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Exploring the feasibility of using Participatory Action Research (PAR) as a mechanism for school culture change to improve mental health

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ABSTRACT

Adolescence is a key time to prevent or reduce poor mental health outcomes. Supportive school environments play an important role in this, and the concept of health-promoting schools have been supported globally. Participatory action research (PAR) combines theory, practice, action, and reflection by developing practical solutions to address concerns and issues within communities. Running four PAR groups across three secondary schools, we explored the feasibility of using the approach as a mechanism for bringing about culture change and improving mental health. We undertook interviews and focus groups with students ($n = 24$), school staff ($n = 11$), facilitators ($n = 3$), and parents/carers ($n = 2$). Findings are organised under five key headings: 1) Establishing PAR groups, and the PAR cycle; 2) PAR group impact; 3) Facilitators of PAR success; 4) Barriers to PAR success; 5) Future recommendations. This study demonstrated the feasibility of PAR as a tool to improve school culture. Students participating in PAR were engaged, passionate, and motivated to influence and transform school culture to improve mental health. Future research should aim to trial the PAR approach on a larger scale, to determine whether the barriers and facilitators of PAR success identified here are relevant and transferable to schools in other contexts, and to measure the impact of such initiatives on mental health outcomes.

1. Introduction

Worldwide, children and young people (CYP) are experiencing increasing levels of mental health (MH) distress, with recent studies indicating high rates of self-

harm, lower educational achievements, and poorer interpersonal relationships (Doyle et al., 2015; Murali & Oyebode, 2004). In England, it is estimated that approximately 1 in 8 CYP (12.8%) aged between 5 and 19 years are living with a diagnosable MH illness (Sadler et al., 2018). Approximately half of adult MH disorders begin during adolescence (Kessler et al., 2005), making this a key time at which to intervene to promote positive MH, and prevent or reduce poor MH outcomes. MH distress amongst CYP was further exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a recent report suggesting that poor MH, and associated problems such as disrupted sleep and loneliness increased amongst 5 to 16-year-olds between 2017 and 2020 (Newlove-Delgado et al., 2021).

Public MH measures, including creating more supportive school environments are emphasised as an important solution to such concerns (Bonell et al., 2019; Brown & Carr, 2019; Hudson et al., 2020; MacNeil et al., 2009). A recent review that investigated non-curricular factors and interventions within educational settings which promote positive MH and prevent poor MH highlighted the importance of school environment, and student voice (Troy et al., 2022). The school environment has been described as offering a unique opportunity to create a sense of belonging, shared values, and positive staff-student relationships (Allen, 2016), with CYP themselves advocating for more regular and in-depth MH education, tailored levels of support in school, and improved training for teachers (Spencer et al., 2022).

These features of the school environment are often described as its 'culture', encompassing the guiding beliefs, attitudes, values and expected behaviours that impact how a school operates (Fullan, 2007). A positive school culture is associated with factors that have been shown to improve student MH (Aldridge & McChesney, 2018; Wang & Degol, 2016). School culture is typically associated with psychological perspectives of the school environment, such as students' sense of cohesiveness; shared purpose and values; and sense of belonging (Schoen & Teddlie, 2008). School culture perspectives focus on how features of the school environment contribute or lead to psychological outcomes, such as feelings of exclusion amongst students due to negative student-staff relationships. Findings on how school culture is conceptualised by students, parents, and staff in English secondary schools identified elements of school culture align into four dimensions: academic and organisational, (teaching and learning, leadership, professional development); community (quality of relationships, inclusion, student voice); safety and support (physical safety, discipline and order, pastoral support); and structure and context (environmental adequacy, student diversity), with strong evidence for the interdependence of these four dimensions in shaping the culture of a school (Jessiman et al., 2022). School culture was the focus of research commissioned in the UK by the Department for Education as a potential means of improving the educational attainment of disadvantaged pupils. It concluded that high-performing schools showed greater

cohesiveness; improved sense of shared purpose and values amongst staff, students, and parents; and high staff morale, suggesting that these aspects of school culture can influence school effectiveness (Mulcahy et al., 2018).

