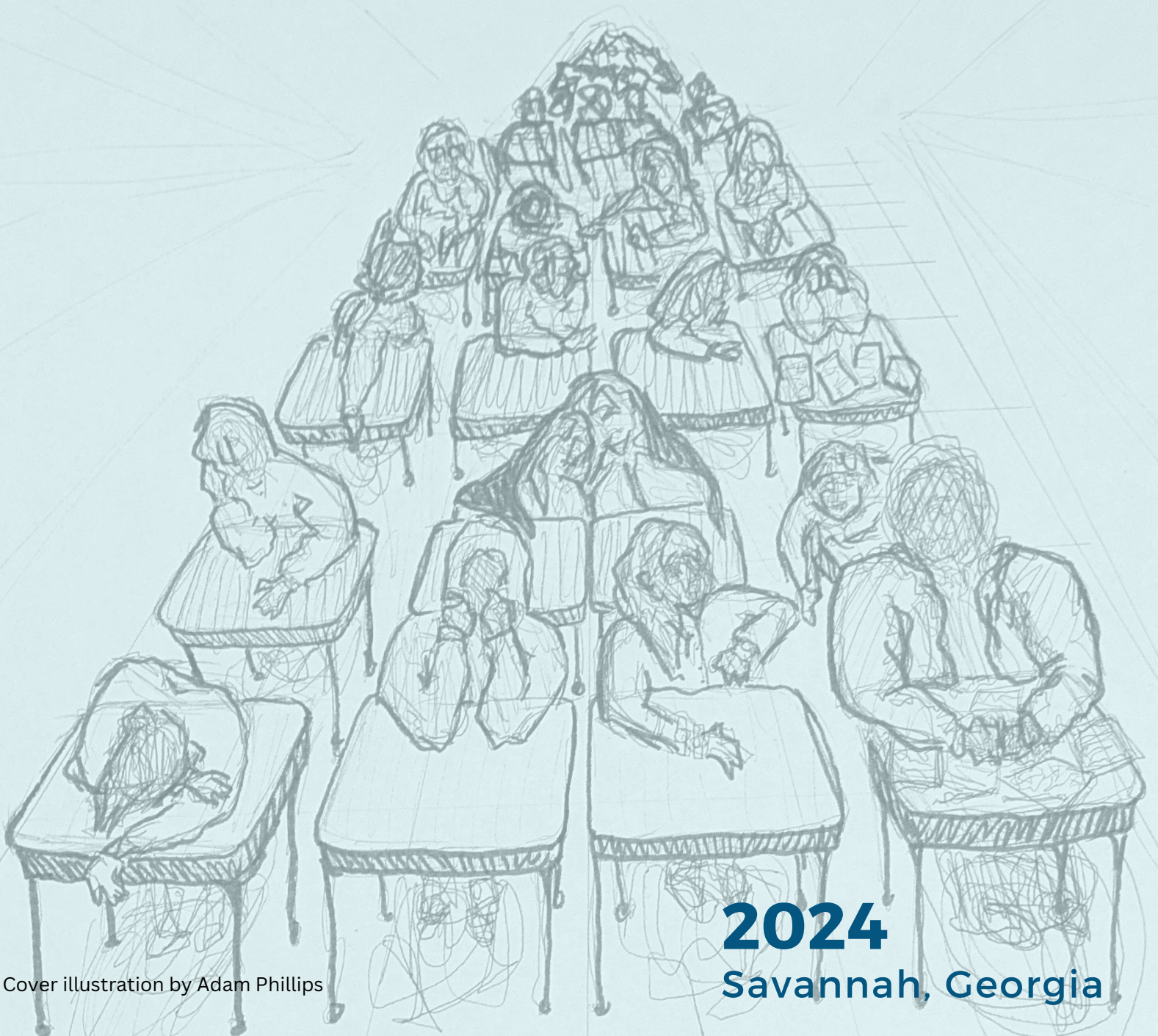




Student Burnout

A Research Report from the
Action Research Team



Cover illustration by Adam Phillips

2024
Savannah, Georgia

Who Is ART?

The Action Research Team (ART) is one of two Youth Leadership Teams at Deep. The cohort is made up of young people between the ages of 14-18 who are passionate about creating a more just and equitable Savannah.

ART explores critical issues that impact their lives and the lives of those in their community, especially those related to shared experiences of education. Members then rise up as activists, researchers, and artists to enact plans that will help transform “what is” to “what could be.”

