Action Research in Selected Teacher Education Colleges of Oromia: Knowledge base, Practices and Challenges

Dame Abera Abdi∗

Abstract: The major purpose of this study was to assess teachers' awareness, current practices and challenges of conducting action research in two Teacher Education Colleges (TECs). Data were collected and analyzed from 67 randomly selected teacher educators and two purposively selected deans. Questionnaire and interview were used to collect the data. The study revealed that majority of the teacher educators had inadequate awareness about the theoretical perspectives and procedures of action research. The results also indicated that the notion of reflective practice is almost non-existent among the TECs. It is found that the culture of undertaking action research is not well established and developed. Lack of time, teachers' low level of commitment, lack of teacher professional development, inadequate teacher support systems and lack of incentives were reported as the major challenges the teacher faced to undertake   action research.

∗ Lecturer, Adama University

Background to the Study

The theoretical perspective that informs the present research comes from Rearick and Feldman's (1999) construct of the action research space that consists of three dimensions, namely: theoretical orientation (Grundy, 1987), purpose (Noffke, 1997), and reflection (Feldman et al., 2001; Rearick and Feldman, 1999). The theoretical orientation dimension of action research aligns with Habermas's (1971), Carr and Kemmis's (1986), and Grundy's (1987) technical, practical, and emancipatory framework for analyzing curriculum practices (Rearick and Feldman, 1999). In the technical orientation of action research, problems are defined, solutions are sought, and actions are governed by theories, prepositions, and empirical laws (Schon, 1983; Mc Kernan, 1996; Grundy, 1987). In the practical orientation to action research, stress is on solving practical problems. Decisions are made through deliberation, and knowledge production comes about through interpretation, detailed description and meaning-making (Marsh 1997; Harnett, 2007; Habermas, 1971). Similarly, in the emancipatory orientation to action research, stress is placed on promoting autonomous action, critical inquiry, and organized action to overcome social obstacles (McNiff, 2002).

The purpose dimension of action research includes professional understanding, personal skill development, and critique of work conditions (Noffke, 1997). In this sense, the professional purpose of action research emphasizes the production of new educational knowledge, and bridging the gap between theory and practice (Feldman, 2002; Elliot, 1991, 2007). According to Noffke (1997), the personal purposes of engaging in action research are greater self-knowledge, fulfillment in one's work, a deeper understanding of one's own practice, and the development of personal relationships through researching together. At the same time, the political purpose of engaging in action research involves critiquing the nature of teachers' work and work places and the advancement of social agenda (Feldman et al., 2001).

Similarly, the reflective dimension mainly focuses on the self-reflective process (Stenhouse, 1975; Schon 1983); that is, at the centre of action research (Harnett, 2007; Feldman and Capobianco, 2000; McNiff, 2002). In this sense, action research and reflective practices are the most effective learning experiences that promote teachers' professional development by perceiving weaknesses in practice (Rosaen and Schram, 1997; Glathar, 2008; Onel, 1997; Gaff, 1976; Ferrance, 2000).

In general, action research can be conceptualized as a form of self-reflective practice (McNiff, 2002; Elliott, 1991; McKernan, 1996), a model for teacher professional development (Feldman and Capobianco, 2000; Harnett, 2007; Loughran, 1995; Stenhouse, 1975) or an inquiry conducted on a particular issue of current concern with the aim of improving their own professional practices (Koul, 1988; Kerlinger, 1986; Anderson and Burns, 1989; Marsh, 1997; Lewin and Stuart, 1991). In Rosaen and Schram's (1997) view as well as in McKernan's (1996) view of action research, educational problems and issues are best identified and investigated at the classroom and school settings, and that they are best studied and researched by those practitioners and participants experiencing the problem. Moreover, it is believed that a productive relationship between reflection and practical inquiry is one of the primary reasons for utilizing action research to help teachers understand about themselves, their students, their colleagues, their curriculum, and determine ways to continually improve (Ferrance, 2000; Elliot, 2007; George and Cowan, 1999; Kemmis and Mc Taggart, 1988).

Research and theory show that lack of adequate resources (Ferrance, 2000), and organizational features (Wallace, 1998; Rosaen and Schram, 1997) can be the major constraints to doing action. In addition to this, teachers' work overload (Marsh, 1997), inadequate knowledge, skills, and commitment (Loughran, 1995; Lewin and Stuart, 1991), teachers' implicit beliefs and routinized behaviors(Loughran, 1995) and a clash of professional values between teachers' craft culture and the culture of reflective practice can also be challenges to teachers' involvement in action research (Harnett, 2007).

