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“The most important thing is to communicate with students”: experiences and voices of Canadian youth during the COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to learn directly from youth about how they navigated and experienced the COVID-19 pandemic response, with a focus on secondary school policies and protocols. Thirty semi-structured one-on-one interviews were conducted with Canadian youth (13–18 years old, 53.3% girls, 46.7% white) and analysed using inductive interpretive description. Youth discussed challenges related to a lack of direct communication and consultation about pandemic-related decisions, the shifts between different school modalities, the loss of extracurricular opportunities, and a need for mental health support, which they connected to adverse impacts on their learning, health, and future opportunities. Participants’ top recommendation for adults was to include youth in decision-making on matters that impact them. To uphold their rights, support healthy development, and ensure more effective policies/protocols, the authentic engagement of youth in decision-making processes and improved communication are necessary and were absent during the pandemic.

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Introduction

The potential unintended consequences of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic and related public health measures on adolescent health and development remain global concerns. To mitigate the spread of severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), governments worldwide implemented several policies, such as restrictions on socializing, mask and vaccine mandates, and the closure of nonessential businesses. Globally, the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the widest reaching and longest school closures in history (UNESCO, 2022); countries enacted varied cycles of full and partial school closures and remote learning strategies (UNESCO, 2022). In Canada, schools first closed in spring 2020 and remained closed for the remainder of the academic year; in the following school year, public debate continued about the return to school and different learning modes (virtual, blended [i. e. part in-person, part virtual], in-person), schedules (e.g. quadesters, shortened lunch/break times), and policies (e.g. vaccine and mask mandates, cancelled extracurricular activities, cohorts). Rising cases in fall 2020 led to discussion on whether to extend school holidays and the potential for another widespread school shutdown (Wong, 2020). Some variations

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occurred across provinces; in British Columbia, masks were not mandated in schools until 3 February 2021, while Quebec required masks in high-traffic areas but not in classrooms, and in Ontario students were required to wear masks in classrooms, hallways, and entrances (Cameron-Blake et al., 2021). By 2021, provinces, and consequently schools, varied in their approach to the fourth wave of the pandemic including whether extracurricular activities and interschool competitions resumed, whether masks were required, and what steps were taken when a student was symptomatic (e.g. isolation of student or if the entire school shifted to virtual learning) (Wong, 2021). Reviews revealed a 'remarkable dearth' of policy-relevant data to guide school decision-making and an urgent need for research on varying school protocols (Public Health Ontario, 2020; Sharma et al., 2020).

Given the psychosocial, cognitive, and physical development that occurs during adolescence, young people may be especially vulnerable to adverse and sustained impacts of the pandemic (Clemens et al., 2020; Fox et al., 2010; Lee, 2020; Loades et al., 2020; Romeo, 2017). Schools are recognized as 'youth development centres' and 'health and wellbeing hubs' (UNICEF Canada, 2021). Beyond academics, schools support the development of a sense of identity, competence, autonomy, and agency; they provide important structure and routine, and opportunities to socialize with peers, for adult mentorship, and to engage in extracurricular activities (Tsujiimoto et al., 2022). Further, schools are a key context for the delivery of public health initiatives and mental health support, and have been identified as playing a vital role in recovery from disasters (Flynn et al., 2022). However, schools can also be a significant source of distress among young people due to academic pressures and/or bullying (Högberg et al., 2021; Valente & Crescenzi-Lanna, 2022).

Systematic reviews and other research on the COVID-19 pandemic response and school closures have identified increased depression, anxiety, fatigue, psychological distress, irritability, and anger in adolescents (Elharake et al., 2022; Guessoum et al., 2020; Panchal et al., 2021; Samji et al., 2022; Sifat et al., 2022), with disproportionate impacts among certain populations (e.g. students who are female, gender diverse, Persons of Colour, or in rural areas) (Gazmararian et al., 2021). Qualitative and mixed methods research has highlighted both positive and negative experiences of school closures (Branquinho et al., 2020; Luthar et al., 2021; Silk et al., 2022). Youth reported concerns about their grades, school workload, their future, family conflict, the loss of milestones and routine, and a lack of space/privacy; however, they also described reduced school pressure and having more time for family, relaxation, and personal development activities (Branquinho et al., 2020; Luthar et al., 2021; Pearcey et al., 2023; Silk et al., 2022).

While the early lockdown period and full school closures saw an upsurge of research, less evidence exists on the prolonged pandemic response. Further understanding of students' experiences of the changes, including cycles of school closures and re-openings and varying policies and protocols, is needed to better prepare for future events. The disruption also provides an opportunity for learning how to improve support for youth health and development in school environments. Using qualitative methods, the current study aimed to learn directly from Canadian youths about how they navigated and experienced the COVID-19 pandemic response, with a focus on school policies and protocols (e.g. learning modes [online, virtual, blended], cohorting models, altered schedules, limited extracurriculars). This approach respects the rights and abilities of young people to interpret their own experiences and recognizes them as people who are knowledgeable and insightful about their lives (UN Commission on Human Rights, 1989).