2024 ART Members

Legend Clark

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Ytinu McDonald

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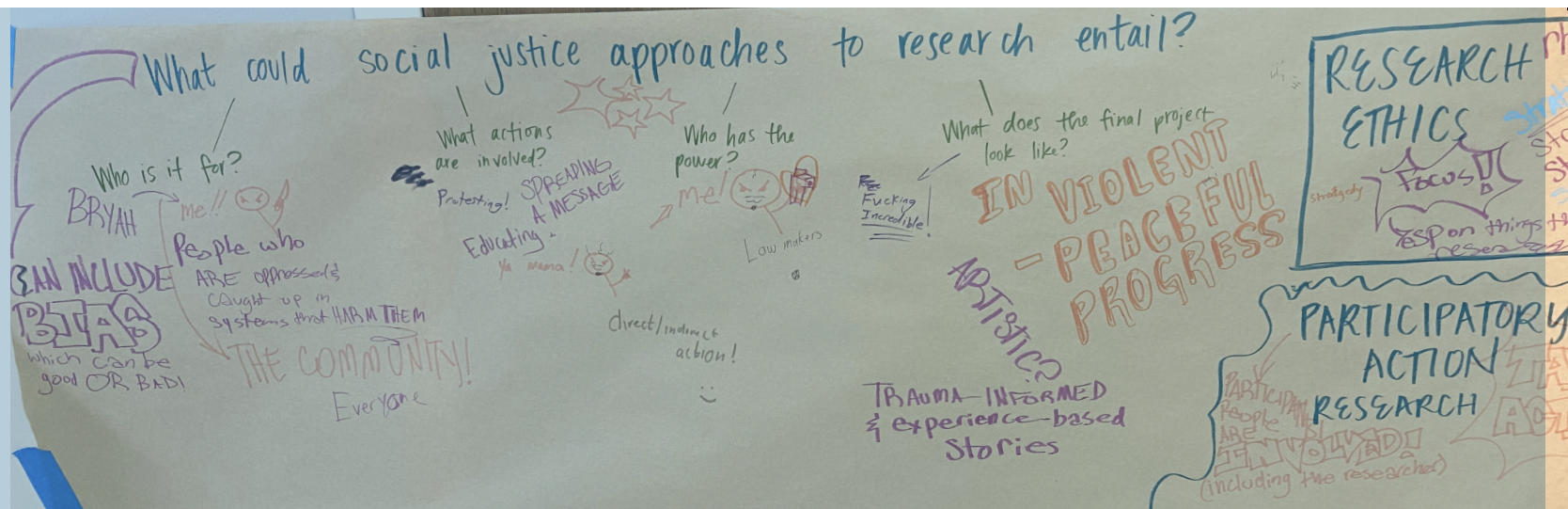
Adam Phillips

