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Walking With Words: A Reflexive Journey of Pre-Project Engagement Through Poetic and Participatory Methods

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Abstract

This reflective paper is written by a multi-stakeholder key advisory set (KAS) team consisting of university academics, engagement staff, and community-based practitioners from an Indigenous group called the Gamtousers, in South Africa. It critically examines the pre-project finalisation stage of a National Research Grant initiative, aligned with the New Frontiers in Research Fund multilateral project. During this stage, the KAS team engaged school and community stakeholders to explore the potential for ethical, reciprocal partnerships rooted in shared histories and lived experiences. Guided by critical pedagogy and participatory praxis, the process emphasised co-construction of meaning, reflexivity, and disruption of hierarchical knowledge flows. Two creative and dialogic methods were employed: a short video capturing the team's physical movement through school spaces, attuning to affective and sensory impressions; and the co-creation of palindrome poems, used to surface embodied insights and invite reciprocal reflection. Analysis of these artefacts revealed two central themes: collective belonging and relational trust, and transformative learning through uncertainty and shared exploration. These highlight the power of dialogic knowledge-making in fostering connection, vulnerability, and shared purpose. However, a key tension also emerged: initial hesitancy and power asymmetries in engagement—particularly in navigating institutional identities and unequal access to research language and authority. The paper makes a methodological contribution by showing how imaginative artefacts—visual and poetic—can humanise pre-project engagement. It argues that such practices form vital groundwork for equitable collaborations, especially in settings influenced by systemic inequality and educational marginalisation.

Keywords: critical pedagogy, key advisory set, palindrome poems, participatory praxis, video capturing

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Introduction and Background

The escalating effects of climate change on water and food systems are unevenly distributed. They deepen long-standing historical injustices and disproportionately impact Indigenous and marginalised communities, who already bear the legacies of colonial dispossession, environmental racism, and structural poverty. In South Africa, as in Canada, Australia, and other settler-colonial settings, these legacies continue to influence patterns of vulnerability to droughts, floods, and agricultural collapse (Satgar, 2023; Whyte, 2023). Climate change, therefore, cannot be viewed solely as an environmental issue: it is a social and political crisis that intersects with questions of land, belonging, and epistemic justice (Chanza & Togo, 2024). Communities historically excluded from decision-making are once again side-lined because technocratic responses to ecological crises often dominate the policy landscape. Such responses tend to rely heavily on technical models, global climate finance mechanisms, and centralised governance frameworks, while remaining disconnected from the lived realities, spiritual knowledge, and place-based wisdoms that influence how communities experience and adapt to environmental change (Johnson & Yazzie, 2024).

In recognition of these systemic disjunctions, the New Frontiers in Research Fund (NFRF) Multilateral Grant, titled “International Relational Accountability of Mother Earth: Revitalising and Restoring the Land and Water,” was established. The grant unites diverse international partners with the shared goal of highlighting Indigenous-led frameworks of research and action, rooted in relational accountability to land, water, and community. By emphasising Indigenous and decolonial

perspectives, the project aims not only to generate new knowledge but also to revitalise ways of knowing and doing that colonial modernity has sought to erase (Williams & Shipley, 2023). It is within this context that this paper positions itself, focusing especially on the reflexive pre-project engagement process coordinated by the South African node, led by Nelson Mandela University.

At the core of this South African engagement process is a dedication to relational accountability and ethical, community-based research practice. Drawing from both Indigenous epistemologies and critical pedagogical traditions, the project's initial phase in the Eastern Cape examined how place, memory, and identity influence community participation in climate adaptation efforts. The Eastern Cape, marked by a history of forced removals, labour exploitation, and educational marginalisation, provides a powerful site for considering how colonial histories continue to shape environmental vulnerability (Ntsebeza, 2023). However, it is also a place of resilience, where Indigenous knowledge systems, cultural practices, and collective solidarities remain vital in everyday life. To engage genuinely as researchers in this space, humility, active listening, and a willingness to prioritise the voices of those most impacted by climate change are essential (Swartz et al., 2024).

To ensure that this commitment was not merely rhetorical but genuinely embedded, the project adopted a two-tiered participatory governance framework. This framework consisted of an action learning set (ALS) and a key advisory set (KAS), both designed to embody dialogic and reflexive principles in line with traditions of participatory action research (Damons, 2017; Zuber-Skerritt, 2011).

The ALS functions as the project's top decision-making body. It comprises a transdisciplinary team that unites university staff from Nelson Mandela University and its partner institutions, municipal stakeholders, and representatives of First Nations communities in Canada and of Indigenous Gamtouer in South Africa. By design, the ALS ensures that strategic direction does not solely originate from academic or institutional elites but encompasses a variety of perspectives across cultural, professional, and disciplinary boundaries. The ALS thus offers not only oversight but also a vital space for dialogue where differing views on land, water, and adaptation are debated and integrated into collective strategies (Puri, 2023).

