

Action Research Practice of Preparatory Secondary School Teachers in West Gojjam Administrative Zone, Amhara Regional State, Ethiopia

Gebeyehu Shiferaw

Department of Education, Debre Markos University, Ethiopia

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to assess the participation of preparatory secondary school teachers in action research and to explore factors that hinder the realization of action research in schools. Descriptive survey design was employed as a method of research. Open and closed ended questionnaire, focused group discussion and individual interview were used as instruments to collect the data. The data was collected from six schools. Teachers and school principals were participated as subject of the study. The data gathered through closed ended questionnaire was analyzed using percentage. Whereas from open ended questionnaire, focused group discussion and interview was analyzed in the form of quotation and narration. The findings revealed that understanding of preparatory secondary school teachers' about action research was at the lower level. School principals who are expected to provide professional support for teachers had no detail awareness and skill about action research. Engagement of teachers in action research activities had been hindered by lack of training and experience on how to conduct action research, lack of support and monitoring, work over load and shortage of time, lack of incentives, lack of research facilities and less attention given for action research. Thus, it is critically important to organize short term training and experience sharing; establishing well equipped libraries; enhancing the support and follow-up system; establish rewarding mechanism as possible solutions to be taken into account for improving the participation of teachers in action research.

Keywords: Action research, preparatory secondary school, school principals, West Gojjam.

1. Introduction

Action research is an applied research to answer a specific practical problem that results in action (Denscombe 1999; Sparks 2002). It is a form of reflective process that enables practitioners or teachers to investigate learning problems and evaluate their work (Heron 1996; Zuber-Skerritt 1996; MacNiff and Whitehead 2006).

The aim of action research is to help teachers become adaptive experts or reflective practitioners who are prepared for effective lifelong learning that allows them to develop their knowledge and skills continuously (Elliot 1991; Sagor 1992; France 2000). Action research helps to study the real school situation with a view of improving the quality of teaching and students learning achievement (Hopkins 2002). It also aims to improve one's own professional judgment and to give insight about how to achieve desirable educational goals (Amare 2000).

In this regard, MacNiff and whitehead (2006:2) explained about peculiar characteristics of action research as "anyone and everyone can do action research. You do not need any specialized equipment or knowledge. All you need is curiosity, creativity, and a willingness to engage". Therefore, teachers' commitment to improve students' learning and love for their profession is the most considerable factors in implementing action research.

Teachers' competency has a greater place in improving the instructional process by identifying students as well as school problems through action research (O'Brien 2001; MOE 2002; MOE 2004). It is also through action research that teachers examine themselves whether they are going on the right way or not. Action research plays tremendous role in improving professional efficiency and the quality of class room teaching (Seyoum 1998). Moreover, carrying out research in schools is being taken as one of the requirements for teachers to improve the quality of education as well as promotion purpose in their career structure (MOE 1994).

According to the policy document of Ethiopia (MOE 2002), teachers at all levels are required to involve in action research activities and school principals are charged with responsibilities to facilitate and create favorable conditions for action research. Ministry of education also designed and tried to implement teachers' continuous professional development program at schools. In this program action research is one of the elements expected to improve the teaching learning process.

In spite of the effort, still teachers are not in a position to participate actively and apply action research in schools (Amare 2000). Obviously, from the day to day experiences there are challenges related to the practice of action research. Previous studies (Seyoum 1998) also proved that secondary school teachers were passive participants in conducting action research. Another study carried out at national level investigated that the participation of primary school teachers in action research was low (USAID 2006). Thus, there is a mismatch between what the literature and the policy document indicates and the real practice of action research in schools. As far as the researcher's knowledge, there is no evidence that indicates the extent to which teachers were

carrying out action research to solve real educational problems in west Gojjam Zone. Therefore, it seems a sound justification to investigate the practice of action research of teacher in preparatory secondary schools of West Gojjam.

Objectives of the Study

The general objective of the study was to assess the existing practice of action research in preparatory secondary schools of West Gojjam. Specific objectives are:

- ✓ To explore the extent of teachers' engagement in action research;
- ✓ To identify constraints that hinder teachers' involvement in action research;
- ✓ To show possible strategies which will help to implement action research in schools.

Therefore, the findings from the research would be quite important to initiate teachers to participate actively in conducting action research. Decision makers can benefit from the results of the study to formulate relevant strategy to implement action research. It also gives insight for school principals who are responsible to support and follow up the implementation of action research.

2. Methodology

This study has been conducted in West Gojjam Zone preparatory secondary schools of Amhara National Regional State. The study was conducted with descriptive survey that followed both quantitative and qualitative Paradigms. The reason was that it is preferable to collect the data from a relatively large sample size and to explore the current practice about the issue under investigation. (Burns, R. 2000; Best and Kahn 2007).

