Rwandan teachers as educational researchers: why it matters

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Abstract

Teachers have generally been conceptualized as passive adopters of policies articulated in high educational and political offices, which has limited their reflection, creativeness and independent decision making. This situation is a challenge for effective teaching because teachers are supposed to critique the way education outcomes are currently defined, to push for the redefinition of what happens in classroom spaces and to adapt to the ever-changing class-room contexts. One way to achieve this is to engage in educational research, allowing a critical view on educational policies and practices. This article explains the necessity for teachers to play an active role in research and reflects on the very limited and mostly passive role which Rwandan teachers have played in research. It then suggests pos-sible ways of increasing the visibility of teachers in educational research in order to increase the likelihood of class-room practices and 'insider perspectives' informing education policies in Rwanda.

Key words

Research, teachers, teacher research, educational research, classroom practices, educational policies

Introduction

Teachers, as classroom practitioners, play a key role in education. They translate educational policies into practice and are supposedly the first to know whether these policies work or not, which may pave a way for revisions for the betterment of education. Moreover, children are put in their hands by parents for moulding and, therefore, they are the ones who know best the challenges which children face in all corners of their education process and how best these can be addressed. In short, they are the masters of the classrooms who (should) inform, and are affected by, all the decisions which are made in education. Therefore, as Gray and Campbell-Evans (2002, p. 2) argue, "the po-tential for understanding the complexity of the school community as an effective learning environment is increased when the teachers have the skills and opportunities to take the role of researching within their school community."

Thus, the traditional role of the teacher as the receiver of knowledge and of school improvement has been contested (O'Donnell-Allen, 2001) in Gray and Campbell-Evans (2002) and shifted to that of knowledge creator. In order for teachers to play their role effectively, several teacher education scholars (for example Arif, 2002; Block, 1999; Burke &Kirton, 2006; Gray& Campbell-Evans, 2002; Henderson, Meier, Perry & Stremmel, 2012) have posited that they should be primary education researchers. This is more so in the 21st Century"when the range of knowledge for teaching would be grown so expansively that it cannot be mastered and managed by any individual and when students' diverse ways of learning are recognized as requiring continual adaptations in teaching" (Boaduo, Milondzo&Gumbi, 2011, p. 5).Being a teacher-researcher makes a teacher more aware of the complexities of the school environment (Gray& Campbell-Evans, 2002) among other things. Focusing on the Rwandan education con-text, this article explains why helping Rwandan teachers to work as teacher-researchers can make a big difference in

classroom practices, which may contribute effective teaching and learning and, by extension, to the quality of education.

Defining educational research

Before explaining what educational research is it is worth defining research. Bassey (1999) defines research as a systematic, critical and self-critical enquiry which aims to contribute towards the advancement of knowledge and wisdom. Cohen et al. (2000) indicate that the aim of research is to overcome the limitations of common-sense knowing.

These explanations suggest that research originates from dissatisfaction with what we know and/or have today and the need for more in order to improve the current conditions. As for educational research, Bassey (1999, p. 39) defines it as "a critical enquiry aimed at informing educational judgments and decisions in order to improve educational action. This is the kind of value laden research that should have immediate relevance to teachers and policy makers." On their part, Burke and Kirton (2006) indicate that most educational research aims to make educational institutions better places for learning. Newby (2010) breaks this aim into three purposes: (i) to explore educational issues, (ii) to shape policy and (iii) to improve practice. Improvement of educational action or practice which, I suggest, is the primary aim of research, is needed on a continual basis because we live in ever-changing environmental, social, political and economic contexts and education needs to keep up with these. Otherwise education may not be relevant to the needs of the society which it is aimed at advancing. One way of making education ever relevant to the various contextual factors and needs is to carry our research in this area on a regular basis in order to understand these factors and determine how best education can respond to these. While educational research is a necessity the question may be whether it matters who does it.

