
Reimagining Literacy through Participatory Family Empowerment: A Freirean Analysis of Mothers Co-Creating Digital Storybooks in Disadvantaged South African Schools

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Abstract: Educational inequality in South Africa continues to restrict literacy opportunities for children in marginalised communities, reflecting entrenched systemic and structural inequities. This study investigates how Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR), framed by Freirean emancipatory pedagogy, can empower mothers in a low-income community to co-create culturally relevant digital storybooks as literacy resources. In alignment with equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) priorities (Sim et al., 2024), this research repositions mothers from a deficit-based to an asset-based perspective (Howard et al., 2024), recognising and leveraging their community cultural wealth to enrich their children’s literacy experiences. Twelve mothers engaged in participatory workshops that built their skills in digital storytelling while also deepening their critical awareness of literacy as a social practice and tool for transformation (Brubacher & Filipek, 2025). Data generated through reflective journals, focus groups, and workshop observations were thematically analysed, revealing significant shifts in participants’ confidence, agency, and collaborative capacity. These findings highlight how PALAR, as a relational and decolonial research methodology, can foster co-learning partnerships between schools and families (McKee et al., 2022), challenge deficit narratives, and support community-driven, culturally sustaining literacy practices. The study demonstrates the potential for participatory, community-embedded interventions to address educational inequities and contribute to more responsive and socially just teaching and learning.

Keywords: community empowerment; digital storybooks; disadvantaged schools; educational inequality; literacy development

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Introduction

Education is a fundamental human right and a critical driver of social and economic development. However, despite substantial investment, equitable access to high-quality education remains elusive in many low-income communities. In South Africa, educational inequalities are stark, with children in historically marginalised communities facing systemic barriers that hinder their academic achievement. According to the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) of 2016, 78% of Grade 4 learners in South Africa are unable to read for meaning in any language (Howie et al., 2017),

a statistic that signals a profound crisis in literacy education. These inequities particularly affect families in under-resourced townships and rural schools, where a deficit lens often positions parents as lacking capacity or expertise (Howard et al., 2024). Drawing from an asset-based perspective, this study recognises mothers' existing community cultural wealth as a vital educational resource. Community cultural wealth, as described by Howard et al. (2024), highlights the skills, knowledge, and resilience that families bring to their children's education assets too often overlooked in deficit-oriented models. Engaging these assets aligns with broader equity, diversity, and inclusion curriculum initiatives (Sim et al., 2024) and resonates with frameworks of culturally sustaining and relational literacy practices (Brubacher & Filipek, 2025; Barkaskas & Gladwin, 2021).

Conventional, top-down literacy interventions have frequently failed to yield sustainable change in disadvantaged communities, often because they ignore the voices, knowledge, and agency of parents. In contrast, participatory, culturally grounded strategies can help transform literacy education by positioning parents as co-designers and partners rather than passive recipients (McKee et al., 2022; Kruger & Buley, 2022). This study explores the potential of Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR), underpinned by Freirean critical pedagogy, to involve mothers in the co-creation of digital storybooks as culturally relevant literacy resources. PALAR, as a collaborative and democratic methodology (Kearney et al., 2013), aims to build participants' capacity and confidence while promoting educational change rooted in the community. By equipping mothers with skills in digital storytelling and supporting their critical reflection on what literacy means in their social and cultural context, the study aimed to disrupt deficit discourses and encourage a shift toward asset-based, community-driven solutions. In line with Brubacher and Filipek (2025) call for relational approaches that stand beside rather than speak for marginalised communities, this project recognises mothers as knowledge holders and co-educators in their children's learning journeys. Such a stance is essential to advancing equity-focused teaching and learning that responds meaningfully to cultural diversity and local knowledge systems (Sim et al., 2024).

