



Participatory Action Research as Value-Laden Practice: Values that Matter to the Participants

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed at resolving the vexing question: Which values do participants cherish and bring into a participatory action research project? To resolve this question, diverse stakeholders comprising heads of departmental, principals, deputy principals, SGB members, and a community development worker were mobilised to participate in this study. Using participatory action research, the principles of the critical emancipatory paradigm were operationalised. Monthly meetings were held where data was generated through the Free Attitude Interview. Discussions were tape-recorded for later analysis using critical discourse analysis to make sense of the meaning-construction processes of the participants. The study contributes to scientific knowledge by revealing the values that participants brought into a PAR study, namely, intellectual humility, transparency, democracy, inclusion and beneficence. The study concludes that these values are a *conditio sine qua non* for a PAR study and that in their absence a study may collapse. It is recommended that these values be heeded by PAR researchers because the participants placed a high premium on them. There is a need for more theorisation and scholarisation on the appropriateness of positivistic nomenclatures such as sample/sampling and data collection in PAR.

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INTRODUCTION

Participatory action research (PAR) has gained ground as a formidable method of enquiry in various disciplines. Most PAR studies, if not all of them, talk about the importance of participants in a study; power differentials between the researchers and the participants are disrupted, subverted, and dismantled; how the researcher-relationality is expressed through observance of principles of respectful research, namely, social justice, equity, equality, freedom, peace and hope. This relationality is told from researchers' angle. There is a need to hear the participants' side about what values they bring to a project. Once they participate and collaborate with the researcher, what makes the participants not abandon the study? What pulls them to a study from start to finish?

To resolve the above problem, it becomes important to present the theoretical lens on which the study was mounted. The ensuing theoretical lens fostered synergy between the methodology, methods used and interpretation of the results, thereby weaving a golden thread that kept the study intact.

LITERATURE REVIEW

PAR has established itself as a legitimate approach in the pantheon of research methodologies. Its origin is mired in controversy because of doubts about Kurt Lewin as its originator.¹ Some historical works point to J.L. Moreno as the first person to use the terms ‘action research’ and ‘coresearchers’ as early as 2013.² What is not disputed is that PAR originated from community development movements in the Third World, including the works of Paulo Freire.³ This makes PAR a Global South epistemological theorisation. Its advent ushered, for some theorists, a welcoming dissociation with hitherto worshipped canons of positivistic enquiry. McTaggart sometimes uses ‘action research’ for brevity, implying it may be used interchangeably with PAR.⁴ This I find confusing amid numerous iterations of action research, participatory research, critical research, action learning, etc.

Research that allows researchers to be fully immersed in the plight of the subaltern communities directly.⁵ Through PAR, researchers respond to the pressing need to identify those circumstances that impede people’s effectiveness. Consequently, PAR is preoccupied with transforming the lives of people through their agency.⁶ As people transform their lives, they move from being helpless to overseeing their destinies.⁷ PAR aims at transforming practices, the way practices are understood and the conditions that foster and constrain practice.⁸ In this regard, PAR espouses and is committed to an emancipatory agenda. While it is a practice on its own, it also changes other practices- a *practice-changing practice*.⁹ Kemmis warns that PAR may change practice for better or worse.¹⁰ For better, if it improves practices and for worse when it spawns unsustainable consequences for practitioners. It is for this reason that *reflection* is an integral part of PAR to evaluate the consequences of PAR processes.¹¹ The researcher and co-researchers open the communicative space to reflect on their practice.¹²

People who experience a problem should be the ones best placed to find the solution to it.¹³ Participants are viewed as complete human beings with emotions and feelings.¹⁴ Despite their limitations that are based on disingenuous markers, the participants are knowing subjects and dynamic and subjective human beings who bring their rich-laden perspectives to endeavours that seek knowledge-creation.¹⁵ That is why they are called co-researchers because they operate at an equal level with the researcher during the research process. They are equally human like the researcher.¹⁶ As

¹ Robin McTaggart, “Participatory Action Research: Issues in Theory and Practice,” *Educational Action Research* 2, no. 3 (1994): 313–37.

² McTaggart, “Participatory Action Research: Issues in Theory and Practice.”

³ McTaggart, “Participatory Action Research: Issues in Theory and Practice.”

⁴ McTaggart, “Participatory Action Research: Issues in Theory and Practice.”

⁵ S M G Mahlomaholo, “Towards Sustainable Empowering Learning Environments: Unmasking Apartheid Legacies through Scholarship of Engagement,” *South African Journal of Higher Education* 24, no. 3 (2010): 287–301.

⁶ Stephen Kemmis, “Participatory Action Research and the Public Sphere,” *Educational Action Research* 14, no. 4 (2006): 459–76; McTaggart, “Participatory Action Research: Issues in Theory and Practice.”

⁷ Masithela Mahlomaholo, “Transformation: Interrogating Dominant and Subaltern Discourses at Vista University Form a Post-Colonial Perspective,” *Southern African Review of Education with Education with Production* 3, no. 1 (1997): 11–34.

⁸ Stephen Kemmis, “Action Research as a Practice-based Practice,” *Educational Action Research* 17, no. 3 (2009): 463–74.

⁹ Kemmis, “Action Research as a Practice-based Practice,” 2009.

¹⁰ Stephen Kemmis, “Action Research as a Practice-based Practice,” *Educational Action Research* 17, no. 3 (September 2009): 463–74, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09650790903093284>.

¹¹ McTaggart, “Participatory Action Research: Issues in Theory and Practice.”

¹² Kemmis Stephen and McTAGGART Robin, “Participatory Action Research: Communicative Action and the Public Sphere,” *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2000, 559–603.

