

# Action Research and School Community Health and Wellness: An Introduction to a Canadian Journal of Action Research Special issue

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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## **ACTION RESEARCH AND SCHOOL COMMUNITY HEALTH AND WELLNESS: AN INTRODUCTION TO A *CANADIAN JOURNAL OF ACTION RESEARCH* SPECIAL ISSUE**

Guest Editorial

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This special issue in *The Canadian Journal of Action Research* focusing on school community health and wellness has been a long time coming. Without question, these overlapping constructs (i.e., health and wellness) have become increasingly important and relevant in recent times. And certainly, across the nation, wellbeing—by many descriptors and definitions—has become a focus within many schools and school jurisdictions over the past 10 to 20 years (Montemurro et al., 2023). Such a focus has been evidenced by the purposeful and responsive attention and action placed upon a number of wellbeing-related concepts and initiatives. These concepts and initiatives include, among others, health promoting schools/comprehensive school health (McIsaac et al., 2017), mental health and mental health literacy (McLuckie et al., 2014), social emotional learning (Mahoney et al., 2018), and daily physical activity (Stone et al., 2012). Moreover, the strengthening of contemporary school health-related programs (which include physical education, health education, physical activity, the social environment, teacher wellness, and psychological and counselling services, again among others) has been identified and utilized as a suitable mechanism to improve upon public health and education (Kolbe, 2019).

Importantly, these two goals (i.e., improved public health *and* education) are not isolated or unconnected. The relationship between health and learning is clear: improving health outcomes has the potential to improve educational outcomes (Hunt et al., 2015). Indeed, it was my recognition of this relationship that motivated me to initially propose this special issue to my colleagues on the Editorial Board of *The Canadian Journal of Action Research*. And I am thankful and grateful that they recognized the same relationship and that they, in turn, supported the proposal for the special issue.

With our call for submissions, we offered a very broad category for inclusion within this school community health and wellness issue. More specifically, we aimed to encourage and welcome submissions related to school community health and wellness and several “sub” or

related disciplines such as—but not limited to—physical education, health education, physical activity, sport, recreation, play, outdoor learning, social determinants of health, mental health literacy, and comprehensive school health/health promoting schools. Fortunately, this broadened invitation has born a diverse array of insightful and important articles.

Herein within this special issue, then, are seven articles that all relate to one or more aspects of school community health and wellness. For example, these articles focus upon pre-service teacher and in-service teacher wellness (Keith et al., 2024), student and school community wellness (Kontak et al., 2024; Verba & Vu, 2024), community and school sport, recreation, and physical activity opportunities (Barrett et al., 2024; Oncescu et al., 2024), and nature-based learning and outdoor play (Gruno & Gibbons, 2024; Zeni et al., 2024). And, given the purpose and goals of *The Canadian Journal of Action Research*, all seven of these articles also connect closely with various applications of action research. Five are action research reports (Gruno & Gibbons, 2024; Keith et al., 2024; Kontak et al., 2024; Verba & Vu, 2024; Zeni et al., 2024), while two are articles about action research (Barrett et al., 2024; Oncescu et al., 2024). These authors' applications of action research are diverse. They include arts-based action research (Keith et al., 2024) as well as participatory action research (Barrett et al., 2024)—more specifically *youth* participatory action research (Gruno & Gibbons, 2024; Kontak et al., 2024), *community-based* participatory action research (Oncescu et al., 2024), and *critical* participatory action research (Zeni et al., 2024). A brief overview of these seven articles follows.

*Illuminating Meshworks of Pre-service Teachers' Curated Co-living Learning Spaces*, by **Erin Keith, Carolyn Clarke, and Allison Tucker**, provides readers with an account of their action research that embraced a/r/tography so that they and their pre-service teachers could challenge colonial structures and practices as part of a decolonizing exercise. Utilizing reflexive journaling, artistic artefacts, interviews, and contemplation, Keith et al. aimed to decolonize praxes through purposeful interpretation and writing exercises. Their action research findings give readers a hopeful sense of how teacher education programs might reconsider physical learning spaces so as to positively impact teachers' wellbeing.

*Peering Deeper: Student Perspectives on School Well-being and Youth Engagement*, by **Julia Kontak, Hilary Caldwell, Rena Kulczycki, Camille Hancock Friesen, and Sarah Kirk**, provides readers with an account of students' perspectives on wellbeing and youth engagement in schools. Using a youth participatory action research approach and applying reflexive thematic analysis to consider data collected through peer-to-peer interviews, Kontak et al. found six most salient themes related to student wellbeing in schools. Their discussion of these six themes gives readers insights into what is occurring, and what is possible, with respect to including youth in participatory action research related to their own schools as sites for meaningful engagement and wellbeing.

