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Action Research—A Means of Continuous Professional Development in a Rural Context: Possibilities and Challenges

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Abstract

This paper presents our findings from a research initiated to support teachers' continuous development through action research in the rural context of a developing country. The study investigated the experiences of seven teachers and teacher educators from the rural context of Pakistan, who spent nearly six months undertaking action research projects as part of a follow-up strategy for a university-based teacher education programme. After the completion of the university-based programme, the participants had gone back to their respective institutes and were expected to initiate action research projects in order to implement new knowledge/learning. It was also a strategy to ensure the continuity of their professional growth.

This study was designed to follow-up the participants' implementation of their action research plans in order to understand the processes involved in bringing reform in the teaching and learning situation in their context and identify related issues. The data includes pre and post conference discussion sessions with the participants as well as the observations of their classroom practice.

The findings suggest that as part of their action research plans, and through the facilitators' support in the context, the participants were able to initiate change efforts and introduce innovative ideas in the classroom. The participants' engagement in this experience provided them with the opportunity and motivation to think about the actions that may improve their practice.

However, going beyond the initial level of efforts in terms of being able to influence their teaching or teacher learning practices or to improve the learning experiences of students in classroom, were still difficult for them. Due to various constraints, the participants on their own were not able to understand and address the complex issues related to teaching or teacher learning. We conclude that action research in the rural context of a developing country can possibly be seen as a collaborative endeavor only. Various constraints restrict the possibility of engaging in action

research as a self-initiated and self-sustained process of individual's learning and growth.

This paper, therefore, present an overview of how action research was redefined for the context of a developing country: What were the constraints that hindered the process; what were the opportunities that could facilitate the process; and what were the conditions that are necessary for teachers to engage in action research as an effective way to promote self-learning and self-growth.

Context of the Research Findings

The study investigated the experiences of seven teachers and teacher-educators from the rural contexts of Sindh and Balochistan, who spent nearly 6 months undertaking action research projects as part of a follow-up strategy for a university-based teacher education programme. The programme was offered for their capacity building to improve practices and bring reform within their context. The participants belonged to the rural public sector, and had varied responsibilities, ranging from teaching to teacher-education. After completion of the university-based programme, the participants had gone back to their areas and were expected to initiate action research in order to implement new knowledge, as well as strategy for the continuity of their professional growth.

Methodology

Our study with the participants was conducted in a qualitative research paradigm, where we played the dual roles of *facilitator* and *researcher*. Our work with the participants was to provide them follow-up support to help improve their practices, which was done mainly through our monthly field visits to their context. These visits would normally include pre and post conference discussion sessions with the participants and their classroom observation. In the discussion sessions, we would facilitate the participants in reflecting on their practice, helping them identify, understand and improve their roles; and help them with practices in order to bring reform in the teaching and learning situation in their areas.

Facilitation involved asking critical questions to help them, and to identify and address any issues/concerns related to their inquiry and development process. It was to help them remain focused, refine their focus and eventually improve it by reflecting on it. However, we had kept our role flexible in the sense that it did change according to the need of the situation. In addition to this facilitative role,

we were also studying the process of the participants' growth and learning - the issues, challenges and opportunities related to their learning in this context.

The schools/areas where these teachers and teacher-educators had come from, had limited resources available for teaching and learning. For example, the children would be seated on the floor, or various grades/levels would be combined in one small room due to the shortage of space, furniture or teachers. Some schools were located in such remote areas, where even the basic facilities such as electricity, telephone and newspaper were not available; they did not even have the notion of 'toilet' in this context. Children, in this context, would mostly travel several miles on foot to reach their schools. They had very limited exposure and access to any resources other than their textbooks, whereas, in some cases, it was noticed that the students did not even have this resource available to them. Due to their inability to get textbooks, they would be punished and harassed by the teachers. The availability and provision of resources, however, varied from region to region (Sindh and Balochistan).

Action Research: Theoretical Perspective

Our research was based on certain assumptions about the role and outcome of action research for the professional growth of individuals. These assumptions were mainly derived from literature originating from all over the world, especially the West, as literature pertaining to developing countries, especially Pakistan, is very limited.

The current literature on teacher learning/development makes suggestions for rethinking professional development and reconceptualizing educational research (Clark, 1992). There is a greater emphasis on the notions such as 'self-monitoring teachers', 'teachers as researchers', and teachers as 'extended professionals'. Current research on teacher education advocates for teachers to become designers of their own professional development.

