

THRIVING AGAINST THE ODDS: A PHOTOVOICE STUDY ON CANADIAN COLLEGE STUDENTS' MENTAL HEALTH AND RESILIENCE STRATEGIES

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Abstract

This study examines the challenges and resilience of nine Canadian students enrolled in a Bachelor of Child and Youth Care (CYC) program at a polytechnic institution in Ontario, focusing on their mental health and well-being in post-secondary education. Using photovoice, students acted as co-researchers, sharing their lived experiences through visual and narrative expression. Participants revealed barriers such as limited access to mental health services, academic demands, and food insecurity. Despite these challenges, students demonstrated resilience through self-advocacy, physical activity, community connection, and relationships with the Land. Framed by French et al.'s (2020) theory of radical healing, the research calls for systemic change and highlights the shared responsibility of faculty, staff, and administrators to foster inclusive and culturally responsive supports. Findings emphasize the need for accessible student services and academic support, offering insights into how post-secondary institutions can better support students' academic and holistic well-being.

Keywords: college students, Canada, mental health, resilience, well-being, photovoice

Résumé

Cette étude examine les défis et la résilience de neuf étudiants canadiens inscrits à un programme de baccalauréat en soins à l'enfance et à la jeunesse dans un établissement polytechnique de l'Ontario, en se concentrant sur leur santé mentale et leur bien-être au postsecondaire. Grâce à la recherche par amorce photo (photovoice), les étudiants ont agi à titre de cochercheurs et ont partagé leurs expériences vécues par l'expression visuelle et narrative. Les participants ont révélé des obstacles tels que l'accès limité aux services de santé mentale, les exigences scolaires et l'insécurité alimentaire. Malgré ces difficultés, les étudiants ont fait preuve de résilience en défendant leurs droits, en faisant de l'activité physique, et en tissant des liens avec la communauté et avec la Terre. S'appuyant sur la

théorie de la guérison radicale de French et al. (2020), la recherche appelle à un changement systémique et souligne la responsabilité partagée du corps professoral, du personnel et de l'administration de favoriser des soutiens inclusifs et culturellement adaptés. Les résultats soulignent la nécessité de services aux étudiants et d'un soutien scolaire accessibles, offrant un aperçu de la manière dont les établissements postsecondaires peuvent mieux soutenir le bien-être scolaire et holistique des étudiants.

Mots clés : Étudiants au postsecondaire, Canada, santé mentale, résilience, bien-être, recherche par amorce photo

INTRODUCTION

The challenges to post-secondary students' well-being are complex and multifaceted, influenced by a range of personal, social, and systemic factors. Thaivalappil et al. (2024) found that institutional challenges to student mental well-being include unsupportive attitudes and inaction, perceptions of campus safety, exclusionary campus climates, and inconsistent assessment practices that hinder meaningful evaluation and comparison across institutions. Post-secondary students in Ontario face increasing mental health pressures, compounded by systemic inequities such as food insecurity and limited access to support services (Suresh et al., 2021). These stressors are particularly significant for students enrolled in Child and Youth Care (CYC) programs, a discipline that prepares practitioners to work relationally with children, youth, families, and communities who have experienced marginalization, trauma, and systemic barriers. Child and Youth Care (CYC) is grounded in relational, ecological, and justice-oriented approaches, emphasizing strength-based, trauma-informed, and culturally competent care with children, youth, families, and communities (Ontario Association of Child and Youth Care, 2025). Students in CYC programs are uniquely vulnerable to mental health challenges (Dewa & Dewa, 2023), yet their specific needs remain largely overlooked in post-secondary research. Addressing this gap is critical to developing tailored supports that can mitigate academic and systemic stressors that undermine both student well-being and professional sustainability.

Our study examines the significant mental health challenges nine CYC students face

and reveals their resilience and creativity to overcome these obstacles while navigating post-secondary studies (PSE) at a polytechnic in Ontario. By amplifying student voices as co-researchers and centring their lived experiences, this study utilizes photovoice to shed light on the perspectives of post-secondary students and their mental health, offering valuable learning and insight for improving institutional support and fostering student well-being. Serving as co-researchers, student participants captured the barriers they experienced and the resilience they cultivated through photos and journal reflections, naming how the natural world, their physical health, and personal resilience strategies contributed to cultivating their sense of joy.

