



Improving Teachers' Engagement in Action Research: A Baseline Study in Primary Schools of Bahir Dar City

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the status of teachers' engagement in action research and identify their challenges and opportunities to undertake such projects in primary schools of Bahir Dar city, Ethiopia. The study was conducted as part of a collaborative action research project that aimed at improving practice. For this purpose, a mixed-methods research approach was employed. Data were collected from 251 primary school teachers and six educational experts of the city administration through questionnaire and focus group discussion respectively. Both quantitative and qualitative techniques were used to analyze the data. The findings revealed that teachers' engagement in action research in the primary schools of the city was low. It was also engulfed by many challenges. However, some opportunities which reinforce the practice were identified. Based on the findings, areas of intervention that could help to increase teachers' engagement in action research in the primary schools of the city were suggested.

Keywords Bahir Dar · Collaborative action research · Ethiopia · Primary schools

Introduction

As Mills (2000) pointed out, action research in the context of education is research conducted by school practitioners such as teachers, principals, and school counselors to understand how their schools are implementing various educational initiatives, how teachers are teaching, and how students are learning. In this form of research, practitioners examine various educational problems so as to improve classroom practices. In general, action research is a systematic process of identifying problems that affect the teaching-learning process, understanding the complex nature of the problems identified, and finally solving problems and improving practices through action strategies designed, implemented, and evaluated.

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Nowadays, action research is given a central position in the education system of many countries. Its relevance to improving classroom practice is the main reason for this verity. Many scholars consider action research as a remedy for the limitations of the traditional educational research (Elliot 1991; McNiff and Whitehead 2006; Hopkins 2008; Hine 2013; Ulvik 2014). They also underline the fact that action research is vital in solving different practical problems at the grassroots level.

Similarly, educators underscore the role of action research in facilitating the professional development of teachers. In this regard, Leuvenink and Aarts (2018) reported that successful action research studies carried out by teachers significantly contributed both to their professional development and school improvement. Citing her action research project, which was implemented in 23 primary schools in Ethiopia, Kati (2018) too confirmed the role of action research in improving teachers' continuous professional development. The contributions of action research in fostering a sense of collegiality among practitioners and bridging theory-practice gaps are also widely recognized (Stenhouse 1975; Elliot 1991; McNiff and Whitehead 2006; Hopkins 2008; Hine 2013).

In Ethiopia, action research is given a central focus in many educational reforms. For instance, in the General Education Quality Improvement Program (GEQIP), action research is recognized as a useful strategy to enhance the quality of education in the nation (MoE 2007a). Likewise, in the School Improvement Program (SIP), the role and relevance of action research in addressing various school-related problems and in enhancing school improvement practices is given high prominence (MoE 2007b).

Regardless of the policy emphasis and empirical evidence about the relevance of action research, the status of teachers' engagement in action research at different levels of the country's educational system has not been worth appreciating. The study conducted by Aga (2017), for example, came up with the finding that due to many impeding factors, Ethiopian teachers were not satisfactorily conducting action research. Likewise, Worku (2017) noted that the practice of action research in primary schools was not encouraging. Other studies also reported that the status of action research in Ethiopian schools was low (Cherie 2003; Yibeltal 2006; Daniel and Turago 2010; Desta 2018).

College of Education and Behavioral Sciences (CEBS) at Bahir Dar University is one of the Teacher Education Institutions (TEIs) in Ethiopia with the responsibility of preparing teachers for secondary schools. As far as action research is concerned, the college is striving to equip its pre-service and in-service teacher trainees with the basic knowledge and skills of action research in different approaches. The first approach that the college uses to foster the skills of action research is curriculum-based. A course on action research is included in the curriculum and has been delivered as part of the teacher education program.

Second, action research is also one of the focuses of the college's short-term training and community service projects. For instance, in 2015/16, a collaborative action research project entitled *Project-108* was designed and implemented. The purpose of this project was to enhance the action research competence of teachers in selected primary schools of Bahir Dar city. From the implementation of *Project-108*, useful lessons were learned. One of the lessons was the fact that teachers' engagement in action research in the schools of the city was low and had been engulfed by many challenges. From the project, it was also understood that without systematically investigating the challenges of teachers' in relation to engaging in action research, planning similar training is of little significance. In other words,

conducting a baseline study that aimed at uncovering the status of teachers' engagement in action research and examining their challenges and opportunities was found to be essential.

The purpose of this study was, therefore, to understand the status of teachers' engagement in action research in primary schools of Bahir Dar city. It also explores the challenges and opportunities related to carrying out action research. As a baseline study for future intervention, the authors were also interested to identify the needs of primary school teachers vis-à-vis action research.

In line with the aforementioned purposes, the study was focused on the following four research questions: What is the status of teachers' engagement in action research in primary schools of Bahir Dar city? What are the challenges that impede the practice of action research in primary schools of the city? What are the opportunities that facilitate teachers' engagement in action research? What are the needs of primary school teachers for better practice of action research?

