

Benefits and challenges of doing research: Experiences from Philippine public school teachers

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Previous research studies have indicated the positive impact that doing research has upon teachers' teaching pedagogies and professional growth. However, only a few studies concerning the challenges and benefits of doing research have been conducted in the Philippines and the ASEAN region. This study explores the experiences of Philippine public school teachers in conducting a school or a classroom research project. The data were collected through individual interviews administered to 11 public high school English teachers in Mindanao, Philippines. Findings suggest that although teachers' motivations to do research were more personal rather than professional, teachers recognised some benefits of doing school and classroom-based research for their teaching practices and career development. Challenges that were reported include the lack of financial support, heavy teaching load, lack of research skills and knowledge, and lack of research materials and resources. Implications are discussed in light of the findings and recommendations formulated for future research directions.

Introduction

The importance that doing research has upon the professional development of teachers and their practices has been widely acknowledged in the literature. For one, it equips teachers and other education practitioners with the skills necessary for identifying what the problem is in a school, and knowing how to address that problem systematically (Hine, 2013). Two, it serves as an opportunity for educators to self-evaluate their teaching practices (Hong & Lawrence, 2011). Three, it allows teachers to make a change in their pedagogical practices that will have a positive impact upon teaching and learning (Mahani, 2012). Lastly, it is a great form of improving teachers' lifelong learning and of continuing professional development (Cain & Milovic, 2010; Ulla, Barrera & Acompañado, 2017). However, despite its positive effects upon classroom teaching and learning (Mahani, 2012; O'Connor, Greene & Anderson, 2006), a number of studies have reported some factors that prevent teachers from doing research. Crowded teaching timetables, heavy teaching workloads (Kutlay, 2013; Morales, 2016; Ulla, 2018), insufficient research training (Ellis & Loughland, 2016), lack of research skills (Vásquez, 2017), lack of financial support (Biruk, 2013), and limited time to do research (Norasmah & Chia, 2016) often constitute the primary challenges and concerns faced by teachers and other educators aspiring to undertake research.

In the Philippines, doing research has become one of the important professional development programs for teachers that is emphasised by the Department of Education (DepEd) and the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) (Ulla, 2017). Teachers both from private and public educational institutions are encouraged to conduct action research in order to identify and address the teaching and learning issues and concerns in their classrooms and in the school. Thus, doing research has now become a part of every

teacher's teaching evaluation and performance appraisal at the end of the school year (Ulla, 2016). DepEd has ordered its schools heads and administrators across the country to adopt the "enclosed Basic Education Research Agenda" which promotes the conduct of research in schools by teachers (DepEd, 2016). The purpose is to discover schools' issues and solutions and form a part of teachers' professional development and skills enhancement. By doing research, teachers are believed to improve their teaching practices for the betterment of students' learning and for the school. However, conducting research in the country, especially in the public secondary schools, may be limited since only a few teachers have tried to do it (Ulla, 2017) due to their tight teaching timetables and heavy teaching workloads (Morales, 2016). Although educational institutions in the Philippines have encouraged their teachers to be involved in research, as it is seen to be useful for their professional development (Morales, 2016) and in their teaching career, teachers are confronted with many issues that affect their motivation to undertake research.

Thus, the present study tries to identify the experiences of public secondary school teachers in Mindanao in the Philippines, with regard to doing school and or classroom-based research. As there are only a small number of studies relating to teachers as researchers in an ASEAN context, this study attempts to fill a gap in the literature. Knowing and understanding the experiences of these teachers as researchers is vital towards the success of education research, not just in the Philippines but in all countries in the region.

Research for teachers' professional development

Classroom research, school-based research, teacher research, and action research have been defined in the current study as a research undertaken and conducted by teachers in the classroom and/or in the school. This kind of research is done primarily to examine and identify a problem or an issue within the classroom and in the school for which teacher-researchers want to find a solution, by understanding it thoroughly (Burns & Kurtoglu-Hooton, 2014). Although the origin of action research is not clear (Masters, 1995) whether it began in England in the 1960s from a movement of secondary modern school teachers who aimed to reform the education curriculum (Fagundes, 2016), or was it Kurt Lewin, a social psychologist, who started action research (Adelman, 1993; McNiff, 2010), it already has an influence in today's research in education.

