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Original Article

Transforming Teaching-Learning Context: A PAR-Based School Improvement Intervention

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Abstract

The teaching-learning context in the 21st century has undergone a massive transformation due to globalization and technological advancement, necessitating whole-school improvement. In this study, we report on the school improvement initiatives through participatory school intervention and their impact on school improvement and students' learning outcomes. This article examines the application of PAR as a transformative approach to whole-school improvement, with a focus on the context of a privately funded institutional school in Nepal. Findings indicate that PAR empowers stakeholders through its collaborative and cyclical process of reflection, planning, action, observation, and engagement with school leaders, teachers, students, parents, and other stakeholders. Our school improvement intervention, utilizing PAR, resulted in the development of a shared vision, teachers' professional development, school-community partnerships, and the creation of a welcoming learning environment, thereby improving students' performance. This study provides valuable insights and practical tips for stakeholders and policymakers, offering guidance for holistic school improvement in similar contexts.

Keywords: *School Improvement. Shared Vision. Teacher Professional Development. School-community Partnership. Stakeholders' Empowerment.*

Introduction

School improvement is becoming increasingly important due to globalization and rapid technological advancements in the 21st century. We have witnessed numerous changes in educational settings (Sokhanvar & Salehi, 2018) regarding teaching and learning, pedagogical

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practices, curriculum, assessment, and community involvement, among others. As a result, schools are expected to redesign or transform to achieve accountability and sustainable change (UNESCO, 2020), thereby fulfilling the expectations of stakeholders (Mafratoglu et al., 2023). Moreover, the global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has also made it more urgent to transform schools to address the new challenges. Therefore, it is essential to adapt evidence-based school improvement initiatives to sustain the dynamic process of school improvement activities (Schildkamp, 2019). Recognizing this fact, the Government of Nepal has implemented numerous policies as crucial means of social transformation, with a particular emphasis on educational transformation (Singh & Allison, 2016). These plans and policies include the National Framework of Child-friendly Schools for Quality Education, the School Sector Reform Plan (SSRP- 2009 – 16), the School Sector Development Plan (SSDP) (2016/17 – 2022/23) with different objectives and a common focus on improving the quality of school education. Therefore, as an engine for producing the skilled workforce required for the country's overall development, improving schools for quality education is necessary. However, the anticipated results have not been so satisfactory. According to "the ERO norm and standard, the status of community schools is that only 0.2 percent of schools fall into outstanding schools" (ERO, 2020, p. 53), except for some outstanding ones. As a result, government-funded "community schools are being abandoned by professionals, businessmen, government bureaucrats, university professors, and schoolteachers or those who can afford to send their children to private schools" (Bhetuwal, 2022, p. 36). So, in most of the cases, community schools in Nepal are attended by children from low-income families who are socio-economically living in rancorous conditions. He further states that due to the massive number of students failing the Secondary Education Examination (SEE), public schools are on the verge of collapse, which highlights the worsening condition of community schools in Nepal.

Various studies demonstrate that stakeholder involvement in school improvement initiatives is essential to create a conducive learning environment and achieve sustainable school improvement (Hargreaves, 2008), as each element of the organization, including leadership, teaching and learning practices, community involvement, school-based policies, and school culture, is interconnected. As part of my PhD research, I, the first author, chose PAR for this study due to my role as a teacher educator in various schools, my familiarity with the transformative nature of PAR, and my lived experiences working with the entire school system and its components. Aligning with the PAR principles, this study reflects the first authors' focus on the holistic improvement of schools. The PAR is based on the principles of social change, participation, empowerment, and collaboration of the researchers (Australian Government, 2015). It provides a practical approach to creating a shared vision, improving school culture and climate, and promoting community involvement through the recognition of stakeholders, democratic participation, empowerment, ownership, and sustainability of the entire school improvement process.

