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Reflexive insights from participatory action research with immigrant adolescents in South Africa: Transforming Social work research

Agrippa MABVIRA, Poppy MASINGA and Roshini PILLAY

ABSTRACT

This paper is a reflexive analysis of the use of participatory action research (PAR) for qualitative doctoral research that sought to capture acculturation experiences of 12 immigrant adolescent learners in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. The study employed PAR as a methodological framework to engage both researchers and participants in a collaborative process of inquiry and action. Through PAR, immigrant adolescent learners were actively involved in shaping the research process, from defining research questions to analysing findings and implementing action plans such as language support programs. Findings reveal that PAR methods provide a platform for people engaged in a study to actively engage in the research process, develop critical skills to advocate for changes in educational policies and practices. Therefore, this reflexive manuscript presents the phases we followed throughout our PAR project whilst highlighting the benefits of using inclusive research practices. Overall, this paper contributes to the growing literature on PAR by providing insights into effective strategies for promoting social well-being through collaborative research partnerships. Additionally, this paper highlights the transformative potential of PAR to Social Work practice as it aligns with the ethos of prioritising the voices and agency of marginalised populations.

KEY TERMS: *agency, inclusive, immigrant adolescent, participatory action research, Social Work practice, South Africa*
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INTRODUCTION

This paper is a reflexive analysis of participatory action research (PAR) where reflexive analysis is understood as the researcher's critical self-examination and account of processes that ensued. Participatory action research (PAR) is a collaborative approach that supports experiential learning by involving participants as active co-researchers to address real-world issues and create meaningful change. By employing PAR, we engaged both researchers and participants in a collaborative process of inquiry and action, allowing immigrant adolescent learners to actively shape the research journey from defining questions to implementing action plans. The study's reflexive analysis takes the form of outlining the phases undertaken in the PAR study. This involves a detailed examination of each stage of the research process. The analysis underscores the empowering nature of PAR methods as it provided a platform for immigrant adolescents to engage actively in research, develop critical skills and advocate for changes in educational policies and practices. This article offers guidelines to any other researchers who may wish to utilise PAR for conducting research through a detailed description of the phases we undertook through our study.

BACKGROUND

Omodan and Dastile (2023) acknowledges the growing prominence of PAR as a research framework within qualitative social research. The origins of PAR can be traced back to work of Kurt Lewin, a social psychologist who, in the 1940s, introduced the concept of action research as a means to solve social problems through a cyclical process of planning, acting, observing and reflecting (Khupe & Keane, 2017). However, the participatory dimension of PAR was later developed and popularised by scholars and activists in the Global South, particularly in Latin America, who sought to decolonise research practices and make them more inclusive and responsive to local needs.

One of the most influential figures in the development of PAR is Paulo Freire, whose seminal work "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" emphasised the importance of education as a practice of freedom and advocated for the active participation of marginalised communities in their own liberation. Freire, created a picture of the participatory research process by saying, "the dialogue has a horizontal relationship between the persons who are engaged in a joint search" (1970, p. 81). Thus, PAR can be understood as a transformative yet empowering process whereby researchers and co-researchers co-create knowledge and negotiate meanings. As such, PAR is an egalitarian methodology that seeks to dismantle precincts of power, culture, gender, ideology, status, elitism and class in research. Moreover, Gardner (2004, p. 10) summarised the participatory research approach as follows:

Participatory research removed the distance between the objective observer and subjective subject and included the community being studied as an active participant in the research with the end goal of empowering the community to create change.

Hence, in accordance with the key tenets of PAR, we placed emphasis on the involvement and participation of immigrant adolescent learners as key players in the research project. This approach concurs with Strydom (2011, p. 491) that "researchers and participants are, therefore, equally involved in the process and take equal responsibility for the outcome of the research endeavour". We attest to the significance of PAR in revolutionising social work research as it enabled immigrant adolescent learners acting as co-researchers in our study to acquire valuable knowledge, experience and skills. In affirmation, Vásquez-Guevara *et al.* (2022) attests that the involvement of participants as co-researchers makes it more open than other approaches in which the limitations of theoretically imposed logic frequently constrain logic and thought.