Leah Spann

Harrison Tran

Andrew White



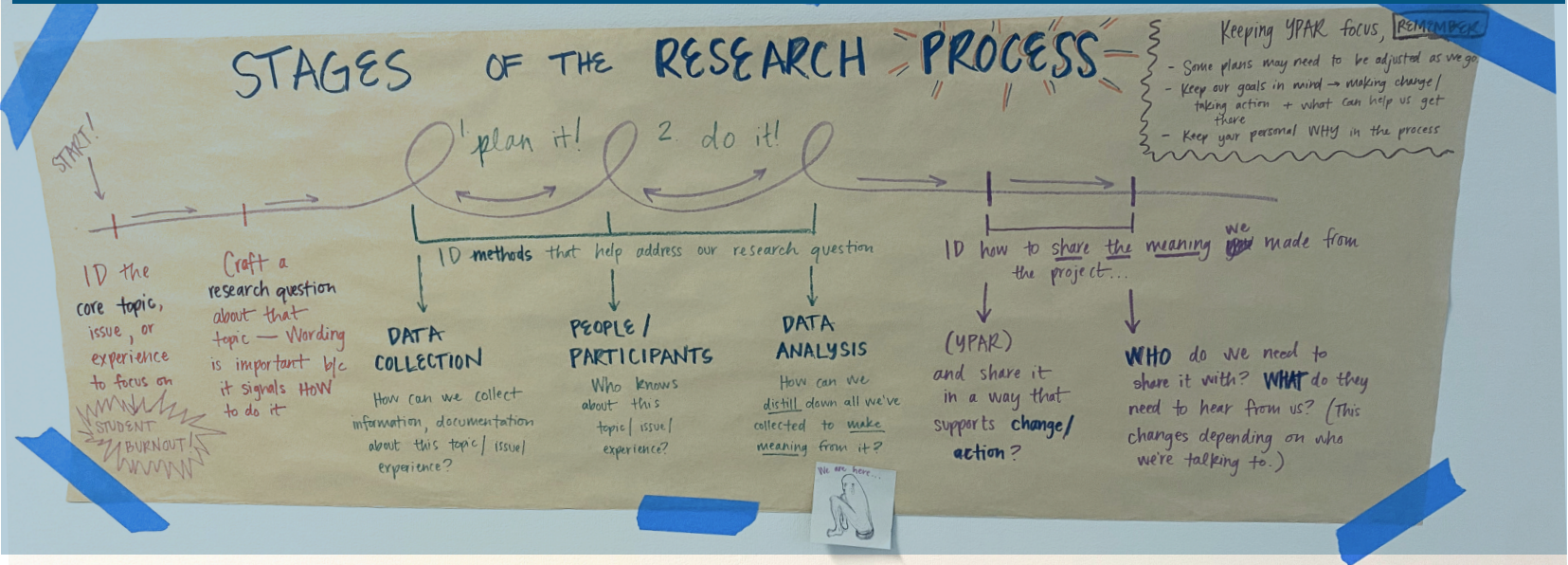


Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a grassroots approach to developing and sharing knowledge about the systems and histories that impact communities in order to affect change.

The Y in YPAR is for Youth, although adult allies supported this project in the following ways:

- sharing information and resources about research methods
- facilitating decision-making and data analysis processes
- offering templates, tools, and supports to create data collection instruments
- training and supporting young people to conduct data collection
- organizing research data and artifacts

This YPAR project was designed and conducted by the young people of Deep's Action Research Team.



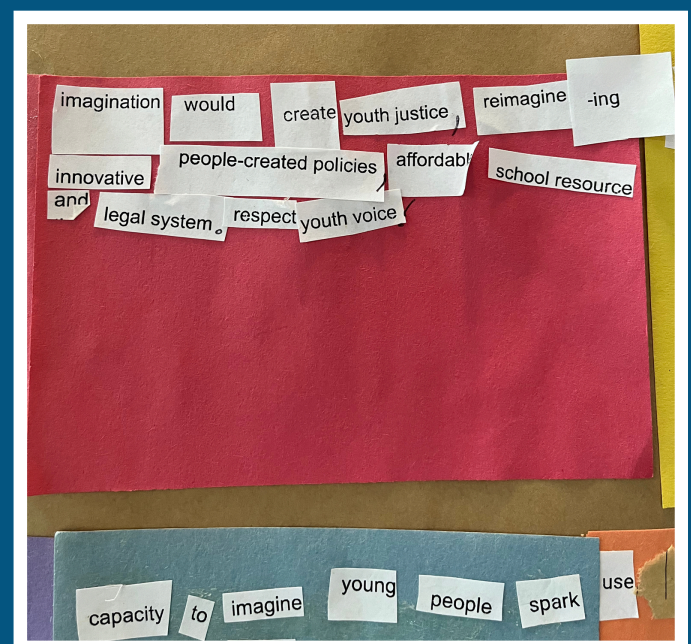
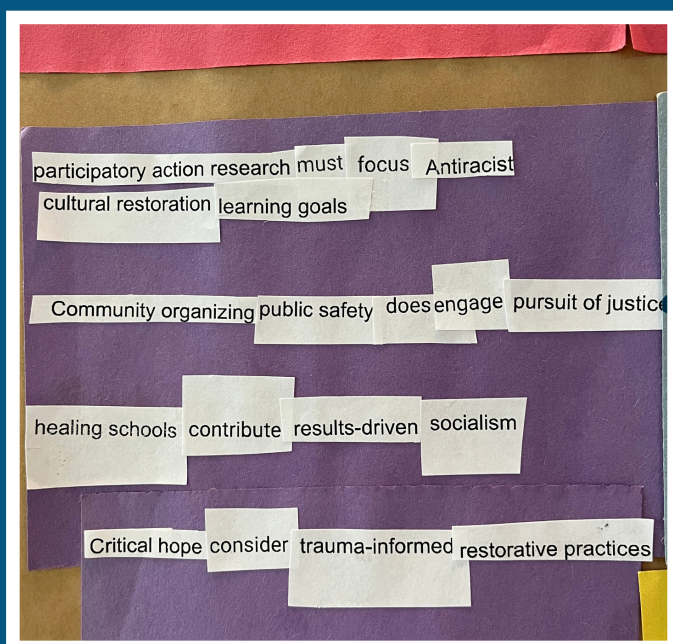
Research Questions

What are young people's experiences of student burnout?

How do the schedules and physical structures of school impact student burnout?

This topic was selected by young people within ART as a result of internal discussions that began in September 2023 about what it would look like to imagine schools, school systems, and communities where young people are valued as equal stakeholders.

This topic was also shaped by their lived experiences living in the Savannah community, navigating the intersections involving their own mental health, gender, and overall identities as autonomous human beings.



Found poems by ART members about Radical Imagination, created as part of analyses and conversations that led the team to focus on student burnout for their YPAR project.

