

Introduction

Young people face a wide variety of health challenges including substance misuse (Emmers *et al.*, 2015), decreasing mental health and wellbeing (Gavin *et al.*, 2024), low physical activity participation (Bucksch *et al.*, 2020), obesity (Hamulka *et al.*, 2018), and lack of sleep (Sharman and Illingworth, 2020) to name a few. Adolescents typically fail to appreciate the long-term impact that poorer health choices have on both their physical and mental health. These trends are worrying, considering that lifelong health behaviours, such as engagement in physical activity and food choices, are established during the school years (Keshavarz Mohammadi, Rowling and Nutbeam, 2010; Inchley *et al.*, 2020). This lack of knowledge and understanding is shown to track into adulthood, rendering the individual at greater risk of many chronic diseases including heart disease, Type 2 diabetes and cancer (Patton *et al.*, 2016). There is overwhelming evidence supporting that people of social disadvantage are at even greater risk of the consequences of poor health choices (Braveman and Gottlieb, 2014). Results of the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children study highlight that Irish young people from higher social classes are more likely to report to be in excellent health, to eat fruit and vegetables, and score higher in terms of mental health (Költő *et al.*, 2020).

The school setting plays a critical role in shaping the health and wellbeing of young people during a key period of development (Adhikari *et al.*, 2024; Deschesnes *et al.*, 2014; Karlander and Geidne, 2025; Nielsen *et al.*, 2023). In fact, some researchers argue that schools may exert a greater influence on young people's health behaviours than any other social institution (Razouki *et al.*, 2021). Evidence is also growing that supports the positive impact of school-based programmes designed to promote wellbeing, support emotional and social learning, and prevent mental health problems in adulthood (Kuyken *et al.*, 2013; Greenberg *et al.*, 2017). In Ireland, in September 2017, "Wellbeing" was added to the post-primary curriculum (DES, 2018). This mandatory program combined Physical Education (PE), Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE), and Civic Social and Personal Education (CSPE) (DES, 2018).

Ensuring that health education is relatable and relevant to students is crucial to promote engagement and learning within health programmes (Ott *et al.*, 2011; Cushing, 2015; Halliday *et al.*, 2019). This can be done by involving the voices of students when designing and creating health promotion programmes. A number of visual methods, such as ethnographies and audio-visual narratives, have been used to promote participant engagement within health research (Pain, 2012). Photographs enable participants, specifically those from disadvantaged backgrounds, to express ideas, emotions and opinions in a unique way (Miller, 2015). Photovoice is a group analysis method, which falls into the category of Participatory Action Research (PAR) (Wang and Burris, 1997). Photovoice combines group work and photography in order to allow people to record and reflect on their daily lives (Lal *et al.*, 2012). Photovoice is accessible to children as it appeals to our visual culture (Abma and Schrijver, 2020). Photovoice has been successfully used in a wide variety of health promotion programmes with young people across the world (Burke *et al.*, 2024). This form of data collection provides adolescents, specifically those from disadvantaged backgrounds, with a platform to express their lifestyles and health issues. Photovoice can be used to generate discussion between adults and young people, which is crucial for social change (Abma and Schrijver, 2020).

Photovoice involves several steps including participants taking photos in their community and choosing the ones they feel highlight issues that are important. Photovoice is not as verbally focused as most methodologies, however, the discussion of the pictures with key stakeholders is a crucial element of its success. It is important that participants feel appreciated and valued (Burke *et al.*, 2024) but also to allow key stakeholders who are capable of action, to get insight

into the lived experience of the participants (Abma and Schrijver, 2020). The SHOWeD (What do you See here? What is really Happening? How does this relate to Our lives? Why does this problem or strength exist? What can we Do about it?) methodology (Wang, 1999) has been used and adapted in many photovoice projects to help stimulate and guide these conversations.

LifeLab is a health literacy intervention co-designed for post-primary students in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas of Ireland (Smith *et al.*, 2022). Developed in collaboration with students and teachers from the target communities, LifeLab includes a series of co-created vignettes (Goss *et al.*, 2021), activities (Goss *et al.*, 2022), and educational resources delivered over a nine-week programme. These lessons are integrated within the SPHE curriculum as part of the broader Wellbeing programme in Irish post-primary schools (DES, 2021). A central feature of the LifeLab programme is its commitment to co-design and youth voice. The intervention evolves in response to young people's changing needs, using methods such as workshops, interviews, and focus groups. Photovoice has been integrated within LifeLab to amplify students' voices within the programme and to enable the team to keep informed on the ever-changing landscape of health for young people.