2.1. Sample size and sampling technique: The subjects of the study were teachers and school principals of preparatory secondary schools. During data collection, there were 12 preparatory secondary schools in west Gojjam zone. From these schools, six preparatory secondary schools were selected randomly where a total of 316 teachers were working. Thus, from the total population of teachers in the sample schools, 83 (26.3 %) respondents were randomly used as a sample of the study with the assumption that similar experiences are found and respondents have equal chance of being selected. Six school principals were also included as the subject of the study which was selected using purposive sampling technique because they have special responsibility and experiences to facilitate and follow-up the practice of action research.

2.2. Data gathering tools and procedures: The data was collected through questionnaire and focused group discussion from teachers. Individual semi-structured interview was conducted with school principals. Before the actual administration of the questionnaire, pilot study was carried out. On the basis of the comments and suggestions, important improvements were made. In the process of data collection, the ethical values of the research were considered (Bogdan and Biklen 2003).

2.3. Data analysis methods: The data obtained from closed ended questionnaire was analyzed using frequency and percentage because they are easier to interpret and useful to compare the responses on each item. Whereas data collected through open ended questionnaire, focused group discussion and interview were discussed in the form of quotation and narration. Finally the overall courses of the study were summarized

3. Results and Discussions

3.1 Awareness about action research

The findings showed that more than half of teacher respondents (56.8%) rated that the awareness of teachers on action research was at the lower level and considerable number of them (39.2%) replied as medium. Regarding teachers' access for training in action research, the study revealed that majority of teacher respondents (93.2) had confirmed that they had taken action research training during their pre-service/in-service education.

Most of the participants agreed that teachers did not have adequate knowledge and skill about action research. In this regard, one of the teachers said:

Most of teachers, including me, had taken educational research at university was not satisfactory and could not enable us to do research confidently. This was mainly action research was given to us as a distance course and was insufficient to allow us to be engaged in action research.

From the above notation one can understand that the preparatory secondary school teachers have less confidence in conducting action research as a result of inadequate training and experience (Hopkins 2002).

The result of interview with principals confirmed that action research knowledge and skill were factors that impeded teachers from involvement in action research. Due to this fact, teachers have perceived that involving in action research as a huge task that demands special knowledge and extra time.

The evidence from teachers' focused group discussion as well as school principals' interview proved that the awareness of school principals who are responsible to support and follow-up the implementation of action

research was low. One of the research participants in the focused group discussion explained the situation in the following way:

The very serious problem observed on school principals was that they were trying to enforce teachers to carry out action research without having the knowledge of evaluating action research work and how technically support teachers.

From this response one can easily infer that not only teachers but also school principals lack understanding about action research. This may lead action research as a complex task and becomes difficult for school teachers to improve their teaching and increase students' achievement (MacNiff and Whitehead 2006).

3.2 The status of teachers' involvement in action research

The result from the teacher respondents' indicated that the extent to which the preparatory secondary school teachers' participation in action research was low where all of the school principals were in agreement with this information. For instance, one of the teachers from focused group discussion explained the research conditions of the teachers as:

The effort made by teachers and school principals to involve in action research activities proved to be very low. We teachers think doing research as an additional task. We have lacked commitment due to many factors which discourage us. For example, absence of incentives and lack of attention to education as a whole.

Therefore, to improve the quality of education, teachers at all levels are expected to do action research (MOE 2002). It is evident from the findings that the extent to which the preparatory secondary school teachers' participation in action research found to be insufficient. They have reserved themselves from engaging in action research and have simply confined themselves only to their teaching tasks.

3.3 Research issues addressed by teachers

It is also believed that school practice could be improved through a continuous investigation of a situation that requires improvement, seeking the means of improvement, and acting accordingly (Amare 2000). The evidence from the open ended questionnaire showed that those teachers who have done research, gave more emphasis on teaching methods, students' results and students' disciplinary problem. One of the participants described his view as follows:

I can say that few teachers who were involved in action research usually focused on issues like teaching methodology, assessments and students disciplinary problems. In general they usually gave emphasis on problems encountered in the classrooms even though they were not implementing their findings to improve students' learning.

This concept has shown that most of the issues that few teachers tried to conduct action research were on practical problems observed in the class room and school environment.

3.4 Support and follow-up system of action research

Most of teacher respondents replied that the support in the form of training, experience share, availability of reference materials and budget allocation to action research was low. In addition, 89.2% of the respondents confirmed that the monitoring as well as the feedback system was not satisfactory.

In the focused group discussion, teachers raised that there was no responsible body or unit to run action research in an effective manner. One of the participants said as "*In my school the school administration facilitated only stationary support when I and my colleagues were asking*". Interview conducted with school principals shared the above response. They told to the researcher that support and monitoring was the critical problem in the school which needs urgent improvement to increase the effectiveness of action research. In this regard, one of the school principal explained as:

Including my school and others, the main problem to be improved is that less attention given to support and follow up mechanism. No budget is allocated for research particularly for action research.