Though the introduction of action research into the Ethiopian teacher education program has been a very recent phenomenon, it attracted attention of the Education and Training Policy document (TGE, 1994) and other subsequent education strategy documents such as the Education Sector Development Program (ESDP), Teacher Education System Overhaul (TESO), and Teacher Development Program (TDP). All these documents call for emphasis on action research. Particularly, the Education and Training Policy (ETP) states that research of practical societal impacts will be given priority and the necessary steps will be taken to facilitate the coordinated efforts of all those concerned (TGE, 1994). Similarly, according to Teshome (2006), the Education Sector Strategy Document states that research into curriculum development, instructional methods and evaluation techniques shall be encouraged and that the teaching-learning process will be integrated with research.

Statement of the Problem

Teacher education colleges are institutions of higher learning mainly responsible for producing qualified teachers for upper primary schools. In addition to producing qualified teachers for the level, these institutions are also responsible for facilitating conditions for teacher educators to conduct practical research into their classroom situations (TGE, 1994; TESO, 2003). Though this is anticipated, there is no empirical evidence to indicate the extent to which teacher educators are currently engaged in action research and use action research result to solve real educational problems in their classrooms. However, there is evidence to show that through action research teacher educators not only learn about themselves, their students, their curriculum, and their colleagues, but they also learn how to become good role models for their student teachers (Ferrance, 2000; Elliot, 2007; George and Cowan, 1999).

Educational problems and issues identified at the classroom and school setting are assumed to be best studied and researched by practitioners and

participants experiencing the problem (Rosaen and Schram, 1997; McKernan, 1996). But it needs to be noted that there is no adequate and up-to date evidence that demonstrates this in the context of TECs of Oromia. Teacher educators, as insiders, may have realistic experiences of their classroom situations and what needs to be studied. However, there are a number of factors that may interact and limit teacher educator engagement in action research. Limited knowledge and skills in action research, teachers' attitudes, lack of institutional support and resources (Harnett, 2007) can be mentioned as examples of these hindering factors.

Evidence shows that action research improves professional understanding and personal skill development. However, which of these purposes are being served in the context of TECs of Oromia is not well examined. Reflection is considered to be at the heart of action research **(**Harnett, 2007; Elliot, 1991), yet the extent to which and in what ways college instructors reflect on their own professional practices is not examined well and in-detail. In additions there are different theoretical orientations to action research (Rearick and Feldman, 1999), but no study has documented the theoretical orientation used as a guide to action research undertakings in the context of Oromia TECs.

On top of this, the Education and Training Policy (ETP) of Ethiopia suggests that efforts be made to facilitate conditions for teacher educators to conduct action research in their classroom. However, there is no evidence that demonstrates the extent to which TECs actually facilitate the necessary conditions for teacher educators at the grass root level. The provision of a clear policy is the first step to get activities done but this, on its own, is not a guarantee for implementation. Conducting action research requires, more than other things, teachers' knowledge and skills in action research procedure that can be acquired through focused training and practice.

Generally, despite the efforts made by the government so far to translate action research into the teaching-learning process at the classroom level, little is known about the extent to which these government efforts have

actually been realized in the context of TECs. Similarly, there is no adequate data to indicate the challenges that teacher educators currently and actually face in undertaking action research in their respective TECs. In conclusion, the above points make clear that there is an acute need for further investigation of the practice of and the challenges related to carrying out action research in the TEC settings. Thus, the present study is an attempt to address this felt need.

Accordingly, the following basic research questions were formulated to address the issues.

1. To what extent are teacher educators aware of the theoretical perspectives and procedures of action research?
2. In what ways do teacher educators reflect on their practical classroom problems?
3. Is there a culture or trend of undertaking action research in teacher education colleges?
4. What major challenges do teacher educators currently face in conducting action research?

Purpose of the study

The major purpose of this study was to assess the awareness, culture of and the perceived barriers to undertaking action research in teacher education Colleges of Oromia Regional State. Specifically, this study intended to:

- identify the major challenges that teacher educators currently face in conducting action research;
- examine the culture or status of action research in the TECs of Oromia;
- examine how teacher educators reflect on their practical classroom problems; and

- investigate the level of theoretical knowledge and action research skills of teacher educators.