METHODOLOGY

Methodology of the reflexive process

This paper utilises reflexive analysis, a process understood as the primary researcher's critical self-examination and account of processes that ensued. Whilst this paper was co-authored by three authors, the process of reflexivity was undertaken solely by the principal researcher, who was a doctoral student at the time supervised by the other two co-authors. I was aware that my own identity, with its many layers could have some level of contribution to this research. I identified with some of the co-researchers in the current study as an immigrant. There was a possibility that my own bias and experiences could transfer to my role as a researcher. I have my own experiences and assumptions about what it is like to be an immigrant student in SA, and this could have impacted my objectivity throughout the PAR process. I could also have been blind to certain nuances and may have benefited from introspection. Hence, a reflexive journal came in handy as it served as a tool for recording thoughts, observations, and reflections during each phase of the research.

The reflexive journal documented a reflexive analysis of key phases, including the recruitment of participants, identification of the problem, choice of participatory action tools, data analysis, action planning, implementation,

and dissemination. During recruitment, the researcher reflected on power dynamics and ethical considerations, ensuring informed consent and equitable representation. In identifying the problem, collaborative discussions with participants were documented, highlighting how their lived experiences shaped the research focus. The selection of participatory tools, such as photovoice and focus groups, was guided by inclusivity, with adjustments made to ensure accessibility. Data analysis involved participants, with the researcher reflecting on biases and ensuring their voices were represented. Action planning and implementation were critically examined to ensure feasibility and participant empowerment, while dissemination focused on ethical and inclusive communication of findings. The information derived from the reflexive journal and reflexive analysis can serve as a valuable resource for other researchers conducting (PAR) projects. In addition, this paper provides a transparent account of the challenges and successes encountered during each phase of the research. This detailed record can guide other researchers in navigating similar complexities, such as managing power dynamics, ensuring ethical practices, and fostering genuine collaboration with participants.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY THAT WE REFLECT ON

Our study adopted a qualitative approach by utilising a multiple case study design, whereby three schools that had more than twenty (20) immigrant adolescent learners were chosen to provide four immigrant adolescent learners each through purposive sampling, culminating in a total of 12 co-researchers. We deemed a small sample size suitable for this study since Participatory Action Research works best in small numbers for the sharing of ideas. We used cameras to capture pictures through the technique of photovoice, that were subsequently discussed through focus group discussions (FGDs). Data was analysed with immigrant adolescent learners through the SHOWED method, participatory diagramming and Tesch`s eight steps of thematic analysis. Trustworthiness in our study was achieved by ensuring that findings closely and possibly reflect acculturation experiences as described by immigrant adolescent learners through involving them in every step of the research process as co-researchers (Fairey *et al.* 2022). Ethical considerations play an important role in Participatory Action Research projects. Thus, our study adhered to a variety of ethical considerations such as voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality and the obtainment of ethics clearance from the University of the Witwatersrand`s Human Research Ethics Committee with the protocol number H20/11/34. The methodology outlined here serves as the foundation upon which the subsequent steps of the project were built. The phases in the section that follows are meant to act as guidelines that provide a roadmap to other researchers who would want to use PAR.

Our participatory action research journey

Phase 1: Recruitment of participants

The first step we took in our research project is the recruitment participants, which is not normally the first step in traditional research methodologies. Recruiting participants as the initial step in PAR projects is crucial. Omodan and Dastile (2023) notes that in traditional research methodologies, researchers often define the problem, design the study, and only then seek participants to provide data. This top-down approach can lead to a disconnect between the research goals and the actual needs and priorities of the community (Strydom, 2011). Whilst various methods can be used for recruiting participants, we opted to purposefully sample twelve (12) immigrant adolescent learners from three basic education learning institutions in Mthatha in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa.