The study is expected to be significant in assisting decision-makers of the city education department and CEBS to have a better understanding of the status and challenges related to action research practice. This, in turn, will help to take relevant intervention and to deliver demand-driven community service projects vis-à-vis action research. The study is also expected to serve as a baseline for subsequent interventions that aim to enhance the action research knowledge, skills, and dispositions of primary school teachers in Bahir Dar city. Finally, the present study is expected to be relevant in providing insight for the international readership about the status of primary school teachers' engagement in action research and the action research-education nexus in Ethiopia.

Literature Review

Conventionally, teachers used to serve as consumers of someone else's research results or were assumed to be the "object" of what is being researched. The introduction of practitioner/action research has given them the chance to be active participants starting from the design to utilizing the results (Johnson and Button 2000). Conducting action research puts teachers in control of their professional development. When they have ownership of the research process, learning can occur in numerous ways including trying new strategies, evaluating existing programs, expanding instructional repertoires, engaging in professional development, and most importantly helping them develop new pedagogical knowledge (Hensen 1996).

Lytle and Cochran-Smith (1992) note that teacher research, which historically has been marginalized in the field, challenges the assumption that knowledge for teaching is generated by outsiders only; they argue, rather, that school-based teacher-researchers are themselves knowers and a primary source of generating knowledge about teaching and learning for themselves and others. Rust (2009) also posits teacher action research as a bridge connecting research, practice, and education policy. In particular, teacher action research can serve as an important and practical way to engage teachers as consumers of research, as researchers of their own practice who use research to shape practice, as designers of their own professional development, and as informants to scholars and policymakers regarding critical issues in the field.

McBee (2004) argues that the quality of teaching can be improved if teachers use their own research experiences. Other studies also note that action research is the impetus for

teachers' changes including their pedagogy, thinking, and confidence which leads to professional growth and improvement (Johnson and Button 2000). By utilizing action research, teachers not only learn about students and colleagues, but they also learn about themselves as they seek ways to continually improve (Ferrance 2000). In Johnson and Button's (2000) study teachers noticed the links between their own learning and the learning of their students, affirming that the principles of good learning that they used with their students applied to their classrooms.

Recent literature in the field of education emphasizes the nexus between action research and educational reforms and practices. While the substantial role of action research in changing and improving classroom practices has been widely acknowledged (Kati 2018; Leuverink and Aarts 2018; Mills 2000), educational reforms too tend to consider the research as a useful and cost-effective tool for realizing various educational initiatives. Recent educational reforms view such school culture as reflective thinking, the presence of a community of learners, teacher collaboration, inquiry-based teaching, teacher professional development, and others critical in making various initiatives of education fruitful (MoE 2007a; 2007b). At the same time, there is an increasing consensus among academics that teachers' engagement in action research is of high importance in developing the above-mentioned school cultures (Stenhouse 1975; Elliot 1991; McKernan 1996; McNiff and Whitehead 2006; Hine 2013; Ulvik 2014).

Though the nexus between action research and quality education is not disputed, many studies revealed various challenges that jeopardize this idea. For instance, due to many hampering factors, teachers' engagement in action research was low and has not been successful in improving school/classroom practices (Elliot 1991; Turago 2010; Aga 2017; Desta 2018). Likewise, educational reforms have not been adequately addressing the barriers that constrain the practice of action research among school teachers (MoE 2007a; 2007b; Worku 2017). It was with this idea in mind that the present study was initiated.

In this study, the authors contend that action research plays an important role in improving school practices. It also plays a vital role in the better implementation of various educational reforms. By doing so, we argue, the contribution of action research in the process of improving the quality of education is substantial. However, action research is less likely to achieve these purposes unless factors that constrain its practice are adequately understood and addressed (Elliot 1991; McKernan 1996; Ulvik 2014; Aga 2017; Leuverink and Aarts 2018). For the successful contribution of action research to one's professional practice and the eventual betterment of the education system, there need to be enabling conditions. Such enablers can be related to the broader policy context, the school organization, and teachers' dedication.

As action research is a route for improving professional practice and self-development, those who engage in it will be more committed if there is a policy backing to it (Elliot 1991; McKernan 1996). The education system needs to show to practitioners that the system values action research. Framing incentive and career development schemes for those who commit to engage in action research will attract more practitioners to the research.

Concerning school-related enabling factors, arrangement of school-based and in-service action research training, resource allocation, creating discussion and dissemination forums of action research works, and establishing a system of research mentoring and partnerships with other institutions are essential to enhance the practice of action research (Stenhouse 1975; Sagor 1992). Besides policy and school-related enablers, teachers' personal commit-

ments to improve their professional practices and competence by undertaking studies of such kind are important enabling conditions.