Significance of the Study

The findings of the present study are expected to have theoretical values in giving insight into the nature of action research. Classroom research helps teacher educators to enhance their personal growth and professional competence. Because of this, teachers are beneficiaries of the results of the present study. Moreover, policy makers, curriculum experts and the administrators at various levels can draw lessons from the findings of the present study. This may help them to enhance the professional development of teachers. Lastly, improved classroom practices and pedagogical skills contribute to improved student learning. This means that students can also be the major beneficiaries of the results of the present study.

Limitations of the Study

In this study, the instruments of data collection were limited to questionnaire and interview. The collected data were not triangulated from various sources, such as focus group discussion, observation, and documentary analysis. At the same time, the data sources were also limited to teachers and deans; students as well as educational experts at various levels of administration were not included. As a result, the researcher feels that such limited data sources, data collection instruments, and data analysis procedures may affect the validity and reliability of the data used in the study. There is a need for further research to consider the aspects that were not given sufficient attention in this study.

Definition of Operational Terms

Action research - refers to a practical inquiry that aims at improving classroom situations and developing teachers' reflective capacities.

Knowledge base - refers to the teachers' level of understanding and awareness of the nature and essence of action research.

Reflective practice-refers to the ability of teachers to continuously appraise and look into their professional performance with the view of further improvement.

Teachers' professional development - refers to a professional growth opportunity in which teachers develop their skills and knowledge, and improve their practices.

Teachers' professional development standard - refers to criteria around clear expectations for what teachers should know and be able to do to help all students learn.

Challenges to action research - refers to the constraints or factors that limit the participation of teachers in action research.

Action research culture - refers to the degree to which action research becomes part of the teacher education institution's regular activity and program.

Research Methodology

Research Design

The major purpose of the study was to assess teacher educators' awareness, of action research their practice, and perceived barriers to conducting action research. Descriptive survey design was used for data gathering. The validity and efficiency of the survey design in describing and interpreting current situation as well as in saving resources has been confirmed by several researchers. For instance, according to Kerlinger

(1986), the survey method enables the researcher to gather data on a one-shot basis and at a particular time.

Participants of the Study

This study was conducted in two Teacher Education Colleges in Oromia Regional State: Robe and Assela Teacher Colleges. The data sources for the study were instructors and deans of the two colleges. Multiple-methods of sampling were employed for selecting the participants of the study.

In the first place, the Oromia Education Bureau was contacted to identify teacher education colleges available in the region. Accordingly, a list of five teacher education colleges was obtained from the bureau with the number of teachers working in the respective colleges at the time. Secondly, out of the five teacher education colleges, two (40% of them) were selected through area or cluster (specifically lottery method) sampling techniques. Once the two colleges were identified the teacher populations in the two colleges were considered as the target group from which the representative participants of the study were drawn. Thirdly, from among 105 instructors teaching in the two colleges (51 from Robe and 54 from Asella), 67 participants (33 from Robe and 34 from Asella), were selected through proportional random sampling technique and used as participants in this study. This selection procedure helped to take proportional sample size that is relative to the size of the given population.

Lastly, two deans, one from each of the colleges, were purposefully selected and used as data sources. Deans are structurally responsible for managing and supporting teachers in their professional careers. They also ensure policy implementation related to action research.

Instruments of Data Collection

In this study, questionnaire and interview were employed as data collection instruments. The questionnaire, which had 40 items, was designed and

used to gather data from teachers on their experiences related to professional development and practices. It consisted of five parts, namely, demographics, action research awareness, reflective practice, culture of action research, and barriers to conducting action research. That is, the demographic measure consisted of six items related to the colleges, the teachers that were teaching in at the time, their teaching experiences in the college, their level of qualification, workload, area of specialization, and gender. The action research awareness measure, on other hand, consisted of five closed ended and five open-ended items that were primarily designed to assess the knowledge base of college instructors on action research. What is more, the reflective practice measure had 20 items of self-report Likert type scale. The items in this section were mainly designed to assess the ways college instructors reflect on and appraise their classroom professional practices. Moreover, the culture of action research measure was designed to access information about the status and trend of conducting action research in the two colleges. The barriers to action research measure were developed to generate information about the major constraints the college instructors thought to have affected their involvement in action research.

