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Editorial: Holistically healthy humans: championing mental and physical wellbeing in education

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Editorial on the Research Topic

[Holistically healthy humans: championing mental and physical wellbeing in education](#)

Humans are at the heart of education and learning environments are active organisms. From an ecosystems perspective, each setting has unique dynamically interacting elements—students, educators, policies, resources, and wider community—with the potential to create optimal conditions for humans to learn, be healthy and thrive. The promotion of good health and wellbeing in education was declared a universal strategic goal by the United Nations in their 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development ([United Nations, 2015](#)). Certainly, wellbeing is seen as both a requirement for learning and a product of a well-functioning education system. Holistic wellbeing is conceptualized as a multi-dimensional construct encompassing physical and mental health and socio-emotional and spiritual wellbeing. Existing literature suggests the interconnectivity of these elements and their combined contribution to optimal human wellness ([Mullins-Owens, 2016](#)). A healthy settings framework ([World Health Organisation, 2025](#)) envisages health as something created and experienced by people within the spaces of their everyday life, including health promoting schools (HPS), and provides a relevant context to explore our Research Topic. In the current climate both global and local factors pose significant challenges for schools and other learning settings, and health and wellbeing concerns are growing. In the UK, school leaders are grappling with funding deficits alongside a teacher recruitment and retention crisis ([McLean et al., 2024](#)); while the education workforce from early years to higher education (HE) face unprecedented strain with high levels of stress and burnout common ([Jayman et al., 2022](#); [Solvason et al., 2025](#)). Nonetheless, education settings are uniquely positioned to promote, nurture, and support holistic wellbeing, and our Research Topic brings together international research to investigate this central theme from a broad perspective. There is a strong emphasis on salutogenic approaches that focus on strengthening social and individual resources and harnessing these assets to help create holistically healthy education ecosystems in which everyone can thrive.

Setting the context for this Research Topic, [Fraile-Martinez et al.](#) reflect on the legacy of Ancient Greek *Paideia*, tracing the origins of holistic approaches and highlighting the urgency for contemporary education systems to proactively integrate and balance physical, emotional and intellectual learning into an inclusive curriculum. Despite a wealth of evidence showcasing the positive effects of physical activity on body and mind, including combating sedentary behaviors and obesity and reducing mental health symptoms ([van Sluijs et al., 2021](#)), modern education systems remain stubbornly singularly focused. International evidence indicates that traditional school cultures prioritize cognitive strengths and academic success over a more comprehensive care model ([Pulimeno et al., 2020](#)). [Bentsalo et al.](#)'s article on vocational schools in Estonia highlights this proclivity. Despite efforts of frontline staff who felt personally invested in their students wellbeing, teachers acted in isolation, without systemic support. Poor communication between staff and management and lack of guidance and training thwarted both students' and teachers' ability to thrive. [Calcutt](#) urges for a more collective approach and champions embedding evidence-led, mindfulness practice more widely in English schools to ameliorate universal wellbeing. In a similar vein, [Suraswadi et al.](#), investigated how students in rural Thailand could enhance their overall wellbeing through applying philosophical principles inspired by Japanese Ikigai. The authors concluded that this approach provides a useful framework for implementing universal positive education in a South East Asian context.

Case study findings from a primary school in a socially deprived area of France ([Johnson et al.](#)) echo the need for staff to receive better support from leadership. Furthermore, the authors advocate fostering transdisciplinary, community partnerships to capacity build schools. Pilot findings showed that co-created health promotion modules on nutrition could be successfully integrated into existing maths and science lessons. While similar health promotion partnerships could be cultivated across multiple sites to benefit more communities. Certainly, [Hennessey et al.](#)'s evaluation of the *Well Schools* whole school approach to pupil and teacher wellbeing demonstrated how a universal framework can be adapted locally, creating case studies of good practice for schools to share. Satellite *Well Schools* sites formed part of a wider network of like-minded institutions showcasing how prioritizing staff and pupil wellbeing was at the heart of an effective learning environment.