Teachers as educational researchers

According to Elliott (1991), the teachers-as-researchers movement emerged in England during the 1960s, in the context of curriculum reform. Huillet (2007) indicates that this movement extended in the 1980s in what is usually known as the teacher research movement, conceptualizing teachers not "as mere consumers of knowledge produced by experts, but as producers and mediators of knowledge, even if it is a local knowledge" (p. 73). In spite of this movement, in many parts of the world, teachers have been conceptualized as passive adopters of curricula and policies from above (Li, 2010; Ricento & Hornberger, 1996). However, this may not be correct because, as Arif put it,

> teachers' place is in the classroom, but their role is not just teaching mechanically in the way designed by others such as education authorities, professional researchers and experts who are not doing the teaching in the classroom. Neither should teachers be confined to a role having nothing to do with research concerning their teaching. Teachers are not merely artisans, but more importantly they are or should be artists with their own vision and originality together with conceptualising and theorizing power. The thing is that they need to be given a chance to do so and be empowered by the access to the means of classroom research and the theory underlying it" (2002, p. 43).

That is why Burke and Kirton proposed a teacher-as-researcher approach "which put the teacher at the centre of knowledge production in the professional context of the classroom, school, college of university department" (2006, p. 1). Teacher research is defined by Arif (2002, p. 43) as "a form of research in which teachers do research in their own classrooms for the purpose of improving practice." Research should be understood as part and parcel of a teacher's job and, therefore, if teachers do not engage in research they may not be doing their job effectively because one aim of teacher research is to understand teaching and learning in context (Henderson, Meier, Perry & Stremmel, 2012). Thus if teachers do not understand the context in which they are teaching they may not be able to confront the realities of the classroom (Johnson & Golombek, 2011).

Arif (2002) suggests four reasons which explain the necessity of research by teachers, which will frame my discussion of the necessity for research by teachers in Rwanda. While Arif explains these reasons in relation to language teaching, I suggest that they can as well be applied to the teaching of any subject. The first reason is the gap which is always observed between theory and practice in the field of teaching and learning. This gap results from a popular association of research work and theorizing with established researchers in higher institutions whose authority cannot be challenged and the understanding of practice as "the only property of teachers who are supposed to carry out practical routine duties in accordance with plans and theories from above" (Arif, 2002, p. 45). This situation results in researchers and teachers working as two different categories of professionals working in different areas and, perhaps, with different aims. This gap, according to Arif, does a disservice to education because research findings are not fully tried, tested, refined and applied in actual teaching practice. Another possible effect for this gap is the lack of mutual influence between policy and practice. Policy influences practice when teachers translate education policies into practice in their classrooms but their practices rarely influence policy making. One way to address these challenges is to help teachers to do research and have their findings considered in policy making processes.

The second reason why teachers should take part in research, not as participants but as researchers, is their role in the application of classroom research findings. As has been explained previously, the main objective of education research is to improve teaching or, in other words, 'curriculum enactment' (Doyle & Rosemartin, 2012). It then follows that in order for the research to achieve this impact, related findings need to be applied and/or tested in the classroom. It appears that nobody can test these theories better than the teacher, "who is responsible for translating the theory from words on paper into deeds in performance and is in actuality testing the sweetness or bitterness of failure in trying out the ideas of a certain approach" (Arif, 2002, p. 45). Now the question which Arif asks is whether the teacher should simply wait for 'established researchers' to come to his or her classroom to investigate the success or especially failure of the approaches, make conclusions, confirm the success and/or provide remedies to something he or she knows best. The answer is definitely negative. This process is time-consuming and, along the way, many things can happen and new problems can arise and, therefore, teachers and learners cannot afford to

wait in their thirst to teach and learn effectively (Arif, 2002). In addition, I suggest that findings of research which does not involve teachers may not make much sense to them and/or become difficult to translate into practice.

The importance of context is the third reason. Educational research suggests that the success of teaching largely depends on effective use of appropriate teaching approaches (Biggs, 1987; Johnson, 2006; Warren, 2004).

