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Experiencing Transformative Learning during Participatory Needs Assessment of a Public School: Journeys and Arrivals to Relational Ontology(ies)

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Abstract

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Keywords

participatory, needs assessment, quality education, transformative learning, relational ontology(ies)

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Experiencing Transformative Learning during Participatory Needs Assessment of a Public School: Journeys and Arrivals to Relational Ontology(ies)

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This paper discusses experiences from school-based needs assessment within a Participatory Action Research (PAR) project aimed at facilitating quality education in public schools of rural Nepal. Being often a first stage in the process of research-action, Participatory Needs Assessment (PNA) offers space for community members' perceptions and attitudes toward their collective needs. In this light, this paper takes evidence from the first and the second authors' Ph.D. experiences, under the supervision of the third and the fourth authors to initiate PNA of a school. Also, incorporating the reflections from the fifth author as a critical friend, it observes the political, epistemological, ethical, and methodological challenges of doing such assessments; the challenges of involving all the stakeholders in identifying problems, and the transformative possibilities the approach inherently brings within it. On the whole, the paper reflects how, despite manifold conflicting interests of the multi-group stakeholders, relational ontology(ies) emerged in the cyclical and spiral process.

Keywords: participatory, needs assessment, quality education, transformative learning, relational ontology(ies)

Setting the Scene

In July 2017, Kathmandu University School of Education (KUSOED), Nepal, selected us (Shree and Parbati), the first and second authors of this paper, for the NORHED Ph.D. fellowship in education. The fellowship constituted an integral component of the Rupantaran Project (2016–2023). Rupantaran, derived from the Nepali language, conveys the concept of “metamorphosis.” This initiative was inaugurated through a collaborative effort involving Tribhuvan University and Kathmandu University in Nepal, in conjunction with the Norwegian University of Life Sciences in Norway. The primary objective was to foster inventive methodologies in pedagogy by means of contextually tailored approaches aimed at augmenting the caliber, applicability, and enduring viability of education within the Nepalese context. Supported by the NORHED fund, this undertaking manifested as an interdisciplinary pursuit structured around discrete yet intricately interrelated focal points relating to education, health outcomes, and means of sustenance. As mentioned in the Rupantaran Project proposal, this initiative aimed at school improvement through contextualized and participatory approaches. As research-degree students, we were to research enhancing the quality of basic school education of rural Nepal, but we were not yet sure of our focus area. The project report had suggested carrying out Participatory Action Research (PAR) but we were not yet familiar with the PAR design. Though action research in general was a popular research design for university requirements and though community-based participatory research was popular in development

sectors, PAR was not yet familiar to those with research degrees in the universities of Nepal. In this background, our initial tasks were to select (and/or get invited from) schools in rural settings and carry out a needs assessment to examine ongoing practices and to understand the current state, problems, and opportunities for improved teaching and learning in rural areas. Thereafter, we had to use the findings from the needs assessment as benchmarks for a collective action plan. All the same, what is the nature of Participatory Needs Assessment (PNA) in local communities? What would be the basic methodological underpinnings of PNA? We were not familiar with it, and so, as novice research practitioners, we chose to start our PAR journey.

Informed through our actions and reflections during PNA of a rural located public school of Nepal, this paper is a detail of our transformative learning experiences. In transformative learning, a learner constructs a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experiences (Miller, 2002; Mezirow, 2012). Not limited to individual transformation, the collaborative process of transformative learning enables the expansion of collective institutional boundaries (Duenkel et al., 2014; Luitel & Dahal, 2020; Napan et al., 2018). To this theoretical reference of transformative learning, this paper describes our PNA journeys and our arrivals to relational ontology(ies) (see Lange, 2018). It explains how, as Ph.D. researchers, we passed through the spirals of contextual dilemmas and discomforts; how we made continuous individual and group reflections; how we identified new political, epistemological, ethical, and methodological options for collective knowing and doing; and how we built confidence to carry on the PAR project at the school and the community.

From Individual to Collective Dimensions of Transformative Learning

This study discusses the PNA action reflections about the individual and collective dimensions of transformative learning and development models. Among various tenants of individual dimensions of transformative learning that have been developed so far (Dewey, 1981; Freire, 1970; Habermas, 1971; Mezirow, 1991; Taylor, 2019), this study particularly focuses on Jack Mezirow's theory on adult learning (Mezirow, 2012). We have chosen Mezirow because Mezirow largely focuses on the psychological dynamics of adult learning, reflecting upon one's frame of reference, thereby reinforcing new perspectives. Grounded in human communication, Mezirow (2012) understands learning as the process of using a prior interpretation to construct a new or revised interpretation. Every individual as a social being has his/her own frame of reference to view the world and the phenomenon. Transformative learning is a way to critically reflect on one's own frame of reference, arriving at renewed and therefore more informed perspectives.

In this sense, Mezirow's (2012) transformative learning is about experiencing a perspective change or a paradigmatic shift in thoughts and actions through reflections. A perspective transformation often occurs through a series of cumulative transformed meanings. At some stage of life, an individual learner may experience triggering events, which may cause him/her to question the current situation. Such questionings may enable the learner to develop an awareness of inconsistency amongst his/her thoughts, feelings, and actions. Continuous engagement in reflective and constructive discourse may enable the learner to approach and thereby accept alternative viewpoints. Thus, transformative learning, according to Mezirow, is the building of competence and self-confidence, and arriving in new roles and relationships through critical reflections to one's own (and others') lived experiences.

