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Article abstract

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"IGNORING" TO "AUTONOMOUS" PARTICIPATION: NARRATIVES OF A PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCHER

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines different layers of participation while conducting Participatory Action Research (PAR). In the journey of three years of fieldwork with teachers, many realizations were made about becoming co-researchers and engaging in a collaborative knowledge-building process for developing an engaged pedagogical approach. The paper had two purposes: a) exploring the different layers of participation in PAR, and b) documenting the lead researcher's continuous professional learning in understanding PAR. The lead researcher proposed "ignoring" to "autonomous" participation as levels. The lead researcher also changed from overly influencing roles on PAR to accepting co-researchers' voices and respecting their efforts for sustainable change.

KEY WORDS: Co-researchers; Participation; Participatory action research; Pedagogy

INTRODUCTION

For a decade, I taught mathematics in different schools. I was a very "successful" mathematics teacher as there was almost no event where I could not get correct answers to complex problems. Over that decade, I had opportunities to interact with and utilize several pedagogical approaches. I realized that my notion of a successful mathematics teacher at the school level just entailed the fundamental ideals of a conventional teacher (i.e., lecturing the

ideas and dealing with exam-focused strategies). Gradually, I started offering teacher training sessions, and people began to recognize me as a teacher educator, and consequently I had multiple opportunities to reach out to thousands of teachers nationwide. This helped me develop an increased level of confidence in sharing my thoughts on teaching and learning and demonstrating my skills as a mathematics educator. I believed I had reached the height of excellence in teacher education. At the beginning of my career as a teacher educator, I believed that teachers had minimal knowledge and exposure to different pedagogical approaches. If I supported them in the preparation and implementation of lessons in their classroom, I could make significant changes even in the worst cases. I observed classes on different occasions and made suggestions for refining their teaching strategies.

In 2013, I joined a university as a member of the teaching faculty and had the opportunity to teach several courses to graduate students. There, I expanded my horizons through interacting with different research traditions and thematic orientations. Arriving at this stage, I was fully confident that "I" could change any academic institution (especially schools) if I got an opportunity to work with them. However, the enthusiasm did not translate into action for many years as I did not get an opportunity to work with schools and school teachers directly.

The opportunity arrived in 2019 when I joined a PhD in STEAM Education at Kathmandu University, and for my dissertation, I engaged in a Participatory Action Research (PAR) project exploring teacher-initiated classroom activities with teachers as co-researchers. My doctoral research was a part of and supported by the NORHED Rupantaran project of the university. This initiative aimed to utilize innovative, transformative, and contextualized pedagogical methodologies to hasten improvements in Nepal's basic education through the adoption of the recently adopted global goals for sustainable development. These goals are supposed to increase capacity and drive among numerous local and higher education partners, as well as empower Tribhuvan University and Kathmandu University to launch ground-breaking, transformative, and contextualized educational initiatives. To promote improvements in education, health, sustainability, productivity, and livelihood opportunities, innovative approaches were tested in schools across Nepal. As well, intensive teacher training and leadership development were provided for teachers and school leaders to support their professional growth. The research team set out to scale up effective models for enhancing teaching and learning outcomes by including underrepresented groups in all project activities, developing Tribhuvan University and Kathmandu University's research and policy-development capacities, and continuing ongoing collaboration with concerned stakeholders. This model involved teachers and students in meaningful and sustainable initiatives for improving water and sanitation in schools and local communities. In addition to improving education and health results and serving as a model for effective social entrepreneurship, this method had a clear multiplier effect.

The project identified two sorts of schools; reference schools and an action school. The action school was comparable to the intervention site where project activities were concentrated, while the four reference schools received a delayed intervention based on the action school's results. My research focused mainly on the action school with some activities in one of the

reference schools. Out of several areas of intervention in the overarching project, my research area concerned pedagogical innovations. I was guided by the question posed by Whitehead (1989), "How do I improve what I am doing in my professional practice?" When I started my fieldwork in the action school, I wondered how to best participate with my co-researchers in the knowledge-making process. During my initial months, it was difficult to create an environment that ensured the participation of teachers. Gradually, I started coping with the situation by welcoming new ideas.