Methods

Methodologically, this study was guided by an interpretive description (Thorne, 2016). Interpretive description recognizes that human experiences are complex and involve biological and psychosocial factors; and helps to capture not only individuals' subjective experiences but also draws on the broader understandings of phenomena being examined in order to inform practice (Thompson Burdine et al., 2021). It allowed us to examine and create an informative account of various aspects of youths' experiences to inform policy and protocols during and beyond the COVID-19 response and recovery, and potential future pandemics or related events. This study was grounded in social constructivism; it recognizes the multiple social realities of participants based on their unique experiences and the construction of knowledge through the interaction between the researcher and the individual and the interpretation of data by the researcher to create shared understandings (Tamminen & Poucher, 2020).

Participants and recruitment

This study presents findings from the qualitative strand of a larger mixed-methods (qualitative/quantitative) study aimed at exploring the experiences of youth related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Qualitative methods were used for the current study to provide more context and in-depth understanding of diverse youth experiences. The sample included 30 participants from across Canada (Alberta, British Columbia, Ontario, Quebec) who were attending secondary school (e.g. in person, online, hybrid). Participants were purposefully recruited from the aforementioned provinces to be in line with the larger mixed-methods study through an initial social media campaign (i.e. Instagram promoted posts in English and French). To help understand varied youth experiences, we aimed to recruit a diverse sample of young people in terms of province (British Columbia [BC], Alberta [AB], Ontario [ON], and Quebec [QC], as the four largest provinces in Canada by population and given variations in COVID-19 measures), grade level (Grades 8–12/Secondary 2–5), and gender-identity. A follow-up targeted social media campaign was conducted to further diversify the sample (i.e. a specific call for youth identifying as boys or gender diverse). Participants were required to be able to communicate in English or French. Youth who met the inclusion criteria were invited to fill out an online demographics survey and schedule an interview.

Procedure

Semi-structured, one-on-one interviews were used to allow for more in-depth exploration of participant experiences. Interviews allow for longer speaking times for each participant, and the interview is able to use prompts to invite rich detail. This approach also supports participant privacy, including participants feeling safer in sharing their experiences as they do not have to worry about reactions from their peers. Interviews were conducted via Zoom (Zoom Video Communications; a videotelephone software) at a time convenient to participants between June and August 2021. All English interviews were conducted by the first author, and French interviews were conducted by a French-speaking research assistant – both had received training in qualitative methodology and rehearsed the interview before conducting participant interviews. Prior to the interviews, verbal consent was provided by a parent/guardian of each participant on Zoom to the research assistant. All participants provided verbal assent and were encouraged to find a private room to complete the interview. While not required to proceed, all parents/guardians left the room after providing consent. The interviews ranged from 45 min to 1.5 h. Following the interview, participants received a \$25 e-gift card for participating. Ethics approval for this study was obtained from Brock University's research ethics board (REB#20–275).

Instruments

A semi-structured interview guide was co-developed with the COMPASS Youth Ambassador Committee ($n = 10$ youth in secondary schools from ON, AB, BC, and QC) to help ensure questions would be relevant to contemporary youth experiences and would generate rich, meaningful data. The composition of the committee was similar to the participants of the study in relation to province and age range. This committee was purposefully recruited to include diverse representation (e.g. age, gender, race/ethnicity) and met through monthly online meetings to inform all components of the larger mixed-methods study, including methods, interpretation of results, and dissemination. This manuscript was reviewed by a member of this youth committee (co-author SL), and feedback was incorporated into the final version. Given variations in COVID-19 protocols and case counts across geographic regions, and evidence of inequitable impacts of the pandemic (e.g. by socio-economic status and race), the online demographic survey asked participants questions related to their social identity and context (e.g. age, gender identity, grade level, race/ethnicity, province, urbanicity, school modality, and number of school closures) (see [Table 1](#) for sample characteristics).

Youth were then asked open-ended, semi-structured questions about themselves and their daily lives, and their experiences of school closures, re-openings, and safety, including changes to their lifestyle, mental health, and support during the COVID-19 pandemic. They were also asked to look to the future in terms of changes they hope to see and their recommendations for schools, policy makers, and others. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim and interviewers kept notes during the interview. The French transcripts ($n = 4$) were translated by a French-speaking research assistant and reviewed independently by another French-speaking research assistant for accuracy. Demographic categories were collapsed, and ethnically relevant pseudonyms were assigned to protect participant anonymity. Pseudonyms were additionally labelled by province. Participant age was excluded within the pseudonym label to reduce the risk of re-identification.

Data analysis

NVivo 12 software (QSR International, 2018) was used to facilitate analysis. The co-authors (NAR and JG) coded two interview transcripts using open coding to develop an initial coding framework. Coding was conducted inductively with the authors grouping common elements together to form themes. The themes across the dataset were reviewed and synthesized using constant comparative analysis to ensure that the findings supported interpretations and were consistent and plausible to the data (Thorne, 2016). Empirical and disciplinary knowledge on youth rights, adolescent health and development, and the pandemic, further informed the interpretation of constructed themes.

Rigour of study

Methodological credibility was considered according to four criteria (Thorne, 2016). Epistemological integrity was maintained by adopting a social constructivist lens which recognized the multiple and varied meanings that people attribute to their experiences and acknowledging that understandings are co-created by the researcher and participant (Tamminen & Poucher, 2020). Representative credibility was ensured through purposive sampling to include geographically diverse (province, urbanicity) participants varying in age, gender-identity, and race/ethnicity; additionally, data triangulation included gathering quantitative data from demographics questionnaires as well as qualitative data through semi-structured interviews. Analytic logic was maintained through the keeping of analytical notes throughout the analysis process. Interpretive authority was maintained by frequent discussions between the main coders (NAR and JG), the larger team, and critical friends (KAP and VM) to enhance independent scrutiny and stimulate discussion about the findings, acknowledge the researcher role in interpreting the results, and increase our understanding of the phenomenon (Thompson Burdine et al., 2021; McGorry & Mei, 2018). The first author is a West Asian

Table 1. Sample characteristics of Canadian adolescents ($n = 30$).