Purposeful sampling is essential for Participatory Action Research (PAR) projects due to several key reasons. Firstly, involving key stakeholders and community members who have a vested interest in the research topic fosters a sense of empowerment and engagement among participants (Omodan & Dastile, 2023). Secondly, since the goal of PAR is not only to understand a problem but also to enact change based on the findings, purposive sampling enables one to select participants who can drive the research process forward by driving real change (Khupe & Keane, 2017). In addition, purposive sampling was an ideal strategy for our PAR project with immigrant adolescent learners because it allowed us to intentionally select participants who had the most relevant experience and knowledge about the subject under study.

Our study only involved twelve participants. A small sample was advantageous as it facilitated active participation and co-creation of knowledge. Moreover, we deemed a small sample size suitable for our study since we focused on detailing each co-researcher's narrative before explicating what may be shared experiences among all the participants (or co-researchers). Strydom (2011) adds that PAR benefits from a small sample since decisions must be mutually agreed upon, and power must be equally shared among participants. This enabled more detailed and personal insights into the troubling experiences and perspectives immigrant adolescent learners they had to endure. It was necessary to obtain insider perspectives on the real felt problems experienced by learners.

Phase 2: Identification of the problem

The next crucial step of identifying the problem was done with the active involvement of participants. Prinsloo (2021) attests that initiating projects with active participation sets the tone for continued engagement, as knowledge attainment and empowerment act as stimuli for sustained involvement in the project. Therefore, we set out to identify the problem with immigrant adolescent learners through collaboratively setting objectives towards solving the problems immigrant adolescent learners experience in acculturating and integrating into their new learning environments.

Moreover, discussing and identifying research objectives together with the participants in PAR was essential as it gave them a voice in the research process thus ensuring that their perspectives and concerns are addressed (Prinsloo, 2021). It also helped in building trust and mutual respect, as participants felt valued and acknowledged for their contributions. Abma et al. (2019) add that when participants actively engage in defining the problem and setting objectives, the outcomes are more likely to reflect their real needs and contexts. In affirmation, our study bears testimony to the fact that setting up objectives with co-researchers improves the quality of the research thus increasing the likelihood of identifying the means and tools to be used in solving the problems and bringing about positive and meaningful change in the school system and society broadly.

Phase 3: Choice of participatory action tools

In contrast to more traditional research design strategies, researchers utilising a PAR approach often choose research methods and tools that can be used in a participatory, democratic manner (Cornish et al. 2023). The foundational premise of participatory research methods is the value placed on genuine and meaningful participation – methods that offer "the ability to speak up, to participate, to experience oneself and be experienced as a person with the right to express yourself and to have the expression valued by others" (Abma et al., 2019, p. 127). Photovoice was chosen for its participatory nature, when co-researchers explain their pictures to the group.

In accordance with the nature of photovoice, our study primarily relied on photography equipment. Co-researchers preferred to use their own smartphone cameras over other photography options, such as disposable cameras. All co-researchers owned their own device which is keeping with the ubiquitous nature of mobile phones in South Africa. We collected data by utilising three stages of photovoice development.

In the first stage, co-researchers took photographs and, in the second stage they selected those pictures which they considered to be more important. In the third stage, the co-researchers contextualised the photographs through storytelling. This occurred in the process of group discussion encapsulated by the acronym VOICE which stands for: "voicing our individual and collective experience" (Ciotoli, 2019, p. 67). We used the photo-elicitation technique to facilitate the discussion of pictures to extract information about the photographer (Ciotoli, 2019). Through this process, the involved immigrant adolescent learners began the analysis process by responding to their own images whereby they engaged in telling stories about what was happening in photographs, attributing these to their social and personal meanings and values (Ciotoli, 2019). These preliminary steps laid the foundation for in-depth data analysis that will be described in the next phase.