In this context, this paper has two purposes. First, it investigates the various layers of participation while performing participatory action research at the research site. Second, it illustrates the lead researcher's continuous professional growth and understanding of PAR.

METHODOLOGY

The paper draws on data from the first author's lived experiences using participatory action research as a PhD scholar. The co-authors are my research supervisors. An important aspect of PAR is that it fully integrates three elements: Participation (life in society), Action (experiences), and Research (knowledge making) (Chevalier & Buckles, 2019). I collaborated with school teachers (i.e., participation) through a series of workshops (actions) to establish collaborative pedagogical approaches. Also, I engaged with different layers of participation, and examined self-growth in understanding PAR (research). During my fieldwork in the two types of schools (action and reference), I interacted with 16 teachers in the action school and 6 teachers in one reference school.

I have narrated the co-researchers' (i.e., teachers') narratives, which they shared at the beginning of the study. Initially, there was virtually no participation from stakeholders to be a part of the school transformation process. At the same time, my limited knowledge of PAR meant I had limited understanding of how to invite the participants into the role of co-researchers. I also discussed my frustration of being in the action school, where I rarely saw active involvement on the part of co-researchers in collaborative actions. Gradually, I observed the increasing participation of co-researchers and expanded my own understanding of participation. I documented the narratives of how co-researchers began to take ownership of generating knowledge and ongoing actions that led to school transformations.

This research study was a component of the overarching Rupantaran project, meaning other researchers were present and collaborating at the same time and locations. The first author shared several activities with other researchers, however, each researcher had a distinct focus, and my initial emphasis was devising inquiry-based classroom activities. Given the nature of the work, my research supervisors acted as mentors in writing this article. The process is informed by the metaphor of writing as co-generative inquiry (Luitel & Taylor, 2007), in which I drafted sections of the paper and conversed with my co-authors to develop intersubjective spaces of knowledge generation. Creating an intersubjective space is about clarifying our crude subjectivities as a recourse to growing into progressive subjectivities informed by comments, critiques, and questions of the co-authors. The practice of writing as a co-generative inquiry has been interwoven in my paper in three different ways. First,

although I have used the first-person pronoun, the self is not necessarily an isolated construct. Rather, it is a co-construction of self and others. As the Buddhist scholar Nagarjuna posits that the process is about the self as being co-dependently arising with others (Vimal, 2009). Second, the idea of intertextuality offers the idea that the texts attributed to "I" are not entirely isolated and solely personal constructions. Third, the Vedic idea of self is as a site of multiplicities and representative of the relative nature of realities connected in our community of practice as supervisors and researchers.

Vignettes

This section describes the field narratives collected during this PAR. I have selected the vignettes to illustrate the various phases of participation. The first anecdote illustrates how I created a sense of collaborative action through self-centered research efforts. The purpose of the second vignette is to illustrate school instructors' resistance to educational changes. The third example illustrates the progressive evolution of the co-researcher's perspectives on teamwork. The final vignette aims to show how co-researchers began to act independently. In order to address the trustworthiness of the narratives, I meticulously documented the detailed context and process while presenting the vignettes.

"I" Will Change the School! No, "We" Will Change the School!

I still remember my initial visit to the school during the PhD proposal preparation in the middle of 2019. I was sitting in the staff room and a mathematics teacher came to the office with a textbook for Grade 8. He sat near me, and opened to the chapter on factorization. He said, "I tried my best to explain the factorization process with rules and techniques. But, students make mistakes in the exam. I came to know that you are an expert in mathematics. Will you please share some techniques?" I immediately started explaining to him the different strategies of factorization: "You can use papers and wooden blocks to help students visualize the process of factorization. This can support in conceptual understanding of factorization." We proceeded to discuss several issues about teaching and learning as he had a spare period.

When I reached my room in the evening, I started to write the reflective journal of the day. I questioned myself: Did I act as a participatory action researcher? Did I invite the teacher to reflect on his practice? Did I respect him as the co-researcher that he was supposed to be? I thought that I could not do it. I should not have explained all the so-called "ready-made strategies" of factorization. Why didn't I ask him to share his best practices? Why didn't I invite him to explore other possibilities and critically reflect on his assumptions? I felt sorry that I had not acted as a participatory action researcher.

