

FULL-LENGTH ARTICLES

Beyond Recruitment: Developing Relational Pathways for Participation Through a Dance Club in Critical Engaging Participatory Action Research

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This paper examines how a dance club functioned as a creative, embodied, and arts-based strategy to engage culturally diverse youth during the early familiarisation stage in a Critical Engaging Participatory Action Research (CEPAR). Conducted at a multicultural secondary school in Melbourne, Australia, the project centres the voices of second-generation African Australian (SGAA) students in rethinking what critical and transformative student engagement can look like in schooling. The paper focuses on the process of entering the research context as an outsider and the steps taken to invite young people into the study. In particular, it examines how the dance club emerged, developed and contributed to establishing a community-engaged relationship with young people. The paper outlines the familiarisation and recruitment stages, highlighting how communicative spaces were intentionally created to build trust, foster connection, and support participation. Rather than treating early research stages such as recruitment as a technical process, it is approached as a relational and evolving process grounded in care for participants' needs and experiences. The Afro dance club provided a space of cultural recognition where students connected through movement, rhythm, and shared expression. Within this environment, participants and researchers co-constructed a sense of belonging, disrupted hierarchical dynamics, and created opportunities for student leadership and collaboration. Reflecting on this process, the paper identifies key lessons about the importance of trust-building, cultural relevance, flexibility, and the sensitivity and skill required to develop community-engaged partnerships with young people. It demonstrates how relational and arts-based strategies can create engaging pathways into research while supporting more equitable and authentic participation when conducting research with young people.

Introduction

Youth from refugee-background families entering Australian schools bring rich cultural knowledge, diverse linguistic repertoires, and multiple ways of knowing that can enrich learning communities and broaden perspectives. However, their voices are frequently overlooked or misrepresented in educational research, particularly for those from African diasporic backgrounds (Keddie, 2012; Molla, 2021). This marginalisation is often

reinforced through deficit-based and homogenising approaches that fail to recognise students' histories, strengths, and contributions (Keddie, 2012). The gap is especially pronounced for second-generation (Koehler & Schneider, 2019; Pillay & Asadi, 2018) and in particular for African Australian youth, whose perspectives remain underrepresented despite offering important insights into educational engagement.

Participatory Action Research (PAR) has been widely recognised as a powerful approach for addressing inequities by centring participants' voices and fostering socially just practices (Fals-Borda, 2006). Research also highlights the value of PAR when working with young people, including its capacity to support voice, agency, and trauma-informed engagement (Denov & Shevell, 2019). Within this literature, arts-based approaches are most often positioned as methods for data collection or representation. Less attention has been given to how relational, arts-based, and community-engaged practices may support the early stages of participatory research, such as familiarisation and recruitment. More broadly, youth participation in these early stages remains limited, with only 5–7% of YPAR projects involving young people in recruitment or the development of research tools (Malorni et al., 2022). Together, these gaps highlight the limited attention given to arts-based and relational approaches during the initial stages of PAR.

This paper draws on a broader partnership project between Monash University and Melbourne Archdiocese Catholic Schools (MACS), developed in response to concerns regarding student engagement among culturally diverse student cohorts in Australian Catholic schooling contexts. Within this broader project, particular attention was given to second-generation African Australian students, whose experiences and perspectives remain largely absent within educational engagement research. Drawing on my doctoral study, which developed the Critical Engaging Participatory Action Research (CEPAR) approach, the research sought to create communicative spaces for reflection and co-creation through which students could collaboratively explore the conditions shaping their educational engagement. CEPAR positions young people not as passive recipients of education but as active contributors and knowledge producers capable of influencing educational practices and structures. This paper specifically examines how the Dance Club functioned as a relational and community-engaged strategy during the familiarisation and recruitment stages of this CEPAR with second-generation African Australian students. Rather than evaluating the dance club itself as an intervention outcome, the paper focuses on how culturally responsive and embodied practices created communicative pathways through which trust, participation, and collaborative engagement gradually became possible within the research process.

Building trust and creating spaces where young people feel comfortable to engage can require significant time, presence, and relational labour, particularly in contexts where students may feel disconnected from schooling or hesitant to participate in research (Luguetti et al., 2022). Prior to

establishing the dance club, multiple efforts were made to invite participation, including school observations, conversations with home teachers, announcements through school communication channels, and invitations to socialisation sessions. However, these initial strategies generated little engagement, with few students attending or expressing interest in participating in the research. This paper examines how the Dance Club emerged as a community-engaged and relational space through which trust, connection, and participation was gradually formed prior to data collection. The dance club was not the object of the research itself; rather, it functioned as a communicative and embodied space through which relationships were developed and sustained. Through collective participation grounded in students' cultural interests and experiences, the club created opportunities for connection, leadership, dialogue, and belonging.

My own experiences and understanding of belonging also shaped the development of this research. As a Latina and Mestiza researcher from Colombia, I have long understood dance, music, and collective cultural expression as important ways through which communities create connection, memory, and belonging. Afro-Colombian rhythms and dance traditions have been part of my own cultural experiences and embodied ways of relating to others, shaping how I understood participation, community, and engagement beyond formal institutional spaces. These experiences informed my sensitivity to the importance of culturally meaningful spaces within schools, particularly after students expressed that they rarely encountered Afro-diasporic music, dance, or cultural representation within school activities and arts curricula, which they often described as centred around predominantly "white" cultural references and practices. Listening to these experiences reinforced the importance of creating spaces where students could feel recognised, represented, and connected through forms of cultural expression that resonated with their identities and lived experience (Major et al., 2013).