The focus of professional development in general and teacher education in particular has now shifted to the notion of 'lifelong learning' or 'continuous professional development'. This further supports the argument that the responsibility for teachers' professional development should be placed in the hands of the professional teachers, since in order to continue and further their professional growth, they need to be engaged in the process of on-going reflections and inquiry into their practices, which would enable them to understand their practice better and improve it further. And, teacher research is seen as an important tool to help them achieve this purpose. Researchers argue

that 'learning from teaching' ought to be regarded as a primary task of teacher education across the professional life span, and that 'classrooms and schools should be treated as research sites and source of knowledge.' (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1993)

A number of studies have suggested that action research methodology offers a systematic approach to introducing innovations in teaching and learning. It seeks to do this by putting the teachers/ practitioners in a dual role; as owners of new knowledge and consumers of the self-generated knowledge, whereby participants learn and create knowledge by critically reflecting on their own actions, and at the same time developing concepts and theories about their experiences in order to improve their practices. In this way, teachers virtually extend their role, and in that role, they critically reflect on their skills and problematic situations with the purpose of improving their practices and resolving problem situations (Woolhouse, 2004; Nico, Cl et al 2004; Mohammad, 2005).

The notion of 'teacher research' is also supported by the fact that teachers as 'practitioners' or 'implementers' are in a better position to inform about practices and policies concerning them, rather than relying solely on input provided by outside researchers, which could be too generalized to be used / implemented within their contexts. Since teachers have the knowledge of context, as well as practical knowledge built through years of experience, they could use that knowledge in a better way to identify and address issues concerning them directly (Ponte, P., et al, 1995; 2004). Thus, there is a growing consensus that teacher research / action research helps the teachers "improve their practices, their understanding of these practices, and the situations in which they work" (Carr & Kemmis, 1986) and that this can function as a powerful means of personal and professional development (Johnson?). Thus, the role of teacher research in improving practices, forming policies and promoting on-going professional development, is well established in the literature.

In this backdrop, some of our assumptions were that engaging in action research would contribute positively towards the participants becoming more professional problem solvers. They would look for ways to improve their practices, given the various constraints of the situation in which they are working, and become the change agents thereby. Action research would help the participants become practitioners, who are engaged in systematic reflection and inquiry for improving teaching and learning within their contexts. This reflection and self inquiry would provide the basis for the developmental process, which in turn, may lead to greater capacity building and improvement in teaching and learning condition. Thus, it was assumed that the participants would be able to continue their

learning process, as well their professional growth once they got back their localities; and that action research would provide a means to help them continue this process.

Action Research in the Rural Context of a Developing Country: Findings and Analysis

Based on this theoretical perspective, action research was viewed as a tool for continuous professional development in order to improve teachers' and teacher-educators' practices, as well as to sustain the reform efforts in the reality of the context of rural areas. It was assumed that action research would promote self-learning ability; an attitude which, in turn, would result in independent learning.

Our findings, on the other hand, suggest that the teachers could engage in action research only in collaboration with the facilitators. Teachers faced various constraints that did not encourage them to see action research as a means for self-growth and independent learning: they lacked pedagogical content knowledge as well as understanding of their role (the moral and ethical responsibilities as teachers and teacher-educators), required to promote meaningful learning environment. This also hindered their ability to identify their own limitations with regards to the nature and complexity of issues. In addition, their sense of isolation because of hailing from a rural culture further restrained their growth process. It was difficult for them to cope on their own with the complexity of issues related to teaching and learning, which in turn, resulted in their limited growth and understanding of action research. Below we present one case study of a teacher, who aimed to improve his teaching practice through action research within the contextual constraints, as an example of issues related to teachers continuing professional development within the rural background of Pakistan.

Story of Hayat – An example

Hayat was a head master in a middle school, having 15 years of teaching experience. He started his teaching career as a Junior School Teacher (JST) in 1990. After completion of his B.Ed., he was promoted to a Senior School Teacher (SST). Along with his responsibility as a head teacher, he would teach all the subjects to the lower secondary classes. Hayat's school was very far from his hometown, where his family lived (including his wife and three children). Therefore, he usually took a week or ten days off from the school to visit his family. In his absence, the school would remain closed. According to him, he had applied for transfer to his home village; however, he had not been very

successful yet, since the government system did not have any proper mechanism to make the justified decisions (especially, when he had been living away from his family for the last 8 years or so). In addition, there were only other two teachers in the school, and they also did not have sufficient knowledge of the subject nor were they proficient at teaching in general. They belonged to the same village and they would mainly be involved in other personal activities rather than the further improvement of their teaching skills. The main responsibility for the teaching hence fell on Hayat; if he was absent, then the school would be off.

