



**UNIVERSITY  
OF TURKU**

This is a self-archived – parallel-published version of an original article. This version may differ from the original in pagination and typographic details. When using please cite the original.

AUTHOR	Elina Nikula, Tero Järvinen, Anne Laiho
TITLE	Future School Well-Being: A Qualitative Study on the Imagined Futures of Finnish Youth
YEAR	2024
DOI	10.1080/13676261.2024.2396336
VERSION	Author's Accepted Manuscript
CITATION	Nikula, E., Järvinen, T., & Laiho, A. (2024). Future school well-being: a qualitative study on the imagined futures of Finnish youth. <i>Journal of Youth Studies</i> , 1–17. <a href="https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2024.2396336">https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2024.2396336</a>
LICENSE	CC BY-NC

# Future School Well-Being: A Qualitative Study on the Imagined Futures of Finnish Youth

**Elina Nikula** (Corresponding author),

Department of Education / Centre for Research on Lifelong Learning and Education, University of  
Turku, Turku, Finland,

e-mail: [eljonik@utu.fi](mailto:eljonik@utu.fi)

tel. +358 50 599 2134

postal address: Savikkakatu 4, 20540 Turku, Finland

**Tero Järvinen**

Department of Education / Centre for Research on Lifelong Learning and Education, University of  
Turku, Turku, Finland,

e-mail: [tejuja@utu.fi](mailto:tejuja@utu.fi),

tel.: +358 29 450 3698,

postal address: Assistentinkatu 5, 20014, University of Turku, Finland.

**Anne Laiho**

Department of Education / Centre for Research on Lifelong Learning and Education, University of  
Turku, Turku, Finland,

e-mail [annlai@utu.fi](mailto:annlai@utu.fi),

tel.: +358 29 450 3661,

postal address: Assistentinkatu 5, 20014, University of Turku, Finland.

# Future School Well-Being: A Qualitative Study on the Imagined Futures of Finnish Youth

Supporting the well-being of young people is one of a school's key goals. We examined school well-being from the perspective of young people by asking them what kinds of images they had of school well-being in future schools. Using a qualitative research design to obtain an open and interpretive response, we analysed essays written by Finnish general upper secondary school students (n = 89). With an analysis that utilised Dator's (2009) archetypes of future images, Allardt's (1996) sociological model of well-being, and components of Konu and Rimpelä's (2002) school well-being model, we present a versatile perspective on school well-being via four alternative future images. The students conveyed desirable and threatening factors at both societal and individual levels, revealing tensions in the young people's views and experiences regarding their acceptance or their criticism of the current neoliberal educational policies, with their emphasis on individual responsibility, efficiency, and competition. This study contributes to the literature on young people's school well-being by using a future-oriented approach that involved describing alternative futures. This enables us to explore our understanding of social change and to examine possibilities for future directions in schooling.

*Keywords:* young people, well-being, future images, education, gender, qualitative

## 1. Introduction

This paper explores future images of school well-being among Finnish general upper secondary school students. We investigated how young people see the future of education in terms of well-being, and we examined the factors, both fostering and threatening, that young people associate with well-being at schools in the future. School well-being is a recurring topic of interest in societal discussions, as school life is closely related to the general well-being of young people (OECD, 2019, p. 47). Because supporting the physical, mental, and social well-being of young people is an essential goal of education, school well-being is considered a fundamental part of schooling and teaching (World Health Organization, 2003; Tomé, Almeida, Ramiro, Gaspar and Gaspar de Matos, 2021). School well-being has been widely studied by psychologists as a subjective experience (Salmela-Aro and Tynkkynen, 2012; González-Carrasco, Casas, Malo, Viñas and Dinisman, 2017) and by

educationalists and social scientists, with a focus on the broader community, where the individual is a social actor and a member of the community (Roffey, 2013; Lantela and Lakkala, 2020). However, previous studies have focused more on the present than on the future. While previous research suggests that young people's well-being cannot be defined adequately based on information obtained from adults alone, discussions concerning the future of education often overlook the daily lives and perspectives of young people (Casas, 2011). We aimed to fill this research gap by exploring well-being in schools in the future from the perspectives of the young people themselves.

In addition to being a learning environment, school is a social and cultural environment for youth in which young people need to find their place as part of a community and also as individuals (Paju, 2011). Reportedly, global school closures as part of the social lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic increased the harm done to young people's mental health and well-being (Viner, Russell, Saulle, et al., 2022). School well-being is a critical issue in Finland, since previous studies have raised concerns about Finnish young people's negative perceptions of school well-being (Salmela-Aro and Tynkkynen, 2012; Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, 2021). It is generally accepted that well-being at Finnish schools relates to gender (González-Carrasco et al., 2017; Tobia, Greco, Steca and Marzocchi, 2019; Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, 2021), and at the upper secondary educational level, young women assess their well-being (e.g., life satisfaction, exhaustion due to school-related demands, involvement, and loneliness) more negatively than young men (Salmela-Aro and Tynkkynen, 2012; Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, 2021). Concerned about this, the Finnish government set one of its top objectives as supporting children's and young people's well-being (Finnish Government, 2019). Nevertheless, it remains to be seen what actions will be taken by the schools and municipalities responsible for implementation.