In this paper, I examine how participatory action research with young people relies on community-engaged relationships developed through critical reflexivity and care-centred research practices viewed through Nancy Fraser's (2008) social justice framework of recognition, redistribution, and representation (Callingham, 2019; Chou et al., 2015). Students played an active role in shaping the space by offering advice, supporting activities, and contributing to decision-making processes, positioning them not simply as participants but as leaders and collaborators. In facilitating the Dance club, I drew on practices of recognition, redistribution, and representation by valuing students' cultural knowledge and experiences, creating opportunities for shared participation and leadership, and ensuring students' voices informed the development of the space (Fraser, 2008). Grounded in students' unique needs and experiences (Veck, 2013), the Dance club fostered familiarity, trust, and connection over time while creating more critical and transformative pathways into engagement (McMahon & Portelli, 2004). The paper further demonstrates how relational approaches during the early stages

of research can support more equitable and authentic engagement with young people. First, the paper discusses student engagement within a social justice framework and outlines the principles of CEPAR. It then contextualises the research setting and examines the challenges encountered during the familiarisation and recruitment stages. Finally, the paper reflects on the development of the Afro Dance Club as a relational strategy for community engagement and considers its implications for participatory research with young people.

Student Engagement and Social Justice

Student engagement is widely recognised as a key factor influencing students' learning, wellbeing, and educational outcomes (Molla, 2021; Quin, 2019). It is commonly conceptualised across behavioural, emotional, and cognitive dimensions, often measured through indicators such as participation, motivation, and academic performance (Bond et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2019).

While these approaches provide important insights into students' participation in schooling, they often position engagement within technical and managerial frameworks that prioritise compliance, performance, and measurable outcomes (Zyngier, 2021). As a result, limited attention is given to the relational, cultural, and political dimensions of engagement, particularly students' agency, voice, and participation in shaping their educational experiences (Cook-Sather, 2020; Mitra, 2018). From a critical perspective, engagement cannot be understood as an individual attribute alone; rather, it is produced through the interaction between students and schooling environments that may or may not recognise and value their identities, experiences, and ways of knowing (Keddie, 2020; Zyngier, 2021).

Framing student engagement as a social justice issue shifts attention from individual deficits to the structural conditions that enable or constrain participation (Callingham, 2019). This is particularly significant for students from refugee-background and African diasporic communities, who frequently encounter deficit discourses that marginalise their cultural identities, linguistic practices, and lived experiences within schooling contexts (Keddie, 2012; Molla, 2021). For second-generation African Australian youth, these dynamics are further shaped by intersecting experiences of race, identity, and belonging, despite their perspectives remaining underrepresented within educational research (Koehler & Schneider, 2019; Pillay & Asadi, 2018). Research that fails to engage with their lived experiences risks reproducing homogenising narratives and overlooking the relational dimensions of engagement, including how students negotiate belonging, recognition, and participation within schools.

In response, this study adopts a critical and relational approach to engagement that positions students as active contributors and knowledge producers capable of shaping understandings of schooling and participation (McMahon & Portelli, 2004). Drawing on participatory and socially just perspectives, engagement is understood not simply as participation in

predefined school activities, but as the co-construction of relationships and communicative spaces where students feel recognised, valued, and able to contribute meaningfully to collective dialogue and inquiry (Freire, 1998; Zyngier, 2003). This perspective underpins the participatory and relational focus of the study, particularly during the familiarisation and recruitment stages of the research process.

Participatory action research and students engagement

Understanding engagement in schooling as a socially constructed phenomenon has prompted growing interest in participatory research approaches (Callingham, 2019; Chou et al., 2015).

Such approaches are grounded in the premise that participation can cultivate a sense of agency among young people and school communities, enabling them to act as co-creators of knowledge rather than passive subjects of inquiry (Chou et al., 2015). Within the field of refugee education, scholars have further emphasised the importance of centring the voices of students from refugee backgrounds as a form of restorative and ethical practice aimed at redressing historical exclusions (Denov & Shevell, 2019). This perspective foregrounds the importance of building relationships grounded in trust, recognition, and mutual respect. Engagement is not simply about participation in predefined activities but about the co-construction of relationships and learning experiences grounded in a humanistic approach that values students as whole individuals with diverse identities, experiences, aspirations, and capacities (Zyngier, 2021). These approaches emphasise the importance of trust, recognition, dialogue, and shared participation in creating conditions where young people feel able to engage voluntarily and collaboratively within the research process (Luguetti et al., 2022).

CEPAR is grounded in the concept of communicative spaces, as articulated by Habermas (2006) and further developed within critical participatory research traditions (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). This study draws on Critical Engaging Participatory Action Research (CEPAR), my methodological framework developed to foreground both critical reflection and relational engagement within participatory research. CEPAR extends Participatory Action Research (PAR) by emphasising that participation cannot be assumed through formal invitations or procedural inclusion alone. Instead, engagement is understood as an ongoing relational process requiring trust-building, familiarity, and communicative spaces where participants feel recognised, respected, and able to contribute from their own experiences.

Central to CEPAR is the development of communicative spaces that support dialogue, collaboration, and co-creation through practices of recognition, redistribution, and representation (Fraser, 2008). Within this framework, recognition involves valuing students' cultural identities, experiences, and forms of knowledge; redistribution involves creating more equitable conditions for participation; and representation involves supporting opportunities for students' voices and perspectives to shape the research process. CEPAR therefore places particular emphasis on relationality, cultural

responsiveness, and the ethical dimensions of participation, especially when working with young people from culturally and linguistically diverse and historically marginalised communities.

Three key premises underpin the CEPAR approach. First, it involves engaging with participants' intersecting social identities, recognising how experiences of race, migration, culture, and belonging shape their engagement with schooling. Second, it prioritises iterative and non-linear cycles of reflection and co-creation, aimed at fostering parity of participation and shared ownership of the research process. Third, it incorporates interventions grounded in critical pedagogies, such as problem-posing and heart-storming, to support collective inquiry and the generation of transformative alternatives. Across these premises, CEPAR foregrounds the political and relational dimensions of engagement, highlighting how interactions and shared experiences can open possibilities for critical dialogue and social change.

Importantly, CEPAR also requires ongoing critical reflexivity, particularly when entering the research field as an outsider. In this study, my position as an outsider required careful attention to positionality, power relations, and the conditions necessary for building trust and supporting meaningful student voice and participation. Consequently, the research process was iterative and adaptive, requiring flexibility, responsiveness, and, at times, risk-taking. Early stages of the study, particularly pre-engagement and recruitment, were understood as central to developing communicative spaces. It was within this context that the Afro Dance Club emerged as a communicative and embodied space through which relationships, familiarity, and participation could gradually develop prior to formal engagement in the broader research project.