Photovoice has been used in a handful of studies to explore the perceptions of Irish students on topics such as mental health and suicide prevention (Walsh *et al.*, 2023), nutrition (Browne *et al.*, 2020) and care in schools (Gleasure *et al.*, 2024). Photovoice has also been used to explore food decisions of Irish families on low income (Spyreli *et al.*, 2024). However, no known study has used photovoice to explore the school health environment specifically in low socio-economic schools in Ireland. Therefore, the aim of this paper, as part of a wider study, was to use the photovoice methodology to gain an insight into the views of a student's taking part in LifeLab, on health in their school.

Methodology

Positionality statement

In reflexive practice, it is important to address the positionality, backgrounds and perspectives of the leading authors (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2017). Three of the lead authors are qualified PE and Biology post-primary teachers (LB, NG, and SB). The wider research team has extensive experience conducting co-design research with this cohort of teachers and young people in a school context. The first author's (LB) teacher training and classroom experience informed the data analysis. Drawing on her background in health education within Ireland, she was able to engage meaningfully with students' lived experiences, develop a strong contextual grasp, and generate nuanced interpretations of the data.

Participants

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Dublin City Ethical committee (DCUREC/2023/152). Recruitment for this study was embedded within the broader enrolment procedures of the LifeLab programme which uses purposive, criterion-based sampling (Patton, 2014). Post-primary schools in Dublin were contacted via email and invited to participate in LifeLab, if they qualified under the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) scheme in Ireland (Department of Education and Skills, 2018; Department of Education and Skills, 2021). As part of the wider study, one school participated in data collection. This includes five class groups with a total of 121 students (75 males, 46 females) and five teachers (1 male, 4 females). The students were all in their second year of post-primary school, between the ages of 13 and 14. School and parental informed consent and participant assent were obtained prior to participation.

Procedure

Students in this study were taking part in LifeLab. As part of this programme (illustrated in [Figure 1](#)), students completed the *LifeLab project*, which was co-designed with participating students and teachers, based on the photovoice technique. The objective of this project was for students to take photos in their school and/or community that they felt reflected “health”. The students were asked to take a minimum of ten photos and then choose their favourite three photos to present at the LifeLab workshop. A *Lifelab worksheet* ([Appendix](#)) was given to students to encourage reflection throughout the process. This worksheet included questions adapted from the SHOWeD ([Wang and Burris, 1997](#)) method to be more relevant for this age group: (a) *What do you see in the photo?* (b) *What is really happening in the photo?* (c) *How does this relate to your life or the life of your community?* (d) *Why does this situation, concern or issue exist?* (e) *How can we help to improve/educate people on this topic?* At the end of the interactive LifeLab session in DCU, students took part in the Photovoice workshop. This workshop was led by the lead author. The photos taken by the students that they felt reflected “health” in their school were displayed on a screen and students were given the opportunity to discuss their answers to the LifeLab worksheet. There was then an opportunity for the wider group to give their opinion on the topic introduced.

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Figure 1



LifeLab programme structure. Sources: Figure created by authors

Figure alternative text

Short Description: A flow diagram shows LifeLab school based lessons and interactive sessions arranged in sequence.

Long Description: The diagram is arranged horizontally from left to right using rectangular boxes connected by straight rightward arrows. The first rectangle on the left is labeled “Introductory school based lessons cross 3” and connects by a right-pointing arrow to the next rectangle labeled “LifeLab Interactive session 1”. A rightward arrow then connects to a rectangle labeled “LifeLab School Based Project cross 3”. This box connects by another right-pointing arrow to a rectangle labeled “LifeLab Interactive Session 2”, which also contains the text “Photovoice workshop” marked with a star symbol inside the box. A final right-pointing arrow connects this box to the last rectangle on the far right, labeled “Closure School Based Lesson”.

Data collection

The photos taken by the students, as well as the LifeLab worksheets they had completed, were collected and uploaded to google drive by the class teacher. One member of the team took field notes during the photovoice workshop, and each session was audio recorded.