¹³ Gloria Ladson-Billings, “But That’s Just Good Teaching! The Case for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy,” *Theory into Practice* 34, no. 3 (1995): 159–65; McTaggart, “Participatory Action Research: Issues in Theory and Practice.”

¹⁴ T Teele, M M Nkoane, and M G Mahlomaholo, “Corollaries of Pedagogic Praxis on Technological Skills Transfer for Emerging Farmers,” *Gender and Behaviour* 18, no. 1 (2020): 14749–60.

¹⁵ Teele, Nkoane, and Mahlomaholo, “Corollaries of Pedagogic Praxis on Technological Skills Transfer for Emerging Farmers”; Mahlomaholo Rosy Makeresemese and Mahlomaholo Geoffrey Mahlomaholo, “Understanding Curriculum Transformations Towards the Creation of Sustainable Learning Environments: A Posthumanist Reflection,” *Research in Social Sciences and Technology* 8, no. 4 (December 23, 2023): 330–44, <https://doi.org/10.46303/ressat.2023.45>.

¹⁶ Sechaba M G Mahlomaholo and Makeresemese R Mahlomaholo, “Employability as Inclusive Entanglement in Relationalities: A Design in Sustainable Learning Environments,” in *Intellectual and Learning Disabilities-Inclusiveness and Contemporary Teaching Environments* (IntechOpen, 2024).

such, PAR deliberately assumes a posture of egalitarian research. Therefore, PAR transcends and blurs the boundaries created by hierarchies, power, and statuses. PAR unashamedly and unapologetically assumes the commendable posture of being egalitarian research. Participants co-determine the agenda of the research to be done.¹⁷ PAR offers a perfect example and lesson on how to operationalise the noble, yet very elusive principle of *equality*.

PAR researchers do not impose themselves on the participants.¹⁸ They help the participants discover the power they have in themselves to resolve their problems.¹⁹ The researchers have a strong sense that a PAR researcher should be transformed into an *organic intellectual*. According to Mahlomaholo, academics become organic intellectuals when they intertwine and entangle themselves with their communities' challenges and mitigate them through research.²⁰ Neutrality is a very alien concept for PAR researchers. They cannot be objective because their loyalty is overtly biased in favour of the dehumanised, oppressed and marginalised members of their communities. Objectivity is a mirage and a regrettable figment of positivistic imagination.²¹ Because PAR is steeped in social **justice**, a PAR researcher is tasked with advancing the ideals of social justice.

PAR is a qualitative approach that focuses on the quality of what the participants are saying to fully understand their meaning-construction processes. Any discussion regarding the number of participants is irrelevant because PAR has no room for generalisations and representativity.²² PAR demands that all stakeholders who can make a difference be included in research that aims to make a difference.²³ When operationalised, PAR has spiral steps of *planning, action, observation, and reflection*.²⁴ These steps may create an impression that PAR is a linear process where one step automatically leads to another. Its flexibility and responsiveness make it a very dynamic approach that can deal with any situation.

Data is generated, and in some instances analysed with the participants. PAR is a welcomed and emancipatory relief from the extractive and exploitative positivistic approaches that characterise Global North theorisation. PAR is not extractive, but interventionist in its quest for social justice, freedom, equality, equity, peace and hope as respectful research.²⁵ Mahlomaholo and Mahlomaholo decry the use of nomenclatures like a sample, research objects or subjects, respondents and participants in PAR.²⁶ This research argues that collection -as used in 'data collection' – should be added to the above list. All these concepts are misnomers and should not find space in PAR rhetoric. They portray extractive and exploitative innuendos and connotations of selfish researchers who brazenly enter the research participants' space; mine data from them for their own parochial ends and leave the space without any gratitude.²⁷

The above discussion of PAR may not be exhaustive; however, its salient features are covered: its genesis, its aims in terms of what it seeks to address, the researcher-coresearcher relationship and

¹⁷ Sechaba Mahlomaholo, "Creating Effective Postgraduate Learning Environments: An Analysis of an Intervention from Realist Social Theory," *Journal of Higher Education in Africa/Revue de l'enseignement Supérieur En Afrique* 13, no. 1–2 (2015): 229–43.

¹⁸ Mahlomaholo, "Creating Effective Postgraduate Learning Environments: An Analysis of an Intervention from Realist Social Theory."

¹⁹ Mahlomaholo, "Creating Effective Postgraduate Learning Environments: An Analysis of an Intervention from Realist Social Theory."

²⁰ Sechaba Mahlomaholo, "Re-Membering the Organic Intellectual in the Mirror." (Noordwes-Universiteit, Potchefstroomkampus (Suid-Afrika), 2009).

²¹ Patti Lather, "Research as Praxis," *Harvard Educational Review* 56, no. 3 (1986): 257–78; Mahlomaholo, "Re-Membering the Organic Intellectual in the Mirror. ."

²² Mahlomaholo N, "Transformation: Interrogating Dominant and Subaltern Discourses at Vista University Form a Post-Colonial Perspective."

²³ Melanie Doucet et al., "Nothing about Us without Us: Using Participatory Action Research (PAR) and Arts-Based Methods as Empowerment and Social Justice Tools in Doing Research with Youth 'Aging out' of Care," *Child Abuse & Neglect* 130 (2022): 105358.

²⁴ McTaggart, "Participatory Action Research: Issues in Theory and Practice."

²⁵ Mahlomaholo and Mahlomaholo, "Employability as Inclusive Entanglement in Relationalities: A Design in Sustainable Learning Environments."

²⁶ Mahlomaholo and Mahlomaholo, "Employability as Inclusive Entanglement in Relationalities: A Design in Sustainable Learning Environments."