The appropriateness of a teaching approach is relative to the context (Johnson, 2006) because "an approach that works perfectly well under one context may not be able to achieve the same effect in another" (Arif, 2002, p. 46). Arif argues that no one is in better command of classroom contextual variables than the teacher: certain aspects of classroom environment are accessible only by the people in that classroom; that is the teacher and learners. Therefore, classroom-based research by 'outsiders' is limited in some way because it may not have a 'unique insider perspective' (Henderson, Meier, Perry & Stremmel, 2012) or "the unique "insider knowledge" which teachers bring to our understanding of educational processes and practices" (Burke & Kirton, 2006, p. 1). This kind of knowledge is at the disposal of the teacher as he or she is the only person who understands fully the dynamics of his or her classroom. The limitation of research by outsiders may be furthered by the discomfort of being observed/studied by others, which may bring the teacher and the learners, as research participants, to change behaviours and/or provide less and/or untrue information. It should be noted that teacher research has been criticised of being of a small scale and context bound, which may bring related findings not to be generalisable. However, as Burke and Kirton (2006, p. 2) argue, "all research, whether large or small, positivist or critical, is underpinned by particular epistemological perspectives and ontological positions and makes particular (culturally specific) assumptions about education" and value-free and decontextualized claims are thus impossible. Therefore, 'generalisability' of educational research findings is itself questionable because, in the words of Burke and Kirton (2006, p. 1), "what works in one school doesn't work in another" and, therefore, large scale research "is unable to address the detailed and complex spaces that different teachers and learners find themselves in". Thus, small scale and context specific research can be more effective in understanding educational practices and challenges. Indeed, teacher research attempts to create local [not global] knowledge about teaching and learning that will contribute to improving their classroom practice (Henderson, Meier, Perry & Stremmel, 2012) and will make them understand that educational research is a major part of the professional practice (Boaduo, Milondzo & Gumbi, 2011).

The need to test research findings in individual contexts is the fourth and last reason that, according to Arif, justifies teacher research. While research findings are important in informing and shaping classroom practices, teachers need to think critically and apply their own judgment while using these findings (Arif, 2002). This is because some research findings may work well and produce positive results in some contexts and fail to work or produce negative results in others. Therefore, instead of just 'swallowing' any research findings, teachers need to chew them and decide on what to swallow and what to 'spit' and how, depending on their relative sweetness and/or bitterness.

In other words, teachers have to test research findings "which remain hypotheses until they are further evidenced to be suitable to his (*sic*) particular classroom" (Arif, 2002, p. 48) and decide on whether to accept or, eventually, reject them. The testing of the applicability and relevance of these findings is in itself a kind of mini research which, in the long run, may lead to further research by the teacher. Such research could, for example, explore the reasons why these findings which have worked well in other contexts have failed in this particular context and devise a different framework for solving the same problem and/or achieving the same results.

To these four reasons suggested by Arif, Gray and Campbell-Evans (2002) add the need for the teachers to critique their own practice from a more analytical, focused and deeper way. Teachers are supposed to think critically about whatever they do and make informed decisions that are in line with the context in which they teach, which may give rise to research. In fact, as Stremmel (n.d) indicates, teacher research originates from teachers' own questions about and reflections on their everyday classroom practice. In this way, teacher researchers learn about themselves as teachers as they try to understand children's learning (Henderson, Meier, Perry & Stremmel, 2012), which is likely to increase their self-awareness, self-confidence and professional self-esteem in their daily activities (Oliver, 2005).In addition, we live in a world that changes at an exponential speed; new phenomena and things which have never been seen arise. Consequently, the kind of knowledge which people acquired in the past is no longer enough and/or adequate to live in the current times, which calls for new 'knowledges' to be constructed. This situation has implications for education since the latter aims at preparing people to live in this ever changing world. Thus it has to construct the kinds of knowledge which is relevant to the time and circumstances people live in and devise the best ways of helping them acquire and use it. In other words, knowledge evolves and so do the approaches which are used to impart it. It then follows that teachers, as key players in the process of knowledge construction and dispensation, need to take the lead in updating themselves about current 'knowledges' and ways of knowing. Given that teacher knowledge needs to be context specific, research appears to be the best way of updating it. New ways of knowing, methods and approaches to teaching and learning, new teaching/learning aids, etc. need to be tested before they can be recognized as worthwhile; nobody can do this better than the teacher and no other approach can do it better than research.

Apart from conceptual arguments, empirical findings from different countries also underscore the importance of teachers' participation in educational research. South Africa is one of the countries which have experienced "continual revisiting, reviewing, recapping and changing of the curriculum" (Esau, 2013). In this context Esau (2013) indicates that involving teachers in participatory action research provided them opportunities to develop pedagogical content knowledge, examine their beliefs about teaching, and gain confidence in addressing social justice issues and "to become more socially conscious, critical, imaginative and argumentative as teacher-researchers" (2013, p. 1). Doing this contributed to the attainment of educational goals, because as Esau notes, "changing policies demands the implementation of new knowledge and creative and critical ways of thinking about the implementation of these

changes" (p. 1) and such knowledge and ways can be obtained mainly through research. In addition, some initiatives have been put in place including Language Teacher Research in Africa, which is an edited book which brings together eight articles written by English language teachers in Africa (Farell & Makalela, 2009).

