



## Bridging the Gap Between Community Schools and Rural Communities in Nepal Using Participatory Action Research

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### Abstract

This paper explores the engagement of parents with out-of-school children through community-based participatory action research in a rural community in Nepal. This study addresses the connection gap between local communities and community schools, which has resulted in consequences such as inconsistent attendance among students and low educational expectations among parents. By investigating the processes of formulating an action plan by a parent-led action group and analysing its execution, the research aimed to understand how participatory action research can foster a stronger bond between community schools and parents, thereby enhancing parental involvement in children's education. The study draws on Mezirow's transformative learning theory, incorporating concepts from Habermas's public sphere and Freire's notion of conscientization. It specifically focuses on the action group's monthly meetings held over nine months and the collaborative outcomes that resulted. By emphasising targeted interventions, collaboration and a departure from deficit-focused approaches, the findings propose effective strategies for bridging the gap between community schools and rural communities in Nepal.

**Keywords:** *community schools, conscientization, Nepal, out-of-school children, parent-led action group*

### Introduction

Community schools play a vital role in providing basic education in Nepal, often catering to underserved populations in rural areas. These schools comprise an overwhelming 76% of the country's educational institutions, having long been at the forefront of delivering basic education (Government of Nepal National Statistics Office, 2021). The *National Education Policy 2076* (Government of Nepal Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2020) emphasises the importance of good governance in community schools and requires active participation and representation of community members in school management. The policy aims to improve community participation in school management committees and parent-teacher associations. In the 1990s, the Ministry of Education (Government of Nepal Ministry of Education, 1997) created the *Basic and Primary Education Master Plan* to improve education management in line with the *Education for All* consensus (Government of Nepal Ministry of Education and Sports, 2003). The plan provided school management committees with more autonomy and elevated their role in managing education at the basic and primary levels (Carney & Bista, 2009). School management

committees are formed via local elections of parents and guardians, and they are accountable to both their local community and the district education officer.

Community schools are considered government entities in Nepal, despite the responsibility for education being devolved to the community. School management committee members in rural communities are not necessarily educated or trained to provide constructive feedback to qualified teachers on teaching and learning (Research Centre for Educational Innovation and Development, 2006). In many instances, parents are nominally part of the schools' Parent-Teacher Association and the School Management Committee, but their involvement is minimal, often a formality. As highlighted in the report by the Research Centre for Educational Innovation and Development (2009), there exists an acknowledged reluctance among community schools to actively involve parents in decision-making processes. This intensifies the perceived disconnect. High levels of illiteracy amongst parents, combined with the limited awareness of community members regarding their roles and responsibilities, have widened the chasm between educational institutions and the communities they serve.

The inadequate representation of parents in the direct management of children's education in community schools has disconnected communities from educational processes, leading to a decline in community trust towards these schools. This is reflected in the academic performance, school attendance and enrolment of students, as highlighted by Bhatta (2021). Even after the implementation of a federal structure in Nepal, the Nepali government continues to face challenges in strengthening school management committees and parent-teacher associations across the nation (Shahi, 2021).

Conversely, educators attribute the dearth of parental involvement in children's learning to parents. This assertion holds, particularly in rural areas where parents have limited literacy skills and are unsure about their roles in children's education. Additionally, criticism is directed at parents for not visiting schools to inquire about their children's well-being, having no interest in children's learning, and failing to provide home learning environments and educational materials (Bhatta, 2021).

Pherali (2012) suggested that excessive politicisation and corruption in school management committees have created tensions in the school system in some places, and privileged groups—mainly the upper castes—are most likely to influence the selection of parents for membership of school management committees. The Nepal National Teachers' Association expressed opposition to the government's decentralisation act, which granted school management committees the authority to recruit, oversee and terminate teachers (Pherali, 2012). Consequently, teachers and head teachers are reluctant to establish school management committees and parent-teacher associations (Uprety, 2021). This tension between government and teachers has further widened the gap between parents and community schools.

Recognising the need to address this gap, the central focus of the current research is on promoting diversity through robust parental and community engagement. Engagement is seen as a critical component in the formulation of a collective action plan, aimed at enhancing the education of children within the community. The objective of the research is to understand how the execution of community-based participatory action research facilitates a bond with community schools and successfully enhances parental involvement in children's education. With the understanding that diversity extends beyond demographic variations to encompass a spectrum of perspectives, experience and cultural nuances within the community, the research applies a participatory approach that celebrates and integrates this rich tapestry of differences.

### **The Literature and the Theoretical Framework Shaping the Research Design**

Bridging the gap between community schools and their communities is a crucial endeavour with significant implications for the overall well-being of students and the community. A substantial

body of literature underscores the importance of fostering strong connections between schools and their surrounding communities. Epstein et al.'s (2018) seminal work on the six types of involvement emphasised the multifaceted nature of parental engagement, asserting that successful schools actively involve parents in various aspects of educational processes. This involvement extends beyond traditional parent-teacher conferences to include participation in decision-making processes and collaboration in shaping school policies. Moreover, the work of McAteer and Wood (2018) highlighted the significance of collaborative partnerships between universities and communities, suggesting that when universities facilitate rather than dictate, they enhance participation, social change, and epistemic democracy. To address these issues, McAteer and Wood advocated for participatory action research as a methodological approach to actively involve stakeholders in research processes.

