



Building Bridges to Equity through CPAR

Study 13 Student Mental Health Awareness

The Justin McNulty Educator Research Project
2018-2019



Critical Participatory Action Research

“Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR) is an epistemology that engages research design, methods, analyses and products through a lens of democratic participation.”

– Torre, Fine, Stoudt & Fox, 2012, p.171





Critical Participatory Action Research

CPAR projects are “rooted in the belief that those most impacted by research should take the lead in framing the questions, design, methods, analysis and determining what products and actions might be most useful in effecting change.”

– Torre, 2009, p.1





Critical Participatory Action Research

CPAR projects draw on both traditional and non-traditional research methods, often using an iterative study design that continues to evolve as more data is gathered and analyzed.





The Cambridge Project

In line with the Building Bridges to Equity Grant, the Cambridge CPAR project was set up to integrate educators from the city into the process of investigating the root causes of inequality in CPS. We adhered to the core principles laid out in the grant proposal:

Core Principles:

- (1) Elevate the voices and expertise of families, students, educators and community stakeholders;
- (2) Proactively cultivate trust;
- (3) Share power;
- (4) Proactively engage families, students and educators from marginalized groups.





The Cambridge Project

Between June 2018 and May 2019, 24 educators from the Cambridge Public Schools engaged in a set of CPAR studies, each of which examined root causes of inequality in the district. Educators were chosen through an extensive recruitment & application process, and included:

- Researchers from 8 elementary schools, all 5 Upper Schools, and CRLS;
- School-day and Out-of-School-Time educators;
- Over 50% educators of color.

These educators were supported by two members of the Building Equity Bridges Grant Working Team, as well as two researchers from the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Additional support was provided by two Researchers who joined the Support Team (shared leadership team).





The Cambridge Project

Our work was grounded in an initial Research Question:

What does it mean to create an authentically participatory process around the investigation of a community-level question?

Our efforts to address this question included:

- Proactive relationship-/trust-building, including 24-hr “real talk” (text, phone, email, in person)
- Frequent Researcher input and feedback (90%+ response rates)
- Consensus-based decision-making for all major decisions
- Participatory budgeting processes for each team and for our overall collective work. *(This included a second round of targeted Researcher recruitment to ensure that specific studies were representative of the communities being studied.)*
- Building an active, diverse, and empowered Support Team (shared leadership team)
- Reducing Support Team stipends to equalize hourly rates with Researchers





The Mental Health Awareness Project

- 1) To what extent do middle school students and parents report being aware of how to identify and seek help for mental health concerns?
- 2) What barriers, if any, do students and parents talk about about when it comes to seeking support for mental health concerns?





Why This Topic Matters....

In 2017, Cambridge Public School Middle Grade Students took an anonymous Health Survey conducted by Cambridge Public Schools and the Cambridge Public Health Department. Data from the Mental Health component revealed that 17% of our Middle Grade Students felt hopeless or sad everyday, for two weeks, for the past year and 13% physically hurt themselves on purpose, thought about attempting suicide or tried to commit suicide.

This alarming data made me wonder, “Why would a student suppress these troublesome feelings”? and “Why didn’t these students reach out for mental health support”?



Research Participants

The target population for this study was middle grade students and their parents. Participants were recruited through their Health Class and a “Mental Health Awareness” night that focused on wellness promotion and mental health awareness.

Consent forms were distributed in English, Spanish, Haitian Creole, Bengali, Arabic, and Amharic.



Research Methods

In order to participate in the study, students and parents were asked to sign a consent form. 147 Students and 31 Parent/Guardians consented.

The student survey consisted of 10 questions based on a likert scale (Strongly Agree, Somewhat Agree, Neither Agree/Disagree, Somewhat Disagree and Strongly Disagree). In addition, there was also one write-in response.

The parent survey consisted of 14 questions, based on the same likert scale. The respondents completed their surveys online, at their own discretion.





An Overview of the Findings

- Students feel that they can identify when they need emotional/mental support.
- Students who need emotional/mental support are hesitant to seek adult help in school.
- Students struggle to find adults who can relate to how they're feeling; they also feel a lack of racial representation.
- Parents feel that the school does care about their child's mental health.