The researchers came together for this project because of our shared concern for students' well-being and interest in identifying ways to better support students' mental health in the post-secondary sector. Katherine, a full-time faculty member with experience teaching in the CYC programs since 2007 and previously known to the co-researchers, contributed her longstanding teaching and professional relationships to the project. Estefania, a scholar-practitioner whose work is grounded in critical theory, centres her work on engaging students in the co-design of mental health programs and services in post-secondary contexts. Together, their combined expertise and commitments shaped the foundation for this collaborative study, which engaged students to co-create knowledge and explore the role of the learning environment in promoting student well-being, resilience, and help-seeking behaviours. Our study contributes to the growing literature on

post-secondary student experiences in Canada by filling a research gap and producing evidence-based research with students on their authentic experiences.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The following section provides a review of the existing literature about post-secondary students in Canada and their experiences of mental health, joy, and resilience. By synthesizing and analyzing relevant studies and empirical findings, this literature review aims to offer insights into the current knowledge base about students' experiences in post-secondary institutions and gaps in mental health service provision.

Learner Mental Health and Well-Being in Post-Secondary Education

In Canada, over 2.8 million full-time equivalent students were enrolled in post-secondary institutions in 2023, with about one-third in colleges and two-thirds in universities (Usher, 2025). While pursuing their educational goals, many students face academic, financial, social, and psychological challenges that affect their mental health and create barriers to program completion (Ketchen Lipson et al., 2022; Salimi et al., 2021). Students are also managing diverse responsibilities that affect their academic progression (King et al., 2022). Learners juggle roles in employment, caregiving, volunteering, and leadership, which can strain their well-being and academic performance. For instance, Reigada et al. (2023) highlight how these competing priorities create added challenges for students navigating academic, personal, and professional demands.

The prevalence of mental health challenges among post-secondary students has escalated in recent years. In Canada, the American College Health Association reported increased rates of psychological distress and formal mental illness diagnoses across campuses, with women exhibiting higher stress levels than men (Linden et al., 2021). Ontario-specific data rein-

force this trend, with 95% of students accessing mental health services reporting overwhelming stress, alongside high rates of anxiety (83.7%) and depression (86%; Moghimi et al., 2023). Comparable patterns have been observed in the United States, where 39.4% of students engaged in counselling and 34.4% accessed psychological services within the last year, in addition to citing financial (49.9%) and academic (49.2%) pressures as significant sources of strain (American College Health Association, 2024). Despite this demonstrated need, barriers like stigma, wait times, and cost complicate access to care, while academic stress remains a leading contributor to student distress (Linden et al., 2022). Stigma and feelings of burden were identified as key deterrents to help-seeking behaviour across student populations and were particularly pronounced among first-generation students (Begum et al., 2024).

Child and Youth Care students in post-secondary education often face unique challenges that impact their mental health and well-being. These programs attract diverse learners, including mature students, first-generation college attendees, and those with lived experience in care systems—groups that are at increased risk of mental health concerns (Richardson et al., 2022; Thaivalappil et al., 2023). While many enter PSE with a strong commitment to social justice, this can heighten sensitivity to systemic inequities and increase vulnerability to emotional exhaustion and vicarious trauma (Gharabaghi & Charles, 2020). The relational and reflective nature of CYC education, which draws heavily on personal experience, can further intensify emotional exposure (Bellefeuille & Ricks, 2010). These realities underscore the need for responsive, tailored mental health supports that address the specific pressures CYC students face in post-secondary contexts.

Experiences of Resilience and Joy Among Post-Secondary Learners

Resilience, the ability to manage stress by drawing on past experiences and support networks, is intricately linked to mental wellness, self-efficacy, and compassion (Kotera et al., 2022).