Data Collection Methods

8

Semi-Structured Interviews

4

Focus Groups

6

Live Survey Administrations

4

Classroom Observations

Participants were high-school-aged young people enrolled in a school in the Savannah–Chatham County Public School System (SCCPSS) and recruited by ART-researchers.

Total: 49 Participants

ART members created protocols for each of these data collection methods, ensuring that two to four of the tools were being used to gather information about:

- Prevalence and intensity of feelings of student burnout
- The physical, mental, and social impact of student burnout
- How the schedule of a school day or physical characteristics of a classroom or school building impact burnout
- How individual teachers contribute to or mitigate student burnout
- Suggestions for how to reduce student burnout in schools

Definition of Student Burnout

created by the young people in ART

“Overwhelm due to the pressure and demands of school to the point that young people are unable to think and focus because they feel restless, overwhelmed, and apathetic.”

Results

“When you come to school every day, see the same faces and classrooms over and over again, forced to do tedious work otherwise your future could be compromised, feeling burnt out would be a given, and I’m honestly just trying to get it over with.”

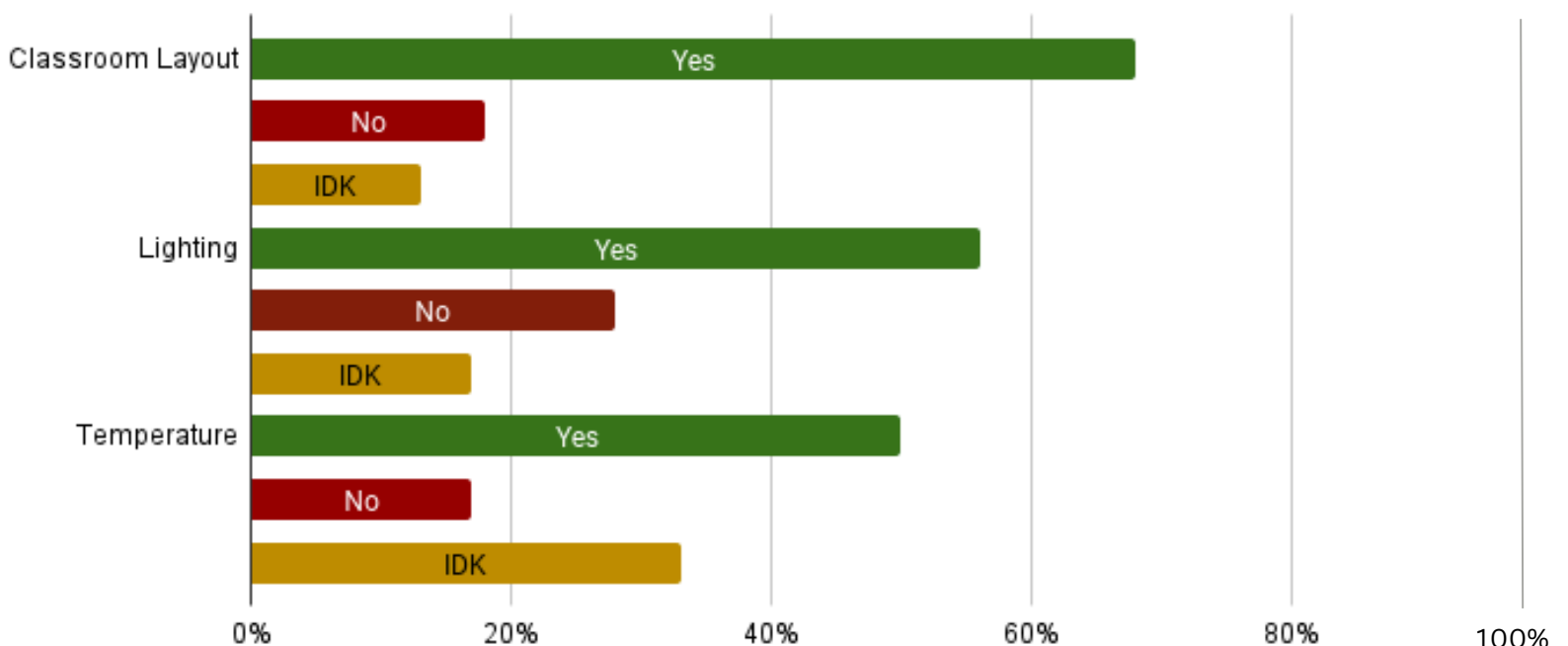
—comments from a live survey respondent

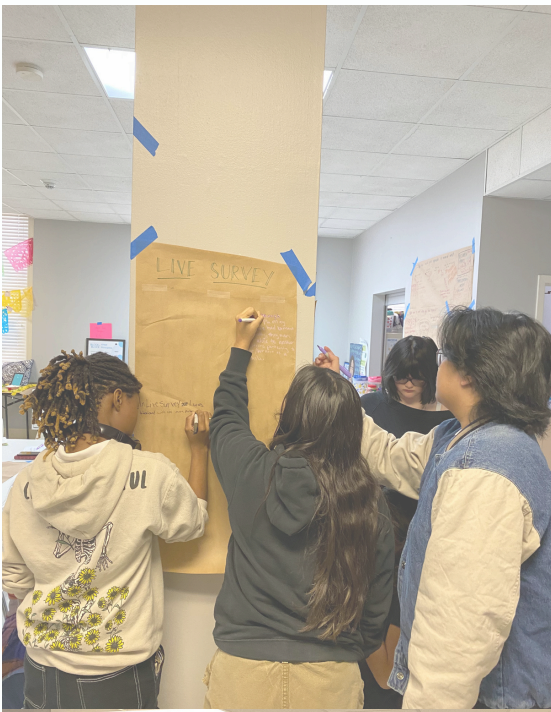
94% felt burned out

21% were very or extremely burned out

89% reported that burnout has impacted their academic performance or engagement

Live Survey Respondents on Features of a School Environment that Impact Their Experience of Student Burnout



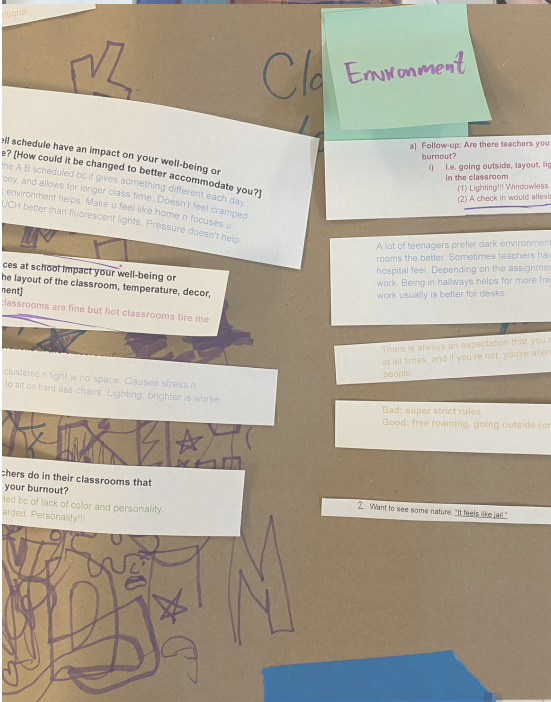


ART members conducted arts-based thematic analyses of results from observations, focus groups and interviews, and researcher reflections.

Data Analysis



To identify the themes of the data, ART members reviewed the raw quantitative and qualitative data and created individual art pieces, along with artist statements that described how and/or why their pieces of art reflected moments or themes that stuck out to them within the data.