²⁷ Kemmis, "Participatory Action Research and the Public Sphere."

its operationalisation through spiral steps of planning, action, observation and reflection. The discussion accentuates the centrality of the co-researchers in PAR. This study further argues that a PAR study may stand or fall on the values that the co-researchers in the study. These values are not known because no study has reported on them, to the best of this researcher's knowledge. They are assumed as reflected in myriad studies under 'Ethical considerations'. These values are told from the vantage point of the researcher to escape the microscopic scrutiny of Ethics Committees. So, the absence of reporting on these values is the lacuna that this study aims to address.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study subscribed to the critical emancipatory research (CER) paradigm as propounded by the Frankfurt School of Habermas. As such, CER is a strand of critical theory.²⁸ A transformative paradigm that would depower, demote and relegate the researcher to the same status as the participants to enhance the processes of co-learning and knowledge co-creation was chosen. This researcher denounces and renounces the "lone genius" and "heroic leader" labels and views them as an affront to the participants. Whilst it thematises power, it also problematises the use of excessive power to advance an emancipatory agenda.²⁹ Mahlomaholo and Nkoane noted that CER empowers people to respond effectively to the challenges of their lives.³⁰ This framework was chosen for the researcher to "be with" the departmental heads as they grappled with social issues that troubled them. This would better help to feel their needs, fears and aspirations.³¹ CER provided an opportunity to listen, at first hand, to the voices of the subaltern communities and to be intertwined and entangled with them as they wrestled with their challenges. Epistemologically, CER is *transactional* and *subjectivist*.³² It is this epistemology that makes the researcher and participants to be inextricably linked and entangled with the biases that they bring into the research enterprise.³³ These biases stem from the CER ontology that is steeped in *historical realism*³⁴ which maintains that reality is not neutral because it is a product of social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic and gender factors.³⁵ Furthermore, CER was chosen because of its *equity, social justice, freedom, peace and hope* imperatives, which Mahlomaholo valorises as principles of respectful research.³⁶ Respectful research pulls marginalised people from the periphery of obscurity and secures them centre stage of research projects as co-researchers and not as objects. As co-researchers, they are at the forefront of efforts that are geared towards the amelioration of their dehumanising conditions through critical conversations.

METHODOLOGY

The transformative and emancipatory imperatives of CER call for a dialogic and dialectical methodology.³⁷ In the pantheon of research methodologies, participatory action research (PAR)

²⁸ V. Nhlapo, "Exploring the Experiences of South African Learners in the Wake of COVID-19: A Social Justice Vantage Point," in *Proceedings on the Conference on the Implications of Covid-19 on Gender and Behaviour in Africa*, 2021, 25–34; Veli Nhlapo, "Enhancing the Management Performance of Departmental Heads in Primary and Secondary Schools: PAR as a Practice-Enhancing Process," *Educational Research for Social Change* 10, no. 1 (2021): 83–101.

²⁹ Mahlomaholo N, "Transformation: Interrogating Dominant and Subaltern Discourses at Vista University Form a Post-Colonial Perspective."

³⁰ Sechaba Mahlomaholo and Milton Nkoane, "The Case for an Emancipatory Qualitative Research s on Assessment of Quality," *Education as Change* 6, no. 1 (2002): 69–84.

³¹ Sechaba Mahlomaholo, "Critical Emancipatory Research and Academic Identity," *Africa Education Review* 6, no. 2 (October 2009): 224–37, <https://doi.org/10.1080/18146620903274555>.

³² Charles Kivunja and Ahmed Bawa Kuyini, "Understanding and Applying Research Paradigms in Educational Contexts.," *International Journal of Higher Education* 6, no. 5 (2017): 26–41; Godswill Makombe, "An Expose of the Relationship between Paradigm, Method and Design in Research," 2017..

³³ Nhlapo, "Enhancing the Management Performance of Departmental Heads in Primary and Secondary Schools: PAR as a Practice-Enhancing Process."

³⁴ Kivunja and Kuyini, "Understanding and Applying Research Paradigms in Educational Contexts.,"; Makombe, "An Expose of the Relationship between Paradigm, Method and Design in Research."

³⁵ Adil Abdul Rehman and Khalid Alharthi, "An Introduction to Research Paradigms" 3 (October 1, 2016).

³⁶ Mahlomaholo, "Towards Sustainable Empowering Learning Environments: Unmasking Apartheid Legacies through Scholarship of Engagement."

³⁷ Nhlapo, "Enhancing the Management Performance of Departmental Heads in Primary and Secondary Schools: PAR as a Practice-Enhancing Process."

matched the CER imperatives, as such PAR stood out as the appropriate methodology to actualise the objective of this study. As Tsoetsi and Mahlomaholo note, PAR enacts CER.³⁸ A methodology that would provide very rich knowledge of the participants' lived experiences including their messiness was therefore selected.³⁹ This is also a methodology where the researcher and the participants would unashamedly interrogate issues troubling the participants on an equal basis without the encumbrance of power differentials; a methodology that would enable both the researcher and the participants to emerge from the research project being empowered and liberated from their not-so-useful proclivities. It was for this purpose that this researcher was not obsessed with a methodology steeped in quantification, objectivity, reliability, reliability and generalisations which Mahlomaholo debunked as unattainable imaginations.⁴⁰ The enactment of PAR is depicted by diagram 1 below.