Thus, schools and educational offices are responsible to provide support for teachers to conduct action research (MOE 2002). But the above findings indicated that due to the limited support and follow-up system the practice of action research in preparatory secondary school is not running in the proper way.

3.5 Challenges in implementing action research

The findings from the secondary school teachers have shown that the major factors which hindered the practice of action research include:

- ✓ lack of skill and knowledge to implement action research.
- ✓ lack of interest of teachers
- ✓ shortage of training on action research

- ✓ absence of incentives
- ✓ lack of in sufficient support and follow –up
- ✓ shortage of time due to high work load

Skills on action research can be developed through continuous practice and training (Elliot 1991). In relation to the problems with the teachers' research skill, one of the group members reported as:

Teachers including myself are forced to do action research under the conditions we have lacked competence in research. The training we had taken on action research methodologies at university or college was not adequate and mainly focused on theoretical knowledge. We didn't get an opportunity to frequently exercise action research. Some of the teachers did not take any training and have no idea about action research. Thus it could not enable us to initiate to do action research on problems observed in class room and in schools.

This finding indicated that shortage of skill on action research was the major constraint to teachers and school principals in the preparatory secondary schools. All teacher participants in the focused group discussion reported that incentives for those teachers who involved in action research was almost none and do not attract teachers to participate in research activities. In relation to this issue, a participant informed as:

Incentives in a form of material, finance, promotion and others forms is very weak. The discontinuation of career structure has also its greater contribution that discouraged the teachers to take initiatives to involve in action research activities.

Most of the research participants have capitalized on the provision of rewards so as to initiate teachers' involvement in action research. The lack of reference books, research journals, research reports, internet access and other research facilities were problems that negatively affect teachers' involvement in action research (Seyoum 1998). On this point one of the participants said:

The library in our school is ill equipped that there are no research reference materials, research journals, and documented action research findings. Even there are shortages of chairs and tables to use in the library. In such a condition, it is not fair to force us to do action research.

The school principals shared the above idea that the library facilities were insufficiently equipped to attract teachers to do action research. From the above response one can understand that teachers might suffer with the poor existence of facilities and reading materials to carry out action research.

Moreover, lack of support and follow-up was also a critical problem to apply action research in schools. The findings obtained from focused group discussion indicated that the support provided for the preparatory secondary school teachers who tried to conduct action research seems negligible. Shortage of time or work load is also another problem mentioned by research participants in the focused group discussion.

3.6 How to increase teachers' involvement in action research?

Teachers and school principals need to improve the teaching learning process by tackling the problems that negatively influence their practice (Day 1999). Teacher respondents in the focused grouped discussion and open ended questionnaire shared their ideas about how to overcome the challenges observed in the practice of action research. In this regard, the suggestions were summarized as follows:

- ✓ School principals are responsible to create a research environment in schools such as: organize short term trainings and experience sharing, continuous and clear discussion with teachers how to be engaged in doing action research. As result, action research could be taken as part and parcel of teaching activity;
- ✓ Incentives should be given to those strived in resolving educational problems through action research;
- ✓ School libraries should be well organized and equipped with adequate and relevant research materials and current research journals;
- ✓ In order to give technical support and monitor the performance of teachers in action research, school principals should have the necessary knowledge and skills.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

4.1 Conclusions

Even though, the majority of the respondents had taken action research training during pre-service/in-service education, most of teachers and principals had not updated their action research knowledge and skills by further reading relevant research books or journals and research reports. As a result the required knowledge and skill of teachers in action research is low. This implies that the extent to which action research conducted by teachers was also low in preparatory secondary schools.

The findings also confirmed that conducting action research can improve teachers' professional competency as well as students' achievement. But there were problems which limit the participation of teachers on action research. The main challenges for carrying out action research in preparatory secondary schools include overload

in teaching and other committee activities, lack of incentives, lack of required knowledge and lack of skill of action research as well as absence of support and follow up system.

4.2 Recommendations

In light of the findings of this study and conclusions drawn, the following recommendations are suggested:

- ✓ It should be clear that the enhancement of the support of teachers to do action research is not only for personal gains of the teachers but also for the educational institution as well. Therefore, their engagement in action research has to be regarded as part and parcel of their duties. To this effect, they have to be encouraged not necessarily in terms of financial support, but by creating conducive working conditions, like personal promotion and long term training opportunities.
- ✓ In addition to facilitating short term trainings and experience sharing, teachers and school principals should update their action research knowledge and skill by further reading relevant research reading materials. Skills in doing action research can be developed through repeated practice. Therefore, there should be a mechanism through which researchers should take experience sharing on action research. For example, schools can create link with universities/ colleges which are potential areas of the research. Universities are also required to revise their action research curriculum that should be focused on skill development rather than theoretical knowledge.
- ✓ It might be difficult for those teachers, who are overloaded in teaching and other activities to be involved in action research properly. Thus, it is recommended that there should be a systematic and wise use of time allocation by school principals and by the teachers themselves.

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