Challenges of the Novice Researcher
Reflection on Conducting a Research in the Teacher Education Program

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Abstract: In the context of a developing country like Pakistan, the "teacher" and "researcher" is seen as two different professionals who have different responsibilities to perform. However, this matter cannot be dealt in isolation; rather there are several interwoven issues involved. The paper sought to explore the challenges that a teacher came across while embarking on a research. The findings indicate that the teacher's insufficient knowledge about conducting research is a major constraint. Secondly, time is also one of the top constraints. Usually education system only targets examination and completion of syllabus. Another issue is support of management. School management usually does not encourage teachers to conduct research in their classrooms. Thereby, it is safe to say that though management struggles to have qualified and professional teachers, they do not realize the crucial role of research in teachers' professional development.

Keywords: challenges, novice researcher, teacher as researcher

Introduction

This paper presents the author's reflections on the process of conducting a research as a teacher. Moreover, the case study will be presented as self-evaluation. The aim of the paper is to explore the notion "teacher as researcher". Then, the paper projects the challenges of a novice researcher.

Teachers as researchers

The argument in this paper derives from the teacher research movement led by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993); Schon's notion of reflective practice for professional development (Schon 1983, 1987, 1991); Shulman's research program on teacher knowledge types (Shulman 1986). These research programs have shifted the perspective of teacher knowledge from knowledge produced by others to knowledge residing within

teachers. Furthermore, this movement has shifted position of teachers as objects of research to teachers as researchers.

"The link between teaching and research is a complex one" (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995, p. 5). In the context of a developing country like Pakistan, teachers' first and foremost responsibility is to teach, nevertheless teaching in classroom is kept isolated from other activities. "Teacher" and "researcher" is perceived as two different professionals who have different responsibilities to perform. "Proposing a role of teacher as a researcher is not new. Arguments that the teaching role should include a research responsibility have been long persistent" (Loughran, 2002). Kinchin and Hay (2007) present the same view when they state "when an academic considers teaching and research from a products perspective, then interaction between them [research and teaching] is problematic. Relationship is difficult to construct between teaching and research" (p. 58). However, this matter cannot be dealt in isolation; rather there are several interwoven issues involved.

Generally, there are two kinds of research assumed for the teacher. First is classroom research, which is undertaken by teachers to enhance their own or their colleagues' teaching to testing the assumptions of educational theory in practice. Second is the kind of research, in which teachers assume only the role of researcher and carry out research projects to the exclusion of their teaching. However, such researches are still related to classroom teaching in one way or other (Hopkins, 2001). Comparison of the first (teacher research) and second type (also called as university-based research) presents a complicated set of relationships. University researchers gain knowledge about teaching from high status information (data) attained through systematic modes of inquiry. However, teachers are accused of not reading or not implementing the findings of such researches in their classrooms (Kinchin & Hay 2007). It happens because the teachers often find such findings irrelevant to their teaching and learning. On the other hand, teacher research addresses issues that teachers themselves identify as significant; this kind of research does not have a legitimate place. For example if a teacher research's main goal is improving teaching, does the study have to be replicated or published? Furthermore, the ideology of teacher research clashes with the ideology of University

research. For example the ideology of University research has been characterized by the "publish and perish" syndrome yet in teacher research learners come first. The University research values knowledge for the sake of knowledge yet in teacher research knowledge is generated primarily for the sake of improving practice. The University research has traditionally valued objective knowledge as the highest form whereas teacher research recognizes that all knowledge is subjective as teacher research is highly contextual (Abell 2005).

Teachers are natural researchers in their classrooms. Teaching is, in fact, an ongoing process of research rather than a process of transmitting information. Moreover, a teacher in classroom is a researcher and a learner rather than a taskmaster. Experience comes to mind and the problem is reconceptualized in order to find out if the new way of seeing it produces good results. This is essentially a research process and many teachers undertake frequently. And this way teachers already are researchers. Reflection, inquiry and action are interrelated in teaching as well as in research. Teachers act as thinkers, learners and practitioners throughout their teaching. Moving from teaching towards conducting research demands inquiring about what is happening (Hollingsworth, 1994). For example, instead of simply being pleased with the students' achievements the teacher immediately begins to question how these achievements come about and where they would lead. This starts a journey of wondering, searching for insights and making discoveries.

Teacher keeps on asking questions about the teaching and learning process; for example why did I do that in classroom? What was I thinking? What does this action say about what I value? These are the same kind of questions that a teacher prepares for her/his class. For instance why am I leaning toward using this teaching strategy instead of that activity. Why do I think it is important to teach this? How can I help a particular student? (Hopkins, 2001) Such questions also help the teacher as a researcher in exploring his/her beliefs about teaching and learning. Then, teacher as a researcher becomes a learner in his/her own classroom by reflecting on his/her practices (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995).