The research of Fuentes (2009–2010), Dworski-Riggs and Langhout (2010) and Snell et al. (2009) share several common themes in the exploration of participatory action research with a focus on parents. One overarching theme is the commitment to challenging societal stereotypes and perceptions regarding the roles of working-class parents and multicultural parents in academic achievement (Fuentes, 2009–2010). In Fuentes' work, there is a deliberate effort to empower parents and challenge prevailing stereotypes that may hinder their active participation in educational decision-making processes. Dworski-Riggs and Langhout (2010). and Snell et al. (2009) similarly aimed to redefine and broaden the concept of parental involvement, particularly for marginalised groups, challenging conventional notions and advocating for more inclusive perspectives. Fuentes (2009-2010) incorporated the idea of organising power within the public sphere. This commitment to understanding and restructuring power dynamics aligns with the transformative goals of participatory action research, where the agency of individuals—in this case parents—is central to research processes.

The literature about critical pedagogical frameworks is inspired by Paulo Freire's (1970, 2000) work. Snell et al. (2009) explicitly draw from Freire's critical pedagogy to amplify the voices of marginalised parents, thereby challenging traditional evaluations of parental involvement. Ditrano and Silverstein (2006) also grounded their work in Freire's model of participatory action research, assisting parents, whose children had been classified as having emotional disabilities, to share their experiences, thus fostering critical consciousness within the special education system. The incorporation of Freire's critical pedagogy reflects a commitment to promoting equity, empowerment, and critical reflection within educational settings through participatory approaches. In Nepal, the *National Curriculum Framework* (Government of Nepal Ministry of Education and Sports, 2007) focuses on the development of an inclusive education and creates evaluation policies based on consultation at every legislative level and with organisations for disabled persons and parents/caretakers.

Participatory action research is seen as a suitable approach for parent-focused research, as it ensures inclusive decision-making incorporating diverse parental perspectives and fostering empowerment, trust, and culturally sensitive solutions within the community (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). Often associated with social transformation, participatory action research has its roots in liberation theology (Freire, 1970), neo-Marxist approaches to community development (Fals Borda & Rahman, 1991), and human rights activism (Brydon-Miller & Damons, 2019). Kemmis and McTaggart's (2005) work highlighted the key features of participatory action research: the reflective cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting.

Considering insights from previous literature and our acquired knowledge, we have adopted the transformative learning theory formulated by Jack Mezirow (2000) as the foundational framework for this research. His theory posits that individuals can undergo significant and lasting changes in beliefs, perspectives and behaviours through critical reflection, dialogue, and the implementation of new perspectives. The current research applies this theory to explore the transformative experiences of parents of out-of-school children and how participatory action

research facilitates critical reflection and dialogue among them, aiming to empower parents and improve the status of parents of out-of-school children in the community. Out-of-school children in this study are those children who are not attending school. They may be chronic absentees (absent for more than one month), school dropouts, or not enrolled in a school despite being of school age.

Habermas's (1984) notion of the public sphere supplements the research, providing insight into the formation and functioning of public spheres or action groups. It emphasises inclusiveness and equal participation in collective decision-making processes, aligning with the democratic ideals of participatory action research. The process of conscientization developed by Freire (1970) is integral to the research and emphasises critical awareness-raising and empowerment. Applied to parents of out-of-school children, conscientization enables them to recognise social and political realities affecting their children's education and to develop strategies to overcome barriers (Freire, 1970).

## Methodology

### ***Underpinning Worldview, Research Location and Participants***

The study adopted a participatory methodology, engaging members of parent-led action groups in the implementation of educational campaigning activities. Using a qualitative approach to data collection, the research sought information from the parents of out-of-school children. Action group members collected the data, which were subsequently deliberated upon in monthly meetings.

The participatory worldview is articulated using subjective-objective ontology (Heron & Reason, 1997). Epistemology is how an individual acquires knowledge, and in this research, it consists of experiential, propositional and practical ways of knowing (Lincoln et al., 2013). Lincoln et al. (2013) explained that experiential knowing involves gaining knowledge through personal experience and direct observation; propositional knowing involves gaining knowledge through logical reasoning and the analysis of facts and concepts; and practical knowledge involves using knowledge in real-world situations and problem-solving. By embracing multiple ways of knowing and valuing the contributions of all individuals, the participatory worldview seeks to create more inclusive and equitable forms of knowledge production and decision-making. The axiology of this research is rooted in the values of social justice. It recognises that access to education is a fundamental human right and that all children should have opportunities to learn and develop their full potential.

This study's methodology was characterised by collaboration between the parents of out-of-school children and an academic study team from Kathmandu University, resulting in mutual learning and social and personal action. The research participants were members of parent-led action groups, each with up to 10 members. The academic research team included a doctoral candidate, a facilitator, and support personnel from a local partner organisation. The study took place in the Durga Bhagwati rural municipality within the Rautahat district of Nepal, purposefully chosen due to having the country's lowest literacy rate at 57.75% (Government of Nepal National Statistics Office, 2021). The municipality comprises five wards and a parent-led action group was set up in each.

