

Where You Are

S5 Episode 8 — The Role of Schools in Promoting Protective Factors For Students

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Nathan Ngieng: Our young people have faced greater and more complex issues in their lives, and schools can't provide that space for them to have connection and belonging through direct, authentic relationships with adults.

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Bryn Askwith: This is Where You Are, a podcast that helps families and their children promote their mental health and wellness. I'm Bryn Askwith. Each season, we produce an episode for school professionals.

After all, teachers, administrators, counselors, and school staff spend a lot of time with students, working to promote and support child and youth mental health and well-being. So I'm very happy to have Mari Del Casal to help host this episode with me. Mari, thanks for joining behind the mic on Where You Are today.

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Mari Del Casal: Bryn, great to be recording with you today. For those listening, I work as part of the BC Children's Hospital's Health Promotion and Schools team. Our team works collaboratively to enhance capacity for system-wide changes in school communities to improve student mental health and well-being. One of the key things that's been coming up when we look at the mental health and well-being of children and youth is protective factors.

As the name suggests, these are factors or positive experiences that can protect or buffer youth against mental health challenges and support greater mental well-being. Protective factors can be developed in the environments which children live, grow up, learn, and play, such as the homes, schools, and wider community. Today, we're going to focus on schools.

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Bryn Askwith: So, in this episode, we'll dive further into what we mean by protective factors. We'll zoom in and unpack two specific ones that can promote youth well-being in schools. We'll also offer strategies for school professionals on how to develop youth sense of belonging and supportive relationships with youth at schools and, of course, share resources that school communities can look to. Let's get into that conversation.

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Mari Del Casal: Our first guest today on the podcast is Dr. Hasina Samji. Hasina is an associate professor in the faculty of Health Sciences at SFU and a senior scientist for

population mental health and well-being at the BC Center for Disease Control. Welcome to Where You Are.

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Dr. Hasina Samji: Thanks, Mari. Thanks for having me on the show.

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Mari Del Casal: Hasina, can you please tell us what protective factors are and why they're important?

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Dr. Hasina Samji: I want to start us off in a good way by acknowledging how grateful I am to live and work on the unceded traditional territories of the Coast Salish peoples, including the Kwikwetlem, the Musqueam, the Squamish, Stó:lō and the Tsleil-Waututh First Nations. Some of the protective factors I'm really excited to share with the group today are positive childhood experiences. These are beneficial experiences before the age of 18 that are thought to promote resilience. So some of these are the ability to talk to your family about your feelings, having your family stand by you during difficult times, enjoying participating in your community traditions, feeling a sense of in high school, feeling supported by your peers and your friends, having at least two non-parent adults who take a genuine interest in you and feeling safe and protected by an adult in your home. So some of these protective factors are at the school level, some are at the community level, and some are at the family level.

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Bryn Askwith: Thanks so much, Hasina, for all those points. We'll definitely dive into those a little bit deeper. I want to bring into the conversation another guest also joining us is Nathan Ngieng, deputy superintendent for the Abbotsford School District. Thanks so much, Nathan, for being here.

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Nathan Ngieng: Good morning, Bryn. Thanks for having me.

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Bryn Askwith: Nathan, you just heard Hasina talk about protective factors, and I'm going to zone in on a couple of them here. Sense of belonging in school and supportive relationships that can help support youth well-being in schools, and so what do those two factors look like for you and your schools? Can you offer some examples?

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Nathan Ngieng: I've been in education now for 25 years, and when we look at the success of students in our schools and the outcomes we're trying to achieve, this idea of belonging, connectedness, engagement are key critical pieces to that student experience. One of the pieces that we've really been focused on this year is the area of voice. And so what we've heard from our young people is the ability to have safe spaces, to have caring adults who allow for the

ability to have some real authentic conversations, to hear about their concerns, to hear about what they need in terms of supports in order to thrive in a school environment.

The school environment over the course of the last four or five years has had some real challenging aspects as we made our way through the pandemic, through our flooding here in the Fraser Valley, and just the economic climate and the pressures on families. Our young people have faced greater and more complex issues in their lives, and schools can provide that space for them to have connection and belonging through direct, authentic relationships with adults. So we've been really clear on providing some space for voice to talk about issues that matter for them.

So we've done some work with Hasina around things like extracurricular and hearing from our young people about the impact of having those opportunities and what it means to them in terms of their sense of belonging at school and their ability to thrive. We've also had spaces where, more recently, we did cultural affinity groups, right, and hearing from our young people or BIPOC and the ability to have spaces and to have conversations with adults who are open to and understand some of the issues they're facing.