Data analysis

Inductive reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyse the photos and focus groups (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2019). This involved; familiarisation with data, coding, generating initial themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and writing up (Clarke and Braun 2018). This approach was used as it allows the research team to identify patterns of meaning in the qualitative dataset that was gathered (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Initial analysis was predominately done by the first author (LB). Her work with the students, as well as her experience as a health education teacher in schools, allowed for insightful and reflexive

engagement with the data and analytic procedures (Braun and Clarke, 2019). The data was coded using an inductive approach to develop themes and subthemes from the dataset. The use of inductive analysis ensures that the themes developed originate from the data collected (Patton, 2014; Alhojailan and Ibrahim, 2012). In this sense, this type of topical investigation is information driven (Clarke and Braun, 2018). Initial themes were reviewed and challenged by the wider research team (HG, NG and SB) (Smith and McGannon, 2018) who questioned any assumptions made during data interpretation. This collaborative process resulted in the development of two themes and their associated sub-themes.

Findings

The thematic analysis brought to light two main themes; (1) Through the Adolescent Lens: Youth Health Challenges; (2) Beyond a Picture: A Call to Action. Within these themes, a number of sub-themes were also identified (see Table 1).

Table 1

The table layout displayed in this section is not how it will appear in the final version. The representation below is solely purposed for providing corrections to the table. To view the actual presentation of the table, please click on

the  located at the top of the page.

Themes and sub-themes

Theme	Sub-theme	Quote
Through the Adolescent Lens: Youth Health Challenges	Drugs Misuse	"Teenagers are starting to get addicted to alcohol a lot more and it's becoming common."
	Nutrition	"Many people are not eating enough fruits nowadays and not meeting their daily fruit intake" "We all eat food eat food even though it might not be nutritious "
	Physical Activity	"Some people do not do exercise, not improving their physical health"
	Climate Action	"We're destroying the world"
	Social Isolation	"There might be some people that aren't treated equally."
	Mis-information	"People don't understand how harmful drugs and alcohol is"
	Mental Health	"This is a concern because some people don't feel good about themselves"
	Obesity	"This is a huge concern as the sugar is addictive and can make people obese" "Obesity is a big problem caused by food"
	Sleep Deprivation	"I think it's important that teenagers especially learn to sleep properly and in a healthy way because they need sleep to function properly"

Themes and sub-themes

Theme	Sub-theme	Quote
Beyond a Picture: A call to Action	Information, Education and Communication	"More information should be added about these activities with various different posters around the school."
	Usable, Relatable and Realistic Advice	"After their leaving cert people might be stuck on what to do, so this noticeboard helps to give us advice"
	Supports and Opportunities for Engagement	"We can help educate people on how to properly research healthcare and how to contact a healthcare professional."
	Schools as Part of the Wider Community	"To bring the community together" "Promote healthy lifestyle and exercise through advertisements and local fairs"

Source(s): Table created by authors

Through the Adolescent Lens: youth health challenges

The photos taken by students highlighted the areas within the school setting they associated with health. There were commonalities amongst students in what they chose to photograph, for example, the school sports hall. However, the way students answered the SHOWeD questions and their elaborations on their photos were all distinctly different. The group discussion provided a deeper understanding of their view of health in their school. It was evident these views were vastly different from student to student. Within the workshops it was clear that students have a negative view of health and saw it as a risk and danger for young people.

"Too many teenagers are staying up to play video games, hang out with friends or do drugs" (shown in [Figure 2](#)).