Health promoting schools (HPS) encourage learners to develop healthy habits such as following a nutritious diet and being physically active. Empowering young people to make healthy choices around diet and physical exercise boosts self-efficacy and encourages lifelong behaviors ([Pekmezi et al., 2009](#)). Notably, [Coxon and Gibson](#) found in their scoping review of school-based dietary interventions that most research was dedicated to examining cognitive benefits, while wellness outcomes including mental health were largely neglected. Furthermore, evidence from 60 international studies revealed that interventions typically targeted younger children (6–12 years) with fewer interventions for older adolescents, revealing a worrying gap in provision. Implementing holistic wellbeing into Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) initiatives is essential for creating inclusive

healthy education settings. Every learner, irrespective of their background, ethnicity, or personal identity, should have access to appropriate resources and support. [Gudbrandsen and Jayman](#) present participatory action research findings from a co-production project designed to foster more inclusive holistic wellness practices in UK mainstream schools. Working with young people with SEND (specifically 22q11.2 deletion syndrome) and their families, a 'toolkit' was created offering actionable steps for educators, non-teaching staff, and non-SEND pupils to help provide support. Strong student voice is central to HPS and this study highlights how co-production in education and research can help reduce health inequalities among youth.

Recent attention has centered on the skills and resilience teaching staff need to mitigate the demands of the modern profession ([Jingjing et al., 2025](#)) and [Ferreira et al.](#)'s paper spotlights pre-teacher education. Study findings revealed a high percentage of trainees in Portugal met the criteria for student burnout. This exposes problems rooted early in a teacher's career journey and the urgent need for preventative action in teacher training programmes.

From a healthy settings perspective, organizations should be understood as complex systems able to support human wellbeing and flourishing ([Newton et al., 2016](#)). [Geister et al.](#)'s insightful contribution on fostering health promoting conditions in HE focuses on the physical setting. Research in Austria, Germany, Italy and Turkey, identified a common need for well-designed, inclusive "cozy spaces" on university campuses. These help to promote wellbeing and social integration among a post-COVID generation, especially students from marginalized groups. The primacy of the physical space in creating healthy settings is also highlighted in [Khadka et al.](#)'s research in Nepali Schools. The authors found that having a dedicated area for counseling was a key factor in effective service delivery, while one-to-one relationships with trusted adults were pivotal for guidance and counseling success.

Achieving the [United Nations \(2015\)](#) strategic goal for the universal promotion of good health and wellbeing in education by 2030 will be challenging. To do so requires significant capacity building, transdisciplinary knowledge integration, co-design with key stakeholders (including marginalized groups), and solution-implementation at local, national, regional, and global levels ([Villanueva-Cabezas et al., 2022](#)). Clearly, places and people are the cornerstones of holistically healthy, well-functioning education settings. However, healthy environments must be adequately resourced, accessible and inclusive; while healthy educators, including pre-service trainees, require appropriate training, regular supervision and on-going support for their own wellbeing needs. Adaptability, inclusion, and collaboration underpin effective ecosystems and there is a mandate for the wider education community to unite in a shared commitment to creating authentic health promoting settings and being active change makers. This requires generating the conditions at a local level—as some of our contributors to this Research Topic have showcased—and macro-level support for education leaders and policymakers in their efforts to promote and embed a culture of holistic wellbeing. Finally, there is the need for a robust research infrastructure, and on that note, we extend our sincere gratitude to the current

authors. Moving forward there is work to be done to further improve our understanding of holistic health in an education context; and crucially, to gain empirical evidence to support policy changes and educational reform that improve both the learning and wellbeing outcomes of current and future generations of holistically healthy humans.

Author contributions

MJ: Writing – original draft. JG: Writing – review & editing. AR: Writing – review & editing. AQ: Writing – review & editing.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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