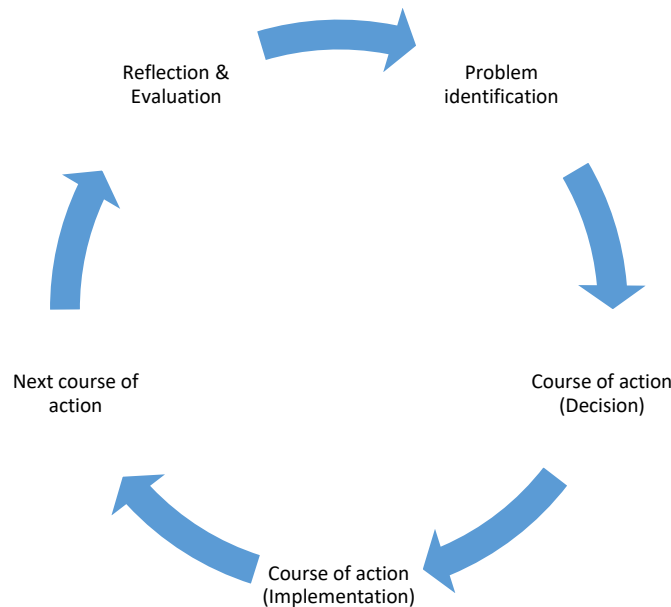


Figure 1: PAR enactment steps

Figure 1 above shows that through PAR, the researcher and co-researchers identified problems jointly. The best course of action was chosen. The chosen course of action is implemented, and the next course of action is agreed upon- followed by critical reflection and evaluation.⁴¹

16 participants, who evolved into co-researchers, comprised of school principals, deputy principals, school governing body (SGB) members, unions, community development workers (CDW) and departmental heads (DHs), who were the main beneficiaries of this study. Principals and deputy principals were included because their leadership repertoire may enhance or choke the DHs' performance of their managerial responsibilities. Furthermore, school governing body (SGB) members, unions and community development workers (CDW) were mobilised for the study because education is a societal issue that needs a multi-perspectival, multi-layered approach. Such an approach

³⁸ Cias T. Tsoetsi and Sechaba Mahlomaholo, "Exploring Strategies to Strengthen Continuing Professional Development of Teachers in Rural South Africa," *Journal of Higher Education in Africa/Revue de l'enseignement Supérieur En Afrique* 13, no.1-2(2015):45-73.

³⁹ Tsoetsi and Mahlomaholo, "Exploring Strategies to Strengthen Continuing Professional Development of Teachers in Rural South Africa."

⁴⁰ Sechaba Mahlomaholo, *Re-Membering the Organic Intellectual in the Mirror* (Potchefstroom: Noordwes-Universiteit, Potchefstroomkampus (Suid-Afrika), 2009).

⁴¹ Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt, Margaret Fletcher, and Judith Kearney, *Professional Learning in Higher Education and Communities: Towards a New Vision for Action Research* (Springer, 2015).

recognises that “knowledge is not the preserve of one mind, but that it is distributed...”⁴² The researcher and co-researchers met monthly.

The research data were generated during the discussion, using the free attitude interview (FAI) technique of Buskens.⁴³ FAI shares the same emancipatory ideals espoused by CER and PAR.⁴⁴ The discussions and dialogues were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. PAR recognises voice recording as a technique to document what the researcher and co-researchers are doing.⁴⁵ The transcribed text was analysed through Van Dijk’s three-dimensional framework of critical discourse analysis (CDA).⁴⁶ Wodak and Meyer view CDA as aligned naturally with critical theory.⁴⁷ CDA was used to analyse the text to lay bare and understand the discursive practices and ideological inclinations of the participants. This was important to dive deep into their meaning-construction processes. The intense data analysis yielded themes which are presented as findings in the next section. Participation in this study was voluntary, participants could abandon the study at any stage if they wished. Pseudonyms were used for the participants instead of their real names.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

The following findings were harvested from the analysis of the research data.

Intellectual humility

Muntu: Ladies and gentlemen, I joined this project because of the modesty of Meneer. I have always known him as a man who does not believe that he is better than other people. Modesty was his middle name as a teacher, deputy principal, principal, and even now as an official in the Department of Education. I respect this man because he respects people a lot.

Kgosatsana: Today marks a historic day in the sense that we are finishing what we started some months ago. In retrospect, I realise that we are still the same number that started this project of collectively trying to come to the rescue of departmental heads. What kept us together was that none of us had airs and graces. I am proud of this group.

The two excerpts above indicate that the researcher and participants were very humble as shown by concepts like “modesty” and “none of us had airs and graces”. The first excerpt shows that when you respect is reciprocal. While being humble is a virtue, the researcher did not expect that it could be one quality that determined people’s longevity in a project. The study was completed with the same number of co-researchers that started with the study.

Transparency

Aluta Continua: Comrades, or pardon my language... I meant ladies and gentlemen. This is our first meeting as a group where we will agree on the way forward. May I be brutally frank to indicate that I will remain part of this group if our engagements are open?

Nomkhulwane: What an experience! This is the first research project I was involved in from start to finish. This was largely because of the level of openness that I experienced throughout. Meneer, our facilitator laid the ground and was honest to tell us how this project was going to benefit him in terms of his studies. Meneer, you won our hearts from the beginning. You provided the glue that kept this group bonded. All of us are heroes because we were open to each other. Our openness is the victor.

⁴² Makeresemese and Mahlomaholo, “Understanding Curriculum Transformations Towards the Creation of Sustainable Learning Environments: A Posthumanist Reflection,” 339.

⁴³ I Meulenberg-Buskens, “Free Attitude Interview Technique,” *London: Unpublished Notes*, 2011.

⁴⁴ Nhlapo, “Exploring the Experiences of South African Learners in the Wake of COVID-19: A Social Justice Vantage Point.”

⁴⁵ Philip R Crane, “Participatory Action Research Workbook,” 2010.

⁴⁶ Teun A Van Dijk, “Discourse and Manipulation,” *Discourse & Society* 17, no. 3 (2006): 359–83.

⁴⁷ Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer, “Critical Discourse Analysis: History, Agenda, Theory and Methodology,” *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis* 2, no. 1 (2009): 1–33.