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Figure 2



DON'T DO DRUGS

Controlled

- Heroin
- Sleeping pills
- Anti-depressants
- Anti-biotics

Illegal

- Ecstasy
- Cannabis
- Cocaine
- Heroin

Legal

- Alcohol
- Nicotine
- Prescription
- Marijuana

enjoyed

OF AND UP

School poster - Don't Do Drugs. Sources: Figure created by authors

Figure alternative text

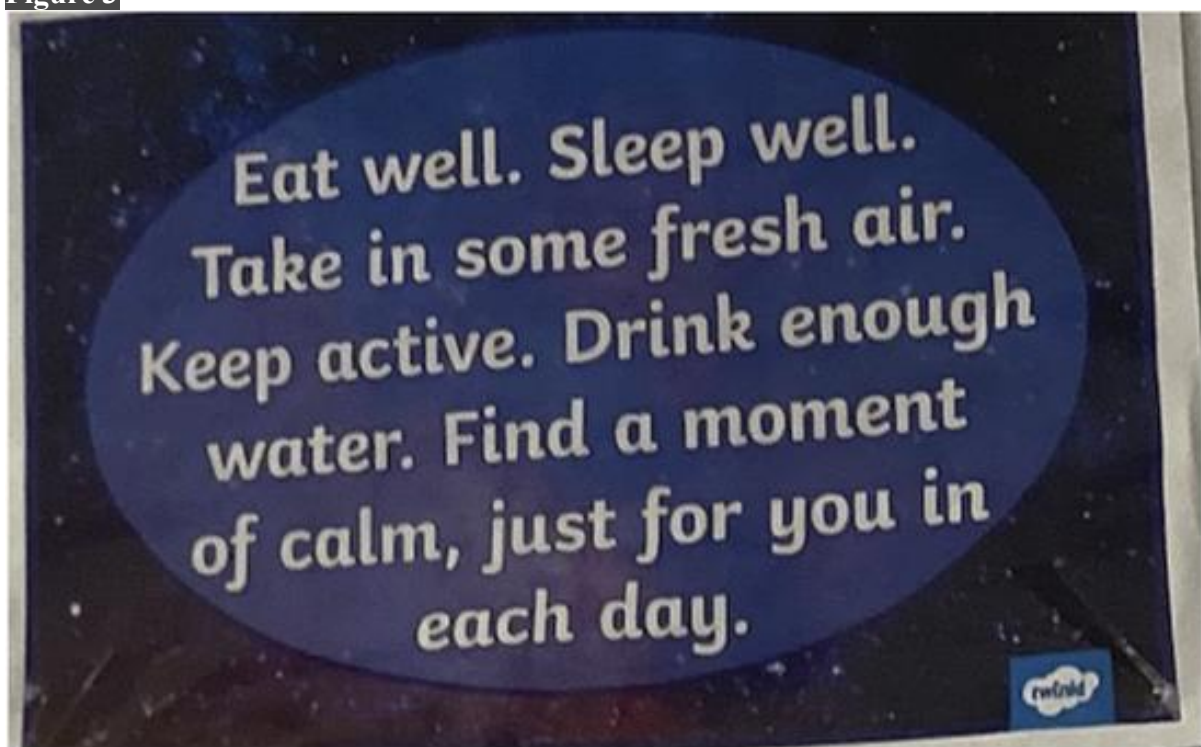
Short Description: A hand-drawn poster shows anti-drug symbols and the message “DONT DO DRUGS”.

Long Description: The poster is oriented vertically. At the top are two circular prohibition symbols with diagonal slashes. The left circle contains drawings of multicolored pills, and the right circle contains a drawing of a syringe, both indicating prohibition. Below these symbols, large stylized text reads “DONT DO” in outlined lettering, followed by the word “DRUGS” written in large block letters, each letter filled with different colors. Beneath the main message, three cloud-shaped sections are drawn and labeled “Controlled”, “Legal”, and “Illegal”, each containing small handwritten lists of examples, though the individual items are small and not fully legible.

Students discussed health challenges such as drug misuse, sleep deprivation and poor mental health (shown in [Figure 3](#)). All of which unfortunately are prominent issues for young people across the globe ([Emmers *et al.*, 2015](#); [Sharman and Illingworth, 2020](#); [Gavin *et al.*, 2024](#)).

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Figure 3



Sleep poster. Sources: Figure created by authors

Figure alternative text

Short Description: A figure shows text displayed on a dark background with a lighter oval shape in the center.

Long Description: The text reads “Eat well. Sleep well. Take in some fresh air. Keep active. Drink enough water. Find a moment of calm, just for you in each day”. The text is arranged across multiple lines within the oval shape. A small logo is visible in the bottom right corner.

Misinformation was another challenge seen by the students in their school:

“Too many people nowadays are relying on fake medical information online, so I think it’s important that people know where to access the right, reliable information”

Climate Action was highlighted by one of the groups as another influencing factor on their health (shown in [Figure 4](#)).

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Figure 4



School notice board on climate action. Sources: Figure created by authors

Figure alternative text

Short Description: A notice board displays multiple posters and photographs related to “Climate Action”.

Long Description: The notice board is mounted on a light-colored wall. At the top center, text reads “Climate Action”. On the left side of the board, a label reading “Photo 2” is visible near the top. The board contains several printed items arranged in rows. On the upper left, there are photographs showing groups of people holding signs and standing together. Near the top center, a poster reads “Forest of Fingal” with a tree graphic. To the right, a certificate-style document with decorative elements is displayed. On the upper right, a poster with an eye symbol is visible. In the middle of the board, a circular logo reads “CLIMATE ACTION” with a megaphone illustration and smaller surrounding text. Below and around this logo are additional documents, photographs of greenery, and

landscape images. Some posters show close-up views of plants and outdoor scenes. All items are pinned or attached within a wooden frame.