I began to question myself. Why did it happen? Wasn't I aware of the process of PAR? My background as a teacher educator, for many years, had become unhelpful in welcoming new perspectives and thinking of alternatives in the field. Perhaps, the deep-rooted beliefs I held about school education in general and pedagogical worldviews, in particular, unknowingly restricted diverse thinking. Ozkul (2020) suggests that it is challenging to shift toward the participatory mindset for researchers as they have the baggage of ideas and perspectives. I

was guided by the thought that "I" as an experienced teacher educator, should "teach" them so that they could implement the ideas in their classroom.

I completed my daily reflection, and it mentally prepared me to shift my role as a participatory action researcher. The next day, I arrived at school with a renewed determination to interact with teachers in a way better aligned to PAR than I had the day before. I sought out the mathematics teacher I had met the day before and learned he was in his Grade 8 class. Checking the class schedule in the staff room, I learned he was free second period and I waited for him.

When he entered the staff room, he said, "Sir, namaskar! It was a fruitful discussion yesterday. I got several ideas on teaching factorization. I am also interested in listening to your ideas in other areas. It's my great privilege to get you into our school."

I was feeling uneasy as he was expecting more ideas from my side. That was not the purpose of the visit. I felt it was very challenging to present myself as a co-learner, as my previous communication had already created an expert-novice relationship dynamic. In this context, I tried to clarify my position. I responded, "Sir, I no longer teach at the school level. For years, I have not been teaching mathematics at the school level. The context in which I was engaged was distinct from where you currently work. I believe the thoughts I have may not be useful to you. You have extensive experience in this field. Let's learn from one another. We, university researcher and school teachers, collaboratively generate new concepts, test their applicability to the situation by applying them. I am here to gain knowledge and collaborate with everyone." He laughed and said, "No, Sir! You know more than anyone here."

From that day onward, I consciously tried my best to listen to teachers before I shared anything from my side. I encouraged them to share their success stories before my stories, and I critically reflected on their values before sharing my values. I realized that this was my process of moving from "I can do" to "We can do".

Armstrong and Ludlow (2020) argues that the focus of a PAR study shifts from an 'I' to 'we' as co-researchers realize that their pasts and futures are inextricably bound up together in so many ways. When we move towards "we," the "individualized notions of responsibility for past failures and future successes" (p. 6) gradually move toward communal responsibility. Díaz-Arévalo (2022) argues that the "ontology of participation fundamentally differentiates PAR from other instrumental or top-down forms of people's participation" (p. 16) in which the emphasis on "'action,' and 'participation' capture how people progressively and self-consciously transform their environment" (p. 16). Armstrong (2019) suggests that PAR is grounded in social constructivism, where people have the right to equal participation, which is of value and relates to their individual interests and those of the wider learning community. He further elaborated that 'collaboration' and 'participation' merge with respect to the PAR model in all its democratic features.

Teachers Do Nothing! How Can I Move Ahead?

In March 2020, I was with the school teachers at my research site. In the past, I had had several opportunities to deliver teacher training sessions at different organizations as a member of a university faculty. While I had presented myself as an expert at those events, when I visited my research site, I tried my best to adopt the role of a PAR researcher. I tried to adopt this role on the day I engaged in discussion with teachers.

It was about 10:00 AM and the teachers and I entered the hall, specifically the Information, and Communication Technology (ICT) room, which we had prepared together a year before. The multi-media was ready and the hall was full of teachers. As before, we started sharing the progress made by each teacher in terms of planning and implementing the lessons. One of the teachers said, "We have been trying our best. You also have been discussing with us several issues and possible solutions. This time, we want to listen to you. Please share the best techniques so that we can use them properly." Other teachers supported him. The head teacher also indicated wanting the same. Immediately, the context changed the focus of our meeting. Almost all teachers were expecting to learn about "Successful Techniques of Teaching." On one side, as a researcher, I was convinced that there was not a single successful way of teaching that would solve classroom and disengagement problems. On the other hand, I was aware that the teachers were seeking recommendations for teaching approaches that offered quick solutions. Teaching methods should emerge from classroom activities, so I thought of a plan to run a workshop where teachers would share their lesson plans, the stories around their implementation, and the challenges they faced. However, my plan did not work. They were expecting my point of view, so I immediately changed the plan. I placed teachers into four groups and asked them to discuss and share their practices on progressive teaching methods in their classes and subjects. Almost all the teachers seemed confused about what to do. As their confusion continued, I added, "You are all in-service teachers. You have rich experiences concerning teaching in schools. Explore some 'Successful Techniques of Teaching'. I will share my thoughts later."