The two excerpts above indicate that the participants in the project vouched for transparency as indicated by concepts like “open” and “openness”. The participants’ openness was engendered by the researcher’s openness. The researcher won the hearts of the participants and their willingness to participate in the study from its conception to its completion. Furthermore, participants viewed the researcher as a person with no hidden agendas.

Democracy

Nandi: Meneer, thank you for not hogging the discussions. We are happy that from the outset, the departmental heads and all stakeholders who participated in this project set the tone, direction and course of this project. I am tempted to call this project a “project of the people, by the people, and for the people”. Every session was for us and about us. This is a rare experience for us, and I reckon, we will cherish it for a long time. **The people were in charge here** [own emphasis]. Some of us would have left the project a long time ago if our voices were not heard.

The excerpt above indicates that the participants remained in the project because they were allowed to participate and collaborate on issues that affected them. It is also evident that the project was one of those very few experiences (...a rare experience for us) that allowed them to access their democratic right. It also appears that the participants set a very high premium in being involved in matters that affect them. Democracy is a sacrosanct value to them. This was illustrated by the atmosphere and aura that engulfed the session after Nandi (quoted above) sat down, all participants stood up, with clenched fists, and shouted “Amandla!”. This fervent display in advocacy and propagation of democracy was only second to its display during the pre-democratic era of mass protests in South Africa.

Inclusion

Manthatsi: Bomme le bo ntate. Re le batswadi ho tswa di kolong tse fapaneng re thabisetswe ke hore lentswe la rona le a helwa lesaka. Rona ba bang ha re ya bala ha ka lo, empa maikutlo a rona le wa seketse tsebe. Di kgothaletso tsa rona , tse ding, di ke ne tsebetsong. Ke thabisitswe le ke hore re ne re dummeletswe ho sebedisa puo e fe kapa e fe. Meneer, SeSotho sa hao se phefa. *(Ladies and gentlemen, as parents from different schools, we are elated that our voices matter. Some of us are not educated, but our opinions are listened to. Some of our recommendations have been implemented. I am gratified that we are allowed to use any language. Meneer, your SeSotho is fluent.)*

The above excerpt indicates that the various stakeholders valued being included in the project that sought to ameliorate the plight of the heads of department. Their inclusion in the project was not a ceremonial tick-box activity. Secondly, the excerpt shows that people make very meaningful inputs when they are given the freedom to use a language of their choice. Furthermore, the excerpt captures the importance of including and harnessing the wisdom of people who are not directly affected by a problem. Manthatsi above was not a departmental head but made inputs and recommendations that were implemented.

Beneficence

Winnie: Colleagues, allow me to make two confessions. Firstly, from our first meeting, it became clear to me that I was going to gain something from this project. I am a better departmental head because of this project. All along, I had a theoretical understanding of SWOT analysis. But with the real school life activities that were used during the projects, SWOT analysis was demystified for me. I am more confident than before this project. In fact, I feel **free from** [own emphasis] the limitations that constrained me from executing my managerial responsibilities effectively. I now appreciate the value of reflection, a concept hitherto unknown to me. I gained more than I bargained for. Secondly, I am not sure whether I would have participated in the absence of gains.

Mafaso: We learnt more than we bargained for. We did not realise that we could conduct research. I will continue to support more of this research. Initially, I did not realise that research is simply a problem-solving exercise. In fact, I will be the first to participate in.

The excerpts above indicate that people participate in a project when there are benefits attached. Participation in the project liberated the departmental heads. The converse may be true, that people will not participate in a project that has deleterious consequences. Simply put, people may not be involved in a project or activity that may bring them harm.

Past collegial encounters/experiences

Thusabatho: Ladies and gentlemen, I am happy that we had reflection sessions. Again today, as we wrap up this empowering project, we are reflecting on our experience. People who started with this project attended all the sessions without fail...and all are here today. Why the full house in terms of the attendance of the sessions? Most of us worked with Meneer as a teacher, deputy principal and as a principal. He was a marvel to work with and to engage with...always empowering and humanely raising pertinent issues.

The above excerpt revealed that participants were influenced by their past experiences and encounters with the researcher to be part of the project. To be honest, I did not see this finding coming (and I do not mean that I saw other findings coming) as I had no inkling that past interactions with people played such a role in swaying them to be part of a project. So, people do not care how much you know until they know and experience how you made them feel!

In light of the foregoing, it appears that *intellectual humility, transparency, democracy, inclusivity, beneficence* and *past collegial experience* swayed the different stakeholders to participate in the research project from conception to completion. The next section is devoted to the interpretation of the findings to simultaneously construct their meaning and make sense of their meaning.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The researcher makes this disclaimer upfront: The following interpretations are his own and other researchers can interpret them differently.

Intellectual humility is very important and a key determinant of quality social relationships.⁴⁸ It denotes being humble and less self-centred and arrogant. Researchers should be humble and “...not think and act like they are the center of the universe...”⁴⁹ The purpose of research is to contribute to the body of existing knowledge by dealing effectively with identified lacunae. The fact that researchers attend to those lacunae is a testimony that their knowledge is finite. They too have epistemic limitations.⁵⁰ They should own their ignorance and intellectual fallibility.⁵¹ It is this intellectual fallibility that amplifies Mahlomaholo and Mahlomaholo’s perforation of the researcher as a ‘lone genius.’⁵² They should acknowledge that there are gaps in their knowledge.⁵³ That is why they also learn from the researched through research. They should become open to new information to improve

⁴⁸ Annette Susanne Peters, Wade Clinton Rowat, and Megan Kathleen Johnson, “Associations between Dispositional Humility and Social Relationship Quality,” *Psychology* 2, no. 03 (2011): 155.

⁴⁹ Peters, Rowat, and Johnson, “Associations between Dispositional Humility and Social Relationship Quality,” 159.