The context of this study is the general upper secondary school. In the period 2014–2022, once they had completed their nine-year compulsory education, more than half of Finnish students proceeded to academically oriented general upper secondary schools, while approximately 40% proceeded to vocational tracks (Statistics Finland, 2023). The general upper secondary school system in Finland was reformed several times in the 2000s; meanwhile, Finnish education policy has been influenced by neoliberal ideology (Rinne, 2021). A common conceptualisation of neoliberalism is that of a political framework which produces a structural change from a welfare state to a competitive state (Larner, 2000). While the welfare state educational thinking that dominated the Finnish education system in the second half of the 20th century aimed to guarantee equal educational opportunities to everyone, regardless of wealth, gender, and social and cultural background (Rinne, 2000), the neoliberal discourse brought the ideas of individual responsibility, efficiency, and competitiveness

into Finnish education policy (Kalalahti, Varjo, and Silvennoinen, 2018). In general upper secondary schools, the student's right and responsibility to decide on the progress of their studies increased in the 1990s with the move to a non-graded system and the enabling of the completion of matriculation examinations in several parts (Järvinen, 2003). Encouraging schools to specialise in their areas of strength and the push to strive for excellence have, in turn, strengthened competition both between schools and among students (Berisha, Rinne, Järvinen, and Kinnari, 2017). The increased significance of the matriculation exam in gaining access to universities has further intensified competition between students and pressurised young people to decide, at an early stage, which subjects they will take for the matriculation exams. The Prime Minister's Office Report 2023 (Kupiainen et al., 2023) confirmed that the demands of their studies and the pressures caused by expectations and the matriculation exams were the primary reasons for the exhaustion experienced by students in general upper secondary schools. On the other hand, the extension of compulsory education and free tuition until the age of 18, implemented in 2021, demonstrates that the old welfare state idea of promoting equal educational opportunities for all, irrespective of their socio-economic background, exists alongside neoliberal ideas.

In this paper, we use the concept of future images to introduce young people's way of thinking, imagining, and planning the future school. Future images are descriptive snapshots and expectations after a specific time (Bell and Mau, 1971, p. 23), and they play an essential role in setting goals and choosing the means to promote them (Rubin and Linturi, 2001). Young people's future images for school well-being reflect views of the future at individual and societal levels (Nikula, Järvinen, and Laiho, 2020). The future images an individual forms are influenced by the personal and external factors—information, interaction, and norms—with which the person is surrounded (Nikula et al., 2020). According to Rubin (2013, p. 40), future images are 'formed from the knowledge and flavoured with imagination', reflecting our values, knowledge, assumptions, needs, fears, desires, and perceptions and interpretations of the present (Rubin and Linturi, 2001). In this way, young people's expectations regarding the future are linked to both past events and their own experiences. The future images of groups and institutions are influenced by the surrounding zeitgeist, culture, politics, and the image of the 'official truth' created by authorities and the media (Nikula et al., 2020).

In this study, we first asked how young people see the future of education in terms of student well-being. Based on previous literature (Salmela-Aro and Tynkkynen, 2012; Tobia et al., 2019; Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, 2021), we assumed that there are gender differences in the views of well-being in future schools. Hence, we were interested in whether young women and men would associate the same or different factors with school well-being. Second, we asked what factors were

highlighted as fostering school well-being in young people's future images and what factors weakened well-being. The following section outlines the theoretical frameworks for school well-being and future images. We then introduce the procedure of the current study, followed by the findings represented as narratives of future images. Finally, we discuss the implications of this study and propose suggestions for further research.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. School well-being

The concept of well-being is widely used but vague in meaning (McLeod and Wright, 2016), and divergent approaches in separate scholarly fields have resulted in multiple concepts, with nuanced differences, being used to discuss the phenomenon. Subjective well-being is an individual-level concept, and in the school context, for example, school satisfaction (Yam, 2022) and school belongingness (Ahmadi, Hassani, and Ahmadi, 2020) are used to explore well-being in psychologically oriented studies. When taking a sociological perspective on school well-being, the focus is on collectivity. Values such as equality, respect for diversity, collaboration, democratic participation in one's community, self-determination, personal growth, health, accountability, transparency, and support for community structures are seen as determinants of well-being in a community (Roffey, 2013; Lantela and Lakkala, 2020). Erik Allardt's (1981, 1996) sociology-based theoretical model of well-being divides well-being into three components: 'having', 'loving', and 'being'. 'Having' includes health, living, environmental, and material conditions; 'loving' refers to relationships with others, social needs, and togetherness; and 'being' concerns the need for personal growth. Subjective well-being is not entirely separate from the sociological perspective, and they overlap. For example, in Maslow's hierarchy of needs, belonging is one of the basic human needs, which is experienced once physiological and safety needs have been met (Maslow, 1943). In Allardt's sociological model, belonging is part of the component 'loving'.

Applying Allardt's model, Konu and Rimpelä (2002) developed a school well-being model (SWM) that combined individual and community perspectives. In this model, the concept of well-being is divided into four categories: 1) school conditions (having), 2) social relationships (loving), 3) means of self-fulfilment (being), and 4) state of health (health). *School conditions* comprise the physical

environment, both inside and outside the school, and they form the context for the school's practices and processes. *Social relationships* refer to the whole array of social contacts in the school environment: student relationships, interactions between teachers and students, staff collaboration, home-school communication, the school's relationship with the surrounding community, and the school's atmosphere. *Means for self-fulfilment* refers to the opportunities for self-realisation offered by the school. Opportunities for positive learning experiences and possibilities for influencing and participating enhance self-fulfilment. Feelings of relevance, equality, encouragement, and respect are essential. This includes access to leisure activities and closeness to nature as a work balancer. *Health status* consists of individuals' physical and mental conditions. Differing from Allardt's division of well-being, Konu and Rimpelä (2002) wanted to include and measure 'health status' as a personal state and therefore, as separate from specific school conditions (having).

Although extensive research (e.g. Tobia et al., 2019; Tomè et al., 2021) has been conducted on school well-being, studies investigating school well-being among adolescents with a future-oriented perspective are scarce. Wu, Gai, and Wang (2020) studied subjective well-being and academic performance among eighth-grade students and recommended cultivating students' well-being by targeting positive feelings towards present life satisfaction and the future. Lantela and Lakkala (2020) explored the school's role in supporting student well-being as perceived by young people, parents, or other caretakers. They highlighted the significance of multi-professional cooperation in supporting young people's school well-being and recommended that youth welfare services be placed in schools. They also outlined the concept of sustainable well-being or working continuously to build the trust and support of young people. This paper has a multidisciplinary approach, and we use the components of Konu and Rimpelä's (2002) classification to conceptualise well-being in future schools, but we include the health dimension within school conditions, represented by 'having' in Allardt's model (1996). Thus, we assessed school well-being using the following dimensions: school conditions (having), social relationships (loving), and means for self-fulfilment (being).

