

Participatory action research (PAR) on school culture and student mental health

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INTRODUCTION

Approximately half of adult mental disorders begin during adolescence – 50% by age 14, and 75% by age 18¹, making this a key time at which to intervene to promote mental health, and to prevent or reduce later poor mental health outcomes. Poor mental health has a significant impact on young people's educational achievements, substance use and abuse, and interpersonal relationships². Despite the rising prevalence of mental health difficulties in the young, mental health service needs for young people remain unmet even in the economically wealthy societies³.

Increasingly, supportive school environments have been suggested as playing an important role in addressing mental health concerns among young people⁴ while the concept of a *health promoting school* has been supported globally⁵. This holistic approach involves not only health education via the curriculum but also having a school environment and ethos that is conducive to health and wellbeing by engaging with families and the wider community, as well as recognising the importance of this wider environment in supporting children and young people's health. Studies of discreet interventions delivered into schools to improve mental health, however, have been found to have a small or no effect. One possible explanation is that these studies did not sufficiently address aspects of the school environment that provide barriers to the intervention becoming embedded, or that are determinants of poor mental health themselves⁶. It is therefore important to develop interventions that focus on and 'disrupt' the whole school system to create significant and sustainable improvement.

In our study, we will be referring to the term *school culture* rather than climate since we seek to consider the relationship between the *psychosocial* and the *demographic* factors in schools, particularly because shared beliefs and values (traditionally associated with the term "culture") are directly influenced by the physical environment, social system and staff/student populations (traditionally associated with the term "climate"). To study school culture, we will use PAR (Participatory Action Research) approach in which people collaboratively research their own experience: the researched communities (e.g., students) become co-researchers of their own experiences in a specific context (e.g., school environment).



Act	Take an agreed action to bring about change. In the case of the proposed research this may be introducing a new policy, practice or procedure within the school, identified and agreed on by the participants.
Observe	Observe what happens and collect a range of data that provides evidence of the change and its effects – this may be in the form of a survey of others in the school, ethnographic notes, vox pops, new school documents.
Reflect	Use the data collected to evaluate the effectiveness of the change and to illuminate the mechanisms and processes at work.
Plan	On the basis of the evaluation, plan alternative or additional actions

Table 1. Act–Observe–Reflect–Plan cycles

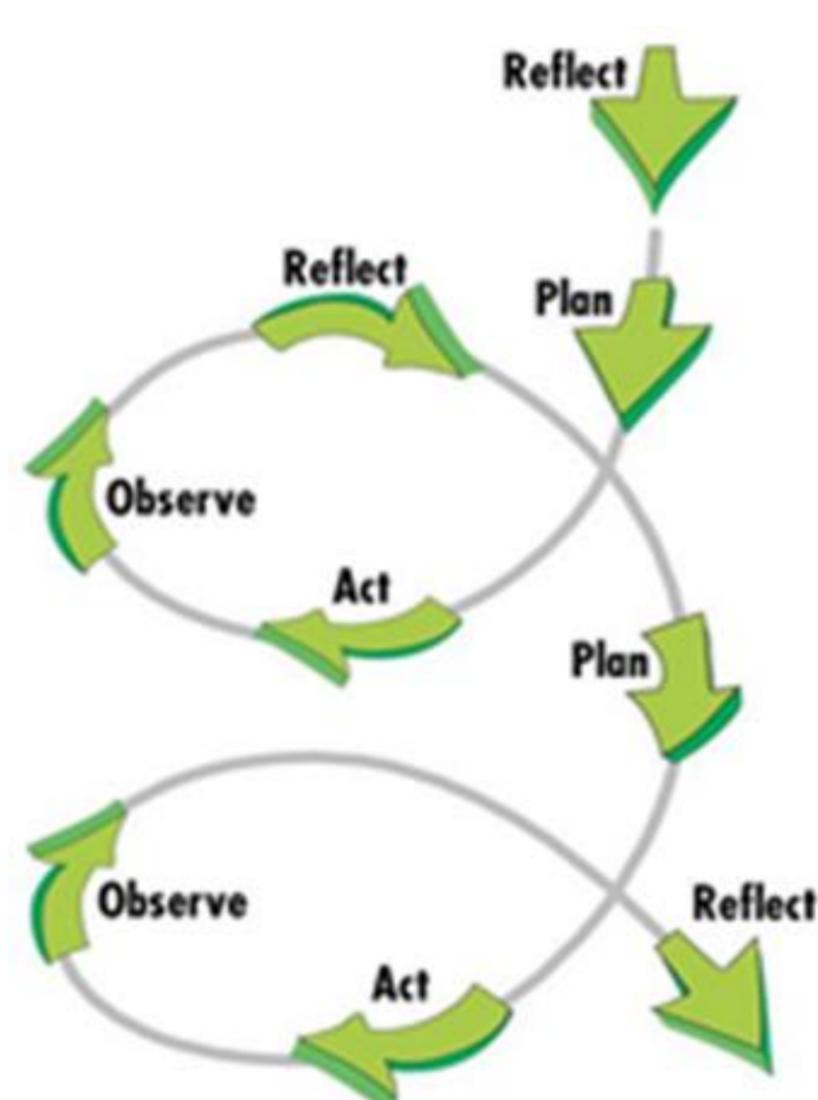


Figure 2. Act–Observe–Reflect–Plan cycles in PAR

SCHOOL RECRUITMENT

	School A	School B	School C	National picture
% pupils English not 1st language	36%	17%	21%	17%
% pupils eligible for FSM last 6 years	33%	19%	41%	28%
Pupil progress from KS2 to KS4	Average	Above average	Above average	48% schools are average 17% schools above average
Latest Ofsted	Good	Outstanding	Good	
PAR year group	10 and 8	12	8	