Demographic Characteristics		N	%
Gender	Girl/Woman	16	53.3%
	Boy/Man	14	46.7%
Age	13–14	4	13.3%
	15–16	13	43.3%
	17–18	13	43.3%
Province	AB	7	23.3%
	BC	7	23.3%
	ON	11	36.7%
	QC	5	16.7%
Urbanicity	Urban	12	40.0%
	Suburban	16	53.3%
	Rural	2	6.7%
Race/ethnicity	BIPOC	16	53.3%
	White	14	46.7%
School modality	In person	15	50.0%
	Blended	5	16.7%
	Virtual	10	33.3%
Number of school closures	1–2	13	43.3%
	3–4	17	56.7%

*BIPOC: Black, Indigenous, People of Colour.

female in her 30s and, a Postdoctoral Research Fellow, who has studied children and youth's physical activity and mental health for seven years. The second author is a white female in her 20s, and a graduate student completing a master's degree studying youth mental health and help-seeking attitudes within Canadian secondary schools. The senior (last) author is a white female in her 40s and an Associate Professor with a research program on youth health and equity, including a focus on school contexts. Authors have backgrounds in qualitative methods and youth engagement. Further, results were interpreted with the COMPASS Youth Ambassador members (including co-author SL), to remain accountable to youth and provide opportunity for perspectives that challenge adult assumptions.

Results

The results encompass four major themes around youths' experiences: 1) (non)communication, lack of voice, and double-standards around pandemic-related protocols, 2) shifting school format and impacts on learning, 3) loss of leisure and organized activities, 4) youths' request for empathy and mental health support. The results section concludes with recommendations from youth to make the pandemic more manageable – with youths' top recommendation being to include youth in decision-making on matters that impact them (see Figure 1). Supplementary files include Table 2 which displays themes and representative quotes and the COREQ reporting criteria. While the youth in this study reflected various socio-geographic positions and reported unique experiences, a consistency among common pandemic-related experiences was clearly observed.

(Non)communication, lack of voice, and double-standards around pandemic-related protocols: '... we had to sit and listen to suggestions without being able to speak'

With the rapid implementation of pandemic-related decisions (i.e. safety protocols, school mode), many students in the study discussed a lack of direct communication with youth themselves, despite the need for familiarity and understanding of these matters to appropriately participate in their schooling. Matthieu (QC) said, 'personally, I did not receive any communications from the school about new measures ... the school did not directly email us the new rules and safety measures.' Namid (BC) also 'wish[ed] that [the school] would have told [the students] a little more' and that 'it