McNiff (2010) outlined the benefits of action research for professional development of teachers. First, it reviews whether one's teaching practice meets the desired and expected outcome of ones' work. Second, it evaluates teaching pedagogies that have to be changed or improved. Lastly, it puts a value on one's work and profession. Generally, teachers, as agents of knowledge and change, have to evaluate and assess the things they do inside the classroom in order to advance and enhance their teaching (Morales, 2016). Teachers identify the problem, reflect on it, and try to address it. This is one of the most important goals of reflective teaching through research. When teachers consider their teaching practices and are able to identify and acknowledge the issues and concerns of their classrooms and their students, they become empowered and independent to solve school

issues on their own. Identifying what went wrong and what went well in classroom teaching and learning helps teachers to decide on the kinds of teaching styles and methods for their learners. This will lead to the improvement of their teaching skills and their students' learning (Hine, 2013). Teacher educators who are doing research studies are able to share with other educators the best practices that are important for the learners (Grima-Farrell, 2017). They become confident in teaching (Borg, 2014), increase their awareness and understanding of their students (Borg, 2014; Hong & Lawrence, 2011; Burns, 2010), and become accountable for their own classroom teaching and learning (Morales, 2016).

As a form of professional development activity, undertaking school or classroom-based research can be both rewarding and challenging for teachers and other education practitioners. Although conducting research can add to teachers' professional qualifications, skills and experience, many teachers are reluctant to do it as it implies additional workloads above their teaching load, and a number of studies have investigated factors linked to this issue (Cain, 2011). Much of teacher education research is centered upon identifying and solving classroom and school problems, where its focus is often on "reflective teaching practice" and "classroom teachers as researchers" (Burns, 2010). Doing research simply tries to put theories into application and practice, where teachers examine themselves and analyse the kind of teaching context they are in (McNiff, 2010). Furthermore, classroom research does not only bridge the gap between theories and practice (Johnson, 2012), it also gives teachers professional skills in research, which is crucial for a transformative education (Hine & Lavery, 2014).

Teachers as researchers

Although there have been limited research studies on teachers as researchers in the Philippines and in the ASEAN context, more studies of this kind can be found from other countries in the world. However, a number of these studies have focused only on teachers' perceptions, beliefs, issues and challenges with regards to doing research. For example, Dehghan and Sahragard (2015) in Iran reported that teachers' beliefs about doing research are shaped by the teaching practices they have for their classrooms. The 89 language teachers participating in this research stated that although they knew the concepts and principles of doing research, none of them had undertaken action research. None of the teacher-participants utilised research in their classes because they thought that doing research was only for expert researchers and not for them as classroom teachers. This suggests that some teachers held a negative view regarding doing research in the school. Teachers' negative attitudes towards research (Borg, 2014) can be attributed to the lack of time, incentives, and professional expertise (Biruk, 2013; Cain & Milovic, 2010; Ellis & Loughland, 2016; Kutlay, 2013; Morales, 2016; Norasmah & Chia, 2016; Vásquez, 2017). These three factors should be considered by the school administrators in as much as professional development for teachers is a concern.

A study conducted by Biruk (2013) in Ethiopia affirmed that only a few teachers conducted research studies, because of the lack of teachers' research skills and expertise.