Thus, teacher as a researcher should target the issues of his/her own and the students' work and the processes of teaching and learning. Furthermore, it should also

consider relevant policies and rules and their impact on the process of teaching and learning. Similarly, action based on the new knowledge that is gained through reflection and inquiry, should be the ultimate goal of research. By taking a research stance, teacher is engaged not only in a meaningful professional development activity but also in process of refining, and becoming more autonomous. The image of teacher as a researcher is powerful one. It embodies a number of characteristics that reflect the individual teacher's capacity. The most important one is the teacher's ability to think systematically and critically about what he/she is doing and to collaborate with other teachers engaged in similar pursuits. Thus, central to this activity is systematic reflection on one's classroom experience, in order to understand it and to create a meaning out of that understanding. By becoming self-conscious, collaborative and critical about their teaching, teachers as researchers develop more power over their professional lives and on their students. Ultimately, teachers at all levels are concerned about their effectiveness. They want to know; do they have an impact on their students. Teachers feel rewarded when their students learn. Studying one's own teaching is affirmation. It also provides information about what needs to be changed and extends main motivation for all teacher researchers. Studying one's own teaching and learning requires expertise, including knowledge of educational theories and research methods. Thus, it is important to recognize the value of teacher research for both classroom teaching as well as university-based research.

The Methodology

This paper presents a case study written as a self-evaluation about understanding as to what kind of challenges are faced by the novice researcher while embarking to conduct a research for the very first time. The case is drawn based on reflection and retrospect on the processes of doing research.

Challenges of a Novice Researcher

1) Researcher's own research knowledge and skills

Research is stimulating and fun once the researcher is sure how to go about it,

otherwise gaining access, collection of information (data), tape recordings, analysis and drawing conclusion may seem messy to a novice researcher. The question with which a novice researcher often faced, is-what to do with all the data? Thus, asking questions, looking for data, describing and focusing on a problem are important for a novice researcher in order to learn. Moreover, reflection on the events and data to make sense of them and gain on insight is the point of all in research. Therefore, a novice researcher should be well equipped with such knowledge and skills.

First time that the novice researcher embarked for a research, she had the experience of two research courses "Educational Inquiry" and "Qualitative Research Methods" in Masters in Education (M.Ed.) program. The purpose of these courses was to prepare potential teachers and teacher educators to conduct research and make research as part of their classroom teaching.

After getting good grades in the courses, which were mainly field-based, the novice researcher developed the understanding, which led to conduct a research. However, the perceptions was changed with the course of time. The given time for the study was six months and supervisors were allotted before research.

All the teachers in the course were asked to select their supervisors keeping in mind their expertise and field of interest. The course participants were provided with the complete information about the faculty to choose as a supervisor. The challenging task was to convince supervisor and get acceptance. Dr. Dean was selected as supervisor, though the novice researcher had never been in her class before. Dr. Dean's expertise in "Gender Education" made the novice researcher to select her as supervisor

When the journey started proposal development was the first step. The novice researcher had to start from scratch. She had two major challenges at the same time. First, was the initial attempt as a novice researcher; second, was she had never studied Gender in whole academic career. However, the supervisor helped the novice researcher in developing a good understanding of Gender in Education and particularly in Science which was done through reading literature extensively, discussing it and reflecting on it. The supervisor's critical questions kept the novice researcher's mind engaged all the time with the area of research, which was Gender and Science Education. After successful

defence of research proposal, the novice researcher had to enter in the field. At that time many questions emerged in her mind: how to get data that answer her research questions? How can the study make a meaningful contribution?

The biggest challenge was to equip herself with the skills of research. As a novice researcher it was pertinent to understand the particular individuals, actions, policies and events that make up the work and work environment and enable the researchers to make professional decisions. The researcher has to engage in moments of reflection and inquiry in order to take action that will help students learn better. In a sense then, all professional teachers participate in research, because they reflect on students' learning and their own, inquire through multiple data sources (observation, analysis of students' work, conferences with students and collegues) and then acting on their new conclusions.

The novice researcher also had to read other researchers' attempts to address similar general issues in order to be more deliberate in the investigation of the particular. Then, the novice researcher proceeded according to conscious assumptions about the reality of situation to make decisions about data sources and analysis that fit the purpose. This inquiry not only requires reflection but also comprehension of research methods and analysis that follows writing reports of research.

Teacher as a researcher has to aim at informed action produced and understood simultaneously. Through this, teacher as researcher can synthesize and alter the conditions of the classroom and thereby make the familiar unfamiliar and problematic. Teacher as a researcher needs to see schooling as being full of puzzles, paradoxes, anomalies, injustices, having reasons for action and opportunities for inquiry.

2) Teaching time versus research time

Doing research takes time, but it is investment in quality teaching and learning in the classroom. Research is challenging for a teacher who is busy surviving the day-to-day demands of teaching to find time to do research that excludes teaching activities. The novice researcher was given six months time for research that termed out as six days for

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her. The research urged the novice researcher not only to list the events, but to spare time for reflecting on the meanings of those events, otherwise, the list would have said little about what was really going on. Consequently, conducting a research demanded ample time for making observations of classroom events, maintaining the records of data and reflecting on the meaning of those events, deciding what use would be made of this reflection, and finally disseminating the findings in the form of research report.