Students spoke of the impact of social isolation on the health of young people.

“In this photo we can see that it shows loneliness and this is about mental health” (shown in [Figure 5](#)).

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Figure 5



Bench in the school wellbeing garden. Sources: Figure created by authors

Figure alternative text

Short Description: A window view shows a small outdoor courtyard with a bench, brick wall, and scattered debris.

Long Description: In the foreground, the bottom edge of the window frame is visible. The ground area consists of gravel, patches of soil, and sparse grass, with loose bricks and debris scattered unevenly across the surface. A narrow curved brick border runs through the ground, forming a rough pathway shape. In the background, a brick wall spans the width of the scene, with two rectangular wooden trellis panels mounted on the wall to the left. Slightly right of center, a painted wooden bench with multicolored slats is placed against the brick wall. On the far right, a tree with leafy branches extends over the area, casting shadows on the wall and ground.

One of the most common photos taken by the students was of the school yard (shown in [Figure 6](#)). At first glance you would link this to physical activity, however, the groups all also linked it to socialising and speaking to friends:

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Figure 6



The school yard. Sources: Figure created by authors

Figure alternative text

Short Description: A wide outdoor field shows grassy areas, football goals, and a paved play space near houses.

Long Description: In the foreground and left side, there is an expanse of grass. Toward the middle of the scene, a paved play area is visible with picnic tables placed near its center. Two football goalposts stand on the paved surface, one closer to the center and another further back. On the right side, a narrow worn path runs through the grass toward the paved area. In the background, a row of houses with pitched roofs lines the edge of the field, and a fence decorated with colorful panels or artwork is visible near the right goalpost. The sky above is overcast with light clouds, giving the scene a calm, open-air setting typical of a school or community recreation ground.

“I can see the school yard in the photo. The yard is empty. On the break students speak with each other.”

This space was therefore seen not only as an area for physical activity, but also mental health:

“This is where you can do physical exercises and improve your physical and mental health”

Beyond a Picture: a call to action

A crucial element of photovoice is the development of ideas for social change within communities based on the feedback and information provided by participants ([Burke *et al.*, 2024](#)). Students were passionate about how small changes within their school could have a big impact on the health of students. They emphasised the need to increase awareness and visibility of health information around their school through posters, talks and within classes:

“We can help teach people about this by having more lessons on it and adding more posters around the school”

Students pointed out the vital role sports plays not only within their school but also the wider community:

“Sports bring our community together.” (shown in [Figures 7 and 8](#))

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Figure 7



Two framed sports jerseys in the school hall. Sources: Figure created by authors

Figure alternative text

Short Description: A wall display shows two framed football jerseys mounted side by side.

Long Description: On the left side, a rectangular black frame contains a blue football jersey with a dark collar, visible sponsor text reading “staycity”, and multiple handwritten signatures across the fabric. On the right side, a similar black frame contains a green football jersey with white and orange trim at the collar, a large white number “4” centered on the front, and a team crest on the chest area. Reflections of light and window shapes are visible on the glass surfaces of both frames, and the jerseys are evenly spaced, aligned at the same height, and presented as a display of sporting memorabilia.