School improvement is a complex, multi-dynamic, and collective endeavour of all stakeholders. School improvement refers to the combined efforts of the entire school community, including administrators, teachers, students, and parents. They work with a shared vision and distributed responsibilities to transform the organization's existing situation into the desired one (Kocx, 2020). It aims to promote students' learning and empower the school community to handle change. Bjorkman (2008) describes school improvement as a systematic, ongoing process involving collaborative efforts to enhance the capabilities of school leaders and teachers in achieving national and local objectives within the school. In this regard, school improvement initiatives consider the school as a whole system, a long-term project, and a multi-dynamic process that requires the capacity building of the concerned school leaders and teachers to improve the school's learning environment. It encompasses multiple plans and actions, achieved through the joint efforts of stakeholders. The primary objective of whole-

school transformation is to prioritize students' learning by addressing their challenges in collaboration with other stakeholders and fostering the school as a learning environment.

Every school is unique in terms of its context, administrative structure, vision and mission, level of available resources, and school culture, which collectively determine the success or failure of the school improvement project. Hopkins (2001) mentions several parameters that comprise the school's vision and mission, curriculum, teacher professional development, leadership, learning environment, resource management, school culture and climate, students, high standards, and expectations. Similarly, Prenger et al. (2021) also identify five major factors for school improvement, which include the school's vision and mission, effective leadership, a welcoming learning environment, and opportunities for professional development among teachers within the school. This complex phenomenon requires a collaborative effort from all stakeholders to improve all aspects simultaneously by developing the school as a learning organization. Regarding school improvement initiatives, the School Sector Development Plan (SSDP) (2016/17 – 2022/23), implemented by Government of Nepal for improving the community school in Nepal, highlights seven cross-cutting themes that include "teacher management and professional development, school governance and management, institutional capacity development, disaster risk reduction and school safety, monitoring, evaluation and assessment, examination and accreditation and application of ICT in education for holistic development of the schools for improving the quality of education" (MoE, 2016, p. 49). Similarly, the School Education Sector Plan (SESP) (2022 – 2031/32) was implemented with the vision "to fulfil the aspiration of a 'Prosperous and Happy Nepali through the economic and social transformation of Nepal by preparing capable, creative, and value-oriented citizens" (MoE, 2022, p. viii).

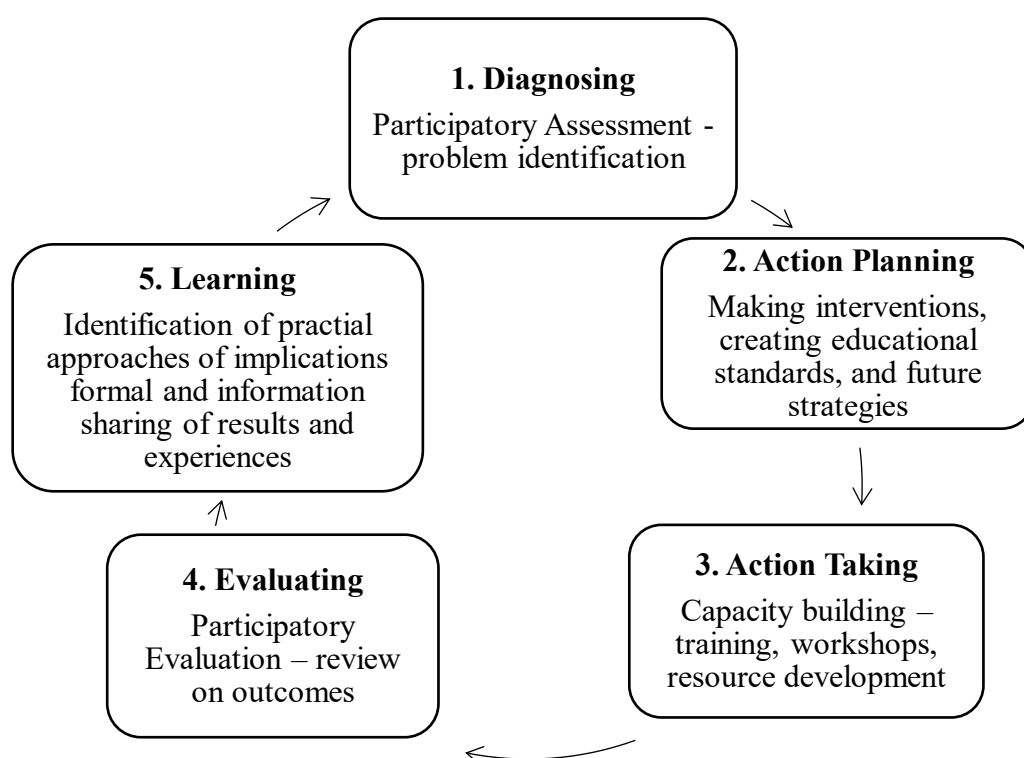
It implies that school improvement discourses revolve around a shared vision, school leadership, teachers' professional development, a welcoming school culture and climate, curriculum planning and implementation, promoting a conducive teaching and learning environment, resource management, school-community partnerships, monitoring, and evaluation. A question may arise in this connection: Are these issues common to the PAR? The answer is 'yes'. However, Nepal, being a multi-ethnic, multicultural, multilingual nation, there exist several challenges and limitations that include geographical constraints, poor socio-economic conditions, deeply rooted caste and gender disparities, political instability, scarcity of qualified and well-trained teachers, lack of professionalism, teacher-centred textbook-based traditional pedagogical practices, inadequate instructional materials, have greatly influenced the quality of Nepali education (Neupane, 2023). In addition, language barriers, poor quality of school infrastructure, lack of awareness, and parental/community involvement (Simkhada, 2023), as well as a lack of opportunities for teacher professional development, financial barriers, and donor-driven financing, where donors' interests prevail in policies and practices. As a result, evidence indicates that several school improvement initiatives have been less effective than expected. In this unique context of the Nepali education system, the transformative power of PAR is both demanding and an urgent call for school improvement initiatives to provide equal access to quality education for all. This involves equipping schools with the required instructional materials and implementing student-centered, modern, and relevant pedagogical practices. In this study, we report on PAR interventions and their transformative impact on whole-school improvement.