Emerging from this broader framework, the KAS was formed to serve as an executive oversight and coordination body. Comprising eight individuals nominated for their distinct expertise, the KAS plays a central role in guiding the project's reflective practices. Its members contribute skills such as administration, cultural translation, community trust-building, and empirical verification of research material. Importantly, the KAS is not a passive consultative board but an evolving leadership collective, responsible for coordinating the co-creation of project outputs. These include not only technical reports and workshops but also creative and participatory outputs like poetry, visual artefacts, and community events. In this sense, the KAS enacts what Damons (2017) described as *distributed leadership*, where authority circulates through dialogue and shared responsibility rather than remaining concentrated at the centre.

Together, the ALS and KAS provide the participatory infrastructure necessary to situate this study within the broader principles of the African Calabash framework (Rangana, 2023). The African Calabash framework is a relational framework that emphasises ongoing reflection, multilingual engagement, co-creation of knowledge, and a response to community-defined needs. Unlike extractive research frameworks that view communities merely as data sources, the African Calabash framework positions the communities as reservoirs of knowledge (Rangana et al., 2025) and advocates for continuous dialogue that persists beyond the project cycle. The framework promotes endless conversation and as a form of relational accountability, where knowledge is co-created, contested, and revisited repeatedly (Marovah & Mutanga, 2024).

By embedding reflexive practices at each stage of engagement, the ALS and KAS together foster a participatory ecosystem that not only advances the aims of the NFRF initiative but also provides a replicable model for community-driven climate adaptation research. The focus on arts-based and dialogic practices within these frameworks further highlights the belief that ecological justice is not solely technical but also deeply relational. To “walk with words” through poems, stories, and shared embodied spaces becomes both a method and an ethics of resistance against the silencing legacies of colonialism. It becomes a means of reimagining futures where communities are not passive recipients of externally devised climate interventions but active co-creators of knowledge and strategy (Bawaka Collective, 2023).

Ultimately, this paper contends that pre-project engagement of this kind is not a marginal activity but central to the epistemic and ethical integrity of climate adaptation research. By focusing on relational accountability, grounding methodology in Indigenous and critical pedagogies, and structuring governance through dialogic, participatory forms, the South African node of the NFRF project offers an example of how climate research can begin to address historical injustice while preparing communities for the uncertainties of ecological change.

Despite growing interest in participatory and decolonial research methods, limited attention has been paid to the pre-project engagement phase where relationships, trust, and shared expectations are built before formal research begins. Much scholarship focuses on data collection and research outcomes, while the relational processes that influence early collaboration between universities and communities remain underexplored. This gap is particularly important in contexts where historical inequalities and extractive research practices have led to mistrust between institutions and marginalised communities.

This research, therefore, explores how pre-project engagement can be organised to support collaborative knowledge creation and ethical partnerships. Specifically, it explores how creative and participatory methods can build relational trust, shared meaning-making, and reflexive learning among stakeholders involved in community–university collaborations. The paper discusses a reflexive engagement process conducted by a KAS working within the South African branch of the NFRF project.

Literature Review

Participatory research has increasingly transformed educational and community-based inquiry by broadening who is recognised as a knowledge creator and how knowledge can be expressed. Instead of viewing communities only as sources of data, participatory approaches involve participants as collaborators who help define research questions, methods, and interpretations. This change has encouraged scholars to explore creative and arts-based practices that enable participants to communicate experiences through various forms of expression beyond traditional interviews or surveys (Cammarota & Fine, 2010; Nunn, 2022).

Arts-based research methods, including storytelling, visual arts, performance, and poetry, have gained prominence because they facilitate expression that captures the emotional, embodied, and relational aspects of experience. These approaches recognise that lived realities are not always easily conveyed through textual or analytical language alone. Creative practices, therefore, broaden the range of communication options available in research and provide opportunities for participants to engage in inquiry through culturally meaningful forms of expression (Leavy, 2020; Lynch, 2025). By valuing narrative, metaphor, imagery, and performance, arts-based methods enable participants to share experiences that might otherwise remain marginalised within traditional research frameworks.

Participatory art practices also cultivate collaborative environments where individuals can reflect on shared experiences and try out new ways of communicating. These temporary engagement spaces often encourage mutual recognition, safety, and creative experimentation among participants. Empirical studies have shown that collaborative creative practices, from digital storytelling to community theatre and poetry, can boost civic engagement, language skills, and cross-cultural dialogue (Lynch, 2025). Such processes break down traditional barriers between researchers and participants, fostering relationships based on shared creativity and dialogue rather than on hierarchical expertise.

Poetic inquiry exemplifies arts-based research that highlights the expressive and interpretive aspects of language. By shaping reflections through rhythm, imagery, and metaphor, poetry enables participants to share layered experiences that might otherwise be difficult to express (Brown et al., 2021). In participatory settings, co-creating poems can foster collective reflection whilst maintaining the unique voices of contributors. Poetic forms also allow ambiguity and emotional subtlety to remain visible within the research process, enabling participants to portray experiences in ways that resist being reduced to simplified analytical categories.

Participatory arts-based research is also closely connected to wider efforts to democratise knowledge creation. In participatory inquiry, community members are frequently seen as co-researchers who help guide the direction, interpretation, and results of research processes. This approach recognises that knowledge develops through interaction between different types of experience and expertise. In contexts where communities have historically been marginalised or spoken for by external researchers, participatory methods provide opportunities for participants to express their perspectives directly and to influence how their experiences are represented (Motala & Vally, 2022; Rangana et al., 2025).