After the ART team shared their art pieces and statements with one another and the adult researchers, adult researchers led them through a process to identify themes of the data and main findings.

Themes

Causes of Burnout

- Working too much, without enough time for socializing or relaxing
- Taking on too many responsibilities, without enough help from others
- Not getting enough sleep
- Cold temperatures in classrooms/school buildings
- Classroom layout (e.g., blank walls, bright fluorescent lights, hard chairs)
- Long class periods and too-short lunch breaks

Mental Effects of Student Burnout

- Negative impact on relationships
- Depression and anxiety
- Hopelessness
- Disorientation
- Cynicism
- Loss of motivation
- Procrastination
- Emotional numbness
- Poor concentration

Physical Effects of Student Burnout

Most common

- Exhaustion
- Stomach aches or gastrointestinal issues
- Headaches, including migraines
- Tension in the body

Less common

- Stress eating
- Hives/cold sores
- Changes in menstrual cycle
- Frequent illnesses

...ay change to lessen burnout?

...ys in each semester. Switching
...d ELA at once is difficult to

...the school day change to lessen b
...reak > back to class, longer lunches

...achers do in their classrooms that
...is your burnout?

Seeing visually how much u have to d
...ays alleviate. Study halls could help at
...r n a half or so. Tutoring does help a l
...pare. Tutoring just focuses on things
...king more time would help.

...ers "go fast" – doesn't help.

...npact on your well-being or
...hanged to better accommodate you
...ses, the constant go go go

...s] messes with my sleep schedule.

...rts too early.

...s lessons because of time

... minutes which is too long.

...ose focus; tried hard to not get distracted, hard
...on time, Few upsides to Block schedule, 4 clas

...chedule at school impact your b

...e day] and I want it to continue." It's so short. C
...ant to be here any more." Don't want to drag th

...nutes, good time, teachers teach 70%. 30% is
...should talk less and help youth go through wor

...block is TWO hours long with no breaks. "I ge

...up food takes too long [long lines.] Classroom

Major Findings

Most Young People Feel or Have Felt Burned Out

Those who were not currently experiencing burnout during data collection all spoke of previous times when they had such experiences.