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Figure 8



Community mural on the school wall. Sources: Figure created by authors

Figure alternative text

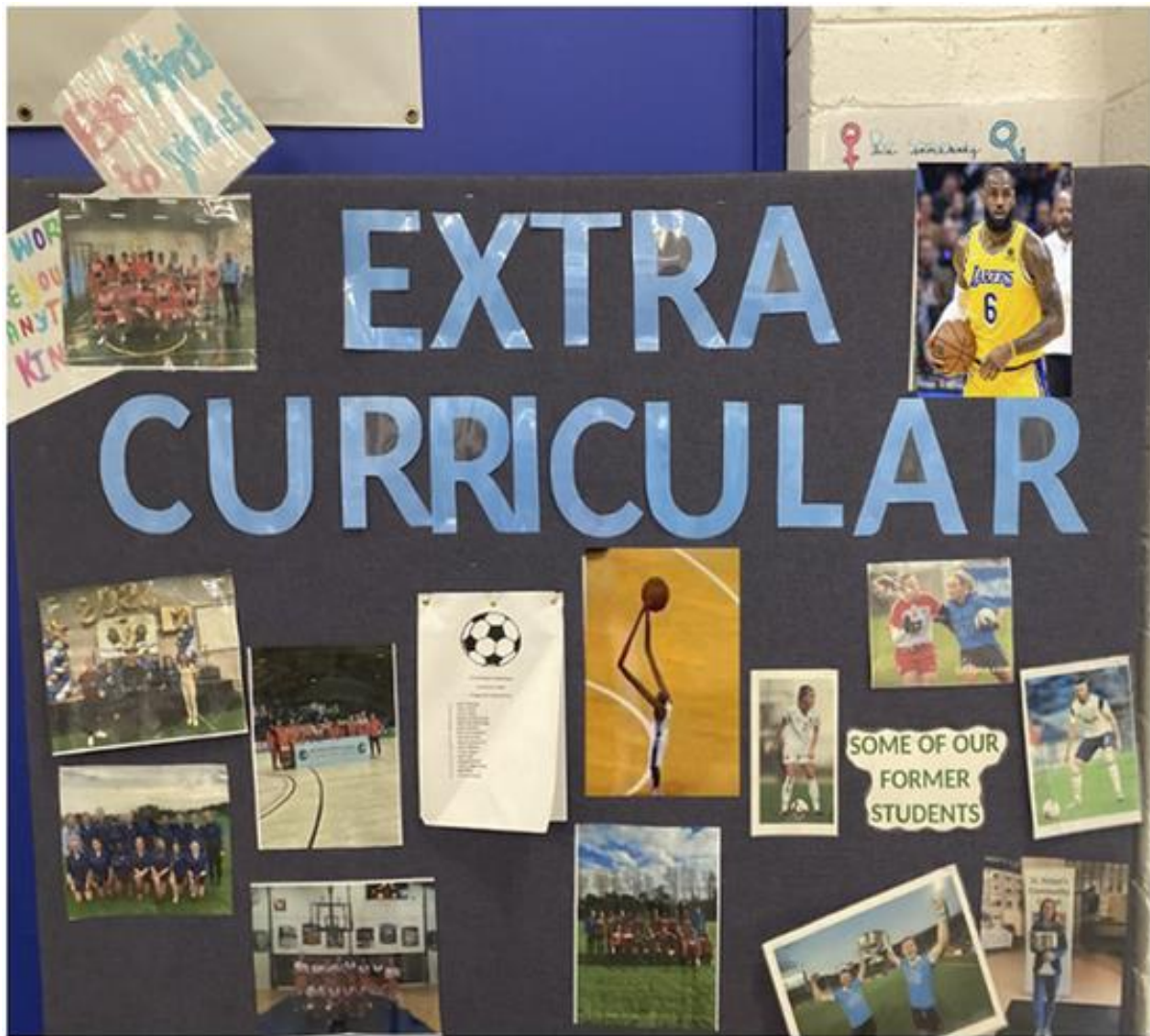
Short Description: A mural with bright background paint shows hands holding a basketball beneath the word “community”.

Long Description: Across the top center, the word “community” is written in a large flowing script. At the center, several overlapping hands of different skin tones are shown holding an orange basketball, forming the main focal point. Radiating lines and abstract marks extend outward across the background. On the left side of the mural, a vertical list of names is painted, including “Hanh”, “Duong”, “Phong”, “Richard”, “Adam”, “TeeJay”, and “Kacher”. On the right side, another vertical list of names appears, including “Brandon”, “Fahad”, “Roman”, “Leo”, “Ashin”, “Rejus”, “David”, “Sean”, and “Zach”. Near the bottom left corner, the name “Olivia” is visible alongside small handprints, while additional small handprints and signature-style markings appear near the lower right corner.

This linked to discussions about the extra-curricular activities in their school and the importance of having a diverse range of activities to encourage student participation (shown in [Figures 9](#) and [10](#)):

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Figure 9



School extra curricular activities noticeboard. Sources: Figure created by authors

Figure alternative text

Short Description: A display board shows extra curricular activities with photos of sports teams and former students.

Long Description: The board shows the text “EXTRA CURRICULAR” placed prominently across the top center in large letters. Below the title, multiple photographs are arranged surrounding the center area of the board. On the right side, near the upper right corner, there is a photo of a basketball player holding a basketball. Across the middle right area, the text “Some of our former students” is displayed, and around this text are several sports photographs. To the right of the text, there is an image of a sports girl standing and playing football. Nearby, another photo shows two players holding a cup together. Below and slightly to the right, there is a photo of a sports boy standing and playing football. Toward the lower right area, a photo shows two women players playing handball, with one holding the ball. On the left and lower sections of the board, additional photos show school sports teams posing in groups, students lined up on fields, and action shots from football and other outdoor sports.