## 2.2. Future images

Future images is a key concept in the field of futures studies, and we used it as the means for approaching young people's views on the future of school. When discussing the 'future', one often assumes it to be the most likely future, a single option that extends from the present (Gidley, 1998). However, in this study, we deal with alternative images of the future. The future is linked to the past,

and our beliefs about the past shape our images of the future (Sardar, 2010). Future images may be conscious, latent, or both, and they might contain contradictory elements that are ‘inconsistent and illogical by nature’ (Rubin, 2013, p. 40). The future is unpredictable, but future outcomes can be influenced (Amara, 1981). Therefore, this study aims to form perceptions of the future by identifying different possible images of the future and utilising them to see alternative futures.

In his pioneering work, *The Image of the Future*, Polak (1973, p. 16–17) introduced two aspects of future images of societies: ‘essence’ and ‘influence’. Essence refers to a predetermined course of events, while influence refers to a person’s opportunity to influence destiny. These aspects can be optimistic or pessimistic, forming four categories (see Kaboli and Tapio, 2018). Dator (2009) conducted several investigations and compressed the range of future images into four discrete images of the future: Continued growth, Collapse, Discipline, and Transform. None of these images is ‘good’ or ‘bad’ and have equal probability (Dator, 2009). *Continued Growth* envisions a growth-oriented, internationally dominant, opportunity-filled, technologically progressive, and liberal society (Bezold, 2009). *Collapse* suggests a situation where the pursuit of continuous growth and the overuse of natural resources lead to the collapse of the current system. However, this future image also contains the potential for a new beginning (Dator, 2017). In the *Discipline*, continuous growth cannot persist; managed shrinkage is needed. Discipline and collapse are images of the future of challenging times (Bezold, 2009). In the image *Transform*, society will undergo a fundamental transformation process driven by the effects of new technologies (Dator, 2009).

Studies of future images relating to young people or young adults have focused either on images concerning their future (Kaboli and Tapio, 2018) or on a specific topic, such as technology (Nikula et al., 2020). Traditionally, young people’s images of their future have revealed the dissonance between visions of personal and global futures: one’s future is seen as more positive than the future of one’s own country or the future of the world (Cook, 2015). This has been explained by the fact that we feel we have more power to influence our own future (Rubin, 2000). In Finland, a 2018 youth barometer looked at young people’s future expectations, revealing their optimism about Finland’s future and the world increased between 2008 and 2016. Likewise, confidence in many societal institutions was strengthened. On the other hand, experiences of uncertainty and insecurity also increased (Pekkarinen and Myllyniemi, 2018). In 2022, young people’s views on resilience and living in a time of uncertainty were studied. Although they estimated that they coped well with difficulties, young women’s and minorities’ assessments of their survival were weaker than those of others (Kivijärvi, 2022). It has been reported that young people are sensitive to envisioning the future and are able to consider the societal factors that affect school life (Nikula et al., 2020). In addition, when

considering the importance of images of the future in understanding social change (Bell and Mau, 1971), an investigation of young people's images of the future is essential because it reveals their beliefs and views of the present, as well as their expectations, hopes, and fears for the future (Rubin and Linturi, 2001).

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Data collection

Participants in this study (N = 89) were 15 to 18 year-old Finnish general upper secondary school students from four different geographical areas. Altogether, 35 study participants stated that they were male, 50 were female, and four were non-binary. The schools were selected for their representation of different areas in Finland. Two schools (one city school and one small-town school) had received a special mandate from the Finnish Ministry of Education (2018) to emphasise particular subjects in their curriculum and to set special criteria for student enrolment. Thus, the students of these schools came from more expansive geographical areas in comparison to the other schools participating in the study. However, in this study, we did not take into account the institutional framework of the schools (meso level).

To convey their thoughts about future schools, the students wrote essays entitled 'The Future School in 2030'. Since future images are complex, and it was unknown beforehand what kind of visualisations the respondents would produce, a qualitative research design was used to obtain open and interpretive data. The essays were collected in late 2017. To set the future image far enough from the present for changes to have occurred but would not be too distant in the future, a point in time approximately 13 years in the future was chosen. The aim was not to predict but to seek potential alternatives and make novel discoveries of the development embedded today. Before gathering the data, the writing assignment for the essay was tested with three young people. After testing, the assignment was as follows:

Write your thoughts freely about what kind of schools there will be 10-15 years in the future. Consider the issue as extensively as possible from different perspectives. What will the general policies and principles be? For example, you can envision what will be studied, in what kind of ways, and with whom. What kind of learning environment will there be? Who will be doing the teaching?

Before gathering data, students and their parents were informed by letter about the purpose of the study and the nature of voluntary participation and were given the researcher's contact information. Study permission from the principals and contact teachers was also received beforehand. Material was gathered on the premises by the first author, making it possible to provide similar instructions to each group. The importance of writing any visions freely was emphasised, as opposed to answering the suggested questions directly. The students wrote the essays anonymously, and only the name of the school, the student's gender, and permission to use the essay as research material were recorded. The essays were written immediately after the instructions were communicated, and about 60 minutes was given to write them. The essays averaged roughly 200 words.

### 3.2. Data analysis

The first author was responsible for the data analysis. Qualitative content analysis was chosen as a hybrid method that approaches the material both inductively and deductively. In qualitative inductive content analysis, categories are derived from the research data, whereas deductive content analysis is based on earlier theory, which means that categorisation utilises previous knowledge (Elo and Kyngäs, 2008). The steps of the analysis were as follows:

- 1. Familiarisation with the material and extraction of original expressions relating to the research questions (inductive orientation)**

The essays were read repeatedly to become familiar with the material, to perform open coding without making assumptions, and to strive for content sensitivity. The essays were loaded, and original expressions were recorded digitally (NVivo).

- 2. Simplifying and coding (inductive orientation)**

Notes and different headings were made to describe all aspects of the content. At this early stage, well-being was found to be a significant theme (young people wrote about school conditions, social relationships, and the means of self-fulfilment in 86 out of 89 essays), and it forms the focus of this article. Data analysis continued with the coding of similar attributes into broader categories (Hennink, Hutter, and Bailey, 2011, pp. 237–247).