Young People Are Often Exhausted

Burnout both causes and is caused by exhaustion; students are staying up late to finish assignments or as a result of anxiety about grades, or may be tired because they are working and/or participating in other extracurricular activities.

Burnout Is Physical Too

Headaches and stomachaches were most often described by participants as being connected to burnout. More comfortable seating and access to outdoor time and space were mentioned as ways to counteract the physical impacts of burnout.

“[When I get burned out,] my menstruation is different. [I get] sniffles, cold sores, and I stress eat. I tell myself I can’t do anything until I get my work done, and I don’t leave my bedroom.” —SCCPSS student

Recommendations

The Schedule Matters

Monotony plays a role in feeling burned out. To feel less burned out and be better able to focus, we need shorter classes or more breaks and chances to move around. Many participants noted there was barely enough time to go through a lunch line before lunch was over. It would help to have longer lunches, study halls, or time set aside for socialization; during the early years of COVID, for example, we saw that this was possible with scheduling.

The Physical Space Matters

Being comfortable matters, especially with regard to how classrooms are set up, including what's on the walls, the lighting, how comfortable the chairs are, and even the temperature. It would be nice to be able to go outside. These are things that seem like feasible changes for school leaders and classroom teachers to address.

The Teachers Matter

Young people notice and are impacted by teacher attitude and relational energy: things like if a teacher is greeting students and asking about their day or if they are showing signs of burnout, such as being cranky or disorganized. Adequate resources and support should be given to teachers so they can show up best for their students.

Grades and Assignments Matter

Grading and assignment policies that are unclear or feel unmanageable contribute to burnout. While grades can be a motivation for some students to stay engaged, most burnout participants spoke of intense pressures to achieve to the point that it became hard to feel like anything was “good enough.” When developing course and lesson plans, educators and school leaders should weigh student burnout when considering the purpose and value of grading policies and assignments.

ART's Art-Based Data Interpretations

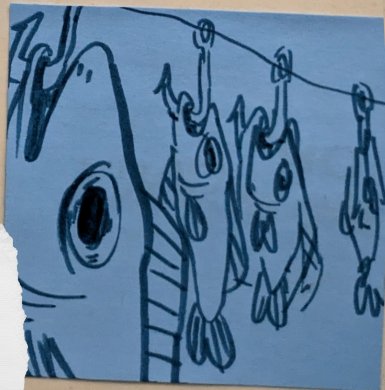
SPACES feel
EMPTY & Boring
= NEGATIVITY



GRADES
DEFINING
YOU



TIME
Blending
together



ON
MONOTONY



All I Want

Windows make me feel like a plant in the sun
 Classrooms are loud, but no music no fun
 No moment to ourselves, no interaction with students
 Burnout still there, no breaks included
 Lighting putting us to sleep, rules that we can't eat
 No one there to support students, nothing fun, no room for
 movement
 Plants and beanbags are all we want, and yet y'all just ignore and
 taunt
 Need breaks to move around, classrooms still feel tight and bound

***ARTist Statement:** This poem was created almost entirely of direct quotes taken from interview and focus group data. It is basically a combination of constant wants that my peers talked about. Most of the time they're never answered, so there's a constant feeling of wanting and never getting.*

Students experience waves of overwhelm that leave us bobbing in seafoam, unsure if we'll resurface. Between life and language and math and science and government and that study guide and another essay due at midnight, time seems lost and the planner becomes blank.



Scan QR Code
to view video



ARTist Statement: This video is June through December of 2023. The beginning is when I was feeling good about myself and relatively keeping up with events and birthdays and little things going on in my life, as well as to-do lists and keeping on top of my stuff. But as I got into the year, it falls off and it shows how everything falls off because I was overwhelmed. It falls off in November, but it was very very gradual. It was mostly about my school work, and I was isolating myself, lost a lot of friends, and my grades absolutely plummeted, worse than they've ever been in my entire life. All this happened during the research project on student burnout.

My planner is a reflection of my mind and mental state and the things I felt capable of in the moment. You can see in the summer I was feeling good. It's messy and chaotic and showcases my art and who I am as a person, but you lose that quality as the months go on. October is packed full, things are getting busier, and then I crash in November. In December I saw a therapist who suggested I was dealing with depression. The pages in December are mostly blank. My planner is a reflection of myself, but that image blurs, and it's not me anymore.



ARTist Statement: I was thinking about how so many people were talking about how the environment made them feel more burned out because it was plain, it didn't have color—it made them depressed, and that's so sad. This is to try to capture what those people felt like and the appeal they are making.

The first panel shows someone in a jail cell, someone who feels trapped in this like blank space where he has nowhere to go because he can't move, or like he's just stuck in a place because of his environment.

