

The Difficulties and Solutions of Primary School Teachers' Action Research

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Abstract—In view of the fact that action research has received the attention of the education community in recent years. This paper observes and explores the doubts and difficulties of primary school teachers when applying action research to pursue professional development. First of all, it talks about the four common problems of primary school teachers' action research, including: first, discriminating the focus of action research is the action or the research; second, exploring the role of action research is an academic framework or an oppressive structure; third, thinking about the motivation of action research is the internal needs or the external requirements; fourth, evaluating the result of action research as the output or the achievement. Those four problems explain the limitations and powerlessness of the teachers, and point out the difficulties of primary school teachers' action research. Then, in anticipation of the vision of primary school teachers' action research, this paper attempts to refer to three possible approaches to solve the difficulties, including: first, primary school teachers should have the consciousness of being "intellectuals" and "researchers"; second, primary school teachers should be provided with external scaffolds; third, it is possible to show the knowledge of primary school teachers and construct their knowledge system. In this way, the teacher's self-action and reflection are enhanced, and the professional status of primary school teachers should become the grassroots strength of educational innovation.

Keywords—*action research; primary school teachers; professional development*

I. INTRODUCTION

In the continuing education model of in-service teachers, action research is often regarded as an effective way to meet the needs of teachers' professional development. In fact, from the individual teachers' reflection on classroom teaching to the comprehensive education reform, action research symbolizes a grass-roots force from bottom to top, which is highly regarded by the education. In view of the fact that primary school teachers are at the grassroots level of teaching organizations, they are the first-line teaching practitioners of grassroots strength. This paper will focus on the problems that primary school teachers use action research to improve their teaching practice and to generate knowledge about their professional fields. To eliminate the confusion, resistance and obstacles that primary school teachers meet

with action research in the process of the professional teaching development, it is the future direction of primary school teachers' action research.

II. DEFINITION OF ACTION RESEARCH

Well, first of all, could what primary school teachers do be considered as action research? Although McNiff, Lomax & Whitehead claim that action research is a form of action-oriented research, known for its limitlessness, the only boundaries are constructed by individual researchers or participants themselves [1].

But, could the courageous action be considered as action research? Because action research is based on researchers' own ideas and actions, its purpose is to expose, solve teaching problems and improve teaching problems, and it mainly focuses on reflection as the core means. Therefore, Action research must meet three basic elements [2]:

- The research purpose is to expose, solve and improve the teaching problems.
- The research subject is the teacher's own ideas and actions.
- The research method is the researcher's critical self-reflection.

This paper does not discuss the disputes about the paradigm status of action research in modern times, the research framework and implementation steps. It does not also focus on various points about the standards of teacher professional growth. In other word, this paper is only concerned about the two focuses which are the difficulties and the solutions of primary school teachers' action research.

III. THE DIFFICULTIES OF PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS' ACTION RESEARCH

A. Discriminating the Focus of Action Research: Action or Research

The term of "action research" comes from the study of social psychologist K. Lewin. He combined "action" and "research" into action research [3]. But, what does it mean the action research that combines the words "action" and "research"? How is it understood and interpreted?

The Taiwanese scholar Huang Zhengjie regarded action research as a combination of "action" and "research". It means the school educators who study the educational problems they encounter and then formulate solutions based on the research results, and put into action by educators themselves. The scholar Cai Qingtian emphasized that action research not only pays attention to the practical issues of solution of practical teaching problems, but also pays attention to the cultivation of action research ability and critical reflection ability to enhance the practical wisdom [4].

However, these views raise the following question, is "action Research" "action" plus "research"? This is a complicated question, and it is also a problem that must be asked "why". To find out the answer to this question, it is necessary to first analyze what is "action"? What is "research"? Are the two subjects interacting closely? If they are not integrated closely, action research may be difficult to have the expected research value. Because the research without action practice is vague; and action practice without research is blind [5].

Moreover, the principal-subordinate relationship between "action" and "research" in action research often plagues primary school teachers. When primary school teachers face action research, they often confuse that "action research" is "researching" for "action" or "action" for "research". Because primary school teachers have to face students, curriculum and teaching problems directly every day, the "knowledge" generated by their practical experience is intended to be "action" rather than "research". In addition to in-service training of primary school teachers, it is necessary to write papers of action research, or some primary school teachers participate with university academics on research projects, most primary school teachers will not be too interested in action research.