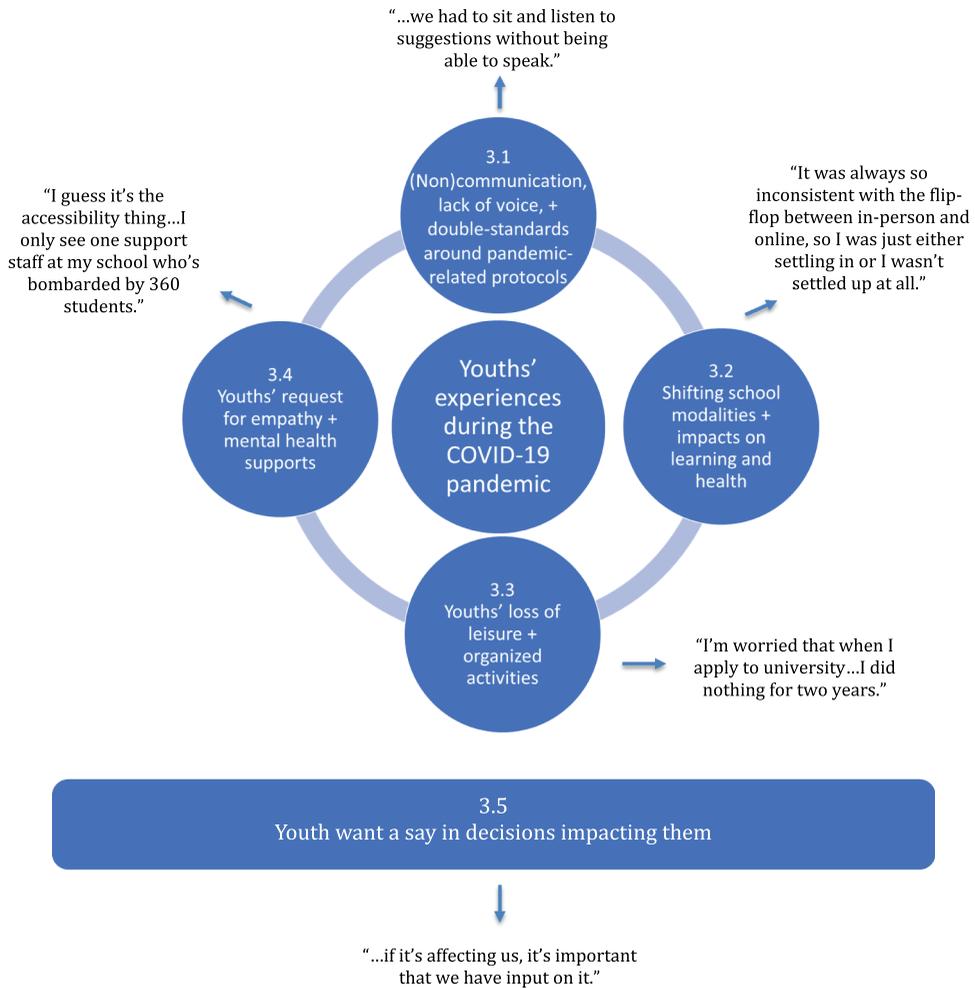


Figure 1. Themes developed from qualitative interviews of Canadian youths on their experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic and recommendations for adults.

would have been nice to get information a little earlier’ in order to ‘be ready to prepare for things.’ Many students noted that their school only communicated directly to their parent(s)/guardian(s). Jeanne (QC) expressed: ‘I would have loved to receive emails about school, the closures ... I always had to ask my parents. Sometimes they don’t read the emails.’ While the majority of students felt they were often bypassed or overlooked by their schools’ communication about pandemic-related measures, there were some students that felt that communication was appropriate. Rebecca (AB) said her school was ‘pretty good at communicating to [them] ... especially because [she’s] in Grade 12 so [they’re] a bit more privy to what’s going on’.

Students felt they never had a chance to voice their thoughts and suggestions on pandemic-related decisions, particularly on the new school formats. Hamza (QC) explained:

For us, youths, the pandemic was the only part of our lives that we could not control. Usually, youths want to control everything and be part of the decision-making, but with COVID, it was different. It was the only time where we had to sit and listen to suggestions without being able to speak. For example, when we had to resume in person, we could not voice our opinions.

While participants generally supported school safety protocols (e.g. mask-wearing, sanitizing), several of them voiced concerns about adult decision-making and actions. Suyin (ON) wished ‘that they would’ve taken it more seriously, not just at the time when there were COVID cases.’ They felt that many measures seemed to only apply to the students, while adult authority figures were not held to the same standard. Diego (AB) explained:

... in the morning before any kids are there, the staff will be walking around without masks on and stuff like that. They put them on when we get there [...] They’ll walk around [for] an hour, talking to each other without their masks on. Then throughout the day, they’ll be really mad at us if we don’t have our masks on.

Some participants expressed confusion about how some safety protocols would protect them, particularly cohorting models. Sam (ON) said students ‘questioned [the protocols] a lot because [the students] still mixed with people not in [their] cohort in the hallways every time [they] switched classes’ and that ‘the buses [were] mixed cohorts ... so that had been a cause of concern.’

In addition to the desire for direct communication and consultation, participants generally felt they were mature enough to make appropriate decisions themselves related to school learning format and safety procedures. Elijah (QC) explained his feelings on returning to school in-person, ‘Yes, I felt really safe, of course, it’s been a long time staying at home, but as for my parents, if I left it to them to decide for me, they’re not going to allow me to leave the house because, of course, I’m their child, they care for me a lot.’ Although most students said they felt safe returning to school and in-person learning was necessary for their academic and personal success, some parents still opted for online learning on their behalf.

Shifting school modalities and impacts on learning and health: ‘It was always so inconsistent with the flip-flop between in-person and online, so I was just either settling in or I wasn’t settled up at all’

Students’ experiences changed over the pandemic response, with the implementation of various school formats, from the initial full closures to virtual and cohorting models (i.e. hybrid/blended models with cohorts alternating in-person and virtual learning, or ‘quadmester’ schedules [four quarters/year with two courses/quarter]). While many students were initially shocked about the school closures and could enjoy the ‘extra week of spring break’ (Li, BC), a substantial shift in learning occurred. Understandably, learning in the early pandemic was ‘a lot more disorganized’ (Tazneen, AB) with ‘plans chang[ing] every week’ (Colette, QC). Namid (BC) described, ‘Sometimes your two Google Meets would overlap, which was not very fun. Sometimes I’d have to have my laptop open and my phone open with two different classes at the same time.’ Nevertheless, students acknowledged the challenges teachers and schools faced, especially at the beginning of the pandemic.

As the pandemic progressed and schools formed plans of return, school modality varied by school board, province, and pandemic restriction level (i.e. virtual format when deemed unsafe to conduct classes in-person). Most students expressed frustration with the changing school modes and highlighted challenges, including increased schoolwork. Over half of the students had experienced three or four school partial closures by the time of the interview, and nearly half expressed concerns about having to alternate between in-person and virtual learning. Wenona (AB) articulated that ‘just as soon as you get used to online school again, we shifted back in-person and then you had to get used to in-person school again. It was horrible’ and that ‘the constant back and forth between online and in-person school has murdered my willingness to want to do work. I have no energy left to do anything. I’m so burnt out, and I do not have a single classmate who isn’t.’