It should be noted that while teachers can and should engage in general research, I argue that they would be better placed to do action research which Ferrance (2000, p. 1) defines as "a process in which participants examine their own educational practice systematically and carefully, using the techniques of research". Teachers as the main educational practitioners will then be able to work best on problems they have identified for themselves (Ferrance, 2000) by engaging in action research. Campbell indicates that this kind of research serves to improve teachers' practice, "inform the teaching profession, and serve as modelling for future teachers to become practitioner researchers in support of their efforts to meet the learning needs of the students" (2013, p. 1).

The need for Rwandan teachers to engage in educational research

The amount of educational research which is primarily aimed at improving educational practice in Rwanda appears to be limited. Indeed, most of educational research projects that have been conducted were mainly meant for fulfilment of degree requirements and were conducted by university lecturers and other people who were pursuing higher education degrees. Some of these include those which were conducted by Habyarimana (2015), Kambanda (2013), Ndabaga (2004), Niyibizi (2010), Nzitabakuze (2012), Pearson (2014), Sibomana (2010, 2014), Uwambayinema (2013), just to name a few. Other educational research projects by university lecturers are triggered by the need to get promotions[5]. In short, we are yet to see educational research which is solely aimed at 'pushing back the frontiers of knowledge' (Altbach, 2003) and/or addressing the challenges facing education in Rwanda. It should be noted that teachers have played a very limited and mostly passive role in this research, working as research participants (or subjects) providing researchers with the research data and/or information which they need. These teachers are not even consumers of research because they hardly have access to the findings of various educational research works including those in which they participated. In fact, there are no dissemination channels which could make educational research findings available and accessible for teachers and other education stakeholders in Rwanda. This situation may have negative implications for teaching in Rwanda, which I will discuss in the next sections.

From the 1990s, the Rwandan education has been characterized by several reforms and policy shifts for the last twenty years. Like any other policy, these needed to be implemented and/or evaluated effectively in order to inform subsequent reforms and policies and research-based responses and strategies in which teachers play a key role are crucial in this process. I will highlight some of these reforms and policies and explain how, without class-

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[5]Like many other universities, Rwandan universities have made research and publication the main requirement for academic promotions in order to improve their ranking. There is a risk for this requirement to overshadow the main aim of educational research which, as has been pointed out previously, is to inform educational judgments and decisions in order to improve educational action (Bassey, 1999).

room-based research, their effectiveness could be questioned. When schools were reopened in 1995 after the 1194 genocide against Tutsi, the Rwandan education system was faced with several challenges, one of which was to integrate the returnees from different social, cultural, linguistic and educational backgrounds. Some of these had learned and used English and could not speak either Kinyarwanda or French or both, while these were the languages of instruction and compulsory school subjects at the time. This phenomenon brought about three new pedagogical practices in the Rwandan education: (i) English had to be introduced as a medium of instruction, (ii) French had to be taught as a second/foreign language to multilinguals (people who had other second/additional languages) and (iii) Kinyarwanda had to be formally taught to speakers of other languages in Rwanda.

In addition to linguistic issues, teachers also had to deal with cultural diversity in their classes: they had to handle learners who had different cultural beliefs and practices. Responding to these issues adequately is key to inclusive education and inclusive curriculum because diversity can reinforce education exclusions and inequalities if it is not well handled by teachers (Burke & Kirton, 2006). However, given that these changes were unexpected, teachers had not been prepared to handle them. In addition, it was not easy to train and offer them the knowledge and skills which they needed in order to respond to these adequately as the education system was dealing with numerous issues some of which were more urgent. However, if the teachers had been trained to be teacher-researchers they could have been encouraged to do action research[6], which could help in finding appropriate responses to these issues, including appropriate approaches and methodologies for these various languages and contexts. These responses could help Rwanda to address some of the challenges that this country's education is still facing even today, including the implementation of English as the only medium of instruction (Pearson, 2014; Sibomana, 2015) and the integration of foreign learners whose number is increasing in some high schools in Rwanda especially with refugees from Burundi and Democratic Republic of Congo. For instance, no materials have been developed and no approach has been devised to teach Kinyarwanda to speakers of other languages more than twenty years after such learners entered our education. Moreover, we are not aware of the challenges which were faced from the perspective of the teachers who handled and are still handling these issues and how they responded to these.