The school runs classes from 1 to 8, consisting altogether 119 students. Children would sit on the floor due to lack of availability of furniture. In addition, various grades or levels were also combined in one small room due to the shortage of teachers. The children mostly came from the adjacent village. The older girls would mostly bring their siblings to the classrooms, as they were supposed to take care of their younger ones, as part of their household responsibilities. Girls and boys studied in the same class in a multi-grade setting (2 or 3 classes combined). The class size (on which Hayat would focus) would normally range from 23-24 students. The language of instruction as well as the textbook was Urdu (except for the English textbook); however, the teachers and students would mostly use their native language in the class.

Since the school was located in a very remote area that was not easily accessible due to traveling conditions, government officials had never visited this school (for monitoring, supervision or any other reason) or similar schools in the remote areas. However, Hayat had close interaction with the community as far as students' learning was concerned, and he said, "If a child doesn't come to the school for a day or two, then I go and look for him in the market; I see his parents and ask them why their child is not coming to the school".

Hayat's Action Plan and Implementation

Prior to his participation in the teacher education certificate programme at AKU-IED, he used to focus on teaching only one class at a time in the multi-grade setting (class 6 and 7), while the students of the other classes would mostly sit silently, or would be sent outside the classroom. He would not engage both the classes simultaneously in the learning activities. Therefore, in his action plan, he aimed to use 'Group Learning' as a strategy to maximize students' learning time, as well as their participation. He wanted to understand how group work could help the students of the two different levels learn more effectively from each other and with each other.

During our first field visit, he informed us that he had started his research according to his plan; however, since he had not heard from the facilitators for a long time after his return from the programme, he had not continued his work. Nevertheless, he believed that the facilitators' presence and support would enable him to assess the outcomes of his new practice and improve it further. He perceived the facilitators' presence as a motivational factor to begin his work from where he had ended. He said that he would plan lessons in such a way that they could allow all the students of varying levels to participate. We had four meetings with Hayat which included observation of his teaching lessons and pre and post observation meetings. Hayat would also maintain his reflective journal on a weekly basis.

Hayat's Process of Growth – Outcomes

Hayat's participation in the action research process resulted in the following outcomes:

- Understanding of Group work and his Role as a Facilitator
- Understanding and Maximizing the Use of Available Learning Resources

Understanding of Group work and his Role as a Facilitator

Our work with Hayat provides evidence for significant changes in his understanding of the use of group work in a multi-grade setting. He made efforts to familiarize the students with this new strategy of 'group work'; explaining to them the benefits, expectations and requirements of working in groups, the roles and responsibilities of individual members in group, use of social skills, and so on. He also took into consideration the differences in the students' levels, making sure that the lessons would be planned in such a way that different aims and objectives could be achieved for different levels, through the correct use of various activities. For example, he would think about how to plan the lesson in such a way that it could serve different purposes for both levels? It was evident that he had conceptualized group work as a strategy that could be used for multi-purposes in a multi-grade setting. For example:

- Engaging both the classes simultaneously, aiming to achieve different purposes; for example, in a combined setting of group, serving as a revision lesson for one group, whereas, providing new knowledge to the other group;

- Teaching common topics related to both classes such as use of language, learning about sentence structure, discussion on problems, professions, issues regarding health, education etc.
- Teaching one class and engaging the other in solving problems or tasks related to their learning and level;
- Teaching them 'learning from each other'; combining groups for the purpose of sharing of ideas/learning from each other (especially, when there was a difference in levels).

It was evident that he involved students actively in their learning by using group work for the various said purposes. In his planning, he would decide how a lesson could be planned in such a way that if the students of Class 6 learned something new, then Class 7 students could revise the previous learning. For example, while teaching fractions, he planned some problem-solving tasks. He divided the class into groups according to their respective levels. The same worksheet was provided to each group, however, the purpose of the task was to teach a new topic to Class 6 and engage Class 7 in solving problems or tasks based on their previous learning. On another occasion, he taught an English lesson where he aimed to teach one class and engage the other in revision, thus aiming to achieve different purposes for different levels.

