
Multiple stakeholder collaborations to co-develop school improvement plans in Community schools: A Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR) study

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Abstract

Background: Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR) has been mostly used in Westernized contexts. The Centre for the Community School (CCS) started using this approach in their collaborations with multiple stakeholders to co-develop school improvement plans. The study was conducted in the Eastern Cape with participants from the Nelson Mandela Bay and Cala. There is no epistemic data that support the use of the PALAR methodology in the African context since it is mostly used in Westernized contexts. Considering this, we needed to establish its effectiveness for use in the African context and adapt this methodology to suit the African context.

Aim: To establish contextual factors that must be considered when using the PALAR methodology to develop school improvement plans in Community schools within the African context

Theory: We made use of critical pedagogy to frame our study

Method: We used PALAR as methodology. An Action Learning Set was formed, and data was generated using cellphilms. Due to COVID-19, we could not all congregate at the same time, we had to maintain social distance. We conducted the sessions in two separate meetings. The

Action Learning Set were divided in two groups and created two cellphilms. We analysed the data using a thematic analysis.

Findings: Language, Cultural intelligence and Coherent collaborations are crucial factors that must be considered when applying PALAR to develop school improvement plans in the African context. The Action Learning Set highlighted the role of language and how it has a potential of discriminating and silencing voices if not used appropriately. They illustrated this through their cellphilm titled *Ingxubakaxaka ngenxa yolwimi* (a state of confusion due to language). Through this cellphilm they highlighted that it is imperative that when PALAR is

being applied in the African context, a language that is understood by everyone be used. Data reveals that even though PALAR puts emphasis on collaboration, it is crucial that this collaboration is coherent. School improvement plans consist of several projects and if there is no coherency the whole process of school improvement may result in chaos, thus compromising the value of the projects. To adapt the PALAR methodology to the African context, data reveals that cultural intelligence is crucial and an important factor that must be considered. Africa is diverse and rich with numerous cultures, and African people pride themselves in the richness of these cultures. To be able to use PALAR within the African context, emotional intelligence is not enough, it must be coupled with cultural intelligence as well.

Conclusion: Through this study a new genre of PALAR was developed, one that is suitable for use in the African context. This study proposes guidelines that support the use of PALAR in the African context through the acronym SERV which stands for Situatedness, Empowerment, Roles, and Vulnerability).

Keywords: Participatory Action Learning and Action Research; School improvement plans; Critical pedagogy; multi-stakeholder collaborations

Introduction

School improvement plans (SIPs) are a crucial aspect in ensuring the success of a school as they assist principals, teachers, and school governing bodies to answer the following critical questions; *what will we focus on now?* and *what will we leave until later?* (Valois et al., 2015). A school improvement plan is a road map that outlines the changes a school needs to make to improve the level of student achievement (Education Improvement Commission, 2000). SIPs are developed based on the needs of the school and are there to address those needs. The whole school evaluation (WSE) policy was developed by the National Education Department to redress the calamitous legacy left by the unequal system that was created by apartheid. This policy was designed to ensure that school evaluation is carried out according to an agreed national model. The WSE policy sets out the legal basis for school evaluation, its purposes, what is to be evaluated, and who can carry out the evaluations. Christie (2020) notes that the National Education Department was weak from the start in relation to schooling, and they were increasingly disconnected from the existing conditions in schools as a result, they drew up its policies in ways that conformed to modernist parliamentary governmentality. Lebeloane (2017) agrees and further state that these policies do little to address decolonization for equity and social justice in the South African public schools. Because of these policies not being contextually relevant, the Education system in South Africa is still divided, 29 years into the democratic South Africa. Spaul (2013) refers to this division as a two-world concept, referring to the great inequality in the South African schooling system where schools in high socio-economic communities are equipped with infrastructure and resources that support teaching and learning, while schools in low socio-economic communities lack adequate resources to support effective teaching and learning (Ramrathan, 2021).

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Recognising this division, the Centre for the Community school (CCS) located in the faculty of Education at the Nelson Mandela University invited various stakeholders from the Nelson Mandela Bay's community schools in efforts to collaboratively co-construct contextually relevant school improvement plans. We define a community school as a values-driven school that creates an enabling and supportive environment for all while fostering solidarity and mutually beneficial relationships with the community (Damons & Cherrington, 2020).