The involvement of CYP has become increasingly important in MH research, as it; (1) focuses on potentially sensitive topics, and (2) aims to ensure that participants benefit from knowledge gained during research process. Participatory Action Research (PAR) seeks to consider both these elements, by placing a high priority on partnering with study participants, enabling action within a specific context by involving them as co-researchers. Participants collect and analyse data (about the environment in which they participate), implement changes and/or interventions (to further develop or improve the environment), and reflect on whether these changes create a significant, lasting outcome (Baum et al., 2006). These are called 'Act-Observe-Reflect-Plan' cycles and are crucial as they help researchers understand how participants bring about (act) and evaluate (reflect) change (Kindon et al., 2007). Some early school-based findings indicate that PAR can be utilised to promote MH, and creatively involve students in developing their own school culture. A student-led MH action research project conducted in Canada revealed that participants believed a positive change occurred in their school environments, which included a favourable impact on the mental wellbeing messages shared throughout their school communities (Berg et al., 2018). More recent research has highlighted the importance of school culture, and the active participation of students in school life, for their MH (Ford et al., 2021; Wong et al., 2021). However, PAR is a relatively novel approach in public MH, and there are outstanding questions about its relevance to, and feasibility within the context of improving school culture, as well as questions regarding the generalisability of PAR findings into broader educational contexts. This paper aims to explore whether a PAR approach is feasible and effective as a methodology for instigating school culture change and improving MH for CYP.

2. Methods

2.1. Study design

Qualitative research is recognised as enabling the in-depth analysis of socially situated experiences. This can help to provide insight into otherwise undetermined practices, ensuring better-informed public health policy decisions (Maher & Dertadian, 2018). The present study used semi-structured interviews and focus groups (FGs) as the primary data collection method. Data collection was led by TJ, with all the research team involved in data analysis and reporting. Ethical approval was granted by the Faculty of Health and Medicine Research Ethics Committee at Lancaster University (Ref: FHMREC19100) in July 2020.

2.2. The PAR process

Three state secondary schools in the South West of England were recruited to run PAR groups. Prior to the PAR groups beginning ('pre-PAR'), data were collected from students, parents, and school staff to identify how school culture was conceptualised, and to explore which components of school culture were perceived to be most important for student MH (Jessiman et al., 2022). In each school, PAR groups comprised of up to eight students, with up to four members of school staff involved in the meetings to ensure that the groups had the power to facilitate changes they identified. Each group was assigned an external facilitator from a MH charity, who received PAR training from the research team. Facilitators ensured parity between staff and students and supported the PAR groups through the 'Act-Observe-Reflect-Plan' cycles. The aim was for groups to meet twice per half-term across one academic year to: (1) develop a shared understanding of school culture; (2) develop initiative(s) aimed at modifying school culture to improve MH; (3) agree on the data to be gathered within the school; and (4) reflect on the success (or otherwise) of their initiatives before refining and/or developing and implementing new initiatives.

2.3. Recruitment and sample

School A ran a PAR group with Year 8 students (aged 12 to 13 years) and a second group with Year 10 students (aged 14 to 15 years); Schools B and C ran one PAR group each with Year 12 students (aged 16 to 17 years). Schools specifically aimed to recruit a diverse group of students across ethnicity, gender, and academic ability. A detailed overview of the sampling and recruitment process for pre-PAR participants is reported elsewhere (Jessiman et al., 2022). This paper reports on data collected after the PAR groups were completed ('post-PAR') from staff and students involved in PAR groups, staff and students who were not, parents/carers, and PAR group facilitators. Our lead school staff contacts supported post-PAR recruitment by signposting us to school staff, parent/carer, student, and PAR group member participants.

2.4. Data collection

Topic guides focused on the PAR approach and how it might have impacted upon culture and MH in schools. Data collection took place between November 2021 and February 2022. Some COVID-19 measures remained in place during this time and, as a result, interviews occurred both in-person and online, depending upon schools' policies and individual participant preferences. Signed consent forms were collected prior to the focus groups (FGs) and student consent was also provided verbally. In addition to the interviews and FGs, members of the research team observed a total of nine PAR sessions across

the schools. Researchers recorded observations on the main discussion topics, key decisions taken (if any), and the stage at which groups were at in the PAR cycles.

2.5. Data analysis

Interviews and FGs were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymised. Data were analysed using the Framework Approach (Pope et al., 2000) following a five-step process: (1) familiarisation; (2) developing a thematic framework; (3) indexing; (4) charting; (5) mapping and interpretation (Ritchie et al., 1994). Two of the authors (GK and NL) developed an analysis framework by familiarising themselves with the data. Analysis was an iterative and progressive process, developed through memos, summaries, mapping exercises, and discussions amongst the research team at study meetings. The observational notes and reports were used to aid this process. This resulted in the development of key themes. The Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) checklist was followed when preparing the manuscript (Tong et al., 2007).