*Kindness in the Classroom: Evaluating the Impact of Direct Kindness Instruction on School and Emotional Outcomes in Second-grade Students*, by **Braelyn Verba and Phu Vu**, provides readers with an overview of their research that focused upon kindness as an essential yet

under-explored element of social and emotional learning models. Working with a diverse group of elementary students, and collecting data via a teacher-scored rating scale of students' social, academic, and emotional behaviours, Verba and Vu utilized action research as they sought to answer the following: What is the influence and impact of direct kindness on students' social behaviour and emotional wellbeing? Their findings suggest that direct kindness, as an "intervention," has the evidenced potential to have a positive impact on students' social, academic, and emotional behaviours. With these findings, Verba and Vu suggest that the purposeful incorporation of social and emotional learning elements (like kindness) is especially important within elementary education contexts.

*Using their (Photo)voice: Student Experiences with Nature-based Physical Activities in and Beyond Physical and Health Education*, by **Jennifer Gruno** and **Sandra Gibbons**, provides an overview of how participatory action research was utilized to explore the experiences of students with nature-based physical activity (NBPA). Using photovoice as part of this participatory action research—whereby photograph, caption, and observational data were collected and analyzed—Gruno and Gibbons found that students were able to make connections to place(s) and others, overcome personal challenges related to being active in nature, learn and articulate how nature can impact their own bodies and beings, and gain a desire to inspire others to similarly enjoy nature. These findings offer readers an instructional approach that they might adopt if they too wish to elicit student voice and enable students to make meaningful connections through NBPA.

*Outdoor Play and Learning in Elementary Schools: A Critical Participatory Action Research Project*, by **Megan Zeni**, **Leyton Schnellert**, and **Mariana Brussoni**, explains how critical participatory action research was utilized within an online community of practice (COP). This COP was developed so as to build a community of outdoor play and learning (OPAL) teachers as practitioners. Through the critical participatory action research exercise, 18 K–8 teachers recognized the need for quality resources related to outdoor play and learning; this led to the co-development of an online resource/webpage to support such teachers.

*Blending Human-centred Design and Community-based Participatory Action Research Approaches: Designing Community Sport and Recreation Provisions for Equity-owed Communities*, by **Jackie Oncescu**, **Jules Maitland**, and **Molly Balcom Raleigh**, offers readers an overview of how community-based participatory action research—alongside human-centred design—can be used to engage a particular equity-owed community in action towards social change. More specifically, Oncescu et al. offer a summary of their community-based participatory action research and human-centred design (CBPAR+HCD) integration model, explaining the benefits and challenges of such a dual approach. And they do so with a clear alignment with aiming for social justice, particularly as it relates to community sport and recreation for low-income individuals and communities.

*Collaborating for (Game) Change(rs): Negotiating and Building Meaningful Action Research Partnerships*, by **Joe Barrett**, **Daniel B. Robinson**, and **William Walters**, details their own learnings related to engaging in multi-stakeholder and multi-jurisdictional action research partnerships related to sport and physical activity. Providing an overview of potential

challenges (e.g., waning commitment, fidelity to action plans), Barrett et al. focus upon how participatory action research can nonetheless engage all partners as co-researchers while sharing power equitably. Also detailing their own Game Changers participatory action research project, Barrett et al. interrogate possibilities related to participatory action research and offer summary conclusions about the opportunities possible with respect to sport and physical activity-focused action research.

Together, these seven articles add to the limited literature related to action research and school community health and wellness, within the *Canadian Journal of Action Research* and more broadly. To fully appreciate this “limited literature,” consider this: from 2011–2022 there were only six articles related to school community health and wellness published within the *Canadian Journal of Action Research*. (Again, this includes all those previously mentioned “sub” or related disciplines: physical education, health education, physical activity, sport, recreation, play, outdoor learning, social determinants of health, mental health literacy, and comprehensive school health/health promoting schools.) And, of those six, three were articles I wrote. So, having seven new articles related to school community health and wellness in one issue of the *Canadian Journal of Action Research* is worth celebrating. These diverse contributions come from scholars and practitioners from coast to coast, as well as from the United States. While these contributions are worth celebrating, my hope is that others will read this work and see a need for this type of action research and see *The Canadian Journal of Action Research* as an especially appropriate publication to disseminate it.

Lastly, I offer my sincere thanks for the realization of this “vision” for this special issue—a vision that was once mine but, in the end, was one shared by the Editorial Board of *The Canadian Journal of Action Research*. Thank you for supporting this venture. But, most of all, many thanks to all the contributors to this special issue (as well as to those who submitted articles that were not accepted for publication within this special issue). The work you are doing, and disseminating, is having a positive and profound impact upon those who teach and learn within school communities. Your work matters. Keep on caring, empowering, researching, and sharing. ■

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