



Making Critical Participatory Action Research for All

Envisioning Restorative Spaces:
Opportunities and Challenges in the Next Wave Process Room



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in Partnership with Next Wave Students
Anthony, Jack, Vegas, and Zen, and staff Pauli Katz

About Us!

In 2024-2025, three Harvard graduate student researchers partnered with four students at Next Wave, an alternative therapeutic school for grades 6-8 in Somerville, MA, to co-facilitate the yearlong Student Equity and Action Team ("SEAT") elective, guiding students through a youth-led research project on a self-identified equity issue within their school.

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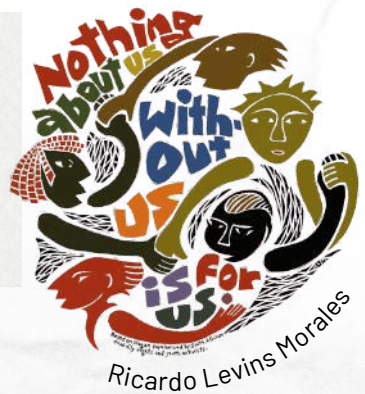
klara



by heart
collective

Mission: "Next Wave is a tight-knit school community for students who have experienced academic setbacks and benefit from a personalized approach to learning. We emphasize: Trusting Relationships, Authentic Learning Experiences, Growth Mindset and Student Voice and Choice, as essential components in our daily work."

Our project is grounded in the Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR) framework.



What is CPAR?

(Pronounce it: "See-Par")

Critical Participatory Action Research is a way for youth and adults to:

- ★ Speak up about problems in their lives
- ★ Research those problems together
- ★ Take action to make things fairer

(Brion-Meisels & Alter, 2018; Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Mirra, Garcia & Morrell, 2016)

CPAR is built on a powerful idea:

The people most affected by injustice should lead the research that helps fix it.

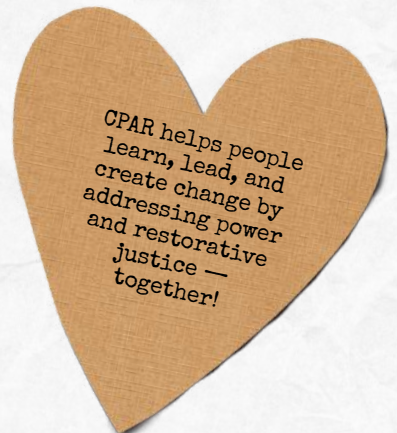
Michele Fine & Maria Torre (2019) describe it as:

"Research rooted in politics, power, participation, and a deep appreciation of knowledge, created in conditions of oppression and mobilized for social action."

Where CPAR comes from:

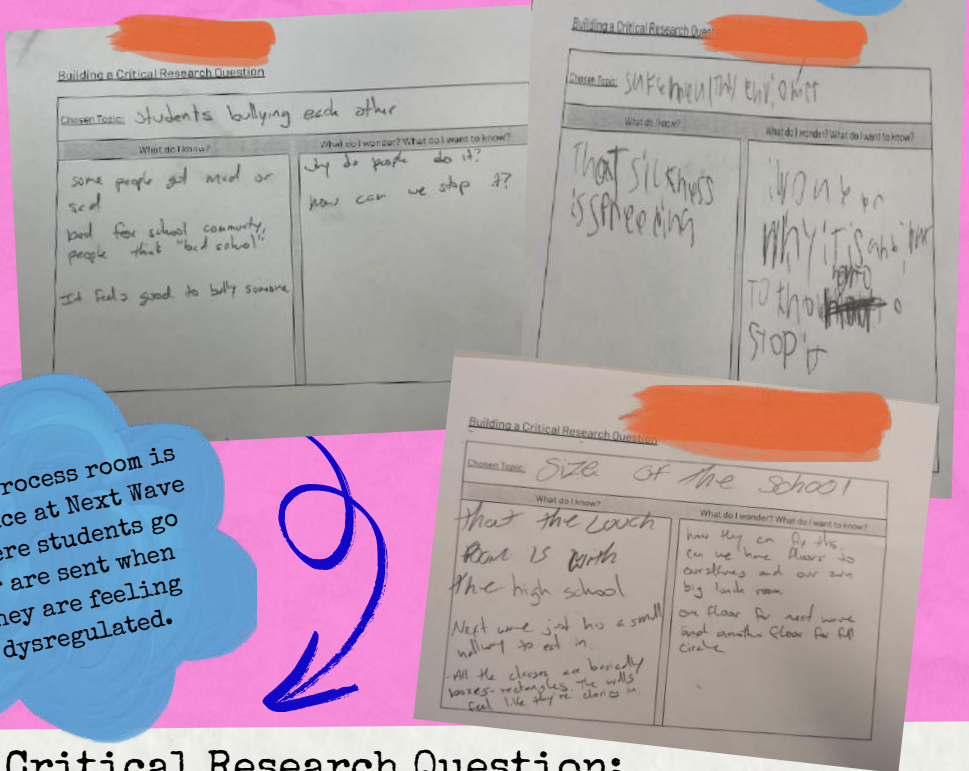
It's inspired by:

- ★ Popular education
- ★ Democratic participation
- ★ Critical + feminist theories



Our Process to Developing a Critical Research Question!

We talked about the problems in the Next Wave community!



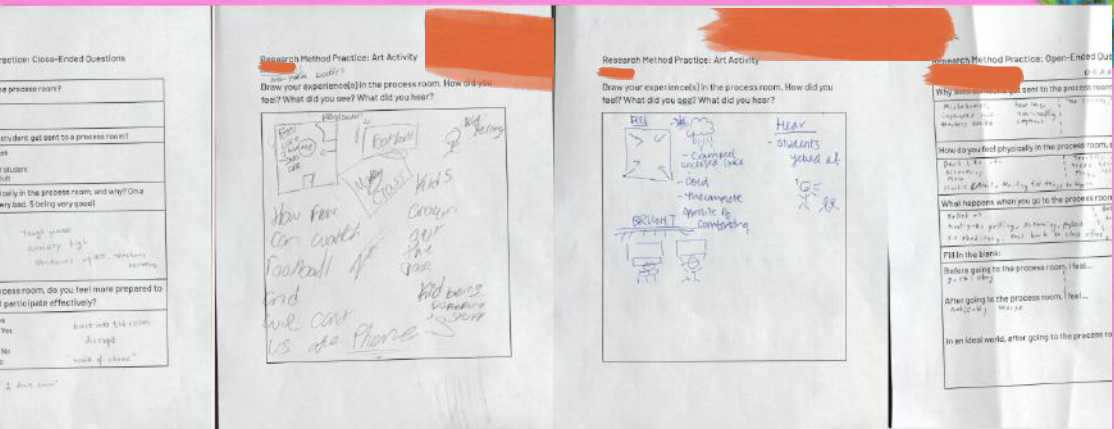
The process room is a space at Next Wave where students go or are sent when they are feeling dysregulated.

Critical Research Question:

How do **students and staff** at Next Wave describe their **experiences with policies and practices** related to the process room, as well as the **physical space** of the room? How do they find the process room helpful in taking a pause, self-regulating, and being able to participate in classes again?

How, if at all, might their stories help NWFC to **set up a process room as a resource that fully supports the school's mission?** ("Trusting Relationships, Authentic Learning Experiences, Growth Mindset and Student Voices and Choice")

We explored different research methods...



We asked the SEAT student researchers:

- What are the best methods that could help their classmates understand the scope of the research project and feel excited to participate?
- What would help them get the types of responses they were looking for to answer the research question?
- Were these methods accessible to everyone and their learning needs?
- What were the most feasible options in the time we had?