Post-secondary institutions are uniquely positioned to foster resilience and promote mental well-being through intentional supports (Ketchen Lipson et al., 2022). This is especially vital for students in social service programs like Child and Youth Care, where practitioners are at elevated risk for burnout, secondary stress, and vicarious trauma due to their work with marginalized and trauma-impacted populations (Dewa & Dewa, 2023). Research also highlights a strong connection between resilience and joy; positive emotions help build psychological resources and support recovery from stress (Cohn et al., 2009; Fredrickson, 2001; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004). As Diener et al. (2009) note, this reciprocal relationship enhances long-term well-being. For CYC students, resilience—nurtured through joy—is a key protective factor supporting both academic and personal growth.

Access to Student Services

Student services in Canadian colleges face ongoing challenges in meeting the diverse needs of their populations, particularly due to growing demand and limited resources. Access to mental health support is a major concern, with long wait times, understaffing, and underfunding creating significant barriers (Moghimi et al., 2023). Students may turn to peer support services when professional care is inaccessible (Suresh et al., 2021). Academic supports like advising and tutoring also struggle with high demand and constrained funding, though effective advising is linked to improved outcomes (Cyrenne & Chan, 2022). Financial strain, food insecurity, and complex eligibility requirements further hinder students from accessing needed assistance (Risänen, 2024). Together, these systemic barriers leave many students without adequate support to thrive academically and personally. Addressing these barriers requires student services to take a holistic approach to student success and involves supporting the whole student by implementing systemic and pedagogical changes to address inequities and barriers students face (Baxter Magolda, 2009; King et al., 2022; Pidgeon, 2009). Cox and Strange (2010) suggest that Canadian student services need to adopt

student-centred practices that acknowledge individual student differences, apply resources effectively, and design flexible, integrative services and programs that anticipate student needs.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

College students' identities are complex and interconnected, and their well-being and mental health are influenced by their social and structural environments. To fully understand the impact of their environments on their mental health and well-being, we used the theory of radical healing (French et al., 2020) to frame care as critical to survival and identify students' strategies to move from survival to thriving in college. Examples in higher education where this framework was used include exploration of how survivors heal from violence and racial trauma (Karunaratne, 2023; Quaye et al., 2024). Radical care is rooted in social justice, liberation, Black psychology, and intersectionality to acknowledge the impact of oppression on people's lives and to promote a "multi-systemic approach to wellness" (French et al., 2020, p. 23). It moves away from attributing blame to individuals for their oppression by holding systems accountable and "building the capacity to act upon one's environment in ways that contribute to the common good" (p. 23). This framework offers a strengths-based perspective that acknowledges students' agency to challenge oppressive conditions by drawing from five components: collectivism, critical consciousness, radical hope, strengths and resistance, and cultural authenticity and self-knowledge. French et al. (2020) emphasize the importance of healing over coping since it focuses on identifying the source of trauma and engaging in "collective resistance against that source" (p. 19). The framework's focus on addressing structural inequities resonates with our methodology and photovoice's ability to visually expose and critique societal injustices.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research is a process that encompasses the emergence of inquiries and methodologies, and the collection of data within the participants' environment and the researcher's interpretation of the data's significance (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). We used photovoice (Sutton-Brown, 2014; Wang & Burris, 1997) and focus groups to explore the lived experiences of college students and their well-being and mental health during the fall 2022 semester. We intentionally use the term "co-researchers" when referring to students who participated in the study as an acknowledgement of their role in the study and in their role as co-knowledge producers. This study was made possible through a grant from the Office of Research and Innovation, the Centre for Innovation in Health & Wellness, and Student Wellness and Equitable Learning at Humber Polytechnic.

Study Design

Photovoice is a participant-centred method, which invites participants to document their experiences and co-produce new knowledge about their challenges and strengths (Jehangir et al., 2022, 2024; Sutton-Brown, 2014; Wang, 2003). Participants are co-researchers in the research process and use their own voice and images to narrate their experiences and promote social change for themselves and their communities (Foster-Fishman et al., 2005; Wang & Burris, 1997). Becker et al. (2014) also posit that photovoice is a community-based method that emphasizes the voices of those with lived experiences of phenomena. Photovoice and the subsequent focus groups guided the study and brought together narration and visual representation of co-researchers' lived experiences. The photovoice methodology supported the enactment of the radical healing framework by amplifying marginalized voices and fostering engagement of students impacted by the phenomena. This study received ethical approval from the institution's Research Ethics Board (REB) prior to commencement of the study.