Although the teacher-participants held a positive attitude towards research, their participation and contribution were reported to be low. Factors like lack of research knowledge, insufficient research training programs for teachers to enhance and develop their research skills, and lack of reference materials limited them from doing research. Likewise, more recent studies in the ASEAN context also reporting the same challenges faced by teachers as researchers were conducted by Norasmah and Chia (2016) in Malaysia; and Ellis and Loughland (2016) in Singapore and NSW. Both studies maintained that teachers in their localities, though holding positive views about research, were also confronted with the same issues of lack of time, resources, and support with regards to doing research. Therefore, these challenges faced by teachers should be addressed by education authorities in order to increase teacher participation in research. Teachers need support from school management and authorities in order to start doing research. As it is believed to be a significant contribution towards professional development for teachers, adequate research budgets, research training, workshops, and other support should be given to teachers to motivate them to conduct research studies. Bughio (2015) held that teachers who were active in doing research at their school would be able to study, evaluate, and assess their teaching pedagogies and practices. By doing so, teachers would be able to change and improve their methods of teaching, which would have an impact on students' learning and success.

Some practical steps to encourage teachers to do research have been outlined by Grima-Farrell (2017). First, teachers' needs should be looked into and provided so that their motivation to do research will increase. Second, research training and other research programs should be offered to teachers to equip them with the necessary skills to do research. Third, research collaboration should be emphasised so that teachers would be able to share their practices, skills, and knowledge. Lastly, support systems should be strong among teachers and schools' management as doing research can be time-consuming and tedious.

Generally, while the above studies have focused on some issues and challenges, and on teachers' perceptions and attitudes towards research, none have discussed and explored the experiences of teachers as researchers in doing research in the Philippines and in the context of ASEAN region. Lack of empirical studies on teachers as researchers may create a big gap between theoretical and empirical studies in the literature. Furthermore, since there is a limited study of teacher-researchers in the region, this study hopes to bridge this gap in the literature. Therefore, the following questions are addressed in the present study.

1. What are the motivations that Philippine high school teachers have in doing research?
2. What are the challenges that these teachers faced while doing research?
3. What are the teachers' perceived benefits while doing research?

An investigation of teachers' experiences while doing research in the Philippines may have implications for other educational institutions both in the Philippines and other nations in the ASEAN region. Education authorities can consider the findings from this study when designing appropriate policies for teacher-researchers.

Method

The present study is qualitative research with content analysis as the main method in analysing the interview data. It is qualitative as it explores, describes, and analyses the lived experiences, interests, and concerns (Phillion, 2002) of 11 Philippine public school teachers about doing research. The interview data obtained from semi-structured interviews were subjected to content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) in order to answer the research questions. All the responses were transcribed and were read many times in order to understand the content and the message. They were then categorised into different themes and subthemes.

Setting and participants

The study was conducted in Mindanao, the Philippines, where 11 teachers from 11 different public high schools participated in the research. The researcher employed purposive sampling of the teacher-participants based on the following criteria: had done at least one research study, had presented a study in national conferences, and had taught in public high school for at least two years. Of the 11 teacher-participants (3 males, 8 females), whose ages ranged from 26-45 years old, only 7 held a master's degree, while 4 were still finishing their PhD degrees. All of them were teaching English in their respective schools.

Data gathering procedure and analysis

Before the study was conducted, the researcher identified the teacher-researchers through a book of abstracts and program from a local paper presentation conference, personal knowledge, and friend's referrals. They were contacted through their phone numbers, email addresses, and through *Facebook* chats to confirm their research involvement in their schools; and whether or not they meet the criteria for participating in the study. For ethical considerations, teacher-participants were informed about the study and its purpose. It was also emphasised that their participation was voluntary and all the data taken from them were treated with high confidentiality.

When the teacher-participants had agreed to be part of the study, semi-structured individual interviews through *Facebook* chats (if personal interview was not possible) were conducted at agreed times and places. Semi-structured interviews (Jamshed, 2014) were used as this was deemed appropriate for the study. Teacher-participants answered preset open-ended questions related to doing research in the school (e.g. research motivations, benefits, challenges, and experiences). For personal interviews, a mobile phone was used to record the data. The interviews, conducted in English, concentrated on teachers' experiences while doing research. It included their research motivations, challenges, and perceived benefits of doing research.

Results

This study has developed three main themes and subthemes as reflected from the research questions, *motivations, challenges, and perceived benefits*. For the purpose of presentation, directly quoted interview excerpts were given below. Pseudonyms are used for the teacher-researchers.