In fact, the motivation of these research papers is not to solve the problem of teaching practice. There are more components for research and fewer for action, so they cannot meet the purpose of action research. Moreover, in conjunction with the requirements of the executive leadership, the action research is to strive for the external honor of the school or work performance of teacher himself. Therefore, the research without substantial participation has become a symptom. The real results of primary school teachers' action research are hard to anticipate, and it can only be regarded as job performance.

B. Exploring the Role of Action Research: Academic Framework or Oppressive Structure

In the early stage of action research promotion, it is very necessary to advocate and lead action research form the experts and scholars, they play the role of "facilitator" to guide or assist in the exploration, clarification and solution of various problems. This is because the focus of professional training is not research methods in the process of faculty development of primary school teachers. Therefore, in the process of action research, teachers often lack confidence in expressing themselves, exploring and improving teaching problems. As a result, teachers' voices (including how

teachers think, learn, and teachers' intrinsic beliefs, knowledge, skills, etc.) are ignored by the outside world. Under the authority of external experts to provide objective knowledge, even teachers themselves lack confidence in their own experience wisdom or pedagogical knowledge [6].

Moreover, because most primary school teachers are at the lowest level of school administrative organizations, they lack strong professional growth motivation and the support of collaborative research groups, it will be difficult for teachers to break through the technological structure, and they can only submit to or rely on the academic guidance of experts and scholars without self-voice.

C. Thinking About the Motivation of Action Research: Internal Needs or External Requirements

Because the core method of action research is the researcher's critical self-reflection, so the ability to criticize and reflect is the most important. However, it is difficult to challenge the concepts, beliefs, attitudes and behaviors that teachers have been practicing for many years. Teachers will have very strong internal conflicts from self-disclosure or interactive observation of other teachers. The internal conflict is mixed with the sense of powerlessness in the action research and the sense of resistance to change. It leads to hesitation in self-reflection and change of the teachers. The action research mostly due to external requirements, but less from the teacher's internal needs. There are three reasons for this phenomenon:

1) *Teachers have the myths of self-concept:* Action research emphasizes that "teachers are researchers", the biggest obstacle to development should be the teachers' myths of self-concept. For example, teachers are busy teaching is not necessary to understand the action research, teachers have no time to engage in action research, action research is the work of experts and scholars in the education sector, action research project is difficult, the teachers engage in action research will affect the normal teaching, teachers do not have the academic research ability to quantify or qualitative, action research should be written as a thick research report that is a huge project and drawn out waste of time, all these become a reason to resist rationalization.

In addition, some teachers still have a fundamental myth about the curriculum, which is often determined that the curriculum is a government-issued curriculum standard or a textbook issued by a government editor, or a private publishing house edited according to the government's promulgation of curriculum standards and approved by the government. This view holds that the course is the official written content of the government or the material product edited by the textbooks. Even the textbook is the whole of the course. It is easy to overlook the significance of the program, goals and experience about the course, and the teacher's right to speak about the course. Some teachers have also determined that the role of the teacher is only to carry out the loyal curriculum. They do not pay attention to the reflection and criticism of the curriculum, and of course they

ignore the action research that emphasizes criticism of teaching and curriculum.

2) *Heavy workload overwhelms teachers' enthusiasm for research*: Primary school teachers who are interested in professional development are willing to try to carry out action research in order to improve their ability of action and reflection. However, teachers' work and pressure will test the determination of professional growth immediately. For example, they must take care for too many students in the class. They must spend a lot of energy on the management of classroom order, class management, curriculum planning, selection and evaluation of teaching materials, design of teaching plans and production of teaching media, selection and application of teaching methods, feedback of learning evaluation, and students' learning guidance. Besides, teachers should also be responding to parents, participating in teachers' communities, receiving training, and meeting school administration requirements, resulting in no time for teaching research. It is a fact that these daily teaching and administrative burdens are too heavy. They are not able to research, because they are stuck by heavy work.

Therefore, teachers face to the increasingly heavy workload, the education reform, they have indeed produced a phenomenon of "proletarianization". It means that there is the "alienation" between the teacher and his work. This also means that teachers regard teaching as a tool for making a living, rather than pursuing a process of self-realization. When this tool of making a living has become a standardization work, the teacher's sense of powerlessness naturally arises and becomes more and more serious. This phenomenon is directly related to the heavy teaching and administrative work of teachers. If they are forced to engage in action research, they should only succumb to realistic factors and cope with or reject action research.