As a means of triangulating data generating sources, interview was employed in addition to questionnaire in the study. The interview data generated from the participants were intended to substantiate the quantitative data generated through the questionnaire. Ten interview guide questions or protocols were developed from the literature reviewed. The interview protocols were designed particularly for the college deans to generate information regarding their perceptions of teachers' knowledge of and attitude towards action research. In addition, issues like the extent of instructors' engagement in action research, the culture of action research undertakings in colleges, the availability of training and material facilities to enable teachers to conduct action research were among the points focused on during the interviews.

Validation of the Instruments

The content validity of the research instruments was established by a panel consisting of people from psychology and education. These experts were asked to review, comment on and judge the relevance, adequacy and appropriateness of the instruments for measuring the constructs identified in the study. At the same time, the language appropriateness of the research instruments was judged by one English language teacher. Revisions and amendments were made as necessary based on the comments and suggestions obtained before the final versions of the instruments were developed and administered to the target participants.

Procedures of Data Collection

The purpose of the study was explained to the participants prior to data collection.   This was followed by conducting interview with the key informants. Two interview sessions (one with the Dean of Asella TEC and the other with Robe TEC Dean) were conducted for about 60 to 80 minutes each. During the interview, the key informants were presented with some guide questions to initiate the discussion. During the interview, necessary notes were taken and the responses were also tape recorded.   The interviews were conducted in the respective Dean's office by the researcher.

The questionnaire was administered to the study participants in a face-to-face approach. At the same time, at each stage of data collection, the researcher was available along with one assistant to further elaborate the purpose of the questionnaire.

Procedures of Data Analysis

The quantitative data generated from the participants through closed-ended questionnaire was analyzed using descriptive statistics, such as mean and percentage.   Mean was calculated for the reflective practice scale item responses and was used to determine the extent to which teacher educators

reflected on their professional practices. The qualitative data generated through interview and open-ended questionnaire were analyzed using words. The data was integrated with quantitative data during the analysis and interpretation of the results.

Results and Discussion

Sample Characteristics

The information obtained from the participants of this study indicates that there were no female teacher educators in the two sample colleges. This shows that there is a problem of gender mix in the sample TECs though it is believed that the presence of female teacher educators serves as role model for female students. It was also observed that about 2.98 % of the participants have diploma, 46.26 % have first degree and 50.76 % have master's degree. This shows that most of the teacher educators are qualified for the level. The implication is that the more the teachers are qualified and experienced the better they are at identifying problems for action research in their classroom.

Moreover, 17.4% of the participants were from social science, 24.65% were from natural science, 4.35% were from mathematics, 20.3% were from education, and 33.3% were from language departments. Similarly, 46% of the respondents had only 1 year of college teaching experience, 27.13% had 2-3 years of college teaching experiences, and 26.87% had 4-8 years of college teaching experiences. The implication is that teacher educators with more experience of college teaching are better exposed to college practices, professional challenges, and various training opportunities. They are also better able to manage the challenges encountered. Lastly, 33.33% of these respondents had less than 12 periods of work load, 35.84% had 12-18 periods of work load and 30.83% of them had more than 20 periods of work load per week both in the regular and the evening programmes. The issue of teaching load coupled with administrative duties seems to link inversely with

conducting action research. This means that the more teacher educators are overloaded with teaching and administrative tasks, the lesser time they have to devote to action research. Thus, there is a need to balance the time to be devoted to teaching administrative duties and research as so to help teacher educators' regularly carryout action research and improve their teaching practices.

Awareness and knowledge of Action Research

Table 1: Teacher Educators' Perception of their Awareness of Action Research

Item	Alternatives	No (%)
Have you ever received adequate and relevant awareness raising training on the theoretical perspectives and procedures of action research?	A. Yes	22 (32)
	B. No	45 (68)

According to the data summarized in Table 1 32% of the participants they had received awareness raising training on the procedures of action research. The majority of the respondents (68%) reported they have not received any awareness raising training on the nature and procedures of action research. This could most likely be because the majority of the participants had only one year of experience in college teaching. In what ways and to what extent does the college support teacher educators; the interviewees (the Deans) said that one way of supporting teacher educators to improve their professional development is through providing the Higher Diploma Program (HDP). The interviewed Deans said, action research is one component of the training package. However, according to the Deans response, the turnover of teacher educators is very high either due to study leave or promotion to other government sectors. Because of this, a significant proportion of teacher educators are employed every year, and this has made involving many new teachers in the HDP program difficult. This implies is that, due to various reasons, not all the teacher educators of the sample TECs have equal exposure to the action research trainings provided

through HDP. This means that the teacher educators do not have similar experience and understanding of action research procedures.