Research Methodology

This study is grounded in participatory action research (PAR), which is connected to theories and practices such as pragmatism, democratic process, constructivism, and feminist research (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). PAR embraces a democratic research process that places

a substantial value on the democratic and collaborative participation of all stakeholders, regardless of their power status, with non-hierarchical relationships for co-creating new knowledge and addressing their problems (Greenwood & Levin, 1998). PAR is also concerned with constructivism, as all members of the PAR team are engaged in the PAR project and work collaboratively to construct knowledge and understanding through rich explanations and interpretations, fostering a mutual understanding of the social situation (Jacobs, 2016). Although various PAR frameworks have been developed by different participatory action researchers, depending on the context of their studies, this study followed the framework developed by Wehnert et al. (2018) to carry out this PAR project, as it is most suitable for this study.

Figure 1: PAR Research Process



Source: Wehnert et al. (2018)

Figure 1 illustrates the framework of the PAR research process, which comprises five key steps: diagnosing or identifying the problem, planning for action, taking action, evaluating the outcomes, and ultimately learning from the action. While implementing PAR research as a school improvement initiative, possible areas for change or existing problems are identified through a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis, along with the democratic participation of all stakeholders. Secondly, an evidence-based action plan is prepared to address existing problems, implement interventions, establish educational standards, and develop future strategies. Thirdly, various capacity-building strategies, including training, workshops, and resource development, are implemented to take action. Fourthly, outcomes of the actions are evaluated. Finally, learning experiences are shared among all stakeholders through both formal and informal channels. Therefore, all stakeholders, as co-researchers, understand what happened, why it happened, how it happened, and the potential outcomes. Thus, following this PAR framework, the school can be transformed into a positive and safe learning environment to enhance students' learning achievement (Council of Europe,

2021), where each learner is offered a democratic model of learning where they can construct, own, and apply the knowledge in a collaborative approach in holistic improvement of the school (Morales, 2016).