This paper begins by reviewing the theoretical foundations of PALAR and Freirean critical pedagogy, highlighting their relevance to equity and community empowerment. It then outlines the research methodology, including participant selection, data collection methods, and the design of participatory workshops. The study's findings are presented to illustrate how the PALAR process transformed mothers' perceptions of literacy and strengthened their role as partners in their children's education. Finally, the discussion considers the broader implications for culturally responsive literacy interventions and recommends pathways for embedding asset-based, participatory approaches in education policy and practice.

Brief contextual literature review

Literacy extends beyond the technical ability to decode and encode text; it is a socially situated practice shaped by power, culture, and identity (Street, 1984). In South Africa, structural legacies of inequality have produced persistent gaps in literacy acquisition, particularly among learners in under-resourced schools (Howie et al., 2017). Langer (1990) emphasised literacy as meaning making and transformation, while Freire's concept of conscientisation positions literacy as a process of reading both the word and the world to challenge oppressive conditions (Freire, 1970, 1974, 2007). This orientation invites an interrogation of how literacy practices can be harnessed for empowerment, not merely skill transmission. Parental engagement is consistently identified as a determinant of children's literacy success (Fan et al. 2018; Clinton and Hattie 2013). Evidence from Kenya (Mudaki, 2016) and Zambia (Kasakula, 2022) confirms that family involvement enhances comprehension and foundational reading skills. However, research increasingly recognises that parents are not a homogeneous group: mothers, fathers, and guardians engage differently due to cultural roles, economic pressures, and gendered expectations (Walker-Dalhousie & Dalhousie, 2009). In South Africa, where mothers often carry the primary responsibility for caregiving and educational support, this dynamic is particularly salient (Ramadikela 2012; Feiler et al. 2008). Consequently, interventions that foreground mothers' experiences have the potential to disrupt deficit narratives that depict working-class families as lacking the capacity to support learning.

Global studies demonstrate that family literacy programmes can strengthen both children's academic outcomes and parents' confidence, civic engagement, and sense of agency (Swain et al., 2014; Al-Maadadi et al. 2017; Tsirmpa & Stellakis, 2024). However, as several scholars caution, such programmes can unintentionally reproduce hierarchical relationships if they overlook the voices and cultural resources of families themselves (Feiler, Greenhough, Winter, & Salway, 2008; Marshall & Jackman, 2015). The literature therefore distinguishes between deficit-oriented approaches which view parents as lacking expertise and needing remediation and asset-based approaches that value local knowledge, cultural wealth, and lived experience as foundations for

literacy learning (Howard et al., 2024). Despite this shift, few studies have examined how parents, particularly mothers, experience conscientisation that is, the process of becoming critically aware of their educational agency within participatory literacy contexts. Digital storytelling has emerged as a culturally relevant and participatory practice that integrates lived experiences into literacy learning (Porter, 2004; Matthews-DeNatale, 2008). It resonates strongly with Freire's emphasis on dialogue and problem-posing education while aligning with decolonial approaches that view communities as co-creators of knowledge (Brubacher & Filipek, 2025; Barkaskas & Gladwin, 2021). When embedded within frameworks like Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR), digital storytelling offers a methodology not only for addressing literacy inequities but also for fostering agency, solidarity, and collaborative capacity among marginalised families (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011; Damons, 2017). However, most existing studies focus on classroom-based applications or teacher development; limited empirical work explores parents especially mothers as co-creators of digital literacy materials or as agents of transformation through Freirean praxis.

Taken together, this body of scholarship reveals three critical gaps. First, research has not sufficiently examined how participatory frameworks like PALAR can facilitate conscientisation among parents themselves. Second, while asset-based models are conceptually well-developed, their operationalisation in contexts of gendered caregiving remains underexplored. Third, there is a lack of empirical attention to digital storytelling as a vehicle for family empowerment and culturally sustaining literacy. Addressing these gaps, the present study extends the discourse by analysing how a Freirean-inspired PALAR process empowered mothers in a disadvantaged South African community to co-create digital storybooks that reflect their cultural identities and challenge deficit narratives. In doing so, it contributes a theoretically grounded and contextually responsive understanding of participatory family literacy as both a pedagogical and emancipatory practice.