Table 2: Teachers' Perception of their Knowledge and Skills in Action Research

Item	Choices	No (%)
As a teacher educator, do you feel that you have adequate knowledge about and skills in action research?	A. Yes	19 (28)
	B. No	48 (72)

The majority of the participants (72%) as shown in Table 2 above reported that they do not have adequate knowledge base about and skills in action research. This may be linked to the fact that either the teacher educators did not receive training on action research at all or the training was only one-shot and inadequate to enhance the required knowledge and skills. However, regardless of all this, all teacher educators are expected to undertake action research to regularly improve their teaching duties. Similarly, in response to a question "S*hould teacher educators be researchers of their own classroom practices and why?"* almost all participants (91%) replied 'yes.' Most of them said teachers are in a better position to know the realities of their classrooms than outsiders and other highly trained academic researchers who are far from the actual conditions of the classroom. Teacher educators are more relevant and closer to inquire classroom problems than others. This means that knowing the 'realities of their classroom conditions better than others' can be a prerequisite for teacher educators to undertake action research. However, conducting action research demands possessing adequate knowledge and skills in action research.

The Trend/Culture of Action Research in TECs

Table 3: Teachers' Perception of their Involvement in Action Research

Item	Alternatives	No
Have you ever conducted action research in your college?	A. Yes	12 (13)
	B. No	55 (87)

As shown in Table 3 above, over three-fourths of the participants (87%) reported that they did not conduct action research at all. This may be linked to a number of factors. As indicated previously, almost half of the teacher educators were new employees at the colleges, and because of this they do not have formal training in action research. They also had no adequate experiences. Another possible reason is that even those teacher educators who had adequate experiences in college teaching and some training in action research may not have the commitment, incentives and material facilities to undertake action research. In response to the question '*To what extent do you think teacher educators are engaged in action research at your respective college and why*?" the college deans replied that the level of teacher educators' engagement in action research is very low. In the opinion of these informants, this limited involvement of teacher educators in action research may be related to work load. They also pointed out that some teacher educators think action research is imposed on them from administration. The interviewees further pointed out that while some teacher educators really lack knowledge and skills to carry out action research, others complain about shortage of resource supply, attitudinal problems and lack of commitment are also among the factors the interviewees mentioned. Generally, according to the deans, it may be possible to say that the issues of action research are discussed during the HDP training sessions, and that most teacher educators do action research merely for the requirement of the HDP. In general, integrating action research with teaching is not yet realized to the extent required in the context of teacher education colleges. Attempts at conducting conventional research mainly to gain some incentives or academic promotion can be observed among some teacher educators.

Such attempts, in the interviewed Deans' opinion, had insignificant contributions in improving classroom practices.

At the same time, of those participants who reported to have undertaken research, none were from natural and social science backgrounds, while 34% were from language areas and 66% were from education background. This implies that teacher educators' understanding as well as involvement in action research practices varies across the fields of specialization in the TECs. Similarly, in response to the question 'W*hat were your major purposes for undertaking research*?' only 10% replied that the motive behind conducting their research was improving classroom practices. The remaining 90% reported that their basic reasons were to gain incentives and academic promotion. Thus, even though one purpose of doing research is for personal growth in which gaining incentives and academic promotion is considered, this is far from the mission and purposes of action research. The primary goal of action research is professional development.

Despite this, in response to the question 'H*ow do you describe the trend or culture of action research in your respective institution*?' the interviewed Deans reported that the culture of undertaking action research is well established in the TECs. They added that the notion of undertaking research is primarily linked with gaining external rewards rather than improving class room practices.

Table 4: Perception of teachers' ways of improving their teaching practices

Item	Alternatives	No (%)
In what ways do you attempt to improve your teaching practices most of the time?	A. Regular and critical self-reflection	4 (5.9)
	B. Action research	5 (7.4)
	C. Dialogue journals (conversation)	4 (5.9)
	D. Laboratory experiments	9 (13.4)
	E. Collaborative discussions with colleagues	7 (10.4)
	F. informal feedback from students	39 (57)