Motivations

a. Research as a degree requirement

In the interview, most of the teacher-researchers revealed that finishing their master's degrees and completing their PhD research requirements was their only motivation to do research. They revealed that they have not done any research yet apart from their MA and PhD degree requirements.

I only did one research study as a requirement for my MA in English language teaching degree. My research was about teaching reading strategies with my students as my respondents. I had to do it, otherwise, I would not be awarded with an MA degree. [Rose]

In order to be considered as a candidate for MA graduation, I had to submit and defend a research paper. I wanted to finish my MA studies so I had to do research also. [Lily]

I think if it was not a requirement for my MA degree, I would not do research. Through conducting a research, I was able to finish my MA degree. Finishing an MA degree means a raise in my monthly salary. [Rye]

From the responses of the teachers when asked about their motivations to do research, it is clear that doing research for the purpose of looking for and solving classroom and or school problems was never the main reason why these teachers undertook research. Doing research was only for complying with their postgraduate degree requirements.

b. Job promotion

Another subtheme that was formed from the data interview was job promotion. Most of the teacher-researchers stated that doing research is a way to get promoted in their job. They mentioned that job promotion always means an increase in their salary; hence, their motivation.

Although it is time consuming and tiring, conducting an action research is one of the requirements to get promoted in the job. This means that once you get promoted, you also get an increase in the salary. [Joe]

Job promotion is my motivating factor why I do an action research at school. My current rank now is Teacher 2 and for me to be promoted, I have to conduct a research and submit it to the school division for my yearly teaching appraisal. [Ken]

I am doing a research because I want to be promoted. I do not want to stay in my current rank now. I want to be promoted because I want to have a raise in my pay. [Bob]

The interview findings also revealed that in addition to finishing their graduate degrees, teachers also did research for financial reasons. This means that doing research helped towards job promotion and salary increments for teachers.

Challenges

Two subthemes were found to be recurring in the interview data, *lack of support from the school* and *lack of sufficient reference materials*.

a. Lack of support from the school

One common challenge that the teacher-researchers faced when doing research is the lack of support from the school. This lack of support refers to financial, work, and training support.

When I did my MA research, there was no financial support given to me by the school. Although my research was for a degree requirement, it was aimed at improving the teaching and students' learning in my school. I should have been at least given some monetary support for my study. (Rye)

In my case, I tried asking for a financial support for my study but my school head said that I needed to submit an intent letter to the school's division; and that it should be signed by at least 5 people before I would get the money. By just thinking about the process and how much time I would be wasting, I did not push it through. I just used my own money to finish my study. (Abe)

It would be great to do a research study if the school would reduce my teaching workload. I was teaching 27 hours a week with an advisory class when I did a research last year. It was horrible and I do not want it to happen again. I was killing myself slowly at that time. I wish our teaching workload would be reduced to at least 20 hours a week. (Marie)

I think one of the challenges that I encountered when I did my research was the lack of enough research skills and knowledge. I had to extend my research study for another year because I lack the skills of doing it. I had to rely always to my research adviser who was also very busy on that time; hence, another year extension. If only I had attended some research trainings, seminars, and workshops, I would have finished my work on time. The problem is there is a shortage of training and seminar on research activities in my school. (Liza)

Common challenges that teachers faced when doing a school research were lack of financial support and lack of research skills and knowledge. These challenges may also be the reasons why teachers do not like to do research. Therefore, these teachers should be provided with the support they need in order to successfully carry out a research study.

b. Lack of sufficient reference materials

Another challenge that the teacher-researchers encountered when doing research was the lack of sufficient reference materials. Most of them revealed that their schools have no

updated library for current journals and books and no Internet connection for online searches.