We ultimately came up with a **survey option for staff, all students** and an **art activity focus group** for students who may be able to express themselves best through visuals and describing their experiences verbally. We also decided to do six longer **interviews with staff** so we could get their thoughts in-depth and students could learn from their points of view.

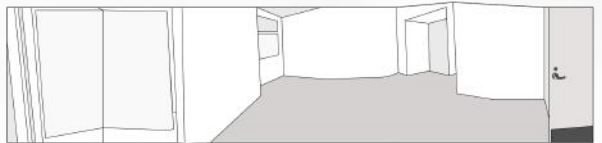
We also co-developed a codebook with the SEAT student researchers to use across all datasets! For example, we approached this by having SEAT students match different quotes from interviews to different "theme buckets, which became our codes.

Art Activity Focus Group

For the art activity, we recruited a focus group of five Next Wave students to share their perspectives. We went into the process room and placed sticky notes around to record what the students found helpful (green sticky notes) and unhelpful (pink sticky notes) in the space.



Then we went into Paul's room and drew and made annotations on large diagrams of the process room, re-imagining how it could better support students. Many of the sticky notes became codes for qualitative analysis that we used to understand the drawings, audio transcript, and other data.



2x3' photo of the process room, with translucent diagram to draw on layered on top

Findings

Our research findings fall into these categories:

- Goals of the process room: students vs. staff
- Effectiveness: students vs. staff
- Points of Tension: Let's Talk About It!
- Re-imagining the process room: process, policies, and the physical space

Using the Process Room



```
graph TD; A((student needs to leave class  
(voluntary or involuntary))) --> B((teacher calls process room staff  
to give context)); B --> C((student calms down and  
reflects on what happened)); C --> D((student returns to class)); D --> A;
```

student
returns to
class

student needs to
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(voluntary or
involuntary)

teacher calls
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student calms
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happened

Goals of the process room

- Space to reflect on what brought students there
- Space to calm down and return to class
- Space for restorative justice: reflecting on behavior, taking accountability, resolving conflict, and making a plan for the future

Points of disagreement:
students sometimes use the process room to socialize, avoid class, or sleep.

Student Voice:

“ I wish they have bean bags [in the process room] and stuff cuz then I would be in there more.

” We want a calming atmosphere with more comfortable seating; a place to sleep.

Staff Voice:

“ I don't think the process room is a place that you should want to hang out in.

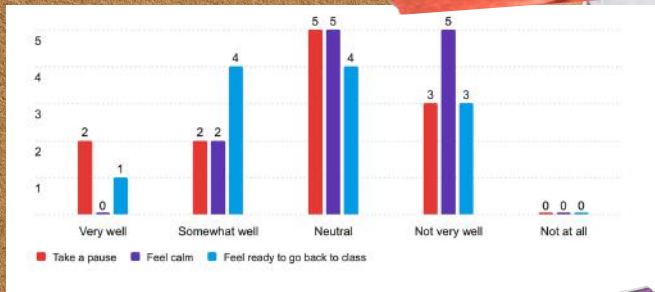
” I like not having it be too comfortable because I don't want kids to go in and sleep. The beanbags that used to be in there were not working.

Effectiveness of the process room

STUDENT SURVEY:

The process room is intended to help students take a pause, feel calm, and get ready to go back to class. How well does it help you do that?

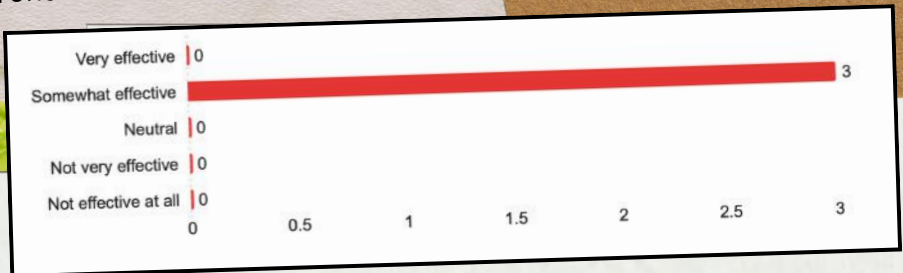
Students: An overwhelming majority of student respondents shared that they DO NOT feel strongly that the process room helps them with "taking a pause," "feeling calm" or "feeling ready to go back to class."