At the same time, scholars emphasise the importance of ongoing reflexivity regarding power dynamics within participatory research. Collaborative approaches do not automatically remove inequalities between researchers and participants. Decisions about interpretation, authorship, representation, and dissemination can still perpetuate hierarchical relationships if not carefully negotiated (Lenette, 2019). Ethical participatory practice, therefore, demands transparency, dialogue, and continual reflection on how research relationships are formed and maintained.

Creative methods also present specific ethical considerations. Issues of authorship, ownership of artefacts, emotional risk, and representation must be carefully managed throughout the research process. Responsible practice involves obtaining informed consent, ensuring participant control over how creative outputs are shared, and providing opportunities for reflection and debriefing when sensitive experiences emerge (Lenette, 2019). Researchers also have practical responsibilities such as making materials accessible and avoiding paternalistic approaches that undermine participant agency.

Beyond producing knowledge, participatory arts-based research often seeks to encourage broader social engagement. Creative outputs such as exhibitions, performances, or community publications help research insights reach beyond academic circles and promote public dialogue. Participants frequently report feeling a stronger sense of agency through these activities, transitioning from being subjects of research to recognised contributors to knowledge creation. In this way, participatory creative practices can strengthen local networks, shape community conversations, and challenge deficit-based narratives by emphasising lived experience and communal interpretation.

Overall, the literature highlights three key principles that inform this study. First, participatory research emphasises collaboration in producing and interpreting knowledge. Second, creative and

arts-based practices allow participants to express the embodied, emotional, and relational aspects of experience that might otherwise remain inaccessible to traditional research methods. Third, reflexive and ethical engagement remains vital for managing power relations within collaborative inquiry.

These insights closely align with participatory action learning and action research (PALAR), which emphasises collective learning through cycles of reflection, dialogue, and action (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011). In African contexts, PALAR has been further adapted via the African Calabash framework, which considers knowledge-making as a relational and cyclical process rooted in community participation, cultural expression, and shared responsibility (Rangana et al., 2025). The calabash metaphor symbolises a communal vessel where diverse perspectives, experiences, and types of knowledge come together to foster collective understanding. In this study, employing walking video and poetic inquiry reflects this approach by creating participatory spaces where knowledge develops through dialogue, creative expression, and collaborative interpretation during early engagement between university researchers and community stakeholders.

Theoretical Underpinning

Dialogic and Decolonial Knowledge-Making

This study is grounded in dialogic and participatory traditions that see knowledge as a relational and collaborative process. Instead of viewing knowledge as a fixed body of information passed from expert to learner, dialogic approaches highlight the co-creation of understanding through interaction, reflection, and shared inquiry. Paulo Freire's (1968/1972) critique of the *banking model* of education offers a key perspective for this view. Freire argued that education should not involve depositing knowledge into passive recipients but should instead involve dialogue among individuals who jointly interpret and transform their social realities.

Within this perspective, dialogue functions not merely as communication but as a mechanism for redistributing authority in knowledge production. When participants contribute to defining problems, interpreting experiences, and shaping outcomes, the distinction between researcher and participant becomes more fluid. This orientation challenges hierarchical assumptions about expertise and recognises the value of experiential and community-based knowledge alongside academic theory (Hall & Tandon, 2017).

These ideas align with broader decolonial perspectives that challenge the dominance of Eurocentric knowledge systems in research and education. Decolonial scholars emphasise that knowledge is historically located and shaped by language, culture, and place rather than existing as a universal and neutral set of truths (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Santos, 2014). From this perspective, research should recognise multiple epistemologies and forms of expression, including oral traditions, storytelling, and artistic practices. Such approaches acknowledge that knowledge is produced through lived experience and collective reflection rather than solely through formal academic discourse.

In participatory research settings, this approach promotes methods that enable participants to express their perspectives through culturally meaningful forms. Creative practices like storytelling, visual artefacts, and poetry offer avenues for participants to communicate experiences that might otherwise be difficult to articulate using conventional research language (Leavy, 2020). By valuing these expressive forms, participatory research fosters spaces where diverse voices can contribute to shared knowledge creation.

Reflexive Praxis and Participatory Inquiry

Freire's (1968/1972) concept of praxis further guides the methodological approach of this study. Praxis describes the ongoing relationship between reflection and action through which individuals critically scrutinise their circumstances and collaborate to change them. In participatory research, praxis demands continual reflexivity concerning the roles, assumptions, and positionalities of those involved in the research process.

Reflexivity plays a crucial role in collaborative research involving universities and communities, where historical inequalities can influence relationships and expectations. Researchers must stay mindful of how institutional authority, language, and disciplinary norms shape interactions with participants (Tuck & Yang, 2014). Engaging in reflective dialogue enables participants and researchers to explore these dynamics and renegotiate roles throughout the research process. Creative methods can support this reflexive practice by encouraging participants to interpret their experiences through metaphor, imagery, and narrative. Transforming experiences into poetic or visual forms slows down the interpretation process and invites participants to engage with multiple layers of meaning. Such practices offer opportunities for participants to reflect on their perspectives while recognising how their interpretations intersect with those of others (Brown, 2019). In this way, reflexive praxis becomes both a methodological commitment and an ethical orientation within participatory inquiry.