Relationality and Recruitment in Participatory Action Research

Recruitment within Participatory Action Research (PAR) extends beyond the procedural task of identifying participants and obtaining consent. Because PAR is grounded in collaboration, dialogue, and collective action, the process of recruitment is inherently relational and forms part of the broader ethical and methodological foundations of the research (Malorni et al., 2022).

Meaningful participation cannot be assumed simply through invitation; rather, it requires the development of trust, reciprocity, and mutual recognition (Burke & Hadley, 2018). This is particularly important when working with young people whose voices have historically been marginalised within educational and research contexts (Malorni et al., 2022). As such, recruitment in PAR must be understood not as a discrete stage preceding the “real” research, but as an integral process through which communicative spaces are initially formed.

Despite its significance, recruitment remains underreported in qualitative and participatory research literature. Kristensen and Ravn (2015) argue that recruitment processes are frequently overlooked within methodological discussions, often reduced to brief procedural descriptions rather than

critically examined as relational and ethical practices. While recent scholarship has begun to pay greater attention to recruitment in qualitative research (Giorgi, 2021; Turner & Almack, 2017), there remains limited discussion regarding how recruitment is enacted within PAR, particularly with young people. This is reflected in YPAR literature, where only 5–7% of projects involve young people in early-stage processes such as recruitment and the development of research tools (Malorni et al., 2022). This absence is important because the ways researchers enter communities, establish relationships, and invite participation can significantly shape both the research process and the possibilities for critical and transformative engagement.

Relationality is therefore central to participatory research with young people (Malorni et al., 2022). Building relationships involves more than establishing rapport; it requires creating conditions in which participants feel recognised, respected, and safe to contribute their perspectives (Grant et al., 2011; Ortega-Williams et al., 2018). For young people from culturally and linguistically diverse and refugee-background communities, participation in research may be influenced by prior experiences of exclusion, institutional mistrust, or deficit representations within schools and broader society (Kaukko et al., 2022). In these contexts, relational engagement becomes foundational to participation itself (Malorni et al., 2022). Processes of trust-building, shared experience, and ongoing presence are essential in creating spaces where young people can engage voluntarily (Burke & Hadley, 2018).

These relational considerations are especially significant when researchers enter educational spaces as outsiders (McDougall & Henderson-Brooks, 2021). Adult researchers often occupy positions of authority that can reproduce existing school hierarchies and shape how students perceive research participation (Aldana et al., 2016). Negrin et al. (2022) distinguish between active and passive recruitment strategies, noting that active approaches (e.g., face-to-face engagement and direct interaction) are more effective for building trust and participation, whereas passive methods (e.g., posters, consent forms, and teacher referrals) may be less effective when used alone. While such strategies remain necessary in qualitative research, relying on them alone may limit opportunities for authentic engagement (Bonisteel et al., 2021). Participatory research therefore requires researchers to critically reflect on how relationships are initiated and sustained, and how young people are invited into the research process in ways that are responsive to their experiences and contexts (Malorni et al., 2022).

Arts-Based Methods and Participatory Action Research Approaches

Arts-based approaches in Participatory Action Research (PAR) offer powerful pathways for engaging participants in processes of reflection, expression, and knowledge generation (Leavy, 2020). By integrating creative practices in action research researchers can access experiences, emotions, and perspectives that may be difficult to articulate through conventional verbal or written methods (Castillo & Rojas, 2014; Harper & Gubrium, 2017).

Within PAR, art-based methods align closely with principles of co-creation, as they invite participants to actively shape the research process, collaboratively interpret meaning, and contribute to the generation of knowledge in ways that centre their voices and lived experiences (Kindon et al., 2007; Leavy, 2020).

Traditionally, arts-based approaches have often been treated primarily as tools for data collection, producing artefacts that are later analysed by researchers (Leavy, 2020). In this study, however, I recognised the potential to extend the use of arts-based methods beyond data production, incorporating them as integral components of the participatory process itself. In particular, the Afro dance club was envisioned not only as a site for creative expression and knowledge generation but also as a strategy for engaging participants and co-creating relational spaces that encouraged young people to engage meaningfully with the research from the outset (Kindon et al., 2007).

Dance, more specifically, has been recognised within youth and community-based research as an embodied and relational practice capable of fostering participation, connection, confidence, and collective engagement (Jones & Deutsch, 2011). Unlike approaches that rely primarily on verbal dialogue, dance creates opportunities for interaction through movement, shared rhythms, collaboration, and collective expression, allowing participants to connect in ways that may feel more accessible, culturally meaningful, and emotionally safe. Research has shown that shared artistic and embodied activities can strengthen relational ties, support trust-building, and create opportunities for young people to participate more actively within community and educational spaces (Jones & Deutsch, 2011).

Within many African cultural traditions, dance is not understood solely as performance or entertainment, but as a communal and relational practice connected to collective identity, belonging, and shared participation (Maluleke, 2024). Drawing on the philosophy of Ubuntu, dance can function as an embodied expression of interconnectedness and community, reinforcing the idea that identity is formed through relationships with others (Bakka et al., 2024). In this study, collective participation in dance created opportunities for students to connect through shared cultural expression, fostering familiarity, social cohesion, and relational engagement within the communicative space, while also helping to build the relational foundations necessary for voluntary participation and the recruitment of participants into the broader PAR research project.

Research Context and Project Overview

This study was conducted in a culturally and linguistically diverse Catholic secondary school in Melbourne, Australia. The school serves a large population of students from refugee-background and migrant families, including a significant number of students from African diasporic communities. The research emerged through a partnership between Monash University and Melbourne Archdiocese Catholic Schools (MACS), developed in response to growing concerns regarding student engagement and

educational participation among culturally diverse student cohorts. Within this broader initiative, attention was drawn to the experiences of students from refugee-background communities and African diasporic backgrounds, particularly second-generation African Australian students, whose perspectives remain significantly underrepresented within educational research despite their growing presence within Australian schools.