Before the commencement of the participatory action research and the formation of action groups, preliminary efforts involved the collection of secondary data by the study team to identify households with out-of-school children in the municipality. This encompassed the examination of school records, identifying chronic absentees (absent for more than one month in a row) and dropouts, supplemented by ward records identifying school-age children not enrolled.

The goal of establishing action groups was to actively engage and raise awareness within communities regarding educational matters, placing particular emphasis on promoting regular school attendance, encouraging parental involvement, and fostering a positive home learning environment. The formation process entailed discussions with members of each community, identification of problems, and collaborative generation of local solutions. The action groups then shared information about the prevalence of out-of-school children in the community and potential future consequences as a means of sensitisation, and presenting an accurate portrayal of the existing reality. This played a crucial role in prompting community members to recognise the unacceptable nature of the situation and instigating a collective realisation that proactive measures were necessary. This was followed by collaborative efforts dedicated to the development of action plans, involving both community members and the study team. The details of the process are presented in Figure 1.

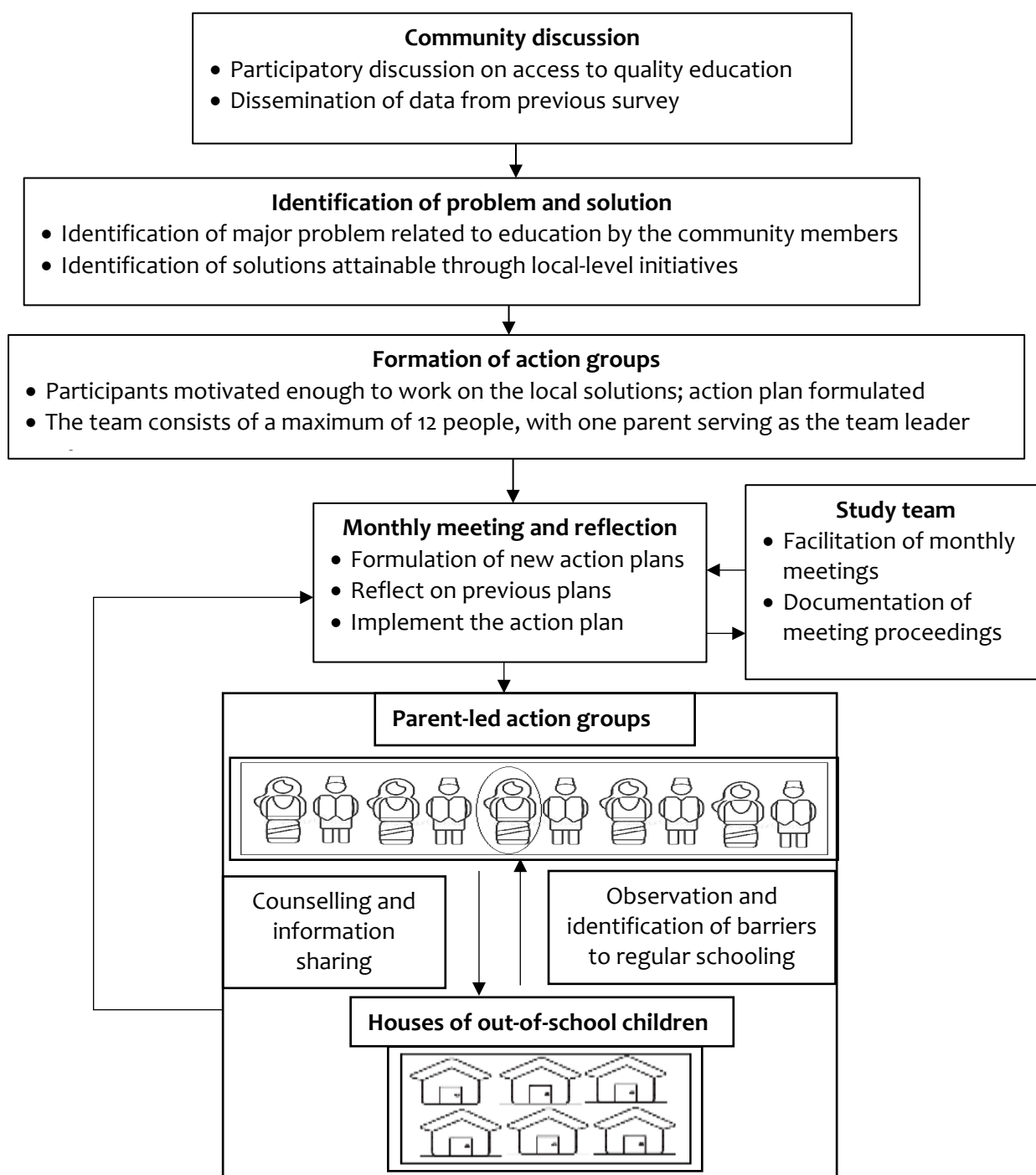
During the discussion and after the development of action plans, interested participants were invited to join the parent-led action groups. The formation criteria considered factors such as active participation, motivation, willingness to commit for a nine-month period, and influence within the community. The study team conducted subsequent meetings with the groups, briefing them on monthly meetings, meeting minutes, and the participatory formulation, revision and documentation of action plans. Five groups were formed across five wards, meeting monthly for progress updates, action plan revisions, reflections, and new plan formulations. Facilitators and local staff from the partner organisation led the meetings, with a strong interest in the outcomes of the action plans and aiming to integrate valuable insights into future projects. The team maintained records, including minutes and action plans for documentation and analysis.