Prevailing practices (status) of engaging in action research in the schools are likely results of the enabling factors. Creating favorable conditions in the three aspects helps to improve the status of action research which will contribute to the improvement of school teaching learning practices and eventually students' learning outcomes (Johnson and Button 2000; McBee 2004; Ulvik 2014). As a whole, the link between enabling factors and the improvement of action research status at the learning institutions results in improvement of school practices and eventually of improved learning outcomes. This idea can be represented in Fig. 1 and it served as a framework to guide the present study.

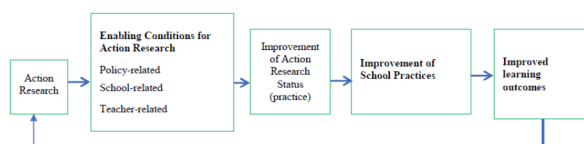
Methodology

This study is aimed to investigate the status of teachers' engagement in action research in primary schools of Bahir Dar city. The study also examined the challenges that teachers face and the opportunities they have to undertake action research at their schools. Further, teachers' demands (needs) in relation to conducting action research were explored. To this end, concurrent mixed methods design (Creswell 2012) was applied as the authors' interest was to get and converge both qualitative and quantitative data and integrate the information to interpret the overall results. While quantitative data were obtained from the closed-ended items in the questionnaire which was distributed to school teachers, qualitative data were obtained from open-ended items of the questionnaire and the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) held with six education experts of the city administration's education department.

Participants

The data sources for the study were primary school teachers and educational experts of Bahir Dar city education department. At the time of the study (2019), there were 38 primary schools (grades 1 to 8) at the city administration. Out of these, 30% of the schools, 11 in number, were randomly selected to be part of the study. While seven of the schools are located in the interior of the city, the remaining four are located in the periphery (suburban) areas of the city. All the teachers in the schools who were present during the dates of data collection were included in the study. This resulted in 251 teachers to participate in the study. While 99 of the participating teachers were males, 152 were females. In terms of years of teaching experience, the teachers had teaching experience which ranged from 1 year to 39 years with an average experience of 22.8 years. Regarding the subjects they primarily teach, 89 of the teachers teach language subjects (Amharic and English), 66 of them teach science subjects, 27 of them teach social studies subjects, 50 teach Math and 19 teach

Fig. 1 Conceptual Framework of the Study



other subjects. Besides school teachers, six experts (all males) of the city administration education department who were responsible for issues related to action research in schools were included in the study.

Data Collection

Data essential for the study were collected using two data gathering methods: questionnaire and FGD.

Questionnaire a questionnaire was prepared for teachers to examine the status of action research in their respective schools, the challenges they face when undertaking action research, and the opportunities that exist to conduct action research. The questionnaire consisted of 20 items grouped under two sections. While the first section requests biographical data, the second one requests information on action research practices at their respective schools. For validating the relevance of the questions, it was provided to two university instructors who teach action research course. Except for the wordings of the items, no conceptual comment was forwarded by the instructors. As a result, all the 20 items were included for final administration. The questionnaire was distributed to the sample teachers by the researchers at the schools during working hours.

FGD this was held with six selected experts of the city administration education department. The purpose was to obtain city-wide data concerning the status, challenges, and opportunities related to teachers' engagement in action research and teachers' demands in relation to action research. Four general discussion questions in relation to the basic research questions were used to guide the discussion. The FGD, which took about 90 min, was facilitated by one of the researchers at the city education department office.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were applied to analyze the data obtained through the questionnaire. The extent of teachers' self-engagement and judgment of colleagues' engagement in action research, number of action research projects per annum, culture and ways of disseminating action research results, the prevalence of challenges, etc. were the focuses of the quantitative analysis. Besides the descriptive statistics, chi-square test was employed to examine if there is an association between self-engagement and perception of colleagues' engagement in action research among the teachers.

Qualitative analysis is conducted for the data obtained through FGD with experts and open-ended questionnaire items. Coding is undertaken and the responses were thematically organized in terms of challenges that teachers face, prevailing opportunities to conduct action research, and demands (needs) for effectively engaging in and doing action research.

Results

This section presents the results of the study under the following four themes: (1) status of teachers' engagement in action research (2) challenges to conduct action research (3)

opportunities for carrying out action research, and (4) needs related to action research at the sampled primary schools.

Status of Teachers’ Engagement in Action Research

To understand the status of teachers’ involvement in action research, the researchers investigated the extent of teachers’ engagement and the culture of disseminating action research results. Results are presented under the following two sub-themes: teachers’ engagement in action research and the practice of dissemination in the primary schools.

Teachers’ Engagement in Action Research

The participants of the study were asked about their own and their colleagues’ engagement in action research. The results (Tables 1 and 2) indicate that while nearly 50% of the teachers reported they were engaged in action research, they rated their colleagues’ engagement to be less than 10%.