...they [these words] were not new for class VII – they were new for class VI. For VII, these terms, 'might', 'right', 'light' – they have been studying in their lesson...but for class VI, they were not....I had decided that it should be easy for VI as well as VII, so that both of them could learn and revise these words together.

Similarly, sometimes, he would prepare tasks specific to each level by preparing two different tasks for the two different levels, and then dividing them into groups according to their respective levels. This was done to teach them according to their specific syllabus. For example he said,

If it's Maths period, then I teach Maths. For example, I ask one class to do these questions that these sums are for class VI and these are for class VII. Class VI is doing its own work and VII is doing its own. When I'm explaining to class VI, then VII is doing its own work. That is, in a way, both are doing their own work.

He would try to identify the topics in the textbook that could relate to both the classes (such as, use of language, learning about sentence structure, discussion

on problems, professions, issues etc.) and planned them in such a way that all the students could get involved and learn together. The purpose was to provide them with an opportunity to discuss similar topics according to their own thinking or take it further according to their previous knowledge.

The lesson that I have planned today is a class VI English lesson in which children are to be told what 'I' means and what 'you' means...and this is a bit easy for class VII but for class VI, it is suitable. I have planned this for both the classes.

...sometimes, what I do is that I take one topic for the classes [while teaching Urdu, English], for example, in Pakistan studies, teaching about District - what is the role of a Coordinator in a district...

...Like, if it's a topic on Maths or Pak Studies, which is interesting for both and is the same for both - for example, it could be for both that they are learning about the provinces of Pakistan...or about the district management or if it's about our education department's officials, such as ADO, DBO, etc...

He also used 'group work' as a strategy to build confidence among the students who were very shy. For this purpose, he would make mixed ability groups so the active one could encourage the shy ones to participate effectively. He thought that this kind of grouping could also help promote self-learning attitude in the students as well as providing them with a diverse experience of learning with each other and from each other.

I formed the groups because groups have the benefits that they learn from each other. [Where] one is weak and the other is intelligent - one is from 6th and the other is from 7th - they take care of each other in the group.

He realized that his role was not only in planning the lessons - rationalizing objectives and designing the relevant tasks - but also in providing appropriate facilitation that includes ongoing assessment for taking action to enhance learning.

In group work, a teacher should facilitate each group and explain to them; he should help them a little and see/monitor how the children are working and also encourage each student [within the group].... I took the role that if the children were hesitant or not

participating, then I encouraged them to take part, or participate in writing...

His effort to plan lessons according to purpose, level and expected outcomes was evident throughout the duration of fieldwork. He realized that a teacher needed to reflect on the lesson outcomes in order to analyze practice. In the feedback session, he would criticize his planned tasks and reflect on the nature of the tasks and their outcomes. This experience also helped him in realizing how to improve group work and what kind of tasks needed to be planned in order to increase participation. His analysis also supported him in taking decisions regarding his planning, i.e., to think about the kind of tasks that could encourage discussion. For example, in one of the lessons, while teaching them about the various 'Professions and Occupations', Hayat did all the explanation himself rather than initiating any genuine discussion or involving the students. Then, he assigned some tasks to the students to discuss about different occupations and relate them to their own experiences i.e., what professions do the people have in their community?

In the feedback session, he realized that he could have invited the students in the beginning to promote meaningful discussion, since he had come to realize that the students had not moved beyond what the teacher had already explained to them in their group discussion. As a result of his reflection on the lesson, he decided that in the following lesson on '*the Qualities of a Teacher/Doctor/Nurse*', he would invite the students to first share their opinions and views before he made any input.

After yesterday's lesson, I found it suitable to ... ask them personal questions [related to their life], and not just the questions given at the end of the text or exercises....I thought that I should ask questions related to their real life ... this lesson would have two kind of benefits, one they would learn about the lesson and they would also get the opportunity to learn more or talk more.

On another occasion, he realized that his own instructions were not clear enough to generate rigorous discussion among the children.

[Reflecting on limited interaction/ issues related to interaction in CLO3] Maybe, I didn't give them such points that they could discuss [that could generate discussion]

His analysis and follow-up actions helped him in moving beyond the traditional practice since he himself was also able to observe change in his practice, he mentioned,

What I had planned that when [earlier] I used to teach one class [level], then the other [level] would remain quiet, get bored, start making noise or they would simply go outside. But when I started working on my research [action research] according to the plan - that I have to take both the classes together and that I have to select such a topic that is of interest for both; and would enable both to get involved in it at the same time, the benefit was that both [levels] did not remain quiet, both classes were being taught, they were both reading, were involved in the lesson, giving responses as well, they were listening as well.