As presented in Table 4 above, the trend of using action research, critical self-reflection, dialogue journals and collaborative discussions with colleagues as common devices for looking back into one's teaching practices seems almost non-existent. Instead, as reported by the majority of the participants (57%), using students' feedback seems a common practice. Even though student feedback can be one way of gaining insights into one's teaching weaknesses and strengths, obtaining valid and reliable data to make sound decisions requires corroborating and triangulating the data sources. Similarly, in response to the question 'I*n what ways do you think teacher educators try to improve their teaching practices*?' the Deans replied that teacher educators are occasionally called on by their respective departments to discuss common departmental and institutional matters The college research and publication office also invites teacher educators to present their research papers to the public in which discussions of general academic research can be enhanced. Other than these, there is no system specifically established for teacher educators to discuss debate and share experiences about their teaching practices, the problems they encounter, and the way they manage their classroom problems. This shows the extent to which the teaching-learning process is left almost exclusively to the teacher educators to deal with. The college administration is mainly responsible for regularly assisting and creating an attractive environment in

which teacher educators can up-date and integrate their teaching practices with recent technological and research outcomes.

Reflective Practice

The reflective-practice measure was assessed through a five point Likert type scale questionnaire, where 1= never; 2= seldom; 3= sometimes; 4= often; and 5= very often.

To test the level of reflective practices among teacher educators in the TECs an arithmetic average value or mean was calculated for the entire raw scores of the scale. Accordingly, the calculated or observed mean value was found to be M=2.70. Thus, the fact that the observed mean value (2.7) is less than that of the ideal mean value (3.0) clearly indicated that the reflective practices of the teacher educators seem to have not been to the expected standard in TECs. This does not mean that there is no any practice of self-reflection at all, but it means that there is a gap between what is expected to be practiced and what is actually observed that needs to be bridged. In a similar vein, in response to the question, 'H*ow do you evaluate the level of teacher educators' reflective practices in their classroom teaching*?' the interviewed Deans replied that the college administration tries to encourage teacher educators to appraise their every day instructional performances in accordance with what has been suggested in the existing documents (Training and Education policy, TESO guidelines, and TDP), this does seem to be taking place at the colleges. This data imply that though reflection is considered to be at the heart of action research, the level and status of reflective practices among the teacher educators in the context of the TECs seems to be inadequate, and calls for immediate intervention.

Barriers to Action Research

Table 5: Teachers' Perception of Factors Influencing their Involvement in Action Research

Item	Alternatives	1st No	2nd No	3rd No	4th No	5th No	6th No	7th No	8th No	9th No	10th No	11th No	12th No
Rank the following perceived potential constraints to action research in order from the most severe to the least severe one.	Maximum work load	14	15	5	1	4	6	4	2	3	6	4	4
	Lack of adequate time	16	11	3	4	3	5	4	5	2	4	5	3
	Lack of adequate resources	12	9	4	7	4	7	6	2	6	4	2	3
	Lack of adequate and relevant training on the procedures of action research	12	12	8	4	4	3	3	4	2	2	6	4
	Lack of adequate knowledge and skills of action research	6	10	3	5	3	2	4	2	6	5	5	12
	Inadequate support systems for teachers	9	10	10	5	7	4	7	7	7	3	-	1
	Few incentives available for teacher-researchers	9	3	10	2	5	7	5	9	4	2	3	6
	Lack of teacher professional development standards	12	6	5	10	6	7	2	4	4	4	3	3
	Lack of definite time table for research activities	4	5	3	1	6	7	8	6	7	11	4	5
	My own reluctances or carelessness	3	4	1	1	-	4	-	5	3	5	7	28

As shown in Table 5 above, time pressure due to teaching and administrative work load lack of teacher professional development standards, lack of adequate and relevant awareness raising training, lack of adequate resources and support systems, and lack of adequate incentives for teacher-researchers were reported as the most severe constraints for the respondents to properly undertake action research in TECs. Moreover, in response to the question, 'I*n your opinion what major factors do you think affect teacher educators' involvement in action research*?' the Deans reported resource limitation, limited knowledge and skills, heavy work load lack of interest and commitment on the part of teacher educators and lack of established research tradition to be the constraints faced in conducting action research in TECs.