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Bryn Askwith: Thanks so much for sharing those.

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Mari Del Casal: Our third guest today on the podcast is Silas, a grade 12 student. Thanks for joining us today, Silas.

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Silas: Hi. Yeah, thank you so much for having me. I'm joining us from the traditional unceded territories of the Katzie and Kwikwetlem First Nations. So heichka to my relations in these nations and my wonderful friends there.

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Mari Del Casal: Silas, we heard from both Nathan and Hasina on sense of belonging in school and supportive relationships. But I know youth and adults often have different perspectives on these things. So what does a supportive relationship with a teacher, educator, or other school staff look like for you?

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Silas: I think that it's very important for teachers to realize that there's different levels to this relationship. There's perhaps an adult that's someone who supports you on an academic level or just in the context of the space in which you interact, whether that's your coach, if that is your teacher. And then there are other adults maybe where you know each other on a more personal level, and you're able to go to them for advice, and you're able to connect with them. I think we've seen the shift towards more and more insular family unit-style existences, and we're not living as communities, and so that can be really isolating to youth in those settings because they

don't have those adults out in the community that care for them as a protective factor. So I think one thing we need to get comfortable with for the betterment of our youth is that they need these relationships with other adults in the community, adults that they can trust, that they can go to because if they can't come to you for something, which you can be the best parent in the world, and there will still be things that they don't necessarily want to come to you for, then they need to be able to go to another adult instead of having to figure it out for themselves. So, as I said, there are different levels to this relationship, and maybe teachers are not necessarily having to take all of them that step to be that second adult in the community, but it's good to have many options to choose from when it comes time for them to be like, "Okay, I need to go trust another adult with something because I don't necessarily want to approach my parent with this."

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Mari Del Casal: Thanks, Silas. I do have another question for you. What does it mean to feel like you belong at school or to feel connected to the school?

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Silas: That's a really good question. Thank you. I think that there are two sides to the belonging at the school. There's belonging within the context of your peers, and then there's belonging within the school as a whole, and those can look very different. For myself, I feel definitely I belong within the context of the school as an institution where I have good relationships with my teachers, good relationships with admin, but not necessarily belonging with peers as that's something that's a little more complicated.

I think that it's, unfortunately, a little bit difficult to control whether or not we feel accepted and safe in terms of peers. But one thing that I think would help is vigilance on the part of staff and admin. We're having a lot of incidents relating, unfortunately, to discrimination against trans youth, and it's mostly coming from a very small section of the population, as it often does. And so when there are smaller incidents that don't get paid attention to, then those grow into big things that just don't get reported because there are some things that just you need to report in order for that to be noticed.

But if you don't have that report with the students that yes, you're paying attention, you see their struggles, then they're not going to come to you. And that is one thing I think that admin and teachers can do to promote more belonging for students in their schools, especially marginalized students.

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Mari Del Casal: So let's move on to how schools can develop or foster these protective factors. I'll throw it back to you again, Silas. What are some of those things that you think that schools can do to develop or foster these protective factors?

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Silas: The biggest thing I can think of in the moment is communicating. I think that communication that is fast and effective is one of the best ways to connect with your students and with your community as a whole. Because when we have big problems, and the school or the school district does not necessarily communicate fast enough with the students and with the parents and doesn't open the pathways for dialogue right away, unfortunately, that can lead to other things happening.

Rumors fly, and parents take sides without necessarily knowing the full story. This is something that, unfortunately, can be dangerous to a lot of students. It's good to have that practice already of keeping the channels of dialogue open where students are allowed to ask their teachers, "Hey, what happened here? Why aren't we allowed to do this anymore? Or why is it suddenly not safe to do this anymore? Why did this practice change?" There needs to be able to have that dialogue between admin faculty and students as well as parents.

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Mari Del Casal: Yeah, I definitely hear you that having an open communication with adults in the community is something that's really important for youth in schools. Nathan, how can schools foster a sense of belonging? Are there any strategies or tips you can share with school professionals listening to this?