He further commented,

Today, I saw that to prepare any lesson, for any teacher, its necessary for a lot of preparation to be done. Before today, we just used to go like that. We used to teach by looking at the text. However, in this teaching method [referring to the current one], even to prepare a small thing [activity], we need to think a lot, to go into such depth. That means that, in a way, it's my development, the development of my teaching.

Thus, as a result of his participation in this research, he was able to define and refine his theoretical assumptions about using 'group work' as a strategy for multi-grade classroom, within the practicality of the existing context.

Understanding and Maximizing the Use of Available Learning Resources

Initially, Hayat would use charts to write the tasks or to get students' written responses; however, he realized that the blackboard could be used for such tasks. Analyzing the outcomes of different lessons, he learned, 'And group work is not simply a display of materials and charts; it is rather a strategy which could be used without concrete materials'. For example, in a Grammar lesson, he had used charts and paper worksheets for writing the tasks. On that worksheet, the teacher had written different words, (i.e. man, light, boy, cat, me in separate rows) the students were asked to think about the words with the similar sounds. He also provided the students with paper sheets and colored markers to do group work and display this work in the class.

In the feedback session, he informed that he had spent a big chunk of time and money to get these materials. Since these materials were not accessible in the village, he went to the main district (which required 4 hours' traveling time on one side) and spent his own money to buy them. The other implications included his absence from the school, therefore, no teaching and learning took place on that day. He suggested that planning a lesson through group work did not only require conceptual clarity, but it was also very expensive in terms of time and money. The facilitator encouraged him to think about how the similar lesson could be taught without using the resources that he had used. It was identified that the blackboard and students' notebooks could also be used to serve the same purpose. In our initial meeting, Hayat mentioned that his personal experience at the AKU-IED suggested that use of such materials was important to create meaningful learning environments. He said "I was thinking that if I'd use some material, then perhaps the lesson would be much easier and attractive... their availability here is also very difficult... "

However, later, he was able to reflect on the expensive nature of the approach he was trying to use, and that it would be difficult for him to continue group work in the classroom if he were to continue with the use of such materials. He informed us that in another lesson (a Grammar lesson), he had planned similar kinds of group tasks; however, this time he used blackboard for the instructions. He asked the students to discuss and present it verbally. While students presented their work, Hayat would write their responses on the board so that everyone was able to hear and see the other groups' presentations. This experience helped him develop an understanding of how to make maximum use of the available resources.

... Resources can be there in the textbook as well. This way, it's not necessary to use any chart or any other materials - I can prepare some activity from the textbook itself. That is, when initially you people were to come here, I was thinking that there used to be so many resources at IED, where do I get them from now? Then I thought I could give task based on the lesson and the exercise for children's learning - and learning can take place any way.

Initially, Hayat did not realize how the textbook itself could be used effectively as an important resource; however, he was later able to relate the textbook knowledge to the existing context, inviting the children to share their experiences or by making it more relevant and real for them.

To some extent in my teaching, I think that this had improved, because I had come after complete preparation and when I used to teach before that, I used to teach in a superficial way – but today, I taught in depth, because of which my teaching improved.

He analyzed the difference between the AKU-IED situation and real conditions, and reached the conclusion that his understanding of the strategies used during the certificate programme had been enhanced and improved through his engagement in trying out new ideas in the reality of the existing context.

At that time, I thought we used to have materials at IED, therefore, I'd use low-cost-no-cost material. But I didn't have to do it here. The change that I have made [that I see] in my thinking is that I can take activities from the textbook and get it done in two to three different ways. This is a big change [in my thinking] I guess.

It seems that his engagement in reflection and self-analysis helped him to adapt new strategies according to the situation. He learned how group-work setting in the reality of his context is different from the context of IED, and also understood about adapting the new methods according to the contextual realities. Referring to his learning during the programme, he mentioned that at IED, his learning was related to organizing students in groups and in different ways of getting the groups to increase their interaction and participation with colleagues. However, based on his practical experiences, he realized that frequently changing groups had implications in terms of time with the context of his situation. However, he would make combined groups of students from Class 7 and 6 (with the ratio of 2 and 3), when his purpose was for students to learn from each other.