Marianno et al (2023) assert that equitable systems and practices must be implanted in all school-level efforts to improve educational outcomes, the concept of community school

achieves this by conducting collaborative and transformative interventions with multiple stakeholders who are interested in school improvement. In this study the participants were various stakeholders who are actively involved in the Centre for the Community school. These stakeholders were inclusive of principals, community members, teachers, and staff from CCS. Participants in the study were drawn from schools located in diverse contexts spanning the Nelson Mandela Bay and Cala. Cala, situated in the Eastern Cape, represents a rural area, and the school has actively participated in the initiatives of the CCS. The schools in the Nelson Mandela Bay region are found in both the Northern areas and the township area. Together they formed a community of practice (CoP). CCS used Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR) as an engagement method in the co-construction of school improvement plans. PALAR has been mostly used in Westernized contexts (Zuber-Skerritt 2013) and there is very little literature on its use in the African context. The research question was,

- *What are the contextual factors to consider when following a PALAR approach in the development of school improvement plans?*

We wanted to establish these factors so that we could develop guidelines that support the use of the PALAR approach in Community schools within the African context.

Literature

The Education system in post-apartheid South African remains unequal “with South Africa ranked among the worst performers on all international comparative scales” (Christie, 2020:200). Even though the Constitution declares education to be a basic right and outlawed discrimination based on race, Christie (2020) observes that this did not translate into equality by stating that establishing one national education department that has one set of norms and standards for all schools established a sense of ‘sameness’ across the system. And as such, this practice neglects the historically unequal circumstances of schooling that was created by apartheid's racial segregation.

With the new democracy, new policies were created that sought to redress the dire legacy left by the apartheid regime. For the South African education system, the National Whole School Evaluation policy was designed to ensure that school evaluation is conducted according to an

agreed national model. The process of Whole-school evaluation is comprised of nine areas which are: (i) Basic functionality of the school, (ii) Leadership, management, and communication, (iii) Governance and relationships, (iv) Quality of teaching and learning, and educator development, (v) Curriculum provision and resources, (vi) Learner achievement (vii) School safety, security, and discipline (viii) School infrastructure, and (ix) Parents and

community (Department of Basic Education, 2015). Based on the Whole school evaluation, schools then construct school improvement plans to address challenges that the school experiences, and some, if not most, of these challenges are identified through the process of Whole School Evaluation. School improvement plans are essential to school improvement (Van der Voort & Wood, 2014) as they encourage staff and parents to monitor student achievement levels, taking into consideration the various aspects that contribute to the success of learners (Valois et al., 2015). Recognising the importance of school improvement plans, the Centre for the Community School held an intervention by inviting critical stakeholders in the school community with the objective of collaboratively developing school improvement plans that are specifically relevant to the needs of the schools.

The importance of the Centre for the Community School

The Centre for the Community School (CCS) is located at Nelson Mandela University in the Faculty of Education. This centre was established because of the increasing demand for social change and the widening gap between institutions of higher learning and the communities surrounding them. Recognising that community engagement is a core function of the university in South Africa (Wood & Zuber-Skerrit, 2013), CCS ensures that the university is engaged for the social good of all citizens and that it advocates for and contributes to social change in the country (Centre for the Community School, 2020). The CCS seeks to contribute to the quality of public education in South Africa by developing theoretical and practice-based models of school improvement that are relevant and responsive to the contextual realities of schools and the communities they serve. In addition, the CCS engages and spear heads development programmes that elevate university-community engagement, while developing the communities in the Eastern Cape. Moreover, the CCS is aware that schools have a crucial role to play in making meaningful and sustainable contributions towards promoting social justice, societal transformation, and moral regeneration within their macro and micro contexts.

The CCS is aware that the university can contribute to the community and learn from the communities around them (Bhagwan, 2017), and they use these lessons to critically reflect on how developing mutually beneficial partnerships between a school and its community can contribute towards the holistic development and well-being of all school stakeholders. So, the CCS reimagines what schools should look like, with an initial focus on those in the Nelson Mandela Bay and rural Eastern Cape (Centre for the Community School, 2020). Acknowledging that schools do not exist in isolation, the CCS values the advice of everyone who has an interest in schooling and argues that a reimagined approach to schools is imperative for engagement that is mutually beneficial, a collective process, and engagement which recognises and values multiple voices. Therefore, they made use of the PALAR approach as they recognised that the social, political, and economic context of communities provides the catalyst for this praxis to occur.