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Nathan Ngieng: I would say, from my perspective, I feel very fortunate. We've done an incredible amount of work of our local nations here, the Semáth First Nation and Mathxwí First Nation, and really understanding or shifting the perspective from a deficit lens to an abundant lens and really tackling and looking at the system that was built on a colonized approach to moving towards more the colonized approaches. So recognizing the power imbalance that exists in our system. It was designed to do exactly what it was designed to do, which was to replicate and not necessarily allow voices or opportunities to come up in an individualized way. And so one of the pieces certainly I would recommend is our ability to look inward as a system, right. To recognize and hear marginalized voices or the voices of learners who historically have not had voice or agency in our system and our ability as leaders, teachers, administrators, staff in the system to recognize our contribution to that suppression, recognize the colonized approaches. Looking at incorporation of First Peoples Principles of Learning, so this idea that incorporating reflective and reflexive practice at the time of patience that takes honoring history, those are some internal pieces that the adults in the system have to work towards. And to Silas's point, absolutely dialogical approaches ability to have conversations or necessary, but the adults need to be open to some of the really hard things that our young people have been trying to tell us in order to shift the system. I've had an opportunity to connect with many wonderful people in my teaching career, and one of the pieces that has stuck with me was an Elder in the Cowichan school district and an Elder by the name of (inaudible) who recently passed on. But we talked about that inward journey, inward look that's supporting our young people. And he said, "The hardest journey to make is the 12 inches between your head and your heart," and it's really the recognition that this is heart work. We need the adults to recognize that this is a human endeavor, right. That what young people are wanting is

connection. Connection with truly authentic adults who are not going to tokenize their experiences, who are not going to tell them that they know best, right. Again, to move to more decolonizing practices and take the lead of what our indigenous leaders and families have been living by.

And this idea that our young people have the skills and abilities and the gifts, and we should be really celebrating and seeing that. The other example that I'll use most recently, I had a chance to connect with a young person. The experiences that they shared were school can be a really hard and challenging place. And what makes the difference is spaces. "Spaces where I can be myself, where I know that I have adults that care. And the ability to have those spaces supported by caring adults makes all the difference in the world in terms of my sense of belonging, my sense of agency, and my sense of who I am, and the belief that I can achieve the things that I want in my life."

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Mari Del Casal: Thank you. Nathan. Hasina, do you have anything to add?

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Dr. Hasina Samji: I can pick up on threads that Silas and Nathan have brought forward. There are some critical things that we can do collectively. And one is certainly understanding, and this is what we look at through research, is the relationship between student voice and feeling like you're a critical part of your school community, that you're needed, an important part of your school community, is the connection to well-being and to school belonging. And that's something we can see in the data.

I think the other really critical thing to note and building on what Silas was saying about relationships is that if we really want to create this environment where all are welcome and where students can interact with other adults who take a genuine interest in them, we have to create spaces, as Nathan said. So, for instance, more extracurricular activities, more student clubs, nature and outdoor education. That was another one that is really important. Physical activity, movement breaks. So young people need those opportunities to move around.

But we also know that there are limited resources in the system to support these. So what are some creative approaches we can take to include more partnerships in the school community? And really this is thinking about resources that are already in the school, the students. And so one of the really, I think, exciting possibilities is involving students in leading clubs, in mentoring younger students. So I think there's a lot of opportunity within the system and resources within the system that may not be as acknowledged.

And we hear this from our Youth Advisory Council, where students are already doing great work to support younger students and their peers, but we could really build on that and create more of a network of these young leaders. There's this saying that we have to support young people because they're the leaders of tomorrow, but what I've really seen through our Youth Advisory Council and getting to work with young people directly is they're actually the leaders of today.

They already have all of the ingredients that we need to better support young people. And so let's do a better job of creating spaces for young people to work side by side with adults in the system so that when we develop policies and programs, it's not just what we think is going to be helping young people. But when they're co-developed, we really hear from young people directly what are the things that they need to be best supported within our systems.

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Mari Del Casal: You're listening to *Where You Are*. I'm your co-host, Mari Del Casal. To learn more about protective factors for children and youth, including resources that can be helpful to school professionals, visit kelymentalhealth.ca/school-professionals.

Are you a teacher administrator or school staff member? Take some time to share out the Kelty Mental Health Resource Center as a hub for free mental health and substance. Use information and resources for BC families, tell parents and caregivers about our website, podcast, webinars, and more send them to kelymentalhealth.ca.

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Bryn Askwith: One of the things I wanted to circle back to is building supportive relationships between children and youth and school staff. Maybe we can start with Silas. Can you speak a little bit more about that and maybe give one or two examples?

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Silas: Yeah, absolutely. I think that one thing that staff can do and continue to do is to look for opportunities to make students feel welcome and to create community within their classroom, whether that's creating a board on their wall that tells them, "Here are some resources in the community. Here's when they're open. Here's where they're located. This is where you can go if you want to interact with this particular section of the community."

And another thing that I think is really important for educators to do is to advocate really for the students and what they're hearing in the classrooms because we trust our teachers. We tell our teachers, "Hey, we're upset about this, and we don't like the way this is going. We don't like the way that something is run."