The broader project sought to better understand the educational experiences, needs, and forms of engagement of these student cohorts in order to identify more inclusive and socially just ways of supporting them within schooling contexts. At the institutional level, concerns had been raised regarding patterns of disengagement among particular student cohorts, often identified through attendance, participation, wellbeing, and academic performance indicators. However, these understandings of engagement tended to be framed through behavioural and performance-based measures, with limited opportunities for students to contribute their own perspectives and experiences regarding schooling and engagement.

As part of this broader project, I identified a significant gap in relation to the inclusion of students' voices within existing research and school-based understandings of engagement. In response, I developed a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach informed by the principles of Critical Engaging Participatory Action Research (CEPAR). The project initially sought to generate communicative spaces for reflection, dialogue, and co-creation through which second-generation African Australian students could collaboratively explore the practice architectures (PAs) that enabled and constrained their educational engagement. Central to this approach was the positioning of students as active contributors and knowledge producers capable of shaping understandings of engagement and informing possibilities for change within the school context.

The broader doctoral study was informed by the Theory of Practice Architectures (Kemmis et al., 2014), which guided analysis of the cultural-discursive, material-economic, and social-political arrangements shaping students' educational engagement within the school context. Multiple forms of qualitative data were generated across the project, including fieldnotes, observations, reflective journals, informal conversations, participatory activities, and co-creative sessions with students.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained through Monash University and Melbourne Archdiocese Catholic Schools (MACS). Participation was voluntary, and careful attention was given to ensuring that students experienced no actual or perceived pressure to participate. A cooling-off period was provided between initial expressions of interest and formal consent procedures, and participation in the Afro Dance Club was not dependent on participation in the research. Written parent or guardian consent and student assent were obtained prior to participation and securely

Figure 1. Examples of familiarisation and observation spaces during the initial research phase

School space/activity	Key observations related to interaction opportunities
Classroom observations	Opportunities for direct interaction with students remained limited; students often questioned the researcher's presence rather than initiating engagement.
Chess Club	Low student participation reduced opportunities for sustained interaction and relationship-building.
Sports activities	Informal peer interactions appeared stronger and more relaxed than classroom engagement, although opportunities for deeper researcher–student interaction remained limited.
Breakfast Club	Relaxed and low-pressure interactions created some opportunities for informal conversation and relationship-building; however, the space operated only for a short period before classes, limiting opportunities for extended conversations with students.

recorded. Conversations presented in this paper draw primarily on interactions with key student leaders who voluntarily chose to participate in the research.

This paper focuses specifically on the familiarisation and recruitment stages of the research and draws primarily on observational fieldnotes, reflexive journals, informal interactions, dance sessions, and discussions with students and staff. Analysis involved an iterative and reflexive review of these materials to identify relational patterns, practices, and tensions shaping participation, trust-building, belonging, and engagement within the development of the Afro Dance Club. The analysis was interpretive and informed by CEPAR, relational participatory methodologies, and the Theory of Practice Architectures.

Identifying Relational Pathways for Engagement

The initial stages of the research focused on developing familiarity with the school environment and understanding the social, cultural, and relational dynamics shaping students' experiences within the site. To support familiarisation within the school community, I maintained a sustained presence within the research site over approximately three months, participating in a range of formal and informal school activities. These included breakfast club activities, celebration events, lunchtime programs, sports activities, classroom observations, and extracurricular clubs operating during break times or after school. [Figure 1](#) provides examples of the initial school spaces and activities observed during the familiarisation phase. These spaces provided important insight into the relational and cultural dynamics shaping students' participation and engagement within the school environment. In relation to the focus of this paper, they also enabled the identification of potential pathways for fostering voluntary participation, trust-building, and more relational forms of engagement that could support the familiarisation and recruitment stages of the participatory research process.

While these experiences provided valuable insight into everyday school practices, they also highlighted the complexities of entering the school as an external researcher whose intersecting positionalities, including my role as an adult researcher, migrant Latina woman, and outsider to the school

community in Melbourne influenced how relationships and participation were negotiated within the research site. Positioned largely as an observer within classrooms and school activities, opportunities for direct interaction with students remained limited. On several occasions, I approached students informally during breaks or after activities to introduce myself, ask questions about school life, or invite them to participate in the research. Most interactions remained brief, with students often responding with short answers before disengaging from the conversation or returning to their peer groups. At times, students questioned who I was or whether I was connected to school authority structures.

These interactions revealed how institutional arrangements, adult authority, and outsider positioning shaped possibilities for participation and relational engagement within the school context. Access to the school site alone did not automatically create familiarity, trust, or reciprocal interaction with students. Instead, participation appeared closely connected to the development of relational practices through which students could gradually feel recognised, comfortable, and safe to engage on their own terms.

At the same time, initial recruitment efforts generated very limited engagement. Information about the project was shared through school announcements, emails to teachers, posts on the school website, informal conversations with staff and students, and visits to home room classes where I introduced myself and explained my intention to listen to students' experiences of engagement and disengagement in schooling through a participatory action research approach. During these visits, I emphasised that the project sought to create opportunities for students to collaboratively reflect on and explore their schooling experiences in ways that centred their voices and perspectives. Despite these efforts, no students attended the research information and socialisation sessions. This became an important moment of reflection regarding the tensions between institutional forms of recruitment and the relational aims of participatory research. It raised concerns about recruitment approaches that relied heavily on teacher-directed participation or formal institutional invitations, which risked reproducing hierarchical power dynamics and forms of pressured engagement that were inconsistent with the participatory intentions of the project. Instead, the findings suggested that more relational, culturally meaningful, and low-pressure forms of engagement were necessary for creating conditions where students could participate voluntarily and collaboratively within the research process.