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Figure 10



Extra curricular activities poster. Sources: Figure created by authors

Figure alternative text

Short Description: A poster lists extra curricular activities offered at a school with illustrated icons.

Long Description: The poster is titled “Extra-Curricular Activities,” written in large uppercase letters at the top. Below the title is a centered list of activities written in bold uppercase text, including “Art”, “Coding Club”, “Chess Club”, “Debating”, “Green Schools”, “Guitar Lessons”, “Musical”, “Reading Club”, “School Band”, “Science Club”, “Yoga Club”, and “Student Council”. In the upper right corner of the poster, a school crest is displayed. Small illustrations are placed around the text, including chess pieces near the top, two figures standing at podiums to represent debating, a person in a yoga pose, musical instruments such as a guitar and musical notes near the bottom, a science-themed illustration with atoms and books, and an art-related illustration showing a paint palette and easel.

“Not a lot of people do sports in Ireland.”

Students recognised the other valuable resources in their school (shown in [Figure 11](#)) and how these could be incorporated into other schools:

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Figure 11



The school sensory room. Sources: Figure created by authors

Figure alternative text

Short Description: A sensory room corner shows an illuminated bubble tube mounted on a red platform beside mirrors.

s”, “Inclusive”, “Compassion”, “Hope”, “Forgiveness”, “Accountability”, and “Citizenship”. The words are evenly distributed across the background, creating a collage-style design. “This picture gives people hope and tells people that things take time to happen (like in the picture plants take time to grow)” (shown in [Figure 13](#)).

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Figure 13



Mural representing hope on the school wall. Sources: Figure created by authors

Figure alternative text

Short Description: A mural shows colorful flowers growing in grass with the word “HOPE” spelled across them.

Long Description: The mural painted on a brick wall depicts a row of large, stylized flowers growing from tall grass. From left to right, the flowers vary in shape and size, each with distinct petal forms and visible stems and leaves. Behind the flowers, the background shows an open sky with curved lines suggesting clouds or wind, and a sun positioned in the upper right corner with radiating rays. Across the center of the mural, the letters “H”, “O”, “P”, and “E” are placed individually among the flowers, together spelling the word “HOPE”. The importance of usable, relatable and realistic advice for young people within schools was also pinpointed (shown in [Figure 14](#)):

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Figure 14



The guidance counsellors noticeboard. Sources: Figure created by authors

Figure alternative text

Short Description: A notice board displays multiple educational posters about careers, courses, events, and student wellbeing.

Long Description: The notice board is mounted on a wall and filled with a variety of printed posters and leaflets arranged in rows. Along the top row, posters include one titled “Event Details” with dates and a college logo, a poster titled “Did you know?” focusing on career options, a poster labeled “P L C” with the subtitle “Your results and the clues to your future course” featuring an illustrated student and reflective questions, and a poster titled “Explore F E T pathways to your future career” showing students in different learning environments. In the middle and lower sections, two large circular posters titled “Career Interests and the World of Work” are positioned on the left and right sides, each displaying icons that represent different job sectors. Between these are posters related to wellbeing, including one titled “Body Image Top Tips” and another referencing “L G B T plus”. Additional posters and smaller leaflets provide information on careers guidance, further education, and student support services. Near the bottom, several small flyers are pinned at slight angles, creating a collage-style layout that highlights career exploration, education pathways, and personal wellbeing resources for students.

“We could say that it’s fine to get something wrong and ask questions because there are no stupid questions”

“We can also help people by adding more guidance counsellors that can help”

Discussion

Visual methods such as photovoice, can be used to help understand the everyday lives of students in schools (Prosser, 2007). The aim of this paper, as part of the wider study, was to use photovoice, within the LifeLab intervention, to gain an insight into the views of students on health in their school. Photovoice has been used in a wide variety of health education studies with young people across the world (Burke *et al.*, 2024). Within this study, photovoice allowed students to present their views and ideas of health within their school. It provided an opportunity for the students to be heard by not only the research team but also their class teachers. The involvement of key stakeholders in photovoice projects has been highlighted as a critical element of this methodology (Burke *et al.*, 2024).