The PALAR methodology is an iterative process dedicated to recognizing and addressing power differentials. Mahadew and Hlalele (2022) associate PALAR with critical pedagogy, while Zuber-Skerritt (2015:15) characterizes it as a method focused on identifying, confronting, and resolving intricate problems within specific groups or communities. The

overarching goal is to deepen understanding, effect practical improvements, foster transformative learning and change, promote social justice, and contribute to a better world for all. PALAR challenges the conventional view of the researcher as the exclusive holder of knowledge, instead positioning all participants as valuable sources of insights. Within PALAR, participants are acknowledged as co-researchers, collaborating to address complex contextual challenges (Mthiyane et al., 2023). PALAR's unique feature lies in its commitment to democratizing knowledge production among both researchers and participants. Another advantage of PALAR is its creation of communicative spaces, fostering active participation where individuals collectively identify, address, and resolve complex challenges within specific groups or communities (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2014; Zuber-Skerritt, 2015). This is precisely why the CCS chooses the PALAR approach, utilizing it to collaboratively develop pertinent school improvement plans with contributions from diverse stakeholders within the school community.

Theoretical framework

This study drew from the critical pedagogy. Literature recognises Paulo Freire as the inaugural philosopher of critical pedagogy (Diallo, 2023; Alexander, 2018). Freire is mostly known for his literacy campaigns in Latin America and Africa, and for his seminal work, the *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (McLauren & Leonard, 1993). Freire's father applied the principle of 'using what is available' when he taught him the alphabet way before he went to school, using a piece of wood to paint words from the 'cultural universe of the child' in the sand (Heinz-Peter, 1993). This served as the origin of critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy has been defined differently by different scholars. Shor (1992; 129) defines critical pedagogy as

“Habits of thought, reading, writing and speaking which go beneath surface meaning, first impressions, dominant myths, official pronouncements, traditional clichés, received wisdom and mere opinions, to understand the deep meaning, root causes, social context, ideology, and personal consequences of any action, event, object, process, organization, experience, text, subject matter, policy, mass media, or discourse”.

We agree with this view especially since the purpose of critical pedagogy is to partake in the act of conscientization which can be defined as “learning to perceive social, political and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (Choi & Kim, 2014; 124). While Gert (1998) views critical pedagogy as a theory of education, Shudak (2014) argues that critical pedagogy is more of a way of being than a theory of education. This analysis of critical pedagogy is supported by Siqueira (2021) as she asserts that critical pedagogy is not a theory or a method, but rather a way of life. We argue that this conviction of critical pedagogy resonates with Freire's concept of humanization, as to be fully human is to be a subject capable of acting on and changing the world (McInerney, 2009). Freire's focus on humanism is based on his curiosity in the cognitive capacity of humans to shape their experiences and achieve personal and collective self-actualization which results in developing their full humanity (Dale & Hyslop-Margison, 2010). This is especially essential in the process of developing context relevant school improvement plans.

Critical pedagogy has been applied in several participatory community activities. Between 1990 and 1996 the El Barrio Popular Education program which was a community-based program in the United States applied critical pedagogy in the bilingual curriculum through which popular research projects were conducted (Rivera, 1999). The Children of the Future Art program used critical pedagogy to promote Artistic and Cultural Development in a Low-Income Community Art Program. Using critical pedagogy, the instructors of the Children of the Future Art program sought to facilitate social awareness and activism as imperatives of self-empowerment in a democratic society (Adejumo, 2010). More recently, the role of critical pedagogy in participatory community activities can be seen in the work of Damons (2017), when he and the school community, inclusive of volunteer community members, collaboratively constructed a process model for understanding and supporting the work of the community volunteer in a community school.

Applying the principles of critical pedagogy in community activities enables community members to interrogate their understanding of the challenges they seek to collaboratively work towards solving. Society can be transformed by the engagement of critically conscious people (Keesing-Styles, 2003) and through reflexive and dialogical practice, participants are asked to consider how their lived experiences intersect and influence how they view the world. The lived experience of South Africans has always been comprised of us experiencing education in a political context, evident in the top-down approach used by the government to govern schools. The idea that schools should be a site for the active promotion of diversity and the empowerment of the marginalised is not necessarily a natural one (Geduld et al., 2021) therefore the application of critical pedagogy was necessary to instil this notion and empower the community to be involved in the process of developing school improvement plans.

The Research Methodology

The participants were purposefully sampled as the criticality of this study relied on who the participants were and the uniqueness of their realities. There were nine participants who are actively involved across the Communities of Practice at CCS and together they formed an Action Learning Set (ALS). An Action Learning Set is defined by Morrison (2017) as a group of people who collaboratively work together on real challenges using their individual knowledge and skills to facilitate deeper learning. The Action Learning Set comprised of 3 community members, 3 school principals, 2 staff members from CCS and 1 teacher, the second teacher who was invited to be part of the study became non-responsive and was not part of the data generation. Wood (2020) advises that an ALS should not be too large, which is why the ALS for this study was purposefully selected to be nine participants.

