Editorial

Participatory Action Research: An Emergent Research Methodology in Health Education and Promotion

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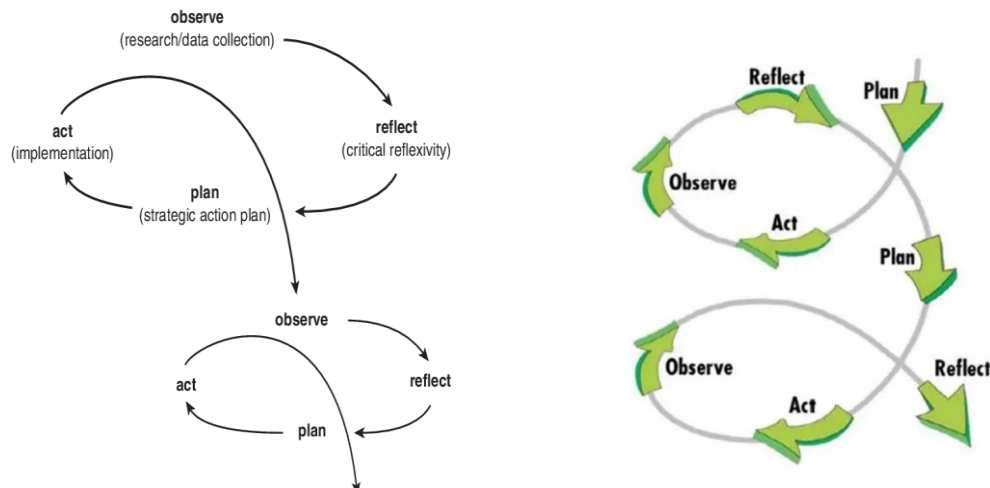## Introduction to Participatory Action Research (PAR)

Available written evidence suggests that Action Research (AR) has its roots in Europe and the United States, which emerged during the 1930s. The origin of classroom action research can be traced back to the contributions of Kurt Lewin, a social scientist who developed the action research model during the late 1930s. Lewin is regarded as the pioneer of action research, which is a methodological approach to problem-solving that engages both the researcher and a practitioner. Similarly, John Dewey first used action research in education in 1933 with the concept of 'reflective thinking' in classroom teaching. But John Collier used the term 'action research' for the first time in 1945. Kurt Lewin developed a model of the 'action-reflection cycle' of action research in 1946 (McNiff & Whitehead, 2002)—aimed at solving

Figure 1
Lewin Model of Action-Reflection Cycle

problems rather than just producing knowledge (Morales, 2016). A decade later, Stephen Corey (1953) promoted 'cooperative action research' in education in the US that featured extensive collaboration with school and teachers across the US. Later, in 1970s, Brazilian emancipatory educator Paulo Freire, an adult educator and critical pedagogue, resurged the concept of AR by emphasizing the need for raising critical consciousness through critical pedagogy (Freire, 1973). Through his approach, collaboration, participation, and empowerment were widely used in AR. The approach of Freire was concerned with empowering the poor and marginalised members of society through consciousness-raising via sociopolitical actions (Freire, 2000).

Stenhouse (1975) floated his idea of 'teacher as a researcher'. He argued that teaching and research are closely related; and he called for teachers to reflect critically and systematically on their practice as a form of curriculum theorizing. Orlando Fals Borda first coined the term 'participatory action research (PAR)' in 1977 (Díaz-Arévalo, 2022; Fals-Borda, 1987). He focused on the epistemological shift from AR to PAR, known as 'participatory turn' (Díaz-Arévalo, 2022). Stephen Kemmis (1986) made significant contributions by locating AR within the critical theory framework (Morales, 2016). Kemmis and his associates, as well as the educational action research team, modified the original AR process. They conceptualized AR as a recursive process that involves an action-reflection cycle in a spiral design (McNiff & Whitehead, 2002). Whitehead (1989) promoted 'educational living theory' in AR, focusing on 'how do I improve my practice what I am doing'.
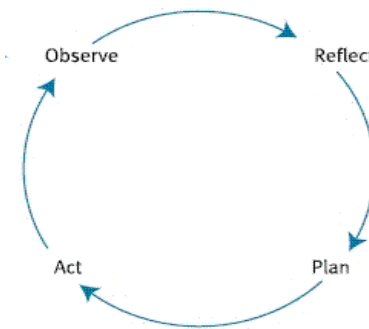
Figure 2.
Spiral Model of PAR Cycle

The PAR is an umbrella term covering a wide array of participatory approaches. It is variously termed, such as 'participatory research', 'critical participatory action research (Kemmis, 2006), 'transformative participatory action research' (Mertens, 2008), 'teacher action research' (Pine, 2000), 'cooperative action research' (Corey, 1953), or 'community-based participatory action research' (Minkler, 2000). PAR is a prototype of action research, which focuses on making inquiries about the identified problems and taking action to solve them, where people are fully involved and actively engaged throughout the research process (Brown & Tandon, 2008). As an applied research, PAR aims to strengthen marginalized peoples' creativity and wisdom through empowerment (Díaz-Arévalo, 2022; Steven, 2016) by involving people from the initial phase to the final implications of the research (Whyte et al., 1989).

