



## **Challenges and Opportunities in Teachers' Action Research: Secondary School Teachers' Perspectives in Tanzania**

***Modesta Antony Kaluwa & Yuanyue Wu***

*Institute of Adult Education & Central China Normal University*

**Email:** [modeka005@gmail.com](mailto:modeka005@gmail.com) & [Wuyuanyue2708@163.com](mailto:Wuyuanyue2708@163.com)

### ***Abstract***

*Teachers' action research (TAR) is a significant practice for self-directed professional learning among educators. However, in low-resource educational contexts, systemic challenges negatively affect its implementation. This qualitative study examined teachers' perspectives on the challenges and opportunities in TAR in Tanzania. Six qualified teachers from two secondary schools (three from each school) were purposively recruited as key informants. Additionally, two heads of the two schools were included for data triangulation. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and were analysed thematically. The findings revealed multi-level challenges: teacher-related (limited research skills, lack of confidence, weak collaboration, poor networking) and institutional (lack of funds, lack of motivation, administrative disregard, assessment-driven culture, excessive workloads, limited professional training, and policy ambiguities in guiding TAR practices). Furthermore, the findings revealed that university partnerships, new education policy, frameworks, digital tools, and communities of learning are the existing opportunities for improving TAR in Tanzania. The study underscores the need to formalise TAR through structured administrative support, teacher autonomy in technology use, and transforming sporadic inquiries into systematic research, which can cultivate a sustainable culture of teacher-led professional learning through TAR and enhance educational outcomes.*

***Keywords:*** *teachers' action research, challenges, opportunities, teacher-led professional learning, Tanzania*

## Introduction

Teachers' action research (TAR), also known as classroom-based action research, is an internationally recognised methodology for addressing classroom challenges and guiding teachers' in-service professional learning, with the ultimate goal of improving instructional practices (AI-Mahdi, 2019). The necessity for teachers to integrate action research into their classrooms stems from the evolution of science, technology, and sociocultural dimensions in the contemporary era, characterised by rapid and uncontrollable changes, particularly in education (World Economic Forum, 2015). The new epoch of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century has brought new needs in education, particularly, what and how teachers can learn, re-learn, and unlearn, as well as how students can be taught across space and time (Darling-Hammond, 2006; HakiElimu, 2021; MoEST, 2017; Zhao & Watterston, 2021). Over the decades, schools have been recognised as a social learning context not only for students but also for teachers as adult learners (Elliott, 1991; Knowles, 1984; Lewin, 1946, 1958; Zhao & Watterston, 2021). Empirical evidence indicates that when teachers are in the classroom, they learn alongside students as they improve their pedagogical practices by bringing solutions to problems they have identified (Garcés & Granada, 2016; Hairon, 2017; Mwakabenga, 2021; Tindowen et al., 2019). In this case, a classroom context for teachers is not only a platform for teaching but also for self-guiding their professional learning and thriving professionally. As such, TAR is necessary for achieving self-directed professional learning.

Research points out that TAR offers an opportunity for teachers as adult learners to execute their autonomy from identifying classroom challenges (learning problems), deciding how to address them (action), who and what is to be involved (planning), analyse the findings, and make use of them to improve their practice (Hairon, 2017). It is argued that TAR supersedes the sporadic traditional approaches to in-service teacher professional learning, such as workshops and seminars, which are periodic, planned by others, and not directly focused on solving immediate problems, often conducted outside the classroom context (Dadi, 2015; Komba & Mwakabenga, 2019).

In this regard, TAR has emerged as a strategy for improving teaching and learning, and is extensively used in many countries, including the Netherlands, Singapore, Spain, China, the USA, and Canada (Chen, 2022; Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Hairon, 2017). A study from Singapore revealed that teachers who engaged in action research regularly improved their curriculum at the institutional level and

enhanced their problem-solving skills (Hairon, 2017). On the other hand, Garcés and Granada (2016) found that teachers who collaborated with other colleagues or students in research strengthened collegiality and mutual relationships with students. Thus, teachers' action research is a valuable tool for teachers to improve the teaching and learning process, increase their pedagogical and instructional knowledge, and positively impact students' learning (Tindowen et al., 2019). Furthermore, a study in Tanzania reported that teachers developed new ways of teaching when they were supported by organising participatory TAR as an intervention to enhance their classroom-based research skills (Mwakabenga, 2021).

Regardless of the benefits and obligations of TAR for teachers, literature indicates several challenges, including teachers' insufficient research skills, unreliable in-service professional learning, lack of motivation and administrative support, time constraints, and poor collaboration (Kunje & Stuart, 2006; Mwakabenga, 2021). These challenges collectively impact teachers' priorities, particularly in low- and middle-income countries like Tanzania. In Singapore, teachers have achieved tremendous success in adapting the new curriculum through extensive use of action research; however, challenges such as a hierarchical work culture, overloaded roles and responsibilities for teachers, and time constraints are notable (Hairon, 2017). In investigating why teachers in the Philippines were unable to conduct action research, Tindowen et al. (2019) summarised four major challenges, including additional workload, writing anxiety, lack of time, and inadequate knowledge and skills. Furthermore, willingness, trust, critical relationships, and autonomy are often lacking in many schools, resulting in teachers' limited engagement in action research (James & Augustin, 2017). Additionally, in some cases, teachers perceived action research as a one-time project rather than part of their regular job routine, while at the same time, they demonstrate limited knowledge and skills, especially in distinguishing TAR and traditional research (Albalawi & Johnson, 2022; Hairon, 2017).