3. Findings

3.1. Background and sample

We had planned to run the PAR groups from the start of the academic year in September, delays arising from the COVID-19 meant that groups had to start the following spring, causing them to pause their progress over the summer school holiday period. Staff changes within the external MH charity also meant that for some groups, the facilitator changed. School A (Year 10) had 8 sessions between March and December 2021, with one facilitator across all sessions; School A (Year 8) had 5 sessions between April and October 2021, with a change in facilitator after the fourth session; the School B (Year 12) group had 7 sessions between April and November 2021, with a change in facilitator after the first session; and the School C (Year 12) group had 3 sessions between April and July 2021, with one facilitator across all sessions. This group did not resume after the summer break owing to staff and timetabling changes within the school.

In total n=40 individuals took part in our post-PAR interviews and FGs across the three schools. Interviews were conducted with n=11 members of school staff; n=11 PAR student members; n=3 facilitators, and n=2 parents. N=13 students who weren't PAR group members, but were of the same age, participated in two FGs: 1 with Year 11 students; aged 15 to 16 years (School A), and 1 with Year 13 students; aged 17 to 18 years (School B) – see Table 1. A groups ran into the next academic year, the year groups which describe student participants in this paper, refer to the following academic year (e.g. Year 10 PAR

Table 1. Participant overview.

	Staff	PAR Student members	Facilitators	Parents	Focus Groups	Total
School A	5	6	1	0	1 (4 students)	16
School B	5	5	1	2	1 (9 students)	22
School C	1	0	1	0	0	2
Totals	11	11	3	2	13	40
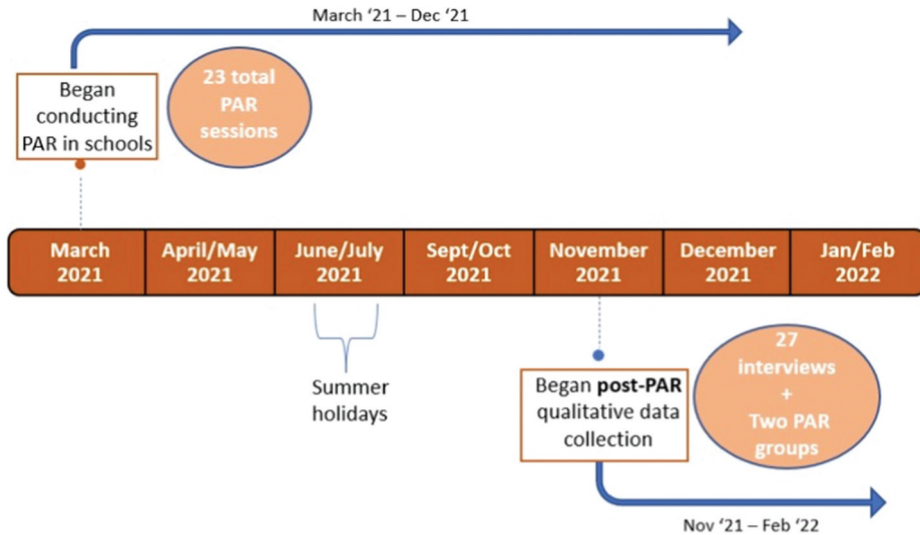
Figure 1. PAR sessions and post-PAR data collection.

students were in Year 11 when these data were collected). Interviews lasted 30–45 minutes, and the FGs lasted around 45 minutes. See Figure 1 for a visual representation of the study flow, from the beginning of PAR sessions through to post-PAR data collection.

Our findings are organised under five key themes: 1) Establishing PAR groups, and the PAR cycle; 2) PAR group impact; 3) Facilitators of PAR success; 4) Barriers to PAR success; and 5) Future recommendations. Findings are described below and illustrated using verbatim participant quotations.

3.2. Establishing PAR groups, and the PAR cycle

Recruiting students to the PAR groups was challenging due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which brought about social distancing measures and school closures, with group numbers fluctuating across schools. In one school, students received an e-mail from the school staff about the project and were asked to write about why they wanted to join the PAR group. Students discussed a variety of motivating factors for engaging in the PAR groups, including the subject of MH being of particular interest to them, and a desire to help improve circumstances for their peers.