- 3. Extracting the data for analysis in the matrix (deductive orientation)**

The next phase involved constructing images of the future using the categories derived from the data. The analysis matrix synthesised Konu and Rimpelä's (2002) SWM and Dator's (2009) four archetypes of future images. In practice, several rounds of coding were performed to identify the correspondence of the categorisation to the research questions and the suitability of the analysis matrix formed, as based on theory. Since the future images in this

study depicted young people's views on the future of school, Allardt's (1981) view of including health status in 'having' was seen as more suitable for this study than Konu and Rimpelä's (2002) model, where health describes a personal state. Thus, extracts related to health status were included within the category of school conditions.

#### **4. Reporting the results**

The data revealed contrasting perspectives towards the future. Most respondents envisioned the school of the future positively, while others expressed negative views and identified threats. The contrasting perspectives are presented in the results as future images (summary in Table 1), which follow the order presented in Dator's (2009) four archetypes of future images: Continued Growth, Collapse, Discipline, and Transform. Since the aim of the data analysis was content sensitivity, the future images formed did not have the same weight. In the analysis, however, it was considered important to include extracts that were portrayed less frequently. The categories given do not describe the views of individual students, but represent more general perceptions of the future as extracted from the data. The essays of individual students contained several contradictory phenomena, a common characteristic among future images (Rubin, 2013).

Table 1. Summary of results: Four images of the future relating to school well-being

<b>Classified elements</b> a combination of Konu and Rimpelä (2002) and Allardt (1981)	<b>I. GROW TO YOUR FULL POTENTIAL</b>	<b>II. ADRIFT</b>	<b>III. FAST TRACK</b>	<b>IV. THRIVE WITH THE SUPPORT OF THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY</b>
<b>School conditions</b>	The environment is pleasant and inviting. Investment in education is high. Students have individual study paths and smaller group sizes. Health promotion is considered in all activities.	The importance of physical schools is minor. Schools are underfunded, and there are more private and fee-based schools. The requirement level is low; students are responsible for their progress; group sizes are enormous. Health promotion is not emphasised.	School buildings remain the same, and learning takes place in classrooms. Funding is disciplined. Traditional schooling. Group sizes are bigger; rules are strict. The use of technology and a decrease in physical activity bring health problems.	The school environment supports health and well-being. Investing in schools is done because equality is valued. Education is free. Projects replace grade-based evaluations.
<b>Social relationships</b>	Teachers' guidance is intense, and support is individual. Interaction is important. Cooperation outside schools is vital. The atmosphere is motivating and innovative.	Less teacher guidance and independent studying are perceived as unfavourable. The schools have no external cooperation. The atmosphere is indifferent.	Guidance from teachers is intense. Cooperation outside school is not brought up, but working life defines the contents studied at school. The atmosphere is competitive.	The role of teachers is minor. Studying is independent and emphasises peer learning and problem-solving. Studying is practical, and visits outside the school are made. The atmosphere is interactive and open.
<b>Means for self-fulfilment</b>	Self-fulfilment and equality are essential. Freedom of choice is high. The student is respected as an individual, and there is a positive emphasis on individuality. Exercising, relaxing, and having fun lift your mood.	Some can experience self-fulfilment when studies are done independently at their own pace, and the responsibility for studies rests with the student. Students must manage without support; individuals are left on their own. Therefore, they might experience increased stress.	Studies are externally controlled and regulated. Students' thoughts are not valued. The needs of society are considered above the goals of the individual. Leisure activities are not relevant, and the goal is to graduate quickly.	Studies progress individually, and students have freedom of choice. Community supports individual growth. Students' opinions are noticed, and they are encouraged to self-reflect. The influence of the student union is strong.

## 4. Four images of the future for school well-being

Well-being in the school of the future is introduced through four qualitatively different images of the future and is illustrated with quotations from the essays. Table 1 presents a summary of the future images formed. In the following sections, the future images are described narratively, and they concentrate on school conditions, social relationships, and the means for self-fulfilment. The future images created are named as follows: 1) Grow to your full potential, 2) Adrift, 3) Fast track, and 4) Thrive with the support of the school community.

### 4.1. Image 1: Grow to your full potential (inspired by Dator's 'Continued Growth')

In the image 'Grow to your full potential', school conditions have been developed to support students' creativity, concentration, and teamwork. Studying is full of opportunities, and society invests in education. Students can use the latest technologies to develop a broad range of skills, and multidisciplinary approaches have increased. Exercise and other stress-relieving activities boost mood and aid in coping.

*"The classroom, in general, will be as innovative as possible and motivate the student." (male 1)*

Social relationships are essential. Teachers understand students and their learning styles. Evening chats about homework between students and teachers have increased. Lessons emphasise discussion, making learning enjoyable. There is a high level of cooperation between schools and working life. This helps the students to acquire the necessary skills for their lives.

*"In 10-15 years, I would like to see schools cooperate more with each other and with other things, such as employers." (female 42)*

*"...new different teaching methods that can be better applied to suit individuals." (female 24)*

A personalised school path promotes self-fulfilment; education is independent and tailored to the individual. Students study only those subjects that interest them. Attention to talented students has increased, and they can progress faster. The future is planned with the student, and teachers help with study methods, not just content. Also, assessments are adapted to each student individually. Expressing one's views is encouraged, and the freedom to create things oneself is crucial.

*"I want young people to have opportunities even though not everyone is the same" (male 13)*

*"In the future, education will be independent and tailored to the individual. Everyone would be able to study the way they learn best." (female 8)*

#### 4.2. Image 2: Adrift (inspired by Dator's 'Collapse')

In the image 'Adrift', the number of school buildings has decreased, and schools themselves are less often attended. The government underfunds the schools. There are more private schools, and public schools have become fee-based, meaning not everyone can receive the education they wish. Responsibility for progressing in one's studies is transferred to the student. Education has been relegated to a minor role in society. Finland's education level is declining because the requirement level is low. The duration of education has been shortened. Study groups are formed as homogeneous groups according to the results of tests.