Another image is in the hallway, so his head is down and it says in "just the hallways," everything is plain and ordinary to make this, making him feel depressed and sad because I mean, his environment doesn't feel good, so it doesn't make him feel good.

The bottom one, he's at his desk in the classroom. And he's just staring at his computer with his eyes, and he wants more, but he's stuck. Even though I don't really care about the color, I know this feeling right here.

ARTist Statement: *These are inspired by the different experiences we heard in the focus group.*

*There is someone
asleep.*

*Someone's wearing a
hoodie, and it's like he
can't see anything.*

*There's a desk that is
so cluttered that
nothing can be done
on it, and someone
who is too big for the
desk*

*Someone is hiding in
the corner, and here
they are sleepy and
they're cold.*

He's bored.

*He's looking away,
looking for something
somewhere.*

*And there are these
ones looking at this
guy who is failing,
getting Fs; no good,
no bueno, and
everyone knows it.*

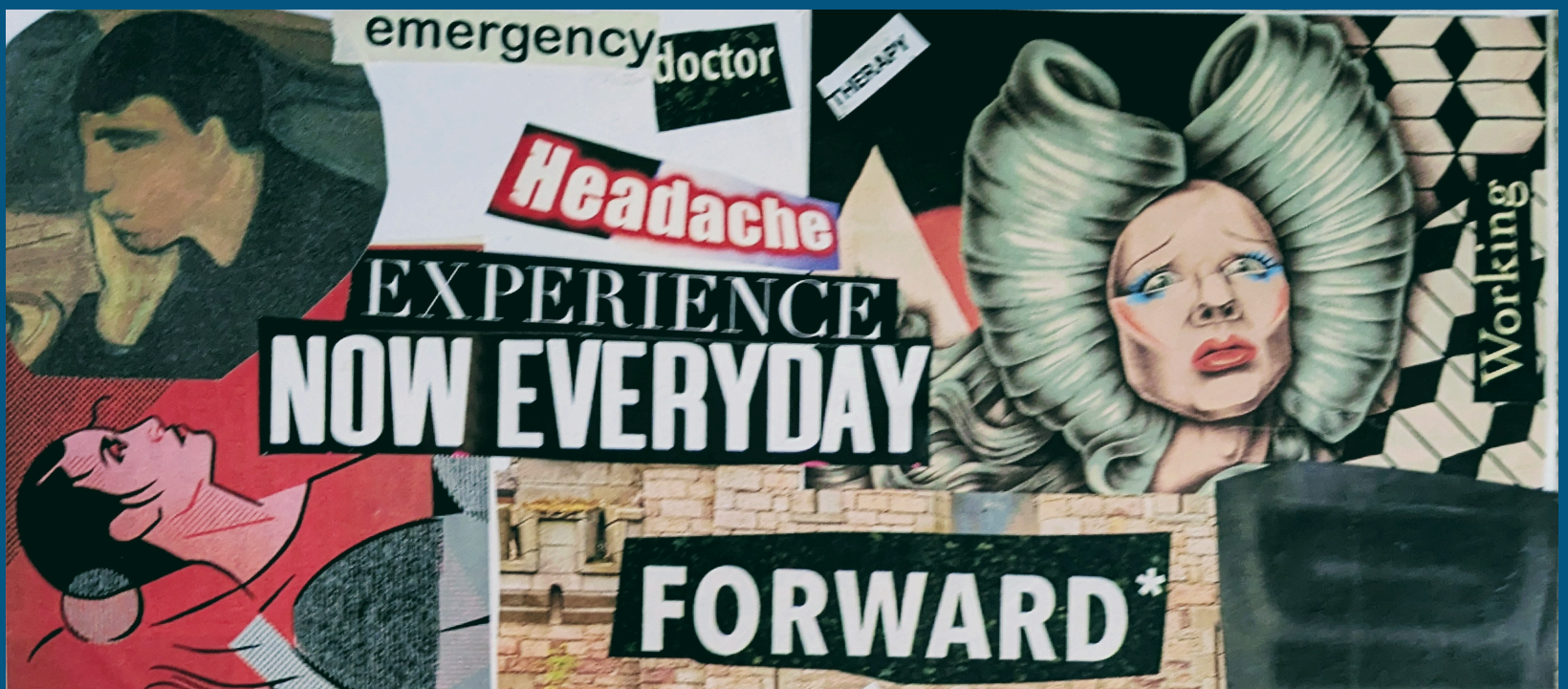


ARTist Statement: A Call to Attention. A Call to Action.

Student burnout is an issue people shy away from, labeling it as incompetence and laziness; it is an issue that teachers, administrators, and even students don't realize needs to be more openly spoken about.