> It started off as eight students, [who] had to be recruited [whilst] the students were at home. That was tricky. (School B, Staff 3)

> It was my passion to help people in the school system. I was going through quite a lot during COVID, and I felt like it was almost my responsibility, to try and do my part. (School B, Year 13 Student 2)

Once established, the PAR groups began the PAR cycle by suggesting initiatives that they wanted to work on. In School A these included providing targeted feedback on a video used by school staff to inform students about different forms of discrimination (perceived by some students as offensive); replacing posters of role-models displayed around the school with those that were more diverse, relatable, and inspiring to young people; and considering access to menstruation education and period products. Student participants spoke about how they took a democratic approach to negotiating conflicting priorities, in order to reach a consensus about which initiatives to focus on.

> Some members of Senior Leadership Team did a video around discrimination [...] I know that the PAR group fed-back that some of it felt a little bit offensive. (School A, Staff 1)

> We were very good at having lengthy discussions about things and disagreeing [and/or] agreeing with each other, and I think debating plenty of solutions. (School A, Year 11 Student 3)

> A lot of the posters around school, everyone had unanimously decided were pretty trash [...] so we decided to design ones. (School A, Year 11 Student 1)

In School B, PAR students prepared the material for and presented an assembly to their Sixth Form student peers, to explain what the PAR group and the PAR initiatives were. The group also planned a Google information page on MH assistance for young people and developed a survey to understand how students were feeling at the school, focusing on anxiety.

> It wasn't just through a student questionnaire though, it was a process where we were directly in front of the students and telling them about our plans. (School B, Year 13 Student 2)

> Two-thirds to three-quarters of the year responded to our survey. It was really helpful in getting an insight into how people were coping and dealing with stress and how the school could make it better. (School B, Year 13 Student 5)

In School C, there were a range of proposed initiatives to promote more awareness of, and responses to, global events. This cohort focused on understanding and challenging political structures, especially due to the 2021 outbreak of violence in the Israeli – Palestinian conflict, which was particularly important and salient to the student demographic. The main initiative was the development of a social action group, with discussion of how to organise

protests, fundraising, and campaigning. Students also wanted to have more school and lunchtime clubs, but this was deemed unfeasible by school staff owing to COVID restrictions.

> A theme that emerged as we got into the group setting and got more comfortable as a collective group - there was a desire to have more activism and social action-facing projects. (School C, Facilitator)

3.3. PAR group impact

In School A, PAR was seen as an opportunity for students to lead something for the first time, and groups achieved 'local' outcomes. Students reported being able to vocalise their needs and felt listened to by staff. One student noted that they saw a difference in the curriculum, learning more about Black history. Although in its early stages, the group's idea around period education was followed up by staff. A student commented that they did not think their school culture was 'the best' pre-PAR, however they felt that post-PAR the right actions were being initiated to take care of identified issues.

> We can see on a really basic level having access to more period products, for example, we might not hear about what impact that has made on people. But we can predict that it will, which is important. (School A, Facilitator)

> We can see what's going on in the school, like when we had [a session], that showed that all the students see it, and we have an opinion on what could be better. (School A, Year 9 Student 3)

PAR was seen as an opportunity for students to express themselves and their concerns within school. Some students noted that PAR seemed fun and perceived it as a meaningful opportunity to create change. Other students noted that they were interested in contributing to activities that bring about change.

> We got the opportunity to have a say in things, because we don't [usually] have a say. So, we actually got to bring things to light. (School A, Year 11 Student 3)

In School B, the group was described as highly successful, and that this group would be handing over the baton to younger students in the future. Staff and student participants felt that the group had impacted MH awareness in school, which led to an increased availability of pastoral support, and better relationships between students and staff members. Whilst students not involved were aware of the PAR group, they weren't overly familiar with the initiatives they were trying to implement, however the assembly was described as making the aims of the group clearer, as well as having a positive impact on PAR students' confidence. A PAR student member voiced that *before* PAR, they felt that it was only staff and Senior

Leadership Team (SLT) members that had the ability to change school culture. The facilitator stated that they were aware of school culture changes due to PAR because of 'casual verbal feedback', however described school culture on the whole as 'slow changing'.