*"Money will change our schools. ... when the state becomes indebted... then the school can become fee-based..." (male 35)*

Face-to-face communication is a minor facet of social relationships. One studies independently, and there is less guidance from teachers. This is mainly perceived as unfavourable. The atmosphere towards adolescents is indifferent.

*"...the classes remain large, and there are not necessarily certain age groups. Students may be placed in order of merit by class. For example, the students with the best results are in one category, and those with the worst results are in another. Access to schools will probably become more difficult, and competition for places will increase." (female 3)*

Students are primarily responsible for studying and making progress, and they progress at their own pace. Because of this, some young people are exhausted and stressed.

*"Studying is also more likely to become more independent. ...We are increasingly responsible." (female 2)*

#### 4.3. Image 3: Fast track (inspired by Dator's 'Discipline')

In the image 'Fast track', school conditions have remained mostly unchanged by 2030. As before, studying occurs in classrooms, schools have strict rules, and class groups have grown. Health is not the highest priority. Thus, exercising decreases, while the use of technology increases health risks.

*"The rules would certainly be stricter." (female 16)*

*"Constantly sitting at the computer causes health problems." (female 5)*

Students go to school every day, and teachers still guide teaching. Competition between students has increased, and there are greater demands on them. Students are constantly tested, which is difficult

because they must always be at their best. Society strives to get more employees into working life, so the starting age of school has been lowered to expedite graduation into professions.

*“Continuous testing is heavy; we only look at the goal and not at all the journey to the goal...”*

*(male 12)*

*“School distracts the mind and forces children to think in one way.” (male 33)*

The content of the curriculum is externally controlled and regulated. Education is strongly linked to the needs of working life and the economy. The freedom of self-fulfilment is diminished, and students are more depressed:

*“But I am sure that they are trying to make us adults faster and faster and more and more is demanded of us because we are the future, and we cannot lose to the futures of other countries.*

*... as much information as possible is forced upon us. ...we get information but do not get to use our skills in any way, even if this is desirable.” (male 15)*

#### 4.4. Image 4: Thrive with the support of the school community (inspired by Dator’s ‘Transform’)

In the image ‘Thrive with the support of the school community’, the school environment is bright, spacious, and close to nature. Health effects are considered in the school environment. Traditional scheduling has changed: there is exercise during breaks, and school starts later in the morning. There are also evening classes, and students can take voluntary courses that interest them. Furthermore, the school provides verbal feedback instead of grades.

*“Joint free-form projects are becoming more common... Themes that are current or related to the teaching of the subject can be studied with a joint project of a larger group”. (non-binary 4)*

*“I hope natural light and nature, in general, will be used more in the future.” (female 25)*

The teacher’s role in learning has lessened, and peer support among students is essential, both of which are perceived as positive. Lessons are also held outside the school, and schools cooperate more abroad. Excursions are made from the school, and joint free-form projects are implemented. The school’s atmosphere is open and positive. Learning is interactive, group sizes are small, and students are allowed to study freely. Tolerance and increasing equality are essential values.

*“The importance of peer support between students is increasing, and not all lessons require a teacher.” (male 28)*

*“I believe that schools will become more international and that schools will cooperate even more abroad.” (female 6)*

The student progresses in their studies at their own pace. Studying is more independent and practical. Instead of subjects, the school fosters problem-solving and phenomenon learning. Students' opinions are taken into account actively, and the influence of the student union is strong. Exams have been eliminated, or at least reduced, because grades do not reveal actual competence. They have been replaced with projects. Matriculation examinations have been abandoned. The value of theoretical studies in general upper secondary school has decreased, and practicality is appreciated. Also, vocational education has become more valued.

*“In schools, it would also be important to teach how to cope with, reduce and avoid future risks, e.g., the rise of the sea level due to global warming or the increase in hunger and the emphasis on extreme natural phenomena. The things to be taught should also be practical. Teaching could occur through doing, which is the best way to learn what to do if this happens in real life.” (female 17)*

#### 4.5. Summary of the findings

The first image, ‘Grow to your full potential’, emphasises individuality. Individual success is essential, and school operations have been developed from this perspective. In this case, the threat could be defined as neglecting community well-being. There has been an apparent change in the teacher's role. While the teacher's guidance is central, it is based more on the needs of an individual than the general curriculum. Technological and global development serve individual needs and are viewed positively. As schools play an essential role in society, they receive substantial funding. Social status and individual success are essential for well-being, fostered by social interactions and cooperation.

In the second future image, investment in education is scarce, affecting all the school's activities and, consequently, the well-being of the students. Fee-based studies increase segregation in society and abolish the idea of the welfare state. Teachers play a lesser role in guiding and supporting students, which is perceived as a negative development. Independent studying suits some, but many students feel unsupported and must survive alone. Although self-directedness is a vital skill in society, young people point out that they need support in decision-making, planning, and progressing with their studies. That is why this future image is called ‘Adrift’.

The image ‘Fast Track’ reflects today's public debate concerning competitiveness and the needs of future working life. This debate creates pressure on young people because they feel that they are pawns in society. Limitations involve students' freedom of choice and self-realisation. While the

guiding role of the teacher is intense, it is perceived negatively because the students cannot influence the contents of their studies, resulting in low self-realisation. 'Fast Track' is the least desirable future state.

The fourth image, 'Thrive with the support of the school community', emphasises togetherness as the custodian of well-being. The school's close-to-nature operating environment also supports community spirit and individual well-being. The teacher's role is weak, but this is viewed as positive because mutual support is vital for the students. The changes that have taken place most involve the ideology of education, the structures of the school, and the meaning of the school in society. The importance of general upper secondary school, with its theoretical studies as preparation for university education, is decreasing, and more practical vocational training is becoming more critical. Also, competition, testing with exams, and comparing students have decreased.