Conceptual framework

Freire's critical pedagogy underpins the design and interpretation of this study. At its core, Freire's theory of conscientisation (1970, 1974) emphasises the need for individuals to develop critical awareness of the socio-political forces shaping their lives and to act collectively to transform oppressive conditions. Rather than viewing mothers as passive supporters, this project embraced Freire's vision of them as co-investigators, capable of challenging educational inequities through active participation, reflective dialogue, and community-led agency. This orientation aligns strongly with asset-based and culturally sustaining perspectives (Howard et al., 2024), which recognise the rich community cultural wealth mothers bring to educational processes, and with equity, diversity, and inclusion frameworks that highlight the value of local knowledge (Sim et al., 2024). The PALAR model operationalises these principles by democratising research processes, honoring relational ways of knowing, and encouraging critical, reflective, and action-oriented learning (Damons, 2017; Zuber-Skerritt, 2015). In this study, mothers were framed not merely as participants but as co-researchers and co-creators of culturally relevant literacy resources. This stance resonates with relational and decolonial literacy frameworks that argue for standing alongside communities rather than imposing top-down knowledge (Brubacher & Filipek, 2025; Barkaskas & Gladwin, 2021), as well as with the collaborative models described by McKee et al. (2022) and Kruger and Buley (2022), which emphasise co-designed learning partnerships between families and educators.

Building on Freire's emphasis on dialogue and problem-posing education, the PALAR approach promoted sustained conversations in which mothers could "name their world" and critically question educational practices that have historically marginalised or excluded them. Through iterative cycles of reflection and action, mothers were able to develop their own critical inquiries about literacy, the nature of schooling, and their roles as educators within their homes and communities. This dialogical and participatory process aligned closely with Freire's (1974) goal of breaking the culture of silence that surrounds oppressed groups, and empowered mothers to recognise themselves as capable and resourceful change agents. By integrating Freirean theory with PALAR and EDI-informed frameworks, the study created opportunities for collective efficacy, solidarity, and shared responsibility for social justice in education. As Freire argued, true liberation emerges through the collaboration of communities working together to transform their conditions. In this case, empowering mothers to co-create digital storybooks was not only an act of knowledge production but also a powerful resistance to the educational inequalities that deny families meaningful participation. Ultimately, this conceptual framework supports the idea that literacy cannot be separated from equity and social transformation, and that culturally responsive, community-centered methodologies offer a path toward more just and inclusive educational practices (Sim et al., 2024; Howard et al., 2024; Willison, 2024).

Research methodology

This study adopted a Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR) approach to engage mothers in co-creating digital storybooks as literacy resources for Grade 4 learners in a disadvantaged community. PALAR is a democratic, collaborative methodology that regards participants as co-researchers rather than research subjects, promoting active participation and shared ownership of the research process (Kearney et al., 2013). Rooted in Freirean emancipatory pedagogy, this approach seeks not only to generate knowledge but also to empower participants and drive meaningful social change (Freire, 2007). The PALAR process was structured around three iterative cycles, each combining action and reflection. Throughout these cycles, mothers participated in workshops and meetings that aimed to build their capacity, foster critical thinking, and develop skills in digital storybook production. The process was underpinned by principles of communication, reflection, commitment, cooperation, and competence-building, which are central to PALAR (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011).