PALAR methodology

Our research sessions followed the structure of Action research which is “Plan, Act, Observe and Reflect” (Nazari, 2022). We applied this structure to our research data generation cycles. To achieve our objective, we used Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR) as a methodology. The alignment of PALAR and critical pedagogy is confirmed by

Mahadew and Hlalele (2022) and since our objective was to establish contextual factors that must be considered when using PALAR in the African context, it was fitting that we used a methodology that incorporates research with a unique learning component. PALAR is a hybrid of all the principles and concepts of the action research genre that, together, form a participatory agenda (Neethling, 2015). This methodology has been described by Zuber-Skerritt (2018) as a special kind of action research that integrates numerous concepts and processes, including lifelong learning, collaborative action learning, participatory action research and action leadership.

The study was guided by the three processes of PALAR which are (i) “the development of democratic, authentic, trusting, and supportive relationships; (ii) the process of continual critical reflection in a collaborative learning context; (iii) recognition of the achievements of all participants” (Kearney et al., 2013:6). Serving as a crucial compass for us were the values of PALAR which are communication, collaboration, coaching, critical reflection, commitment, competence, and compromise, also known as the 7Cs of PALAR. We started with the relationship building phase, which is a crucial phase in the PALAR methodology. This phase is where we held our initial meeting where we established the problem or concerns that we sought to address. It was during this phase that we also conducted an inventory of the assets

we possessed. It was important for us to establish trusting and mutually beneficial relationships with each other and negotiate how we were going to journey together throughout the research study. This study was conceptualized before the COVID-19 emerged however we then experienced the pandemic and had to re-think and adjust to the new environment in which we found ourselves. We had planned to have our initial meetings in a face-to-face setting however we had to abide by the COVID-19 protocols and hold the meetings online.

Following the relationship building phase we then entered the research phase which was the data generation phase. We were guided by the principles of PALAR which ensured that we *communicated* constantly, and we *collaboratively* worked together as a team towards the objective of the project. Constant *critical reflection* ensured that we fully participated in our learning, and we offered support towards one another through *coaching*. Our *commitment* towards the project encouraged us to keep going since a PALAR project can be time-consuming (Sethlare-Kajee, 2018). The compromises we made led to us gaining *competence* as a team as we learned how to navigate storyboards and the making of cellfilms to generate our data.

Due to the COVID-19 restrictions we had to observe, we separated our data generation sessions and instead of convening as one big group, we had to convene during separate times. This did not negatively affect the quality of the data, instead it gave us more time to reflect and thoroughly clarify what we meant in our data.

Participatory visual methodology as data gathering strategy

Creswell and Poth (2016) stress the importance of choosing the data generation strategy as this determines the quality of data generated during the research process. We made use of Participatory Visual methods as data generation strategy. Participatory Visual Methods enabled us to be inclusive through promoting critical engagement and collective action as warranted by the methodology (Nguyen et al., 2015). As an instrument to generate the data we used cellphilms. A cellphilms is a short video, usually between 2-3 minutes long, that is taken using a cell phone (Dennison, 2020). MacEntee and Flicker (2023) explain that cellphilms are made with the intent to respond to a prompt or a question. To guide us we had the following prompt: “*what comes to mind when you reflect on the engagement CCS had with the CoP’s?*”

The prompt serves as a guiding tool to prevent participants from deviating from the data generation process, ensuring that the generated data remains pertinent to the study.

The specific prompt used aimed to prompt participants to reflect on their experiences with using the PALAR methodology in developing school improvement plans. It was intentionally designed to be open-ended, allowing participants the flexibility to brainstorm and explore ideas they deemed essential for inclusion in their cellphilms. Through the storyboard process, they refined their ideas, highlighting crucial factors upon which they collectively agreed.

The primary objective was to pinpoint, based on their experiences, factors perceived as contextually irrelevant in the African context due to its unique characteristics. The cellphilms presentations allowed participants to illuminate these contextual factors. Subsequently, lessons drawn from the data informed the crafting of guidelines to support the application of PALAR in the African context. The participants' experiences with the PALAR methodology played a pivotal role in identifying factors crucial for consideration in the African context. This data, in turn, gave rise to the development of the SERV guidelines, and the supporting evidence is provided.