However, Mezirow's (2012) theory of transformative learning has some limitations in that it focuses more on cognitive and rational dimensions of reflection at an individual level and gives less stress to collective emotions and social dimensions (Mälkki, 2010). To this realization, through "ontologies of relationality" (Lange, 2018), this study adopts collective dimensions of transformative learning as well. Here, relational ontologies refer to philosophical

perspectives that emphasize the interconnectedness and interdependence of entities and phenomena in the world (Molderez, 2021). Within this framework, reality is perceived as a network of relationships and interactions, challenging more traditional views of independently existing objects or substances. Napan et al. (2018) observe that in “collaborative developmental action inquiry” (Nicolaidis & Dzubinski, 2016), there is always a space for collaborative transformations, which according to Buechner (2020), is a developmental space from “liminality to *communitas*.” For Heron and Reason (1997), this relational ontology enables humans to understand themselves as a part of a wider community of life, where to experience anything is “to participate in it” (p. 278). These undertakings suggest that transformative learning, collaborative practice, and praxis are intertwined within a relational ontology that allows individuals to perceive themselves as integral components of a broader community of life. Here, the term “praxis” refers to the integration of theory, the practical applications, and their reflective meanings, emphasizing the transformative process of learning through active engagement, and reflecting its significance in understanding how knowledge is enacted and evolved in real-world contents. To this recognition, we have linked praxis to transformative learning and collaborative practice (Dahal et al., 2023; Dahal & Luitel, 2023; Luitel & Dahal, 2020; Luitel et al., 2023), suggesting that individuals not only gain new insights but also actively apply and integrate these insights into their interactions and engagements with the broader community of life. Seen from these perspectives, the act of experiencing something inherently involves active participation, emphasizing the interconnectedness of these concepts.

Other similar studies (e.g., Nutton et al., 2020; DeGennaro, 2018), forward relationality in transformative learning as a response to move from collaborative practice to praxis. Such orientations of transformative learning show many possibilities for facilitating praxis informed ventures through personal, joint, and intra/inter-organizational partnerships in educational endeavors. Stepping on these developments, this study is a detailed reflection of a case where the PAR researchers involved in PNA of a school, journeyed through transformative learning, and arrived to appreciate relational ontology(ies) in transformative learning and researching.

The Study Context

Initially, Tribhuvan University (TU), and Kathmandu University (KU), Nepal, the two collaborating partners of the NORHED Rupantaran project selected five (later it increased to eight) Ph.D. research degree students to facilitate PAR project in ten different schools from three different districts of the country (Kavre, Chitwan, and Nawalparasi). Another partner university, the Norwegian University of Life Sciences (NMBU), Norway, provided a contributing environment for reciprocal knowledge exchange between NMBU and partners to facilitate bi-directional collaborative learning. In the very early phase of the PAR journey, the research-degree students from TU and KU studied Rupantaran project documents and gained some insights into its philosophical and epistemic standpoints. As mentioned in the project document, its objective was to improve teaching and learning outcomes of basic school students through community empowerment and sustainable improvements. Accordingly, the action research process suggested by the project proposal was grounded in an intentional focus for transformative learning. Thus, acknowledging transformative learning as one of the major cross-cutting themes of the project performances, at the end of every stage of the PAR process (preparatory, plan, action, and reflection), the team of research students and the research supervisors would reflect on their transformative learning experiences.

KU selected five schools located in the Dapcha community of Kavre district, Nepal. Located in Namobuddha-7, which is about 50-kilometer North-East of Kathmandu, the Kavre district is a rural location with a hilly landscape. Among those five public schools from the Dapcha community, Shree Janahit Secondary School was the one. Established in 1960 AD and

located in the village center, the school had seven decades of long schooling experiences. Despite remarkable past records in terms of students' enrolment, when we first visited the school in July of 2017, there were just 198 students. Initially, we gathered from our discussions with the parental community that the school had begun to lose community trust, and many parents had admitted their children to English-medium private schools. Several community leaders and supporters of Janahit School were seeking opportunities to improve the school's overall performance. Meanwhile, the former School Management Committee (SMC) chair of this school visited us with a proposal to collaborate for school improvement. This initiative prompted our decision to designate it as an "action" school for our PAR project, and furthermore, to select this school as a leading school for the project. Based on our project model, we would first work in leader school and take the experiences and learned lessons to other four reference schools; in this way, the significant changes in this school were likely to get transferred to other nearby schools within the community.

PAR Needs Assessment at Janahit School

Following the establishment of enhanced community communication and rapport, the PAR "intervention" was initiated in May of 2018. The PAR team comprised two doctoral researchers (Shree and Parbati, the first and the second authors of this paper), twelve school educators, the principal, members of the School Management Committee/Parent-Teacher Association, 16 student representatives (two from each grade spanning from Class 1 to Class 8), and six community advisors (selected to articulate community perspectives). Notably, key research participants such as the principal, teachers, and student representatives assumed a dual role as both subjects of research and practitioner-researchers, essentially functioning as "co-researchers" (Kemmis et al., 2015). Explicit written consent was procured from these co-researchers, supplemented by requisite permissions from the village chairman and elected representatives to document visual media, including photographs and videos, of public events and communal activities.