After about 10 minutes, they seemed ready to share the product of the group discussion. One mathematics teacher, Mr. Khadka, who represented the first group, began sharing:

> I teach mathematics. Other group members teach other subjects. But, I share my experiences. Sir, we all know that mathematics is difficult for many students. Students cannot learn mathematics if we do not give many techniques to memorize the formulas and steps of some important problems. For me, the best way to teach mathematics is to encourage them to memorize important problems with solutions and allow them to practice them.

Other group members also agreed with this view. Another teacher, Ms. Khanal, shared:

> Sir, we have many students in Grades 3 and 4 who cannot read and write words. They do not study at school or home. Parents also do not give time to their children. I have tried my best to improve students' reading and writing culture. But now I have realized that only the teacher's efforts do not work.

I could sense her frustration, helplessness, and doubt in her voice. Other group members also shared their opinions regarding their teaching practices and successful ways of dealing with students. Almost all teachers held similar beliefs. I came to know that teachers were searching and expecting readymade techniques that could be given by the trainers/experts. As a researcher, I anticipated that teachers' personal constraints and challenges would be examined critically, although there may be various other factors contributing to the students' unexpected performance in reading and writing culture. Engaging in critical reflection methods has the potential to guide individuals towards enhanced professional development.

That day, my intention was to discuss teachers' reflections about the preparation and implementation of their classroom activities. I tried to bring all of us into a self-reflective approach to development (Brookfield, 2015), where teachers look at themselves rather than blame others. However, the expectations of teachers were at odds with the self-reflection I had hoped for. I saw my role as aiming to create an environment to ensure participation and lead them toward growth through self-reflection. I was puzzled; What do I do? What do I not do? I immediately decided to engage teachers in another activity. Half the participants were asked to remember one of their "finest classes" and the other half one of their "most unpleasant classes". Many of them looked confused at each other, hoping someone else would break the ice. Some of them might have thought participating in such nonsense activities was worthless.

A teacher of Grade 8 finally shared:

> Sir, when I taught OBT (Occupation, Business, and Technology) for grade eight in the last session, there were several new contents. When I saw the course contents, I thought I could not teach them. But, later, students explored several new ideas, such as bee farming. I came to know that we can also learn from students' experiences. It does not mean that teachers should always teach students. But, I think this approach does not help all the time. We should make students ready for the board examination, too.

Another teacher of Grade 6 shared:

> It was any day of my first year of teaching. I was in a science class. I tried to explain everything in detail as I was a fresh BSc graduate. But, in the exam, no one wrote the correct responses. I realized that lecturing does not work. I changed my style of teaching. I have realized that I should be well prepared with several useful materials. I searched for some of the approaches and consulted with my seniors on how to deal with grade six students. Now, I feel comfortable teaching science lessons. I believe my students also understand better. But, there are several issues on the students' side.

"Do you regularly reflect on your teaching?" I asked. His response was: "Yes, I do. Perhaps, we all should do this. But, it is not easy to be a classroom teacher." He tried to generalize this by looking at other friends.

We were running out of time, and I had not started my sharing, which the teachers were expecting. I decided to end the sharing part of the teachers since the teachers' facial expressions indicated that they were no longer willing to share their experiences. On one side, I realized that the background exercise created a rich discourse on the importance of self-reflective pedagogical practices (Tour, 2017). Conversely, teachers were not sharing hopeful moments, bringing the success stories of making educational plans and implementing them. Almost all teachers shared "not-able-to-perform" situations by adding BUT at the end of their explanation.

I thanked them for their active participation in the activity and began my sharing:

> There is no royal road to pedagogy. As educators, we do not have readymade solutions to the different problems you have been facing for many years. If we collaborate and develop a sense of co-learners, I think we might get better solutions to several issues.

