

Action research's instructional impacts: Article review

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Abstract

The main intention of this paper was reviewing action research (AR) related academic articles and investigating the impacts of AR on classroom practices. In detail, it has addressed the benefits of AR for teachers and the influences of conducting AR on teachers' classroom practices. Moreover, the reviewer has examined the practices of conducting AR in Ethiopia. The reviewer has used and followed the interrelated steps of reviewing research literature. He has identified, downloaded, gathered, evaluated and selected original and frequently cited relevant research articles from diverse journals. It was structured and organised by using thematic literature review model. This article review may help student-teachers, teacher-educators and instructional supervisors to get awareness about the impacts of conducting AR. AR improves the classroom practices of teachers, empowers them, and enhances their self-confidence, problem solving and leadership ability. The teachers' practical experiences on engaging and conducting AR in Ethiopian context is not that much sufficient.

Keywords: Action research, impacts and instructional practices.

1. Introduction

Education is a vital tool for social, economic and technological changes of every individual, country and society. The function of education is to make individuals to think critically and solve his or her personal and societal problems. Individuals learn and get experiences throughout their life through the help of formal, non-formal or informal forms of education. It helps individuals to construct and reconstruct their experiences or understandings about their surroundings and adjust themselves with their real life situations (Read, 2020; Tasdugen, Tekin, Kaya & Gunel, 2020).

Designing, providing and having the quality education which improves and changes the quality of every individual's life is the major goal of every country, including Ethiopia. As indicated in a recent education sector development program, expanding quality education which contributes for the rapid progress in economy, technology and industry is a key concern of Ethiopia and its whole people (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2015). This implies the quality of teaching and quality of learning are the key issues of government officials, educational organisations (Universities, Colleges, Pre-primary, Primary, Secondary and Preparatory Schools), teachers and students. The quality of society's economic, technological and political life and the performances of educational institutions, teachers and learners are highly determined by the quality and quantity of thoughts, knowledge, skills and experiences which learners have and teachers provide in the educational institutions.

The reviewer has been advising students who have been attending in Debre Berhan University (DBU) about conducting Action Research (AR) project both in summer and regular post graduate diploma in teaching (PGDT) programs. These students become teachers in different elementary, general secondary and preparatory schools in various regions of Ethiopia. Besides, the reviewer has been worked as a facilitator and advisor of higher diploma program (HDP) candidates or teacher educators who were teaching in DBU about AR project and related issues. Giving adequate advice for these candidates requires sufficient theoretical and practical knowledge and familiarity on the issues vis-a-vis AR. Because of this, reading, studying and reviewing various previous research works about the impacts of AR on classroom practices was needed.

This has helped the reviewer himself in the process of giving advice for these candidates. It may also assist other teacher-educators, including the colleagues of the reviewer who are interested to conduct AR in their classrooms or who have been advising their student-teachers about AR projects. Finally, this article review may be used as a starting point and reference for identifying and conducting other related AR works. Therefore, the objectives of this review were to examine, understand, recap and document the benefits of conducting AR for teachers, how AR affects the instructional practices of teachers and review the practices of conducting AR in Ethiopia.

The reviewer has used and followed interrelated steps of reviewing research literature suggested by Creswell (2012). He has primarily identified, downloaded, gathered, evaluated and selected original and frequently cited relevant articles from different international journals. Careful inquiry was made to describe and summarise about the impacts of AR on classroom practices. Finally, this article review was structured, organised and written by using thematic literature review model. In a thematic literature review model, the reviewer or the researcher identifies the theme and discusses the major ideas/findings/results from the related and relevant studies. This approach of organising and writing article review is mostly recommended and frequently used in journal articles, dissertations and theses (Creswell, 2012).

2. AR instructional impacts

AR and Teaching/Learning Situations: AR is a kind of applied research which is conducted by teachers to solve their classroom problems. It is used when teachers have specific and practical instructional problems to be solved in their classrooms immediately. It allows teachers to take ownership over their teaching activities. Improvements and changes in teachers' thinking and

confidence happen as they reflect and learn about their teaching and their learners' learning. It provides them with opportunity to design intentional plan so as to examine their classroom practice or experiences (Creswell, 2012).