The first cycle commenced with a start-up workshop focused on team building, problem definition, and needs analysis. Mothers worked collaboratively with the researcher to identify their children's literacy challenges and to consider the potential role of digital storybooks as a response. This cycle also established a Key Advisory Set (KAS) of mothers to guide and support the project throughout its implementation (Zuber-Skerritt, 2015). In the second cycle, mothers participated in workshops where they acquired skills in digital storytelling, including scriptwriting, storyboarding, and the use of multimedia tools. Data collection occurred simultaneously, through reflective journals, baseline checklists, and workshop transcripts. These data sources offered insights into the mothers' experiences, perspectives, and the obstacles they encountered in developing the storybooks (Matthews-DeNatale, 2008; Porter, 2004). The final cycle focused on collective reflection and validation of outcomes. Mothers engaged in focus groups to share their experiences and evaluate the impact of the project on their children's literacy. The KAS played a crucial role in confirming the quality and appropriateness of the storybooks produced. Throughout the process, the researcher maintained a reflective journal as an audit trail to document decisions, observations, and methodological rigor (Merriam, 2002; Merriam, 2009).

The study employed purposive sampling to recruit twelve mothers from a disadvantaged primary school in the Nelson Mandela Metropole, based on their willingness to participate and their availability for workshop sessions. This school was strategically chosen due to its location in a low-income community with limited educational resources, providing an appropriate context for investigating digital storytelling as a literacy intervention (PIRLS, 2016). The mothers were active collaborators throughout the PALAR process, attending ten workshops and five KAS meetings designed to develop their confidence and skills. They were also encouraged to apply these skills at home with their children, reinforcing workshop learning and ensuring the stories reflected their children's cultural and personal contexts (Neha & Rule, 2018). Data generation relied on qualitative methods, including reflective journals, baseline checklists, workshop transcripts, and focus group discussions, to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences.

Thematic and narrative analysis techniques were applied to identify patterns and meanings around the mothers' perceptions of literacy, their storytelling skills, and their empowerment through PALAR (Cohen & Crabtree, 2008). The data were coded inductively using NVivo 12 software. Initial open coding identified recurring expressions of change, empowerment, and reflection, which were then clustered through axial coding into broader analytic categories ("emerging confidence," "redefining literacy," "dialogue and solidarity"). Illustrative excerpts were linked directly to these categories to enhance analytic transparency. For example, Participant 8's reflection — "This new knowledge will help me approach my child's homework differently" — was coded under transformative learning and critical awareness. These categories were then interpreted through Freire's stages of conscientisation, connecting micro-level narrative shifts to macro-level processes of empowerment. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) further examined the language mothers used during workshops and discussions, shedding light on the social dynamics and power relationships within the project (Fairclough, 2013). To ensure trustworthiness, the study incorporated strategies for credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, including data triangulation, member checking, and transparent documentation through reflective journaling (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Given the involvement of a vulnerable population, strong ethical safeguards were maintained. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were reminded of their right to withdraw without penalty. COVID-19 protocols were rigorously followed to ensure participant safety. The project complied with the ethical standards

of the Nelson Mandela University Ethics Committee and received formal approval from the relevant institutional review boards (Mosoge & Van der Westhuizen, 1997).

Study findings

The analysis of data was driven by the central research question: *“How can a Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR) process serve as the foundation for empowering mothers to develop digital storybooks as learner support materials?”* In line with the project’s goal of fostering both literacy development and parental agency, this phase explored mothers’ levels of involvement in their children’s learning as well as their evolving conceptions of literacy. Through thematic and critical discourse analysis, the study identified one central theme supported by three key areas of need, highlighting how mothers progressed from limited understandings of literacy to more expansive, socially situated perspectives, and how their participation strengthened their confidence and sense of ownership in supporting their children’s literacy journeys.

Theme one: Understanding literacy

At the beginning of the project, many mothers held a narrow and somewhat fragmented understanding of literacy, largely associating it with reading and writing alone. During the initial conversations, participants described literacy in simple and familiar terms. Participant 5, for example, noted, “geletterdheid is alles te doen met boeke” (“literacy has everything to do with books”), while Participant 6x added, “as jy geletterd wil wees moet jy kan lees en skryf, so jy moet kan lees uit ‘n boek en skryf in ‘n boek” (“if you want to be literate, you must be able to read from a book and write in a book”). These responses reflected a conventional, skills-based view of literacy.