## 5. Discussion

This study explored the future images of school well-being among Finnish general upper secondary school students. First, we asked how these young people saw the future of education in terms of well-being and whether there were gender differences. Second, we asked what factors in the young people's future images were highlighted as fostering well-being of the young people in school and what factors weakened it. The four alternative future images give perspectives on school well-being through school conditions, social relationships, and means for self-fulfilment. While we are aware of the limitations related to the generalizability of qualitative research and the limitation of the focus group to general upper secondary school students, the formed future images provide interesting results that provoke thought for further discussion.

The study showed that young people's future images were heterogenous and complex. Their insights targeted different aspects of school well-being, revealing both optimistic and pessimistic views. Perhaps the most interesting discovery was the tension experienced between the emphasis on individuality and communality. The first and fourth future images were both optimistic (see Polak, 1973) and desirable visions, and they conveyed strong confidence in the future and one's ability to impact change. However, the positive image of the future in 'Grow to your full potential' is based on individuality, while well-being in 'Thrive with the support of the school community' is built on

community, reflecting the values of community well-being such as cooperation, democratic participation, and a sense of relatedness (Roffey, 2013).

In contrast, the second and third future images identified threats: increased inequality due to the privatisation of fee-based schools, societal pressures, and the fear of being left without support for development and learning. These reflect a view of deteriorating well-being at school and the pessimistic attitude that young people cannot influence things themselves (see Polak, 1973). It also seems that some young people find it difficult to identify with the future image depicted by society and the media: offering education as a tool for competitiveness and economic development. While the factors that described the first future image—*independence, individualism, and individual responsibility*—reflected neoliberal rhetorics (Silvennoinen, Kalalahti, and Varjo, 2016), the second and third images challenged the prevailing notions maintained by neoliberal discourse. The young people criticised the narrow view of the future offered to them in which they had no space or time to dream or to search for their own paths.

Another finding that related to the tension between individuality and collectivity was the changed role of the teacher and differences among the participants concerning the amount of guidance that students should receive from teachers and the extent of the independence that should be granted to future students. Some felt that teachers should remain to guide studies and support the individual's personal growth, and some even experienced anxiety about being alone with their studies. In contrast, some found it reasonable that the teacher's role as an authority responsible for defining studies is weakening and that students can define their interests. However, the freedom to plan one's studies requires responsibility and initiative. For some young people, this responsibility seems too big to bear alone, and they want adults to guide and support them in difficult situations. These findings suggest that young people need support and appreciation to find their strengths. The traditional role of the Finnish general upper secondary school teacher as an expert in their subject area seems to have changed, and the results can be interpreted as illustrating the importance of student-teacher interaction and, through that, guiding the studies. Support from family, friends, and neighbours is reportedly essential for young people's well-being (Runarsdottir and Vilhjalmsón, 2019). We suggest that support can also occur at the level of the whole school community in line with self-determination theory (Deci, Vallerand Pelletier and Ryan, 1991), which identifies as vital, alongside individual competence and autonomy, a sense of community and relatedness to others. We concluded that individuality and communality are not opposing values at school, but operate in parallel and are mutually supportive in terms of well-being. According to the desired future image, constant effort

must be made to ensure that young people in school feel recognised, included, and valued, especially when so many uncertainties characterise the everyday life of today's youth.

Contrary to expectations, the images of the future in this study were not related to gender. However, we recognise that the gender perspective, which involves viewing young women and men as separate groups, may also maintain existing hierarchies and essential understandings of gender. Differences within gender groups may be greater than differences between groups. With some reservation, we can speculate that gender is not an emerging factor in future images because it is thought that schools treat students equally. In Nordic countries, gender equality has long been a central political value (Borchorst and Siim, 2008). Furthermore, our typical discourse emphasises that 'we are already gender equal'. However, education, including its practices, processes, and outcomes, is still gendered (Lahelma, 2023). A possible explanation for this could be that gender is now included among the principles of diversity: it is just one personal trait, among others (Kantola, 2014). The assignment used was loosely defined and did not directly target personal experiences or factors related to well-being. Gender differences may have emerged had a different method been used. Further studies regarding the role of gender would be worthwhile.

As society changes, school organisations follow that change, although in context-specific ways. However, these changes do not automatically achieve a promising future for education. Reforming education requires the planning of future work, and improvements should be broadened to include social, economic, health, and educational policies and practices (Perry, McSporrán, and Whipp, 2024). But there is a risk that we will settle for an inward-looking conversation. The contribution of this research has been to confirm that the perspectives of young people cannot be ignored in future work. Education is a dominant institution in the creation of young people's identities, and schools can promote student well-being. Young people can contribute a profound vision for the development of schools: their views observe both societal and global perspectives and emphasise education's deeper perspective on humanity. Education cannot only be developed to meet working life needs, but ethical choices, empathy, and socioemotional skills must be included as central in the discussion. Based on our results, schools that promote well-being should be spaces which support communality, social interaction, and inclusion while, at the same time, providing space for individuality. Attention to individuality means freedom to choose one's studies, the method of study, and how one receives teacher support. Challenging neoliberal discourse in future images is a reminder of a point stressed by Hansen, Säntti, and Saari (2021): at its best, school provides an opportunity for students to break

away from the demands of family and society and to find the space and time to develop their personal and social potential.

In this study, we present a new perspective on school well-being using a futures approach, but the study is limited by the possible effects of the method used. Even though the essays were rich and broad, our methodological approach of using essays as data may have restricted some young people from fully expressing their thoughts. In addition, a different data analysis method could have brought out different aspects. Further work is needed to fully understand the implications of the school's role as an institution affecting young people's well-being. It should be noted that the respondents' future images were gathered before the COVID-19 pandemic. However, we have indications that the pandemic years have continued to emphasise the importance of school well-being (Viner et al., 2022). The selective application process employed by the two specialised schools included limits any investigation into regional differences in the present research. It would be interesting to explore whether there is regional polarisation or equality in education in relation to well-being. The participants were students from general upper secondary schools, and their future images of schools therefore reflected that context. Further studies carried out with adolescents, for example from vocational schools, might produce divergent views.