Participant Recruitment

For this study, we applied purposive sampling and criterion-based selection (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) to recruit collaborators from the Child and Youth Care (CYC) programs at a large polytechnic in Ontario, Canada. Recruitment for the study was conducted through CYC courses and through the institution's internal communications and social media accounts. To participate, students were required to attend a training session, collect up to 10 photos, write a journal reflection for the photos, and attend one of three focus groups. Initially, 63 students signed up for the study and 30 eligible students participated in the training. Fifteen students withdrew or did not respond after attending the training. Nine co-researchers completed the photo collection, journals, and attended one focus group session. Students who did not submit photos were removed from the study.

Data Collection

As part of the data collection, co-researchers were trained on photovoice, either in a small group or individually by the research assistant (RA) or one of the co-principal investigators (PIs). The training provided participants with the study objectives, instructions on the ethics of care for capturing photos (such as limiting photos to objects, places, and things), and prompts for taking photos and writing reflections using an adapted version of the SHOWED technique for the study (Skoy & Werremeyer, 2019). The guiding prompts included describing the photo (e.g., What is Shown here? What is Happening here?); reflecting on how the photo related to their well-being, mental health, agency, sense of purpose, and happiness as a student (e.g., How does this relate to Our (your) lives? Why are things this way?); and finally, how to address the barrier or challenge to cultivate student well-being and joy (e.g., How could this image Educate people? What should be Done about this?). Co-researchers participated in one of three focus groups which were recorded and transcribed. All co-researchers received a list of campus resources and mental health supports,

weekly check-in emails from the RA, and were provided with an \$80 gift card and co-curricular record (CCR) credit for their participation. Participation in the study was optional and was not linked to any course assessments or evaluation in any present or future courses. Co-researchers were given the option to select how they wanted to be referred to in the study, or a pseudonym was provided to them.

DATA ANALYSIS

Qualitative data analysis involves the systematic examination and interpretation of non-numerical data—such as text, audio, images, or video—to identify patterns, themes, and meanings (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). It is a process of organizing, categorizing, and interpreting qualitative data to generate rich, detailed insights into the underlying phenomena being studied (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). Qualitative data analysis aims to uncover the complexities of human experiences, behaviours, and social interactions, often within the context of specific research questions or theoretical frameworks (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). Researcher memos were recorded after the focus groups and throughout the study, capturing emergent themes, ideas, and thoughts (Jones et al., 2021). We triangulated the data and employed a thematic analysis of the journal reflections, photos, focus group transcripts, and researcher memos using two cycles of coding (Saldaña, 2021). In the first cycle, researchers coded individually using open coding and then came together several times for peer debriefing to compare codes and determine new codes for the second round of coding (axial coding) to finalize the main themes. Our finalized analysis was shared with co-researchers for member-checking and mitigation of bias; one student requested the study highlight the need for individualized support based on unique student needs.

FINDINGS

The findings from this study highlight the profound and multifaceted impacts on students' academic experiences, revealing the challenges, systemic barriers, and sources of resilience that shape their journeys through higher education. Co-researchers' mental health was negatively impacted by systemic inequalities that limited their access to healthy and affordable food options, including experiencing food insecurity. Despite these challenges and barriers, students demonstrated agency and cultivated joy through their connections to the Land, water, and animals, engaging in physical activity, and strengthening their resilience.

Impacts of Mental Health on Academics

The pressures from the academic environment and personal responsibilities left co-researchers feeling overwhelmed, stressed, and anxious, which had a negative impact on their well-being and mental health. Co-researchers expressed perceiving stigma around reaching out to their professors for support and found it difficult to manage the stress and anxiety of their academic demands. As one co-researcher expressed, “my mental health, my well-being coincides with my academics just because if I’m not mentally healthy, then I can’t actually focus on any of my schoolwork nor can I focus on lectures.”