Thus, PAR is a combination of theory and practice, action and reflection, information and transformation with the participation of the research stakeholders who seek the practical solution of the problems in their socio-political, economic, and familial contexts (Steven, 2016). It differs from conventional research in that it embodies shared ownership of research outcomes, social and political empowerment, community-based analysis, focusing on social problems, and (re)orientation towards community action (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). PAR is a participatory, systematic, dynamic, developmental, and transformative action inquiry (reflection-in-action). It inherently embodies the ideas of co-learning through critical reflection in practice (Upreti, 2023). Critical reflection is the central tenet of PAR. As critical inquirer, the PAR researchers use critical reflection as a tool of social inquiry to take action for socio-political change (Baum et al., 2006). Paulo Freire's concept of 'praxis' stems from critical reflection in action, which further results in pursuing transformation. Freire asserts that human consciousness brings critical reflection upon the action (Freire, 1973). It further brings improved practices, which is called as praxis (Kemmis, 2006). Through the praxis, critical awareness develops over the deeply held false consciousness, which is called transformation (Freire, 1973). PAR, thus, essentially empowers the participants to reflect on their false consciousness by enabling them to analyze the real-world situation and consequences of a particular practice (Upreti et al., 2024).

Participatory Action Research (PAR) Methodology

PAR significantly differs from traditional research approaches since it stems out from the philosophical root of pragmatism and transformative worldviews (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). PAR is a participatory, democratic, inclusive, and culturally responsive approach that brings social change through action (Whyte, 1984). Baldwin (2012) asserts that PAR aims to be transformative in nature. The transformative lens in PAR is increasingly used in the field of health and educational research, which improves the socio-political situation of those who are being researched by participating in the thorough process of action inquiry (Baum et al., 2006). PAR methodology fosters mutual collaboration with the research participant/s with diverse knowledge, skills, and expertise that best match the context where the research is conducted. PAR has been an emergent methodology that works in partnership with stakeholders, leading to the action for sustainable change (Baum et al., 2006). It prescribes no 'cookbook methodology' in advance; instead, it is developed through collaborative efforts by the researcher and co-researchers based on their communicative action inquiry (Widianingsih & Mertens, 2019). Jacobs (2016) opines that PAR is an emergent methodology that challenges the traditional hierarchy between a researcher and one being researched; rather, it assumes that research is conducted 'with participants' (p.49). PAR accepts a multi-paradigmatic approach allowing an integral perspective (Luitel, 2019; Paul & Marfo, 2001; Peter Charles Taylor & Medina, 2013; Taylor, 2008) in the process of intervention development, implementation, and data generation – as PAR accepts the idea of methodological pluralism within a single study (Dhungana & Luitel, 2021; Taylor et al., 2012; Upreti et al., 2024). The complexities of the research problems and underlying research questions demand a hybrid research methodology (Taylor et al., 2012). Moreover, multi-paradigmatic space in PAR supports to enhance inclusive practice and nurture harmony with the research participants (Dhungana & Luitel, 2021).

PAR methodology holds an ontological assumption of 'co-constructed multiple social realities' which are contextual and dynamic (Lincoln et al., 2011). PAR opposes objective or subjective reality alone, rather it does both (Jacobs, 2016). Contextualized realities emerge from different groups of people at different times who were distinct from each other with respect to their social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, gender, and age group. In PAR methodology, knowledge is co-constructed through 'collaborative action inquiry', 'participatory inquiry', 'action inquiry', and 'inquiry of praxis' between the researcher and the research participants to explore context-bound solutions to the problem (Morales, 2016; Steven, 2016). PAR enables the co-researchers to co-construct the knowledge through rigorous collaboration (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011); and it has a strength for the improvement in practice and co-creation of knowledge but a non-hierarchical relationship between (co)researchers is a must. PAR researchers assume that knowledge is deeply rooted in the lived experiences of the people who are involved in the study. Corresponding to this, Maguire (1987) as cited in Jacobs (2016), quoted that 'we both know somethings, neither knows everything' (p. 49). Axiological assumption of PAR holds a value-based study, which assumes co-constructed knowledge cannot be separated from the possession of both researcher(s) and co-researchers (Baum et al., 2006). Participants in the PAR are recognized and valued as co-researchers since they are the active change agents of society (Upreti, 2023).