A significant turning point during this phase occurred through conversations with teachers and Cultural and Diversity Leaders, who identified several students from African diasporic backgrounds who were widely recognised within peer networks as socially influential and well-connected students, despite not occupying formal leadership roles within the school. Initial informal conversations with these students became important relational entry points into the school community. Through more informal

discussions, I introduced the broader aims of the research and listened to students' perspectives regarding school life, participation, belonging, and cultural representation. Among the first students who engaged voluntarily in the research were Pita a Year 11 student from a South Sudanese background, and Sikita, a socially connected Year 7 student who was well known across peer groups. Other students, including Sadia and Palek also became important early participants through their willingness to engage in conversations about school experiences, friendships, music, and cultural identity. Although these students did not occupy formal leadership roles within the school, they held important forms of peer influence within their social networks. Over time, they played a key role in encouraging other students to participate and helping create more welcoming and socially comfortable spaces for engagement. These early experiences highlighted the importance of creating less formal and more culturally meaningful spaces through which relationships and participation could emerge more organically, later informing the opening of communicative spaces within the research.

Familiarising and opening communicative spaces and parity of participation

Opening the communicative spaces sought to create conditions for parity of participation through practices of recognition, redistribution, and representation (Fraser, 2008). Practices of recognition were enacted through informal conversations where students shared their cultural backgrounds, interests, aspirations, music preferences, and experiences within school life. Rather than approaching students through deficit framings, these interactions sought to position students' experiences and perspectives as valuable forms of knowledge within the research process. For example, during informal discussions with students and Cultural Diversity Leaders, students frequently shared experiences regarding belonging, friendships, music, and participation within the school environment. Several students discussed feeling more connected to informal peer spaces than to formal school activities and expressed interest in spaces where different cultural identities and experiences could be more visibly recognised.

These interactions became analytically significant because they demonstrated that engagement for many students was closely connected to experiences of recognition, visibility, and relational connection rather than simply participation in formal school activities. The findings suggested that opportunities for engagement emerged more strongly when students felt their cultural identities and experiences were acknowledged and valued within the interactional space.

Alongside these conversations, informal "chat and snack" gatherings were established as low-pressure relational spaces where students could socialise, share experiences, and discuss school life more openly. Food, snacks, and shared resources were intentionally incorporated into these gatherings as practices of redistribution that supported more equitable participation and

contributed to creating welcoming and socially relaxed environments. Unlike formal recruitment meetings, these spaces encouraged interaction through informal conversation, humour, storytelling, and collective participation. For example, students often remained in the space after eating to continue conversations about friendships, teachers, music, lunchtime activities, and their broader schooling experiences. Participation within these gatherings was fluid, with some students attending briefly while others returned regularly and gradually became more engaged in ongoing conversations and activities. Importantly, the informal nature of these spaces also reduced some of the hierarchical dynamics associated with adult researcher–student interactions, as conversations emerged more naturally and reciprocally rather than through structured questioning or formal interviews.

These observations highlighted the importance of relational and low-pressure environments in fostering familiarity and trust during the early stages of participatory research. Rather than functioning primarily as recruitment sessions, the communicative spaces enabled the gradual development of reciprocal relationships that later supported broader participation within the research process.

A prominent finding from the familiarisation stage was students' desire for greater cultural recognition and representation within school spaces. As we spent time getting to know one another, conversations frequently centred on our shared interests, including music, food, hobbies, family, and cultural backgrounds. Through these informal interactions and participatory activities, students spoke enthusiastically about Afrobeat music, traditional African music, dance, and other culturally diverse forms of artistic expression that were meaningful to them. However, many students also felt that these cultural forms were largely absent from their educational experiences.

Sikita: I think they should do more cultural music and... like different styles of music and different cultures to it and not just simply the same 3 instruments.

Sadia: Like everyone's traditional music **Sikita:** Because they make us like ... one race **Sadia:** It should be more inclusive

Sikita: It is based on the teacher's race

Palek: Heyyyy

Sadia: white

Sikita: They make us do more white traditional stuff, instead of inclusivity with all cultures. I just think they need to include other cultures instead of just the same

These reflections suggest that students did not experience the curriculum as culturally neutral.

Rather, they perceived school knowledge and practices as privileging particular cultural traditions while marginalising others. Students' comments highlight a sense of misrecognition, whereby their own cultural identities, histories, and artistic practices were insufficiently represented within formal learning spaces. From a social justice perspective, these conversations reveal how questions of recognition are closely tied to students' experiences of belonging and participation (Fraser, 2008; Keddie, 2012).

Students were not simply requesting the inclusion of different musical genres; they were calling for more inclusive educational spaces that acknowledged and valued the cultural resources they brought to school. Consistent with previous research on African Australian students (Wilkinson et al., 2017), these reflections demonstrate how curricular and extracurricular spaces function as sites where cultural visibility, belonging, and recognition are negotiated (Baak et al., 2025). Importantly, such conversations also signalled potential directions for participatory action, as students began articulating changes they wished to see within their school community.

At the same time, existing dance spaces attended by Pacific Islander students appeared to foster stronger senses of collective participation, cultural identification, and visibility. These observations became important in identifying the potential role of embodied and culturally responsive spaces in supporting more relational and participatory forms of engagement.

Together, these experiences and discussions laid the foundations for the later development of the Afro Dance Club as a community-engaged and parity of participatory space.

Reflecting on Positionality and Embodied Engagement

The familiarisation stage of the research required ongoing reflexive engagement with positionality, power, and relationality in order to support ethical and participatory engagement within the school context (Schensul & Berg, 2004). Rather than treating reflexivity as a purely descriptive or individual exercise, positionality was approached as relational and dynamic, shaping how students interpreted my presence within the school, how trust was negotiated, and how opportunities for participation emerged over time. Consistent with Critical Engaging Participatory Action Research (CEPAR), reflexivity became central to examining how intersecting identities, institutional roles, and embodied interactions influenced the development of communicative spaces and the possibilities for engagement within the project.

To support this process, I engaged in critical reflection on my intersecting social identities using a three-tier Social Identity Map (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019). This process enabled me to critically examine how my positioning as a Latina and Mestiza woman from a working-class background in Colombia, a Catholic, a teacher, a migrant researcher, and a doctoral student in Australia shaped my assumptions, interactions, and relational positioning within the research context. Reflecting on these identities allowed me to recognise how my own experiences of migration, cultural hybridity, and social inequality informed my commitment to social justice-oriented research and influenced

how I approached engagement with students from refugee-background communities. However, rather than assuming shared experiences automatically generated connection or trust, reflexive analysis highlighted important differences in age, institutional positioning, educational privilege, and authority that shaped researcher–participant relationships within the school setting.