Co-researchers were balancing multiple responsibilities, including employment, academic courses, and placements, which made it challenging to find balance in their lives. Often, they felt overwhelmed with their course requirements and assignments, and they expressed limited flexibility with their course schedule. Li shared that “when I’m mentally exhausted, I can’t focus on school. I don’t have the resources I need to be able to complete my academic work.... I wish I could curl up somewhere and blend in with my surroundings.” These conditions make it easy to deprioritize their self-care and put themselves at the “bottom of the list, an afterthought,” as described by Tami. She goes on to describe the difficulty of balancing multiple roles and responsibilities:

This has been a learning curve as the demands of being a mother, student, and worker; it is easy to put oneself to the side, the bottom of the list, an afterthought.

Assignments due, studying to do, articles to read.

Papers to sign, homework to help with, laundry to do, meals to be made....

At the end of the day, there just wasn't enough time made for me.

Tami's journal reflection was a description she provided for a photograph capturing the shadows of her two children (Figure 1), who kept her grounded and motivated to complete her degree. The difficulty of balancing multiple roles and responsibilities had a negative impact on her mental health and led to a "collapse" and a forced break in her studies. Tami described being in "survival mode" and "losing her priorities, which just spiraled [her] down."

Figure 1
Tami's Photo of Learning, Reflection on Her Multiple Roles as Mother, Student, and Worker



The stress from academic demands, especially around exam period, is a time when students' mental health is negatively impacted. Emma finds the December exam period, coupled with the holidays, to be a difficult time, and it is when her anxiety manifests itself most in her physical spaces, with a messy room. She describes the state of her mental health: "When I let my room get in this messy state, it is usually a representation of how messy my mind feels and how poor my mental health is" (Figure 2). This photo reflects Emma's room, which illustrates "a cyclic pattern of feeling stressed."

Figure 2
Emma's Photo of Her Bedroom, Reflection of Her Mental Health



Navigating Institutional and Systemic Barriers

Our research into the experiences of college students uncovered significant challenges in accessing mental health services, navigating academic curricula, and meeting basic needs, such as food. Students reported the struggle to access mental health care due to limited availability of counselling services, long wait times, and difficulties navigating online platforms. These findings emphasize the critical need for post-secondary institutions to address these systemic gaps and develop targeted interventions to support student well-being.

Barriers to Accessing Student Services

Several collaborators expressed challenges with receiving support from student services, specifically accessible learning services and counselling. Li shared a photo of a withering leaf (Figure 3) and expressed that she felt discouraged from seeking out support after negative experiences and was a forgotten “withering leaf in the background.” She also expressed frustration in attempting to secure accommodations for her anxiety and mental health and felt like her experiences and needs “aren’t as important” because she does not have an official mental health diagnosis. The lack of support makes it “harder to keep on top of school or participate in co-curriculars.” In the focus groups, co-researchers shared experiences with waiting for counselling appointments or leaving class early for an appointment with accessibility services due to limited availability. One co-researcher expressed that “students’ don’t really feel like the supports are actually necessarily fully helpful all the time and that they are hard to access and very confusing.”

Figure 3

Li’s Photo of a Lonely Leaf, Reflection on Feeling Lost and Out of Place



Curriculum Structure

Jem expressed disappointment in the curriculum structure, specifically in the lack of culturally relevant content in her courses and the lack of diverse faculty members. As a Black woman, she describes performing whiteness and code-switching throughout her studies in efforts to fit in. Jem attributes this to the lack of Black-identifying faculty and culturally relevant readings. She expressed, “I feel like there could be a bit more cultural representation in the program, and just in general around campus.” Jem attributes feeling lonely in her program and lacking a sense of belonging on campus. The photo (Figure 4) to represent this experience shows book covers featuring the work of Black writers, a display from an event during Black History Month.

Figure 4

Jem’s Photo of Black Cultural Representation on Campus



Food Insecurity

Jem and Veronica shared stories of having limited access to affordable, healthy, and culturally sustaining food options on campus that they could access during their break times, especially in the evening. Jem took a photo of a closed campus food vendor to illustrate the lack of options on campus. She finds that the line-up and wait times for food are long, which make her late to class. Jem shares, “I had three classes and a break in between...I was incredibly stressed.