3) *Without institutional guidance, it causes insufficient motivation for teachers to study*: Primary school teachers do not need to try to improve the quality of teaching in the system, their pursuit of professional growth is only a conscience or self-expectation of teaching, it not related to the system. In this way, it is not easy for teachers to act in the exploration and improvement of self-education practice. Although there are still some teachers who will take the initiative to explore based on their enthusiasm for education. No institutional guidance, it causes insufficient motivation for teachers to study. Because there are fewer strong external incentives, many teachers do not focus on action research. Even if school leaders actively promote action research, they may respond in a manner of resists, challenges or perfunctory [7].

However, the external drive from the system is not a panacea. If primary school teachers do not initiate action research spontaneously, but are purely by way of external support or specification, the action research is only a means of the system and regulations. Finally, action research will eventually become an administrative requirement.

D. Evaluating the Result of Action Research: Output or Achievement

In the traditional view, teachers are not expected to construct educational knowledge, criticize educational theory and evaluate the actual situation of education. These are the powers and abilities of educators, experts and even superior leaders. In recent years, although teacher research has been encouraged to increase, it still occupies a marginal position in the power class of educational research. However, the knowledge accumulated by teacher research institutes is not seen, and the ultimate result of action research is just "the output", not "the achievement".

When selecting the issues of action researches, what primary school teachers choose focus on their practical difficulties. Therefore, most of the issues of action research are related to the improvement of curriculum, the teaching problems, and the students' behavior problems. In other words, the problems of action research mainly focus on the educational practice directly related to teachers' personal teaching, which tends to be instrumental and practical research. However, there are few reflections and explorations on higher educational concepts, educational reforms, school culture, and so on, and the criticism of the context of educational issues is neglected. As a result, action research is limited to the practical experience of individual teachers or a few people, so it is reasonably questioned as the output of "micro" research, which is not considered educational knowledge of analogy.

IV. THE SOLUTIONS TO THE DIFFICULTIES IN PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS' ACTION RESEARCH

According to the above analysis, this paper proposes the following three efforts; it may be able to point out clear way forward for the future action research of primary school teachers.

A. Primary School Teachers Should Have the Consciousness of Being "Intellectuals" and "Researchers"

It can illustrate the relation between the self-transformation of teachers and the action research with the concept of transformed intellectuals of H. Giroux [8]. Primary school teachers try to want to solve the above four difficulties, first of all, they should be able to be transformed intellectuals consciously, then to break away from the role that was originally limited or depreciated. In the view of empowerment, the teachers get the speech right of action research. In other word, primary school teachers should deeply realize that in the process of conscious and transformation, including the transformation of the teacher's self itself, the transformation of students' education, the transformation of textbooks and teaching methods, and the transformation of linking education and social relations. Action research is not only an important research tool, but also an attitude of teachers towards knowledge and education.

Because teachers infiltrate in the professional culture for a long time and lose the role of cultural anthropology strangers gradually, it is easy to take the problem for granted

without questioning. Therefore, it is necessary to cultivate the sensitivity of teachers' awareness problems, and to think deeply about what they think and hear, such as school education, which is full of rituals, folk customs or rules, cleaning activities, life competitions, class activities, etc. Teachers can try to re-examine or give meaning to these familiar things.

That is to say, teachers must be open-minded to observe the factors which involved in the teaching process, such as teaching methods, teacher-student relationship, subject textbooks, environmental context, etc., they should be actively thought and criticized, and then strive to improve. In addition to the "reflection-on-action" (including pre-action, in-action, and post-action reflections), there is a meta-concept of "reflection on reflection-in-action". The former refers to the teacher to find out the hidden problems and the whole picture of self-action and theory in the research process. The latter is the teacher's reflection on "reflection of action", it can clarify the values or context of the self-action. No matter what kind of action reflection, teachers can gain a deeper understanding of the actions and theory practice.

In short, primary school teachers should have the consciousness of being "intellectuals" and "researchers" in the various changes of education and curriculum. As an intellectual and a researcher, teachers can't be complacent with the reality of their life and work. They must constantly surpass themselves by the way of learning and conducting action research. This is also the most important key for the transformation of teacher's role.

B. Providing Primary School Teachers with External Scaffolds

If primary school teachers at the first-line teaching field have the self-confidence and willingness to engage in action research, but the social environment fails to provide administrative assistance and resources. Then, the teachers' action research may be lack of success in the education field. Therefore, it is important to provide external scaffold for primary school teachers. There are several important supports to provide the scaffolds:

1) *The first scaffold is a subsidy or incentive policy from the educational administration:* The educational administration should adopt some administrative measures to promote and assist primary school teachers' action research. In addition to the Ministry of Education should arrange the research projects for primary school teachers' action research, or formulate relevant subsidy regulations and incentive policies, the Ministry of Education can also reward outstanding research results and incorporate action research results into teacher professional evaluation indicators. Furthermore, the Ministry of Education or schools should establish a research network or a platform for exchange and publication of research results, as well as the implementation of in-service teacher training courses. These will be of great help to primary school teachers' action research.