STAFF SURVEY,

same question, different answer...

Staff: staff survey respondents unanimously agreed that the process room is "somewhat effective" in helping students "take a pause," "feel calm" or "feel ready to go back to class."



Let's Talk About It!

Some findings show opportunities for students and staff to collaborate on a more aligned vision for the process room.

Student Voice:

“ I want [adults] to stop yelling at us and starting arguments with kids. They are adults, they should be mature. ”

When you get sent out for five minutes you end up staying here for like the whole rest of class. ”

“ I need to process. I don't want to hear loud videos from [adult's] phone. ”

The kids p*ss you off a lot. I wish there were cubbies... so you don't have to argue with other people. ”

Staff Voice:

“ I think it would be helpful if clinical staff had rotations in there without [the dean of students], so that he wasn't always seen as the bad guy. ”

It's like a fishbowl. There's windows all around. If a kid goes in there, they end up being the center of attention because of the way the room is set up. And there's really no problem-solving around it. It's a general problem that we have in this building. ”

“ I don't think that there's a lot of [student] voice and choice in the process room right now. It's one of the places that has the most rules and expectations with how you should and shouldn't act. ”

So typically, as a dean, it tends to be a more disciplinary role as he's technically admin. And so if it's really egregious behavior, I allow him to manage that. ”

Desired Changes in the Process Room

Staff & Student Voices:

“

Staff: Make it larger, more comforting, more calming, but mainly just larger space.

”

Staff: It's not always possible to have the student and the person process together.

“

Student: I hate this white mental institution-looking room!

”

Student: A calmer atmosphere, with more comfortable seating. (The current arrangement is that cushioned chairs are reserved for staff due to, as far as I can tell, for punitive reasons.)


Desired changes fell in two main categories: Process and Physical Space

Process:

- ★ More consistent communication between teachers and the process room staff.
- ★ A restorative justice practice that engages both the student and the other party after conflicts.
- ★ At least two staff present at all times.
- ★ A realignment on what the reflection process looks like. The current reflection sheet is not meeting all students' needs.

Physical Space:

- ★ There is a desire from both students and staff for the process room to be a calmer and more comfortable environment.
- ★ There is a strong need for more comfortable seating for students.
- ★ There is a strong need for privacy for students processing.
- ★ The process room is not big enough.



Short-Term Recommendations

GET ON THE SAME PAGE

Convene an action-oriented listening circle where students and staff commit to shared goals of the process room and reimagine a process room that meets everyone's needs.

INCORPORATE STAFF

Design a process for teachers to participate in the restorative justice that takes place in the process room once harm has been done. This will create an opportunity for empathy building.

CHANGE THE MOOD

Implement low-lift physical changes to the process room space to make the environment more calming and comfortable. For example, more comfortable seating, decorations, warm lighting, privacy blinds/curtains, plants, essential oil diffuser, etc.

Long-Term Recommendations

FUND MORE STAFFING

Secure funding for more staffing for the process room. Many staff mentioned the need for at least two staff present at once to meet student needs

RENOVATE PROCESS ROOM

Securing funds for a process room renovation that is conducive to privacy and restorative justice. The data calls for more soundproofing, wall painting, or even expanding the whole structure of the school in the Somerville High School basement!

GET BIGGERS SPACE

Advocating to the Somerville School Committee and City Council for a bigger space for NWFC, and the process room as well. Perhaps a move to the 1865 building next door?!

Trauma-Informed Design

Trauma-informed design is an approach that takes seriously people's needs—from all five senses—to create more comfortable, calming, and restorative spaces.

(Wunderfund 2023, "Trauma Informed Design Toolkit: Guidelines for Creating Trauma Informed Interior Spaces," 5)

Students need spaces that are...