This reflexive process also informed how I interpreted students' experiences and potential barriers to participation. In reflecting on the positionalities of second-generation African Australian students, I drew on existing literature identifying experiences of stigmatisation, deficit assumptions, and exclusion within educational settings (Koehler & Schneider, 2019; Pillay & Asadi, 2018). These reflections sensitised me to the possibility that students may perceive formal research processes through institutional lenses associated with surveillance, judgement, or deficit framings. Consequently, the initial lack of student engagement during formal recruitment activities was not interpreted as disinterest alone, but as indicative of broader relational and institutional dynamics shaping participation within the school context. This analysis became important in shifting the recruitment process away from procedural invitations and towards the creation of relational and participatory spaces where trust and familiarity could emerge more gradually.

Attention to positionality also shaped the design of the Afro Dance Club as an embodied and relational space that sought to reduce hierarchical dynamics commonly reproduced within school-based research. Adult–youth relationships in educational settings are often structured through forms of adultism that position young people as less knowledgeable or less capable than adults (Wright, 2015). Recognising these asymmetries, the dance space was developed as a collaborative environment where students could contribute ideas, shape activities, and participate in decision-making processes. In practice, this shifted some aspects of participation away from researcher-led interactions towards more reciprocal and student-informed forms of engagement (Gardner et al., 2019; Warren & Marciano, 2018). For example, students contributed suggestions regarding music, dance styles, activities, and the broader organisation of the club, while informal interactions within dance sessions and “chat and snack” gatherings created opportunities for students to engage on more equal and less formal terms. These interactions did not eliminate institutional power relations; however, they contributed to reducing some of the social distance between researcher and participants and enabled more open forms of interaction and dialogue to develop over time.

Embodied participation further influenced how relationships and recognition were negotiated within the space. Dance functioned not simply as a creative activity, but as a participatory and cultural practice through which students and researcher engaged collectively through movement, rhythm, humour, and shared experiences. My own participation through Colombian and Latin American dance traditions created moments of intercultural

exchange that enabled forms of mutual recognition and dialogue across different diasporic experiences. Importantly, the significance of these interactions was primarily relational rather than structural. While the project supported increased visibility, connection, and opportunities for student leadership within the Afro Dance Club, the research did not seek to claim broad institutional transformation or redistribution of decision-making power across the school. Instead, the contribution of this process lies in demonstrating how relational, embodied, and participatory approaches can create conditions that support trust-building, familiarity, and more inclusive pathways into participatory research with young people.

Co-creating and implementing the Dance Club

The development of the Afro Dance Club emerged as a relational and participatory response to the challenges and opportunities encountered during the familiarisation and recruitment stages of the research. Rather than functioning solely as an extracurricular activity, the club was intentionally designed as a culturally grounded and student-centred space through which trust, connection, and participation could gradually develop. Consistent with the principles of CEPAR, the club sought to create communicative spaces that valued students' cultural knowledge, experiences, and forms of expression while supporting more collaborative and less hierarchical forms of engagement within the school context.

The decision to develop an Afro Dance Club was informed both by observations within the school environment and by discussions with students, Cultural and Diversity Leaders, and teachers regarding the limited participation of African diasporic students in existing extracurricular spaces. While some clubs appeared to foster strong senses of cultural connection and collective participation, students from African diasporic backgrounds were less visible within many school activities. The creation of the dance club therefore functioned as a practice of recognition that aimed to create a space where students' cultural identities, histories, and forms of expression could be more visibly acknowledged and valued within the school setting. Importantly, the significance of the club did not lie simply in cultural celebration itself, but in its capacity to create conditions for relational engagement and participation that had previously been absent within formal recruitment processes.

The club was developed collaboratively with student leaders and school staff, particularly students from African diasporic backgrounds who contributed ideas regarding music, rhythms, activities, and the broader organisation of the space. This collaborative process reflected an attempt to move beyond researcher-led engagement towards more shared and participatory forms of decision-making. Students influenced the structure of sessions, selected music, introduced dances from their cultural backgrounds, and contributed stories and historical reflections connected to the dances and rhythms explored during the sessions. Over time, students increasingly shaped the direction and organisation of the club. For example, participants suggested incorporating additional Afrobeat and contemporary dance styles,

proposed specific songs and artists, and initiated group dance activities that reflected their own cultural and social interests. Some students voluntarily assumed informal leadership roles by teaching choreography, leading warm-up activities, explaining the cultural significance of particular dances, or encouraging peers to participate. These shifts gradually moved aspects of the space away from researcher-led facilitation towards more shared and student-informed forms of participation. While the broader structure and coordination of the club remained supported by the researcher, students exercised increasing influence over the content, atmosphere, and relational dynamics of the space. These interactions enabled students to participate not only as attendees, but also as contributors, cultural knowledge holders, and co-creators of the space. In this sense, participatory principles were operationalised through students' active involvement in shaping aspects of the club's activities, content, and social environment.

The sessions themselves were intentionally flexible and informal, creating opportunities for participation through movement, storytelling, humour, discussion, and shared cultural exchange. Sessions often involved introducing the historical and cultural origins of dances, sharing music from different African diasporic traditions, practicing movements collectively, and engaging in informal conversations regarding identity, migration, culture, and belonging. For example, students introduced dances and songs connected to their own cultural backgrounds, while discussions emerged regarding the histories, meanings, and experiences associated with particular rhythms and traditions. My own participation through Colombian and Afro-Latin dance traditions also created opportunities for intercultural dialogue and mutual learning across different diasporic experiences. These embodied interactions contributed to reducing some of the formal boundaries typically associated with adult researcher–student relationships within school settings and supported the gradual development of familiarity and trust.