2) *The second scaffold is the promotion from the school:* That is unnecessary about the school leaders personally

leading teachers to conduct action research. But they must be support the teachers to conduct action research, guide teachers to research in school development plans and curriculum plans. It will also be a great help for teachers, and to make the school a learning organization. It is possible to recruit criticism and disapproval at the beginning of the action, school leaders need to establish communication mechanisms especially, and to engage in regular or irregular dialogue with participating researchers, and to provide psychological support for researchers so that the teachers' action research could be successfully completed.

3) *The third scaffold is the attention and the support from academic institutions:* Universities should conduct action research courses or arrange seminars to promote the participation of teachers, because the universities has always been the main influence force driving the research atmosphere. However, the action research courses are still not popular in the Normal universities. Research method training and courses that encourage the establishment of pre-service teacher training should be advocated. Therefore, the third scaffold must be established by the academic institutions.

Teacher-training institutions use their academic resources to provide research methods courses for in-service teachers. Universities must offer research method training and courses for pre-service teacher development, seek funding to set up research and consultation centers, or hold the seminars on the theme of action research, or encourage teachers to publish their research results in other fields, provide teachers' professional sharing and knowledge exchange gatherings. Teachers have the opportunity to publish and dialogue in order to stimulate more people's attention and input research.

4) *The fourth scaffold is the leadership and the care from scholars and experts:* Although it is not necessary to conduct action research about the in-depth statistical knowledge, deep information technology capabilities, or understanding of difficult research terms, but it requires the researcher to be familiar with the basic skills of research. However, due to the fact that the professional training of research methods is not the focus in the teacher training process of primary school teachers, teachers often worry that they lack research skills and abilities.

Teachers believe that they will not do research because they lack confidence. Therefore, they need the fourth scaffold from scholars and experts. It is necessary in the early stage of action research to use the help of experts and scholars who are outsiders to play the role of "promoter", to guide or to assist in the discussion, clarification and resolution of various issues. The support of experts and scholars can provide consultation of action research to reduce trial errors of primary school teachers' action research, and not to collect useless research data. Furthermore, it is also possible to provide constructive ideas about the feasibility of the teacher's action research program, the rationality of the research method, and the value of the research results through the experts and scholars.

C. Showing Knowledge of Primary School Teachers and Constructing Their Knowledge System

The professional knowledge of primary school teachers is not valued in the perspective of knowledge management. Even if the teacher has accumulated years of professional knowledge, it will eventually disappear with the teacher's transfer or departure. It is difficult to make effective experience inheritance and knowledge innovation. In fact, the school is a knowledge-intensive field, and the professional knowledge of teachers is an important asset in the school organization. If one can effectively manage knowledge, he can not only retain more meaningful knowledge, but also promote the professional development of individual teachers, it even promotes the comprehensive development of education.

Unfortunately, teachers are often positioned as individuals who have only teaching experience and are unable to construct knowledge. Therefore, even if teachers produce certain teaching knowledge, they are usually not disclosed. The reason is that the teacher's research status is neglected, or the teacher themselves does not value it, and it is extremely unfavorable for the link between teacher knowledge management and professional growth.

In particular, the publication of research results in action research presents not only the reflection and improvement of teaching practice, but also the tacit knowledge that teachers understand and the educational beliefs of teachers' reconstruction. It is a very valuable educational knowledge. If it can be published publicly, so that teachers' knowledge can be seen, it can not only strengthen the professional confidence of teachers, but also highlight the teacher professional status [9]. If the knowledge management practice strategy is adopted, the innovation of the teacher action research institute into the knowledge map or the knowledge database and develop into a knowledge sharing mechanism. It is also the vision that educational innovation is expected.

V. CONCLUSION

Although teachers do not participate in action research or write research reports, it does not mean that there is no reflection on the educational practice of self-improvement. However, if one can face up to the confusion of the four primary school teachers, he can recognize the meaning and essence of teacher action research. From the three solutions proposed in this paper, the teacher action research helps the primary school teachers' consciousness and transformation under the four external scaffolds. It can make teachers more proactive and in-depth study of practical problems, and build their professional confidence and status. Finally, it will also improve the advancement of educational quality and construct the educational knowledge system.

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