The participatory action research cycle spanned the entire academic year 2022–2023, comprising four consecutive cycles, each lasting three months. Cycle 1 was the preparatory phase, during which necessary preparations for the whole-school intervention were made. A thirty-one-member core PAR team was formed, comprising thirteen teachers (seven male and six female), nine students (five girls and four boys from grades eight, nine, and ten), and nine parents (five female and four male). In addition, a seven-membered Monitoring Team (MT) was formed, including a university professional researcher, principal, SMC chair, finance head, teacher representative, and parent representatives. The primary responsibilities of the MT were to help the PAR team, manage the necessary resources, and monitor and evaluate the school improvement initiatives conducted by the PAR team. Cycle 2 focused on leadership practice, creating a shared vision, pedagogical practices, curriculum planning and implementation, and classroom management. Likewise, Cycle 3 focused on community involvement, teacher professional development, and enhancing positive school culture in action school. Cycle 4 focused on shifting the conventional term-based written assessment system to formative assessment, developing instructional materials, conducting school exhibitions involving, and planning and experimenting 'Bagless Book Free Day' once a week throughout the year. To diagnose the school's needs, a SWOT analysis was conducted, followed by the development of an action plan, and the PAR project was subsequently undertaken. The action was evaluated to analyze the project outcomes. As knowledge is socially constructed in the PAR process, the researcher and co-researchers' daily life experiences were also integrated to co-create knowledge as milestones for mutual collaboration and solving problems (Jacobs, 2016). Following Lewin's cyclic steps of observing, reflecting, acting, and evaluating PAR (MacDonald, 2012) in each cycle, the academic year was divided into four consecutive cycles corresponding to four terms.

Moreover, through continuous "being here" and "being there" as a critical reflexive practitioner (Wagle et al., 2023), critical reflection (Freire, 1970) was done at each stage of the school improvement initiative. As stakeholders' recognition, democratic participation, empowerment, and shared ownership are the key components of the PAR project, the university researchers played an active role as academic researchers, facilitators, and active observers to assist stakeholders' participation from the preliminary stage of needs assessment to the final stage of sharing project outcomes, incorporating day-to-day life experiences. To this end, purposive sampling was employed to select the research participants, including teachers, parents, and students. The participants were selected from diverse groups representing the total school population, with a male-female ratio. Embracing the action-reflection and following the cyclic process of decision-making, planning, implementing, observing, and reflecting on the PAR process, the PAR team generated information from multiple sources, such as training and workshops, individual and group observations, field notes, journal entries of the academic researcher, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions. Additionally, the interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and translated before undergoing data analysis (Macdonald, 2012). Following the ethical considerations, the data were analyzed and interpreted, assigning pseudonyms to participants with their informed consent, under several themes that covered the critical components of whole-school improvement.

We conducted the thematic synthesis of the findings. We, as authors, have contributed to different sections of the article. After the article's conceptualization, the first author was primarily concerned with conducting PAR research, collecting data, and developing the themes. We have drawn the stories substantiating the themes mainly from the first author's school improvement initiatives. The second author made a significant contribution to

conceptualizing the research agenda, writing the methodology section, and refining the draft through multiple revisions, ultimately shaping it into its final form. The third author primarily contributed to reading, providing feedback, and occasionally writing and editing sections of the article. We have distributed authorship in terms of the contribution level in shaping the final article.

Findings

This discussion implies that PAR is a transformative approach for school improvement. Based on our lived experiences of PAR in school improvement initiatives, altogether, eight themes emerged as significant findings of the PAR initiative, such as stakeholders' empowerment, democratic participation, stakeholders' recognition, shared ownership, resource development, promoting school-community partnership, enhancing school culture and climate, and sustainability of the PAR program in the action school. The thematic delineations are illustrated in the subsequent sections.