And so then the teachers have an opportunity to advocate for the students in situations where student voice is not necessarily already incorporated. And this is a way that I think teachers can really foster belonging in the classroom and create those bonds, create spaces that are safe for all of our students.

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Bryn Askwith: Nathan, anything to add to that?

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Nathan Ngieng: Absolutely. There are some structures that we can support in our schools to really foster that belonging system-wide, right. And so it really is a question of system

transformation. And from my perspective as a district leader, what can I do to support the system? So in our middle schools this year, we brought in a number of our Indigenous youth through two of our middle schools in a meaningful way to talk about impact to structures in our school. Where they ultimately landed was the importance of having, in our case, Indigenous support workers or teachers that they felt that they could connect to.

And they identified the benefit of that and how it made them attend more. And they also identified the challenge when we move those people around as a result of our system and the collective agreement pieces and how that impacted their sense of safety and well-being at school. We just signed our Enhancement Agreements with both Semáth First Nation and Mathxwí. And at that signing, that's the first time we've had students at a signing. They directly influenced what was in the Enhancement Agreement. So the point that they made about don't move adults around that are our trusted adults because it impacts us, made its way into the Enhancement Agreement.

And so the structure of having meaningful conversations, the spaces piece that we talked about, ultimately connect to making kids, students, young people feel connected and that they belong and that they're valued. The other example I'll give is at our secondary. And so through all of our secondary schools, we had about 60 young people come together with trusted adults in their school to investigate and be curious about an inquiry question ranging from how do we improve our sense of well-being at school to how do we create safe spaces?

And over the course of two years, equipping them with some tools to collect information and data and then giving them some opportunity to engage in some conversations over the course of a two-year period where the net result were impactful actions that they directly engaged in, led for, and created. And so that, at the end of the day, created a sense of we can have an impact, and we belong, and we can lead for that change. And at the secondary level, what that meant was a higher level of engagement and more trusting, caring relationships between the young people that were involved in those initiatives and the adults that were supporting them.

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Bryn Askwith: I really like how, through our conversation throughout the podcast, I've noticed the examples that people have shared today. Some are very much at the individual level, some are at that kind of systems level, and some are at that community level. So I'm really grateful to sharing the variety of examples that I think our listeners can really take away as they listen to the podcast.

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Mari Del Casal: Hasina, we've talked a lot about protective factors today, but we often hear about risk factors. Why is it important to focus on building protective factors and not just reducing risk factors?

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Dr. Hasina Samji: We really take a strengths-based approach to our work. And one of the things that really catalyzed my interest in supporting these strengths-based protective factors approach was this study by Bethell and her colleagues looking at these positive childhood experiences. And in that study, what she was able to show was that adults who were called having those protective factors were much less likely to develop anxiety or depression. And to me, this was really groundbreaking. I had spent two decades working with populations of people living with HIV, people who use substances, and I heard so many stories of unaddressed trauma and early life. So combined with that experience and this study, I said, "Well, we can really work earlier in people's life course to support more positive trajectories."

And so schools are this incredible partner. At one of our dialogue sessions that we had, someone stood up and said, "Schools have been traditionally seen as places for academic enrichment and learning, but really schools could really be this place for human development. And it's really thinking about a young person as a whole and all of the things they need and the communities, the wider community that they need to be connected to." And going back to Silas's point about the degree to which we've become so much more insular, the growth of the nuclear family, and we really need to recreate this village around children and schools, think of schools as hubs for human development and community and increasing focus not on just individual-level factors of what individual teachers can do, what individual students can do, but systems as a whole.

How can we all better support schools that I think have been traditionally under-resourced? How can our other systems and structures come in and support the immense efforts that are being undertaken in school settings? And I think one of the other things I really should mention is staff well-being. So if we're trying to support student well-being, we really need to think about the degree to which staff in the system feel well cared for and feel that they have those additional resources within themselves to then support the young people and their own peers as well in the school systems.

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Bryn Askwith: Just out of curiosity, if I'm an educator listening to this podcast and so many of these points are resonating with me, Nathan, Hasina, Silas, wondering what you would say as, so what can I do. What's one next step that I could do to be helping promote these protective factors?

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Silas: The biggest to next step that you can take, really the best one is to get involved in your school's community. It doesn't necessarily have to be in a big way, but you should find one thing within the actual community outside of the school that you can build a relationship with. I think from my personal experience, one thing that was really meaningful to me was I've been learning Cree to kind of reconnect to my grandparents and just being able to better understand who they are as people.