Cellphilms are “a way of making the theory come to life” (Flicker et al., 2018:39) and they help to strengthen the voices of the people involved in knowledge generation (Milne et al., 2012). The participants were divided into two groups and were first shown a few examples of cellphilms and taken through training on how to create cellphilms as we could not assume that everyone knows how to operate a cellphone. We then proceeded to the process of creating a storyboard, guided by the prompt. The participants discussed and deliberated on the various topics they wanted to showcase through their cellphilms. They then shortlisted their ideas and voted on which idea they are going to create the cellphilms on. Cellphilms are democratic and

the participants are at the centre of everything (Noreiga, 2022) so this process was essential as the power of how they wanted to tell their stories was in their hands. The participants assigned roles to each other on how the production of their cellphilms was going to take place. After designing their storyboards, they then proceeded to create their cellphilms. PALAR employs the principle of “learning by doing” and critically reflecting on the action, on self, and with others (Zuber-Skerritt, 2018). The cellphilms were a suitable instrument to use as it afforded the participants the opportunity to partake in learning while generating data. We then had a

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session where we all watched the cellfilms and reflected on them. These reflections shaped our discussions and influenced how we analysed the data. We used a thematic data analysis strategy and we collectively participated in a process of open coding which resulted in broader themes merging.

Findings and Discussions

We sought to explore the contextual factors that need to be considered when following a PALAR approach in the development of school improvement plans in Community schools within the African context. Data reveals that language is an important factor that needs to be considered when using a PALAR approach to develop school improvement plans in the African context. The first cellfilm which was conducted by group one was entitled *Ingxubakaxaba ngenxa yolwimi* which refers to a state of confusion because of language. Fig 1 is their storyboard.

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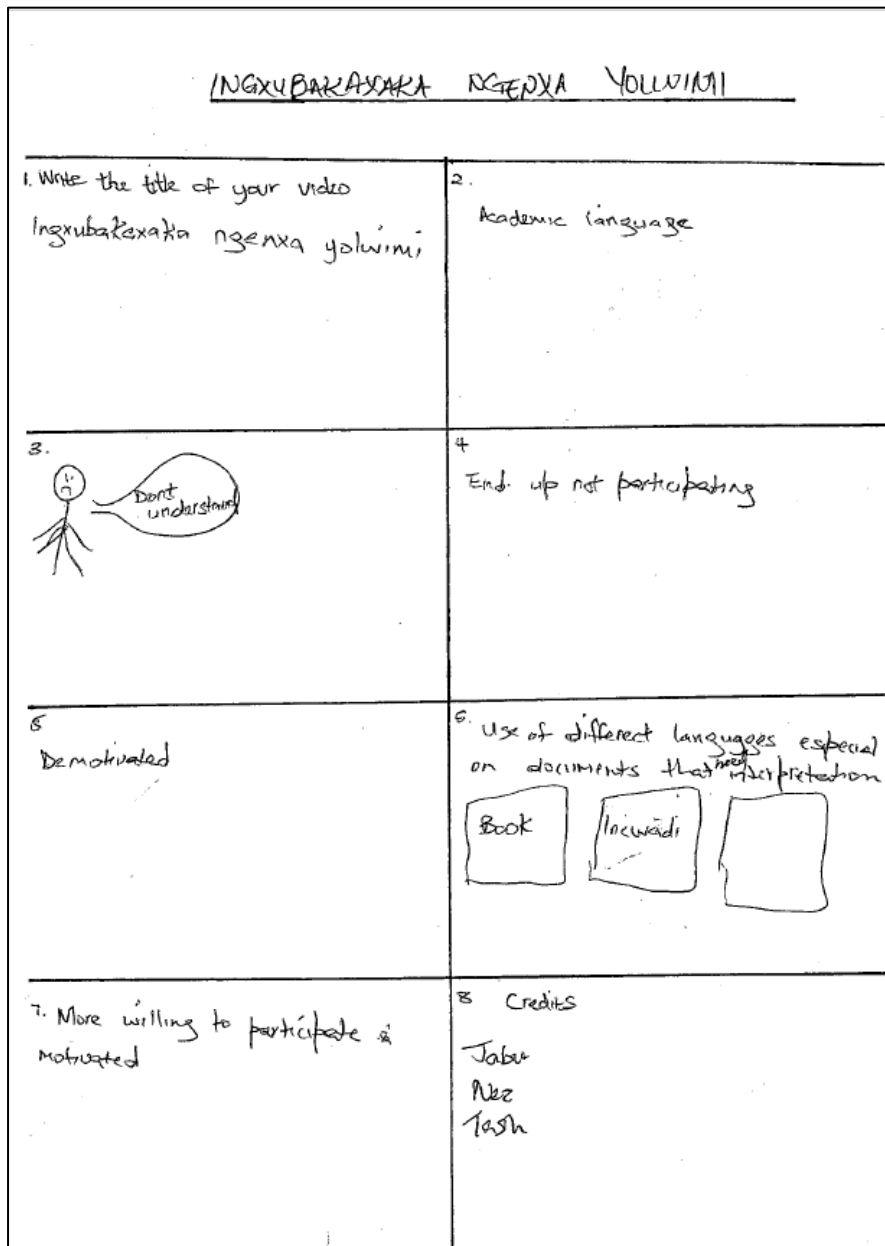