Table 2. School demographic information

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What are the key components of school culture that have an impact on student mental health?
- What changes or interventions can be made to improve school culture and mental health outcomes for students?
- What is the process by which school culture impacts on young people's mental health?
- Is a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach feasible and effective as a methodology for instigating positive change to school culture?

METHODOLOGY

In this qualitative study, we will develop PAR groups in three English secondary schools. The PAR groups will facilitate a shared understanding of the culture in their school and develop activities or interventions intended to improve it. A qualitative study will be conducted alongside the PAR groups to address the four research questions. This will include qualitative semi-structured interviews with school staff, parents and members of PAR groups, focus groups with students, observations of PAR groups and a review of school documents pertaining to mental health and inclusion (see figure 1).

The work in PAR groups will be based on *Act–Observe–Reflect–Plan cycles* (see table 1). *Act–Observe–Reflect–Plan* was developed to understand how researchers working alongside participants bring about (*act*) and evaluate (*reflect*) change (see figure 2).

PAR interventions will run in four groups across three secondary schools (see table 2). We chose a purposeful sampling approach to recruit schools with variability in school performance (using Ofsted inspection outcomes as a proxy measure for this), and diversity of student intake across ethnicity, and eligibility for free school meals.

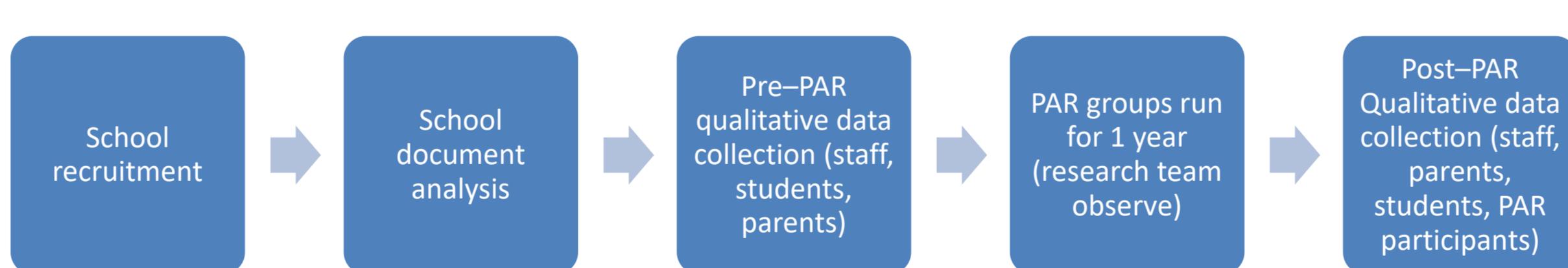


Figure 1. Step-by-step data collection and analysis flow chart

PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH (PAR) APPROACH

In each school the PAR group will comprise up to eight students from across all school years. Up to four members of school staff will also be involved in the meetings to ensure that the group have the power to facilitate the changes that they identify. These staff members are likely to be those with responsibility for student wellbeing (pastoral support, PHSE lead, head of year, form tutor). Each group will be assigned a facilitator from a mental health charity, who will work with each group over the course of a school year. Facilitators will support the PAR groups to:

- Develop a shared understanding of school culture in their school.
- Develop initiative(s) aimed at improvement in school culture. These will be determined by each group, and could include introducing a new policy, practice, or procedure.
- Agree the data to be gathered by the PAR group within the school for observation and reflection stages.
- Support the PAR groups to reflect on the success (or otherwise) of their initiatives before refining and/or developing and implementing new initiatives.

The PAR groups will meet twice every half term (14 meetings in total).

The research team will provide initial training for the PAR group facilitators. In addition, the team will meet with the facilitators one day per school term to provide ongoing support and supervision, in particular to support the PAR groups' data collection and evaluation of the initiatives and changes they have instigated.

RESULTS

The findings will inform the development of the school culture toolkit, which will comprise:

- Definition of school culture* and its components in the context of English secondary schools
- Logic model* describing the mechanisms through which improvements to school culture can improve student mental health
- Guidance on the use of the PAR approach to school culture improvement*, including resources for schools running PAR groups and case study examples from schools involved in this work.

CONCLUSION

This study is based on PAR methodology that puts young people and school staff at the heart of the research process. We anticipate that the study findings will contribute to:

- Identifying what needs to change within schools, and providing the necessary resources to implement and monitor these changes
- Understanding of the key features, details, and dynamics of the PAR approach to school culture improvement (and mental health outcome improvement more generally)
- Examination of possible causal pathways from the interventions in schools to observed (and perceived) outcomes in both school culture and student mental health.

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