The research question we attempt to answer in this paper was, "What were the research-degree students' transformative learning experiences of participatory needs assessment in a rural public school in Nepal?" This paper, therefore, doesn't reflect our transformative learning experiences during the overall PAR project; instead, it is focused on transformative learning we experienced during the preparatory and planning phases, particularly, during PNA at Janahit School and the community. Being the first stage in the process of research-action, PNA offers a space for community members' perception and attitudes towards collective needs (Rajbanshi et al., 2021). In our case, PAR needs assessment held two underlying beliefs; first that transforming the existing ways of thinking and doing is possible when people are themselves convinced of some overarching needs for transformation (Gravett, 2004); and second that the change initiatives which focus mainly on the improvement of technique or skill, just for some speedy improvements, usually bring superficial change which could not sustain. Therefore, we put a great deal of efforts on strengthening school-community (and the university) interactions in the initial phase, which in long run could empower local actors to foster a favorable environment to utilize available local knowledge, experiences, and resources. As Edwards-Groves and Kemmis (2015) suggested, it would also foster ownership and accountability among all the stakeholders.

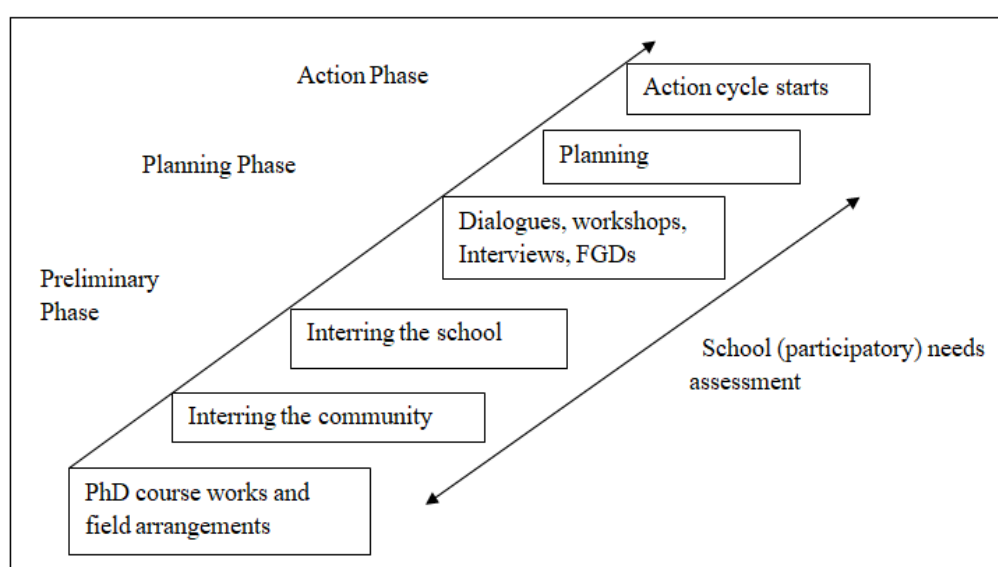
To achieve the above-mentioned goals of PNA at Janahit School, our project team from KU made a threefold strategic plan that is, (a) mapping local contextual realities, (b) fostering collaborative and demographic platforms, and (c) determining problems and prospects of engaging local educators, parents, and students in school improvement initiatives. Following it, during the preparatory phase, the Rupantaran team from the university applied for access

and research permission. Thereafter, we the student researchers and the supervisors visited nearby communities where the study school was located and held several formal and informal discussions with local stakeholders.

We designed survey instruments and conducted baseline surveys with stakeholders. Doing all such activities, we were preparing the ground for initiating PNA in the chosen school and the community. The PNA activities included: (a) preparing tools and carrying baseline survey, situation analysis of the school, observation of on-going teaching and learning activities in the school, (b) a four-day participatory workshop in the school, and (c) in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with school stakeholders. Figure 1 below is an overview of the PAR phases and PNA activities at Janahit School.

Figure 1

PAR phrases and needs assessment activities at Janahit School



As shown in Figure 1 above, we carried out a three-phase research process; that is, preliminary phase, planning phase, and implementation (action) phase. They passed through spirals of the actions and the reflection cycles in the implementation phase. Also, we made collective participation in reflective evaluation and sharing of the overall outcomes. Therefore, it was evident that the PNA of the study school began and moved from the university through the community to the school in a reciprocal exchange of information and ideas.

Study Methods

The study followed a PAR approach, particularly inspired by Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) and McNiff and Whitehead (2010). PAR develops knowledge and practice grounded in the participants' context and in collaboration with people in that context (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). We believed that local participation is key to facilitating the democratic process. To this end, through their interaction with local inhabitants in everyday life, we slowly began to recognize the cultural identities and social practices of the communities. As facilitators, our role was to assist stakeholders in keeping the dialogue open. This role assisted and enabled us to open ourselves up to a variety of perspectives.