Use of PAR in Educational Research

Several studies in the educational research reveal that PAR methodology has empowered teachers, students, and school management committees, including parents, to contextualize school curriculums and classroom teaching practices to implement inquiry-based learning, experiential learning, participatory action learning, arts-based pedagogies, and performance-based assessment strategies. These engaged pedagogical approaches not only increase the meaningful engagement of students in the classroom, but also empower them to seek solutions to the problems in their real-world situations. The collaborative action research conducted in Canada among elementary school teachers reveals that the use of action research enables teachers to foster their expertise, strengths, talents, skills, and knowledge (Jaipal & Figg, 2011). The study supports and sustains the changes in teaching practice and student learning. Similarly, a research conducted in the urban middle school of the US reveals that PAR can promote meaningful engagement of students in school and develops a sense of self-efficacy (Ozer et al., 2010). A similar study conducted in Europe, which involved eight schools from three countries, also reveals that PAR develops collaborative and reflective practice among the teachers and increases students' active participation in learning (Messiou, 2019). Teacher action research conducted in Chinese schools demonstrates the improvement of teachers' professional development in a meaningful and sustained manner with earnest progress in student's learning endeavors (Liu & Wang, 2018). A study in primary schools of Tanzania highlights that PAR increases school attendance, confidence, self-esteem, and active engagement among the primary-level students while teachers incorporate participatory methods in their classroom teaching (Roberts et al., 2015). A review-based study also argues that P/AR develops teachers' pedagogical and instructional practice, cultivates students' better learning outcomes, and improves the school's teaching environment (James & Augustin, 2018). A study conducted in a rural school in Bangladesh also illustrates that PAR-based teaching practice in a rural school improves better educational outcomes (Liu & Wang, 2018). A study conducted in the Philippines also reveals that PAR boosts teachers' reflective learning practice for their professional development (Morales, 2016). PAR has been widely utilized in educational research to examine workplace challenges and overcome them via collaboration, participation, and action. Its popularity has exploded as a qualitative approach to resolving educational issues.

Use of PAR in Health Education and Health Promotion in Nepal

Though PAR methodology was utilized by some of the NGOs and INGOs in Nepal to address community health challenges during the 1980s and 1990s (Khadka & Paudyal, 1995; National Zoonoses and Food Hygiene Research Centre, 2001), to our best knowledge, an American academia Marion Gibbon conducted her first doctoral study in the late 1990s using a PAR framework. Her work remains significant for the application of PAR methodology in addressing public health challenges through a participatory and inclusive approach, particularly within Nepal's socio-cultural and community-oriented context among the academia (Gibbon, 2002). This pioneering research has inspired Nepali scholars to adopt PAR methodology to tackle health and educational issues. In Nepal, PAR was formally introduced into educational research in 2016 through the NORHED Rupantaran academic project (2016–2023). This initiative was a cross-broader collaborative effort between Tribhuvan University (TU), Kathmandu University (KU), and the Norwegian University of Life Sciences (NMBU). The

project aimed to explore innovative strategies for improving quality in teaching and learning in a few of the resource-constrained schools of Nepal. Researchers working for PhD and master's level from TU and KU adopted PAR methodology in their studies, significantly advancing the field. One notable contribution was made by a TU PhD researcher who explored the impact of PAR in a public school. His findings suggest that PAR enhances students' active engagement in activity-based science learning through school gardening initiatives. These activities improved students' learning experiences and increased the involvement of parents and the community (Acharya et al., 2020). Another TU PhD researcher demonstrated how PAR empowers schoolchildren to adopt better handwashing practices, use human urine as liquid fertilizer in school gardens, and integrate water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) topics into classroom teaching sessions (Devkota, 2023).

Similarly, Upreti (2023), a PhD fellow at TU, highlighted that school-based nutrition education interventions using PAR effectively transformed children's nutritional behavior. The intervention activities improved food and nutrition knowledge, fostered positive attitudes towards healthy eating, and encouraged healthier dietary practices. Participatory learning allowed students to critically examine the misconceptions about health behaviors, fostering self-awareness, harvesting positive intentions, and self-efficacy in adopting healthier habits. Ghimire conducted her PhD study under the same project and concluded that skills-based health education undergoing PAR methodology fosters health promotion among school-going adolescents and builds teachers' capacity in skill development (Ghimire & Devkota, 2022). Besides, the PAR methodology is gaining popularity among Nepali academia across multidisciplinary fields. It is increasingly recognized for its participatory and transformative potential, making it a valuable tool for addressing complex social, cultural, health, environmental, and language related issues.

Conclusion

PAR methodology in educational research holds significant potential to empower both researchers and research participants (co-researchers). By fostering critical consciousness and awareness of their shared context, PAR enables the participants to collaboratively generate context-specific knowledge and develop strategies to address the challenges within their practice settings. Although the history of using PAR as a research methodology by university researchers in Nepal is relatively recent, its application is gaining momentum and popularity within the academic community. This growing acceptance highlights its relevance and effectiveness in addressing complex real-world issues through collaborative efforts. PAR is particularly well-suited for designing, implementing, and evaluating school-based health and education practices. Its participatory approach ensures that interventions are tailored to the needs and realities of the target community, making them more sustainable and impactful. By engaging educators, students and other stakeholders in the research process, PAR not only enhances the effectiveness of interventions but also fosters a sense of ownership, critical thinking, and empowerment among all participants. This methodology, therefore, offers a transformative framework for addressing educational and health challenges in diverse and resource-constrained settings.

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