AR is an important tool which helps teachers to look closer at their own teaching and learning situations. It makes teachers more aware of the way they teach and the strategies they use and invites them to change what they are doing to meet the needs of their learners in a better way. Although it is difficult to influence the learning process of each and every student positively, conducting AR also benefits learners directly. This is because, if the teacher searches out the best teaching strategy which works best with his/her students and subject matter helps learners and improves the quality of the classroom learning (O'Connor, Greene & Anderson, 2006).

AR and the Quality of Teaching/Learning: Firdissa (2017) has investigated about the perceived roles of AR for the teaching quality of English as a foreign language in two public universities of Ethiopia (Jimma and Hawassa Universities). Forty three instructors and 150 learners were participated in his research from both institutions. In his study, the perception of teachers and learners was AR highly enhances the quality of teaching and learning English language in Ethiopian higher institutions through enhancing learning, improving classroom practices, practitioners and problem resolutions.

Participating and conducting AR can empower teachers and increases their self-confidence by increasing their awareness of analysing students' work. When participants were asked how the AR experience empowered them, they responded that they perceived themselves as more effective and confident teachers (O'Connor et al., 2006). This means, it encourages them to know their own gaps including their students' strong sides and weak sides.

In their research, O'Connor, Greene and Anderson have also examined the impacts of conducting AR on teachers' futures instructional practices. They showed that it has a long lasting impact on improving the teacher's future career practices. Participants (teacher-students) who involved in their study said that, AR which they have conducted for fulfilling their Master's Degree requirements prepared them to face and take risks with future learners and will make them to try or test different instructional methods.

By using Case Study Method, Smeets and Ponte (2009) have studied the impacts of AR on educational practices of in-service teachers themselves in De Hondsberg Pedagogical Institute in Netherlands. In their study, Smeets and Ponte concluded that it forces teachers to choose, use and experiment various educational and pedagogical theories deliberately depending on the classroom situations and the traits of learners.

Smeets and Ponte explain that conducting AR not only affects the practices of those teachers who conduct it, but also it influences the teaching practices of other teachers in the school environments. AR encourages teachers to contribute for the improvements of another educational community (for instance, their colleagues/co-workers, instructional supervisors or directors) through dialogue or debate depending on experiences gained from conducting this classroom based research. It invites sharing of learners' and teaching related experiences and ideas among teachers in the school settings. The quality of reflection and dialogue which teachers make in the classroom also improves in the process of AR. Smeets and Ponte have concluded that actively taking an initiative to encourage and initiate educational improvements improves teachers' leadership skills in their work.

AR and Teachers' Professional Development: There is a strong linkage between AR and teachers' professional development. Conducting AR enhances teachers' professional practices (Firdissa, 2015; Rukya, 2016). It encourages them to update their professional knowledge, skills and attitudes. According to Creswell (2012), participating in this type of research gives teachers to evaluate and learn from their past experiences and change their present and future practices in and out of the classroom continuously.

There is a relationship among teaching, learning, teacher education and AR (Hine, 2013; Hong & Lawrence, 2011). The problem which teachers and learners have been facing during the teaching-learning process is the starting point of AR. The ultimate goal of AR is giving immediate solutions for immediate classroom problems that teachers and learners have been encountering and improving the quality of teaching and learning. Since its purpose is solving immediate, specific and practical classroom problems, AR can equip teachers with necessary problem solving skills.

3. The implementation of AR in Ethiopian schools

AR is taught as a course at pre-service undergraduate program level and as a part of research coursework in MA/MSc programs in Ethiopia (Firdissa, 2015). It is taught either in a separate manner or including the concepts/theories of AR into others related courses. For example, AR is one element of the course 'Teachers as a Reflective Practitioner' in PGDT Program (MoE, 2013). It is also integrated into HDP as a training issue among others for higher institutions teachers (MoE, 2011b). Its aim is helping teachers to improve their own teaching and the learning of learners. Conducting AR to address and solve teaching-learning related problems is considered as characteristics of role model teachers in Ethiopian school improvement program, (MoE, 2011a). This indicates that Ethiopian teachers are expected to conduct AR to solve their classroom problems and to improve their teaching and their students' academic performance.