Empirical evidence reveals that the challenges of TAR across countries are highly influenced by the lack of school administrative support because leaders have limited knowledge and skills about the importance of action research and the steps involved (Kunje & Stuart, 2006). As such, they give less priority and little support to teachers who conduct action research in schools. Hancock (1997) argues that with the appropriate backing, more teachers are likely to engage in classroom-based action research to inform students' learning. Similarly, the National Framework for Teachers' Continuous Professional Development in Tanzania documents that "in communities of learning, teachers should be encouraged to move towards analysing

pupil/student results, and their teaching through collective or individual action research (MoEST 2017). Also, analyse student work and conduct inquiry or action research projects" (p. 8) and "head of schools and ward education coordinators should encourage teachers to present their action research projects at district level or ward cluster PD meetings" (p. 10).

In Tanzania, TAR is recognised in education policy (URT, 2023) and curriculum frameworks (MoEST, 2015, 2017, 2019) as a significant strategy and mandatory for teachers' self-led professional development. However, research indicates limited normalisation and institutionalisation in secondary schools (Losioki, 2020; Mwakabenga, 2021). While some studies suggest teachers engage in informal classroom-based action research (Mwakabenga, 2018; Mwakabenga et al., 2022), others reveal critical gaps: Komba and Mwakabenga (2019) found teachers unaware of classroom-based action research as a school-based professional learning activity, while Mwakabenga (2021) reported that teachers and school leaders lacked knowledge, time, resources, and had weak collaboration to enhance the implementation. Similarly, Losioki's (2020) study identified TAR as one of the least practised professional learning activities due to teachers' insufficient skills.

These consistent findings across multiple studies suggest a policy-practice mismatch. The problem is especially relevant given Tanzania's shift to Competence-Based Curriculum (CBC), where teachers face increasing classroom challenges at the expense of limited administrative backing and sporadic workshops and seminars (Chacha & Onyango, 2022; Komba & Mwakabenga, 2019). While TAR could offer a sustainable alternative solution to contemporary challenges faced by teachers in Tanzania, its potential remains untapped due to systemic barriers. Existing studies highlight three gaps: scarcity of empirical studies related to TAR, a predominant focus on individual-level challenges, and minimal exploration of opportunities to promote TAR in secondary schools. Additionally, there is limited attention given to school-level and systemic policy-practice challenges, as existing studies have deviated from this line of investigation. Other studies have explored TAR as a sub-element or emerging theme in the context of studying CBC-related issues, teacher professional development, and other related topics (Chacha & Onyango, 2022; Komba & Mwakabenga, 2019; Losioki, 2020). Few studies, such as Mwakabenga (2021), directly examine TAR experiences, but in their localised scope (e.g., one school, four teachers) which limits broader insights. Generally, existing studies seldom examine available opportunities to enhance TAR in Tanzania. These gaps, cumulatively, underscore the necessity for this qualitative case study in Tanzania to investigate teachers' perspectives on the

challenges and opportunities associated with TAR at both the teacher and institutional levels.

The overarching goal of this study is to use teachers' perspectives to provide detailed insights on the challenges and opportunities in TAR in Tanzania that may further be used to offer contextual, realistic recommendations for educational stakeholders at different levels, including policymakers, to bridge the policy-practice gap. By doing so, this research is expected to contribute to the understanding of existing challenges that secondary school teachers encounter in TAR while self-guiding their professional learning as adult learners and the available opportunities to mitigate the identified challenges in Tanzania. Furthermore, this study may provide insights into how teachers translate knowledge into practice, offering information that could inform future models of teacher-led professional development. Also, the practical insights that teachers generate through inquiry may inform localised theories of practice. Therefore, this study addresses a key gap and supports Tanzania's efforts to strengthen teacher-led professional learning. Consequently, we set two objectives to guide this study: To examine the challenges that hinder secondary school teachers in Tanzania from conducting TAR. To explore the opportunities that teachers identify as essential to mitigate challenges in conducting TAR.

## **Methodology**

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore teachers' perspectives on the challenges and opportunities they experienced in TAR. Under this design, a case of six teachers who have at least conducted TAR during their teaching experience was the centre of focus in this study. The design aimed to explore in-depth information and understand the challenges and opportunities that teachers encountered in conducting classroom-based action research.