I hate being late for class but [am] usually late because the lines are way too long...I feel like the cafeteria just needs more staff in general.” Jem also expressed frustration with the limited healthy options available in the evening: “I have class at 4 p.m. and by 5 p.m., before we get a break, everything is closed around L building. Just the vending machines, which don’t have anything healthy in there.” Quinn mentioned that campus food services lacked inclusivity and shared experiences of harassment from food service workers. She took a picture of the student services pole, which promoted healthy eating. On this, she reflects,

At the top of this pole is a sign that says, “Burger again or should I go for a salad?” which, to me, has offensive and ignorant undertones...I find food, diet, and body image very personal and touchy subjects for many people. Coupled with experiences of having food services staff comment on our bodies, breasts, and choice of food, eating...wellness and campus services which claim to promote health appear to me more performative than anything else.

The students’ union has attempted to address food insecurity on campus by offering free soups. However, Jem tried to access the soup fridge (Figure 5) but found it empty within minutes of seeing the post on social media. She believes that the service should be enhanced to meet the needs of students on campus. There were also co-researchers, like Emma and Lulu, who intentionally made time for meal preparation during the week to eat healthy and support their mental health. As Lulu explains, healthy snacks helped her “avoid sugary, processed food, which can trigger anxiety and depression.”

Figure 5

Jem’s Photo of Empty Food Fridge, Reflection of Food Insecurity on Mental Health



Cultivating Joy and Resilience

Co-researchers demonstrated agency and cultivated joy by engaging in strategies to foster their well-being despite the challenges they faced. These strategies included a connection to the natural world, a focus on physical health, and the application of resilience in various areas of life. Students protected their mental health and felt “re-energized” by connecting to the Land, water, and animals, helping them to reduce their anxiety and better cope with stress.

Connection to the Natural World

Co-researchers (e.g., Quinn, Lulu, Li, Katrina, Emma, and Riley) took study breaks and replenished their spirit by going outside for walks and connecting to the Land, water, and animals. For instance, Quinn shared photos of Lake Ontario and the outdoors, specifically around campus, and said, “Walks around campus have been

central aspects of my routine and self-care intentions. Going down to the water, alone and with friends, is something I regularly enjoy and look forward to.” Katrina, Li, Quinn, and Riley also shared photos of their pets and discussed how their pets support their mental health and help them connect to the Land. Katrina exemplifies this by describing her dog as “protecting her agency” since it allows her to go on long walks or visit the dog park, helping her to socialize with other dog owners and take a break from her studies. These activities provide her with a “sense of happiness” and help her feel “re-energized.”

Physical Health

Co-researchers (e.g., Emma, Tami, Lulu) focused on their physical health to improve their mental health and participated in physical activities on and off campus. Emma shared a photo of her favorite yoga studio, where she goes for classes with her best friend. The classes have a positive effect on her mental health and help to clear her head and refocus on her priorities, including school. For Tami, weight training helped her manage her stress, relieve “some anxiety,” and feel “lighter” and “strong.” She offered a photo of the weight room and described the weights as representing “the world’s weight I feel is on my shoulders. Along with whether I am being a good mother and then the guilt I feel opting out of family activities to get homework done.” Weight training resembles the daily heavy weights she carries and acts as an activity to help her manage her stress. Another co-researcher, Lulu, shared a photo of a ski lift and described the joy she feels when she goes skiing with friends as a reward for finishing the semester.