Thus, in this review paper, the reviewer has examined and provided an overview on the practices of conducting AR on instructional practices in Ethiopia and came up with the following research-based findings. Asefa (2014) has explored the practice of AR in Addis Ababa City Primary schools by involving 87 teachers, six school principals, two Woreda educational officers and others. He concluded that the practice of conducting AR was low. Only 18.4% of teachers participated in conducting action and 81.6% were not involved from those 87 participant teachers.

Another related study was conducted in Addis Ababa City (specially, in Bole Sub-City) Preparatory Schools by Megabit Nigusso in 2015. Megabit has assessed the status of teachers' engagement in AR, including their knowledge and skills about how to conduct this kind of instructional research. He included 60 preparatory teachers from different subject backgrounds, six school principals and two Woreda education officers. Megabit has find out similar findings with Asefa's research findings although the grade levels where they have conducted their research were different. He has concluded that although 71.6% of the respondent teachers were engaged in AR and related activities, the level of their engagement was very minimal.

Although teachers were provided with trainings on AR, as the studies conducted by Asefa (2014), Firdissa (2007, 2015) and Megabit (2015) indicated, they were not adequately and regularly engaged in conducting practical AR as result of the following main hindering factors. Some of these hindering factors were the existence of overload in teaching-learning related works, large class size, lack of motivation from the side of teachers, lack of enough practical AR experience and skills which resulted from lack of practical AR related trainings, workshops or seminars, lack of financial and material supports, shortage of time, lack of encouragement from the top management, teachers were rushing for content coverage and etc.

4. Conclusion

This review paper was focused on studying the different AR related works and examining the impacts of AR on classroom practices. It also reviewed the implementation of AR in Ethiopian educational institutions. The reviewer has identified, downloaded, gathered and selected original and frequently cited relevant research articles on AR from international journals and made a review about the influences of AR on classroom practices and its practices in Ethiopian schools.

AR is an applied educational research which teachers use to solve specific, practical and immediate problems. Using AR as a tool to solve classroom problems allows teachers to take responsibility for their own tasks, decisions and outcomes. It empowers them by enlightening their awareness regarding what they and their students do, how they do what they do and why they do a given instructional activities.

Participating in AR enhances teachers' thinking, problem solving skills, leadership ability and self-confidence in their profession. It prepares them to experience and be ready to take their profession associated risks. It provides them with more opportunities to learn and increase their professional knowledge, experiences and skills. It creates suitable environments to interact, share experiences and influence one another among or between teachers, supervisors or schools administrators. AR can advance the quality of classroom learning and teaching.

The teachers' practical experiences on engaging and conducting AR in Ethiopian context is not that much sufficient. This is as results of various obstacles for instance, the existence of overload in teaching–learning related works, large class size, lack of motivation from the side of teachers, lack of enough practical AR experience and skills which may be resulted from lack of practical AR related trainings, workshops or seminars, lack of financial and material supports, shortage of time, lack of encouragement from the top management and teachers were rushing for content coverage.

What should be done in Ethiopian educational institutions in the future? What can I do as an advisor? The reviewer's final suggestion and message for him-self, for other teacher practitioners, for educational institutions and for other concerned bodies is 'in the classroom settings where there is no AR, there will be no empowerment of teachers, there will be no improvements of learners' academic performance and there will be no improvements in classroom practices or quality of education. Those teachers who are not taking part in conducting AR cannot be fruitful in their teaching profession and cannot make their learners successful.'

Therefore, educational organisations and teachers in Ethiopia who provide AR trainings and advices should focus on its practical experiences, skills and procedures. Adequate time, finances and the necessary materials should be assigned for teachers to engage in conducting AR effectively. School managements and instructional supervisors should encourage teachers and enhance their inner passion and interests. Additional seminars and workshops on how to execute practical AR should be organised in local school settings.

Higher educational institutions that provide trainings on AR should follow up and supervise whether those candidates who have obtained training apply AR in their classroom or not. Finally, unnecessary wastage of time, money, materials, teachers' knowledge and experiences should be minimised by inspiring teachers to implement AR, solve the instructional problems and benefit themselves and their learners. Additional exhaustive article review and empirical study should be made in the future regarding the impacts of AR and the practices of conducting AR in Ethiopian context.

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