⁵⁰ Chloe C Banker and Mark R Leary, “Hypo-Egoic Nonentitlement as a Feature of Humility,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 46, no. 5 (2020): 738–53.

⁵¹ Tenelle Porter et al., “Clarifying the Content of Intellectual Humility: A Systematic Review and Integrative Framework,” *Journal of Personality Assessment* 104, no. 5 (September 3, 2022): 573–85, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00223891.2021.1975725>.

⁵² Makeremese and Mahlomaholo, “Understanding Curriculum Transformations Towards the Creation of Sustainable Learning Environments: A Posthumanist Reflection.”

⁵³ Tenelle Porter et al., “Predictors and Consequences of Intellectual Humility,” *Nature Reviews Psychology* 1, no. 9 (2022): 524–36.

their current knowledge.⁵⁴ It is the realisation that they do not know that should humble them. Acknowledging that a person is not omniscient and being receptive to learning fosters intellectual growth and progress.⁵⁵ Therefore, researchers should be *au fait* with their limitations.⁵⁶ These limitations should lead to restrained egos, modest self-presentation and interpersonal relations that are steeped in respect.⁵⁷ Researchers should be humble enough to hold their ideas, beliefs and viewpoints by being amenable to the viewpoints of the researched. It should be borne in mind that the viewpoints of the researched are genuine and authentic as they reflect the reality of their lived experiences. Humility on the side of researchers strengthens their relationship with the researched. According to Van Tongeren et al., humble people are more likely to care for relationships and have relational advantages because people gravitate toward those who are humble.⁵⁸ Therefore, humility on the part of the researcher is an important source for the flourishing of the researcher-researched relationship. These relationships will flourish because humility may tone down the researchers “more authoritarian, dogmatic, and biased proclivities.”⁵⁹

Transparency is a cardinal touchstone of all research. Despite the proliferation of literature on transparency, the definition of transparency remains conceptually diverse.⁶⁰ In this study, transparency is conceptualised as “the availability and accessibility of knowledge and information, as well as **openness** [own emphasis] to the gaze of others.”⁶¹ The researchers are enjoined to be open and honest with the researchers regarding their research. They should lay everything bare. Transparency is necessitated by the researched right of access to information. The *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa* dictates that the public should be provided with timely, accessible and accurate information. The right of access to information is a human right. Klaaren argues this right finds perfect expression and articulation in transparency.⁶² When the researched are given information, they can make informed decisions that may determine their voluntary participation in and withdrawal from a study. As the finding indicates in the preceding section, none of the co-researchers jettisoned the project. This affirms Klaaren’s observation that transparency can promote accountability and participation.⁶³ At the heart of transparency lies a mechanism for the researchers to be held accountable by the researched. Transparency opens the researchers’ demeanours and misdemeanours to the public scrutiny of the researched. When a study is rooted in transparency, the researched develops trust in the researcher. According to Licht et al., transparency seeks to inspire trust. It is this trust that promotes the participation of the researched in a research project.⁶⁴ In fact, transparency fosters substantial public participation.⁶⁵ In the case of this study, transparency added gravitas and increased the researcher’s level of accountability. Therefore, transparency becomes the “prerequisite for successful beneficiary participation in programme design and implementation.”⁶⁶ By being transparent, the researcher

⁵⁴ Elizabeth J Krumrei-Mancuso et al., “Links between Intellectual Humility and Acquiring Knowledge,” *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 15, no. 2 (2020): 155–70.

⁵⁵ Peters, Rowat, and Johnson, “Associations between Dispositional Humility and Social Relationship Quality.”

⁵⁶ Megan Haggard et al., “Finding Middle Ground between Intellectual Arrogance and Intellectual Servility: Development and Assessment of the Limitations-Owning Intellectual Humility Scale,” *Personality and Individual Differences* 124 (2018): 184–93.

⁵⁷ Daryl R. Van Tongeren et al., “Humility,” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 28, no. 5 (2019): 463–68.

⁵⁸ Van Tongeren et al., “Humility.”

⁵⁹ Porter et al., “Predictors and Consequences of Intellectual Humility,” 524.

⁶⁰ Jonathan Klaaren, “The Human Right to Information and Transparency,” 2013; Portia Roelofs, “Transparency and Mistrust: Who or What Should Be Made Transparent?,” *Governance* 32, no. 3 (July 18, 2019): 565–80, <https://doi.org/10.1111/gove.12402>.

⁶¹ Khensani Richard Chauke and Xolani Thusi, “Transparency: Should It Be a Stand-Alone Governance Principle?,” *International Journal of Social Science Research and Review* 6, no. 7 (2023): 182–91.

⁶² Klaaren, “The Human Right to Information and Transparency.”

⁶³ Klaaren, “The Human Right to Information and Transparency.”

⁶⁴ Jenny De Fine Licht et al., “When Does Transparency Generate Legitimacy? Experimenting on a Context-bound Relationship,” *Governance* 27, no. 1 (2014): 111–34.

⁶⁵ Kitae Kim and Shin-Il Moon, “When Algorithmic Transparency Failed: Controversies over Algorithm-Driven Content Curation in the South Korean Digital Environment,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 65, no. 6 (2021): 847–62.