### ***Data Collection, Data Analysis and Dissemination of Findings***

Complementing participatory action research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; Reason & Bradbury, 2001), participatory narrative inquiry (Kurtz, 2009) was used to capture the lived experiences of participants. Through the collection of personal stories, participatory narrative inquiry facilitated a deeper understanding of complex situations and provided a platform for sharing previously untold narratives, thereby providing an opportunity to hear diverse perspectives and gain new insights. This collaborative process involved active engagement of the participants, aligning with the participatory action research principles of involvement and collaboration.

Participatory narrative inquiry's three essential phases guided this research: narrative collection, sense-making, and dissemination (Kurtz, 2009). The narrative collection phase involved gathering stories to offer diverse perspectives and gain new insights. Members were assigned to visit five or six houses of out-of-school children in their neighbourhoods at least once a month (see Figure 1). During these visits, members of the action group engaged in discussions with parents of out-of-school children about the obstacles preventing regular school attendance. These conversations provided insights into the challenges faced by out-of-school children. Action group members documented the stories in their notebooks or recalled and shared at the monthly meetings.

Monthly meetings served as a platform for discussion for members of the parent-led action groups. During these sense-making sessions, the groups worked with the raw stories gathered along with personal experiences to make sense of complex situations. This approach emphasised the importance of diverse perspectives, interpretation by storytellers, catalytic pattern exploration, and narrative group sense-making (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The sense-making phase entailed collaboratively analysing narratives to extract meaningful insights. The dissemination phase involved returning these insights to the community, ensuring a purposeful and goal-oriented engagement.

**Figure 1: The Study's Participatory Action Research Process**

The dual-method approach, using participatory action research and participatory narrative inquiry, ensured the study team's comprehensive exploration of parents' transformative experiences in their children's education, adhering to the principles of active participation, collaboration, and purposeful engagement. Each stage of the process was documented. The monthly parent-led action group discussions were audio recorded, transcribed and translated into English.

Subsequently, the transcribed data underwent a process of anonymisation and coding during analysis. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was employed to examine the data, with key themes emerging organically. Coding and categorisation identified recurring patterns and shared perspectives, allowing for the identification of significant challenges faced by out-of-school

children. The presentation of these themes captured the collective sense-making and reflections of parent-led action groups, offering valuable insights for targeted interventions and enhancing the overall impact of the study. This paper focuses on the thematic analysis conducted by the study team.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The researchers followed ethical guidelines, obtaining informed consent and maintaining confidentiality. They actively acknowledged potential biases through reflexivity. The study team adhered to fundamental ethical principles, including securing informed consent, respecting participant autonomy, ensuring no harm, and presenting empirical data fairly. The team used pseudonyms to maintain the confidentiality of the research participants. The entire process of data collection and assessment strictly adhered to the principles of systematic inquiry, competence, honesty, and respect for participants. The research received approval from the Ethical Committee at the School of Education, Kathmandu University.

### **Findings**

Four main themes emerged from the data: the utilisation of sense-making sessions as a means of conscientization (Freire, 1970), the role of participatory action research in connecting the rural community with community schools, the importance of rising above deficit discourses, and the proactive solution measures undertaken by the action group members and community. In the discussion that follows, we discuss these themes, referencing both the field and relevant theoretical literature.

#### **Conscientization Through Sense-Making Sessions**

A participant of the study and action group member, Sarita, shared a narrative highlighting the challenges a fellow parent, Sabira Begam, faced in balancing household chores and her daughter's education.

*I struggle with the household chores without my daughter's assistance. If she goes to school, it becomes challenging to oversee her younger sibling. With the need to work at a nearby farm and her father employed in Dubai, our family faced practical difficulties. While it's easy to preach about education, the reality is tough for the rural people like us who grapple with financial constraints.*

Sabira Begam's dilemma raised concerns about the prioritisation of education, particularly for girls within the community. This became a catalyst for understanding the complex interplay of factors affecting community educational decisions. One of the action group participants, Nursrat Begam, acknowledged that:

*Sarita's story really resonates with me. I've faced similar challenges trying to balance work and my children's education. It's not just about sending our kids to school; it's about juggling multiple responsibilities with limited resources. Education seems like a luxury sometimes.*

The group members engaged in a conversation tinged with frustration, reflecting on a common theme that emerged during the discussion. They expressed a shared sentiment, acknowledging their economic struggles and the daunting challenges associated with accessing education. The prevailing belief among the group was that poverty extended beyond financial constraints; it encompassed the opportunity costs associated with pursuing education. They emphasised that the true cost of education went beyond school fees and stationery expenses, encompassing the time and effort required to support a child's learning while managing household responsibilities. In their view, poverty was not just a consequence of lack of education; rather, it perpetuated a cycle where impoverished individuals were unable to afford educational opportunities for their children, thereby perpetuating their own economic hardship. This cycle seemed inescapable,

trapping generations within a cycle of poverty and limited educational access, but the central question was whether there was a way to break the cycle.