Table 1 Teachers’ involvement in conducting action research

Involvement	Frequency	Percent
Involved	122	48.6
Not involved	126	50.2
No response	3	1.2
Total	251	100.0

Table 2 Teachers’ responses concerning their colleagues’ involvement in action research

% of Involvement	Frequency	Percent
0	52	20.7
1–10%	168	66.9
11–25%	7	2.8
26–50%	15	6.0
51–75%	2	0.8
Missing	7	2.8
Total	251	100

Table 3 Association between participants’ engagement in action research and their rating of colleagues’ engagement

Context	Participants’ rating of the percentage of school staff involved in AR					Total (%)	χ^2	df	p
	No of staff involved	1–10%	11–25%	26–50%	51–75%				
Participants’ involvement									
Not involved	37 (15.2)	79 (32.5)	3 (1.2)	2 (0.8)	1 (0.4)	122 (50.2)	17.99	4	0.001
Involved	15 (6.2)	88 (36.2)	4 (1.6)	13 (5.3)	1 (0.4)	121 (49.8)			
Total	52 (21.4)	167(68.7)	7 (2.9)	15 (6.2)	2 (0.8)	243 (100)			

We further examined the association between the participants' self-engagement and their rating of their colleagues' involvement in action research using the chi-square test. The result revealed a significant association as shown in Table 3 below.

To identify the cells which contributed to the significant association, we examined the adjusted standardized residuals of the cells as indicated in Table 4 below.

According to Agresti (2002), adjusted standardized residual (standardized Pearson residual) values that exceed 2 in absolute value indicate that the frequency of a cell contributes significantly to the association. As it can be seen in Table 4, the cells intersecting "participants' involvement" with "No staff" and "26–50%" have higher Adjusted Standardized Residual values. That is, while more participants who were not themselves engaged in action research rated most of their colleagues as not involved in action research, most of those who themselves were involved in action research rated 26–50% of their colleagues as engaged in action research.

Besides their own and colleagues' involvement, the participants were asked to indicate the number of action research projects that they think have been conducted in their respective schools per year. The results obtained are presented in Table 5 below.

As Table 5 shows, the majority of participants (69.7%) indicated that teachers in their schools were conducting up to 10 action research projects per year. On the other hand, a significant number of participants (19.9%) reported that no action research was conducted in their schools.

To better understand the extent of teachers' engagement in action research in the schools, qualitative data were also collected concurrently through FGD. From the discussions held, the city education department experts raised issues related to the quantity, quality, and relevance of the action research projects. The findings are summarized in the following paragraphs.

Regarding quantity, the FGD discussants unanimously mentioned that there was an increasing trend of doing action research among primary school teachers. Using evidence, discussants firmly asserted that in terms of quantity, action research has been showing some progress. The following excerpt taken from one discussant strengthens this contention.

Table 4 Adjusted standardized residuals for the association between participants' engagement in action research and their rating of colleagues' engagement

Context	<i>Participants' rating of the percentage of school staff involved in AR</i>				
	No staff	1–10%	11–25%	26–50%	51–75%
Participants' involvement					
Not involved	3.4	–1.3	–0.4	–2.9	0.0
Involved	–3.4	1.3	0.4	2.9	0.0

Table 5 Action researches conducted in the primary schools per year

No. of Action researches	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
No action research in the school	50	19.9
1–10	175	69.7
11–25	12	4.8
26–50	9	3.6
Missing	5	2.0
Total	251	100.0

In terms of quantity, there is a tremendous change. Based on the reports we receive from schools and our observation of annual research symposia, it is possible to say that action research outputs in primary schools are at a good status (Discussant 06).

However, discussants were not confident to witness the quality of action research projects conducted by primary school teachers. They disclosed that many of the research projects were far from fulfilling the minimum requirements. In this regard, one of the discussants forwarded the following suggestion.

Talking about the quality of primary schools' action research is somewhat difficult. I think we are not at the level of talking about quality (Discussant 01).

Regarding the relevance of action research projects, discussants reflected different views. While some judge the projects as relevant, others consider them less relevant as reflected in the following excerpts.

Most of the action research projects I know so far are aimed at improving classroom practices. If they improve classroom practices, they can be considered as meeting the criteria of relevance (Discussant 02).

Even though the issue of relevance is relative, I do not dare to say that the action research projects undertaken by primary school teachers are relevant enough to the realities of many schools and classrooms (Discussant 05).

The ideas forwarded by focus group discussants generally revealed their doubt on the relevance of the action research projects in solving problems. In this regard, one of the discussants reflected the following.

One could not see and hear about a deteriorating and frustrating trend of educational quality if the action research projects conducted by school teachers would have been effective. In terms of student achievement, disciplinary problems, and many other related issues, our schools have to travel a long distance (Discussant 01).

The Practice of Action Research Dissemination in Primary Schools

In this study, the status of action research dissemination in primary schools of Bahir Dar city was also examined. The data obtained on the status of dissemination is presented in the following table.