Importantly, the Afro Dance Club was not framed as a formal research activity or recruitment session, but as a voluntary and low-pressure space centred on enjoyment, connection, and participation. This distinction was significant in shaping how students engaged within the space. Informal dance circles, shared music, and collaborative activities created opportunities for students to participate without the pressures often associated with formal school environments. At the same time, participation remained fluid and uneven. Some students engaged enthusiastically in particular dance styles or discussions, while others participated more selectively or chose not to engage in certain activities. Rather than interpreting participation through binary notions of engagement or disengagement, these varied forms of involvement were understood as part of the relational and negotiated nature of participatory engagement with young people.

The relational outcomes of the club became evident through the gradual strengthening of trust, familiarity, and ongoing participation among students. Over time, students became more comfortable contributing ideas, initiating

conversations, inviting peers to attend, and participating in discussions related to school experiences and engagement. These developments supported the formation of communicative spaces that later enabled deeper collaborative inquiry within the broader PAR project. However, while the dance club contributed to fostering belonging, visibility, and opportunities for student leadership within the immediate relational context of the club, the project did not seek to claim broader institutional transformation or substantial redistribution of structural decision-making power within the school. Instead, the significance of the Afro Dance Club lies in demonstrating how culturally grounded and participatory spaces can support the relational foundations necessary for engaging young people in participatory research.

Similar relational dynamics have been identified in youth engagement research examining arts- and movement-based programs. Jones and Deutsch (2011), for example, describe how a staff-initiated dance program fostered competence, confidence, connection, and participation among young people through shared interests, mentoring, and collaborative engagement.

Importantly, the authors highlight how staff members' ability to connect with young people through areas of personal expertise or shared interest, such as dance, strengthened relational ties and created opportunities for positive developmental experiences. While dance in their study was not conceptualised as a formal recruitment strategy, it functioned as a relational and engagement practice that supported participation and affiliation within the Participatory action research.

Similarly, in the present study, dance emerged not simply as a cultural activity, but as an embodied and relational medium through which familiarity, trust, and participation could gradually develop within the communicative space.

Amplifying the Afro Dance Club and Inviting Participation in the Research

Participation in the broader research project emerged gradually through the relationships, trust, and familiarity developed within the Afro Dance Club rather than through isolated recruitment procedures alone. Consistent with the principles of CEPAR, recruitment was approached as a relational and participatory process that prioritised voluntary engagement, transparency, and student agency. Rather than positioning students as subjects to be recruited into a predetermined study, the process sought to create opportunities for students to shape the direction, focus, and forms of participation within the research over time.

From the early stages of the Afro Dance Club, I openly discussed my intention to learn from students' experiences and collaboratively explore issues related to educational engagement and schooling. These conversations occurred informally throughout dance sessions, shared activities, and social interactions, allowing the research to become gradually socialised within the group rather than introduced solely through formal recruitment events. This

ongoing openness regarding the aims of the project contributed to building familiarity and reducing some of the hierarchical dynamics often associated with school-based research. Importantly, participation in the dance club itself was not dependent upon participation in the research, and students were repeatedly reminded that involvement in the study was entirely voluntary.

As trust and participation within the club strengthened, students increasingly contributed to amplifying awareness of the project among their peers. Recruitment therefore evolved partially through peer-to-peer interactions, with students inviting friends, encouraging attendance, and discussing the space within their social networks. In this sense, participation emerged relationally through students' identification with the space and its social and cultural dynamics rather than through direct recruitment alone. These interactions reflected emerging forms of shared ownership over the space, as students influenced not only the atmosphere and activities of the club, but also how the broader research project was communicated and understood within the student community.

To further introduce the research, three socialisation sessions were held during lunchtime in a classroom space separate from the dance sessions. These sessions created opportunities to discuss the aims of the research more explicitly and to invite new students to participate in collaborative inquiry regarding their schooling experiences and educational engagement. During these sessions, I explained the participatory nature of the project, emphasising that students would have opportunities to contribute ideas, shape discussions, and participate in co-creative activities connected to the research process. New students were informed that the project sought to create spaces where their perspectives regarding engagement and schooling could be heard and explored collectively. Ethical considerations, including voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the option to use pseudonyms, were also discussed openly with the new group of students.

Across the three sessions, thirty-one students and two staff members attended. Ultimately, eighteen African Australian students from refugee-background families, most of whom identified as second-generation students, one 1.5-generation student, and one teacher formally participated in the broader PAR project. Approximately 60% of the students who engaged regularly within the Afro Dance Club later chose to participate in the research, particularly girls from Years 7, 8, and 11 who had already assumed active and visible roles within the dance space. While the socialisation sessions played an important role in formalising participation, recruitment cannot be understood as the outcome of a single strategy or event. Rather, participation emerged through sustained relational engagement, ongoing presence within the school community, and the gradual development of communicative spaces in which students felt recognised, comfortable, and able to contribute on their own terms.

Participation within both the Afro Dance Club and the broader research project remained voluntary, fluid, and uneven throughout the study. While some students engaged consistently and gradually assumed active leadership roles within the space, others participated more intermittently, attended only selected sessions, or chose not to participate in the research component of the project. Although the club was initially developed in response to conversations regarding the experiences and engagement of second-generation African Australian students, participation was not limited to this group, and students from other cultural backgrounds also joined some sessions over time.

Participation patterns also differed across gender, with the space becoming more strongly attended by girls, while only two boys participated consistently throughout the project.

More broadly, these participation patterns highlighted the complexities of creating participatory spaces within school contexts where students engage differently depending on their social relationships, interests, gender dynamics, prior experiences, and levels of comfort within collective spaces. The stronger participation of girls within the Afro Dance Club suggested that embodied and expressive forms of engagement may have resonated differently across gendered experiences and peer cultures within the school environment. At the same time, the involvement of students from diverse cultural backgrounds indicated that, although the space emerged in response to the experiences of second-generation African Australian students, its relational and cultural dimensions also created opportunities for broader forms of intercultural connection and participation.