As discussed in the introductory section of this paper, within the "bigger PAR project," this study is limited to the research question about the student researchers' experiences of

transformative learning during initial phase of the PAR process; that is, participatory needs assessment. To this end, confined to collaborative action and reflection spirals of PAR, written from a reflexive practitioner perspective (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; Reason & Bradbury, 2008), this paper addresses the research question about our (student-researchers') transformative learning experiences while in the needs assessment phase of the PAR process. Through continuous "being here" and "being there" hermeneutic shifts, we reflect student researchers' transformative learning experiences. "Being there" is the time and space of the actual field experiences. Likewise, "being here" is the present time and space, where (and when) reflexive practitioners continuously look back and make meanings of the shifts. Reflexive practitioners look for subjective understandings of reality (Anderson & Herr, 2005). In their action-reflection process, they think about the impact of their own actions in creating reality and knowledge. In this line, this paper reflects our tacit practical consciousness of everyday sense-making (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005), and discusses how we experienced transformative learning during overall activities (i.e., mapping study contexts, fostering democratic space, and developing collaborative culture) involved in PNA of the school and the community.

Data Generation

Embracing the action-reflections approach, we generated field observations that formed the cornerstone of our study. The evidentiary foundation was constructed particularly from the field notes and journal entries of the student-researchers, penned during the preliminary and planning phases. Also discussed in the separate heading, "PAR needs assessment at Janahit School" above, our holistic dataset encompassed insights garnered from participatory workshops and faculty gatherings events facilitated by our research team during the needs assessment juncture. These data generation activities constituted the needs assessment phase within the overarching PAR process. These entries, ranging from narratives detailing both triumphs and setbacks, were enriched by collaborative reflections involving both the student-researchers and research-supervisors, echoing the insights of Nicolaidis and Dzubinski (2016). Subsequently, the transformation of raw audio and visual recordings into transcribed textual records paved the way for systematic analysis.

Data Interpretation

In accordance with Saldaña's (2016) approach, our data analysis process was firmly rooted in PAR framework. We undertook the intricate process of coding and categorization, aligning our analytical framework with the notations embedded in the field notes, narratives, and journal entries. Guided by an inductive lens, we sought out the emergence of recurring themes across distinct sets of evidence. It was within this dynamic interplay that our themes concerning transformative learning experiences of student-researchers began to crystallize organically, evolving into more comprehensive categories: disoriented dilemmas and discomforts, individual and collaborative reflections, and the cultivation of novel possibilities and self-assurance. This iterative refinement of reflective observations (the collaborative reflections of student researchers, supervisors and critical friends) was strengthened further during the writing phase of this paper, which mirrored the essence of transformative learning experiences intrinsic to our participatory needs assessment focus. The thematic tapestry was then interwoven with the fabric of transformative learning theory, particularly in the context of shifts from individualistic to relational ontologies, fostering profound discussions and enriching our scholarly exploration.

Major Observations Concerning Transformative Learning

Beginning from here, the article articulates our major observations that facilitated transformative learning during the PNA of the school. Divided into four different sub-headings, each section narrates transformative learning experiences of the student-researchers while situating PAR in the university, in the community, and in the school. Also, it narrates our transformative learning experiences while situating the researcher-researched role in PAR action reflections. Each sub-heading introduces the researchers' gradual shift from appreciating self-directed transformative ontology to collective and relational ontology(ies).

Situating PAR in the University

In phase one, the student-researchers reflected on Nepali education practice based on educational policy reviews and personal experiences in Nepali schools. Being involved in the mentorship of Bal (the third author of this paper), the Ph.D. courses on advanced qualitative research enabled us to develop an ontological and epistemological understanding of transformative educational research (see Luitel & Taylor, 2019; Taylor et al., 2012). Likewise, the courses on curriculum and instructions made us critical to disempowering nature of highly centralized curriculum design and implementation processes in Nepal (see Wagle et al., 2019). A few meetings and discussions with a group of NMBU action researchers (see Ahmad et al., 2016) enabled us to develop and improve our understandings of the process and principles of PAR in school settings (also see Dhungana et al., 2021).

Despite such theoretical and methodological orientations, we passed through a series of PAR-related perplexities and dilemmas. In Kathmandu University, despite its rigorous exercising of transformative educational research (e.g., Qutoshi, 2016; Wagle 2016), it was the first attempt to establish PAR as a requirement for academic degree. Therefore, it was as expected that the dilemmas aroused from linearly practiced hierarchical models of academic research and their reluctance to accept multi-layered rhizomatic structures of practitioner research. For example, despite the emergent and the embodied nature of PAR, the university asked us to present our research proposal with a detailed strategic intervention plan prior to their engagement at the target community. The university's strong academic focus and its aftermath arising from the tendency to put all research endeavors into the same procedural basket were visible in the journal entries below:

Our funding program guidelines suggested us to carry PAR in a rural public school in Nepal. I prepared my research proposal following the given proposal template. There, in my first research proposal presentation, informed through available literature in the area, I made a seemingly general claim that PAR could eloquently correspond our study context as the "best" methodological options. But as I became more familiar with fundamental principles of PAR like democratic participation and social justice, soon I began to ask myself a question- how ethical is it that my university asked me to formulate the research question, and design research methodology in advance before entering the field? Perhaps, our university is still not prepared enough to position practitioner research like PAR as an alternative to linearly designed dominant models of academic research (Shree's journal entry).