Participatory Action Learning and the African Calabash Framework

The study is further positioned within the tradition of PALAR, which regards participants not just as sources of information but also as co-learners and co-researchers who help shape research processes and outcomes (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011). Through repeated cycles of reflection and engagement, participants collaboratively examine problems, generate insights, and develop responses rooted in their shared experiences.

The African Calabash framework emphasises multilingual engagement, shared responsibility, and ongoing dialogue between communities and institutions. Instead of viewing research as a linear process with fixed stages, the framework promotes continual cycles of reflection and interaction where knowledge is revisited and reinterpreted over time. This approach aligns with the participatory ethos of PALAR by highlighting relational accountability and collective sense-making.

Within the present study, these theoretical perspectives establish the conceptual foundation for using creative and participatory methods during the pre-project engagement phase. The walking video and palindrome poems serve as dialogic artefacts that enable participants to reflect collectively on their experiences of collaboration. By promoting shared interpretation and creative expression, these methods exemplify the principles of dialogic inquiry, reflexive praxis, and participatory learning that support the study.

Methodology

This study used a reflexive and participatory methodological approach, using arts-based practices to uncover knowledge that is "harder to reach through more traditional approaches" (Kramer, 2022, p. 4). Inspired by recent contributions to qualitative enquiry, which highlight that arts-based research "creates opportunities for new insights, empathy, and connection" (Leavy, 2020, p. 15), the process was designed not only to gather insights but also to promote trust, reciprocity, and dialogic relationships among participants. Our reflexive journey was both a method and an enactment, exploring pre-project engagement through relational, dialogic spaces. Puri (2023) suggested incorporating creative non-fiction elements to frame and reflect on researchers' own experiences,

grounding academic inquiry in personal reflexivity. This approach sought to disrupt hierarchical dynamics and foster ethical reciprocity among the participants.

Research Paradigm

This study is conducted within an interpretivist paradigm that values reflexivity, the co-construction of knowledge, and creative engagement. Arts-based research practices are utilised throughout, with creative activities serving as tools for carrying out the research itself rather than solely for communication (Craig & Arezou, 2024). This approach aligns with participatory action traditions that emphasise partnerships and collaborations between researchers and community members. Additionally, arts-based research aims to challenge conventional research paradigms by emphasising collaboration, equity, and action-oriented outcomes (McPherson et al., 2024).

Participants

The data were generated during the finalisation phase of a pre-project for a National Research Grant from the NFRF. Participants comprised the project's KAS, which included eight members: university academics, engagement staff, and community-based practitioners from a First Nation group in South Africa. We employed purposeful sampling as the data generation strategy and used a short video capturing the team's physical movement through school spaces, and palindrome poems to generate data.

Data Gathering Cycles

The data generation process unfolded through two interconnected cycles of creative involvement. In the first, we created a short film that showed the KAS team's collective walk-through of the school spaces. The making of the film itself was participatory: team members took turns walking, highlighting details of importance, and operating the camera, ensuring that no single perspective dominated the visual record. The footage captured not only spaces such as classrooms, playgrounds, and corridors but also gestures, conversations, and the ambient sounds of children and the environment.

Once the film was finished, it was screened in a collective session where all participants watched it together. This act of viewing as a group was as significant as the filming because it allowed participants to see the school space in a new light through each other's eyes. Comments, laughter, and silences during the screening became key to the interpretive process, revealing insights not apparent during the walk itself. The shared viewing thus created a space of dialogic recognition, where participants could affirm, challenge, or build upon each other's impressions before proceeding to further reflection.

This approach aligns with emerging research on walking video, which has been shown to offer "a multi-sensory account of place and experience that cannot be reduced to words alone" (Broadhead, 2024, p. 12). This method fostered attentiveness to atmospheres, textures, and movements within the school setting, thereby emphasising forms of knowledge rooted in the body. As Strand et al. (2024, p. 5) observed, creative participatory practices can reveal "tacit and affective knowledge that often remains hidden in conventional qualitative research," making embodied engagement central to reflexive inquiry.

To extend this engagement, the team engaged in reflective narrative writing as a way to verbalise and deepen our experiences of the video. Each participant wrote a short narrative in response to both the walk and the collective screening, blending sensory impressions, memories, and emotions. This additional layer allowed feelings and observations to be expressed through words, creating a dialogic

link between embodied practice and collective interpretation. In this way, the film was not just a static data artefact but became a catalyst for layered reflection and meaning making.

The second cycle expanded this commitment to creative practice by involving the participants in co-creating palindrome poems. These poems were seen as dialogic artefacts through which meaning could be layered and shared. A palindrome poem, unlike traditional verse, is composed so that it can be read forwards and backwards, with the second half echoing, reframing, or even challenging the first. This reverse writing process demands careful attention to rhythm and word arrangement, ensuring that the mirrored lines offer new insights when read backwards. For instance, a line expressing doubt may, when reversed, imply resolution, allowing the poem to contain multiple and sometimes conflicting meanings within the same structure.