These findings further demonstrated that participation within PAR is not fixed or uniform, but relational, negotiated, and continually shaped by the social dynamics operating within the research space itself. Students moved in and out of participation in different ways over time, highlighting that engagement was not simply about attendance, but about how students experienced comfort, recognition, trust, and belonging within the space. Rather than interpreting uneven participation as a limitation of the project alone, these dynamics revealed the importance of understanding participation as fluid and context-dependent within participatory research with young people. It is important to recognise that some students may not have identified with the focus of the dance space, may have preferred different forms of engagement, or may have felt uncomfortable participating in a culturally visible collective space within the school environment. Participation therefore remained negotiated, fluid, and context-dependent throughout the project.

Importantly, the focus of this paper is not on evaluating long-term institutional outcomes of the intervention, but on examining the Afro Dance Club as a relational and participatory recruitment strategy during the familiarisation stages of the research. In this context, the key outcome of the intervention was the creation of communicative spaces that enabled trust-building, voluntary participation, and ongoing engagement with students

who had initially shown little interest in participating in the research. Without the development of these relational spaces, opportunities to hear from some students' experiences, perspectives, and critiques regarding schooling and engagement may not have emerged in the same way.

Discussion and Reflections

This paper has examined how the Afro Dance Club functioned as a relational and community-engaged space during the familiarisation and recruitment stages of a Participatory Action Research (PAR) project with second-generation African Australian students. In doing so, the study contributes to discussions regarding the ethical, relational, and participatory dimensions of engaging young people in research, particularly within culturally and linguistically diverse school contexts. Rather than approaching recruitment as a procedural stage preceding the “real” research, the findings demonstrate that recruitment itself constituted an important relational process through which trust, recognition, familiarity, and communicative spaces for participation were gradually established (Kristensen & Ravn, 2015; Torre & Fine, 2008).

A key contribution of this study lies in foregrounding the relational labour required to create the conditions for participation with young people whose voices have historically been marginalised within educational settings. Initial recruitment strategies generated limited engagement, highlighting that participation could not be assumed through formal invitations or institutional procedures alone. Consistent with participatory and youth-engagement scholarship (Bettencourt, 2020), the findings suggest that meaningful participation requires sustained presence, flexibility, relational responsiveness, and opportunities for young people to engage on their own terms. Within this study, the Afro Dance Club created an informal and embodied space through which relationships, trust, and familiarity could emerge gradually over time.

The primary outcomes of the project during this phase were relational rather than structural. Relationally, the Afro Dance Club created opportunities for students to experience connection, belonging, cultural recognition, visibility, and collaborative participation within the school environment. Students contributed to shaping aspects of the space by introducing dances, selecting music, facilitating activities, encouraging peers to attend, and sharing stories connected to their cultural backgrounds. These shared and negotiated forms of participation supported opportunities for student leadership and agency within the immediate context of the club. The findings therefore reinforce scholarship highlighting the importance of culturally responsive and embodied spaces in fostering recognition, participation, and belonging among young people from historically marginalised communities (Fraser, 2000; Nakhid & Farrugia, 2021).

Importantly, the Afro Dance Club also created opportunities to question the dominance of Eurocentric and “white” curricular and cultural norms within the school context. Through dance, music, storytelling, and

discussion, the space enabled students to engage with Afro-diasporic histories, rhythms, and forms of cultural expression that many described as largely absent from formal curricular spaces. In this sense, the club functioned not only as a relational space for participation, but also as a subtle form of cultural resistance and recognition within a school environment where some students felt their identities and cultural experiences were insufficiently represented. These interactions opened conversations regarding whose cultures, histories, and artistic expressions become visible and valued within schools.

At the same time, the project's structural impact at this initial stage remained emergent rather than institutionalized. Nevertheless, the Afro Dance Club contributed to opening possibilities for further intercultural initiatives within the school community. Most notably, the space contributed to discussions among students, school leaders, and staff regarding the importance of creating more culturally inclusive activities and representations within school life. This later supported the development of an intercultural expo co-developed with students and key school leaders as part of the broader research process. This initiative represented an important institutional opening through which students' cultural knowledge, experiences, and forms of expression became more visible within the school environment.

The findings of this study suggest that while participatory and relational spaces can create meaningful opportunities for connection, recognition, and collaborative participation, they do not automatically disrupt entrenched institutional hierarchies or inequalities. Rather, structural change within schools appears gradual, negotiated, and dependent upon broader institutional support and ongoing collaboration with the community.

The findings also raise important considerations regarding researcher positionality and relationality within participatory research. Reflexive engagement with my own positionality shaped how I interpreted participation, trust-building, and belonging within the project. My personal connection to Afro-Colombian and Latin American dance traditions influenced how I understood embodied participation as a form of relational engagement and cultural recognition.

At the same time, entering the school as an adult outsider required ongoing reflexivity regarding institutional authority, age, cultural identity, and the potential reproduction of hierarchical researcher-participant dynamics (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019). In this context, collective participation through dance helped create more reciprocal and less formal interactions between students and researcher, although these interactions did not eliminate power relations entirely.

More broadly, this study suggests that community-engaged relationships should be understood as foundational to participatory research rather than secondary to it. For researchers working with young people, particularly within culturally diverse and historically marginalised communities, the findings highlight the importance of creating spaces that prioritise recognition, relational trust, cultural responsiveness, and shared participation

before expecting formal engagement in research activities. In this sense, the significance of the Afro Dance Club lies not simply in its use as a creative activity, but in its role as a relational process through which participation, dialogue, and possibilities for future collaboration became possible in the first place.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that participatory recruitment with young people cannot be understood as a procedural or technical stage separate from the broader research process. Instead, recruitment emerged as a relational, embodied, and community-engaged practice grounded in trust-building, recognition, and shared participation. The Afro Dance Club created communicative spaces through which relationships, familiarity, and participation gradually became possible, particularly among students who had initially shown limited interest in formal recruitment approaches. It demonstrates the importance of culturally responsive and relational approaches in creating more ethical and inclusive pathways into participatory research with young people. More broadly, the findings contribute to ongoing discussions regarding relationality, recruitment, and participation within youth participatory research by highlighting the importance of time, flexibility, embodied engagement, and cultural recognition in supporting meaningful participation.

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