Together with these university-related procedural (and structural) tensions, research students encountered other PAR-related ethical dilemmas arising from the conflicting interests between the funded project and the university. The project was by nature more interested in

field actions and activities while the university was more interested in preserving the academic merits of the research activities. In other words, there were continuous dialectical interactions between the project and the university in the process of bringing practical practices to the scholarship. Deviating slightly from the basic PAR principles for identifying improvement needs, and designing improvements plan in collaboration with local actors, the Rupartaran Project guidelines had suggested researchers to limit their study scopes in advance within few areas as suggested in project proposal template like STEAM education, contextualized curriculum development, inquiry-based learning, and health education. As the guidelines were prepared by university partners, and maybe because they had to set the project within established university structure, the university's conventional tendency to idealize departmentalized disciplinary world was visible in the project's linear structures and processes. Or perhaps, to this realization, the researchers raised a question in a project review meeting that despite the fundamental objective of PAR to free research studies from hierarchical and unjust power structures between the researcher and the researched, the ideas of how to improve the education situation in the rurally located public schools came not from local actors but from university-based academicians. The project team prepared project proposals before consulting the local actors, and before identifying the actual contextual needs of the study schools and the communities. The proposal template suggested researchers to limit study scopes within those pre-identified frames.

Continuously learning from the experiences, the student-researchers and the research supervisors responded to these procedural dilemmas by working more closely with the university research team. The project team, comprising of research students and the research supervisors, continuously engaged in dialogues with the university-based research committees to develop common (and relational) understandings of the challenges of initiating funded projects and practice-oriented action research in the university settings. To strengthen recognition, we formed a university-based PAR advisory committee. It consisted of university faculties who were already familiar with the fundamentals of PAR projects. We organized a workshop once a week, every Wednesday. The workshop consisting of research students, research supervisors, and PAR advisory board members continuously reflected on how our own identities, experiences, and positionalities would contribute to establishing practitioner-research like PAR in the university's academic settings. We continuously developed shared visions that were likely to accept the academic value of alternative (participatory) research methodologies. Such forums and informed discussions enabled the university research committee to recognize the relational and collaborative nature of PAR. It continuously opened spaces for more flexible practitioner approaches, which in long run added relational practitioner perspectives in the ways to appreciate transformative learning and researching.

Situating PAR in the Community

Passing through the above-mentioned procedural and ethical perplexities of PAR, and continuously followed by the learnings from self and collective reflections, the Rupartaran team began community consultations through formal and informal meetings. We, the student-researchers observed that our first challenge was to establish trustful relationships with the communities. We began field visits and participated in various formal and informal interactions and dialogues with community members. Maybe the interactions enabled us to reflect on basic-school educational practices in the community. We explored the communities and our cultural landscape and engaged in activities, which could possibly strengthen our "place-sense" (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015). Initially, we had thought that we would spend only a few days in the communities and soon afterward start the PAR cycles in the study school; however, after a few initial visits, we felt that it would take months to develop quality relationships and familiarity

in the study community. For a total of eight months, we regularly visited the community and stayed there for weeks. In between those visits, we made photographs and video recordings of the actual lifeworld and cultural landscapes of the community. We shared informal talks with the villagers and had tea together in local shops, which may have enabled us to develop familiarity with the outer and inner realities of local folklore and traditions, as well as with political and power structures in the community. However, the initial visits and interactions were not free from PAR-related perplexities, which would make us pause to reflect and revisit the field strategies. Our longer initial presence in the community increased the tensions of some kinds. The more we increased our presence and familiarity in the community, the more we realized that the expectations of villagers were continuously increasing. Some villagers would show their higher interests in interacting with us and discovering that our presence there was just for the school improvement, soon some of them would maintain visible distance from us. The villagers' expectations from us were more on financial and material supports to their families. They were more concerned with their own day-to-day family activities than additional concerns like public school improvement:

Most often the villagers share their trivial family matters with us. We have to study their body language and read between the lines to understand their views and concerns on the school education of their children. In this situation, to focus the discussions on educational issues, and develop understandings of our shared purpose of public-school improvement is not an easy task (Shree's journal entry).

Passing through this stage, we realized that PAR complexities may also arise from conflicts of interest among community members which were more connected to their own tribal needs. Despite its higher benefits in strengthening emotional connections with the community members, our prolonged engagement in the community before entering the action school left many people in doubt. Frequently, we would hear comments from the villagers that we were there just for the purpose of Ph.Ds. Also, people would comment on our activities relating them to other funded projects they had seen earlier in their community. It was difficult to make villagers find the differences between the PAR project and other funding projects, the hit-and-run approaches of those projects, which they had experienced earlier in the village. Thus, our challenges were to explore and to work in contextually appropriate ways, arising from shared values and higher social interests of public-school improvement.

We experienced some kinds of methodological challenges as well. It was likely that the more we worked with contextually different (but academically established) models of PAR, those (displaced and decontextualized) models would distance us from the everyday lifeworld of the community. Therefore, we considered developing our own emplaced model of PAR. With the suggestions from the supervisors Bal and Erling, we continuously examined and modified our PAR methodological approaches based on Hindu-Buddhist-animist worldviews of collaborative participation and nature celebration in Nepali rural communities. In doing so, the majority of the research participants' Hindu/Buddhist upbringing and orientations to their lifeworld enabled us to recognize the communal cultural frames to view the world and the phenomenon.