Fig 1. Storyboard of group 1 titled: Ingxubakaxaka ngenxa yolwimi

The first frame of the cellphilm shows the members of the group sitting down in a session as a community of practice (CoP), eager to participate. The facilitator starts speaking and uses 'big words' (academic jargon) that are normally used in an academic space and the members of the group start to feel unsettled. They start to show a lack of interest in what is being done in the session because they do not understand the words that are being used by the facilitator. One member gets up and leaves, while the other starts to play with her phone. Frame six sees on

of the members raising his hand and asks the facilitator to explain the words that she is using as they are not familiar with the vocabulary. The facilitator then explains the meaning of the word in isiXhosa, which is the primary language that is spoken by the members of the group

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and, as soon as they understand what the words mean, they become motivated, and have smiles on their faces. They are seen on the last frame happy, fully participating and suggesting to the facilitator the use of at least 3 languages, isiXhosa, English and Afrikaans and, if that is not a possibility, at least use English that can be understood by all and not just the academic jargon that community members are unfamiliar with.

Group one titled their cellphilm *Ingxubakaxaka ngenxa yolwimi*, because they wanted to highlight the confusion and oppression that is caused by using language that is not familiar to everyone. Language and context are two integrated concepts and, these two mutually constitute each other (Ahearn, 2021). To be in a position of not understanding what is being said must have made these members of the Action Learning Set feel inferior; a state that is in contradiction with the principles of the PALAR approach. Freire (1970) postulates that language can never be neutral and what was interesting was that group one titled their cellphilm in isiXhosa, and yet they portrayed how the use of language has a potential to oppress and demotivate, resulting in lack of participation. One would say the irony in this is that this group is highlighting how the use of academic jargon and language that was not familiar to them oppressed their voices, and yet they named their cellphilm in a language that not everyone understands. On the other side of the coin, one would argue that to place emphasis on their experience of being oppressed through the use of a language that they did not understand, they used their own language as a title of their cellphilm so that it can be known how it feels to not understand something because of the language barrier.

Language can be discriminatory, especially in a country such as South Africa where we have a history of gross discrimination channelled by colonialism and apartheid. Colonialism and apartheid instilled a sense of inferiority, especially in the black community (Nhamo, 2012), and this came with systemic problems such as power relations being deeply aligned with race, gender, and language. Language was used as an instrument of oppression especially in the Education sector. Through the Bantu Education system oppression was channelled by

providing “education for subservience and cultural domination precisely by imposing outmoded tribal customs, languages, and governance on unwilling Blacks...Blacks must learn how to find their tribal place in white dominated society” (Christie & Collins, 1982:60). With the history of Colonialism in Africa, Academic language sits in the hand of the oppressor as a means of controlling knowledge construct. This oppression also has to do with who holds this power? In this case, the academic elite. Consequently, positioning the language of the elite to dominate over the standard language of the society (McKinney, 2016).

The findings also reveal cultural intelligence as an important factor that needs to be considered when using a PALAR approach. There is close connection between language and culture (Aliyeva, 2023). Culture comprises of social and institutional practices, cultural values, and traditions as well as language and particular forms of knowledge (Foley et al., 2015). Mokhoathi (2022) agrees that culture is a social construct and further explains that culture is learnt over time through practice, and it is an entity that gives a particular group an identity that distinguishes them from other groups. To clarify when we are referring to Culture, we are