Stakeholders' Empowerment

As argued by Carr and Kemmis (1986), stakeholder empowerment is a crucial component of PAR research. All the teachers were engaged in various professional development activities, including teacher training, workshops, curriculum planning and sharing, materials development, research activities, and self-evaluation activities with a focus on reflective practices. The reflective practice was organized, involving careful thinking back over one's activities (Russel & Munby, 1992), in which teachers engaged in thoughtful reflection and critical analysis of their actions (Morales, 2016). As a transformative approach, PAR involved each organization member in sharing their partnership in the PAR project by promoting their critical consciousness regarding their situation, empowering them with the necessary knowledge and skills, and implementing innovative pedagogical practices, such as activity-based learning, project-based learning with the integration of ICT, curriculum planning, and resource development. Moreover, various trainings, workshops, and several rounds of formal and informal meetings and discussions were conducted. Therefore, they could collaborate at each stage of research to co-construct new understandings and address specific issues independently (Jacobs, 2016). In addition, in the course of participating in the PAR investigations, more than simply teaching classroom contents and grading students, the teachers were engaged in other various activities, e.g., modeling classroom teaching, discussions, feedback, collaboration, and materials development, which offered ample opportunities to the teachers to become more democratic, participatory, and collaborative in the ways they engage learners (Jacobs, 2016).

While reviewing the PAR project, we found that teachers' professional development had undergone significant changes, as evident in the following statement from one of the teacher participants. He says, "Almost during 20 years of my teaching career, this PAR has helped me to change the old concept of the lecture method of teaching and rote learning by implementing progressive education." Similarly, another teacher participant states, "Although I had some difficulties at the beginning, later, I felt very excited to work with the PAR team regarding various school improvement activities and our professional development in terms of curriculum planning, materials development, designing a variety of hands-on instructional activities, assessment tools, forming and implementing club-based activities, etc."

This statement indicates that PAR plays a vital role in a school improvement initiative, particularly in enhancing teachers' professionalism and teaching-learning practices (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Elliot, 1991). As stakeholder empowerment is one of the key components of

PAR, all teachers were engaged in several professional development activities, including teacher training, workshops, curriculum planning and sharing, materials development, research activities, and self-evaluation activities (Carr & Kemmis, 1986), with a focus on reflective practices. The reflective practice was structured thoughtfully, considering their actions (Russell & Munby, 1992). They were engaged in thoughtful reflection and critically evaluating their behaviors (Morales, 2016).

The success or failure of the organization revolves around leadership practices. Therefore, developing effective and visionary leadership is required as school leaders are key change agents for uplifting academic achievement standards, leading school improvement, and enhancing the quality of education (Day & Sammons, 2016). Schools have formal and informal leaders who do not hold proper titles (Haber, 2020). Thus, while working with the PAR team, the division of work and distributed leadership practice among the stakeholders motivated them to participate and take ownership of the school improvement activities regularly. In addition, school leaders were responsible for engaging all stakeholders in school improvement activities by raising critical awareness, self-reviewing progress made, identifying needs, creating a shared vision, and committing to actions. Likewise, Day and Sammons (2016) list out some critical dimensions for successful leadership that include defining a shared vision and mission for the school, enhancing teaching and learning, aligning roles and responsibilities for teachers and staff, creating a conducive learning environment, and building relationships in/outside the school community for the successful functioning of the school. Such multi-dimensional responsibilities, working with diverse people, and regular interactions for improving the school, enhanced the leadership quality of school leaders. Ferreira et al. (2006) also argue that continuous intellectual exchange, participation in decision-making, planning, and implementation, as well as leadership development opportunities, made them feel valued, respected, and motivated to support school improvement.

While working with the PAR team for an entire academic year at the research site, significant changes were observed in the school leadership practices. The concept of leadership has changed from conventional to democratic, participatory, and distributed leadership practices. Forming various children's clubs and providing the concerned subject teachers and students with opportunities to lead the clubs and conduct multiple activities, with shared responsibilities, enhanced their leadership qualities. As a result, the teaching-learning environment was significantly changed, as teachers and students were responsible for classroom activities as part of a whole-school system.