Poetic inquiry has been recognised for its ability to deepen lived experience through rhythm, imagery, and metaphor, making the unsayable sayable (Li, 2025). By working with palindrome texts that reflect themselves, we deliberately disrupted linear research language and highlighted reciprocity. The process of composing and reversing lines required collaboration and dialogue among participants because each person contributed words or phrases that would work in both directions. In this way, the form itself embodied the principle of mutuality; every word needed to make sense not only in its original orientation but also in its mirrored form.

Notably, the process of writing palindrome poems also proved empowering for the poet. Because the structure required contributors to view their own words from multiple perspectives, participants were able to reclaim their voice, craft their experiences creatively, and embed personal meaning into collective dialogue. As one participant reflected, the act of reversing lines felt like “seeing myself reflected through others’ words,” demonstrating how the technique facilitated both individual expression and shared understanding.

In this way, co-creating poems became both an analytical tool and a participatory act of collective reflection. Together, the walking video and palindrome poems demonstrate how embodied and poetic forms of engagement can enhance reflexivity, build relational trust, and generate artefacts that both document and transform the experience of collaboration.

Analytical Process

The analytical process started with a familiarisation phase. Members of the KAS repeatedly watched the walking video, read the palindrome poems, and revisited the reflective narratives produced after the engagement process. During this stage, each participant made brief reflexive notes capturing sensory impressions, emotional responses, and symbolic meanings that emerged from the artefacts. These notes helped participants attend not only to the explicit content of the artefacts but also to the affective and relational dimensions of the engagement experience.

Following familiarisation, an initial round of open coding was carried out. Segments of the poems, narrative reflections, and video observations were coded descriptively to capture expressions related to relational dynamics, emotional shifts, spatial awareness, uncertainty, trust-building, and perceptions of collaboration. Coding was performed collaboratively during team discussions, allowing multiple interpretations to emerge and preventing the analysis from reflecting just a single researcher’s perspective. These preliminary codes were documented and refined through iterative dialogue among the KAS members.

In the next phase, related codes were grouped into broader conceptual categories. Through repeated cycles of discussion, reflection, and comparison across artefacts, patterns of shared meaning began to

emerge. These categories were then synthesised into three overarching themes: collective belonging and relational trust, transformative learning through uncertainty and shared exploration, and initial hesitancy and power asymmetries in engagement. Rather than viewing themes as objective discoveries, they were understood as negotiated interpretations that arose through the collective sense-making of the research team.

To improve the trustworthiness of the analysis, several strategies were included. First, collaborative coding and interpretation ensured that multiple perspectives influenced the analytical process. Second, reflexive journaling allowed participants to critically consider how their own positionalities, expectations, and emotions affected interpretation. Third, the themes were discussed collectively within the KAS group to ensure that the interpretations aligned with participants' lived experiences of the engagement process. These strategies reflect participatory validity principles in qualitative research, which emphasise transparency, reflexivity, and shared ownership of knowledge creation.

By integrating creative artefacts with reflexive thematic analysis, the study aimed to explore both the experiential and relational aspects of participatory engagement. The analytic process therefore became an extension of the project's dialogic methodology, allowing participants to interpret their experiences collaboratively and ensuring that the themes remained rooted in the collective reflections of the group.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were addressed through principles of participatory and relational ethics that emphasise dialogue, mutual accountability, and shared decision-making throughout the research process. The study concentrated on the reflexive engagement of the KAS, whose members actively collaborated in the project rather than being external research participants. As the creative artefacts and reflections emerged from the team's collective engagement, ethical decisions were openly discussed within the group before developing the manuscript.

Informed consent was obtained from all KAS members before including their reflections, narratives, and creative artefacts in the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research, the planned publication of findings, and how their contributions would be represented. Because the project focused on collaborative knowledge production, participants had the opportunity to review and approve how their words and creative expressions were incorporated into the manuscript.

Particular attention was given to the ownership and representation of the creative artefacts produced during the engagement process. The walking video and palindrome poems were regarded as collectively created artefacts, and decisions regarding their interpretation and inclusion in the paper were made through dialogue among the contributors. Members of the KAS team expressed a preference to be recognised by name rather than anonymously, viewing authorship as an important form of recognition and ownership of their perspectives. Their inclusion as co-authors therefore reflects the participatory ethos of the project and honours their contributions to the research process.

Ethical practice also involved continuous reflexive discussions about power relations and representation. As the project united university researchers and community practitioners, the team stayed attentive to how institutional authority and research language could influence participation. Ethical decisions, including how artefacts were interpreted, voices represented, and findings communicated, were collectively negotiated through group discussions and reflective dialogue.

These practices align with participatory research principles that emphasise transparency, reflexivity, and shared ownership of knowledge creation. By integrating ethical reflection into the collaborative

process itself, the study aimed to ensure that the research remained responsible to the participants whose experiences and creative expressions shaped its development findings.

Findings and Discussion

Thematic Analysis: Artefacts as Relational Mediators

Reflexive thematic analysis identified three interconnected themes: collective belonging and relational trust, transformative learning through uncertainty and shared exploration, and initial hesitancy and power asymmetries in engagement. These themes highlight both the productive and challenging aspects of participatory engagement. They demonstrate how creative artefacts, particularly palindrome poems and reflective narratives, serve as mediating tools through which participants express experiences, negotiate meanings, and reflect on their interactions.