Calming

Creative

Embodied

Private



Credit: Sophia Brion-Meisels WIN Spaces



Key Guidelines of Trauma-Informed Design

- **Light:** natural or low lighting
- **Color:** soothing and natural colors
- **Layout:** clear sight lines for openness and lack of clutter
- **Art:** culturally-relevant art
- **Furniture:** comfortable is a must!
- **Accessories:** pillows, fidgets, and books help people distract and connect
- **Understanding the user:** who will be spending time in the space, and why?

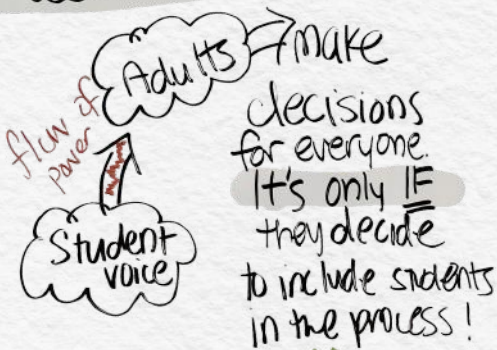
(Wunderfund 2023, "Trauma Informed Design Toolkit: Guidelines for Creating Trauma Informed Interior Spaces," 7)

Challenges and Limitations of Research

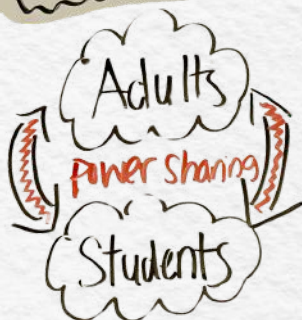
- There weren't many people to sample from, so the results might not show what a bigger group would think or experience.
 - N = 22 students in total
 - N = 12 student survey responses
 - N = 5 student participants in the art activity
- Low survey response rate from staff
 - N = 14 in total
 - N = 5 responses
- The Dean of Students was in the process room during the art activity, which could deter students from sharing their truths.
- The Harvard CPAR researchers' lack of trusting relationships with student focus group participants – it was the first time we got to know each other – may have influenced the data.

Lessons Learned: We Need to Shift Adult Power Structures!

The Current Narrative

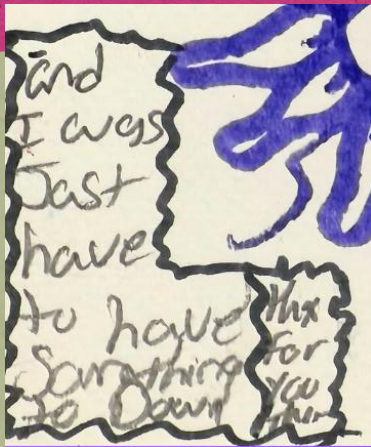
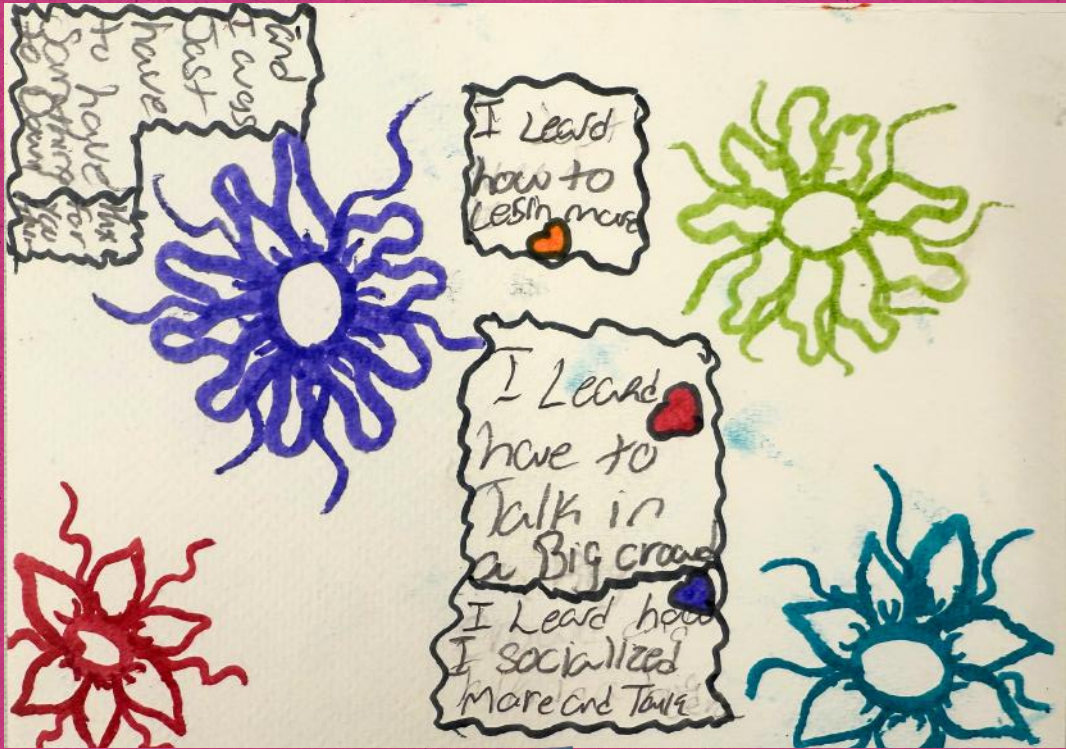