As can be seen from Table 6, the majority of the participants (60.6%) reported that there was no culture of sharing action research results. Only 35.5% of the participants reported its presence in primary schools.

Table 6 The culture of sharing action research results

Presence of the culture of sharing	Frequency	Percent
No sharing culture	152	60.6
Sharing culture	89	35.5
Missing	10	4
Total	251	100.0

Those participants who reported that there was a culture of sharing action research results were also asked to indicate the methods of dissemination used in their schools. Their responses are presented as follows.

Table 7 depicts the research participants' responses concerning the methods of action research dissemination used in their respective schools. As can be seen from the table, most of them (51.7%) reported that informal way of dissemination (e.g., private discussion) was the dominant method. On the other hand, 29.2% of the study participants reported that school-level action research conference was used to disseminate action research results. This indicates that school-level research conference was the second important form of dissemination. Dissemination through publication, however, was found to be the least utilized strategy to share with colleagues.

Challenges to Conduct Action Research in the Primary Schools

One of the purposes of this study was to identify the major challenges that impede teachers from engaging in action research. For this purpose, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected. In this sub-section, findings obtained from both data are presented.

In the questionnaire, research participants were asked to rate the level of some perceived challenges of action research. Their responses are presented in Table 8 as follows.

As indicated in Table 8, the majority of participants (72.9%) reported that lack of action research training was the major challenge that inhibited primary school teachers from engaging in action research. High teaching load and lack of incentive were also reported to be important inhibitive factors by 39.4% of the survey participants. Besides, insufficient

Table 7 Ways of sharing action research results

Ways of sharing	Frequency	Percent
Forums arranged by schools	26	29.2
Private discussion with colleagues	46	51.7
Giving print copies to colleagues	10	11.2
Other ways	1	1.1
Missing	6	6.7
Total	89	100.0

Table 8 Participants' ratings of the challenges to conduct action research

Challenge	No. of participants who selected it as a challenge	Percentage of participants who selected it as a challenge
Lack of adequate training	183	72.9
Lack of sufficient budget	94	37.5
Lack of support from school administration	43	17.1
Lack of interest from teachers	88	35.1
High teaching load	99	39.4
Lack of incentive	99	39.4

research budget and lack of interest among teachers were found to be the third and fourth impeding factors respectively.

To understand the perspective of the city's education department experts regarding challenges related to conducting action research, the experts were given the chance to reflect on the impediments. By so doing, some important challenges were identified. These include lack of solid knowledge regarding action research, lack of courage and motivation, lack of confidence, lack of experience, lack of commitment, and shortage of reference materials. Being busy with many routine activities, questionable quality and relevance of action research projects, tendency to conduct action research for personal benefits, questionable competence of action research assessors/evaluators, and problems related to dissemination of action research results were also found to be important.

Opportunities for Doing Action Research

This study has identified the available opportunities to conduct action research. The data on this issue were collected through FGD. In the discussion, the following issues were frequently raised by the city's education department experts as opportunities.

Favorable National Policy

One of the issues that FGD discussants raised was the attention given to action research in the national education policy. The following verbatim data taken from two of the discussants are good examples in this regard.

Action research is one of the educational issues that got the attention of policy. In the country's education and training policy and other educational policy documents, action research is considered as the best approach to tackling diverse classroom and school-level problems (Discussant 04).

Action research has gained prominence both in policy and practice. If you see the general education quality improvement programs, action research is recognized as one effective way of ensuring quality education in the country. In the two programs, i.e. in the school improvement program and in the curriculum improvement program in particular action research is considered as an important strategy (Discussant 06).

Action research is also given a substantial place in teachers' promotion on the career ladder. Those who conduct action research have a better opportunity to get promoted from one career ladder to the next one (Discussant 06).

What could be understood from the above qualitative data is that action research has been given a substantial place in the education and training policy of Ethiopia. It is considered as a useful strategy in resolving educational problems and ensuring educational quality. Action research has also been given high value in teachers' promotion policy. All these imply that in Ethiopia, there is a favorable policy environment concerning action research in primary schools.

Availability of Short-term Training

Another issue that emerged from the FGD data as an opportunity for conducting action research was the provision of short-term training. Two discussants' ideas presented hereunder epitomize this contention.

In my opinion, the second opportunity we have for a better practice of action research is the training offered by different bodies. I remember our school teachers had received action research training organized by both governmental and non-governmental organizations (Discussant 02).

As indicated by my colleague, action research has been at the heart of the training given for primary school teachers. Instructors from Bahir Dar University, for instance, had provided action research training. Besides, our teachers had received similar training from NGOs that work in the education sector (Discussant 05).

From the above qualitative data, it can be noted that both governmental and non-governmental organizations were capacitating primary schools teachers by giving short-term training on action research. As mentioned by the discussants, this can be considered as an opportunity for a better practice of action research in the city's primary schools.