At IED, I thought that group work was much easier, that is, groups are formed easily. However, here I felt that this is difficult that you assign names to various students and ask them to sit at different places. When I looked at this method [in this context], I felt this way their time would get wasted and the children won't be able to understand the instructions...therefore, I have decided that it would be a group of five children. I have to teach in any case. I don't have to take so much pain for forming groups this way. I just have to help increase their learning. I'm not concerned how groups are formed that one is assigned the title 'rose' ... if I have to make groups then I'd consider that class 6 and 7 are combined.

Hayat reflected on the outcome of group work, and he analyzed that new experiences created motivation and interest among children to work together in various ways. He observed that all the children were involved; they were all participating, helping each other and practicing social skills during the lessons. This observation, in turn, motivated him to continue his efforts to work on his new methodology.

Yes, this [group work] would continue. I see its outcomes very clearly – because when I did it for the first time, they [children] didn't show/give me much response but today, despite your presence, I think at that time [his first attempt], I was alone – but today's was better to some extent....Obviously, they had never been taught like this before. They came in 6 and 7 and hadn't even heard about 'group work', but today they understood. I told them that someone is coming; therefore, it [group work] must be a serious thing. That's why they took it seriously and took interest.

His on-going assessment of students' learning helped him to make a comparison between prior lessons and subsequent ones, and by so doing, helped improve his teaching. He analyzed the differences and progressions in students' behavior, i.e., students' movement from less participation to slightly better, improvement of confidence and the subsequent implications for their learning outcomes. He also discussed and reflected on the role of individual members in the group, individual accountability within a group, and on thinking and planning strategies in situations such as when one group had completed the task while the others were still working.

If one group is still thinking [working] and if I ask one to present, then the others who are still on task – they would get affected.... [On the other hand] if one group has done the task earlier and if I ask them to stop while the others are still on task, then they might get involved in talking and might forget the task....In this situation, a teacher should ask the students to record what they have discussed, to write it on paper [i.e. involve them in an additional task] ... Yesterday...all [children] were not talking [participating]...maybe there are some such children who don't get involved, but today I thought I would also focus and assist whether all the children were getting involved in group work or only 2-3 students were talking or working. So, that's why I felt that need that I should ask individually as well ... so that they are

ready to respond individually as well....this way, children would remain prepared that they can also be asked; only one person [in a group] is not responsible for all – I can also be asked and I should also be ready to respond.

Students' improved participation had developed a sense of ownership and achievement in their learning. Hayat now wanted to extend the scope of this kind of work to the other classes and other teachers as well.

From children's perspective, I learnt that this teaching method [group work in a multi-grade] should be used in our context – not just myself but other teachers of the school as well should use this method because it'd be very effective for the children; especially for small or nursery classes ...because they learn through playing – maybe it'd be good for class 7 as well and it should be implemented in the whole school... if it's done once or twice a week, then it'd be better. And I have learnt that children, through this teaching method, are giving a lot of responses and are also taking interest...even when you weren't there once and I did this lesson, they were taking a lot of interest.

Reflecting on his learning from action research, he said that until he experienced the new methods himself, he was not sure of what action research was and how it helped in learning. He had developed his action research plan at the AKU-IED because it was the course requirement; however, he was not sure how he would work on it:

I took it non-seriously [during the course at AKU-IED]. At that time, we were thinking that we just had to write the proposal – maybe it would happen, maybe not – this is what we were thinking there – but we also knew that in our context, we face a lot of challenges – we had told this before as well that in our context, doing such research is quite challenging.

He realized that integration of research in teaching brings reform to the practice; teaching without thinking becomes a routine or mechanical activity, which does not serve the purpose of improvement.

I understood [at that time] that [action] research is like a PhD that a teacher does. He does it alone – and learns himself – he does it on his own and does not involve anyone else. He writes thesis on it. But now I understood that the one who is researched

upon is also involved in this research, the way you are doing it with me....My learning took place here because I got more opportunity to think; I planned innovative new lessons...and for planning, I had to learn some new ideas and how I should plan them so that they are also effective for the children and that there's also potential for increase in my learning.

Hayat's Process of Growth –Constraints and Issues

The above examples provide evidence of change in Hayat's thinking and practice. However, there were various conceptual and contextual issues for which he still needed some support and facilitation in order to move further in his growth process. Various concerns and issues were identified and analyzed in this regard:

- Limited Exposure and Resources
- Loneliness and Frustration

Limited Exposure and Resources

Our analysis indicated that since the students were from very remote and poor backgrounds and because they did not have any exposure to the outside the world, it was difficult for Hayat to relate the textbook's topics to their real life situation, despite his efforts to increase participation. For example, in the lesson on teaching about the 'Professions', it was difficult for the teacher to generate dialogue due to the students' limited exposure and personal experiences. Three professions, i.e. doctor, nurse and teacher were identified in the textbook, since there was no doctor or nurse available in the village, it was difficult for the students to share their experiences and discuss the qualities of a doctor or a nurse. The only contribution (in their discussion on qualities of good doctors) they made was that good doctors should serve the poor people.