Student Survey Questions

1. I know when I need emotional support (e.g., I feel depressed, I feel anxious, I feel scared)
2. When I need emotional support, there is an adult at school who I can talk to honestly.
3. When I need emotional support, there is an adult outside of school who I can talk to honestly.
4. There is an adult at school that looks like me, that can relate to me.
5. I know how to access mental health support in school.
6. I can tell when I have a friend who needs emotional support.
7. When I have a friend who needs emotional support, I know how to help.
8. When I have a friend who needs emotional support, there is an adult at school who I can talk to honestly.
9. I think this school cares if students are happy.
10. I think this school cares if students are safe.
11. How many adults at your current school do you trust? (write in)



Parent/Guardian Survey Questions

1. I feel confident that I could identify warning signs in my own child for depression.
2. I feel confident that I could identify warning signs in my own child for anxiety/worry.
3. I feel confident that I could identify warning signs in my own child for self-harm.
4. I feel confident that I could identify warning signs in my own child for substance abuse.
5. I feel confident that I could identify warning signs in my own child if he/she was experiencing bullying or harassment at school.
6. I feel comfortable talking to my child about his or her mental health.
7. I understand what mental health supports are available at my child's school.
8. I can identify someone in my child's school to talk about his or her mental health.
9. I know how to access mental health supports for my child, through his/her/their school.
10. I know how to access mental health supports for my child outside of school.
11. I trust my child's school to support him/her/them with mental health.
12. I believe that my child's school cares about his/her/their mental health.
13. I trust my child's school to communicate with me if there is a mental health issue.
14. I can access emergency resources if someone needs help.



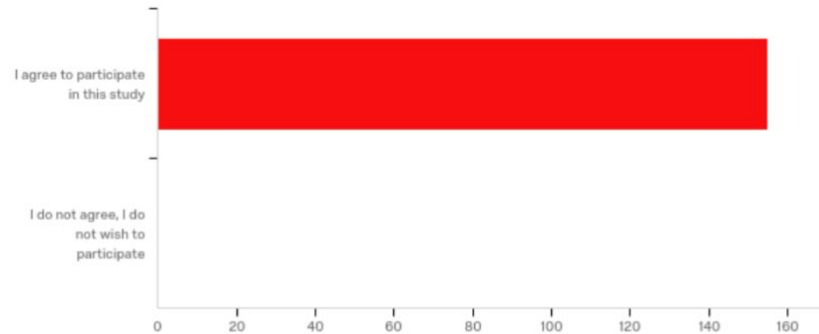
Limitations

Before sharing these findings, we want to note that *only one upper school was allowed to take the survey*. In addition, *parent surveys were distributed and collected on short notice, due to legal limitations*. Given this, our data analysis should be seen as preliminary but important for future exploration.



155 Student Participants

Assent - Hello Students! This survey is part of a study that is being conducted by a group of teachers



#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	Hello Students! This survey is part of a study that is being conducted by a group of teachers	1.00	1.00	1.00	0.00	0.00	155

Most students answered all questions.

#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	I know when I need emotional support (e.g., I feel depressed, I feel anxious, I feel scared).	1.00	5.00	2.09	0.89	0.79	147
2	When I need emotional support, there is an adult at school who I can talk to honestly.	1.00	5.00	2.80	1.28	1.63	147
3	When I need emotional support, there is an adult outside of school who I can talk to honestly.	1.00	5.00	2.07	1.31	1.72	146
4	There is an adult at school that looks like me, that can relate to me.	1.00	5.00	3.11	1.32	1.75	145
5	I know how to access mental health support in school.	1.00	5.00	2.46	1.14	1.31	147
6	I can tell when I have a friend who needs emotional support.	1.00	5.00	1.86	0.83	0.69	144
7	When I have a friend who needs emotional support, I know how to help.	1.00	5.00	2.12	0.98	0.96	145
8	When I have a friend who needs emotional support, there is an adult at school who I can talk to honestly.	1.00	5.00	2.52	1.17	1.37	147
9	I think this school cares if students are happy.	1.00	5.00	2.36	1.21	1.46	147
10	I think this school cares if students are safe.	1.00	5.00	1.77	0.97	0.94	147



Parent Demographics by Gender

Answer	%	Count
Male	23.68%	9
Female	71.05%	27
Transgender	2.63%	1
Gender Non-binary	2.63%	1
Other	0.00%	0
Total	100%	38