⁶⁶ Obotsamang James Maropo, “The Lack of Accountability and Transparency in Local Government in South Africa” (University of the Free State, 2018), 59.

acquires the transparency capital that gives them moral authority which is indispensable for the sustenance of a research project.⁶⁷

Democracy is a very important constitutional principle. Currie and De Waal opine that “since the French and American revolutions it has been accepted that no person or institution has a divine right to govern others.”⁶⁸ In research, this may mean that the researcher co-researchers relationship is not based on power but is mounted on the steel rods of *consent*. The consent of the co-researchers erodes the perceived power of the researchers, implying that any research enterprise owes its legitimacy to the voluntary participation of the co-researchers. Democracy finds perfect expression when people are invited to participate actively in matters that affect them. Participation gives them access to decision-making processes.⁶⁹ Democracy, through participation, ensures that their “voices” are not muted. Instead, their voices are heard and taken seriously among those of others.⁷⁰ Thomson warns that “...voice can mean not only having a say but also refers to the language, emotional components and non-verbal means used to express opinions”⁷¹ The co-researchers have the latitude of withdrawing their participation at any stage of the research. Therefore, the legitimacy and, by extension, the success of a study hinge on the “will of the co-researchers” This “will of the co-researchers” becomes the bulwark against the researcher’s power excesses and whims such that the researcher behaves in an open and accountable manner.

This study argues that accountability as a manifestation of the democratic impulse in research paradoxically depowers the researcher and empowers the co-researchers. It is this depowering and empowering that humbles the researcher to heed the “voices” of the coresearchers. This adds to the richness of discussions during the research project. Mahlomaholo attributes this richness to the co-researcher’s experience from working with practical issues in their schools and communities which are complemented by the researchers’ educational theory and research expertise.⁷² Tsotetsi and Mahlomaholo valorise the maintenance of the balance between theory and practice.⁷³ Therefore, theory and practice are coalesced and blended by the democratic impulse that permeates a research project.

Inclusion, one of the study’s key findings, is gaining global traction consequent to its influence on education policy and practice.⁷⁴ It entails the involvement and empowerment of different stakeholders in a project/endeavour of mutual interest and/or concern where their immanent worth and dignity are preserved. Inclusion gives the requisite gravitas to the “the more, the merrier” truism. While the main beneficiaries and target of this study were DHs, it was important to include other stakeholders like principals, deputy principals, SGB members and a community development worker. Ainscow views inclusion as a process that attempts to involve all stakeholders, including members of the community.⁷⁵ These stakeholders are diverse and not homogeneous.⁷⁶ The inclusion of various stakeholders brings the multiplicity of meanings to bear on research and the construction of meaning is central to

⁶⁷ Clare Birchall, “Introduction to ‘Secrecy and Transparency’ The Politics of Opacity and Openness,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 28, no. 7–8 (2011): 7–25.

⁶⁸ Iain Currie and Johan De Waal, *The Bill of Rights Handbook* (Juta and Company Ltd, 2013), 13.

⁶⁹ Currie and De Waal, *The Bill of Rights Handbook*.

⁷⁰ Sechaba Mahlomaholo, “Education Researchers as Bricoleurs in the Creation of Sustainable Learning Environments,” *Perspectives in Education* 32, no. 4 (2014): 171–83.

⁷¹ Pat Thomson, “Children and Young People: Voices in Visual Research.,” *Doing Visual Research with Children and Young People*, January 1, 2008, 1–20, 4.

⁷² Mahlomaholo, “Towards Sustainable Empowering Learning Environments: Unmasking Apartheid Legacies through Scholarship of Engagement.”

⁷³ Tsotetsi and Mahlomaholo, “Exploring Strategies to Strengthen Continuing Professional Development of Teachers in Rural South Africa.”

⁷⁴ Mel Ainscow and Kyriaki Messiou, “Engaging with the Views of Students to Promote Inclusion in Education,” *Journal of Educational Change* 19 (2018): 1–17; Mel Ainscow, “Inclusion and Equity in Education: Making Sense of Global Challenges,” *Prospects* 49, no. 3 (2020): 123–34.

⁷⁵ Ainscow, “Inclusion and Equity in Education: Making Sense of Global Challenges.”

⁷⁶ McTaggart, “Participatory Action Research: Issues in Theory and Practice.”

research.⁷⁷ It was important to include them because DHs' practices, whether good or bad, affect the education of their children, and education is a societal matter. They are endowed with *aspirational*, *navigational* and other capitals that collectively enable them to contribute meaningfully to discussions that seek the amelioration of DHs' challenges.⁷⁸

The *aspirational capital* imbues them with aspirations for the future, whereas the *navigational capital* enables them to negotiate their way through life challenges for survival.⁷⁹ These capitals endow the co-researchers with rich knowledge and invaluable lived experiences that offer meaningful context for a research project. The exclusion of the co-researchers would have led to their discrimination, marginalisation and de-humanisation. Exclusion is a subversion and negation of social justice. Therefore, exclusion as an antithesis of social justice is morally wrong and cannot be justified. Mahlomaholo, Israel, and Mahlomaholo, in a candid repudiation of enlightenment and humanism, muse that hierarchies in society are an offshoot of both.⁸⁰ These hierarchies lead to the overt exclusion of the subaltern communities on the fallacy that they lack knowledge.⁸¹ Conversely, inclusion eliminates social exclusion that emanates from discriminatory proclivities that are based on markers such as social status and ability.⁸² All the coresearchers were mobilised in the study because they could make a difference in the amelioration of the challenges besetting the DHs' management practices. They had to be included because the study aimed at making a difference.⁸³

Importantly, Mahlomaholo et al. reveal that the quality of discourses, theorisation and praxis is heightened when the subaltern voices are given a platform in communicative spaces.⁸⁴ This study would have been poorer and disadvantaged in the absence of the diverse co-researchers who participated in it.