Growing Tendency to Recognize Action Researchers

In the FGD, discussants reported another enabling issue about the practice of action research. For some discussants, there has been an encouraging beginning to recognize and incentivize those teachers who conduct action research projects with better quality. Supporting this, the discussants had the following to say.

Though it may not satisfy our teachers, there has been an effort to incentivize teachers who perform better in relation to action research projects (Discussant 03).

In the education sector, there is a growing tradition of arranging annual research symposia. Nowadays, it is common to see annual research symposia at school, cluster center, woreda, zone, and region levels. Therefore, those teachers who present their action research work in these symposia and were able to get the first three ranks will be given incentives (Discussant 03).

The tradition of recognizing and incentivizing teachers who undertake action research projects with better quality is another opportunity that could motivate teachers to engage in action research.

Primary School Teachers' Needs in Relation to Action Research

As part of a collaborative action research project and with the intention of undertaking intervention, the baseline study has also identified the needs of primary school teacher participants in relation to action research. For this purpose, participants were asked to indicate their responses, through the questionnaire and FGD. The following are findings obtained in this regard.

Action Research Training

From the questionnaire responses, almost all of the participants (98 %) requested training on the basics of action research. Of course, as presented in Table 9, these research participants had differences in the emphasis of the action research training to be offered.

As Table 9 depicts, action research training that focuses on problem identification and action planning was found to be the first and second areas of priority by the research participants as these issues were preferred by 75.3 % and 56.2 % of the teachers respectively. A substantial number of research participants also demanded training on the implementation of proposed actions, designing data collection tools, data collection, and data analysis.

Close Supervision and Monitoring

One of the frequently mentioned demands as cited by the FGD participants was the need to make close supervision to action research projects of primary school teachers. In this regard, the following suggestions were forwarded.

The most important thing that we need from the university is to practice the idea of collaborative action research in our schools. Your support could be more meaningful and effective if university instructors are assigned and work in partnership with school teachers on the practical aspect of action research (Discussant 01).

To be frank, I do not believe that the major gap in relation to action research practice in our schools is lack of training. In my opinion, the problem is our inability to support teachers on how to materialize the theoretical knowledge they gained into practice (Discussant 04).

From the above qualitative data, it is explicitly indicated that close supervision of primary school teachers' action research projects, in the form of collaborative action research, is quite necessary.

Needs Related to Action Research Dissemination

As the findings of both the quantitative and qualitative data depict, one of the challenges that daunt the practice of action research in primary schools of Bahir Dar city was the one related

Table 9 Training needs of participating teachers

Area of training	Number of participants who preferred it	Percentage of participants who preferred it
Training on problem identification	189	75.3
Training on action planning	141	56.2
Training on implementing proposed action strategies	125	49.8
Training on designing data collecting tools	116	46.2
Training on data collection	114	45.4
Training on data analysis	116	46.2

to dissemination. This problem was frequently mentioned in the FGD. This sub-section, therefore, presents data that implies the need to work on this dimension.

Once I served as an evaluator of action research projects on a symposium organized by one primary school cluster center. On that occasion, I observed many problems. For instance, the way the teachers prepared their reports had too many problems. Using different reporting formats, negligence to strictly adhere to the standards to be followed in the write-up of the paper, poor quality, and organization gaps were among the problems I noticed (Discussant 02).

Another serious challenge that I faced during that time was the lack of presentation skills among action researchers. The way many researchers presented their findings was not attractive. They did not use modern technologies like Power Point and LCD. So, with such gaps how can they share their works with others? How can others be ready to take the findings of the researchers as important lessons? (Discussant 02).

One of the supports that we expect from Bahir Dar University is professional assistance that could help us solve the problem of sharing action research results with concerned bodies. Nowadays, many teachers in our primary schools are doing action research. However, concerned bodies do not know this because their works are not shared properly. Many action research results that could have been important for others are often shelved (Discussant 04).

Bahir Dar University need to give training for school principals, supervisors, and other educational leaders on the whole process of action research. This will solve many of the problems that we experience at the time of evaluation of papers at symposiums. It will also create awareness for them on how to publish our works (Discussant 03).

The above qualitative data suggest the need to work on the task of action research dissemination.

In general, both the quantitative and qualitative data illustrate that the status of teachers' engagement in action research in primary schools of Bahir Dar City is low. In comparison to the number of teachers, the action research output in the sampled schools is not encouraging. Issues of quality and relevance of the research outputs were also raised as an extension to the quantitative finding. The qualitative data indicate that the quality and relevance of the existing research outputs are not worth appreciating. As far as dissemination of the research outputs is concerned, both teachers and education office experts noted that at present schools have no effective and efficient systems of disseminating their action research outputs.