Flipping the Narrative



We are creating a symbiotic relationship dynamic for critical decision-making!

Lessons and Takeaways from Next Wave SEAT Students



"I learned to be comfortable speaking in front of big groups, and sticking to a project for a long time!"

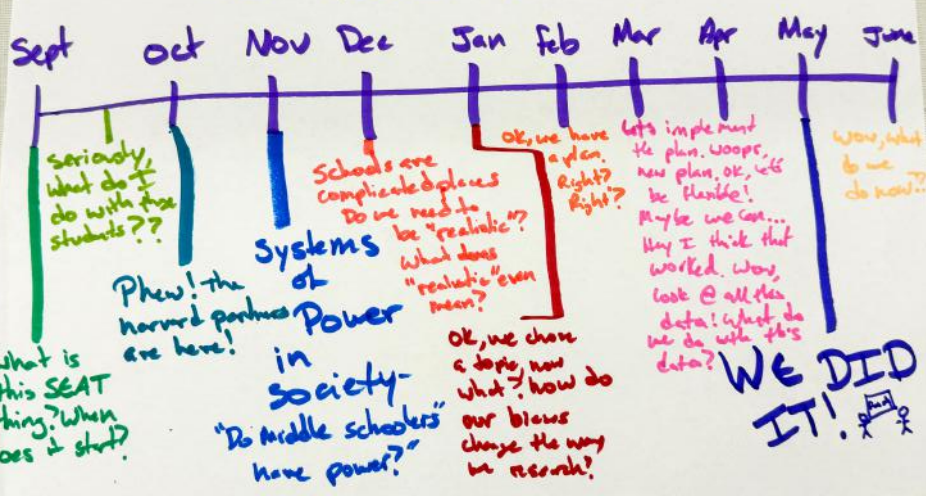
- a casual environment (e.g. snacks)
- the supportive assistance persons



"I used to think that students didn't care, and now I think that we can actually make a positive change in our community!"

& Next Wave SEAT Teacher

The Partner Teacher View





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With Love,
Karen, Klara, and Nadia



STUDENT EQUITY ACTION TEAM,
NEXT WAVE, SOMERVILLE, MASS.
2024-2025

by heart collective

Our mission is to collaborate with learners* of all ages and walks of life to shift power. We co-design liberatory educational spaces, tools, and research methods - with people, not just for them.

*We believe that if you are alive to this world, you are a learner.

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