While almost two-thirds of students in the study (63.3%) felt that schools should be open for in-person learning, most students experienced and were dissatisfied with the quadmester system, expressing that it felt ‘very rushed’ (Li, BC). Li explained at the,

very beginning [of the pandemic], it felt a little bit easier simply because there were less things to do ... With that initial mindset, I felt, okay, but now looking at the amount of work I have to complete, it’s a little stressful

because the time constraint is very tight and because of our school system too, the quarter system ... It's definitely a lot more stressful and harder to learn this way because you don't have time to process the information...

Participants agreed that 'a lot of people were unhappy with the quadesters ...' (Amreeta, ON). Students emphasized the challenges of quadesters including the condensed time frame and longer class periods, with experiences differing depending on which courses they were enrolled in. 'They're so draining because you reach a state of burnout halfway through each one ... you can't focus for two and a half hours straight' (Wenona, AB). Mei (BC) explained, 'I was excited, but the first quarter was very bad for me. I think the two courses per 10 weeks is a little bit hard because, depending on the course, your course load could be completely different if you had two academic courses or two electives or something.'

Participants also reported difficulties in connecting with teachers to receive help and worried about their futures as a result. Rebecca (AB) discussed that the 'most annoying thing with the school closures and re-openings for me is that there's less of an easy access to the teachers. Instead of just walking up to them and asking a question, you have to send them a chat message and wait for them to respond...' This sentiment was echoed by other youth, like Li (BC), who voiced,

It's also a lot harder to look for help, I guess, from the teachers because they do have a lot on their hands ... I guess another thing about school now is because of the quarter system, you spend less time with your teacher so you don't really have an opportunity to form the teacher and student relationship that most students would need ...

The challenge of creating and maintaining teacher–student relationships was noted as an issue that could impact obtaining references for university applications. Many students expressed worry of losing academic opportunities as they progressed through secondary school and prepared for post-secondary education or careers.

Feelings of uncertainty around their futures also arose as the pandemic progressed; participants discussed a lack of motivation and guilt about not filling their time 'productively'. Sam (BC) said, 'When you don't feel motivated, you feel bad about not having done more because you have all this time without doing anything else.' Omar (ON) explained, 'I was just happy to get extra days off, but then as it slowly continued, I was noticing my education getting affected as well ... I'm just thinking, "What am I doing with my life?" I could be doing so much and yet I'm just sitting around, wasting my days away. That just really hit me.'

Several students explained that virtual classes left little separation in their school and home environments. Michelle (ON) said,

It just doesn't feel the same because, for me, I like the two different areas, like school's for school, home's for home, but then now everything's in my room ... I know for safety, it's good; but then for my mental health, it's like ... horrible.

While the majority of students discussed the challenges of new school formats, some students felt they had more ownership over their schedules and time. Rani (BC) said the hybrid system meant not attending class every day, 'Then the teacher would just have to give homework or classwork independently. I like that because I can just finish the work according to my own time.' Matthew (AB) explained that while he didn't particularly like coming 'back from isolation and in the span of two days [having] to write three unit tests, a midterm, four quizzes,' he did like being able to tailor his schedule. 'I'll admit I would often just mute their Zoom class and do other class's work. It was really nice because I'm not a fan of learning in a super structured style.'

Youths' loss of leisure and organized activities: "I'm worried that when I apply to university ... I did nothing for two years."

In addition to academics, the pandemic measures resulted in loss of opportunities for leisure and extracurricular activities; this also contributed to several students feeling apprehensive about achieving their future aspirations (e.g. applying to university, health). Amreeta (ON) explained,

I'm in choir and band and those can't run online ... It's just hard to get the same grades I used to, and you have no extracurriculars. I'm worried that when I apply to university, what's it going to look [like]? I did nothing for two years.

Missing milestones (e.g. graduation, school trips) and the inability to engage in artistic, organized, or leisure activities (e.g. school plays, band, sport) led students to express frustration, helplessness, and loss. Wenona (AB) noted that she had completed six years of cheerleading only to have her senior season cancelled; she felt 'helpless a lot because all of these things that [she] love[d] were being cancelled, being postponed...or [she] didn't know if [she] would ever do them again.' Student athletes were sidelined from their athletic pursuits when the pandemic interrupted their sport seasons. Matthew (AB) said, 'Basically, all sports got cancelled which was terrible ... We got 3 games instead of 20.'

As a result of closures and restrictions, most students in this study saw a decline in physical activity. Abigail (ON) explained 'There was no way I could have maintained the same amount of physical activity I was doing before the lockdown. Just because I didn't have the same access to a gym or a pool.' Some students were concerned over how this decreased physical activity would impact their physical and mental health. Rani (BC) said her physical activity 'went way down. I feel like I gained so much weight...I know a lot of people said exercising in quarantine had more time but I didn't. Mine just got worse because everything's on the laptop so I just sit down and study.' Some participants were able to adapt by shifting to online platforms (e.g. Zoom), engaging in physical activity at home, or employing their pets. Christopher (ON) explained that he had '...some weights in [his] basement. [He] did that from time to time and [he] would go on some jogs every once in a while.' Hamza (QC) said that her dog helped her: 'I am motivated to take him for walks and that is one of the reasons why I have not gained weight or have health issues.'

Youths' request for empathy and mental health support: "I guess it's the accessibility thing ... I only see one support staff at my school who's bombarded by 360 students."