In the present study, challenges that impede teachers' active involvement in action research were identified from both the quantitative and qualitative data. The finding also explicated that despite the diverse challenges, opportunities that could be harnessed to strengthen teachers' engagement in action research exist. To tailor action research capacity-building efforts based on the gaps of schools, participants were finally asked about their needs that could be addressed by the university. The finding illuminated many issues which require the attention of the university in particular College of Education and Behavioral Sciences.

Discussion

As educators (e.g., Elliot 1991; McKernan 1996) contend, understanding the status of a certain educational issue is the first step in the process of undertaking an intervention. As a result, one of the issues that this study addressed was to examine the current status of primary school teachers' engagement in action research at Bahir Dar city. As presented earlier, teachers' engagement in action research was not satisfactory. Both the quantitative and qualitative data indicated that a large number of primary school teachers were not engaged in action research projects. For instance, from the quantitative data, it was noted that more than half of the participants did not take part in any action research project. Only 1–10% of the primary school teachers were engaged in doing action research. Surprisingly, it is also reported that no action research was conducted in some primary schools.

Likewise, the findings of the study indicated that the culture of sharing action research results was not salient. In the schools studied, formal methods of disseminating research outcomes and lessons learned from the experience were not adequate. Instead, it was through such informal methods as private discussion and sharing copies of action research reports that teachers were trying to disseminate their research outputs. The qualitative data were also consistent with the quantitative results. According to this finding, the practice of action research, particularly in terms of quality and relevance, was low. As the purpose of action research is to bring about improvement in one's professional practice (Elliot 1991; McKernan 1996), one can imagine how the low engagement of teachers may impede their professional development and eventually affect the quality of education and students' learning.

The results of the present study on teachers' engagement in action research were consistent with the findings of local and international studies. Some local studies, for instance, those conducted by Yibeltal (2006), Aga (2017), Worku (2017), and Desta (2018) indicated that due to different reasons teachers' engagement in action research in Ethiopian schools is low. The situation in the international context is not as such different. As the works of Elliot (1991) and McKernan (1996) show, as a result of many inhibitive factors, teachers' level of engagement in action research worldwide is not encouraging.

The present study identified the challenges that inhibit teachers' engagement in action research in primary schools of Bahir Dar city. The quantitative data, for instance, shows that a substantial number of participants reported lack of adequate training, high teaching load, and lack of incentives as the most serious challenges. Besides, lack of sufficient budget, assigning teachers to teach different subjects, the poor culture of action research dissemination, and inadequate administrative support were mentioned as important challenges.

From the qualitative data too, many inhibitive factors such as lack of adequate knowledge and skill in doing action research, lack of courage, motivation, confidence, experience, and commitment, lack of time due to teachers' engagement in many routine activities, inadequate administrative support and shortage of reference materials were identified as factors impeding the practice of action research.

Responses from the FGD participants also indicated the prevalence of various problems in the schools' action research culture. These include poor relevance of action research projects to the professional development of teachers, the tendency of doing action research for personal benefits (e.g., for career growth), and problems related to dissemination.

Most of the challenges identified in this study are consistent with previous research findings. For instance, according to McKernan (1996), lack of time, lack of resources, school

organizational factors, and inadequacy of research skills were reported as the most frequently ranked constraints. McKernan (1996) also noted that heavy workload, limited support, anxiety about research skills, and timetable pressures were critical hampering factors for teachers' involvement in action research.

In the context of Ethiopia, challenges that inhibit teachers to actively engage in educational research, including action research, were reported by some researchers. Organizational and resource-related problems (e.g., unsupportive leadership and inadequate finance), lack of expertise, low motivation, and high workload in teaching and other committee activities were found to be major impediments (Cherie 2003; Yibeltal 2006; Turago 2010; Aga 2017; Desta 2018).

Despite the challenges reported by the above researchers (i.e., Cherie 2003; Yibeltal 2006; Turago 2010; Aga 2017; Desta 2018), opportunities for undertaking action research also exist. From the quantitative data, it was noted that most teachers were convinced of the importance of action research and believe that action research has a significant role in solving different problems that occur in the teaching-learning process. Such belief is a good opportunity to engage teachers with relevant intervention.

This study is believed to serve as a baseline empirical evidence to identify relevant and effective strategies that could meaningfully contribute to improving teachers' engagement in action research. As part of the strategy, the participants were asked to propose the areas of intervention that would help them to be more engaged in action research. Training on the basics of action research was found to be the most important need. Nearly all participants (98%) were interested to have practical training. Besides, two important areas of intervention were raised by the teachers. The first was close supervision and professional support and the second one is related to the dissemination of the outputs of action research. Collaboration with faculty in higher learning institutions has the advantage of enhancing the knowledge and practice of the school teachers and this, in turn, helps those from the institutions know the school contexts and shape their teacher training programs (Elliot 1991). Dissemination of research outputs is essential for others to learn from tested practices. Unfortunately, there are no noticeable outlets for the dissemination of action research results. Locally, existing journals at higher learning institutions focus on publishing conventional research works and they fail to invite school-based action research studies carried out by practitioners. Besides, educational seminars organized by the institutions are mainly dedicated to conventional studies. Hence, interventions on these issues are worth considering.