## References

- Ahmadi, S., Hassani, M., & Ahmadi, F. (2020). Student- and school-level factors related to school belongingness among high school students. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth, 25*(1), 741–752.
- Allardt, E. (1981). Experiences from the Comparative Scandinavian Welfare Study, with a bibliography of the project. *European Journal of Political Research, 9*(1), 101–111.
- Allardt, E. (1996). Hyvinvointitutkimus ja elämänpolitiikka [Welfare research and life policy]. *Janus, 4*(3), 224–241.
- Amara, R. (1981). The futures field: Searching for definitions and boundaries. *The Futurist, 15*(1), 25–29.
- Bell, W., & Mau, J. A. (1971). Images of the future: Theory and research strategies. In W. Bell (Ed.), *The sociology of the future: Theory, cases and annotated bibliography* (pp. 6–44). Russell Sage.
- Berisha, A-K, Rinne, R., Järvinen, T., & Kinnari, H. (2017). Cultural capital, equality and diversifying education. In K. Kantasalmi & G. Holm (Eds.), *The state, schooling and identity: education dialogues with/in the global south* (pp. 149–172). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bezold, C. (2009). Jim Dator's alternative futures and the path to IAF's aspirational futures. *Journal of Futures Studies, 14*(2), 123–134.
- Borchorst, A., & Siim, B. (2008). Woman-friendly policies and state feminism: Theorizing Scandinavian gender equality. *Feminist Theory, 9*(2), 207–224.
- Casas, F. (2011). Subjective social indicators and child and adolescent well-being. *Child Indicators Research, 4*(4), 555–575.
- Cook, J. (2015). Young adults' hopes for the long-term future: From re-enchantment with technology to faith in humanity. *Journal of Youth Studies, 19*(4), 517–532.
- Dator, J. (2009). Alternative futures at the Manoa School. *Journal of Futures Studies, 14*(2), 1–18.
- Dator, J. (2017). Why gaming, why alternative futures. *Journal of Futures Studies, 22*, 75–80.
- Deci, E. L., Vallerand, R. J., Pelletier, L. G., & Ryan, R. M. (1991). Motivation and education: The self-determination perspective. *Educational Psychologist, 26*(3 & 4), 325–346.
- Elo, S., & Kyngäs, H. (2008). The qualitative content analysis process. *Journal of Advanced Nursing, 62*, 107–115.
- Finnish Government. (2019). *Finland promotes competence, education, culture, and innovation*. Government programme. <https://valtioneuvosto.fi/en/rinne/government-programme/finland-that-promotes-competence-education-culture-and-innovation>

- Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare. (2021). *School health survey 2019 and 2021*. Available in Finnish:  
[https://sampo.thl.fi/pivot/prod/fi/ktk/ktk1/summary\\_perustulokset2?alue\\_0=600836&mittarit\\_0=199594&mittarit\\_1=199900&mittarit\\_2=199256&vuosi\\_0=v2019&kouluaste\\_0=161123#](https://sampo.thl.fi/pivot/prod/fi/ktk/ktk1/summary_perustulokset2?alue_0=600836&mittarit_0=199594&mittarit_1=199900&mittarit_2=199256&vuosi_0=v2019&kouluaste_0=161123#)
- Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture. (2018). *Act 714/2018, §6. General upper secondary school act*. 10.8.2018/714. Available in Finnish:  
<https://www.finlex.fi/fi/laki/ajantasa/2018/20180714>.
- Gidley, J. M. (1998). Prospective youth visions through imaginative education. *Futures*, 30(5), 395–408.
- González-Carrasco, M., Casas, F., Malo, S., Viñas, F., & Dinisman, T. (2017). Changes with age in subjective well-being through the adolescent years: Differences by gender. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 18, 63–88.
- Hansen, P., Sääntti, J., & Saari, A. (2021), Tulevaisuuskuvat koulutuksen hallintana ja ohjauksena: Koulutuksen vaihtoehtoiset, kerrokselliset ja rinnakkaiset tulevaisuudet [Visions of the future as management and guidance of education: Alternative, layered and parallel futures of education]. *Koulutuksen politiikat: Kasvatussosiologian vuosikirja 3*. Kasvatusalan tutkimuksia, Nro 83, Suomen kasvatustieteellinen seura, Jyväskylä, 283–309.
- Hennink, M., Hutter, I., & Bailey, A. (2011). *Qualitative research methods*. SAGE Publications.
- Järvinen, T. (2003). *Urheilijoita, taiteilijoita ja IB-nuoria. Lukioiden erikoistuminen ja koulukasvatuksen murros* [Athletes, artists and IB youth. The specialization of upper secondary schools and the change in school education]. Nuorisotutkimusverkosto.
- Kaboli, A., & Tapio, P. (2018). How late-modern nomads imagine tomorrow? A Causal Layered Analysis practice to explore the images of the future of young adults. *Futures*, 96, 32–43.
- Kalalahti, M., Varjo, J., & Silvennoinen, H. (2018). Lupaus kilpailukyvästä koulutususkon evankeliumina [The promise of competitiveness as the gospel of educational faith]. In Silvennoinen, H, Kalalahti, M. and Varjo, J. (Eds.) *Koulutuksen lupaukset ja koulutususko* [The promises of education and the belief in education]. Kasvatussosiologian vuosikirja II. Jyväskylä: Suomen kasvatustieteellinen seura. 371–381.
- Kantola, J. (2014). The paradoxical gendered consequences of the EU policy on multiple discrimination: The Nordic case. *European Integration Online Papers*, 18, 1–19.
- Kivijärvi, A. (Ed.). (2022). *Läpi kriisien. Nuorisobarometri 2022* [Through crises. Youth Barometer 2022]. Valtion nuorisoneuvoston julkaisuja. Verkkojulkaisu nro 178. Hansaprint.  
<https://tietoanuorista.fi/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/nuorisobarometri-2022-web.pdf>.
- Konu, A., & Rimpelä, M. (2002). Well-being in schools: a conceptual model. *Health Promotion International*, 17(1), 79–87.
- Kupiainen, S., Rämä, I., Heiskala, L., & Hotulainen, R. (2023). *The reform of higher education student selection through the eyes of general upper secondary schools and students*. Prime

Minister's Office: Publications of the Government's analysis, assessment and research activities 2023:44.