> More people are going to be like, 'These are the right people to go to when I'm down and need help.' Because even in my previous school, I had pastoral support, but I never needed to go to it, and I never needed to know what it was about. (School B, Year 13 Student 3)

> I think it was just like we all had similar interests and that we all wanted similar things. (School B, Year 13 Student 4)

> Looking at culture more broadly, it's quite a slow-changing thing. So, I wonder whether all that much impact on school culture will have been visible over the space of. [time] (School B, Facilitator)

The most marked form of engagement with the 'observe' stage of the PAR cycle occurred in School B, where the PAR group developed a survey, and undertook qualitative research methods (observing students in class and around the school). The group showed students the results of the survey, and listed improvements they were hoping to implement. PAR students noticed that there was more openness in the way people approached discussing MH. The group facilitator also thought the PAR group was successful in measuring outcomes from their PAR initiatives where they could, for example recording feedback from peers regarding the assembly, which was largely positive because it had been student-led.

> The survey was probably the main form of observance, but we also [had] an anecdotal part of it, where we would observe students purely just in class, and around school. (School B, Year 13 Student 2)

Work undertaken by the School C group was limited, as both staff and students were constrained in their ability to engage as hoped, due to continued limitations imposed as a result of COVID-19 and having to finish early. However, the facilitator noted that the group may have had an indirect impact on MH by challenging structures, through the group's social action-focussed project. The facilitator felt that the group could have gone much further with their ideas and initiatives if they had more time. As with School A, students felt listened to, and were able to communicate their thoughts and ideas.

> We've never been back up to capacity to be able to run things. Even the things that we typically do, have not happened. (School C, Staff)

> For the students, the outcome was simply that they had staff members that were actively listening and willing to apply the changes that they put forward. (School C, Facilitator)

3.4. Facilitators of PAR success

Positive dynamics between group members was identified as an important facilitator. Engaged students and staff were more likely to develop feasible initiatives and maintain high motivation. In School A, staff noted that the group felt non-judgmental and organic, with students able to express their opinions. Students reported that staff were knowledgeable and welcomed engagement with students as part of the process. In School B, respondents described positive relationships between the group students and the facilitator. Students all worked well together, despite the fact they were not from the same friendship groups – there was diversity in thought and opinions, and students were able to overcome differences.

> Recruitment is important - what kind of students are actually forming the group. And the group dynamics - they're always a little bit outside of staff's control. It really depends on how students interact. (School B, Staff 4)

> PAR was a place where we could say it, and it could be listened to, rather than just us saying it to each other. (School A, Year 11 Student 2)

In School A, students reported that appropriate staff members were part of group discussions, as they would normally be in contact with students regarding pastoral issues, which helped facilitate openness. Students felt that staff were engaged in group conversations and listened to their needs. Having a larger proportion of students than staff was important, as too many staff members could potentially hinder student expression. In School B, the staff member was the pastoral lead and was described as supportive and helpful. This kind of compatibility between staff and students made the group feel like a 'collective', rather than detached individuals, and created a sense of unity around the group's aims. Acknowledging that organising the groups was frustrating at times, staff members from School B involved in the group expressed positive emotions of pride about the group and the students involved, which was bolstered by positive feedback from other students, particularly regarding their peer-led assembly.

> It was good to have a pastoral teacher there because we did focus on mental health. (School B, Year 13 Student 1)

> There's a lot of optimism, and certainly more openness in the way people are speaking about mental health. (School B, Year 13 Student 2)

External facilitation played a key role in group success, with students from both School A and School B noting that a facilitator was needed to keep the groups focused. Facilitators encouraged collaborative approaches within groups, with school staff noting the role that facilitators had in supporting students during group discussions. In School A, the facilitator was described as engaging and active; creating a space where everyone could safely express their views.

A student from School B stated that students valued the facilitator's focus on meeting end goals. Students felt the facilitators helped students to focus on MH and real-world issues, which they deeply appreciated. The facilitator would guide students rather than take control; students felt a part of the group rather than being outside of it. The facilitator from School C felt that students knew they could express things they wanted to see, and understood the PAR structure quite easily, which made facilitation run smoothly. The facilitator noted that they adjusted to the unique dynamics of the group, to ensure students remained engaged.