*There was not a single student among our research participants who had never felt burned out, and almost every student was feeling actively burned out during our research project. **Our society is built to hustle; however, schools are meant to be a safe space. Schools should be a place of opportunity for students to grow, not a place for students to be pushed so hard that they feel that high school is the hardest point in their life—and burn out.***

Burnout ruins students' drive and motivation to work hard, and even their ability to focus on school, which is already difficult given that many young people also have a job and other extracurricular activities that we are told are important for us if we ever want to be successful or have a good life.



As our research data show, some of the physical issues that derive from burnout are levels of concentration, throwing up, stomachaches, and frequent headaches. At the tender age of 14–18, young people go through these issues which aren't healthy at all.

I myself had a problem of constantly throwing up because of stress and other health issues which mainly stemmed from school and other responsibilities and my want to have a good college application and resume for competitive opportunities.

It does not feel that the reality of these pressures or the causes and impacts of student burnout are understood, and when this happens, students feel misunderstood and that their actions are being misinterpreted, leading to even more burnout.

We need to break this cycle, and the first step is to talk about student burnout—and for adults to listen.



Conclusion

At the beginning of the year, when ART identified some of the things that were most important to them to explore in a YPAR project, some of the initial topics included the need for better communication with and support for ESOL students and their families, equitable and sufficient funding for schools, better student access to mental health resources and support, and resisting moves to censor education or ban books that tell the complex truths about our history and/or represent different folx' identities.

We also talked about the need for rest: for naps and in-school study halls or socialization with peers in real life, and of course things like better food and longer lunch times. ART members continually expressed, and heard from their peers, that things that they have heard dismissed from adults as being non-serious or unimportant, like time to chat with friends during lunch or the chance to be outside or goof around, are in fact very important.

Many of the systemic issues that contribute to burnout are too large for any individual— young person or educator—to address on their own. We cannot individually change the real pressures that things like high-stakes testing, not enough funding or teachers for schools, the cost and competitiveness of college, the weight of social media, and the ongoing fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic place on students. However, some changes are possible.

Our research indicates that there are specific changes to environments and assignments that an individual educator can make which may lessen students' burnout.

To reduce student burnout, students should have access to study halls or free periods; spaces in a school to take a break or rest; freedom to move our bodies; supportive and flexible teachers; and classroom environments with nice light, engaging visuals, and music.

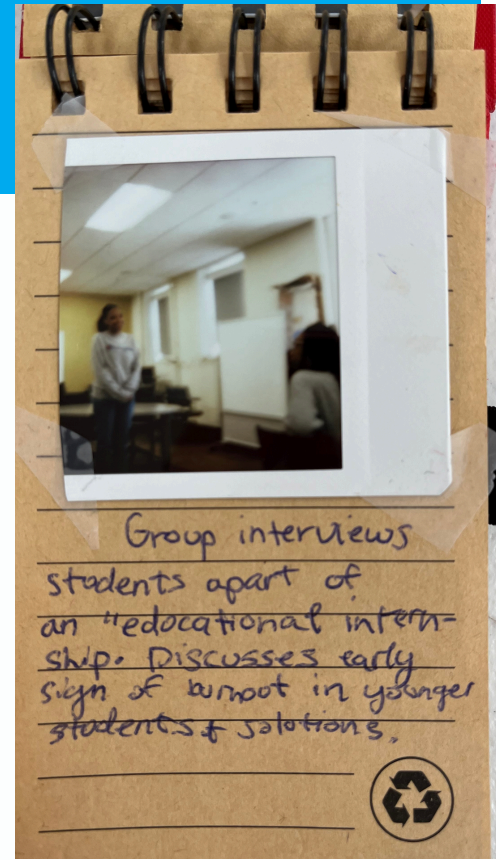
More research is needed to learn more about student experiences of burnout specifically as well as their overall well-being and mental health needs. Research should be guided and led by young people, and adults should take care not to inadvertently contribute to students' burnout through the student-led research process. Adults can mitigate burnout by being mindful of the pressures that young people are under and working toward being as transparent and collaborative in creating the research process, timelines, and activities.

What's Next?

The work continues!

Some ART members shared the findings of this YPAR project at Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia, during a meeting with Dr. Chateé Omísadé Richardson, Professor of Multicultural Education and Child Development, and some of her students, which included hearing about the Spelman group's academic, professional, and personal experiences with burnout. ART members noted that many of the physical, mental, and emotional causes and impacts of student burnout we saw in high schoolers were also described by these college students.

More conversation and research is needed to explore student burnout across high school and college education—and especially how it is experienced by individuals of different backgrounds or identities.



Future ART Cohorts will continue to raise the voices of young people in Savannah to imagine and advocate for more healing and just schools.



use

our

voice

And


impact

injustice




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