Parent Demographics by Race

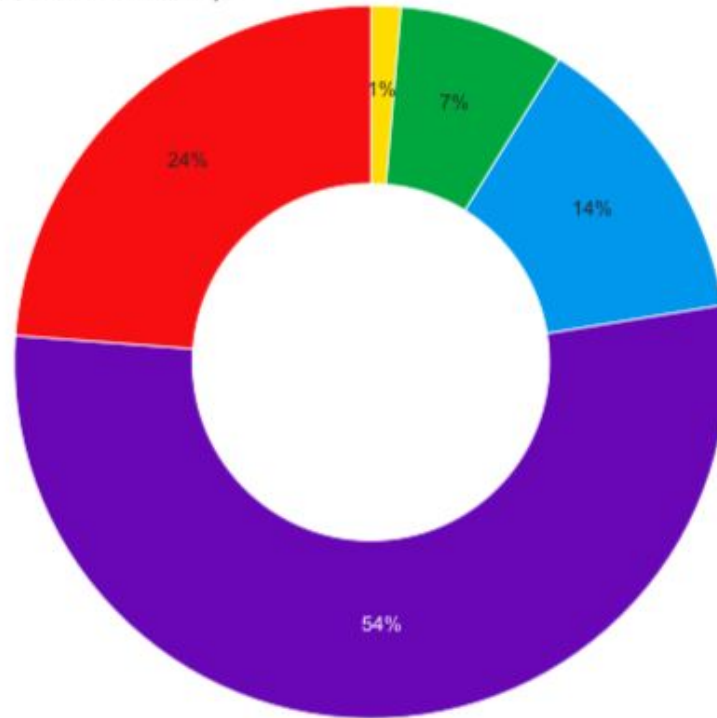
Answer	%	Count
White	82.05%	32
Hispanic or Latinx	0.00%	0
Black or African American	12.82%	5
Asian	0.00%	0
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0.00%	0
American Indian or Alaska Native	2.56%	1
Another race or ethnicity	2.56%	1
Total	100%	39



Finding #1 : Participants felt that could identify when they needed emotional/mental support

When students were asked if they knew when they needed emotional support (feeling depressed, anxious, scared), 78% responded that they could identify those feelings on their own.

Q2_1 - I know when I need emotional support (e.g., I feel depressed, I feel anxious, I feel scared).



Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

Finding #1: Student Survey

#	Question	Strongly agree		Somewhat agree		Neither agree nor disagree		Somewhat disagree		Strongly disagree		Total
1	I know when I need emotional support (e.g., I feel depressed, I feel anxious, I feel scared).	23.81%	35	53.74%	79	13.61%	20	7.48%	11	1.36%	2	147



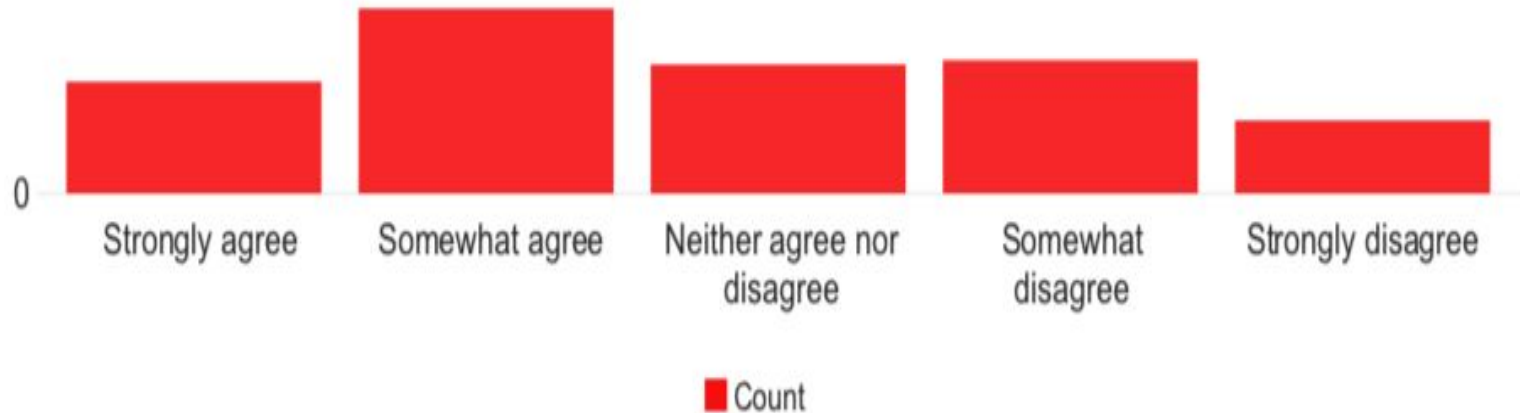
Finding #2: Students who need emotional or mental support are hesitant to seek adult help in school

When students were asked if there is an adult in school that they could talk to honestly, if they needed emotional/mental support;

- 48% said there is an adult they feel that they could talk to
- 33% said there is not an adult they feel that they could talk to
- 20% said that they were unsure if there is an adult that they can talk to

Finding #2: Student Survey

Q2_2 - When I need emotional support, there is an adult at school who I can talk to honestly.