Collective Belonging and Relational Trust

The first theme illustrates the gradual shift from initial silence and uncertainty to a sense of shared belonging and trust. Deidre's palindrome "When the Room Breathed Back" captures this transition, moving from "blank eyes blink back, silent echoes in stiff rows" to "together, we softened the silence." Her accompanying reflection describes how "timid smiles blossomed into genuine curiosity, and hesitant glances transformed into eager gazes."

Jonathan's palindrome "Oasis of Learning" extended this imagery of growth and emergence: "a journey of learning has just begun . . . no expectations—just learning as guide." In his narrative "A Harvest of Promise," he described how "more seeds will be planted through our collaborative efforts to ensure an even greater harvest."

Similarly, Nomthandazo's palindrome highlighted inclusivity and dialogue: "listening to one another at the table and dreams are shared . . . learning that the cup is not empty." Her narrative reflected on learners "from diverse backgrounds and abilities working together in the gardens, their differences becoming a strength rather than a barrier." Asiphe's palindrome emphasised humility and connection: "acceptance is the key . . . the comfort of being part of something bigger."

Together, these artefacts suggest that relational trust emerged through shared experiences and dialogue. Belonging was expressed not only through words but through gestures, metaphors, and collaborative interactions. These moments illustrate Freire's (1968/1972) argument that dialogue depends on mutual recognition and relational respect.

Transformative Learning Through Uncertainty and Shared Exploration

The second theme highlights how uncertainty and vulnerability became catalysts for learning and reflection. Noluvo's palindrome "A Mirror in the Moment" begins with hesitation—"I wondered if the community would welcome and accept us"—but concludes with gratitude: "what a humbling experience." Her narrative similarly described how initial uncertainty gave way to appreciation of "the warmth, energy, and genuine hospitality" encountered during the visit.

Bruce's palindrome expressed a similar tension: "The excitement of initiating a new project is balanced by the uncertainty in what we will find." His narrative later reflected that "day one might have started shaky, but day two confirmed we were in the right place."

Amy's palindrome also recognised challenges while highlighting community strengths: "in difficult circumstances . . . parents are stepping up . . . learners are bearing the fruit . . . we have so much to learn." Her narrative reinforced this reflection, observing that "this school is getting something right . . . parents and staff are people we can get behind, learn from."

Other artefacts emphasised the importance of dialogue and collective discovery. Oyama's palindrome "A Dream We Shared" reflected how shared engagement fostered connection: "a dream we shared, then walked the land . . . hearts met as hands gave and planned." Derrick's poem "Eco-Pedagogy's Power" linked this experience to ecological metaphors, describing the school community as "a profound ecosystem of change defined by order, care, and respect."

Across these reflections, uncertainty became a productive space for learning. Rather than reinforcing hierarchical roles, it encouraged researchers and participants to engage as co-learners. As Cammarota and Fine (2010) suggested, participatory transformation often emerges through shared vulnerability and reflection.

Initial Hesitancy and Power Asymmetries in Engagement

The final theme examines initial hesitancy and the role of institutional hierarchies during early engagement. Several artefacts captured moments of uncertainty at the start of the interaction. Deidre's palindrome began with "silent echoes in stiff rows," while Bruce described how "day one might have started shaky." Noluvo also reflected on questioning "if the community would welcome and accept us," and Asiphe described praying for guidance during the first engagement.

However, these artefacts also demonstrate how such asymmetries began to change during the engagement process. Oyama's palindrome highlighted the importance of shared physical presence, shifting from "a dream we shared" to "land we walked." Nomthandazo's narrative observed that participants "engaged freely during the workshop, using their mother tongue," allowing community voices to influence the dialogue. Amy's reflection similarly recognised learning from community members, stating that "this school is getting something right . . . parents and staff are people we can get behind, learn from."

These examples show that power asymmetries were not eliminated but actively negotiated through dialogue and shared activity. As Hall and Tandon (2017) argued, participatory research becomes transformative when authority over knowledge production is gradually redistributed through collaborative engagement.

Methodological Contribution: Creative Artefacts and Participatory Validity

Incorporating palindromes and reflective narratives into the analysis was more than an aesthetic choice; it demonstrated how creative artefacts can serve as meaningful relational mediators in participatory research. These artefacts enabled participants to encode their experiences in layered, reversible, and metaphorical forms that resisted being reduced to linear or overly rationalised narratives. In doing so, they highlighted what Chilisa (2012) called decolonial validity expressions: ways of knowing and representing rooted in community aesthetics, oral poetics, and embodied forms of knowledge rather than abstract academic jargon. This created a methodological space where the rhythm of local idioms, the cadence of shared silences, and the affective power of memory could be incorporated into the analytic process as valid forms of knowledge.

Methodologically, using palindromes and reflective narratives broadens the range of participatory creative tools. Photovoice and cellphilm, for instance, are now well-established in participatory visual research and are widely recognised for their capacity to democratise knowledge production by prioritising participant perspectives through images and narratives (de Lange et al., 2007; Mitchell, 2011). Although these methods emphasise the visual, the palindrome provides a textual equivalent: concise, reversible, and co-created, embodying the principles of reciprocity and circularity in both form and content. Poetic inquiry enables researchers to make the unsayable sayable by expressing affective and embodied experiences through metaphor, rhythm, and imagery (Leavy, 2020).