Another issue which calls for continuous research by teachers is the frequent, but necessary, curriculum reforms in the Rwandan education. Most of these reforms are conceptualized mainly from a theoretical perspective and are not research-based (Rwanda Ministry of Education, 2015). Thus the practice side of which relevance could be established through research is left out. In other words, classroom practices play a limited (if any) role in informing curriculum reforms. Educational policy makers themselves justify the reforms based on whether or not the curricula which are taught are still valid given the evolving contexts. For instance, Rwandan education officials indicated that the newly launched 'competence-based curriculum' was needed because the 'old one' did not provide learners with

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[6]Action research and teacher research are used interchangeably by some educational researchers (Henderson, Meier, Perry &Stremmel, 2012), but there are some nuances which I do not intend to address in this article.

the skills they needed to succeed in the increasingly competitive world of work (Kwibuka, 2015). In other words, the leading question appears to have been "is the current curriculum providing our learners with the kind of knowledge and skills which they need in the present world? If the answer to the question is negative, the assumed reason becomes that the curriculum is inappropriate and, therefore, curriculum reform is needed. The role of curriculum enactment appears to have been overlooked while policy is as important as practice; without the latter, the former remains a document. Indeed, the Rwandan education Minister's explanation of how the [new] Competence-Based Curriculum will benefit learners is primarily related to practice. He said: "[T]he focus [of the new curriculum] should be on developing the learner capable of making creative use of knowledge and skills and being capable of linking theoretical and practical skills and how they are applied for problem solving in the real life situations" (Kwibuka, 2015). I suggest that this kind of approach can be adopted in any type of the curriculum because education has always been about training learners for life in society. Thus, a teacher who understands what his or her role is does not need to wait for the curriculum to tell him or her to do the above for his or her students and, therefore, those who did not do it with the old curriculum may not necessarily do it with the new one. Thus teachers' experiences with the old curriculum should have informed the development of the new one. However, the discourse around the new curriculum does not suggest this possibility.

Therefore, the practical challenges which were faced by teachers while implementing the 'old' curriculum are likely to remain unresolved and, possibly, hamper the implementation of the new one. One possible effect of this situation is the previously discussed widening gap between policy and practice (see Arif, 2002). Moreover, the situation may bring teachers to think that their role is to unquestioningly implement the policies and enact curricula which have been designed by others, as has been the case in many parts of the world (Throop, 2007). Pearson (2014) reports the same understanding by the teachers who took part in her study which she conducted in the Rwandan Southern Province. Such an understanding is detrimental to teacher effectiveness and identity because, as Throop (2007, p. 51) suggests, competent and confident teachers "need to develop and maintain an explicit understanding of how policy shapes their classrooms and how they can (re)construct this policy to better meet the needs of students in their local contexts." In other words, teachers need to be masters of their classrooms and part of this mastery is the ability to decide on what works for their students irrespective (possibly) of what the policy says; they are the ones who know their classes best.

The newly introduced nine and then twelve-year basic education which has considerably revolutionalized the Rwandan education is another phenomenon which calls for teacher research. This type of education was introduced in order to enable all Rwandan children to access free primary and secondary education. But it came along with a number of challenges which placed more demands on the teacher and required him or her to rethink his or her teaching and classroom management approaches. The class size, i.e., the students-teacher ratio became high bringing about a double shift system in the upper primary level. The latter change meant that teachers had half a day (ei-

ther morning or afternoon) to cover what used to be taught in a full day. In addition, given the shortage of qualified teachers, some teachers who had been trained to teach at the primary level were called on to teach at the secondary level. The teachers accepted these responsibilities but they were not helped to reflect on their experiences, to critique and, eventually, to 'improve their practices' (Gray& Campbell-Evans, 2002) in these new changes through (action) research. This could have made a difference in our education because teachers

> have privileged and knowledgeable first-hand access to crucial information about their students' needs, learning styles and available resources and about the schools they work for and about the policies framing their professions, which allow them to reflect on their own educational settings so they can provide effective, reliable and realistic possibilities to solve or improve them (Vasquez, n.d.).