The teacher tried to use students' prior experiences and daily life experiences to make learning more relevant but faced difficulty in doing so. For example, the students did not have any concept of cleanliness due to poor facilities and conditions, and therefore it was difficult for him to teach about cleanliness, such as taking shower to keep themselves healthy or changing into clean cloths regularly. These were not possible for the students who did not have even the basic necessities available to them; they had to fetch water from far places. Similarly, while teaching them vocabulary in relation to the context, the teacher used the example of students' hunting the immigrant birds (who migrate to this

village in this particular season). During our discussion regarding the environmental safety and promoting students' ethical values on survival of the birds, he said that the students did not have any other entrainment here – this was the only activity over the year for which they wait eagerly. It seems that no such generalization could be made about what is morally right or wrong; it all depends on the context and peoples' needs in such contexts. Thus, due to the students' weak basic education and limited exposure, he sometimes appeared very frustrated and unmotivated with the whole situation to continue reform in practice. Hayat himself was motivated to take initiatives but due to lack of support on part of the government, he also felt that he would lose motivation to take initiatives or make efforts to bring about change in the long term. For example, it was a frustrating situation for him that despite his various written requests, the school had not been provided with any proper furniture.

Loneliness and Frustration

He did not have any activity after the school time. Therefore, he would spend his evenings in taking extra coaching classes and in reflecting on his actions for revised planning. He realized that reflection required time and concentration; therefore he used to utilize his extra time in reflecting on experiences. The time available for reflection helped him in planning the task beyond the textbook, which was an outcome of his deliberate effort and effective use of time.

Sometime, it seems difficult, and then sometimes it seems easier in loneliness. In loneliness, one can think clearly and if interest is there, then one can enjoy.

However, the adverse effects of his situation were his complete sense of isolation. He did not have anything to do in his own time, no access to newspaper, radio etc. He needed entertainment to get mental and emotional relaxation. Though he was provided with a room, it was isolated from the village; there was no electricity. In addition, he was also away from his home and family. All these factors developed a sense of frustration and negative attitude that created hindrance for the process of reform. He felt isolated in the absence of any other kind of entertainment since he did not have much interaction with the people around, as he did not have like-minded people to talk about politics or any other topic of mutual interest – they were mainly labors and farmers, and the topics of their discussion were specific to their work. He was tired of his situation, which sometimes resulted in the lessening of his motivation towards improvement. At times, he would question the very need for efforts on his part

for improvement, when the government itself was not supportive and kept ignoring his application for transfer.

[Talking about his situation and sense of isolation] Yes, they can affect...I face difficulty in studying here. Secondly, the environment is not such where one can sit with others and discuss something or learn...the society is not such...of course, going to market or fields and talking to farmers about goats would not cause increase in knowledge. Secondly, there aren't any newspapers or magazines, etc. Thirdly, politics is also involved. It' been 15 years since I have been working outside my hometown, in different schools...some other teachers have come, they have been adjusted...Then one feels frustrated that I haven't taken the sole responsibility for education!

Consequently, despite the limitation in terms of his understanding of action research, he did make an effort to use some aspects of learning and gain some insight. This was because of his commitment and sincerity towards his job and his students. Hayat also raised important questions and concerns regarding his role as a teacher-educator and the way it was envisaged in the AKU-IED training programme. He did not see himself engaged in any such model, which was discussed in terms of its future role as a teacher-educator model, used in the capacity of building mentees at the district level.

Thus, he raised important questions about the continuity of his professional development: Would he be able to continue his development in isolation, in the absence of any support or incentive, and with such constraints? Is it a fair expectation or even a realistic one to expect from him to continue his action research process? Action research itself is an intellectual activity, requiring an environment that could support such kind of intellectual tasks, while Hayat did not even have the basic facilities to survive in this context.

Discussion

As part of their action research plans, the participants were able to initiate change efforts and introduce innovative ideas in the classroom. However, going beyond the initial level of effort, it was still difficult for them to be able to influence their teaching, teacher-learning practices, and to improve the learning experiences for students in the classrooms. The participants' engagement in this experience provided them with the opportunity and motivation to think about some continuity or follow up on the course after returning to the context.