Democratic Participation

Another critical pillar of the PAR is the democratic participation of the stakeholders. PAR assumes that knowledge exists in people's daily life experiences, which is co-generated by the collective effort of researchers and co-researchers. As noted by Jacobs (2016), the everyday life experiences of the researcher and co-researchers serve as milestones for the co-creation of knowledge and mutual collaboration in solving existing problems. PAR adopted a democratic research process (Greenwood & Levin, 1998), which placed a substantial value on the democratic and collaborative participation of all individuals with different power statuses, characterized by non-hierarchical relationships, at each research stage for co-creating new knowledge and addressing their problems. The multiple voices of all stakeholders were heard and valued, and they gained their identity as active co-researchers rather than mere passive participants. PAR is a qualitative research method that focuses on the democratic participation of all stakeholders, emphasizing equity, liberty, and life enhancement throughout the research process, where multiple perspectives and collaborative decision-making are valued. Based on this PAR principle, both professional researcher(s) and community people or the members of

an organization with different power statuses and influence (McTaggart, 1991) were involved in all the school improvement initiatives, such as trainings and workshops, FGDs, formal and informal meetings, the collaborative decision-making process in each stage of research as co-researchers seeking to improve their situation (Creswell, 2012) which is the clear example of democratic participation.

Stakeholders' Recognition

Stakeholders' recognition is crucial for the success of the PAR project. Unlike in other research methods, PAR is carried out with the research participants as co-researchers rather than on them (Herr & Anderson, 2015). In this approach, individual teachers, parents, and students, who hold organizational hierarchies and power statuses, are involved in the research through democratic participation, aiming to solve existing problems in the school. The findings of this research reveal that multiple subjective realities, critical understanding, and reflection of the social context of each participant were equally valued and respected (Greenwood, et al., 1993; Greenwood & Levin, 1998; McTaggart, 1997, as cited in Selenger, 1997), and each member of the organization was recognized as the co-researchers in the PAR process. As a result, each member of the multidisciplinary PAR team was motivated to be involved in the research.

Promotion of School Community Partnership

The school community partnership refers to the mutual collaboration between the school and various community components, including individuals, organizations, businesses, NGOs, and local authorities, to promote students' social, emotional, physical, and intellectual development (Strickland, 2016). Accordingly, the Action School expanded its collaborative partnership with various professional organizations, including Activity-Based Instruction Nepal (ABI Nepal), to support instructional planning, teacher professional development, teaching-learning materials development, and overall school development. Similarly, it also collaborated with other professional institutions, e.g., New Concept Metal Arithmetic System (NCMAS) for ABACUS and handwriting skills, the Robotics Association Nepal for promoting robotics and innovation, and the International Taekwondo Federation (ITF) for practicing Taekwondo in the school. In addition, collaborations were also extended to business organizations, media houses, agricultural farms, and religious and social organizations, with the objective of all contributing directly or indirectly to the school's holistic development. It implies that the school-community partnership proved to be a cornerstone in the school's overall improvement, promoting a positive school culture and climate, fostering collaborative relationships among stakeholders, enhancing students' learning, and contributing to the school's success. The regular meetings, orientations, and parenting programs, as well as intellectual exchange among teachers, parents, and students, enhanced the school-community partnership. They were directly connected through various social media platforms, such as Facebook, Messenger, and Viber, where they could exchange necessary information, feedback, and suggestions regularly to improve their instructional environment at the school. In addition, it was realized that all the stakeholders were accountable and taking ownership of what was happening in the school.

Promotion of School Culture and Climate

School culture and climate are two different entities, but overlapping concepts. School climate refers to the psychological and behavioural perspectives of how one feels in a particular school. Meanwhile, school culture refers to the rules and regulations of the organization (Kaluzeviciute et al., 2021). In the school climate research, Thapa et al. (2013) identified five dimensions that comprise: "1) safety, 2) relationship, 3) teaching and learning, 4) institutional environment, and 5) school improvement process" (p. 2). A school with a positive school culture features a safe, pleasant, child-friendly, and welcoming learning environment, characterized by family-like relationships among students and teachers, as well as collaborative and co-ordinal relationships among teachers and staff. This fosters a sense of belonging, making it a conducive learning environment. On the other hand, a toxic school culture can spoil the entire school environment.