In other words, as Burke and Kirton (2006) explain, teacher researchers are in a strong position to enlighten the community about pedagogical processes of particular educational settings, and shed more light on broader educational policies and practices. Up to now, however, we have not had an 'insider perspective'(Burke & Kirton, 2006) so as to know what the teachers have made of these challenges, which could lead to classroom-based conclusions on this apparent test of these new initiatives.

Potential reasons for the limited teacher research in Rwanda

A number of reasons may have limited teacher research in Rwanda. Like in other parts of the world, some people have questioned teachers' ability to carry out valid research projects and the usefulness of their research findings.

Some critics have gone as far as criticizing these findings for not being as reliable and valid as professional research (Arif, 2002) mainly because teachers are usually not provided with proper training for research in either their pre or in-service education programmes (Vasquez, n.d.). This may be why Gray and Campbell-Evans (2002) suggest that teachers should be introduced to research in the first educational courses. Indeed, teacher research can be not only possible but also fruitful and innovation stimulant if proper training is availed. Proper research training is crucial to effective teacher research because, without it, there is a risk for teachers to mislead institutions and policy makers in the processes of implementing and/or changing policies (Vasquez, n.d). It should be noted that high school teachers in Rwandan take a research methods course in their pre-service teacher education programmes and they actually conduct research and write research reports in partial fulfilment of the requirements of their degree programmes. If these teachers do not engage in research in their work after completing their studies it may not necessarily be because they do not have the abilities to do so (unless the training was not proper and/or effective) but because they do not see it as part of their job. This is not surprising because the research culture in Rwanda is reportedly limited even in higher learning institutions (Butera, Shyaka & Habimana, 2012).

Another reason which that could explain the paucity of teacher research initiatives in Rwanda is the thinking that what has worked in other contexts will necessarily work in Rwanda and, therefore, there is no need to investigate

what is already known. Again this refers to the aforementioned limited (if any) attention paid to research in educational policy making in Rwanda. Indeed, some education officials and academics in Rwanda justify different education policies with the fact that similar policies have worked in some other countries. For instance, the current language-in-education policy of using English as the only medium of instruction in Rwanda from Grade Four was justified by some on grounds that most of the powerful education systems in the world teach through the medium of English (Kagabo, 2008; Ndabaga, 2008). Such justification seems to miss contextual enablers and challengers which determine the success or failure of the same policy in different contexts. In Rwanda, such factors include the socio-linguistic landscape which has a strong bearing on the teaching of foreign languages and the use of these as media of instruction (Pearson, 2014; Samuelson & Freedman, 2010) and the fact that English is not a home or second language but a foreign language in Rwanda. Therefore, teachers, who are more familiar with the teaching context than anybody else, should be given a chance to establish whether the policy (will) work(s) or not and, if it will not, why and what is needed for it to work. This could be achieved through teacher research which, as has been pointed out, aims at testing theories and research findings in new/local contexts, among other things. Such research could also propose policy changes in case there are "inconsistencies between their [teachers'] practice and the applicable government regulation" (Vasquez, n.d). Seven years after the introduction of this language-in-education policy, we do not have a teacher's own reflection on the challenges which have been faced, how these have been addressed and the extent to which these teachers have succeeded in addressing these. The lack of such information may be a stumbling block for an effective implementation of this policy.

Collaborative research as a springboard for teacher research in Rwanda

Collaborative research may also play a role in establishing a working relationship between teacher educators in education colleges and primary and high school teachers, a relationship which is currently lacking in Rwanda. Indeed, teacher research is beneficial not only to teachers but also to teacher educators because as Stremmel (n.d., p. 4) argues, "the real value of engaging in teacher research at any level is that it may lead to rethinking and reconstructing what it means to be a teacher or teacher educator" and "university-based researchers have begun to recognize teachers' role in contributing to the knowledge base about teaching practice" (p. 5). In addition, collaborative research may enable Rwandan teachers to have access to new theories, concepts, approaches, methods, techniques and ways of knowing in various areas, which are accessible almost only by university lecturers. It provides opportunities for all team members to learn from each other's expertise (Oliver, 2005). In this way, teachers cease to be receivers of knowledge and become creators of knowledge (Gray & Campbell-Evans, 2002) as they are required to continuously update and upgrade their knowledge (Singh & Harris, 2010).