Most participants noted a decline in their mental health and experienced challenges accessing support during the pandemic. Youth described feeling 'frustrated', 'angry', 'overwhelmed', 'stressed', 'burnt out', 'hopeless', and 'helpless'. Rebecca (AB) described her experience early in the pandemic: 'I think [the pandemic] just made my mental health a little worse because it's increased my stress and anxiety.' The pandemic lockdown meant many youths were spending more time at home. Dependent on their home situation, some youth found this involuntary home time had a negative impact on their mental health. The close proximity to family sometimes led to misunderstandings and increased tension within the household. Drew (ON) said that during the pandemic he was 'irritated every single day' which would cause 'a domino effect in [his] family' and ended with everyone 'blow[ing] up on each other and that was a pattern.'

Over half of students discussed how school closures limited their access and agency to seek out mental health support. Students expressed feeling ignored when they conveyed their intention to seek mental health support or they lacked the knowledge of how or where to voice concerns. Drew (ON) explained that 'Nobody really helps ... specifically with finding someone to help you out with [mental health problems]. It's tricky. It's not easy to find support.' Others expressed confidentiality concerns with accessing mental health support through school. Mei (BC) explained that 'all the free resources around [her] area are not the best and they're not practicing confidentiality, especially with

school counsellors ... ' Amreeta (ON) echoed the same sentiment, stating that she was 'scared because [she didn't] want the school telling the parents.' Other students highlighted stigma around mental health and limited school staff for mental health support. As Tazneen (AB) expressed 'I guess it's the accessibility thing...I only see one support staff at my school who's bombarded by 360 students.' However, a smaller portion of students felt they were able to voice their concerns to trusted adults (e.g. family, mental health professions, school counsellors and teachers). Jeanne (QC) said 'I speak with my mom because my mom has always given me great advice' and Hai (AB) reported having 'a therapist who' he talks 'to every other week'.

Students identified school workload and pressures as having an adverse impact on their mental health. Zian (BC) explained,

I think something for me that happened this year was I struggled a lot with schoolwork. I got lower grades than what I would normally get, and then I noticed that that had a really big impact on my mental health ... I guess I had associated my grade with my self-worth, and I realized that was negative for me...

Many participants expressed their hope for more empathy for what they and their peers were experiencing during the pandemic, while also understanding that everyone was experiencing challenges. Suyin (ON) described that her school has been 'really hard on [students]' during virtual learning. With the return to in-person school during the first full school year of the pandemic, some youth felt there was an elevated expectation to adapt more readily to the ongoing changes. Drew (ON) explained,

As silly as it is, just ending the email off on acknowledging how hard things are, that would just go a long way just because it feels like I'm working, working, working, all the time with no acknowledgment as to the challenging times ... Last year, people were a lot more understanding. This year people are just like, 'Oh, you're supposed to be used to it by now.'

Other students found their teachers provided extra support. Despite their varying experiences, most students acknowledged the difficulties teachers were experiencing with adapting to pandemic teaching. As Jeanne (QC) noted, 'I know that our teachers became more and more demotivated ... because they had a lot of work to do, and it really showed.'

Youth want a say in decisions impacting them: " ... if it's affecting us, it's important that we have input on it."

When asked about their recommendations for adults, participants communicated to us, first and foremost, that it was important to consult youth and listen to their views on policies, services, and school format decisions – decisions that would directly impact youths' lives. Elijah (QC) explained, 'What I would advise the government and the schools to do is they should have a specific time to speak with students ... We also have our own choices and our own state of mind to think with...' Rebecca reiterated, 'if it's affecting us, it's important that we have input on it.' This sentiment was echoed by most youth. Suyin (ON) expressed,

I find that the adults making a decision and they always say, 'Oh yes, we're doing best for the children.' They don't really ask us what we want...I wished they stop[ped] making decisions on adults' minds, because they are different than what we think.

Some participants discussed society's stereotype of youth being inconsiderate and sometimes reckless. However, youth in this study demonstrated awareness, maturity, and understanding of pandemic-related public health measures. Most students reported wanting to keep certain safety measures after the pandemic such as masking when an individual was sick, practicing hygiene (e.g. hand washing, sanitizing stations), and being more safety conscious. Sam (BC) explained, when asked what she hoped would remain post-pandemic,

Maybe hygiene habits like washing and things, and sort of the awareness of doing things for other people's benefit as well as your own, the whole attitude with mask-wearing and social distancing being that it affects everyone, not just yourself. I guess just that attitude being carried on in other aspects of life...would be cool, I think.

Furthermore, youth discussed wanting accurate information that was more accessible through avenues most used by youth. Youth explained that to reach other youth, it was crucial to communicate information in a format that they used – social media, particularly Instagram, was mentioned as an ideal source for them.