Through the reflective workshops and guided discussions, however, participants began to challenge these initial definitions. Drawing on excerpts from the literature review and engaging in collaborative dialogue, mothers were exposed to broader, more transformative understandings of literacy. They came to see literacy as a social and cultural practice connected to communication, critical thinking, identity, and empowerment. This shift aligned with Langer’s (1990) view that literacy is often misunderstood in its function, as well as Fialho’s (2019) assertion that literacy has a fundamentally transformational role. Participant 8 captured this moment of personal change, saying, “I am stunned at all of this information, if it was not for the workshop my thoughts would still be limited. This new knowledge will help me approach my child’s homework differently, because I will look at many ways instead of not helping her at all.” Similarly, Participant 1 reflected on how the workshop opened her mind to the power of dialogue, stating, “Today I realise the importance of talking to my child; it will enlarge her vocabulary. The importance of storytelling will help her develop listening skills and comprehension.” Participant 9, who was only twenty-nine years old, expressed a profound sense of motivation, sharing, “These workshops are so inspiring that I feel like going back to school and making something of my life.” These reflections illustrate how the PALAR process went beyond technical skills, fostering confidence, agency, and a sense of purpose among the mothers, which was deeply aligned with the project’s Freirean objectives.

The mothers’ evolving conceptions of literacy were also enriched through the participatory storytelling exercises. When asked to co-create visual stories around the theme of “democracy,” they produced a range of thoughtful and powerful illustrations, including a ballot box, a wedding gown, the South African flag, a house, a school, and even the word “democracy” framed within blurred lines. Participants were moved by how these simple drawings evolved into compelling narratives. As Participant 10 remarked, “I did not know this simple exercise can lead to the creation of such a story.” This experience resonated with Zeichner 2023 argument that personal stories can serve as powerful knowledge resources. During the storytelling process, mothers connected their stories to the rich and often painful history of Uitenhage/Kariega, bringing intergenerational memories into their children’s learning. Figure 1 below, captured the stories written by each group. One participant powerfully reflected, “I will be there for my child. We will learn together and assist each other as we move through each school year. I know it might seem easy, but I know my value as a teacher and learner with my child. Together we can. Simunye, we are one.” Such moments demonstrated how the mothers’ growing understanding of literacy included not just reading and writing, but also a broader vision of participation, belonging, and empowerment in their children’s education. This thematic shift represents a critical foundation for co-creating digital storybooks that are culturally grounded and meaningful, embodying the transformative power of literacy as a social practice.



Figure 1. Discussion and activities on literacy

Parental involvement

Family involvement is consistently linked to improved academic performance, reduced absenteeism, and stronger parental confidence in their children's education (Garcia & Thornton, 2014). Parental involvement goes beyond monitoring grades or attending events, and includes active, ongoing engagement with children's learning (Ntekane, 2018). However, most participants in this study initially described parental involvement in limited terms, with examples such as "helping with homework if they are given any," "checking the term reports," and "buying school supplies as requested by the teacher or school." These responses revealed a somewhat constrained understanding of what genuine, sustained involvement might look like. One mother reflected in her journal that, had she known about broader forms of engagement earlier, she could have supported her child more effectively and positively impacted her performance. Participant 4 expressed a shift in her thinking through the PALAR process: "I am responsible to form a partnership with my child's class teacher. I will not only receive a report card, but I will ask my child's teacher the relevant questions, for example, how can I assist my child to improve her reading, her oral or writing? I will not sit idly and just receive a report card or homework without being involved; no, I will take responsibility. As an involved parent I need to turn up and be present." This deeper sense of agency resonates with research emphasising that parents' active participation is essential for children's success (Hornby and Lafaele 2011). However, Lemmer n.d. notes, schools themselves sometimes struggle to build bridges with parents, particularly in low-income communities where historical exclusion has shaped relationships.