And through my Aboriginal support work at my school, I was able to go and be connected with classes at the Fraser River Aboriginal Friendship Centre. And I think that teachers can do this for all students, find these community resources, and help connect students to them so that students are not just going between home and school and home and school. They have these other resources in the community where they can feel part of something.

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Bryn Askwith: Absolutely. Nathan, anything to add?

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Nathan Ngieng: Don't be afraid to have a conversation. Sometimes, the system is so large that it can retreat into a siloed structure because of the complexity and the challenge that exists within our school system. And what the system needs is more of the system to be connected to itself, right.

And that starts with conversations, and an individual can make a difference, and that one interaction could change the trajectory for that youth. Don't be afraid to push, right. The system wants to snap back the status quo. And so we need people in the system to push it to know that it can make a difference. And at the end of the day, we all want the same thing, which is for our young people to be successful, and everyone can contribute to that.

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Bryn Askwith: Hasina, one next step from your perspective.

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Dr. Hasina Samji: I think, first of all, if you're an educator, just pat yourself on the back because you're probably already doing a lot to support student well-being. But in terms of other ideas, I'll echo Silas's idea of reaching out and building your broader community. Don't think about having to do everything on your own. How can we build partnerships so that educators, staff, students are supported? I think one really critical example. I may be biased in this, but I think researcher-school collaborations can really support too.

We've had the privilege of working with Nathan and Abbotsford and with other school districts and with other organizations that support the school system. And I think we have sometimes a bit more time and space to take a little step back and then spend some time interviewing the system as a whole. There are incredible initiatives happening all across the school sector, but sometimes those initiatives don't get shared across the sector. And so these opportunities to share across districts and create this network. And then the last thing, and I think this is where the researchers really come in, is the evaluation.

So there are a lot of things happening, and in some ways, it's a really busy space, not almost an overwhelming space, this well-being space, right. And so we hear that really loud and clear, but I think that the thought is, why don't we take a closer look at what we're already doing, and then let's think about what's working and for whom? And so if we don't evaluate, then we're not really able to see what are those differences that are making a difference.

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Bryn Askwith: Thanks so much. In our last minutes here together on the podcast, we always ask this of all of our guests who join us on Where You Are. Just wondering if there's any last words of wisdom that you'd like to share with our listeners, including those school professionals who might be tuning in today. Nathan, we can start with you.

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Nathan Ngieng: Know who's in your network. I do firmly believe in that partnership with researchers and people who could support the work to build the case for system transformation. And probably the most important piece is bring young people into the conversation in a meaningful way, right?

They have so much to contribute to the conversation, and for so long in our system, they have not been attended to or valued in terms of their opinion. There's been some remarkable change as a direct result of young people being equipped with a sense of agency and a belief in who they are that's helped to transform the system into some things that, moving forward, will serve young people well.

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Bryn Askwith: Silas, any last words of wisdom for any school professionals listening?

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Silas: I want to emphasize that a lot of school professionals are already doing so much and keep doing that because you never know when you're going to give a young person the support they need to really thrive. And so I just want to tell all school professionals keep doing those good things because you are making a difference. Even though you don't necessarily see it all the time, you are making that difference. And it's important to recognize that.

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Bryn Askwith: Hasina.

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Dr. Hasina Samji: And I think what we really need to do moving forward is to think about how we can create those spaces where voices from each sector, public health, education, youth themselves, how do we bring all those voices together to really make sure everyone has a voice, and we create something that leads to system transformation. There's an opportunity, I think, and maybe a window.

As Nathan said, there's been change over the last few years and more interest and openness to bringing all the voices to the table. So how can we capitalize on that and really work together across sectors, and including youth voice, to really catalyze this transformational change, and really involves the relationships and the partnerships? So I'm really excited thinking about the future and what we can do collectively and together to create that system change.

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Mari Del Casal: Great. Thank you so much, Silas, Nathan, and Hasina. You've all shared such wonderful words of wisdom and have really helped us to understand a little bit more about protective factors, especially around school belonging and having supportive relations with the other adults in the school community. So on behalf of Bryn and I, we really want to thank you so much for your time and being with us today on Where You Are.

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Dr. Hasina Samji: Thanks for having us.

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Nathan Ngieng: Thank you.

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Silas: Yes. Thank you.

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Mari Del Casal: To our school professionals listening today, thanks for making time for this episode of Where You Are.

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Bryn Askwith: And a very big thank you to my co-host, Mari. If you enjoyed the conversation today, please leave us a rating wherever you might be listening now. Where You Are is brought to you by BC Children's Kelty Mental Health Resource Centre. Our show is produced and edited by Jenny Cunningham, with audio engineering by Sam Seguin, audio production by JAR Audio.

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