Phase 4: Data analysis

While many data analysis methods in PAR are naturally collaborative, conventional data analysis techniques used in quantitative and qualitative research, such as thematic analysis and coding, remain valuable (Cornish *et al.*, 2023). These traditional methods can be adapted and reimagined to be approached in a participatory manner, ensuring that participants are actively involved in the interpretation of data and the development of actionable insights (Mabvira, 2023). Hence, we used a combination of both the traditional and the PAR specific methods. Thus, in the first two phases of our study we followed two prominent Photovoice methods. Firstly, we utilised the SHOWED method – an acronym comprising of a set of five standardised questions often used in Photovoice to gain insight into the meaning of photographs collected by participants. Secondly, we used another method called Participatory diagramming, as will be discussed in the next sections:

Part 1: The SHOWED method

The SHOWED method as displayed in Table 1 addresses a set of five standardised questions to elicit information to gain insight into the meaning of photographs collected by participants (Ciotoli, 2019). The method is described below.

Table 1. The *SHOWED* Method

Acronym	Facilitator's Prompt	Co-researcher`s Actions

S	What is **seen** by the co-researchers?	The co-researcher describes what they see in the photograph.
H	What is **happening** here?	The co-researcher describes what is happening in the picture that may not be seen by others.
O	**How** does this relate to acculturation?	The co-researcher describes how the picture relates to the photo prompt.
W	**Why** does this situation, concern or strength exist?	The co-researcher hypothesises about the factors that contribute to what is happening in the photograph.
E	How does this image **educate** us?	Co-researcher describes how the image can educate stakeholders in the well-being of immigrant adolescent learners.
D	What can I/we **do** about it?	Co-researchers suggest recommendations for an acculturation strategy for integration.

The SHOWED method as the first phase of data analysis allowed for the contextualisation of pictures in line with the priorities and views of immigrant adolescent learners. It put immigrant adolescent learners at the forefront of data analysis in line with the PAR principle of inclusivity. Analysis through the SHOWED method was corroborated by Participatory Diagramming as discussed in the section that follows.

Part 2: Participatory diagramming

The second phase of data analysis entailed using participatory diagramming-a PAR technique that typically involves participants creating visual representations of their analysis, which can include flowcharts, causal loop diagrams, or other forms of graphic illustration that depict relationships, processes, or impacts relevant to the research topic (Vásquez-Guevara *et al.,* 2022) Participatory diagramming was the most appropriate in our study context because it is frequently used in FGD settings, in which people being studied are encouraged to simultaneously contribute to the derivation and analyses of data (Ciotoli, 2019).

One of the key advantages of participatory diagramming is its ability to simplify complex information and make it more accessible to participants, particularly those who may have limited literacy skills (Vásquez-Guevara et al., 2022). In our study, participatory diagramming was used for the identification of primary themes from the photovoice presentations and engagements. For the current study, co-researchers and I identified themes that emerged from the FGDs. Figure 1 shows one of the co-researchers engaging in participatory diagramming.