Rita Mishra, one of the group members and a teacher at the local school, had a slightly different opinion. She articulated:

*I think we need to look beyond just the financial aspect. There are cultural and societal expectations at play here too. Why does the elder female child always have to sacrifice her studies to take care of the sibling? This is rarely the case for elder boys. In fact they are sent to stay at their relatives' homes in towns for better learning opportunities. Even if the families are poor they borrow money to give better education for their sons. Families prioritise boys' education over girls', perpetuating inequality. Even in the case of Sabira Begum, it is her daughter she is talking about, not her son.*

The group members agreed with her, but also acknowledged that it was hard to change the attitude of parents towards sons and daughters. They were univocal in saying that it not just about convincing parents, but also about challenging deep-rooted beliefs in the community that take a long time, even generations, to change. After this, the group facilitator tried to refocus the conversation towards action plans. She stated:

*But isn't education supposed to be the key out of poverty? How can we ensure that every child, regardless of their circumstances, has access to quality education? Can we do something locally that can help these children?*

While the socio-economic conditions are likely to persist, the participants affirmed that collaborative efforts could be made to ensure that Sabira Begam's daughter had opportunities to attend school regularly. The participants proposed various ideas but they unanimously agreed that meaningful change would only occur when Sabira Begum recognised that education serves as a beacon to lead her family out of the relentless cycle of poverty. They invited her to the next month's meeting when the group discussed that education can provide females with better life opportunities compared to their mothers. Concerning the action plan (dissemination of information to the community), the suggestion was to collaborate on creating community-driven childcare initiatives. This would involve seeking assistance from both local government and non-government organisations for technical expertise and financial support. Such initiatives could offer opportunities for numerous students in the community to attend school consistently, while simultaneously allowing parents to pursue their livelihoods without concerns about the well-being of their young children.

This process exemplified how participatory narrative inquiry facilitated a deeper level of conscientization (Freire, 1970), which refers to the process of developing critical awareness and understanding social and economic injustices, leading to action for change. By valuing and interpreting personal stories, the group uncovered systemic issues influencing educational choices. The dialogue moved beyond individual experiences to a collective understanding, fostering a richer appreciation of the participants' realities. The approach facilitated a collective learning process, empowering individuals to critically assess and address the complexities surrounding education in their community.

### **Participatory Action Research Connects the School with the Rural Community**

As shared by a member of one of the action groups, a third-grade student from the Saraswoti Primary School had an extended period of non-attendance, having missed school for two consecutive months within the previous six months. When the member of the action group had visited the student's home and asked about the reason for the child's irregular attendance, the mother responded:



*Previously, my son used to attend classes in Saraswoti Primary School, but last year they refused to provide stationery to him. Unfortunately, my husband and I were out of town at that time. Upon our return, we visited the school to inquire about the stationery issue. But the school officials mentioned that he was registered in two other schools, and they couldn't give stationery to a student from another school. Although it's correct that my son is enrolled in two other schools, he only attends Saraswoti Primary School. We enrolled him in the other schools because all the parents are doing the same, to receive school meal compensation and uniforms. The teachers come to our house and enrol our children in their school because they need the student count to keep the school running. It's for their benefit. Now they are not giving the amenities showing the same reason. It's unfair, and my son stopped attending due to humiliation.*

In the sense-making session, the group acknowledged this issue in their community and the associated mindset of parents and the hoarding mentality that seemed to exist. This story illustrates the complex interplay of factors influencing children's attendance, some of the motivations behind multiple school enrolments, and challenges faced by school authorities in maintaining fairness amid varying pressures.

An integral realisation emerged from the discourse: that community members do not adequately value education and its role in their livelihoods. Acknowledging this, one participant questioned the need for education beyond the eighth grade, asserting that basic literacy was sufficient for their children to maintain day-to-day life. From this viewpoint, he argued that boys can sustain their livelihoods by seeking employment abroad, while girls usually marry. Participants deemed education up to the eighth grade sufficient to guide children in their school assignments. They raised doubts about the justification for pursuing higher education when graduates reportedly earned comparable income to daily wage labourers.