Self-Advocacy and Resilience

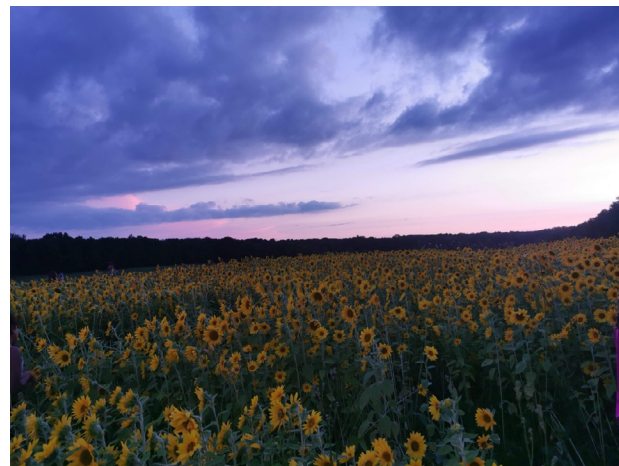
Reaching out for support and practising resilience was a form of self-care for co-researchers to manage their overall well-being and mental health. Co-researchers (e.g., Li, Lulu, Emma, Tami, and Quinn) discussed reaching out for support from professors and receiving extensions, and they expressed gratefulness for “grace days” offered by their department. Grace days allowed students to request up to five days in extensions, which they could use at any time

during the semester, either on one assignment or across multiple assignments. This flexibility allowed them to best manage their priorities, time, and assignment deadlines. Additionally, co-researchers discussed how their educational journeys were unique, and they honoured their own pace and learning from failure. Emma, a mature student who shared a photo of her student account with different semester schedules, shared that she had been pushed out of an earlier program due to her languishing mental health and finances, and was returning to college to pursue a new program. She is practising agency and her sense of purpose by “reframing my previous academic ‘failures’ as learning periods in my life.” This sentiment is also shared by Tami, another mature student, who shared a photo of a vast sunflower field, which symbolized her personal and academic resilience (Figure 6). She expressed,

I try to remind myself of this time when I stood in the field and when I compared myself to my younger peers...I may be an older flower, planted long ago and seasoned more than my peers. Still, it doesn’t mean that I am worth anything less.

Figure 6

Tami’s Photo of Comparison, Reflection of Strong Roots and Resilience



In summary, these findings shed light on the significant challenges that students face as they navigate the intersection of mental health and academic demands. The pressures of balancing coursework, personal responsibilities, and external commitments often lead to feelings of increased stress, anxiety, and overwhelm, compounded by systemic barriers such as limited access to support services, inequitable curricula, and food insecurity. Despite these difficulties, students demonstrated remarkable resilience and personal agency, employing strategies to foster well-being, such as connecting with nature, prioritizing physical health, and advocating for themselves. These findings underscore the urgent need for institutions to prioritize holistic support systems and inclusive practices that address the diverse needs of students, fostering environments where mental health and academic success can co-exist.

DISCUSSION

The findings contribute to the understanding of college students' well-being and mental health, and the strategies students employ to cultivate their resilience and joy despite the challenges within post-secondary environments.

Using the Radical Healing Framework in Post-Secondary Education

The use of the radical healing framework (French et al., 2020) within this study provided a meaningful lens to understand how student co-researchers navigated systemic stressors and cultivated well-being in post-secondary education. Radical healing is a form of resistance against oppressive systems like PSE that may devalue marginalized communities (French et al., 2020). As a framework rooted in collectivism, cultural affirmation, and resistance in the face of systemic oppression, radical healing offers a powerful approach to reimagining how institutions support marginalized students. Studies in student engagement and success can benefit from this framework as it invites institutions to

receive authentic feedback from learners and focus on institutional change to support student success. The photovoice methodology (Becker et al., 2014; Sutton-Brown, 2014; Wang, 2003) aligned well with the empowerment aims of radical healing, enabling students to reclaim narratives and share stories of both adversity and resilience in PSE through images and reflections.

The students' abilities to experience and intentionally seek out joy—even amidst academic and personal stress—reflects the core of radical healing as a practice of resistance and restoration of self. French et al. (2020) emphasize that joy is not merely an emotional state, but a radical act in environments that often devalue or pathologize marginalized identities. Co-researchers Li, Tami, Emma, Quinn, and Lulu described finding strength in natural environments, cultural connections, and peer support, which were not just coping mechanisms; they were expressions of resistance to the pressures of PSE and affirmations of self-worth and community care.