> It was very student led. Sometimes within schools, even though we talk about student voice, it can get lost. Because it was run with [an outside organisation], not just the school, it was more impactful. (School B, Staff 1)

> They [facilitator]are a really big help, and they are there to support you. We noticed that his advice had helped us so much, in what we wanted to decide to do. (School B, Year 13 Student 2)

> If you left young people to do it themselves with not much guidance, I'm not sure they would get anywhere. Mental health and school culture is so broad, you could try and solve everything but not get anywhere. (School B, Staff 1)

3.5. Barriers to PAR success

Across all schools, managing student expectations about proposed initiatives was a significant barrier to PAR success. Staff involved in PAR suggested that students needed support to understand the practicalities and constraints associated with running a school, to help them manage the suitability of suggested initiatives. Some of the actions suggested by PAR students were not perceived by staff to be realistic, feasible, or practical, whilst others could not be implemented due to limited resources or safeguarding concerns. Communicating this to students could be challenging, as it may have come across as a rejection of their ideas. One staff member from School A noted that decisions in school were made by the SLT alone, and therefore the PAR group initiatives were stalled. They perceived that the SLT didn't discuss the PAR group meetings and added that this hesitancy to listen to student feedback, contributed to a poorer school culture.

> They want to save the world with things that they're really passionate about. But it's drawing back to what is achievable within the short space of time, and what's impactful. (School B Staff 1)

> Changes that are made in our school are made by the SLT alone. You can feedback to them but if they aren't on board with that or have a different thinking then that overrides, so it can be quite difficult.

Changes that are made in our school are made by the SLT alone. You can feedback to them but if they aren't on board with that or have a different thinking then that overrides, so it can be quite difficult. (School A, Staff 1)

The progress of groups was hindered by practical barriers, including conflicting priorities such as mock exams and timetabling concerns, school holidays, managing COVID-19 restrictions (and restricted interactions due to social distancing), fluctuating group numbers, and changes in facilitators. It was noted that some of these barriers could prevent PAR group members from completing their allocated tasks, between meetings.

> They split up into five pairs, and only one of the pairs had done the research, which was like, 'Well, until we've done that we can't move on to the next stage'. But I think also they've got mocks.' (School A, Facilitator)

Contributions within the PAR sessions were mixed and varied between schools and groups. Whilst some students were described as engaged and motivated, others were described as 'timid' or 'reserved' - not speaking much or actively participating, with one student suggested they were just using it as a reason to miss lessons. Some staff noted that, at times, it was difficult to get all students involved, and often it was the same students contributing, whilst the rest remained disengaged.

> Getting people to stay engaged and to do some of the stuff outside of sessions can be tricky. That is something that I've experienced in other roles. (School A, Facilitator)

Creating awareness of PAR beyond those immediately involved was also a challenge. In School A it was noted that there was little awareness of the group amongst students and staff *not* directly involved. Staff felt that the group should have been more widely publicised but were unclear who should have led this. Students at School B noted that they were aware of the PAR group but weren't overly familiar with the initiatives they were trying to implement.

> It hasn't been spoken about in staff briefings. There haven't been any notifications, really, about what's kind of going on. (School A Staff 1)

> I wasn't too familiar with what they were doing. I kind of heard of them. I wasn't specifically aware of who was on the team or exactly what they were doing or were trying to achieve. (School B, Year 13 Student FG)

3.6. Future recommendations

Students felt that sessions should be appropriately structured, but not held during break or lunchtimes, with a facilitator suggesting it would be beneficial if groups could be scheduled into lessons. An allocated space for the groups to meet was suggested, with a room layout that encourages collaboration (not a standard classroom layout). Although students enjoyed the 'privacy' of PAR,

they also thought it could have been more 'open'. Ethnic, gender, religious and other forms of diversity was perceived as crucial for representing the wider school through PAR, and important in the groups to allow for various perspectives on different issues. To better represent a range of student experiences and student voices, School A staff and School B student PAR members suggested having more students in their groups. They also thought that a group should be held in every year group, or that students from different year groups should be included within one group, which was also suggested by a parent. This could encourage older students to take a peer mentoring approach to improve younger students' confidence in talking about specific topics and coming up with ideas. Students from School B who didn't take part in the group suggested that, should the group run again, a more diverse group of students should be involved, and all students should have the opportunity to take part. It was also suggested that different groups could lead different initiative ideas, whilst still reconvening an overarching group.