I started discussing the contents of the presentation slides. I had wanted to emphasize the different approaches of reflection and the roles of co-learners in the knowledge generation process. Due to the limited time, I could not share specific examples of different approaches of reflection on that day. I tried my best to capture the basic ideas I had planned to share with them, but I did not feel I did an adequate job of it.

When I returned to my residence in the evening, I started reflecting on the session. I reflected on why I was there in the school. How could I conduct participatory action research? How could I envision better schools where most teachers would be able to walk as co-learners? Most teachers indicated that students were not attentive, parents were not serious about their children's performances, and local community members and political leaders were not helpful. I realized that the discourse was turning towards blaming others. In the first few months, I had several questions: How can I/we move ahead in a context where teachers are unaware of their roles? Does engaging in the practice of assigning blame to other educational stakeholders contribute to the improvement of the teaching and learning environment? On the other side, according to the experience of other PAR researchers, I was confident that the journey could be extended and that such activities were necessary to move ahead. I subsequently read a few papers on how to ensure participation in PAR.

Schlebusch (2020) investigated how collaborative leadership can influence sustained learner academic performance in secondary schools. The study concluded that educational stakeholders should build the capacity of teachers to function as members of high-performing collaborative teams without blaming each other. In order to develop high-performing collaborative teams in schools and improve learner achievement, educational leaders in schools need to establish a clear purpose, priorities, structures, support, and a

regular feedback system. Khadka and Bhattarai (2021) suggest that school stakeholders in Nepal are "playing the blame game by pointing at each other for the failure of integrity in school rather than reflecting upon their actions and finding a solution to such an issue" (p. 11). This literature demonstrates that the participatory approaches to solving issues by reflecting on one's strengths and limitations have not yet been practiced in Nepal.

Oh! We Can Develop Resource Materials Ourselves!

On another field visit, sometime in late 2020, the aim was to collaborate with teachers in developing resource materials, especially by cutting and folding paper, in two schools (one was an action school, and the other was a reference school). The action school was supposed to conduct several activities with co-researchers at first, and later successful cases were to be transferred to other reference schools as per their needs. The purpose of developing resource materials was to establish inquiry-based teaching and, thus, to create foundations for integrated projects.

On this day, I was in the reference school. The teachers and I went to the classroom. They seemed motivated to develop resource materials, and I distributed papers, scissors, markers, and other stationery. There were five teachers, including the head teacher. The head teacher was in and out frequently during the session due to some administrative tasks. The teachers were placed in two groups, and they were asked to develop a game like a jigsaw puzzle where the context is given on one piece of the paper, and the possible response is on another piece. They were instructed that when the puzzle is arranged, it should form a shape, like a triangle, rectangle, or square. One group prepared an activity for the Nepali language subject and the other for Science. After they developed the jigsaw, one group was asked to play the game developed by the other group and vice-versa. They found it very interesting. One of the teachers, Ms. Khadka, shared, "Sir, this can be useful for any grade and any subject. It is very interesting." The head teacher, who was also a Nepali language teacher, shared, "Sir, I am facing difficulties in teaching the meaning of Nepali words. Now, I can use such techniques." Another teacher, Mr. Tamang, said, "Yes, this is truly an inquiry-based approach." I immediately asked him, "Sir, why do you think it is an inquiry-based approach? He replied, "Sir, students have to search and take decisions with reasons." Again, the head teacher said, "This encourages group-learning." The head teacher further added, "If all teachers develop such games in each unit, this can be very useful if some teachers remain absent. I always faced difficulties in managing classes when the teachers were on leave."

I had planned to do another activity, but it was almost 3:30 pm. I asked the teachers if they wanted to develop one more activity or if they would rather stop for the day. "Sir, we still have half an hour left for 4 pm, and we can sit for 10-15 minutes more if needed," said a teacher. "So, let us make one more." I was happy to receive such an enthusiastic response from a teacher.

I distributed sheets of paper and asked them to develop a puzzle demonstrating the number of students at their school, from Early Childhood Development (ECD) to Grade five. Some teachers were preparing the questions and the boxes for the puzzle. Some were looking for beautiful patterns. Two teachers were preparing the alphabet (on small pieces of paper that

were the same size as the box). After they had prepared the puzzle, all of them played in a group. They enjoyed it a lot. Although they shared positive comments about using such puzzles in teaching and learning, they also shared that it was time-consuming and needed to be developed in advance.