Finally, most students expressed the need for more emphasis on mental health and accessible support for Canadian youth at the school level. Zian (15, BC) explained the need to prioritize mental health, 'I feel like sometimes, you just can't have a bad day or you get punished for having a bad day or for not feeling like yourself ... For me personally, sometimes it feels like it's schoolwork and then mental health. Maybe it should be mental health and then schoolwork.' Others described that it was 'difficult to access their [mental health support staff] office hours' (Tazneen, AB) and mental health resources and support were 'not normalized' and 'not very openly advertised' (Karanveer, ON).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to learn directly from young people about their experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic, with a particular focus on the school context, and to amplify their voices and concerns. Further, our aim was to inform policy and practice and to be better prepared for future similar events. While a sizable literature has explored youth mental health in the early lockdown, this study provides a nuanced understanding of youths' experiences beyond the initial school closure and into the first full school year of the COVID-19 pandemic, with different learning modes, schedules, and safety measures. Youth discussed several challenges, including a lack of direct communication and engagement in decision-making, shifting school modalities and quadmester scheduling, the loss of leisure opportunities and time use, and challenges to accessing appropriate mental health support. As a result, most participants experienced adverse impacts on their learning and mental, physical, and social health, and expressed concerns about their futures. Moving forward, their overwhelming sentiment was that adults should consult and communicate directly with youth on decisions that affect them. Additional recommendations included making accurate information more accessible to youth, having empathy, prioritizing mental health, and improving mental health support. While our sampling strategy accounted for provincial, grade level, and gender differences, we did not observe major differences in youths' experiences. These findings provide insights into how we can better support, communicate, and engage with youth, especially those related to the school environment.

The most consistent theme emergent from youths' experiences of COVID-19 in this study, and less apparent in extant literature than other identified themes, was the lack of direct communication and voice in decision-making. Article 12 in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) states that youth have a right to be provided with the opportunity to express their views and have them taken seriously on matters that directly affect them. Canada ratified the UNCRC in 1991, committing to protecting and promoting children's rights. However, with several policies and protocols implemented at the onset of the pandemic, many youths felt overlooked and lacked an appropriate outlet to voice their opinions, ideas and concerns. Despite their need to know and being among the primary populations impacted by school-related changes, most students reported that schools bypassed them to communicate directly with their parent(s)/guardian(s) and that they were not consulted regarding pandemic-related measures. The lack of communication and consultation conflicted with their autonomy and recognized right to receive relevant information, be heard, and make their own informed decisions. Autonomy is considered an innate psychological need (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and a key task in healthy adolescent development, with lessening dependence on parents and growing independence in thoughts, values, and decision-making (McElhaney et al.,

2009; Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986; Levpušček, 2006). Participants felt they were mature enough to make and inform pandemic-related decisions, were generally supportive of pandemic protective measures, and dismissed stereotypes of youth being inconsiderate or irresponsible. In fact, a desire for altruistic attitudes to remain post-pandemic was reported in reference to safety protocols (e.g. mask wearing and sanitizing when sick) for the protection of the community, as an example. Likewise, in a large sample of Canadian secondary school students, nearly 82% supported wearing masks in indoor public spaces and 68% supported school mask requirements (Patte et al., 2022). To make informed decisions, youth wished for more accessible and accurate information and acknowledged the vast misinformation available online.

In response, the primary recommendation from youths for schools, policy makers, and other adults, was to communicate directly with youth and include them in decision-making processes. Despite increased discussion of the importance and value of youth engagement, and a growing number of youth advisory committees, the voices of young people were for the most part absent in pandemic decision-making. In keeping with the UNCRC Article 12, *UNICEF's Report Card of Child and Youth Well-being* and the *Inspiring Healthy Futures* vision – an urgent pan-Canadian cross-sector call to action to create a healthier and stronger future for children, youth, and families – highlights the importance of ensuring youth remain at the centre of all programs, policies, and research targeting them, through meaningful engagement and inclusion of youth voices (UNICEF Canada, 2021). Other research has pointed to adultist beliefs as a barrier to fully recognizing and incorporating youth voice and resulting in tokenistic interactions with youth (Conner, Ober, & Brown, 2016). Authentic youth engagement leads to the creation of more appropriate and effective policies, programs and services, with direct benefits to the youth themselves (Jacquez et al., 2013; Yogalingam, 2021). Decision-makers in the arenas of education, mental health, and public health should prioritize engaging youth meaningfully and avoid tokenistic participation (Heffernan et al., 2017; Scheve et al., 2006). Young people are knowledgeable and insightful interpreters of their own lives, and the failure to consult them in meaningful ways is not only a violation of their rights, but results in policies that lack relevance because they have been informed by adultist agendas (Perry-Hazan, 2016). Findings from this study suggest that in Canada, for the most part the pandemic response lacked accountability to including youth perspectives, and instead was guided by such an adultist oriented agenda.

The other themes identified in this study largely resemble the experiences of youth found in prior research, which has demonstrated challenges with establishing teacher relationships, loss of routine and opportunities, mixed family experiences, and concern around school workload, grades, and their future (Branquinho et al., 2020; Literat, 2021; Luthar et al., 2021; Pearcey et al., 2023; Samji et al., 2022; Silk et al., 2022). Research has also pointed to increased absenteeism, poorer academic performance, higher failure rates, educational disengagement and fatigue, and feeling highly burdened during the pandemic (Hertz et al., 2022; Pearcey et al., 2023; Ravens-Sieberer et al., 2022; Vaillancourt et al., 2021). Consistent with prior studies, many students reported a reduction in typical school distress during the initial lockdown, but felt overwhelmed by the workload upon the return (Literat, 2021; Patra et al., 2020; Pearcey et al., 2023; Samji et al., 2022; Silk et al., 2022). Experiences of burnout and exhaustion were common. In particular, students highlighted trouble adjusting to repeated shifts between in-person and online learning with additional school closures and re-openings, and dissatisfaction with quadmester scheduling. A minority of students learning in blended modes appreciated having the autonomy to set their own schedule when provided schoolwork to complete at home. However, research has suggested that such positive experiences of online learning primarily occurred early in the pandemic and among youth in families that have the skills, space, and other resources necessary to support learning from home (Pearcey et al., 2023).