Theme two: Communication between school and parents

Effective, trusting communication between parents and teachers is a cornerstone of schools as learning communities (Zeichner 2023). Participants strongly recognised this, with Participant 10 noting: "I think regular meetings with the teachers may help me understand what is required to help my child." Several mothers highlighted a need for easier, more direct ways of interacting with teachers. Participant 8 suggested creating a WhatsApp group, explaining: "Deur 'n WhatsApp group te stig waar ouer en onderwyser gereeld met mekaar kan kommunikeer." "We created a WhatsApp group so that teachers and parents were able to connect and communicate easily". Participant 7 called for the revival of home visits, "Huisbesoeke moet teruggebring word soos in die ou-bedeeling," "Home visits need to be reinstated as was did during our times at school", to rebuild personal connections. These conversations sparked momentum among the Action Learning Set (ALS) to propose new channels for

ongoing communication, and they began drafting a proposal for the next parent-teacher meeting. This proposal would advocate for more regular, practical, and culturally sensitive forms of school-home dialogue.

Teacher expectations

Llamas and Tuazon (2016) argue that involving parents increases their confidence and comfort in working with schools. Yet participants noted that teachers sometimes excluded them not out of neglect, but because of assumptions about their financial or social status. Participant 9, a foster grandmother, shared that parents in poorer communities are often made to feel unimportant: “Ouers was net ingeroep skool toe vir probleme en as kinders geskors moet word. Ek stel belang in my kind se vordering op skool. Ek ken help waar nodig en ek wil weet dat ek ‘n bydrae tot my kind se leer kan maak. My toekoms vir my is belangrik. As hy leer in die skool sal hy belangstel om in die skool te bly, nie in die strate te dwaal nie.” “Parents were only called to school for problems and if children had to be suspended. I am interested in my child’s progress at school. I know how to help where needed and I want to know that I can make a contribution to my child’s learning. My child’s future is important to me. If he learns in school, he will be interested in staying in school, not wandering the streets.”

This echoes Ramadikela’s (2012) observation that during apartheid, parental involvement was discouraged, but the South African Schools Act (1996) now formally recognises parents’ right and duty to participate. Singh et al. (2004) similarly argue for empowering parents as partners in reconstructing schools. Still, participants felt that teachers often failed to clearly communicate how parents could help. Participant 6 remarked: (“Teachers don’t really tell us what they need, except when it involves fundraising”). “Roep my om vir die klas stories te kom lees. Ek ken ook help met ‘n groepie leerders wat dalk sukkel met lees as die juffrou my wys wat hulle nodig het om te weet. Ek is beskikbaar — roep my, juffrou.” “Call me to come and read stories to the class. I can also help with a group of learners who may be struggling with reading if the teacher shows me what the kids need to know. I am available, call me, teacher.” Participant 7 expressed frustration at only receiving vague messages through the homework book, while Participant 8 added: “Sometimes I don’t understand what the teacher wants, especially with the homework, and I do not know how to get clarity from the teacher.” These reflections highlight Chen et al.’s (2008) finding that parents are often unclear about their role, while Feiler et al. (2008) emphasise that teacher expectations must be explicitly shared. Otherwise, misunderstandings can harm both school-home collaboration and student achievement (Marshall and Jackman n.d.).

Curriculum changes

Discussions about the “Democracy” theme used in story creation also triggered conversations about curriculum content. Older participants, in particular, stressed that children should learn more about local histories: “It will be so much better if our children can learn about what happened right here in Uitenhage. Maybe they will value our town and its people more.” There was also confusion about curriculum changes. Participant 4 noted: “Changes in what the children are taught are not communicated to the parents. I still talk about history only to realise it is now called Social Sciences.” Interestingly, participants were divided on whether the curriculum had really changed. Younger mothers argued that the essential subjects remained the same, while older participants felt that school reforms, from shifting “Sub-A” to “Grade 1” and changing subject names, signaled much larger transformations. Informal conversations revealed common cultural memories, for example, topics like Silkaats was ‘n Zoeloe, Jan van Riebeeck, and die Slag van Bloedrivier, which both older and younger mothers recognised. This revealed shared ground but also highlighted the need for schools to communicate curriculum reforms more clearly to parents, so that they feel confident and included in their children’s education.