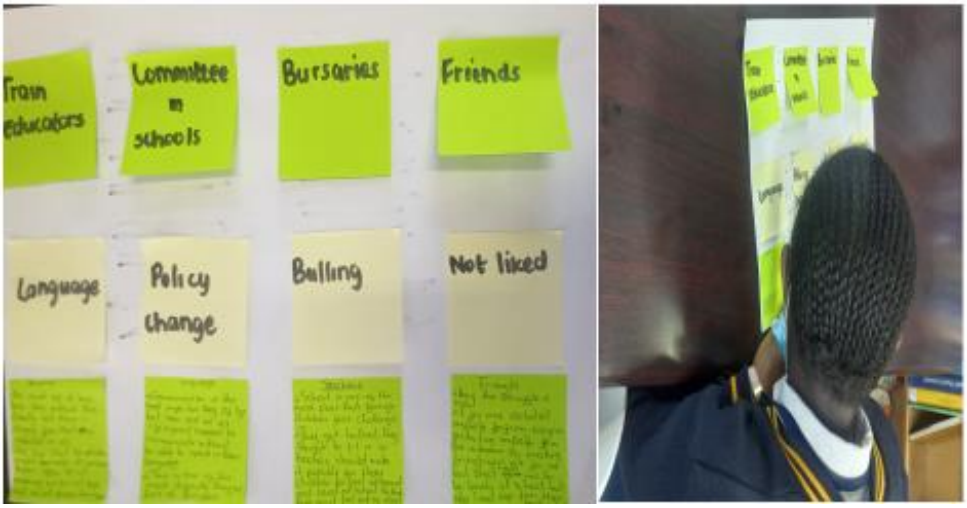

Figure 1. Participatory diagramming by one of the co-researchers

The themes identified by co-researchers formed the foundation for the third method used to analyse the collected data – namely Tesch's eight steps of data analysis (Sundler et al., 2019) as will be described next.

Part 3: Integration of Tesch's Steps of Data analysis

In order to adhere to scientific principles and minimise issues of bias and subjectivity, as is often the case in most PAR projects (Strydom, 2011), we integrated the output from participatory diagramming with Tesch's eight steps

of data analysis. We began with the transcription of data and then engaged in a critical reflection process to identify topics and generate ideas. These topics were linked to acculturation experiences and participatory diagramming outputs. We wrote these in the margins of the transcripts as themes. The third phase of the analysis process unfolded leading to a compilation of final themes and sub-themes. Subsequently, the themes were categorised, and repetitions were checked (Sundler et al., 2019). This preliminary analysis culminated in data material being assembled according to each theme and then presented to co-researchers for consensus building. In line with PAR principles, members were encouraged to critically reflect on the findings and allowed to make adjustments if necessary. This data was then used for action planning, as discussed in the following section.

Phase 6: Action planning

Taking action is an integral part of a PAR process. Cornish *et al.* (2023) assert that what counts as action and change is different for each PAR project. Thus, in our study, after gathering information on the experiences of immigrant adolescents in acculturating into South Africa, our focus shifted to developing a comprehensive action plan aimed at addressing the challenges faced by immigrant adolescent learners. We formulated a robust action plan, by engaging with our co-researchers in a series of discussions and brainstorming sessions

Through these collaborative efforts, we identified specific roles that various stakeholders could play in easing the acculturation process for immigrant adolescent learners. Evidently, our study has an entire chapter dedicated to indicating the roles that can be played by a variety of stakeholders who have something to do with the welfare of immigrant adolescent learners (Mabvira, 2023). As an illustration, co-researchers in our study revealed that school administrators can implement inclusive educational practices and provide language support programs (Mabvira, 2023). In addition, Strydom (2011) asserts that such active involvement does not only enhance their problem-solving skills but also increases a sense of ownership and commitment to the project. Proper planning created a proper foundation for the implementation of input by the co-researchers. The process of implementation is discussed in the phase that follows.

Phase 7: Implementation

Our study heeded to the advice by Cornish *et al.* (2023) that that when planning for action, it is essential to analyse the power dynamics involved and anticipate the potential resistance to change. As an illustration, some of the recommendations for acculturation forwarded by the immigrant adolescent learners were targeted to the political leaders, hence not easily implementable. Accordingly, we facilitated discussions with the participants to help them understand the complexities of policy change and how some of their recommendations could take time after being presented to policy makers. We also encouraged the group to refine their recommendations, focusing on actionable steps that could be taken within their school and local communities.