By anchoring analysis in these artefacts, the study challenged extractive tendencies in qualitative research that often view participants merely as data sources. Instead, participants were acknowledged and engaged as co-analysts and meaning-makers, reclaiming agency over how their voices were portrayed. This aligns with Denzin and Lincoln's (2018) call for qualitative inquiry that is both emancipatory and decolonial, emphasising collaborative authorship and ethical responsibility. Importantly, the palindrome's reversible structure did not just aestheticise the engagement—it embodied the principle of reciprocity by encouraging readings that reflected back on themselves, mirroring the iterative cycles of reflection and dialogue that characterised the group's process.

In this way, creative artefacts such as palindromes became epistemic bridges between embodied experience and analytical abstraction. They conveyed what Finley (2011) described as the politics of representation in arts-based research: the power to change whose stories are told, how they are told, and what counts as legitimate knowledge. Consequently, the integration of palindromes and reflective narratives into analysis both broadened the methodological toolkit of participatory research. It demonstrated a form of knowledge-making that was dialogic, reflexive, and fundamentally relational.

Action Implications and Future Pathways

The analysis indicates three specific implications for participatory practice, each emphasising a methodological approach that goes beyond what is typically captured in traditional qualitative methods. First, trust-building depends on artefacts—metaphors, poems, and stories that convey relational affect. Unlike standard fieldnotes or transcripts, these artefacts are not just by-products of research but form part of the relational contract between participants and researchers. They serve as vessels of memory and imagination, producing what Santos (2014, p. 8) described as “epistemologies of the South,” where knowledge arises from collective creativity and symbolic exchange. By prioritising artefacts as the core medium of dialogue, trust was built not through verbal assurances but through the shared act of creating and interpreting together (Leavy, 2020).

Second, uncertainty must be embraced as an epistemic resource, not dismissed as a methodological flaw. In many research traditions, uncertainty is regarded as a methodological obstacle that must be resolved to produce valid knowledge. However, in participatory praxis, uncertainty functions as a condition of possibility, it offers a space where alternative logics can emerge, and relational accountability can flourish. Rowlands (2021) described this as the productive ambiguity of insider–outsider dynamics, where the lack of complete clarity sustains dialogue. Likewise, Smith (2012) contended that decolonial methodologies should accommodate unfinishedness because knowledge itself remains provisional, evolving with context and relational encounters. In this project, moments of hesitation or narrative contradiction were not mistakes but invitations to reconsider what constitutes knowledge, to honour plural truths rather than reduce them to singular accounts.

Third, power asymmetries require continual negotiation, including intentionally emphasising community languages, aesthetics, and categories of knowledge. This goes beyond merely inviting participants into pre-established methodological spaces; it involves reshaping the very basis of inquiry.

As Chilisa and Ntseane (2010) observed, Indigenous feminist frameworks demand those methodologies affirm forms of expression rooted in local cosmologies and oral traditions. In practice, this meant placing isiXhosa idioms and ecological metaphors at the centre of meaning-making, not as translations of English categories but as epistemic anchors in their own right. By doing so, the project rejected what Tuck and Yang (2014, p. 10) referred to as the “settler move to innocence,” where participation risks concealing deeper structures of domination. Instead, it underlined an ongoing, negotiated redistribution of epistemic authority, in which KAS members determined not only what was said but also how it should be developed.

In the Eastern Cape context, these implications crystallise in the Calabash framework, extended not only as metaphor but as method. Traditionally a vessel that holds diverse ingredients together, the calabash here symbolises methodological hospitality; it accommodates plurality without dissolving differences, generating nourishment from the combination of poetic, narrative, ecological, and dialogic contributions. Rangana et al. (2025) suggested that such frameworks are essential in contexts of ecological precarity, where knowledge must not only document but also heal, restore, and connect. By grounding participatory practice in this living metaphor, the project offers a decolonial model of engagement that values reciprocity, recognises uncertainty as fertile, and deliberately reconfigures the hierarchies of knowledge production.

Closing Reflection

By integrating walking videos, reflective narratives, and palindrome poems into a reflexive thematic analysis, this study demonstrates how dialogic and decolonial praxis can create more equitable ways of pre-project engagement. These artefacts functioned not as mere embellishments but as relational mediators, humanising the research experience and allowing participants to express their experiences in ways that honoured affect, embodiment, and plurality. In doing so, they revealed tacit aspects of trust, highlighted the importance of uncertainty, and necessitated the ongoing negotiation of power imbalances.

The methodological contribution lies in demonstrating that artefacts, whether poetic, visual, or narrative, expand the range of participatory practices beyond familiar tools such as photovoice, introducing innovative modes of co-creation that connect with local epistemologies. This study, therefore, reinforces the argument that schools, and communities should not only engage in research but also actively define, represent, and disseminate it. Such an approach aligns with the Calabash as a method: a vessel of reciprocity where diverse knowledges can be combined, circulated, and returned in nourishing form.