It is important to emphasise that in the context of participatory action research the university's role as facilitator was not to steer or influence the group's perspectives on how they comprehended certain matters (Freire, 2000). The facilitators refrained from expressing opinions on the significance of education in individuals' lives. The conversation instead focused on acknowledging the challenges faced by the school management in distributing resources amidst societal pressures. In line with this, the group developed an action plan to assist the school to ensure a fair and equitable distribution process. One of the action group participants, Sadam, said:

*In the schools of our village, head teachers face threats and are compelled to distribute amenities to anyone who shows up, as they have no alternative. Ultimately, they also reside within the same community and must consider their safety.*

The group decided to meet with the head teacher to identify and implement feasible solutions. During the meeting, the head teacher requested the group's assistance in managing the upcoming distribution of uniforms, which they anticipated would attract a large gathering of people. In response, the male members of the group expressed their willingness to aid in this task. During the conversation, the head teacher disclosed his plan to distribute the goods exclusively to students with at least 80% attendance, aiming to mitigate concerns of favouritism and discrimination. The group welcomed this decision and acknowledged the necessity of communicating this change to the community. Recognising the potential for unrest during the distribution process, the group felt compelled to convey this message effectively. Given that each member of the action group was assigned to six or seven households, they resolved to disseminate this information within these houses and beyond, aiming to ensure a smooth distribution process and prevent any potential conflicts.

The inclination of parents towards accumulating resources was leveraged as an incentive or strategy to encourage consistent school attendance for their children, with the condition that

they achieve at least 80% attendance to receive any amenities from the school. The action plan carried the potential to foster collaboration between the community school and the rural community itself, working together for the betterment of children's education.

### ***Rising Above Deficit Discourses***

As highlighted by community participants during the initial community discussion (see Figure 1), there were parents who were detached from their children's community schools. They showed minimal engagement in the schools' activities, revealing a clear absence of community school ownership, with the parents primarily holding the school responsible for the perceived low quality of education. Parents perceived these schools as institutions where influential individuals in the community profit from government funding. Based on their perspective, the benefits and amenities provided to community schools rarely reach the students who should be the primary beneficiaries. Instead, the advantages were often enjoyed by those with strong connections and networks. They viewed community schools as the exclusive domain of influential families, functioning as a kind of family business where key positions, from teachers to administrative roles, were held by members of a single family. Parents felt marginalised and had minimal influence in addressing any misconduct.

Oversight from the education authorities in the rural municipality was infrequent. Even when monitoring visits occurred, they often did not take necessary actions. This lack of oversight resulted in community schools operating as monopolies. Families with the means to seek a better future for their children typically opted for private schools, while those with fewer resources enrolled their children in community schools. Within the same family, participants reported that boys sometimes attended private schools, while girls were enrolled in community schools.

In the discourse surrounding educational deficits, members of one action group emerged as advocates for addressing a critical concern: the inadequate quality of school meals. A collective grievance surfaced, revealing that some students received meagre provisions, often limited to biscuits worth 5 rupees for an entire day, resulting in hunger which forced them to leave classes early. To understand the problem, the action group asked a student to keep track of what food was given every day for a month. When they looked at the information, the action group members realised the extent of the issue and felt more empowered to do something about it.

Foremost, the group confessed to their ignorance regarding the government's allocation of funds (Government of Nepal Ministry of Education, 2016) for a child's daily meal. Rehena Khaun, one of the group members, explained:

*We were aware that the school wasn't providing enough food for our children, but I never thought about what exactly they were giving them. The list only mentions instant noodles and biscuits. Some days, they don't provide anything at all. There is nobody here to whom we can complain about the issue.*

Additionally, there was a notable gap in understanding the nutritional needs for children's optimal growth and development. Stepping into this void, the study team provided invaluable support, offering government guidelines tailored to community schools. These guidelines, structured around local food availability, nutritional content and a weekly menu, empowered schools to utilise government-provided meal funds judiciously.

With their new understanding, the action group talked to local schools and had discussions with the head teachers about following the food guidelines. They found a big challenge. There were limited funds to cover things like gas, paying the people who helped with the meals, and buying food. The head teacher stated that the government's assistance of 15 rupees per child per day covered only the cost of purchasing food and did not take into account any expenses associated with its preparation. That was the main reason behind the school distributing cheap packaged food which was easy to store for a long time. The head teacher of Shiva Primary School asserted:

*How can we afford to provide a sumptuous meal with such a small amount of money? The 15 rupees are used up in transportation just to bring biscuit packets from the market. Now, the villagers expect us to give their children chicken curry and rice every day. Should we spend that from our own pockets? It's not realistic. They should have more reasonable expectations.*

Responding with resilience, the action group proposed a collaborative solution: community members with low economic status volunteering to prepare meals in exchange for school meals for themselves and their children. The school, in turn, committed to pursuing this matter. The action group also gave copies of the guidelines and cooking instructions to the school. It helped the school administration understand that a nutritious meal does not necessarily have to be expensive; locally available, affordable ingredients could also be used to create a healthy diet. The action group members pledged ongoing monitoring and close collaboration with schools to ensure sustained improvements in the school meal program.