- Lahelma, E. (2023). Controversies and challenges in the history of gender discourses in education in Finland. In M. Thrupp, P. Seppänen, J. Kauko, & S. Kosunen (Eds.), *Finland's famous education system. Unvarnished insights into Finnish schooling* (pp. 257–272). Springer.
- Lantela, L., & Lakkala, S. (2020). The role of comprehensive schools in supporting the well-being of Northern Finnish young people as perceived by the young people, parents and carers. *Education in the North*, 27(1), 125–140.
- Larner, W. (2000). Neo-liberalism: Policy, ideology, governmentality. *Studies in Political Economy*, 63(1), 5–25.
- Maslow, A. H. (1943). A theory of human motivation. *Psychological Review*, 50(4), 370–396.
- McLeod, J., & Wright, K. (2016). What does wellbeing do? An approach to defamiliarize keywords in youth studies. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 19(6), 776–792.
- Nikula, E., Järvinen, T., & Laiho, A. (2020). The contradictory role of technology in Finnish young people's images of future schools. *Young*, 28(5), 465–484.
- OECD. (2019). *PISA 2018: insights and interpretations*. <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/PISA%202018%20Insights%20and%20Interpretations%20FINAL%20PDF.pdf>
- Paju, P. (2011). *Koulua on käytävä. Etnografinen tutkimus koululuokasta sosiaalisena tilana*. [You have to go to school. Ethnographic study of the school classroom as a social space.] Helsinki: Nuorisotutkimusverkosto.
- Pekkarinen, E., & Myllyniemi, S. (2018). *Vaikutusvaltaa Euroopan laidalla. Nuorisobarometri 2018* [Influence on the edge of Europe. Youth Barometer 2018]. Valtion nuorisoneuvoston julkaisuja. Verkkojulkaisu nro 140. [https://tietoanuorista.fi/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/NB\\_2018\\_web.pdf](https://tietoanuorista.fi/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/NB_2018_web.pdf)
- Perry, L. B., McSparran, G., & Whipp, P. R. (2024). Family, school, and community contributions to student outcomes: International perspectives on family, school, and community factors that contribute to students' health, wellbeing, and achievement. In B. Schneider, S. Lamb, & M. Berends (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of sociology of education*. London: SAGE Publications Limited. Print.
- Polak, F. L. (1973). *The image of the future* (E. Boulding, Trans.). Elsevier.
- Rinne, R. (2000). The globalisation of education: Finnish education on the doorstep of the new EU millennium. *Educational Review*, 52(2), 131–142.
- Rinne, R. (2021). The Nordic Social Democratic regime in education colliding with the global neo-liberal regime. In J. B. Krejsler, L. Moos (Eds.), *What works in Nordic school policies? Educational governance research*, vol 15. Springer, Cham.

- Roffey, S. (2013). Inclusive and exclusive belonging – the impact on individual and community well-being. *Educational & Child Psychology, 30*(1), 38–49.
- Rubin, A. (2000). *Growing up in social transition: In search of a late-modern identity*. University of Turku.
- Rubin, A. (2013). Hidden, inconsistent, and influential: Images of the future in changing times. *Futures, 45*, 38–44.
- Rubin, A., & Linturi, H. (2001). Transition in making: The images of the future in education and decision making. *Futures, 33*(3–4), 267–305.
- Runarsdottir, E. M., & Vilhjalmsson, R. (2019). Ethnicity and adolescent well-being in the context of families, friends, and neighborhoods. *Journal of Youth Studies, 22*(10), 1345–1360.
- Salmela-Aro, K., & Tynkkynen, L. (2012). Gendered pathways in school burnout among adolescents. *Journal of Adolescence, 35*(4), 929–939.
- Sardar, Z. (2010). The namesake: Futures; futures studies; futurology; futuristic; foresight—What's in a name? *Futures, 42*(3), 177–184.
- Silvennoinen, H., Kalalahti, M., & Varjo, J. (2016). Globalisaatio, markkinaliberalismi ja koulutuspolitiikan muutos. [Globalization, market liberalism, and educational policy change]. In H. Silvennoinen, M. Kalalahti, & J. Varjo, (Eds.), *Koulutuksen tasa-arvon muuttuvat merkitykset*. Kasvatussosiologian vuosikirja 1. [The changing meanings of educational equality. Yearbook of sociology of education 1]. Jyväskylä: Suomen kasvatustieteellinen seura FERA. 11–34.
- Statistics Finland. (2023). *Koulutukseen hakeutuminen* [Applying to education]. Official statistics of Finland. Retrieved 11 June 2024, from <https://stat.fi/tilasto/khak>.
- Tobia, V., Greco, A., Steca, P., & Marzocchi, G. M. (2019). Children's wellbeing at school: a multidimensional and multi-informant approach. *Happiness Studies, 20*, 841–861.
- Tomé, G., Almeida, A., Ramiro, L., Gaspar, T., & Gaspar de Matos, M. (2021). Intervention in schools promoting mental health and wellbeing: a systematic review. *Global Journal of Community Psychology Practice, 12*(1), 1–23.
- Viner, R., Russell, S., Saulle, R., et al. (2022). School closures during social lockdown and mental health, health behaviors, and well-being among children and adolescents during the first COVID-19 wave: A systematic review. *JAMA Pediatrics, 176*(4), 400–409.
- World Health Organization. (2003). Creating an environment for emotional and social well-being: An important responsibility of a health promoting and child friendly school. *Information Series on School Health 10*.
- Wu, X., Gai, X., & Wang, W. (2020). Subjective well-being and academic performance among middle schoolers: A two-wave longitudinal study. *Journal of Adolescence, 84*, 11–22.

Yam, F. C. (2022). The relationship between school satisfaction and psychological well-being of secondary school students: The mediating role of happiness at school. *Journal of Teacher Education and Lifelong Learning*, 4(2), 248–262.