In our observation, various children's clubs were formed, a classroom library was established, and a range of entrepreneurship and lab activities were conducted. As a result, a pleasant, child-friendly, and welcoming learning environment was created in the school. The initiation of the '*Bagless Book Free Day*' once a week increased the learners' excitement and motivation. In the course of our school visit, in response to our question, "How is your '*Bagless Book Free Day*' running?" one of the students in the group replied,

"It has been a great learning experience as we do not have to carry the load of heavy bags and worry about the monotonous homework; rather, we get ample opportunities to get involved in a variety of hands-on skill-oriented activities, such as project works, field visits, club-based activities, and entrepreneurship activities."

The above expression reveals that students get excited to be involved in various hands-on outdoor activities, where they have opportunities to develop their learning skills, such as communication, collaboration, critical thinking, research, and innovation, on the *Bagless Book Free Day*. Similarly, our query to the principal at tea time in the school canteen regarding the impact of children's club-based activities and '*Bagless Book Free Day*' under the PAR project, he informed us, "We have found our students more excited and motivated in learning and lowered the rate of absenteeism. Students' creativity and innovations are highly appreciated. Student-teacher collaboration has increased." These statements suggest that the PAR project has fostered a pleasant, supportive, and welcoming learning environment in the school. It shows that school culture and climate cover a broad aspect of the whole school system. Therefore, it is essential to foster a welcoming learning environment by promoting inclusivity, equality, empowerment, creativity, and innovation throughout the entire school system (Thaninwong & Sanrattana, 2022).

Shared Ownership

The stakeholders' shared ownership was one of the PAR project's significant achievements, laying the foundation for its success and sustainability. The PAR project was powered by the teachers' feeling of being "in charge" of the activities taking place in the school (Schaenen et al., 2012). Moreover, it was found that all stakeholders were committed and actively engaged in each stage of the research. As a result, whenever they encountered any problem or puzzlement, they began investigating and solving their own problems independently. Therefore, participants' shared ownership of the school improvement initiatives is essential for the sustainability of the school improvement process. The successful implementation of the '*Bagless Book Free Day*' once a week, initiation of subject-specific labs and classroom library, school gardening, and well-managed classrooms are evidence of stakeholders' shared ownership. Therefore, stakeholders' shared ownership of the school improvement project is essential to its success and sustainability.

Resource Development

In addition to these significant changes in school improvement activities, the PAR team collaborated to develop subject-specific, theme-based, and level-appropriate instructional materials. It resulted in the initiation of subject-specific labs and whole-school exhibitions twice a year, which are examples of materials development. Similarly, the PAR team also rigorously worked on subject-wise and level-wise curriculum planning and implementation, and developed theme-wise rubrics for each classroom to implement formative assessment. Shifting from the conventional assessment system also became possible due to this PAR project. In addition to successfully carrying out all these programs and activities through a collaborative decision-making process involving all stakeholders, the PAR team also worked on reframing school-based policies regarding teaching and learning periods, pedagogical practices, and the organization's administrative structure. Consequently, the school started teaching core subjects by changing the time frame per period from 45 minutes to one hour and addressing all the minor subjects through project works by extending one and a half hours of teachers' working time per day, as well as providing an extra amount of revenue to the concerned teachers and other staff. These evidences prove that PAR is a transformative approach to whole school improvement.

Sustainability

The sustainability of school improvement initiatives is another essential dimension, which entails the involvement of stakeholders (Filho & Brandli, 2016). From the above discussion, PAR is an effective research method that promotes participants' recognition, democratic participation, shared ownership, and empowerment for social transformation, which are the foundations for the sustainability of the entire school transformation. The involvement and participation of multiple stakeholders, including school leaders, teaching and non-teaching staff, students, parents, community members, and local agencies, contribute to the betterment and sustainability of school improvement initiatives (Nidao & Ancho, 2020). As the participation of multiple stakeholders and their collaborative decision-making improves the quality of decisions for sustainable development (Filho & Brandli, 2016), it is necessary to check whether these factors are focused on the PAR project or not for its sustainability.