The implementation stage began with putting the co-constructed acculturation strategies into action within the school environment. At school level, we facilitated language support initiatives and awareness campaigns. Thus, immigrant adolescent learners took on leadership roles in organising and facilitating discussions and providing feedback on the effectiveness of the strategies. In so doing, we concur with Ciotoli (2019) that active involvement is crucial during implementation. This involvement not only empowered them but also ensured that the strategies remained relevant to their needs and experiences. Due to time constraints, we could not implement all the recommendations (Mabvira, 2023). Thus, we planned to disseminate the findings so that policy makers and other stakeholders could also assist in implementing the findings. The process of dissemination is discussed in the section that follows.

Phase 8: Dissemination

After completing a PAR project, the dissemination phase is crucial for sharing the findings and insights gained through the research (Omodan & Dastile, 2023). To effectively disseminate the findings of our photovoice project, the first step we took was organising a photo exhibition with the co-researchers. This exhibition provided a platform to showcase the various pictures taken during the project, each capturing unique perspectives and stories from the participants. The event not only highlighted the visual and emotional aspects of the learners' experiences but also facilitated discussions among the teachers and fellow students who attended, encouraging them to engage with the issues presented through the photographs. Fairey et al. (2022) asserts that for PAR projects to be more impactful, the results must be shared with a larger audience. This includes reaching out to other communities, researchers, and stakeholders who can benefit from the research findings (Omodan & Dastile, 2023)

Moreover, the findings of the study have been presented to international conferences such as one hosted by the Association of South African Social Work Education Institutions (ASASWEI) from 27 to 29 September 2023. The conference brought together policy makers within the department of Social Welfare, Social Workers, Non-Governmental Organisations, Social Work Educators and practitioners. In addition, the findings have been

presented at the Multi-Inter-Transdisciplinary Conference on Africa Transformation Perspectives Hosted by Walter Sisulu University in 2024. In terms of sharing research finding through publications, we have written three academic papers. We are committed to adopting and implementing empowering and transformative approaches to social work research in full cognisance of the criticisms that have been channelled towards PAR as we delineate some of the methodological pitfalls below.

Critique of PAR

While PAR is designed to be inclusive and collaborative, some critiques suggest that it may not always be as participatory as intended. As an illustration, Christens and Speer (2006, p. 2) have raised concerns that the methodology is not sufficiently ‘‘participatory, bottom up and open’’ to live up to all it had claimed to be. A body of criticism has developed pointing out how PAR is ‘done to’ people, thereby undermining the transformative goals (Fairey et al., 2022). In addition, Cooke and Kothari, (2001) accuse PAR of the illegitimate and unjust use of power and identifies three such ‘tyrannies’ which have also been echoed by other authors:

Decision making tyranny

The decision-making tyranny is based on the rationale that PAR has become institutionalized (Fairey et al., 2022), ritualised (Cooke and Kothari, 2001) and populist (Prinsloo, 2021). This happened because PAR has been integrated into established structures and processes, potentially diluting its original intent of empowering communities (Bennett, 2020). The concept of ritualisation in PAR also implies that the methodology may have become routinised or ceremonial in nature, with actions being performed for the sake of tradition rather than genuine engagement or impact. Cooke and Kothari (2001) assert that ritualisation could result in a superficial adherence to participatory principles without meaningful involvement or empowerment of community members, ultimately undermining the transformative potential of PAR. We ensured that our study had genuine involvement not mere tokenism through a decision-making checklist that kept track of consultations on key decisions.

Group tyranny

The utilisation of participatory practices in research has often been critiqued for oversimplifying complex power dynamics and failing to address external power differentials (Bennett, 2020; Cooke and Kothari, 2000; Prinsloo, 2021). In line with this, Cooke and Kothari (2000) argue that this has inadvertently played a role in reinforcing existing inequalities within research processes. In affirmation Prinsloo (2021) attests that the simple use of participatory practices has at best been naive about issues of power, masked the external power inequalities and even reinforced existing inequalities. This critique showcases the need for an accurate understanding of power dynamics and their implications within participatory research in order to empower marginalised groups instead of falling short in recognising and challenging entrenched power structures. In order to address this we recommend that researchers must employ power analysis tools to identify and mitigate the influence of external power structures that could hinder genuine participation and empowerment.