However, it was evident that the participants, on their own, were not able to understand and address the complex issues related to teaching or teacher learning. It was mainly due to the facilitator's presence and support available to them in the field that the participants were able to begin the process.

The case study above raises a very important question, what are the possibilities of continuous professional development in the context of rural context in Pakistan? Despite the various constraints that hindered the participants' growth process, their engagement in this research and their experience provided them with, at least, some opportunity to implement their learning in the field. This could be seen as an important step to begin the process of their professional development.

However, our findings suggest that action research and professional development extends only if the culture and environment provides the necessary impetus and support to the teachers. Thus, in the rural context, action research could be seen in terms of a collaborative activity. The participants, on their own, did not have the capacity to understand and deal with the complex issues of teaching or teacher learning alone within their various contextual and conceptual constraints.

Although the conditions were not present in the reality of their context, the facilitators' presence made some conditions available to them and, as a result, they were able to meet the programme expectations to some extent. However, the question for most of the participants remained, 'What would happen when the facilitators won't be there?'

For us, the question raised had significant implication: Would they continue their action research or not? They could not initiate the research until the facilitators' availability was confirmed, and due to the various constraints faced, they saw little hope in taking this journey/process further; therefore, it is difficult to analyze whether what they had been engaged in could be termed as 'action research'? How can action research be defined or redefined for the rural context?

Our study suggests that for the continuous professional development, there must be a collaborative setting involving like-minded professionals, where teachers who encounter the same situation work together to help one another in designing and investigating the situation. Since such kind of culture did not exist in the context of this study, the facilitators created an opportunity, providing a forum to the participants for raising questions, sharing concerns, identifying issues and outcomes. In the presence of the facilitators and their support, the participants

felt secure to take risks for implementation. However, now that the inquiry is over, would they continue? Some of them gave a positive response to the question, elaborating that a thousand miles begins with a single step, that they would possibly continue asking the questions that we have raised together; however, would it be sufficient enough to proceed on the long journey of continuing to be a reflective practitioner?

For us, there is danger of losing the impetus: In the absence of these factors (the support provided, for example), how would they be able to keep up with the momentum, even if they wanted to? There is no simple answer. In some cases, the participants did express their willingness and commitment to continue the process of their growth, however, we can imagine their becoming gradually less thoughtful, asking fewer and fewer questions, and becoming even more complacent.

In some cases the answer was 'no', where the participants clearly stated that they were not strong enough to continue this process, despite their realization and acknowledgement that the outcomes of action research for them would be *learning*, for them, their learners or their teachers.

For example, some of them mentioned that they may not be able to sustain the effort of working with the teachers, of planning lessons together, organizing pre and post conferences as a teacher/or teacher educators but they could perhaps meet together with a small group of fellow teachers, simply to ask one another difficult and unsettling questions, every now and then. For example, one of them said that once this process of awareness begins no one could stop it.

The participants' involvement in their action research enabled them to experience possibilities of continuous professional development – to provide a basis on which they can build as they develop their *vision* of change in their classrooms, schools and communities. This leads to the assumption that teachers come to see the purpose of action research by doing it and they start to do it when they start to understand the purpose.

Thus, at a conceptual or theoretical level, everyone had this understanding and belief that action research is a means for continual professional development – seeking to understand and acting on the best we know.

However, for real outcomes in terms of improved practice, the participants required motivation (both extrinsic and intrinsic), commitment towards their profession as well as reform initiatives to improve the teaching and learning

situation, emotional attachment, and a moral and ethical perspective of teaching and education.

Although the essence of the notion of action research, as discussed in the literature, is the simultaneous development and application of knowledge by teachers. This implies that the development and application of professional knowledge are aspects of a cyclical that teachers are themselves responsible for – they apply knowledge to achieve certain goals and based on their application of knowledge they develop new knowledge, which they then apply again, and so on. However, in the context of this study, it was not possible for the participants to engage in this process on their own; they required assistance of the facilitators. Thus, action research in a rural context was a collaborative endeavor.

Therefore, we conclude that in the context of this study, action research is possible only as a collaborative activity or endeavor. We conclude that action research, in a rural context, can be initiated in a collaborative situation, where some form of support is available that could provide them with a forum for sharing questions, concerns and outcomes of their research.

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