### **Proactive Solutions**

In the Bhadarwa (Ward 5 of Durgabhagwati rural municipality), action group members engaged in home visits also engaged in conversations with adolescent female students enrolled in community schools. The focus of these discussions centred around attendance and the factors influencing students' motivation to attend school. According to the female students, they frequently experienced catcalling, bullying and harassment while travelling to school, which discouraged them from going alone. To navigate these challenges, they relied on their brothers for company, or if possible, they gathered a few friends to make it easier to confront bullies on the way. Unfortunately, if they were unable to arrange for such companionship, it often resulted in them missing school. At times, the instances of harassment were so intense that it led them to return home in tears. These conversations shed light on the complex dynamics affecting school attendance of adolescent girls in that community.

Kasturi Devi, one of the female students studying in grade 8 of a community school, recounted:

*One day, while my sister and I were on our way to school, a local boy who had a crush on me started following me and grabbed my hands tightly. His friends, sitting at the tea shop, began applauding. That day, he wanted to propose to me, but I had no interest. My younger sister rushed home to inform our parents. It was embarrassing for me. I rejected his proposal and returned home. I still feel scared to walk down that road because his friends are always there in the area and start shouting his name whenever they see me. This is unnecessary.*

The action group convened to address the issue and formulated a plan of action. They identified specific locations where catcalling incidents involving adolescent males were prevalent, particularly around the marketplace where they gathered to play carom-board (an indoor board game). The action group took a proactive approach by engaging with local shopkeepers, urging them to warn the males against harassing students. The warning emphasised potential consequences, including the possibility of the action group reporting incidents to the local police.

Upon further investigation, they discovered that some of the males involved were students in local schools. To deter such behaviour, the action group approached the head teachers of these schools, requesting them to issue circulars to particular classes. The circulars warned that severe punishment would be imposed by the school management on anyone found engaging in catcalling. The action group's coordinated efforts and measures proved effective in putting a complete halt to catcalling events within the community.

In another incident, the action group members along with other parents appointed two temporary teachers at Rajdevi Primary School Matsari. Despite official provisions designating 12 teachers per school, many schools struggled to operate as they had a mere fraction of the

necessary teaching staff. This resulted in significant barriers to the delivery of quality education. One action group member had a candid exchange with the head teacher when he conveyed the difficulty of managing a school with over 300 students with just two teachers and himself. The head teacher said:

*The shortage of teachers means we're often forced to merge classes, compromising our ability to provide individualised attention to students. We teach for 15 minutes in the classroom and then have to go to other classrooms to teach there. How can the students benefit from such kind of education?*

He expressed frustration with the situation, feeling a sense of urgency and helplessness. The responsibility of hiring new teachers would usually fall on the school management committee, but it had not existed for the previous seven years.

After conversing with the head teacher, the community member initiated a discussion on how to persuade the municipal office to allocate additional teachers for the school. Manoj Ji, a member of the group, proposed the idea that they would require the backing of an influential individual, such as a leader or someone recognised by the municipal office. Among the suggested names was Laxmi Ji, who had previously served as a ward chairperson and had contributed to the school by donating land for its playground. He possessed strong connections with education authorities in the municipal office. All group members agreed and proceeded to approach Laxmi Ji for assistance. In response to the request to address the issue, Laxmi Ji suggested hiring two local teachers for the school at salaries equivalent to those of government-appointed teachers, funded by donations collected from the community. He also reassured that the need for collecting funds would be temporary, only for a period of one to two months. Additionally, he pledged to communicate with the municipal office to advocate for the permanent status of these teachers. However, the rural municipality hesitated to provide regular salaries, prompting Laxmi Ji to assert:

*I have personally requested the mayor and administrative officer to ensure monthly salaries for the new teachers. If needed, we will take collective action against the municipal office.*

## Discussion

The narratives underscore the complex interplay of challenges faced by educators and community members in striving to uphold the integrity of the education system. Regardless of the outcomes, the participatory action research and the dedication of the action group members succeeded in directing the community's attention toward the previously overlooked issue of basic education in community schools. This sparked discussions about education quality, with a growing realisation that community schools aspire to provide quality education but face limitations due to resource scarcity and inadequate infrastructure. Rather than assigning blame for educational outcomes, the community offered support to improve results. It is now evident to the community that change is possible with time and collaboration, and even small efforts or initiatives have the potential to bring about positive transformations in the education sector of their community.

Conscientization, rooted in Paulo Freire's (1970) educational philosophy, empowers individuals to critically analyse societal structures. Utilising participatory narrative inquiry, the research facilitated monthly meetings where the parents shared narratives, revealing the intricate challenges that were faced. The case of Sabira Begam exemplified how sense-making sessions delved beyond surface issues, uncovering systemic influences on educational choices. Sabira Begam's concern regarding sending her daughter to school every day highlighted a genuine problem that was prevalent in several households, due to the foreign migration of family members for employment. This situation forced children to assume additional responsibilities, impacting their educational attainment.

This issue always existed within the community and, while everyone was aware of it, no one had previously discussed it in any forum. The magnitude of the problem and how many children in the community faced the same issue, was not known before the discussion. The action group unanimously acknowledged this as the primary reason for the high number of out-of-school children in rural communities. This newfound dialogue in the public sphere (Habermas, 1984) became instrumental in fostering collective awareness. Participant narrative inquiry (Kurtz, 2009) fostered a collective learning process, empowering participants to address complexities collectively, and showcasing the role of deeper conscientization (Freire, 1970). The local solution proposed by community members, namely community-driven childcare initiatives, had the potential to not only enable consistent school attendance for many students, but also to allow parents to pursue their livelihoods without concerns about the well-being of their young children.