The baseline study in general illuminated that in the effort to increase the engagement of primary school teachers in action research, many constraints have to be resolved. At the same time despite the constraints and /or challenges, the finding shows that there are potential opportunities. If such opportunities are harnessed, schools can go a long distance in improving the practice of action research in their system. One such unexploited resource is the partnership between the city's education office and Bahir Dar University, in particular, College of Education and Behavioral Sciences. The growing attention given to action research at policy and practice level is another underutilized asset. As the experts from the city education department indicated, there is a growing effort to recognize teachers who engage in action research, and this is believed to have an impact on teachers' motivation and students' learning outcomes. Schools have also underutilized potential to disseminate exemplary research works to their community.

Conclusions

As a baseline research for subsequent intervention by CEBS, Bahir Dar University, the present study investigated the status, challenges, and opportunities in relation to teachers' engagement in action research in primary schools of Bahir Dar city. Four research questions guided the study. As a springboard, we were interested to understand the present status of teachers' engagement in action research in primary schools. We were also interested to know the constraining factors (challenges) to conduct action research. Opportunities for engaging in action research were also of interest to the researchers. Finally, related to the three themes, we sought the needs of teachers and schools in relation to action research.

The findings indicated that teachers' engagement in action research in the primary schools of Bahir Dar city was low. In the schools studied, both the quality and quantity of action research were found to be unsatisfactory. The number of action research projects that teachers undertook in the past years, in proportion to the number of teachers, was not encouraging. Besides, in terms of relevance, it was found to be unsatisfactory.

Second, the practice of action research in the primary schools of the city was engulfed by several challenges. Lack of adequate training, high teaching load, lack of sufficient budget, and inadequate administrative support were found to be important. Besides, shortage of reference books, teachers' engagement in many routine activities also inhibited them from engaging in action research.

Third, some enabling conditions for teachers to engage in action research were identified. Policy support, provision of research training, and the growing tendency to recognize and incentivize teachers with better action research performance were found to be facilitating conditions. Teachers' maturity in teaching experience and, most importantly, their conviction on the relevance of action research in resolving various instructional problems were also found to be opportunities that could be harnessed for better practice of action research in primary schools of Bahir Dar city.

From the findings, we conclude that prior efforts to improve teachers' engagement in action research in primary schools of Bahir Dar city often used a top-down approach. University instructors and other educational experts often assume that they know the gap or what school teachers need to improve their skills and practice of action research. Little or no opportunity is given for the target teachers to reflect on how the situation can be improved. The present study bridges such a gap by identifying the perspectives of teachers in relation to the existing context of action research performance in the schools and how current performance can be improved.

Implications

Based on the findings, it is implied that the school teachers have no adequate opportunities for professional growth and improvement. As a result of these constraints, teachers' changes in their pedagogy, thinking, and confidence are less likely to exist.

The data from the practitioners imply that there is a need to take an intervention that aimed at improving the practice of action research in the primary schools of the city. The various challenges of teachers to engage in school-based action research signify that the schools' management and the city educational officers' effort to create conducive conditions

are minimal indicating that all concerned bodies need to revisit the context and thereby alleviate the constraining factors before enforcing teachers to engage in action research.

Despite the existence of different enabling conditions, those opportunities were not effectively harnessed to improve teachers' engagement in action research. Thus, identified opportunities need to be cared and exploited. Another implication of this study is related to the nature of the intervention. In this regard, the college's future collaborative action research project and the specific action strategies to be implemented need to reflect both the findings of the study and the needs and interests of the research participants. As far as this is concerned, training on the basics of action research, close supervision and follow-up of teachers' action research projects, and professional and institutional support that could ameliorate the problems concerning the dissemination of action research results need to be given priority.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The results of the present study indicate that the perspectives of teachers and the city's education department experts sometimes vary. For instance, a gap in training was rated as a serious challenge by the teachers. However, experts reflected that teachers have different opportunities to capacitate themselves through training. This raises a concern about why such differences happened. Second, as the data were collected during the season where schools are preparing to close for vacation, we did not access some teachers. As a result, we used availability sampling to get our questionnaire completed. The perspective of those who did not show up in the school during data collection could have given some insight from the point of representation. Future research needs to probe further why the perspectives of the practitioners and experts vary through in-depth qualitative data from teachers. Our study is a cross-sectional survey. Studies which use longitudinal approach and employ additional data collecting tools for instance observation may give more comprehensive picture regarding the challenges of teachers to conduct action research. Using random sampling to represent primary school teachers fairly is another issue for future studies to consider.

Data Availability The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon request.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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