Methodological tyranny

PAR is characterised by theoretical tensions and has been accused of of engaging in "unnecessary philosophical dualism," being dogmatic, and even being "flawed, idealistic, or naive” (Christens & Speer, 2006, pp. 2-3). The criticism on "unnecessary philosophical dualism," suggests that PAR, in its attempt to integrate theory with practice, creates a dichotomy between theory and action that might not necessarily exist (Christens & Speer, 2006). In addition, Cooke and Kothari (2001) argue that the methodology's emphasis on participant empowerment and social change can lead to a form of dogmatism where the goals of the research are predetermined, and alternative perspectives are not adequately considered. Critics on naivety and idealism also argue that PAR's emphasis on empowerment and social change can be overly idealistic, particularly in contexts where structural inequalities and power imbalances are deeply entrenched (Christens & Speer, 2006). As proponents of PAR, we argue that despite these mentioned pitfalls, the methodology is highly effective, thus we forward counterarguments to criticisms.

Counter arguments to criticisms

Fairey et al. (2022) note that, while this critic of PAR highlight legitimate concerns, it is important to recognise that PAR is not meant to be panacea because like any research methodology, it has its limitations. Fairey et al (2022) add that assuming that the limitations overshadow the methodology`s significance is an exaggeration. In support we assert that the methodology does not inherently promote dualism. Instead, it seeks to bridge the gap

between theory and practice by involving participants in the research process, thereby ensuring that the knowledge produced is both theoretically sound and practically relevant (Strydom, 2011). In response to the accusation on dogmatism, proponents of PAR contend that the methodology is inherently flexible and adaptive, allowing for the research process to be shaped by the participants themselves (Omodan & Dastile, 2023). Now that we have argued that despite criticisms, PAR is an invaluable methodology, we hereby offer recommendations for Social Work practice.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK

Based on our findings, we have learned the crucial need to foster and encourage the integration of PAR methodologies into social work research to inform practice and facilitate a deeper connection between practitioners and the communities they serve. We have also come to the realisation that social workers who adopt participatory and collaborative approaches will yield significant advantages by adopting egalitarian methodologies, ensuring that the voices of community members are not only heard but actively used to shape the interventions and strategies implemented. This is in keeping with the social work principles of the right of clients to self-determine and respect for the uniqueness of the individual Moreover, PAR challenges social workers to reconsider the power differentials inherent in their roles. It encourages them to move away from being practitioners who view themselves as experts in delivering services, believing they know what communities need and what works. Instead, social workers are called to become facilitators who recognise the strengths of individuals and collaborate with them to co-create solutions to their problems.

This study encourages social workers to establish partnerships with community members and organisations to co-create research agendas and action plans. PAR`s prioritisation of the inclusion of marginalised and vulnerable populations aligns with social work's commitment to social justice and empowerment. The social justice and empowerment aspect emerges from PAR`s ability to enable people to advocate for their rights and influence policy decisions. Accordingly, this can be augmented through participatory methods such as focus groups, community dialogues and workshops to ensure inclusivity. Our study also confirmed that PAR is inherently action oriented as it focuses on solving real-world problems. This could have positive implications if adapted by social workers as it means that research findings are not merely academic exercises but tools for social change. The emphasis on action also ensures that research is immediately relevant and beneficial to the communities involved, thereby improving the impact of social work practice.

CONCLUSION

This paper has provided a reflexive analysis of our use of the technique of PAR with immigrant adolescent learners. This reflexive analysis has traced the steps that were undertaken in our study. It has highlighted how we recruited participants and identified the problem with them. It has also highlighted how we chose PAR instruments and data analysis. The paper has also highlighted how we went through the processes of action planning and implementation and ultimately dissemination. This has been concluded by the critique of PAR and the implication for Social Work practice.

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