We also experienced some kinds of ethical complexities. For example, we could not fully adhere to the ethical requirements like informed consent in every interaction we made in the communities. There were no clear demarcations to differentiate unintentional (usual) interactions and the interactions for research purposes. Therefore, during interactions, it was often difficult to distinguish between ethically sensitive private matters and public sharing. To overcome this dilemma, we made our moral engagements in committed actions as our core

values, and worked accordingly, without violating participatory research norms for social justice and social beneficence. Also, to create awareness of the PAR project and build community support, we increased the frequency of our interactions with community leaders. The leaders, in one way or other, played the role of spokesperson to communicate project vision and activities in the community. Also, we increased our presence and interactional sharing in the local tea shops. Like in other villages of Nepal, the local tea shops of Dapcha communities were an appropriate place to interact with and share information with a large number of people.

Situating PAR in the School

Starting in May 2018, our research team from KU began to plan PNA workshop and situation analysis of Janahit School. Together with the school headteacher, we conducted a school mapping exercise which enabled us to examine the schools' everyday practices and experiences, teaching strategies, and stakeholders' attitudes towards school improvement. Informed through the findings from the school mapping, together with the findings from their series of meetings and consultations with the school stakeholders and community members, we designed baseline tools, workshop activities, and the schedule. We shared the plan with the chair of the school management committee, the school headteacher, and teacher participants, incorporated their feedback, and modified it accordingly. We made active involvement in the research process, including questionnaire development and survey administration. It was natural that the overall process demanded tremendous commitment of time from all collaborating team members. The decision process was time-consuming. But, to the positive side, such thorough consultations with different school stakeholders like headteacher, teachers, supporting staffs, and school management committee members enabled us to understand one another's interests and provided them a space to negotiate the conflicting interests and to integrate the disagreements for common benefits. Despite these positive experiences, while planning for the needs assessment workshop, research students were worried about some PAR-related fear. This time, they were particularly concerned with their seemingly ambiguous role as a PAR researcher:

Now, we are in the process of preparing tools for needs assessment at Janahit School. The result from the assessment will be the foundation for future activities plans. These days I encounter fear of some kinds. I doubt—what if the collaboratively identified needs of the school are different from the interest of the funding agency as suggested in project guidelines. Also, I doubt—what if the collaboratively identified improvement area is not the area of my academic interest. What, if as a researcher, I am not skillful in that area? (Shree's journal entry).

Passing through such continuously emerging dilemmas and perplexities, we finalized the survey tools and interview guidelines. Maybe the interdisciplinary team was the valuable assist of the project. Therefore, there were ample opportunities to collaborate and learn from one another. To gather baseline data, in our close facilitation, the Rupantaran project employed three graduates from the same school. They assisted voluntarily to collect field data, and in the process their self-engagement motivated other school stakeholders to participate in the research. They also used it as an opportunity to develop new skills.

In July 2018, we facilitated a four-day workshop in the Janahit School. The workshop aimed at broadening the interactional participation of the schoolteachers and the administrators, where the agreements reached were likely to involve mediation of improvement needs of the school; therefore, we followed the democratic dialogue criteria. We organized the workshop in

accordance with Nicolaidis and Dzubinski's (2016) suggestion for two-way communication through mutual dialogues of the participants. Also, we designed the workshop in a way to neutralize the traditional hierarchical power system:

The school headteacher and the teachers had decided to give half school holidays during four-day workshop. Accordingly, on the first day, the teachers took their scheduled classes in the first half, had tea in a nearby teashop, and gathered in the staff room. It was very interesting that, as we were about to start the workshop, the headteacher stood from his chair, walked forward, and sat together with other teachers and supporting staff. It was a dramatic shift in creating a sense of equality in bureaucratic institutional structures like ours (Shree's journal entry).

Accordingly, we provided short briefings on the workshop theme and all-inclusive, democratic and contextual workshop procedures. Teacher-participants, including the headteacher and deputy headteacher, choose a comfortable seat located around a long round table. They formed two groups of their choice, where they discussed overarching issues like teachers' training, school curriculum, students' performance assessment, and students' discipline. Members in each group shared their personal views and experiences, explored several obstacles, and discussed the ways to mitigate the obstacles. Based on the discussion, each group made presentations. During the workshop, our challenges as workshop facilitators were to stimulate free interactions from the teachers who would rarely interact in professional settings. What could we do in this context? We listened carefully to each participant and added some kinds of fun and humor. We constantly asked a few probing questions and encouraged the less interactive participants to share their own lived experiences. In the process, we experienced a few critical moments arising from the conflicting interests of the school management chair, the headteacher, and the teachers. For example, the school management chair was more interested in increasing physical infrastructures. The head teacher's interest was to strengthen the control mechanism of the school. The teachers were more concerned with flexible working hours and pedagogical support. The claim of workshop participants would often develop into the form of blame and bargaining. Student researchers observed that when the workshop brought together the teachers and the administrators, the hidden conflicts related to workplace issues burst out. Throughout the discussion, our role as a facilitator was to establish and continue free and easy interactions. We were cautious to listen and value every voice but not to take the side of any particular group of participants.