Discussion

Teacher Educators' Awareness about Action Research

The findings of this study show that most of the teacher educators of the sample TECs had inadequate awareness about the nature and procedures of action research. This may be linked to the fact that most of these teacher educators were newly employed, and that they did not gain access to action research trainings. However, they are expected to undertake action research in their classroom. Instructors' limited awareness can be one reason for the practice of action research to lag far behind its theory in TECs. Instructors' level of awareness of action research also varies across the field of specialization in the TECs. For example, teacher educators from education background tended to have better exposure than teachers from natural and social science background. Despite their limited skill in and experience of conducting action research most of the participants believe that research into the classroom practices needs to be conducted by the classroom practitioners rather than outsiders. Hence, this limited participation of teacher educators in undertaking action research is a clear indication for the existence   of   some   barriers   that   call   for   immediate   intervention.

Knowledgeable, thoughtful and skilled teachers are expected to have significant impacts on student learning (McNiff, 2002). Clearly, lack of these qualities limits teacher educators' contributions in this regard. Consistent with this, it is also suggested that teacher educators' lack of adequate knowledge and skills of action research can be linked to their own limited participation in action research (Ferrance, 2000; Loughran, 1995; Lewin and Stuart, 1991). The implication of this is that if the rate of participation of teacher educators in action research needs to be improved, the capacity of teacher educators should be built to the desired level. McKernan (1996) indicated that calling upon teachers to conduct action research will require two essential conditions: practitioners should understand and possess research skills, which generate curriculum data, and findings should inform teachers in such a manner as to compel them to take action.

Teacher Educators' Reflective Practices

The findings of this study revealed that using action research, critical self-reflection, dialogue journals and collaborative discussions with colleagues as well as using reflective data for further modification seems almost non-existent among most of the teacher educators of the sample TECs. This means, the ability to and the practice of reflecting on one's teaching experiences seems not well established among the teacher educators of the sample TECs. This may be linked to either lack of the theoretical perspectives that are indicative of the ways through which classroom teachers can develop their reflective abilities or lack of practical skills of how to reflect on one's own teaching practices. However, evidence in the literature shows that teachers can develop their reflective thinking skills and abilities through: conducting dialogue journals; having focused and purposeful discussions with colleagues; solving problems through practical inquiry and clinical experiences such as micro-teaching, reflective teaching and simulation (Cruickshank, Bainer and Metcalf, 1999; Schon, 1983). Similarly, evidence also shows the link between reflective practices and teachers' professional development (Ferrance, 2000; Elliot, 2007), though this is not evident in this study. Productive relationship between reflection

and practical inquiry has been considered as the primary reason for utilizing action research to promote teacher professional development (Hitchcook and Hughes, 1995; Kemmis and Mc Taggart, 1988; Glathar, 2008; Onel, 1997). However, the level of reflective practices that was evident in the sample TECs does not seem to exert significant effects in enhancing the anticipated teachers' professional development. This is in line with Harnett's (2007) assertion that teacher educators who are not engaged in critical reflection of their teaching practices and action research will always allow common sense and routinized behaviors to guide their professional actions. Thus, the major insights to be drawn from the above discussion are that teacher educators need to be aware of the resources, support systems and choices available to them. They also need to be assisted in how to get access to these inputs to develop and improve their reflective capacities.

The Culture of undertaking Action Research in TECs

The results of this study revealed that the culture of conducting research has not been well established and developed in the TECs included in the study. This shows that even though the teacher educators, in addition to their teaching and advising roles, are expected to undertake action research, the practice and spirit of inquiry was not adequately developed in the two colleges. This may in fact be related to a number of factors. One of these factors may be that the college environment is not well structured and established in ways that motivate and attract teacher educators to engage in action research. So, this has a clear implication for the college administration to think about, examine in-depth and take corrective actions. The other factor may be linked to lack of teacher professional development standards that make clear what are expected of teacher educators in their professional career. The absence of well established culture of action research may also be linked to the tendency of teacher educators to view action research as an activity isolated from the teaching and learning processes, It should be noted, however, that the existing local documents (education and training policy, TESO guidelines and TDP) as well as the available literature strongly

suggest the need to integrate the teaching-learning process with research (Teshome, 2006). Elliott (1991) suggests that action research is a dialectical process of testing theory against practice and developing theory through practice. Similarly, Glathar (2008) and Stenhouse (1975) also suggest that a well established culture of action research can help teacher educators modify, improve, and make informed decisions about the instructional processes.

The result of this study also depicted that the primary reasons that have attracted some teacher educators to engage in research were incentives and academic promotion. This means, engaging in research just for the purpose of improving the existing classroom practices is limited to a minimum extent in the context of TECs.

