with school. In our project, the opportunity to take part in an equal partnership with teachers to set and accomplish academic and personal goals led to feelings of shared power and decision-making. A mutual community of learning where everyone could be considered both a teacher and a student enhanced the feelings of mutuality and valued student input. Successful mentoring relationships founded on mutual benefit have been described in the literature (Liang et al. 2002). Although the school used teacher mentors as direct supports to individual students, an overall mentoring mindset throughout the school environment engaged everyone in promoting student capacity. This extended to formal and informal student peer mentoring as well. Teachers who were described as ‘true mentors’ were supportive, they cared about students, listened and respected them as humans; the same criteria for teachers who excelled at relationship development with students. Parents discussed the impact of this supportive approach on their children: ‘... they’re starved for any kind of respect or recognition from their teachers and so when they get it [at this school] they just gobble it up and they just blossom. It’s amazing’ (parent focus group). Relational mentoring qualities including empathy, engagement, authenticity and empowerment are strong influences that assist with successful transitions to adulthood (Liang et al. 2002). Healthy student–teacher relationships were supported by a school norm whereby students and teachers called each other by their first names, which is still considered an unusual school practice; and in some environments is actively discouraged because of a belief that it promotes disrespect towards teachers. However, the opposite was true in the findings from this study – in many focus groups and research discussions, the topic of using a first-name basis was raised as an exemplar of a two-way, respect-engaging school environment. Furthermore, the first-name basis helped students view teachers as human beings and assisted in breaking down artificial barriers, making teachers seem more approachable from a student perspective:

[The first name basis] brought it to a level playing field where the respect was there for them being the teacher ... it opens the doors ... it doesn’t put up a wall ... and I think the communication opens up a lot quicker. (Student alumni focus group)

When adults encouraged students to challenge themselves and take risks this helped initiate emotional growth. A default teacher position where students were

believed capable and strengths were built upon (Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Van Bockern 2005) contributed to capacity-building teacher–student relationships, and showed a lasting impact: ‘[A teacher] really helped me discover what exactly my talent is ... I suppose I do what I do now [in my work life] because of ... having that talent realized in the beginning ...’ (student alumni focus group).

What role does a school democratic process play in student capacity-building?

The positive impact of a democratic school environment has been identified by others (Anderson and Ronson 2005; Cockburn 2007; Thornberg 2008; Vieno et al. 2005). In this study, the democratic school environment also had a large capacity-building impact on students. Anderson and Ronson (2005) drew connections between democracy and health-promoting schools, suggesting healthy schools require roots in democracy, equity, empowerment and active learning. If a democratic school philosophy and practice promotes students’ well-being and educational successes, why is it not more widespread? How might the barriers to a more democratic inclusion of student voices be lifted? If part of the purpose of education is to provide preparation for the role of citizenship, it would seem to make sense that inclusion of students’ voices in decision-making when young would provide grounding for their participatory involvement as an adult citizen in a democratic society. As one student focus group participant shared, this grounding had occurred: ‘Most of [our students] are really excited [to turn 18, the age of majority]. Like, they don’t want to go out drinking or anything like that, they want to go out and vote’.

The democratic environment was highly visible in weekly whole-school meetings held in the gym. From the research we found that these school meetings provided students with a safe environment where opinions could be discussed and maturely debated. Every student had a vote, meaning they experienced equal opportunity to express their voices and the ability to create change. A corresponding sense of responsibility developed with the power to create change.

Thoughtful whole-school meeting discussions and debates resulted in the development of critical thinking, provided experiential learning and development of real-world skills. These included negotiation skills, learning how to separate a person from an opinion (thereby preventing perceiving another’s opinion as a personal attack), and learning to respect diverse opinions as strengths:

[My experience] at this school taught me something new, it taught me about how to manage conflict, ... what respect really means and [to] kind of teach other people what respect really means ... if I go way back and think about what I was exposed to then [at school] it’s what I do now ... so it probably got me to where I am now. (Student alumni focus group)

High-level critical thinking skills were built – for example, from learning about how to become change agents in the world; and these skills were described as valuable adulthood preparation.

School meetings gave students the opportunity to develop confidence in public speaking, activism and to develop leadership skills. Through the democratic school environment, student engagement in issues was actively encouraged and supported, leading to meaningful experiences that added individual character-building success

to academic success. Student roles in the weekly meeting included one student acting as Chair and one acting as Secretary. They would sit at a table on the stage in the gym, facing the school audience so they could direct the meeting. These roles were rotated through the school's student population and the involved students were given training for their roles beforehand. Some students were very anxious about taking on these leadership positions, but once completed their successes were exhilarating:

It's confidence [building] with the Chair, at [the school's weekly meeting] ... it was really nerve-racking 'cause I don't know these people very well and, but you just do it and kinda break that boundary ... I was like 'I can do it, I'll do it again'! (Student focus group)

What strategies do students and staff feel would be effective in promoting student capacity?