In the process, teachers particularly identified three major constraints affecting teaching and learning as (1) de-contextualized teaching and learning just to pass exams and future selections, (2) de-contextualized capacity development programs for teacher, which cannot be replicated in actual classroom situations, and (3) weak school community connection and overly attractions of parents to privately-owned English medium boarding schools. Teachers identified improvement needs arising from those problems. On the fourth day of the workshop, we asked teacher participants to list the needs ranging from one to five based on their immediate priority. They identified immediate problems of the school and thereby prioritized the needs for improvement as (1) contextualized teaching and learning, and/or construction and use of locally available resources; (2) continuous (collaborative) professional development of teachers; (3) use of information technologies and digital devices in teaching, learning, and assessing; (4) development and implementation of local curriculum; and (5) increased parental participation for students' learning.

The findings from the interviews and the group discussions also supported the urgency of addressing the needs as identified in the four-day workshop. Among those collaboratively

identified needs for school improvement and pedagogical innovation, Shree decided to work on exploring participatory approaches to curriculum contextualization. Parbati facilitated teachers' continuous professional development through collaboration. It was to this end that the team now began to explore possible ways to establish the school as an agent of creative, place-based teaching and learning. The overall outcome of the needs assessment process, thus, was the development of an action plan, and an implementation strategy. The collaboratively designed and agreed plan contained interconnected domains of knowledge and practice; namely, the content (flow of information), the process (ways people share and use the information), and the reflection.

Situating Researcher-Researched Roles

As workshop facilitators, our role was to create spaces to discuss and share. As we shared in the review meetings, initially, we would give expert answers to the questions raised in the meetings and the workshops with the teachers. Later, realizing that the answers were more technical, we now began to continuously encourage teacher participants to share the real-world condition of the school practice, and inquire into direct personal experiences rather than looking at expert answers. It was based on our intention to bring informed consensus (Elliott, 2006) from the living world rather than the instrumental (and/or the theoretical) one.

In the process, it was both a terrifying and an exciting experience that the student-researchers' role and position continuously changed over time. While in university the researchers were insiders studying their own personal and professional practices. Working together with other researchers to plan and prepare the needs assessment tools, their role shifted to insiders in collaboration with other insiders. While in the study community and the school they understood their presence as outsiders working with insiders. Such shifts as outsiders-insiders in reciprocal collaboration continued throughout the research process:

Initially, I had thought that as a Ph.D. researcher my role was straight and clear. I was a university student and a researcher. But my role has been continuously shifting from one role to the other. While in the university, I am *a student researcher*. When orienting research participants on the fundamentals of PAR, my role as a researcher shifted to the role of *a trainer*. When managing and facilitating the meetings and workshops I become *a facilitator*. After every field visit, I write a field report and enter the journal entries. Doing so, I play my role as *a writer*. I present my reflections in the university workshops and there I become *a presenter* (Shree's journal entry).

Though the multi-group participation was seemingly an assist, initially, the researchers experienced difficulties in managing diverse identities of the participants. Moving ahead with the perplexities, they observed that their gender, ethnicity, and class determined the way they presented in the community and with the school stakeholders. For example, while in interaction, those female teachers who were not open with male researchers were with extended emotional responses in their interactions with female researchers. When the researchers realized this, they designed interview and facilitation plans accordingly. The male researcher interviewed male teachers and the female researcher interviewed female teachers. In students' focus group discussions, a female researcher facilitated a group of female students; a male researcher facilitated a group of male students. It became supportive in creating a comfort zone for easy communication. There, we learned that within a PAR project, learning is an ongoing process. It may be vital that a researcher develops an ability to learn from the context. The researchers continuously reflected on their fluid social position, particularly concerning the

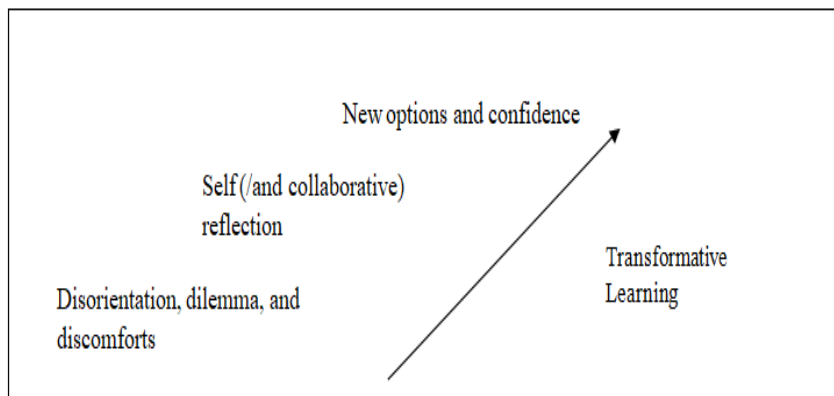
social position of the participants: it enabled them to be explicit about their social identity, which continuously shaped their immediate role in the context.