> If we had different groups for specific subjects, but still have them joined together so it's not completely segregated. (School A, Year 11 Student 2)

> Our older group could meet with a younger group to help them come up with ideas and say, 'If you want to do this, you need to speak to this teacher' [...] A bit of peer mentoring. (School A, Staff 2)

Participants from all groups suggested an increased frequency of PAR sessions, e.g. weekly, or bi-weekly to ensure that PAR is kept at the forefront of students' minds and initiatives are more likely to be implemented.

> Having a clear long-term plan, 'by the end of the year we will have done this and these are the things we need to do to. ... Then next year, we will do this.' Then we would be running on a schedule. (School A, Year 11 Student 2)

> It could have been more structured, like, here's a room that you guys could go to at lunchtime once a week, 'would you like to take that up?', or sort of trying to structure it as a regular thing. (School A, Staff 3)

Staff stated that implementing the PAR approach is a joint effort between students and staff. Staff and facilitators perceived that staff input was essential to a successful PAR project, hence those involved needed good levels of motivation, time, and resource. One facilitator proposed a minimum of two staff members should be part of each group, to ensure initiatives are implemented, can communicate with students, and be prepared to locate/chase students if they were not present at sessions. Student group members noted that better communication was needed to promote awareness of PAR to the whole school community, including information about the initiatives being implemented. In schools where this didn't occur, students suggested that instead of teachers setting up groups, students themselves, and pastoral teams could have more involvement in this process.

> It's a joint effort, and getting students to really engage in their school is a great thing. You want kids that are engaged in where they spend a lot of their lives. (School A, Staff 4)

> [You need] students that actually want to do it, rather than just being attracted to missing a lesson. (School A, Year 9 Student 2)

Participants felt it was important to encourage more communication between PAR members outside of sessions so that students continue to form good relationships. Some students felt that members should get to know each other before sharing ideas, as many didn't know each other well before the group was formed. This would allow members to feel more confident in voicing opinions and potential concerns. PAR students also stated that future group members should work hard to listen to others; to facilitate a cooperative and collaborative approach.

> Try to form good relationships with the people in your group because they often will have similar morals to you, and things that they want to change as well, and listening to other people in the group. (School B, Year 13 Student 4)

4. Discussion

In this study, we aimed to explore the feasibility of the PAR approach as a mechanism for bringing about school culture change and were interested in how the involvement of students as co-researchers working to improve school culture to benefit student MH could work in practice. The study demonstrated that students can generate and lead initiatives intended to improve school culture, including feeding back on teaching tools, developing posters of diverse role-models, leading assemblies, promoting better health education, and developing opportunities for social action. Through this research we have been able to identify key facilitators of, and barriers to PAR success, and make recommendations for future endeavours.

School culture is slow changing (Prosser, 1999), and whilst it is perhaps too soon to ascertain the full impact of PAR on wider school culture; our findings suggest that appropriate actions were being initiated to take care of issues which groups identified. The groups were largely described as successful – an opportunity for students to lead something, and tangible outcomes identified by participants included: better relationships between students and staff; students feeling more listened to by staff; improved MH awareness; and increased availability of pastoral support. These findings are consistent with previous research which has reported that PAR participants gained a sense of connectedness to their school and peers as a direct result of PAR interventions, which led to improved health awareness, and further facilitating student engagement (Berg et al., 2016), with changes brought about to school culture having the

potential to create environments that better support the MH of students (Hudson et al., 2020; MacNeil et al., 2009). The perception of a participative school environment is a key component of a positive school culture, and with the help of dedicated and supportive school staff, students can be provided with a sense of unity, safety, and belonging (Allen, 2016; Bonell et al., 2019).

We have identified several facilitators to PAR success. Positive dynamics between PAR group members is essential, with engaged students and staff more likely to remain motivated and develop feasible interventions. This relates to a crucial difference between PAR and conventional health research, as it seeks not only to the highlight the subjective experiences of individuals, but is also reliant upon and seeks to facilitate the competence, reflexivity, and self-change of participating people as positive action outcomes (Kindon et al., 2007). It is also important to have a balanced ratio of students and school staff, as too many staff members can hinder student engagement. The presence of appropriate staff members is key; staff that would normally be in contact with students regarding MH and pastoral issues, and those in positions which can enable change (e.g. SLT members). Whilst it is crucial that PAR is student-led, an experienced and capable facilitator is needed to help guide students through the PAR process and structure, keep the groups focused, and create spaces where students can safely express their views.