We have no updated library. We have no journals and books that will serve as our research references. Our library only houses textbooks, some old newspapers, and magazines. When I did my research last time, I had to go to a local university here and access their library for possible journals and books. It was time consuming and tiring. (Aly)

In my experience, I had to take a leave of absence from my school just to visit the library of the school where I was taking my MA. Our MA classes were held at the weekends and I had to be absent sometimes from my work either on Friday or Monday just to do my library research. (Ana)

It is very difficult to do a research when your school has no Internet connection. That is one of the challenges that I am facing now especially that I am finishing my PhD. I could not continue doing my research during my vacant time at work because of the lack of Internet connection. (Rye)

Perceived benefits

When teacher-researchers were asked about their perceived benefits of doing research, a number of them stated that doing research can have a positive impact on their teaching and to their students' learning, while a few said that it made them grow professionally.

I believe that doing research has a positive impact on my teaching. I would say that it makes me a better teacher because I am able to identify the aspect of my teaching that needs to be changed or improved. Through doing research, I am able to address the issues that can eventually benefit my students. (Abe)

Conducting a classroom research improves my teaching practices. It makes me understand the needs of my students, the teaching strategies that they are comfortable having, and the learning strategies that they like doing. It serves as my mirror in the classroom. (Marie)

I got to improve my teaching strategies after doing a research. I was able to apply the findings of my study in the real classroom setting. I believe that is the most important benefit of doing research. (Bob)

I was invited as a plenary speaker in one of the local research conferences here a few months ago. I talked about the process of doing an action research, some methodologies, and technicalities. I was able to share with my fellow teachers the art of doing research. From that, I would say that doing research develops and enhances my skills professionally. (Lily)

Doing research brings me to many different places in and out of the country. I got to attend conferences where I presented my research studies and met a lot of friends. Through this, my professional circle of friends and my skills of doing research have also widened. (Aly)

Despite the many challenges that these teachers encountered in doing research, most of them affirmed that doing research can have a positive effect and impact on their teaching and on them personally. They stated that their teaching practices have been improved, their professional expertise was appreciated, and their professional linkages were widened.

Discussion

The present study explored the experiences, motivations, challenges, and perceived benefits of 11 public high school-teachers while undertaking a research study in their respective schools in Butuan City, Mindanao, Philippines. Among the motivations that teacher-researchers had in doing research were completion of their graduate degrees and job promotion. Although some studies in the literature affirmed that conducting a research study enhances teachers' teaching practices and enables them to probe into their classroom problems and concerns (Hien, 2009; Hine, 2013; O'Connor, Greene & Anderson, 2006; Young, Rapp & Murphy, 2010), teacher-researchers as participants of the study mentioned that they were only motivated to do research because it was part of the requirements for their MA or PhD degrees. This implies that these teachers did not undertake a research study because they wanted to examine their teaching practices and improve their students' learning skills, but because they wanted to improve their financial status in life. In other words, doing research is more for teachers' personal rather than professional development. This kind of situation is common in the education sector in the Philippines, where teachers receive an unattractive salary (Agarao-Fernandez & Guzman, 2005; Usop, Askandar & Langguyuan-Kadtong, 2013). Thus, many Filipino teachers either go abroad to work (Frederiksen, 2014) or continue to improve their qualifications to receive a better salary. For those teachers who choose to stay in the country, doing a research project and completing a postgraduate degree are among the ways that they may take in order to be promoted and get an increase in their monthly pay.

Consequently, conducting research studies also means facing some challenges. The studies by Biruk (2013); Cain and Milovic (2010); Ellis and Loughland (2016); Kutlay (2013); Morales (2016); Norasmah and Chia (2016); Vásquez (2017); and Zhou (2012) exposed a number of common problems that a teacher has to deal with when conducting a research study. The findings of the present study also disclosed some challenges that these teacher-researchers encountered. The lack of support from the school and the lack of sufficient reference materials contribute to a number of challenges mentioned in the literature. Teacher-researchers stated that there was no financial support given to them when they did their research and there was no reduction of their number of teaching hours. This may be the reason why some teachers showed no interest in doing and conducting a research study. It should be noted that when teachers have the support they need, they will be able to produce good quality research work (Ellis & Loughland, 2016). Likewise, reducing teachers' teaching hours also means teachers' quality time both for doing research work and for attending to their family meals and gatherings (Vásquez, 2017). Teachers need to balance their work life and personal life; and by giving them a considerable number of hours for teaching and conducting research, they will be able to deliver their work more effectively and efficiently. Furthermore, lack of research skills and knowledge affects