Discussion

This study set out to explore how a Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR) process could empower mothers in a disadvantaged South African community to co-create digital storybooks as learner support materials. Consistent with Freire’s (2007) emancipatory framework, the project showed how mothers moved from limited, skills-based conceptions of literacy toward broader, transformative understandings that integrated cultural identity, critical thinking, and collaborative meaning-making. This confirms Langer’s (1990) assertion that literacy is more than a mechanical skill and supports Fialho’s (2019) view of literacy as a socially and personally transformative process. The findings also resonate with research on equity, diversity, and inclusion in education. By reframing mothers as holders of community cultural wealth rather than as lacking expertise (Howard et al., 2024), the project challenged traditional deficit perspectives and emphasised asset-based frameworks consistent with the priorities of equity-oriented teaching (Sim et al., 2024). The PALAR

process enabled mothers to share their own stories, reclaim their cultural knowledge, and contribute to culturally sustaining literacy resources, echoing the decolonial and relational literacy approaches described by Brubacher and Filipek (2025) and Barkaskas and Gladwin (2021). In doing so, the study aligns with global conversations on positioning community members as partners rather than passive recipients of educational support (McKee et al., 2022; Kruger & Buley, 2022).

Participants' reflections on parental involvement illustrate a similar shift. Initially, many mothers described involvement in narrow terms, limited to checking reports or supervising homework. Through the PALAR process, they began to see themselves as co-educators, capable of building trusting relationships with teachers, participating in curriculum conversations, and shaping their children's literacy experiences. This mirrors Swain, Brooks, and Bosley's (2014) observations on the confidence-building role of family literacy programs, as well as Al-Maadadi et al.'s (2017) evidence of enhanced parent-teacher partnerships in Qatar. The mothers' embrace of digital storytelling to preserve their histories of democracy, community, and resilience aligns with Zeichner's (2003) argument that personal storytelling offers a rich site of knowledge creation and resonates with culturally responsive pedagogy (Brubacher & Filipek, 2025) that affirms marginalised voices. In addition, the study reveals communication barriers between families and schools, consistent with the concerns raised by Feiler et al. (2008) and Chen et al. (2008) about unclear teacher expectations. Participants' ideas including the establishment of WhatsApp groups and more regular parent-teacher dialogues reflect the need for accessible, relational, and culturally sensitive communication strategies (McKee et al., 2022). Their suggestions mirror the collaborative, relational practices identified by Schussler (2003) in building learning communities, and support Willison's (2024) argument for research-informed teacher practices that are responsive to community voices.

Importantly, the project demonstrated that systemic barriers including poverty, social marginalisation, and unclear curriculum expectations do not mean parents lack capability or commitment. When mothers were treated as co-researchers and co-designers, their sense of confidence, agency, and skill was markedly strengthened. This confirms Damons (2017) and Zuber-Skerritt (2015), who argue that PALAR is a powerful methodology for cultivating critical participation and social change. The study underscores that meaningful literacy transformation cannot rest on funding alone but requires community-driven, participatory processes that foster solidarity, trust, and co-ownership of educational practices. This echoes call to move beyond financial solutions toward relational and democratic practices. The PALAR framework, rooted in Freirean critical pedagogy and enriched by culturally sustaining, equity-centered approaches, offers a promising, replicable model for similar disadvantaged contexts. Future programs might build on this approach by scaling family-led storytelling initiatives, providing teacher professional development grounded in research thinking (Willison, 2024), and formalising parents' involvement in curriculum design as co-creators of knowledge. In this way, education systems can advance the broader goals of equity, diversity, and inclusion, ensuring more just and culturally responsive literacy experiences for all learners.