Typically within health education in schools, there has been a dominant pathogenic view of health designed to achieve individual behaviour change (Wright, O'Flynn and Welch, 2018). PE was used to highlight to students the role physical activity has in preventing diseases such as obesity and coronary heart disease (Quennerstedt, 2008). Over the last number of years, changes have been made to curricula across the world in order to move towards a more salutogenic view of health with the goal of developing the qualities, abilities and knowledge of students for sustainable health development (Quennerstedt, 2008). This can be seen in Ireland through the introduction of the "Wellbeing" programme in 2017. This programme adopts a whole-school approach to health education with the view of developing students skills such as "communication" and "managing information and thinking" (Department of Education and Skills, 2021, p.18) to nurture students' mental, physical and emotional wellbeing (O'Brien *et al.*, 2024). This activity provided an opportunity for the students to develop these skills by facilitating discussions on their school health environment. The workshops highlighted the negative view students have of health. They pinpointed a number of different elements they viewed as "risks" to their health such as "drug misuse" and "sleep deprivation" demonstrating the still prevalent individual behaviour change view of health present within schools.

Students brought forward photos representing health topics such as mental health, that have been cited within research youth health challenges over the years (Adelman and Taylor, 1999; Rossen and Cowan, 2014; Bjørnsen *et al.*, 2019; Brown and Dixon, 2020). While some of these topics are widely recognised in the literature, students contributed context-specific discussions and ideas that provided important learning for the research team and teachers. What stood out in the analysis was the societal and environmental influences discussed by students, such as climate action and misinformation, that are not as commonly cited within the literature. Previous research has also found that the combination of the photographs as well as the interpretations from participants allows researchers to gain insight into the critical challenges participants and their communities face (Cooper *et al.*, 2017; Abma and Schrijver, 2020; Trask *et al.*, 2024).

Based on the variety of health topics discussed by students, it is clear from this study that the conception of health differs from person to person (van Druten *et al.*, 2022), and as a result, one size does not fit all in terms of health promotion within schools. Photovoice has been used in the school setting to amplify students' voices in health research (Trask *et al.*, 2024). It is important that students feel valued and heard within their communities in terms of their specific health needs. The breadth and depth of ideas to develop health in their school showed the passion and desire students have to make a change. Giving students a voice in health promotion has shown to have a positive impact on the personal effects on students, on the school as an organisation and the interactions and social relationships within schools (Griebler *et al.*, 2017). Educative frameworks across the globe such as the World Health Organization (WHO)

Health Promoting Schools (HPS) model ([WHO, 2021](#)) emphasise the importance of student participation and the development of positive social and physical environments for students. Students themselves highlighted opportunities to connect the school within the wider community, another key principle of these frameworks. This study supported the idea that involving students in the process of health promotion develops a sense of ownership and empowerment ([Abraczinskas and Zarrett, 2020](#)), which directly increases their commitment and engagement with the process. This project provided an opportunity for the LifeLab team, as well as the teachers and schools themselves, to learn from the students. This is something that can be easily replicated and used for curriculum and program development in schools.

Conclusion

Although health in adolescence is a well-researched field, evidently there are still prominent issues young people are facing in terms of health. It is crucial that we continue to involve young people in the discussion, as their needs are constantly changing. Previous photovoice studies have used photovoice to explore health topics and programmes with young people. This study demonstrated the power of using this methodology to help students reflect on their school environments and develop context specific ways for improvement. This study provides ideas to help tackle some of the health challenges young people are facing, in schools and the wider community, including misinformation and social isolation. This study used photovoice to gain an understanding of how students view health within their school community. Photovoice proved to be a powerful tool when working with young people to gain a deeper understanding into their opinions and lived experiences. It is clear from this study that students have different needs and understandings of health, which should be considered when designing and implementing health programmes within schools. Photovoice is a way for educators and policymakers to include student voices in the design and implementation of health and wellbeing initiatives.

Strengths and limitations

The first author's experience within the school setting delivering health education provided a deeper contextual understanding and rich interpretation of the data collected. A limitation of this study is that data was only collected from one school due to the timeframe of the wider project; it was not possible to sample post-primary schools more broadly. LifeLab focuses on a range of health topics which may have influenced some of the health issues brought forward by students in this study.

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Availability of data and materials

The datasets used and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Appendix

LifeLab Worksheet

Name:
Photo:
Caption:
Questions:

1. What do you see in the photo?
2. What is happening in the photo?
3. How does this relate to your life and the life of your community?
4. Why the situation, concern, or issue exists?
5. How can we help to improve/educate people about this topic?

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Further reading

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