We also identified several barriers to PAR success. Students suggesting unrealistic or impractical initiatives may mean that their expectations require management by staff, however this can be interpreted by students as a rejection of their ideas. Schools also face constraints, such as a lack of staff time or resources, timetabling conflicts, school holiday periods, and requirements to adhere to safeguarding policies, which can limit what they're able to change. A lack of buy-in from the SLT within schools can also hinder progress. Additional conflicting priorities in the context of the present study included mock exams and managing COVID-19 restrictions (El-Osta et al., 2021; Gurdasani et al., 2022).

PAR is a joint effort between students and staff; therefore, the whole school should be made aware what PAR is, and which initiatives the groups are planning on implementing. It is feasible that increased promotion of PAR initiatives within schools may support a more rapid change in school culture. Where feasible, more students should be encouraged to participate in PAR groups, with students themselves and pastoral staff having more involvement in the set-up of groups, so that students feel they can better relate to the members of staff supporting the group, and to encourage a sense of group ownership, facilitating improved engagement and motivation. As previously reported, work which directly involves participants is increasingly important within MH research as it not only focuses on potentially sensitive psychological topics, but also seeks to ensure that participants benefit from knowledge gained in the research process (Garwick & Seppelt, 2010; Wright & Ord, 2015). Although challenges due the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in delayed PAR group

recruitment, students were keen to get involved, and it was seen as an opportunity for students to express themselves, and their concerns, within the school context. These findings are consistent with an earlier study, which reported that PAR can be utilised to promote MH, and creatively involve students in developing their own school culture (Berg et al., 2018). Students are well placed to identify environmental stressors to MH (Atkinson et al., 2019), and the experiences of students involved in the present study were at the heart of the PAR process throughout; from early planning to decision-making, and from measurement to reflection, which is a high priority in this methodological approach (Garwick & Seppelt, 2010).

A major strength of the present study is the focus on student voice, and having students directly involved in the research process through this relatively novel method in schools (Garwick & Seppelt, 2010). We acknowledge that it was challenging to recruit some participants, and only two parents were included in the sample. Existing literature has argued that PAR (and other qualitative methods) do not seek to produce findings that are generalisable, since these methods have a different process, and the end-goal is focussed on capturing subjective experiences, rather than producing de-contextualised data (Yin, 2013). Whilst the data were drawn from a small sample of three schools in one geographical area, they were recruited using a purposeful sampling approach, to select schools with variability in school performance and diversity of student intake across ethnicity, cultures, and eligibility for free school meals (Jessiman et al., 2022). Additionally, as the present study was undertaken during COVID-19, the PAR groups did not have as long to run as had initially been planned, and they were not always able to meet face-to-face. Future endeavours should be mindful that recent research has suggested that some aspects of school-based MH interventions may increase symptoms of MH distress (Foulkes & Stringaris, 2023). However, the young person-focussed and peer-led nature of the PAR approach is well-placed to mitigate these unintentional negative consequences (Berg et al., 2018; Ford et al., 2021; Wong et al., 2021), and these potential concerns were not reported in the present study. If feasible, baseline and follow-up measures of students' perceptions of their school culture (Berg et al., 2016) is recommended to quantitatively measure changes brought about by PAR groups. Increasing the regularity of sessions, with allocated PAR 'spaces' for groups to meet may increase salience and engagement with students and improve group momentum; increasing the probability of initiatives being acted upon. Taking a peer mentoring approach to improve students' confidence in talking about specific topics and engaging with PAR is recommended.

5. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that setting up PAR groups to improve school culture is feasible. Whilst it may be too early to say that a PAR approach is

something which all schools would benefit from, we have been able to evidence several positive changes that these groups brought about, which is testament to students' motivation and engagement with the process. At the heart of PAR success is engaged, passionate, and motivated students who will take the opportunity to transform the culture within their schools. The availability of interested, motivated, and engaged school staff is a necessity, as is the buy-in from the school SLT; providing sufficient resources, and offering willingness to accept and act upon suggestions from PAR groups. Future research should aim to trial the PAR approach in the post-pandemic world and on a larger scale, to determine whether the barriers and facilitators of PAR success identified here are relevant or transferable to schools in other geographical, cultural, and socioeconomic contexts, as well as specifically measuring the impact of such initiatives on MH outcomes.

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Data availability statement

The data that has been used is confidential.

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