Discussion

Based on the above-mentioned findings, this section first discusses how we, as teacher educators and academic researchers, journeyed from disoriented dilemmas and discomfort to self-reflection and realization (Mezirow, 1991). We realized that the school transformation is a complex, context-based, and multi-dynamic process. The PAR played an essential role in shifting my (first author) existing frame of reference through the process of critical reflection (Mezirow, 1991), that stakeholders' empowerment, shared ownership, democratic participation, participants' recognition, resource development, promoting community involvement, positive school culture, and climate are also inevitable for the sustainability of the whole school improvement. Before undertaking this PAR project, my frame of reference regarding school improvement was that whole-school transformation is possible by conducting content-specific teacher training programs at a specific level. In this regard, PAR research directly impacts the transformation of the entire school. Similarly, this section presents a theoretical analysis of PAR. The epistemology of PAR posits that knowledge is socially constructed through various interactions between the researcher and co-researchers (Jacobs,

2016). A multidisciplinary PAR team is formed, involving all members of the organization with different power statuses and influences as co-researchers (McTaggart, 1991) in each research stage, with democratic participation. However, equal participation is rarely possible due to the inequality in individual capacity, power status, and conflicting interests among the participants (Wagle et al., 2023). Despite the diversity in personal capacity and manifold conflicting interests of the participants, they can be united by a meaningful purpose that benefits the wider community. The PAR framework consists of five significant steps: diagnosing or identifying the problem, planning for action, taking action, evaluating the learning outcomes, and reflecting on the learning (Wehmert et al., 2018), which begins with a SWOT analysis. However, while experiencing PAR, we understood that PAR is "not linear, finite and developmental ... but cumulative and additive" (Wagle et al., 2023, p. 3565). Paulo Freire argues that critical reflection and participants' empowerment are essential for both individual and social transformation (MacDonald, 2012). Therefore, it is essential to focus on empowering participants and fostering critical consciousness for the entire school transformation. Stakeholders need to identify their problems in the local setting and bring solutions independently (Morales, 2016).

Conclusion

In a nutshell, PAR is a democratic, equitable, liberating, and life-enhancing research approach that focuses on social transformation through the empowerment of stakeholders, the development of critical consciousness, the promotion of social justice and equity, the voicing of the voiceless, capacity building, access, and democratic participation of research participants as co-researchers at every stage of the research process. School improvement is a multi-dynamic process and a collective endeavour of all stakeholders with a shared vision and responsibilities. PAR, as a transformative approach, follows a cyclic process within a transformative framework that includes diagnosing the problem, planning for action, taking action, evaluating outcomes, and learning. This process begins with a SWOT analysis to identify possible areas of change and plan for action, involving the democratic participation of all stakeholders. Following the consecutive cyclic process of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting in each cycle, all the participants are involved in the school improvement project. Unlike other orthodox research inquiries, for the successful implementation of PAR, it is necessary to focus on the stakeholders' recognition, democratic participation, shared ownership, empowerment, and project sustainability. So, PAR is also a transformative approach for whole-school improvement. Therefore, when conducting PAR for whole-school improvement, it is necessary to involve all stakeholders in the school improvement initiatives from the preliminary stage to the final result sharing, working in multiple dimensions. These initiatives include creating a long-term vision and mission for the school, promoting stakeholders' recognition and empowerment, fostering democratic participation and shared ownership, developing school leadership, enhancing organizational culture and climate, promoting resource development, planning and implementing the curriculum, and improving the teaching-learning environment. Similarly, developing stakeholders' critical consciousness, empowering them, and seeking their democratic participation throughout the entire research process, from the preliminary to the final stage, are equally important.

Data Availability Statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the corresponding author, without undue reservation.

Ethics Statement

The Research Committee at Kathmandu University School of Education, Nepal, had granted ethical approval to conduct the study. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements.

Author Contributions

Dhundi Raj Giri: primarily concerned with conducting PAR research, collecting data, and developing the themes. **Bharat Prasad Neupane:** contributed to conceptualizing the research agenda, writing the methodology section, reading and rereading the draft, and leading it to its final shape. **Dhanapati Subedi:** contributed to reading, giving feedback, and, at times, even writing and editing some of the sections of the article.

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Conflict of Interest

Authors would like to declare that the research conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial support. The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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