Finding #2: Student Survey

#	Question	Strongly agree		Somewhat agree		Neither agree nor disagree		Somewhat disagree		Strongly disagree		Total
2	When I need emotional support, there is an adult at school who I can talk to honestly.	17.69%	26	29.25%	43	20.41%	30	21.09%	31	11.56%	17	147



Finding #3: Students struggle to find adults who can relate to how they're feeling; they also feel a lack of racial representation.

When students were asked if there is an adult at school that looks like them or can relate to them;

- **36% said that there is not an adult that looks like them or can relate them**
- **32% said there is an adult that looks like them or can relate to them**
- **31% were unsure.**

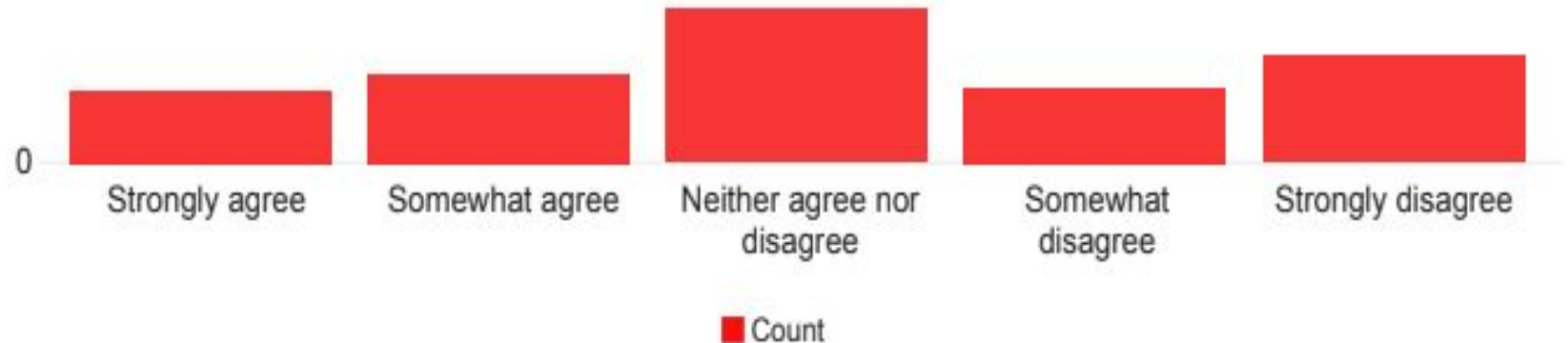


Finding #3: Student Survey

#	Question	Strongly agree		Somewhat agree		Neither agree nor disagree		Somewhat disagree		Strongly disagree		Total
4	There is an adult at school that looks like me, that can relate to me.	14.48%	21	17.93%	26	31.03%	45	15.17%	22	21.38%	31	145

Finding #3: Student Survey

Q2_4 - There is an adult at school that looks like me, that can relate to me.





Finding #4: Parents feel that the school does care about their child's mental health.

78% of parents agreed that they believe that the school cares about their child's mental health.

Finding #4: Parent Survey

#	Question	Strongly agree		Somewhat agree		Neither agree nor disagree		Somewhat disagree		Strongly disagree		Total
12	I believe that my child's school cares about his/her/their mental health.	51.35 %	19	27.03 %	10	8.11%	3	5.41%	2	8.11%	3	37



Implications for Future Research

- 1. Offer all Middle Grade students the opportunity to take the survey;*
- 2. Give parents the survey with more time to respond and more translations available.*
- 3. Ask for more detailed explanations from students for their responses.*



Implications for Practice

- 1. We need more guidance counselors and emotional/mental health support in the middle schools.*
- 2. We need more Mental Health Education for parents, students and staff.*
- 3. Students need to see their race be represented at a professional level.*