Beneficence is an important moral principle. Rancich et al. opine that beneficence has its roots in the medical profession and denotes an obligation to benefit other people and cause them no harm.⁸⁵ In essence, beneficence is affirmative conduct in service of other people.⁸⁶ Any research project that is devoid of beneficence borders on maleficence. Most research projects, if not all, profess to beneficence without providing empirical evidence. Research should not only benefit the researchers but should also benefit the researched. According to Deming, a leader learns from his people and learns with them.⁸⁷ There is reciprocity and no opportunism. This researcher views beneficence as an antithesis of opportunism. Furthermore, opportunism flourishes on parasitism. Cruz, Gomez-Mejia and Becerra warn that opportunism spawns distrust.⁸⁸ Researchers should not only interact with the researched in

⁷⁷ S M G Mahlomaholo, "Higher Education and Democracy: Analysing Communicative Action in the Creation of Sustainable Learning Environments: Part 1: Exploration of the Critical Relationship between Higher Education and the Development of Democracy in South Africa," *South African Journal of Higher Education* 28, no. 3 (2014): 678–96; Tsotetsi and Mahlomaholo, "Exploring Strategies to Strengthen Continuing Professional Development of Teachers in Rural South Africa."

⁷⁸ Tara J., and Rebeca Burciaga Yosso, "Reclaiming Our Histories, Recovering Community Cultural Wealth.," *Center for Critical Race Studies at UCLA Research Brief* 5 (2016): 1–4.

⁷⁹ Sechaba Mahlomaholo, "Creating Sustainable Learning Environments at a School through Validation of Its Community Cultural Wealth," *International Journal of Arts & Sciences* 5, no. 3 (2012): 429.

⁸⁰ Makeresemese Rosy Mahlomaholo, Hilda Israel, and Sechaba M G Mahlomaholo, "Relationally Enhancing Teacher Education in Early Childhood Learning Environments towards Sustainability," *Journal of Curriculum Studies Research* 5, no. 2 (2023): 56–68.

⁸¹ Mahlomaholo, Israel, and Mahlomaholo, "Relationally Enhancing Teacher Education in Early Childhood Learning Environments towards Sustainability."

⁸² Ainscow, "Inclusion and Equity in Education: Making Sense of Global Challenges."

⁸³ Doucet et al., "Nothing about Us without Us: Using Participatory Action Research (PAR) and Arts-Based Methods as Empowerment and Social Justice Tools in Doing Research with Youth 'Aging out' of Care."

⁸⁴ Mahlomaholo, Israel, and Mahlomaholo, "Relationally Enhancing Teacher Education in Early Childhood Learning Environments towards Sustainability."

⁸⁵ Ana María Rancich et al., "Beneficence, Justice, and Lifelong Learning Expressed in Medical Oaths," *Journal of Continuing Education in the Health Professions* 25, no. 3 (2005): 211–20.

⁸⁶ Cam Caldwell et al., "Beneficence as a Source of Competitive Advantage," *Journal of Management Development* 33, no. 10 (2014): 1057–79.

⁸⁷ W.E. Deming, *Out of the Crisis* (Cambridge, MA.: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2000).

⁸⁸ Cristina C Cruz, Luis R Gómez-Mejia, and Manuel Becerra, "Perceptions of Benevolence and the Design of Agency Contracts: CEO-TMT Relationships in Family Firms," *Academy of Management Journal* 53, no. 1 (2010): 69–89.

the right manner but should also be disposed to do good for the researched.⁸⁹ Their interaction with the researched should be anchored on altruism. This implies that a study should add value to the lives of the researched. As Pandit notes, beneficence is a foundational principle of ethics as it is inextricably linked to morality.⁹⁰ To illuminate beneficence, its distinction from benevolence is critical. Whereas benevolence denotes the *intention* to do good to others, beneficence denotes the *actual act* of doing good to others. It is evident from the findings in the preceding section that the co-researchers accrued benefits from participating in this study. The benefits are explicit and not implicit. It is concluded that the co-researchers would have voluntarily withdrawn from the study if they did not derive any benefits from it. Mahlomaholo indicates that participants remain in a study when it is meaningful and helps them to better their real-life practices.⁹¹ Their wanton withdrawal would have spawned the total collapse of the study. Therefore, the fundamental principle of beneficence held the study intact from its conception to its completion. By being beneficent, researchers commit to the welfare, growth and wholeness of the co-researchers.⁹² This commitment creates high trust and solidifies the relationship between the researcher and the co-researchers which added to the longevity of the study.⁹³ The co-researchers perceive the researcher as a trustworthy person who deserves their trust and relationship.

CONCLUSION

This study was able to establish some of the values that may contribute to the sustenance of a PAR study from start to finish, namely, *intellectual humility, transparency, democracy, inclusivity and beneficence*, and by so doing added to the scientific body of existing knowledge on PAR. It is hoped that these values will add further impetus to theorisation and scholarisation. Furthermore, the study concluded that the five values were a *conditio sine qua non* for the PAR study. In their absence, a PAR study may be sacrificed at the cruel altar of collapse. It is therefore recommended that researchers be mindful of the above values, particularly during the mobilisation of stakeholders as they try to negotiate their entry into the research sites. It is at this stage that the research enterprise may be aborted due to the dearth of all or some of the five values. It is noted that conducting research mounted on PAR is not the proverbial walk in the park. It is fraught with challenges. The only challenge that appears to be gaining traction is around the Ethics Committees which do not want to accept and induct PAR and other Global South theories into the research Hall of Fame. More theorisation and upscaling of empirical research are needed to illuminate and amplify other challenges and how they may be overcome. Again, the use and relevance of positivistic nomenclatures like *sampling/sample, data collection* etc., is troubling and merits scrutiny as this researcher views them as misnomers.

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⁸⁹ Prasasti Pandit, "Toward a More Credible Principle of Beneficence," *Journal of Indian Council of Philosophical Research* 38, no. 3 (2021): 407–22.

⁹⁰ Pandit, "Toward a More Credible Principle of Beneficence."

⁹¹ Mahlomaholo, "Creating Effective Postgraduate Learning Environments: An Analysis of an Intervention from Realist Social Theory."

⁹² Caldwell et al., "Beneficence as a Source of Competitive Advantage."

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