Institutionally, the findings of this study call for post-secondary environments to shift from deficit-based approaches toward those that foster resilience, joy, and culturally affirming care of students. Additionally, faculty play a key role in institutional change by coordinating assignment mapping, engaging in inclusive course design, and embedding student service connections into curricula to normalize and destigmatize help-seeking behaviours.

Involvement of Students in Program Design and Implementation

Involving students in the design and implementation of programs and supports within post-secondary institutions is a critical strategy for fostering mental well-being and academic success. We found that students face immense structural and systemic barriers, yet they use their strengths to challenge the oppressive conditions to move toward their personal and academic goals. Students bring lived expertise that offers valuable insights into the challenges and supports that shape their educational experiences (Kotera et al., 2022). When institutions

engage students, particularly those in social service programs like Child and Youth Care, as co-creators rather than passive recipients of services, they help ensure that initiatives are responsive, inclusive, and relevant. This participatory approach strengthens the effectiveness of programming and reinforces students' sense of agency, belonging, and resilience.

Researchers assert that students who are flourishing in their well-being can offer meaningful perspectives that inform teaching practices and support systems across the institution (Ketchen Lipson et al., 2022; Kotera et al., 2022). Their involvement can help shift institutional cultures toward equity and care, especially when students are invited to collaborate in shaping policies that directly impact their learning and well-being. Co-researchers in our study were highly successful in exercising their resilience and agency, but the responsibility fell to them, not the institution, to make transformative changes in their own lives to thrive as post-secondary students. One possible intervention to build on the strengths of students is for the institution to seek authentic feedback across a variety of areas, allowing students to truly advocate for their needs and exercise their personal agency as programs and services are being created, implemented, or evaluated.

Redesign of Mental Health Service Delivery

Co-researchers in our study expressed the impacts of academic pressures on their mental health, competing roles and responsibilities, long service wait times, and perceived limitations in service quality acted as barriers to seeking mental health support. Additionally, students have limited awareness of services while also feeling overwhelmed by the number of services available (MacDonald et al., 2022). Administrators and practitioners can conduct intentional program redesigns to reduce wait times and address student needs, such as introducing same-day mental health supports and self-registration and online self-booking systems. Researchers have found that peer-to-peer mental health programs and offering culturally affirming and cul-

turally sustaining mental health services, while also increasing staff resources, can lead to increased trust in mental health supports (Cooper et al., 2024). Another intervention that might improve outcomes for students is offering in-person and virtual information sessions throughout the semester to promote student services—particularly mental health services—and to communicate the benefit and value of the services. Institutions can promote initiatives through class presentations, sharing of resources and service hours with faculty and program coordinators, and through social media channels.

Our study found that limited food options, poor scheduling of food service hours, and negative staff interactions adversely affected student mental health. Research confirms these impacts: food insecurity is linked to psychological distress, suicidality, and lower academic performance (Broton et al., 2022; Hesson & Fowler, 2024; Lee et al., 2018; McKay et al., 2025). To address these issues, institutions should invest in campus food programs, offer food vouchers, and work with vendors to improve affordability, while also prioritizing accessible transportation options with student input and feedback. This emphasizes the focus of mental health as holistic and multifaceted.

CONCLUSION

This study highlighted the complex challenges college students face at the intersection of mental health, academic demands, and systemic inequities within post-secondary education. Consistent with prior research (Ketchen Lipson et al., 2022; Salimi et al., 2021), students reported high levels of stress from balancing academic workloads, personal responsibilities, and multiple roles. Structural barriers such as food insecurity, long wait times for mental health services, and difficulties accessing accommodations further compounded these pressures (Broton et al., 2022; Moghimi et al., 2023).

Despite these obstacles, student co-researchers demonstrated resilience and agency through strategies like connecting with nature, prioritizing physical health, and engaging in practices of radical healing (French et al.,

2020). Their experiences reinforce the importance of holistic, culturally responsive support systems that foster joy, well-being, and equity in post-secondary education (Stanton et al., 2024; Thaivalappil et al., 2024). Institutions must prioritize inclusive approaches that empower students to thrive academically and personally.

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