In the end, all teachers seemed happy and agreed to develop such lesson activities. I asked them to decide for themselves on the next workshops. The head teacher shared, "Sir, let us have a week-long break to mark the test papers and prepare the results." We all left the school happily.

I returned to the residence and started to reflect on my day. I thought it went well. The purpose of the fieldwork was achieved as we had developed the resource materials. I was glad that the teachers in the reference school participated actively in preparing resource materials, and they shared their commitment to continue further. I realized that in order for this to happen, it had to be scheduled by keeping regular Teacher Professional Development (TPD) sessions in the school calendar (at least once a month.) On that day, teachers would develop the activities and share their experiences of successes and challenges.

I tried to make the event participatory, and I did not force them to develop materials on that day. One of the teachers, Mr. Adhikari, had a meeting on that day, and he left the session. He said that he would learn from his friends.

At the end of the session, the head teacher took me to his office and shared that he expected my support for preparing the School Improvement Plan for the coming academic year. That was also an encouraging step for sustaining the ongoing activities.

When I thought back on it, I recognized that Vygotsky's (1978) concept of scaffolding was used in conjunction with the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). As a researcher, I encouraged school teachers and provided supports for making games (like jigsaws), which is a part of scaffolding, and helped teachers accomplish tasks in tandem with another person. The research that is done in the social sciences is dependent on the nature of learning as a socially cooperative process (Lave & Wenger, 1991). I found that when teachers' professional development methods included collaborative efforts, it fostered a sense of mutual responsibility to enhance the environment of the schools. The sense of mutual responsibility was observed when the teachers developed games (like Jigsaw, as shared in the above part) and later implemented them in the classroom.

Sir, Please Support Us! I Will Send You an Email!

It was a day in March 2022 when I formally completed my fieldwork. In the beginning, it seemed like everything was unplanned. COVID-19 meant I had to wait another year to return to the field. Several lessons were learned during those times, such as coping with new situations, living in a pandemic, and thinking outside the box. During COVID-19, a few virtual sessions were also organized among school teachers. Those virtual sessions were fruitful in terms of making resource materials and conducting home-based learning. Thankfully, school resumed after COVID-19.

I received a call from one of the school teachers, Mr. Khanal. I answered, "Hello sir. Namaskar. How are you?" Mr. Khanal said:

> I am fine, sir. How are you? Now, I have developed a few multidisciplinary projects. I am not sure whether they are good or not. I kindly request you provide feedback. I will send it via your email by this evening.

I replied, "I am good. It's good that you are working hard in developing projects and implementing them. I will surely go through them and keep my observations, if any. How are other friends in school? What is the good news?" Mr. Khanal replied; "Everything is good, sir." We had a long conversation. This was one of the notable moments for me. I remembered the initial days when teachers had ignored our presence in the schools, and had tried to avoid new ideas, and expected readymade solutions from others. Only a few teachers had emails at this time. I had not observed the teachers sharing any materials via email before. Now, teachers have started working independently. They began consulting others. It took a long time, but it happened.

After a few hours, I contacted the head teacher. I asked about the ongoing activities in the school. She shared that school teachers were busy developing projects in their subjects. They were preparing teaching materials using papers and wooden blocks.

I checked my email in the evening, and I received three integrated projects developed by Mr. Khanal. I went through them. The projects aimed to connect mathematics and science from the principles of multidisciplinary integration. The understanding of disciplinary perspectives is considered as a foundation in any integrated teaching practice (Mård & Hilli, 2022). I was encouraged that teachers took the initiative for making resource materials themselves. As a PAR researcher, I was happy to hear about the progress made by the teachers and schools regarding self-initiated participation. Initially, I had to motivate (or in some cases, "force") them to participate in the activities. Now, they began requesting me to include them in TPD and to observe their plans. I realized that teachers were engaging in self-initiated participation.

Many experienced teachers find ways to continually develop their teaching knowledge and skills through self-initiated learning activities (Lohman & Woolf, 2001). Such approaches are sustainable forms of TPD in which they are motivated to explore new strategies when they encounter new situations. According to Tour (2017), professional practices should not be viewed as a prescribed list of learning activities for teachers; rather, they should encourage self-initiated professional learning through personal learning networks. Such approaches may not support all teachers as people prefer different modes of learning.