referring to both culture as beliefs, and culture as a ‘way of doing things’. Colonialism subjected Africa to an imposition of Western values (Gwagwa et al, 2022) as such when we constructed our African identity, post colonialism, culture became fundamental in that process (Falola, 2003). The culture of a people is what differentiates them from other human societies in the family of humanity (Idang, 2015). In Africa, there is no single culture and there is no single nation, there are many cultures that share many similar assumptions and a variety of nations that share similar characteristics (Falola, 2003). It is therefore crucial to possess in depth knowledge of the cultural beliefs, practices of the context in which PALAR is being applied. Not possessing cultural intelligence in the African context carries disastrous risks and even a possibility of not successfully completing the PALAR project that is being conducted. For example, PALAR insists on equality, while most African cultures value hierarchy. Emotional intelligence is not enough when using PALAR, one ought to possess cultural intelligence to be able to navigate the contradictions and power differentials that come with using PALAR in the African context. Gwagwa et al, (2022) explain that in Africa there are many cultures with different beliefs, however, the commonality in all the cultures is that they are engrained in the philosophy of Ubuntu, I am because you are. Aligned with Freire’s concept of humanization, this African philosophy puts emphasis on humanity, among Africans there is no worse humiliation than to be characterized as ‘*akangomntu*’ (not a human being), as this downgrades a person to the status of a non-human (Mangaliso et al, 2022). Applying PALAR in the African context requires one to be culturally intelligent and embrace the many cultures that exist within the African context.

The PALAR methodology is collaborative in nature, in fact collaboration is one of the values of the methodology (Zuber-Skerritt, 2013). Data reveals that coherence is an integral aspect that needs to be considered when applying the PALAR approach for developing school improvement plans. So, mere collaboration is not effective if it is not coherent. Below is a storyboard of group two highlighting the importance of coherence in collaborations.

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<u>Stronger Coherence</u>	
1 .. write the title of your video Set Conscious Apart - Showing Apart -	2 Collaboration (At table) ↓ Table and chair empty ↓ Break
3 Showing and Andover between the different Projects CCS in the middle...	4 Kind of communication Better together Showing collaboration
5	6
7	8 Credits Bruce Jerome Tracey Ian

Fig 2. Storyboard of group 2 titled: Stronger Coherence

Group two had few frames in their storyboard but had slightly longer scenes in each frame; the first frame opens with various representatives of the different Communities of Practice (CoP) that exist within the Centre for the Community School standing individually holding a plaque that displays their respective CoP (fig 2). The CoPs represented in the cellphilm were WALs (Wellness Action Learning Set), PLEM (Physical Science, Life Science, English and Mathematics), PALS (Principals Action Learning Set) and CCS (Centre for the Community School). They then walk away, scratching their heads, being confused and isolated. The second frame shows the CoPs and CCS coming together around a table and having discussions. The

third frame sees the participants dispersing into different directions after they had worked together. Each of them went into their own corner and there was no one left at the table. The

fourth frame sees the participants returning to the table and working together, sharing knowledge among one another about the various CoPs that they belong to. They each exchange their plaque cards to represent oneness, and collaboration. Each member is then afforded an opportunity to re-arrange the plaque cards on the table to show inclusivity and, while one member is re-arranging the plaque card, he/she gets a pat on his/her back to show acknowledgement of the great work he/she is doing. The pat on the back also shows that they are supporting one another, and they are now working together *coherently*. We acknowledge that school improvement plans consist of various projects that aim to improve certain areas in the school, and that if there is no coherence, there will be a negative effect on how these projects are developed.

Following the cellphilms presentations, we conducted debriefing sessions and engaged in discussions to identify and delineate the themes that surfaced in the cellphilms narratives.



Picture 1: Bruce facilitating the Action Learning Set's discussion on cellphilms

From the discussions surrounding the cellphilms presentations, the following data surfaced as additional factors that require consideration when employing the PALAR approach for developing school improvement plans in the African context. These factors are organized into themes and sub-themes below.

COMMUNICATION

- Commitment

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- Culture (beliefs)
- Objectives
- Space

FEEDBACK

- Reward
- Acknowledgment
- Capturing
- Impact

TRANSPARENCY

- Experience
- Dynamic
- Objectives
- Relationships

TIME

- Sessions
- Finances
- Transport
- Process

COMPROMISE

- Environment
- Emotions
- Self-Awareness

Critical pedagogy revolves around the notion of creating a just society where individuals are both emancipated and empowered (Aliakbari & Farajj, 2011). The study's findings reveal that the PALAR approach was perceived as not contextually relevant to the African context by the participants. Consequently, it becomes imperative to adapt the approach before its application

in this setting. In line with the principles of critical pedagogy, which advocates for a continuous questioning of one's societal position, the study participants not only scrutinized the contextual relevance of the PALAR methodology but also played a significant role in adapting PALAR to align with their specific context. The social justice aspect of PALAR is closely tied to the concept of Situatedness, emphasizing engagement within a particular context. Critical pedagogy prompts us to introspect, asking questions such as "Who are we? What resources do we possess? What can we achieve with our available resources?" (Keesing-styles, 2003). These queries motivated the participants to customize the PALAR methodology to suit their context, rather than applying it in its current form as observed in Westernized contexts.