teachers' motivation to do research. In this study, teacher-researchers admitted that they lack the necessary research skills and knowledge to conduct a study of their own. Sheikh, Sheikh, Kaleem and Waqas (2013) emphasised that attending to research workshops will create a positive impact on teachers who are doing or will be doing a research study. Thus, these teachers need to be exposed to research training, seminars and conferences, in order to develop more of their skills and to confidently conduct a research project on their own.

Despite the reported challenges and issues faced by a number of teacher-researchers, they still held a positive perception towards doing research. Most of them admitted that doing research can benefit them professionally and personally. Some of these benefits include: became a better teacher; improved teaching styles and strategies; better understood the learning needs of their students; and enriched their professional experiences. These perceived benefits as found in this study are congruent with the findings by Borg (2014); Burns (2010); Cain and Milovic (2010); Hine (2013); Hong and Lawrence (2011); Grima-Farrell (2017); Mahani (2012); Morales (2016); and O'Connor, Greene and Anderson (2006). Indeed, doing a classroom and or a school research project is a great opportunity for teachers to advance in their profession, improve their teaching qualifications and experiences, and adopt pedagogical changes that will have an impact on the school and its community. Teachers who are engaged in research will be able to share with their fellow teachers some best teaching and learning practices that are essentials for improving student learning.

Although the present study claims strengths in the presentation of teacher-researcher experiences, motivations, challenges and perceived benefits when doing a research study, there are limitations with regards to participants and focus. As this study has only 11 teachers as participants, the data and the findings may not provide a sound representation of all public high school teachers in the Philippines. Studies of teachers as researchers with a different focus, with a greater number of teacher-participants, and with different methodologies are recommended. Future studies may compare the research experiences of Filipino teachers with other teachers in the ASEAN region. Implications for ASEAN regional education research may arise.

Conclusion

Conducting classroom and school research does not only improve teachers' teaching styles and practices, it also allows teachers to grow professionally and personally. The present study attempted to identify the experiences, motivations, challenges, and perceived benefits for 11 public high school-teachers in Mindanao, Philippines. The findings indicated that although the teacher-researchers as participants of the study held a positive perception when doing research, most of them were motivated to do a school research only because they wanted to be promoted and to have an increase in their salary. Some challenges that were reported include the lack of financial support, heavy teaching load, lack of research skills and knowledge, and lack of research resources.

The findings of this study are not only relevant in the Philippine public high school setting; but for all schools in the ASEAN region and elsewhere in the world. It is therefore important to consider the following key points. One, when considering teachers as researchers, school administrators, heads, and supervisors should extend their support to their teachers who are keen on doing research. Teachers need support not only financially but morally. This is to uplift the motivation of the teachers to continue doing research. Two, to motivate teachers to conduct research, the school should provide for teachers be sent to research training and workshops for the teachers to gain the necessary skills and knowledge. Three, research allowances should be given to teachers so that they will be motivated to conduct research. Lastly, teaching workloads should be reduced so that teachers will have more time to do research. By doing so, teachers will be able to produce quality work, for research and for teaching. Since doing a research study enhances and improves teachers' teaching practices (Borg, 2014; Ulla, 2016), widens teachers' understanding of their students' learning needs (Burns, 2010; Hong & Lawrence, 2011), and advances their professional experiences (Grima-Farrell, 2017; Vogrinc & Zuljan, 2009; West, 2011), improved consideration of the challenges faced by these teachers when doing a research study would have a positive effect for teachers, their students, the school, and the community.

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Please cite as: Ulla, M. B. (2018). Benefits and challenges of doing research: Experiences from Philippine public school teachers. *Issues in Educational Research*, 28(3), 797-810. <http://www.iier.org.au/iier28/ulla.pdf>