DIFFERENT LAYERS OF PARTICIPATION: IGNORING TO AUTONOMOUS

As a PAR researcher, I realized that establishing relationships with co-researchers through participation in each step can be very challenging. Orlando Fals-Borda made a substantial contribution to the term PAR in 1977 in arguing the notion of participation "with"

participants as opposed to well-established ideas of "by" the people (Díaz-Arévalo, 2022). Based on my fieldwork, I landed on different layers of participation.

Ignoring: In the initial days, when I visited the schools, I realized that the teachers ignored my presence. It seems that schools run on specific structures, and we, as university researchers, did not directly fit into the school system structure as the government bodies work. Perhaps, several other organizations might have visited schools in the past with the agenda of improving the condition of the school. As a PAR researcher, I was not in a hurry. I wanted to ensure participation from the beginning of the needs assessment. Though I had some ideas for "interventions," I was open to other ways of thinking and ready to adjust the tentative action plan I had developed. The teachers' responses, body language, and gestures indicated that they were neglecting the educational problems and possible solutions that might be achieved through collaborative efforts. Smith et al. (2010) argued that neglecting is a micropolitics in PAR where expected co-researchers do not seem ready to move on the same board. Freire (1985) also argued that breaking the "culture of silence" is the first step to ensuring the participation of community people. Perhaps, this "ignore" is the first step where adults often follow the culture of silence to continue the status quo without accepting the challenges of reforming the situation.

Agreed But No Action: At another layer of participation, people seemed to agree with the ideas in the discussion and meeting but did not perform as per the consensus. We, the teachers and the researcher, used to have a review and planning meeting monthly in the school. Teachers used to share ideas and demonstrate their commitment to conducting activities (such as preparing projects and organizing community-based activities). Teachers shared several excuses when we had another round of sharing meetings. They seemed to not be internally prepared and convinced to perform the tasks. However, it also had a good aspect. Teachers, at least, shared ideas in the meeting. They participated in the discussion, which was better than the previous stage of "ignoring" in the continuum of participation. White (1996) mentioned that this is the weakest form of typology of interests and is named "nominal," where participation means demonstrating that they are doing something. Perhaps, participating in the discussion is a good beginning in moving toward the action. Larrea (2021) argued the notion of participation as "a participatory process between territorial actors in the conflict, where action researchers, embodying the role of university/academia in territories, are participant facilitative actors" (p. 121). Here, as a researcher at the university, my major role was to facilitate the process by encouraging them to participate in the activities.

Other-directed Participation: Another layer I noticed was other-directed participation. When I realized that we (myself and the teachers) were lagging in collaborative tasks, we discussed the possible solution with major stakeholders, such as the head teacher and school management committee members. We had a combined meeting with teachers, parents, and school management committee members. After having the meeting, the participation of stakeholders (mostly teachers) increased. The teachers started sharing their ideas with parents and school management committee members. The teachers also shared that they would now develop projects and engaging classroom activities for the students' effective

learning. When I analyzed this situation, it was other-directed participation. Teachers were forced to participate in the teacher professional development activities when the parents and school management committee members were present in the meeting. Such approaches were context-specific as per the needs of the schools and communities (Dhungana et al., 2021). Pretty (1995) labeled such participation as "passive participation" and "participation by consultation" (p. 1250). In passive participation, people participate by being told what has been discussed. In participation by consultation, participation is achieved through consultation or answering questions. The analysis is controlled by external agents who define problems and gather information. In such a process, people do not contribute to decision-making, and professionals do not have to consider their views. The voices for participation are loud in PAR. There are some ethical and political questions including, whose voice 'counts,' what research is for, how we position ourselves and carry power, and what happens when research ends (Armstrong & Ludlow, 2020)? At this level of participation, the voices of people who are in power (such as university researchers, school management committee members, and parents) are counted.