It is worth noting that teacher's learning does not end in colleges. On the contrary, research shows that teacher knowledge is constructed more in their classrooms as fields of reflection than in pre-service training (Arif,

2002; Bertram, 2011; Throop, 2007). In addition, teaching involves continual inquiry and renewal, which makes a teacher primarily a questioner (Stremmel, n.d.). Therefore, even if teachers are not provided with (proper) research training during their pre-service education, their job is another opportunity to get it. Therefore, I suggest that teacher educators'role should not end in colleges as well; they should continue to 'educate' and mentor these teachers even in their jobs notably through research. In order for this to be achieved, Burke and Kirton (2006), Gray and Campbell-Evans (2002) and Potter (2001) suggest that collaborative research could be used as a starting point to initiate teachers to, and involve them in research. As Henderson, Meier, Perry and Stremmel (2012) suggest, teacher research flourishes when it is collaborative and there is a supportive network of colleagues and mentors. According to the Centre for Collaborative Research for an Equitable California - CCREC (2014), all research partners in collaborative research respect the knowledge that each partners brings to the discussion and together they may know better how to understand the complex problems facing our communities and how to design and implement research-based responses to those problems. Instead of treating teachers as subjects, other researchers in collaborative research treat them as equal partners, which are likely to promote their voice (Oliver, 2005). In this way, the research findings will be more meaningful to them and there will be more chances of these findings influencing their teaching. This may be why some people consider collaborative research as a key factor in teachers researching their own practice effectively in order to inform school improvement (Gray& Campbell-Evans, 2002).In addition to making the teachers feel valued, collaborative research between teachers and teacher educators (or education college lecturers) will help teachers to gain knowledge, experiences and skills which will enable them to initiate and conduct research on their own or cross-curricular research with colleagues. This is very crucial in Rwanda where, as has been pointed out, teacher research is almost nonexistent.

The role of policy makers

Teacher research will not achieve much if the findings of such research and teachers' voice are not valued by education policy makers. Thus, education policy makers should always consult teachers and take their research findings into consideration whenever they think of making or changing policies and developing new curricula. This will increase teachers' ownership of the policies instead of looking at them like commands from above, as some Rwandan teachers indicated with reference to the current language-in-education policy (Pearson, 2014). Such an approach may also facilitate policy makers and teachers to become 'a community of practice' (Wenger, 1998) working towards the same goals, thus preventing the blame game which can arise between the two categories. Another issue which needs to be taken into consideration by educational policy makers in trying to stimulate teacher research is teachers' workload. It has been observed that teachers are constrained by a great amount of practical work and activities and, under normal circumstances, no incentives and extra support are provided to facilitate teachers to do research (Arif, 2002). Thus, research should be incorporated in teachers' workload and the necessary support in terms of time, budget and expertise provided. This is because it is hard for teachers to sacrifice their already limited income and

time for research as it will compromise their family or personal lives (see Vasquez, n.d.). This will not only facilitate teachers to engage in research but will make them understand that research is part of the activities which they have to engage in as teachers.

Conclusion

Research by teachers plays an important role in teacher effectiveness and quality education. However, Rwandan teachers have not engaged in research activities as researchers mainly because they do not see it as part of their job. They have only worked as research informants in the few educational research projects mainly conducted by university lecturers and researchers from specialized research institutions. Most of these were mainly carried out in order for the 'researchers' to obtain higher degrees or job promotions. In addition, there are no channels or platforms to offer teachers access to these findings. This situation has limited the use of educational research findings in solving the challenges facing the Rwandan education. Moreover, such a situation may create unequal relationships and further widen the gap between educational researchers (who are generally teacher educators) and the teachers, and between colleges of education and schools. These, however, ought to work hand in hand in order to avoid the blame game as they all share the same responsibility: educating for the Rwandan society. Therefore, there is a need for teacher educators to revisit their research practices in order for their findings to make more sense to the teachers, who will use them to inform their teaching. Policy makers also need to let teachers and research findings have a say in educational policy making process because, in actual fact, teachers are 'catalysts for policymaking' (Ricento & Hornberger, 1996).

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