Students reported a desire for empathy, flexibility, and understanding from educators; they also had trouble accessing help and establishing relationships with teachers in new learning modes and schedules. Previous research has demonstrated the lack of interaction with teachers to be a key challenge of learning online for many youth (Hertz et al., 2022; Samji et al., 2022). An analysis of youths' TikTok social media posts revealed similar experiences during COVID-19; students sought

greater empathy, support, and authentic connection from teachers (Literat, 2021). While needs to equitably address learning loss post-pandemic are acknowledged, rebuilding school connectedness and student–teacher relationships must come first. As articulated by Vaillancourt et al. (2021), relationships are essential for achieving learning goals and healthy development; schools are important for learning socioemotional skills and fulfill the innate need for belonging. Prioritizing the wellbeing of adults at school is fundamental to these goals (Vaillancourt et al., 2021). As students recognized, the pandemic was challenging for teachers and school staff, who had to rapidly adapt to new learning modes with little direction, while simultaneously enforcing COVID-19 safety protocols and managing the impact on their own health and family (People for Education, 2021).

The results add to evidence of adverse mental health experiences among adolescents during the pandemic and the interruption of both formal and informal mental health supports in the school context (Elharake et al., 2022; Guessoum et al., 2020; Panchal et al., 2021; Samji et al., 2022; Tsujimoto, 2022). Early identification and intervention are critical to prevent the progression to more severe and chronic mental health problems and disorders. Experts point to the need to meet youth where they are, with schools identified as ideal contexts for mental health interventions, given incomparable access to youth. However, despite greater attention and resources devoted to improving school mental health services, this study revealed barriers to accessing support for mental health, including a lack of awareness of how or where to access support, limited staff and high staff-student ratios, and concerns about confidentiality. Previous research has similarly identified individual, social, systematic, and structural barriers to seeking and accessing mental health support among young people, including availability, knowledge, and perceived confidentiality (Radez et al., 2021). There is a continued need for increased mental health resources within and outside of schools. Services must be designed with consideration of adolescent development (e.g. flexible, low barrier, and ‘drop in’ style; youth-centred; multidisciplinary and integrated and coordinated with other organizations) and with meaningful input from young people themselves (Dovey-Pearce et al., 2020; Henderson et al., 2023; McGorry & Mei, 2018).

Strengths and limitations

We used one-on-one interviews with youth to explore and understand their lived experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly focused on school closures and protocols, to inform policy and practice. We were sensitive to youths’ accounts of their experiences including whether they felt their voices were heard during the pandemic; we involved the COMPASS Youth Ambassadors (including SL) to help ensure the interview questions would capture relevant youth experiences and youth perspectives were accounted for in the interpretation of the results. While we aimed to include diverse experiences in the study, the sample included boys and girls from four Canadian provinces and required participants to be fluent in English or French; most lived in a house and were from urban and suburban areas, and more than three-quarters of the sample indicated that their families were ‘as’ or ‘more’ financially comfortable in comparison to their peers. Thus, experiences of youths such as those from gender diverse, rural, and less affluent populations, those that are not fluent in English or French, and students from the provinces and Territories in Canada were not included. Additionally, by participating in the interviews, youth indicated their interest in the study, which may introduce self-selection bias. Youth in the study may have been particularly interested in and differ in their experiences of mental health, school closures and service use; more than half reported experiencing mental health concerns prior to the pandemic and there was a change in service use from before to during the pandemic (from 10% *before* the pandemic to 16.7% reporting accessing formal support *before* and *during* the pandemic). Conducting interviews virtually enabled us to protect safety during the pandemic lockdown and include participants across four Canadian provinces; however, they may also

present limitations, such as in establishing rapport or dealing with poor internet connection. That said, comparisons of online versus in-person interviews with adolescents have found that while virtual interviews took longer and produced fewer words, they produced equivalent data quality (Shapka et al., 2016). The large majority of Canadian youth have access to mobile devices and internet, yet there remains a digital divide in terms of internet quality. All participants were informed regarding confidentiality and encouraged to complete the interview in a private location, and all parents/guardians left the room after providing consent; however, some youth may not have felt fully comfortable sharing their experiences with the interviewer and while at home. The requirement of parental/guardian consent may have also prevented some youth from participating. Given evidence of inequitable impacts of the pandemic from recent research (Guhn et al., 2020; UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2021), further research is needed to speak with youth belonging to equity deserving populations. For instance, youth living in rural locations and disadvantaged neighbourhoods (e.g. no safe outdoor space, inadequate space to live/learn), without appropriate access to technology and internet, and identifying as gender diverse and/or LGBTQ2S+, may report differences in pandemic- and school-related experiences and in the fulfilment of their rights.

Conclusions

With the progression of the pandemic response, and new and shifting school modalities, youth experienced adverse impacts on their learning and their mental, physical, and social health. As a result, many voiced concerns about their future. Communication and meaningful consultation with youth were missing from the conversation regarding the COVID-19 pandemic public health response, particularly related to the school context. To uphold youth rights, support healthy adolescent development, and ensure more relevant and effective policies and protocols, it is important for young people to have their voices heard and taken seriously on matters that impact them. Improved efforts are needed to prioritize, acknowledge, and incorporate youth voices authentically into the decision-making process.

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