Freire's pedagogy of conscientisation provides a vital interpretive lens for understanding the mothers' transformative journeys throughout the PALAR process. Conscientisation, or the development of critical awareness through reflection and action (Freire, 1970, 2007), was operationalised in this study through iterative cycles of participatory dialogue, digital story creation, and collaborative reflection. During these workshops, mothers moved from a state of naïve consciousness viewing literacy as a set of isolated technical skills to a more critical and dialogical understanding of literacy as a social and cultural practice. The PALAR structure facilitated this transformation by encouraging participants to interrogate their lived realities, identify the socio-economic and linguistic barriers affecting their children's learning, and co-design culturally grounded solutions. Through the Key Advisory Set (KAS) meetings, participants not only learned new digital storytelling skills but also began to articulate how power, inequality, and schooling practices shape children's opportunities. This progression from awareness to critical reflection and then to collective action reflects Freire's notion of *praxis* the dynamic interplay between reflection and transformation. Mothers' narratives provided clear evidence of this emergent conscientisation. For example, Participant 8's comment, "*This new knowledge will help me approach my child's homework differently, because I will look at many ways instead of not helping her at all,*" illustrates the shift from passive acceptance to active agency. Similarly, Participant 4's recognition that "*I am responsible to form a partnership with my child's class teacher*" demonstrates a move toward dialogical engagement with the school as a site of shared learning. These reflections exemplify how PALAR's participatory and iterative design transformed Freire's theoretical principles into lived practice. By integrating dialogue, reflection, and collective creativity, the process cultivated not only individual empowerment but also a sense of communal responsibility affirming that conscientisation is both personal and social.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated the potential of Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR), rooted in Freirean critical pedagogy, to empower mothers in disadvantaged communities as active co-designers of their children's literacy experiences. Through the co-creation of culturally meaningful digital storybooks, mothers expanded their conceptions of literacy beyond narrow, technical definitions, building skills, confidence, and a powerful sense of agency. The PALAR process positioned mothers not simply as helpers but as co-educators, community leaders, and knowledge holders, challenging deficit-based assumptions and affirming their community cultural wealth (Howard et al., 2024). By supporting relational and reflective practices, this study aligns with decolonial and culturally sustaining approaches (Brubacher & Filipek, 2025; Barkaskas & Gladwin, 2021), strengthening connections between families, teachers, and schools in ways that advance equity, diversity, and inclusion (Sim et al., 2024).

By equipping mothers with skills to develop contextually relevant literacy materials, this project contributes to sustainable, community-driven strategies that go beyond financial resource provision. The collaborative, democratic cycles promoted by PALAR fostered solidarity, trust, and partnerships grounded in authentic dialogue, echoing broader frameworks of participatory, relational education (McKee et al., 2022; Kruger & Buley, 2022). This approach demonstrates how family voices can be integrated meaningfully into curriculum co-design, furthering the principles of research-informed, responsive teaching (Willison, 2024). This research study underscores the transformative potential of community-led, participatory solutions to address deep-seated educational inequalities in literacy. It offers a model that can be adapted to other disadvantaged communities, encouraging local knowledge-building, collective capacity, and social justice-oriented educational change. Beyond its community-level insights, this study offers implications for teacher education and literacy policy. Embedding PALAR principles in teacher preparation programmes can help educators view families as partners in knowledge co-construction rather than as peripheral participants. Policymakers could integrate digital storytelling and parental co-design within literacy intervention frameworks of the Department of Basic Education to ensure sustainability and scalability. Future initiatives should continue to explore PALAR and similar participatory methodologies, expanding the role of parents as critical agents of change and working toward a broader vision of equitable, high-quality education for all.

Declarations

Interdisciplinary Scope: This study adopts an interdisciplinary perspective by integrating insights from education, critical pedagogy, digital literacy, and community development to explore how participatory and culturally sustaining approaches can empower families as partners in literacy learning within disadvantaged South African schools.

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