Based on the study's findings, the research proposes guidelines designed to facilitate the application of PALAR in the African context, encapsulated in the acronym SERV (Situatedness, Empowerment, Roles, and Vulnerability).

Situatedness - when applying PALAR in the African context, you must be mindful of the environmental, social, economic, cultural factors, political context of the participants. For example, PALAR is cyclic and requires numerous meetings, if the participants are not employed, you cannot expect them to find their way to the meeting venues as financial constraints will prevent them from attending. Considering participants' situatedness also means acknowledging that people have different cultures, and their worldviews are influenced by their beliefs and lived experiences.

Empowerment - The PALAR approach is new, especially its use in the African context therefore it is highly recommended that anyone who desires to use the PALAR approach receive training to be able to facilitate a PALAR project and deal with its complexities. In addition, it is important to capacitate the participants as you are all striving to gain competence through the PALAR project. For example, the facilitation of check-in sessions can be rotated so that everyone in the group can learn the skill of facilitating.

Roles - Participation is an important factor of the PALAR approach so it is imperative to always encourage all participants to fully participate in the activities of the project. Participation is not automatic; everyone will have to be constantly encouraged to participate and collaboratively work together as a team. For a team to successfully work together, there must be clearly defined *roles* to ensure that everyone feels valued. Furthermore, defining roles will mitigate issues of power differentials especially in a group setting where people are used to occupying various positions of power.

Vulnerability - The PALAR approach is not an easy approach to use; it is complex and requires emotional and cultural intelligence. It is based on developing relationships and trust therefore one must be sincere, genuine, and honest when using this approach. This means one must not be afraid to be vulnerable as everyone will see this vulnerability and reciprocate it. This creates authenticity, and everyone will be able to open up easily and be comfortable around each other, strengthening the relationships that have been created.

Considering our discoveries, we contend that the SERV guidelines, rooted in its philosophical foundations, acknowledge, and embrace the distinctive nature of the African context. An illustrative instance of this is PALAR's approach of placing all stakeholders on an equal footing. While this may pose a challenge, particularly in the African context where a hierarchical structure is highly valued, the SERV guidelines serve to conscientize us about the significance of cultural intelligence. This concept, unique to the SERV guidelines, aids us in navigating these inherent contradictions.

The SERV guidelines are contextually relevant for guiding those utilizing the PALAR methodology in the African context, bridging the gap between theory and praxis. Aligned with the principles of PALAR—democracy, inclusivity, and equality (Zuber-Skerritt et al., 2015; Wood, 2020)—the SERV guidelines are rooted in the educational aims of critical pedagogy: Humanization, Conscientization, and Problem-posing (Freire, 1970). Recognizing Africa's cultural diversity and the absence of a singular nation, as noted by Falola (2003), the guidelines acknowledge the multitude of cultures that share common assumptions and various nations with similar characteristics. Despite this diversity, many African cultures resonate with the philosophy of Ubuntu, encapsulated in the belief that '*I am because you are*,' emphasizing interdependence (Gwagwa et al., 2022). Our African identity shapes our actions, and our beliefs influence our worldview. What distinctly characterizes the African essence within the SERV guidelines is their foundation in the philosophy of Ubuntu. These guidelines achieve this by advocating for the recognition of all participants as reservoirs of knowledge, emphasizing cultural intelligence, and embracing vulnerability as an integral epistemic process in collaborative efforts.

Conclusion

This study sought to disrupt the acceptance of directly using methodologies which originate from a context different from ours (Africa). The Centre for the Community School applied this methodology to co-develop school improvement plans with multiple stakeholders. With no evidence of the effectiveness of applying this methodology, we needed an African epistemic contribution on the relevance of using this methodology in the context of school improvement within Africa. This research project makes an impact to knowledge through its methodological contribution and making use of critical collaborative research epistemology to enable schools to become agents of change in their communities. The SERV guidelines that are produced by the study conscientize people to the importance of context. Africa is a diverse continent rich with various cultures. This study sought to celebrate that by constructing guidelines that are relevant to our African context, guidelines that are influenced by our African values and principles. The philosophy of Ubuntu is intertwined and engrained in the SERV guidelines, and through them community schools are able to enhance their school improvement plans regardless of the challenges they are faced with, which, amongst them, is the lack of resources.

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