Not surprisingly, students and staff felt effective strategies to build student capacity should include genuine opportunities for leadership, participation and responsibility; all were viewed as components of adulthood preparation. Parents agreed, emphasizing an important underlying strategy that built student capacity:

... you just have to sort of underscore that this is THEIR community. That school belongs to those kids ... It's real. It's not being said to make them happy or to try to get them to behave in a certain way – it's real ... and it's a collaboration between everybody there. (Parent focus group)

As the themes indicated, a safe non-judgemental space to experiment with new behaviours (such as public speaking) is important for a school to create, and underlying values that support a safe environment should include respect for students, include understanding, build a sense of community and encourage their engagement in school issues. As discussed, supportive relationships based on respect and caring are directly related to students' evolving sense of capacity and emotional growth:

[It's] feeling like you belong to a family when you're at [this school], it's the value of um, connections between people, between teachers, between students, ... it's 'everyone kind of cares', you know, even if they don't really need to, ... or they don't know you well, they still care. (Student alumni focus group)

In a large national study, Boyce, King, and Roche (2008) found that the quality of students' school experiences (shown in attitude towards school) was more important than academic achievement for understanding effects on emotional health. Positive attitudes towards school exert a protective influence on emotional health, which shows a reciprocal relationship with academic achievements (Boyce, King, and Roche 2008; Daly et al. 2006). Building a sense of community at this school and promoting relationships in general built student capacity, using strategies such as students and staff problem-solving together.

Poem

In data analysis training, the development of metaphors was suggested as an important contribution to help understand the meaningfulness of the data and to

deepen interpretations. One of the student researchers decided to write a poem rich with metaphors, as a synopsis of his interpretation of the meaning the school held for students, staff, alumni and parents. This poem is therefore an important local representation of the meaningfulness of our research as seen through the eyes of one of our student researchers; and additionally honours the intent and purpose of the PAR research design. This poem was shared with audiences at our subsequent project presentations (the name of the school has been removed from the poem for research ethics purposes):

Through the simple act of existence,
Life bestows upon us spools of thread that exactly mimic our life experiences.
Whether it be the satin silk of our mother's nurturing embrace,
Or the cold, distant feel of barbed wire disapproval,
The threads remain as individual as the lines and crevices that engrave themselves
upon our calloused, capable hands.

Yet some souls wander the earth perpetually lost in the maze of curveballs thrown by
an entity unknown,
Continually avoiding the piles of spools building up at their feet,
Ultimately finding themselves lost in the mirror of identity;
It is then the spindle of our alternative school comes into play.

Allowing us to create something tangible from the disarrayed pile of confusion,
Our school enables the construction of self-esteem and individual capability through
the sole ability to gently weave together the threads – satin and steel alike – into the
concrete security blanket of self-worth; a true reflection of self.

With our newly quilted armor draped around our shoulders,
We embrace at the foot of the lake.
Watching our group reflection upon the top of the water,
We realize that we are all a series of quilts designed to project our individual stories
and experiences,
Yet meant to mend and blend to form the quilt of our school;
A mosaic of patches readily waiting to warmly embracing anyone who seeks to find
security. (Andre)

Discussion

The major theme to arise from the data was that supportive healthy relationships within the school environment were one of the most important factors in student capacity-building: 'Well I've seen some major changes in myself since [attending this school]... it's where you feel like you're wanted ... you feel like you're involved, feel accepted and ... able to put your own word out there' (student focus group). We found that when students' voices were nurtured and they participated in important school decision-making processes, a sense of confidence and capability was promoted. We also found that once an environment is set up for student involvement, support and safety to speak, students obtain adult experiences of voice, of capacity-building and emotional growth. Real-world confidence develops:

... this school prepares you for like, adult life, and how to be independent. And other schools don't do that ... [they] prepare you with a ... class that basically tells you how to write a resume and how to get a job. And that's not proper preparation for the workforce at all... You can get the job, but then how are you supposed to act when you

finally get the job? Like how do you, um, be a leader? How do you participate? How do you communicate? These skills you don't learn in a regular high school. (Student focus group)

The sustainability of capacity-building outcomes for students was evident in alumni focus group discussions of long-term positive effects on their careers, family lives and even child-rearing practices. A further surprise arose for us in the analysis of parent focus group data – that the effects of the school environment on the student could result in a profound effect on a parent or a family:

[My son] and I were headed down a road where ... I would have been that [parent] he hated and he would have been that kid I never saw again. Which is a terrible thing to say about your kids ... but that's all changed ... that's what [this school] has done. [My son] has definitely changed in the way he speaks. And he's, in some cases, he's become the adult ... [He] and I have become friends ... we now like each other. (Parent focus group)

Sharing research outcomes

Consistent with the tenets of PAR, local and broader dissemination of research findings is a component of facilitating ongoing action and change. Additional research ethics board permission was obtained to have research team members (students and staff) participate in local research presentations and media interviews regarding our research findings. Our team felt strongly that all team members must have the opportunity to disseminate the findings of the research project. Research dissemination activities first included two school presentations of project results (one to the staff and one to the whole school population) and then a presentation to the Faculty of Education Research Forum, University of Calgary. Research findings and exemplary quotes were used to update and improve the alternative school's introductory process for new students, and for its presentations to other schools. The school also filmed a short documentary about its philosophy and practices, and I was interviewed on camera regarding the research findings. We presented to the Board of Education Senior High Divisional Principals' meeting where our team members facilitated small group work with other schools' principals and administrators to identify what project findings might be useful and feasible for them to implement in their own schools. Our final presentation was to the Board of Education Trustees.

We developed a document using table comparisons to show the alignment between our research findings and the Board of Education mission and ends statements, and a recently completed review of secondary education – for our principal to share with key decision-makers. The initial draft of the comparison chart was completed by one of the student research team members. To further a broad dissemination of research findings, our work was presented at a national community health nurses conference in Canada, unfortunately just by myself (alone for the first time) because the cost of attending this conference would have been prohibitively expensive for other team members, particularly the students. The assistant principal of the school wished to present some of our research findings at a US educational staff development conference, so I collaborated with him and another teacher in this additional dissemination of results.

Conclusions

The original objective of our research project was to identify capacity-building situations and experiences to further understanding of what promotes capacity development in adolescents in an alternative high school. The expected outcome of the research was to gain an understanding of which situations and experiences at the school promote capacity-building in students. This objective was achieved, but must be viewed in the context of this school setting.

How does the fact that this research was completed in an alternative setting influence what was found and how it was found? Many capacity-building experiences were closely connected to the democratic school environment. Philosophically, the positive, strengths-focused approach to this PAR inquiry fit well with the school's approach to education. The philosophical fit and openness to partner in this type of research may not exist in other school settings, depending on their values and approach to education. Democratic school environments are less prevalent, and may be viewed as posing a threat to traditional, hierarchical adult–student relationships as they shift the balance of power and control in a setting that is traditionally controlled by adults. Although it would be an important comparison to explore capacity-building in a more mainstream school setting, accessing that population could prove more challenging if their educational focus did not support an interest in understanding what builds student capacity, or the administration was not interested in partnering in PAR research.

The research results cannot be considered generalizable to other schools due to the research design and the intent of this qualitative project to explore one school's practices. However, the results may be valuable for other teachers, nurses and school administrators who wish to gain a deeper understanding of key components that underlie student mental health, well-being, sense of participatory capability in the world, and sense of success. They may then assess their own capacity-building practices with adolescents, and whether some of the project outcomes would be valuable to implement in their own practices and in other school environments. Indeed, that was the objective of our presentation to the Senior High Divisional Principals' meeting. The outcomes of this research are consistent with San Martin and Calabrese's (2011) study that explored how alternative high school students learned best – through a school environment that is respectful, cooperative, where students were treated like family; where they felt cared about and recognized as a person by the staff.

Capacity-building experiences arose in my previous research as a key concept in understanding what promotes adolescent health – as capacity affects readiness, ability to learn (Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Van Bockern 2002), and hence academic successes. This research contributed to the advancement of knowledge in the area of building capacity in students. We found well-rounded citizenship preparation occurred at this alternative high school, not just for future roles but also for current roles. Students were given citizenship through nurturing their voices and participation in real experiences that promoted a sense of confidence and capability, extending into long-term positive effects.

Following completion of the presentations used for dissemination of research findings, both of the remaining students shared that being involved in this research project had had a positive effect on them. The 'last word' on capacity-building was

nically articulated by one of the students who shared the meaning that involvement in the project had held for her:

The project taught me about co-operative team building, and gave me lots of challenges in terms of personal comfort. Also the experience itself is valuable for the fact that it's something that most young people (and most people in general) don't get to have. I might not be involved in something this neat again unless I go to grad school. The public speaking part [dissemination] was really valuable ... I've never spoken so well on any other topic ... The project has ... enriched my life on all levels.

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