Although the process urged the novice researcher to develop the ability to vividly remember details of classroom situations, recording observation was essential as soon as possible. This provided quality primary data for later reflection. Waiting too long can cause details to be lost, changed, or covered over by feelings and reactions. The challenge was to what extent the novice researcher had time after class to record the data and reflect on them. Reading and thinking associated with data analysis also required a lot of time. However, the process did not point the novice researcher away from her own classroom practices, but in fact, brought an even deeper awareness of what was happening there.

My question through this paper is how a school teacher can find time to conduct such kind of research. One possibility is to conduct teacher's research or "action research". It is not different from the way of finding time to teach, because to some extent they are the same. For example, the questions a teacher asks as a teacher are the same questions he/she asks as a researcher: What do I know about each student? What do I know about how each student best learns this content? What support can I provide? Furthermore, doing library research and discussion with colleagues are also part of teaching. On the other hand, there is one aspect of research that is not part of teaching namely writing research. Thus, it is safe to say teacher research is not something added on top of teaching; rather doing research changes the utilization of time. This possibility leads to another question, which is to what extent teacher research is respected within the educational community, because it does not appear to offer the certainty claimed by other researches. For example, ethnographic and experimental studies seem to be completely planned and well managed, while teacher researchers' reflection, inquiry and action do not. Instead teacher research is instead organic, sometimes chaotic, unpredictable as well as generative. Teacher research is underestimated by the belief that it is tool to change

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and enhance practice. However, rigor in this kind of work should be demanded. It refers to CoChran-Smith and Lytle (1993) "systematic and intentional inquiry carried out by teachers" (p.7). Studying teachers' own teaching should be approached with the same passion and vigor as being a scientist. It demands systematic attention to evidence. It also demands for a historical perspective, which means what else has been done before? On what theories it is built?

3) Lack of support from management

If school management wants to have teachers that are professional, then teachers should be encouraged to conduct research. During the six years of teaching experience, before novice researcher's induction into Aga Khan University- Institute for Educational Development, many a times, she tried to learn about research in order to conduct it in her classroom. She was discouraged and kept deprived from the opportunities.

The reflection of the research presents a meta-analysis of the worthiness of conducting the research study. As mentioned earlier, the interest in the new topic paved the way for developing novice researcher's own understanding in the area of gender. At the end of the research, she can claim to have understood the concept of girls and boys learning science in co-education classroom through the gender lens. This has been due to reading relevant literature on gender in science, listening to and interpreting teachers' perceptions on the notion and having thought-provoking discussions with the supervisor. Thus, the combination of perspectives from literature and understanding teachers' views directed her own learning about the topic in a more practical and meaningful way. Reflecting on the experiences she accumulated during the study questions that to what extent school management can support a teacher in conducting such research. Is it possible for management to relieve the teacher from the teaching duties for a long period of time (in this case six months)?

Generally, school management does not realize the puissant connection between research and teacher's professional development. Thus, the school management needs to know that research helps teachers to grow as teachers, when they start looking closely at

what is happening in their classrooms. Through research, teacher becomes more involved in classroom, students and overall teaching and learning process. They also start taking risks with their learning and accept others in their classroom, as they become aware of the reason of presence. However, it must be considered that the teacher should be encouraged and involved.

Due to the insufficient support of management, teachers do not like presence of others (colleagues, course coordinators and head teachers etc) in the classroom. This is because usually, the reason for the presence of others is judging teacher's presentation rather than providing support. If the management becomes supportive, then through research, the teacher not only learns how to conduct a research but also learns how to work together and learn together.

Conclusion

Research was an integral part of M.Ed. studies for the novice researcher. This experience strongly recommend that teachers should be encouraged and involved in classroom research rather than in research that excludes teaching. In this case, the novice researcher was given six months purely for conducting a research. Teachers cannot concentrate only on conducting research and neglect their classroom teaching during this period. Thereby, teachers should be encouraged to make classroom research as part of their teaching. As teacher educators, we should strongly advocate teacher research, arguing that a research perspective is fundamental for improving teaching. Conducting classroom research helps teachers to be learners in their own classrooms; helps them in improving their different skills e.g. observation, taking notes, recording data, reflecting and analyzing them before arriving at conclusions. If teacher as a researcher becomes willing to invest time and energy in sustained efforts, research can be an effective professional development option. However, research remains challenging for teachers, because there is no sense of closure and certainty by the end of the day. Each research question opens up many more questions than it answers. Furthermore, it is always hard to continue ignoring the peripheral questions and focus on one interest at a time. Finishing up involves a more conscious decision to stop rather than arrival at sure answers.

Teachers can never feel sure about what should be done in the classroom, because each day, each class, each encounter with content and individual student is unique.

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