The discussion with Kabita Devi regarding the distribution of stationery exposed complex factors affecting students' absences and emphasised the difficulty of handling multiple school enrolments. It is important to recognise flaws in the ways community schools were managed and monitored by the central government for budgeting, because they failed to identify inflated student numbers (Budhathoki, 2022) due to students' enrolment in multiple schools. This issue requires urgent attention to ensure the equitable distribution of government scholarships and amenities.

The action group served as a microcosm of the public sphere (Habermas, 1989), where individuals came together to discuss matters of common concern—in this instance, issues related to education access and distribution of resources within community schools. Furthermore, the action group's engagement with the school authorities reflected communicative action characteristic of the public sphere. By negotiating and formulating action plans to address challenges faced by the school, participants engaged in intentional and conscious efforts to achieve inter-subjective agreement and mutual understanding. The decision to distribute resources based on attendance rates demonstrated a commitment to fairness and transparency in decision-making processes, essential aspects of a functioning public sphere (Habermas, 1989).

Mezirow's (2000) transformative learning theory offers insights into how individuals can undergo significant changes in their beliefs and perspectives. In the case of poor quality school meals and insufficient numbers of teachers, parents challenged deficit discourses surrounding education by critically reflecting on their assumptions. Rather than blaming the school for everything, the action group took a stance to address the quality of school meals and teacher numbers. This highlighted a shift from deficit discourses. Through collaborative solutions and ongoing monitoring, they fostered a connection with the community school.

Mezirow's (2000) framework underscores the transformative potential of participatory approaches, as parents actively engaged in the process of redefining their understanding of quality education and their roles in shaping it. It is essential to recognise that this step is a positive move, with the potential to bring community schools and rural communities closer.

The solutions implemented by the action group members further underscored the transformative potential of community-led initiatives. Addressing issues of safety and attendance among adolescent girls reflected a commitment to holistic educational reform. By leveraging local knowledge and resources, the action group members were able to implement targeted interventions that directly addressed the needs of their community. Moreover, their collaborative approach and willingness to engage with stakeholders at various levels highlighted the importance of building partnerships and fostering community ownership in their attempts to make sustainable change.

An evaluation of all the outcomes resulting from the action groups' initiatives is beyond the scope of this paper. However, we can deduce that the participatory platform provided a space for community members to openly share narratives, delve into the intricate details of their

community realities, and formulate action plans that suited their context. In each case, the theoretical frameworks of Freire's (1970) conscientization, Habermas's (1989) public sphere and Mezirow's (2000) transformative learning offered valuable insights into the processes and dynamics underlying the participatory action research and community-driven interventions in education. These theories provided a way of explaining how individuals engaged in critical reflection, dialogue and action to address systemic challenges and to promote social change within their communities.

### Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate the transformative potential (Freire, 1970) inherent in participatory action research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; Reason & Bradbury, 2001) within the context of rural community education. Through sense-making sessions and participatory narrative inquiry (Kurtz, 2009), community members engaged in critical reflection, dialogue, and collective action to address systemic challenges within their community schools. Four main themes emerged: conscientization through sense-making sessions, the role of participatory action research in connecting the rural community with community schools, rising above deficit discourses, and proactive solutions undertaken by the action group members and community.

Conscientization inspired by Freire's (1970) philosophy empowered participants to critically analyse societal structures and understand the complex interplay of factors influencing educational choices. Through personal narratives, participants explored beneath surface issues, recognising the systemic influences of poverty, gender inequality, and cultural norms for education access and quality. This deepened understanding, fostered collective awareness, and facilitated a richer appreciation of the participants' realities.

Participatory action research served as a bridge between the rural community and community schools, allowing for meaningful dialogue, collaboration and collective problem-solving. By acknowledging and addressing issues such as stationery distribution and multiple school enrolments, community members challenged deficit discourses surrounding education and advocated for fair and equitable practices within their schools. The measures undertaken by the action group members—from addressing inadequate school meals to hiring additional teachers—demonstrated a commitment to improving educational access and quality within their community.

Despite the challenges faced by educators and community members, the participatory approach directed attention towards the overlooked issue of basic education in community schools. By fostering discussions and collaboration, the community realised that change is possible through collective effort and collaboration. It is evident that even small initiatives have the potential to bring about positive transformations in the educational sector of the community.

It is essential to acknowledge the research's limitations at this point. The evaluation of long-term outcomes and the sustainability of the interventions falls beyond the scope of this study. Additionally, the study's focus on a specific community and context limits the generalisability of the findings to other settings. Further research is needed to assess the long-term impact of participatory approaches on educational outcomes and to explore the scalability of these interventions to other communities.

This study has contributed to the growing body of literature on participatory action research and highlights the importance of community-driven initiatives in promoting educational equity and social justice.

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