Noffke (1997) suggested that the personal purposes of engaging in action research are development of self-knowledge and fulfillment in one's work, as well as a deeper understanding of one's own practice, instead of gaining academic promotion or incentives. Similarly, according to McKernan (1996), the major purpose of action research is not the generation of reports, articles, or books on the problem; nor is it about the advancement of one's professional career through publication although this may be important for the researcher. Rather, the real reason is the freeing of blockages and barriers to effective action. In short, it is the improvement of quality of life in the research setting (Loughran, 1995). At the same time, Feldman et al. (2001) showed that the political purpose of engaging in action research involves critiquing the nature of teachers' work and work places and the advancement of social agenda. Consistent with this, the professional purpose of action research emphasizes bridging the gap between theory and practice (Feldman, 2002). In connection with this, the training and education policy of Ethiopia (TGE, 1994) states that teachers at any level should be able to carry out action research to examine their teaching-learning processes. Similarly, the Education Sector Strategy Document states that research into curriculum development, instructional methods and evaluation techniques shall be encouraged and assisted in schools (Teshome, 2006).

Thus, there is a need to increase effort to translate action research into the classroom in Teachers' Education Colleges in the region.

Perceived barriers to Action Research

The findings of this study indicated time pressure due to teaching and administrative work load lack of teacher professional development standards, inadequate support systems, lack of commitment on the part of teacher educators, lack of adequate resources, inadequate awareness about action research, and inadequate incentives available for teacher-researchers as the most severe constraints that faced the teacher educators to properly undertake action research in their colleges.

This finding is consistent with what has been suggested in the existing literature. For instance, numerous research outcomes have pointed out that both personal (lack of commitment, knowledge, skills) and institutional (inadequate resources, support systems) factors affect the level of participation of teacher educators in action research of their own practices (Wallace, 1998; Lewin and Stuart, 1991). Thus, it follows that in order to alleviate some of these barriers and encourage teacher educators' involvement in action research, the college managements and teacher educators of TECs need to develop mutual institutional vision, goal, and concerns. At the same time, the management of TECs needs to establish effective support systems, coordinate the available scarce resources and prepare professional development standards for teacher educators to improve the existing situation.

Conclusion

The following conclusions can be drawn from the findings reported above.

- The majority of teacher educators of the teacher education colleges (TECs) had inadequate awareness about the nature and procedures of action research.
- The notion of reflective practice was almost non-existent in the TECs.
- The culture of undertaking action research was not well established in the sample TECs.
- Time pressure due to teaching and administrative work load, lack of teacher professional development standards, inadequate support systems, lack of commitment are noted as hindering factors. In addition, lack of adequate resources, inadequate awareness about action research, and inadequate incentives available for teacher-researchers were reported as constraints teachers face to conduct action research in the TECs.

These findings have important implications for teacher education and professional development. Specifically, the study offers educators valuable insights into one's own practice and how action research involves educators in the process of identifying questions that they want to explore in their own classrooms to improve their practice and achieve student success. It also highlighted the discrepancies between the theoretically based, idealized teaching and learning envisioned by academics, and the practicalities of the classroom in which teachers with limited theoretical knowledge struggle to cope with complex and competing demands.

In addition, the study has demonstrated the effectiveness of classroom-based action research as a model for reflective professional development. If professional development is to bring about lasting change and improvement in teachers' practice it must involve the teachers in analyzing and critiquing their own classroom practice.

Recommendations

On the basis of the conclusions made above, the following recommendations have been forwarded:

1. Since teachers' professional development that can be enhanced through action research requires a transformation of processes and policies that support teachers, their work, their education and their growth in the profession, teacher education colleges included in this study are recommended to redesign their existing policies as well as practices.
2. Teacher educators are at the heart of enhancing their own professional development through enquiring into their classroom practices, curriculum, and student learning. It is therefore recommended that teachers be given the time and financial support needed.
3. Action research is considered as a model of professional development for teachers. Respective TECs therefore need to develop a unit/center of action research that:
   - establishes sustainable system of supporting teacher educators
   - designs and provides adequate and relevant training for teacher educators
   - assists teacher educators to develop better reflective abilities
   - establishes teacher professional development standards

4. Assisting teacher educators to conceptualize action research as a means of improving their professional development begins with initial preparation. This requires the collaboration of different stakeholders. It is recommended that colleges and teacher preparation universities work collaboratively to realize this.
5. Teacher educators should take self-initiatives and develop their own reflective abilities. This will help them to improve their own classroom practices.

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