In this sense, the work embodies Freire’s (1968/1972) vision of education as the practice of freedom: a collective journey of reflection and action in which knowledge is created with, rather than for, communities. More broadly, it demonstrates that participatory practice, when grounded in decolonial ethics, is not merely about inclusion but about reconfiguring the very terms of knowledge-making towards justice, plurality, and mutual care.

Conclusion

This study has examined how participatory, creative, and decolonial methods, walking video, reflective narratives, and palindrome poems, can transform pre-project engagement in school–community collaborations. At its core, the project shows that when research is seen not as simply extracting data but as co-creating meaning, the resulting knowledge becomes more relational, diverse, and emancipatory. The analysis revealed how artefacts of collective practice can humanise research

encounters, highlight embodied and emotional aspects of experience, and challenge the unequal power dynamics that often characterise interactions between universities and marginalised communities.

A key contribution of this work is its methodological experimentation. By integrating visual, narrative, and poetic practices, the study broadens the range of participatory methods beyond traditional formats like focus groups or photovoice. Walking video engaged participants in a multi-sensory experience with place, capturing atmospheres and movements that resist being reduced to words alone (Broadhead, 2024). Reflective narratives served as a textual bridge, allowing embodied impressions to be verbalised and collectively interpreted. Palindrome poems introduced a novel form of dialogic artefact, disrupting linear research language and encouraging participants to inscribe personal meanings in reversible, layered texts. Collectively, these practices demonstrate the creative potential of combining artistic and analytical approaches to capture knowledge that is tacit, affective, and embodied.

This methodological contribution has ethical significance. In settings shaped by historical marginalisation and systemic inequality, extractive research practices have too often silenced community voices or treated them as objects of study. Conversely, the artefacts produced in this project returned authorship to the participants themselves. When the KAS team requested that their names be included alongside their contributions, they expressed a refusal to be anonymised and an insistence on recognition as knowledge-makers. This aligns with Chilisa's (2012) call for decolonial validity, where legitimacy is based on alignment with community aesthetics and protocols rather than external academic standards. In this way, the project redefines research not only as a process of knowing but also as an ethical act of recognition.

The findings also provide meaningful insights for future school–community collaborations. Trust-building appeared to be both delicate and essential. Silence, hesitation, and nervous glances in the early stages of the workshop indicated the influence of institutional authority, but they also held the potential for change. Through creative artefacts, participants could gradually shift from guardedness to openness, from being “researched” to becoming co-authors of meaning. Uncertainty similarly proved to be not a barrier but a resource. Palindrome poems, with their reversible structure, demonstrated how ambiguity can encourage reflection and prevent premature closure. For practitioners and researchers alike, this underscores the importance of viewing uncertainty as a productive space rather than eliminating it in pursuit of methodological tidiness.

Furthermore, the project shows that participatory engagement demands ongoing awareness of power. No method, regardless of how innovative or collaborative, automatically removes asymmetry. What truly matters is how those imbalances are recognised, negotiated, and reshaped through practice. In this study, intentional efforts to prioritise participant language, aesthetics, and authorship helped create a more equitable research experience. For school–community collaborations, this indicates that successful engagement should be assessed not solely by procedural inclusion but by the extent to which participants can influence the terms, categories, and outcomes of the process.

The Calabash framework provides a powerful metaphor and approach for advancing these lessons. Like the calabash that contains diverse ingredients in one vessel, participatory engagement can serve as a container for multiple forms of knowledge poetic, narrative, ecological, dialogic, without forcing them into uniformity. In the Eastern Cape context, this approach aligns with local ways of sharing and reciprocity. More broadly, it offers a model for participatory practice that fosters mutual understanding, redistributes knowledge within communities, and promotes ongoing collaboration.

Looking ahead, several directions for further inquiry surface. First, the integration of creative artefacts in participatory research remains insufficiently explored and calls for systematic development. Future projects could experiment with other poetic forms, digital storytelling, or collaborative theatre, assessing how different modalities facilitate varied types of relational knowledge. Second, questions of authorship and circulation demand ongoing attention; how can co-created artefacts be shared beyond the research encounter without reinforcing extractive dynamics? Third, exploring the potential to scale such practices into formal educational programmes is promising, especially in contexts where school–community relations have been historically marred by mistrust.

Ultimately, this study affirms that participatory practice is not only about methodology but also about justice. Engaging with communities in ways that respect their knowledge, aesthetics, and voices is a form of epistemic redress. The artefacts produced in this project demonstrate the power of creative, dialogic methods to humanise engagement, redistribute authority, and create spaces where diverse ways of knowing can thrive. In doing so, they promote a vision of research as a collective journey of reflection and action, aligning with Freire’s (1968/1972) idea of education as the practice of freedom.

In conclusion, the study does not claim to present a definitive model for participatory engagement. Instead, it offers a set of practices, reflections, and possibilities that others may adapt, develop, or challenge. What is evident is that pre-project engagement is important; it sets the tone for collaboration, builds the conditions for trust, and influences the direction of research partnerships. When approached with creativity, reflexivity, and a decolonial commitment, such engagement can do more than lay the groundwork for research it can itself, become a space for transformation.

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