Autonomous Participation: When teachers realized that the innovative pedagogical practices supported students' learning and they were acknowledged for their efforts, their participation increased. They started envisioning new approaches to making resource materials and implementing them. According to Pretty (1995), such a level of participation is self-mobilization at a higher level of participation. At this stage, people participate by taking initiatives independent of external institutions to change systems. As a result, they gain access to external resources and technical advice but retain control over how resources are used. Non-governmental organizations and governments can facilitate self-mobilization by providing an enabling environment. A self-initiated mobilization may challenge current power and wealth distributions or may not. White (1996) argued that such a form of interest, in terms of various forms of participation, is transformative, where participation means empowerment that enables people to make their own decisions and work out what action is to be done. Luitel (2019) also argued that transformation is possible through self-empowerment. At this stage, people take both means and ends as continuing dynamics as per the situation.

Armstrong and Ludlow (2020) mentioned that "one of the promises of PAR is that, through processes of co-constructing knowledge, participants become actors in the planning, implementation, and dissemination of research and, through this repositioning, the experience of participation is less objectifying and more empowering" (p. 6). The idea of Freire is also very pertinent in terms of participation. He mentioned that researchers have political roles which change the existing contexts, so participation differs from the conventional form of listening and welcoming all ideas (Freire, 1996). With this level of development, involvement is seen as something that is automatically present in PAR (Bradbury, 2015). For making sustainable changes in the educational field, reflecting on the "self" and "context" are necessary (Luitel & Taylor, 2019). In my research journey, teachers started sending emails and contacting each other even if nobody asked them to do so. I had a similar experience to that of Black's (2021) research, which indicated that while utilizing action research in a teacher preparation program, teacher candidates may initially be

resistant, but upon reflection, they will recognize and appreciate their growth in achieving their goals. Cornwall (2008) argued that such self-directed participation is a genuine form of participation. Genuine participation requires a deeper level of realization of the changes in the existing conditions.

Lead Researcher's Journey from "I" to "We"

The journey of the lead researcher is notable in terms of understanding and internalizing the ideas of participation during the research work. During the initial visits to the research site, I was unable to create a welcoming environment among co-researchers due to the lack of knowledge and experience while conducting PAR. I gradually developed a sense of collaboration and started to invite co-researchers' ideas. Since we, the teachers and the researcher, participated in researching more effective methods of engaged learning (such as integrating project-based learning, which is a knowledge-generating process), teachers in this situation were not only co-learners but also co-researchers (Pant, 2022). Here, teachers started to be involved in knowledge generation by developing and implementing projects, a journey toward being co-researchers. Although I was aware of the ideas of collaboration before I went to the field, "being" in the research field mattered a lot to developing an attitude of collaboration. I realized that the individual exercise of self-reflection and reflection on one's own personal story and the exercise of shared reflection with teachers (Lozano, et al., 2023) is important to develop the skills of collaboration.

The study's focus in PAR, according to Armstrong and Ludlow (2020), changed from an "I" to a "we" as a result of the realization that our pasts and futures are intimately linked in so many ways. The individual concepts of responsibility for past mistakes and future accomplishments would eventually shift toward collective duty as we advance toward "we." According to Díaz-Arévalo (2022), the emphasis on action and participation in PAR fundamentally distinguishes it from other instrumental or top-down types of people's participation. Participation captures how people gradually and actively modify their surroundings.

Conclusion

Ensuring participation in PAR is a challenging process. It was easy to name co-researchers during the process of the research journey, but very difficult to establish a relationship with co-researchers. In the context of Nepali public schools, the negligence of issues was found in the first stage. The regular follow-up and informal relationship among co-researchers helped to minimize the gap between the lead researcher and teachers. Continuous efforts and patience for moving to another stage of participation are essential. In the public system, where the hierarchical structure matters to make actions happen, other-directed participation is also needed before self-directed participation. When people are participating (whether it is influenced or not), they get opportunities to reflect on the impact of that participation. It would lead them to self-directed involvement if the previous participation was worthwhile. A PAR researcher maintains efforts to include all stakeholders to implement steps to change the current situation successfully. Continuous professional development in the lead researcher's understanding of PAR is not limited to knowledge of PAR. The researcher should engage in praxis by consistently critically reflecting on their

assumptions and practice concerning PAR. Participatory Action Research (PAR) is an extensive process, and varying forms of participation are natural within it. It is incumbent upon the PAR researcher to foster a welcoming and familial atmosphere for co-researchers by building a relationship founded on trust.

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