Discussions

The discussion in the first half of this section focuses on how we, the researchers journeyed from disoriented dilemma and discomfort to self and collective reflections and eventually arrived at the stage of appreciating relational ontology(ies) characterized by new options and confidence of authenticity, relationality, and ethical responsibility in transformative learning. The second half then discusses our transformed perspectives towards (1) mutually agreeable vs. mutually beneficial, (2) Insider/outsider binary vs. collective (relational) responsibility, and (3) standard model vs. the contextually relational model of PAR. Narrated above, our journey was in a way a transformative learning journey from disorientation, dilemma, and discomforts to self and collaborative reflection to new options and confidence with relational ontology(ies). Perspective transformation, for Mezirow, is a shift in one's existing frame of reference through the process of critical reflection. But, as Walter (2013) observes, our experiences of transformative learning were not "linear, finite, and developmental... but was cumulative and additive" (p. 27). The journeys, thus, were embedded in ontologies of relationality (Lange, 2018), which, when aligned with the nature and purpose of action, developed action confidence (Pomeroy & Oliver, 2021) of the researchers, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Transformative learning: Journeys and arrivals



It seems that, initially, we were more inclined to seek mutually agreeable solutions to the problems. Only later we realized that in participatory projects, mutual agreements needed some meaningful purpose to bind together the mess of manifold conflicting interests of the participants (Tricket & Beehler, 2017). Passing through the perplexities, we slowly began to realize that collaboration rarely occurs unless the beneficiaries are convinced that it is for wider beneficence. To this end, we began to discuss possible ways to break the iceberg. While in the university, we asked how we could establish the organic models of PAR as academic requirements in the university. While in the field, we asked how we could foster easy communication with the teachers, the students, and the parental communities, and whether we could possibly cultivate a good working relationship. We continuously thought over different emerging questions. Perhaps our first-time PAR experience was the reason behind our growing uncertainties. We were not yet familiar with the field "realities" of participatory research.

Having come to Ph.D.s straight from analytical writing in our master's theses (see Dhungana, 2013; Wagle, 2010), and self-reflective transformative research design in MPhil (see Wagle, 2016), we had no experience in the participatory nature of field research. Passing through the perplexities of conflicting interests of those involved in the collaboration, we began to appreciate personal differences between collaborators, which we could bridge by common purpose (Ahmad et al., 2016). Cultivating relational wisdom, thus, entailed an ongoing process of transformation – a perspective transformation from mutually agreeable to mutually beneficial; a transformation that entwined the question of knowledge and value.

This recognition of mutually beneficial (relational) wisdom lowered the boundary of the binary language of insider/outsider (Thomson & Gunter, 2011). Working for some meaningful purpose of mutual benefits, there was no insider and the outsider, but a team working in reciprocal collaboration. Slowly, our appreciation of Hindu-Buddhist relational worldviews like “One-Belonging-Together,” and “Mandala wisdom traditions” (Radhakrishnan, 1980; Gautam, 2017) informed the whole participatory process to move from standard model to contextually organic model. These models broadened the spaces for practical acknowledgment of plurality in knowledge construction (Meredith & Quiroz-Niño, 2021), which continuously shaped purpose and relationships of mutual co-arising and interdependence.

Our mutual co-arising brought some structural and functional changes in the project's strategical decisions as well (see Wagle et al., 2023). In an annual review meeting, the project coordinators realized the importance of the participation of local stakeholders beginning from the very initial phase of project proposal writing. Also, they showed their commitment to consider this learning in similar other projects in the future. Likewise, the research committee of Kathmandu University School of Education became flexible to allow practitioner-researchers to work on research proposal only after some visits and familiarity in the research communities. This was some visible evidence of our arrival to relational ontology(ies) in transformative learning.

Conclusions

The transformative journey undertaken by us, the student-researchers, has been one marked by a profound shift in perspective and understanding. The progression from disorientation and discomfort to self-awareness and collaborative reflection ultimately led us to embrace the concept of relational ontology. Our exploration revealed that this transformation was not a linear process but a cumulative and additive one, interwoven with the principles of relationality. This shift aligned with the nature of our PAR endeavors and instilled in us a newfound sense of authenticity, ethical responsibility, and confidence. As we delved into our research, we initially sought mutually agreeable solutions, only later realizing the necessity of imbuing such agreements with purpose and wider beneficence. Through collaboration, we navigated complexities, recognizing the significance of bridging differences through shared goals. The journey unveiled a transformation from seeking mutual agreement to understanding the essence of mutual benefit, transcending the insider/outsider binary. This was more than a conceptual shift – it resonated with the ethos of Hindu-Buddhist relational worldviews (prevalent in the community), fostering an organic evolution from a standard model of research to a contextually relational one. These models expanded the realms of knowledge construction, facilitating co-arising and interdependence among diverse perspectives. Furthermore, the impact of our evolving perspectives was tangible in project strategies and institutional practices. Collaborative efforts at the project level embraced local stakeholders from the outset, signaling a shift in approach. Similarly, our university's research committee exhibited flexibility in accommodating practitioner-researchers, reflecting a broader acknowledgment of

the relational ontology that now guides our work. In essence, our transformative learning journey stands as a testament to the power of critical reflection and collaboration in shaping new paradigms. The progression from disorientation to relational ontology signifies a profound growth, not just in our understanding but also in our approach to research, problem-solving, and ethical engagement. On the whole, this journey encourages us to view research not as a solitary pursuit but as a collaborative, mutually beneficial endeavor that transcends boundaries and fosters authentic relationships.

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