The study was conducted in the Ubungu Municipality of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. We purposely chose two secondary schools only – Juhudi and Maarifa (pseudonyms) to narrow the scope of the study for in-depth interviews with the intended sample. We applied two criteria to select participants, including being currently employed as secondary school teachers with at least five years of teaching experience, and having engaged in or having knowledge of TAR. Before recruiting participants, we provided teachers with the necessary information about the study, and their informed consent was subsequently requested and obtained. Six qualified teachers were purposively sampled, three from each school. The six teachers were

the key informants in this study because they were identified as having experience with TAR, while school heads from their schools were included to supplement the information from an administrative point of view. The two heads of these schools were included based on their leadership positions. Therefore, the study comprised a total of eight participants, aged between 25 and 55 years, of whom five were female and three were male. The participants' demographic information is delineated in Table 1.

**Table 1: Participants Information**

Participant pseudonyms	School	Gender	Teaching subject	Academic qualification	Working experience	Action research report
Gara-Head1	Juhudi	Female	English	Bachelor	16 years	Absent
Nepa-CT1	Juhudi	Male	Physics	Bachelor	13 years	Absent
Dola-CT2	Juhudi	Female	Geography	Masters	10 years	Absent
Uda-CT3	Juhudi	Female	History	Diploma	06 years	Absent
Kai-Head2	Maarifa	Male	Chemistry	Bachelor	20 years	Absent
Zoa-CT4	Maarifa	Female	Kiswahili	Diploma	09 years	Absent
Lola-CT5	Maarifa	Female	Geography	Diploma	11 years	Absent
Bozi-CT6	Maarifa	Male	History	Bachelor	19 years	Absent

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews. The interview guide was developed based on the research questions that guided the study. It was intended to capture detailed information with diverse perspectives from teachers regarding the challenges and opportunities in conducting TAR in Tanzania. The instrument was flexible, allowing for prompting and probing as the researcher navigated to gain deeper insights from participants (Christensen et al., 2015). The interview guide was prepared in both Kiswahili and English. During data collection, all participants were comfortable using Kiswahili, although code-switching and code-mixing with English were allowed.

The thematic data analysis, as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2023), guided the analysis of data in this study. The analysis involved familiarisation with the data, coding, identifying patterns across the data, and analysing and interpreting the identified patterns. The audio records were thoroughly studied and transcribed in Kiswahili, and then the transcripts were translated verbatim into English. The researcher reviewed each translated transcript by reading and re-reading for familiarisation with the data. The commonalities from participants' responses were identified, themes established, and all related responses further clustered into their

respective themes. Thereafter, all themes were presented in the form of challenges and opportunities that teachers encounter in classroom research. Finally, the findings were presented using the identified themes, supported by quotes, which were validated for consistency and grammar by a language expert proficient in Kiswahili and English.

This study received ethical approval from Central China Normal University (CCNU), and the authorities in the Ubungu Municipality of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, authorised data collection from the selected schools. The study ensured that the rights of participants were protected, informed consent was obtained, and no participant was compelled to participate in the study. Information about the purpose of the study was shared with participants before data collection. Throughout the study, the researcher observed confidentiality, privacy, and non-traceability of participants. Pseudonyms were used for schools and participants as presented in this study. Interviews were audio-recorded to facilitate subsequent data analysis, following the acquisition of explicit and informed consent from each participant.

## **Findings and Discussion**

This section presents the findings and discusses them accordingly. Generally, the findings revealed challenges in TAR in two main categories: teacher-related and institutional-related. On the other hand, the findings revealed opportunities available within and beyond the school context that can enhance regular and effective utilisation of TAR practices and develop a self-led professional learning culture.

### **Challenges in Teachers' Action Research**

This section presents the emerging challenges in TAR, as revealed in public secondary schools in Tanzania, based on the perspectives and experiences of teachers. However, the difficulties revealed fell into two main categories: teacher-related challenges and institutional-related challenges.

#### **Teacher-Related Challenges**

It was revealed that, in conducting TAR, teachers experienced several challenges as follows:

##### ***Limited skills in TAR***

Like any other research activity, TAR adheres to a systematic and consistent approach to stages and activities, requiring teachers to possess fundamental research skills to effectively complete the process, from reflection and problem identification to data analysis and reporting. The study revealed that regardless of teachers' engagement in the inquiry process, the majority of them encountered difficulties in achieving effective and regular TAR practices because they had limited research skills. Furthermore, there was a shared viewpoint among themselves that they faced various limitations during the inquiry process. Detailed information was acquired when teachers were required to "Briefly describe how you conduct teachers' action research in their classrooms". In light of that question, the findings revealed a significant deficiency in skills in TAR relative to all teachers. It was evident that most of them encounter substantial challenges in building research questions, designing the experimental part of the research plan, analysing and interpreting data, and writing reports. It was also noted that teachers had similar experiences based on their initial professional training, which highlighted a lack of sufficient training in formal research methodology in education, particularly in TAR. Commenting on this, teachers from Juhudi and Maarifa had the following to say:

Most of us conduct action research in our classrooms, but we often lack competence, especially when it comes to the stages that follow after identifying the problem. It is challenging to set a precise research question, design the entire research structure, analyse, and interpret the data. As you have seen, none of us has written a report of what we did because writing is also very challenging, especially when you want to document something you are not very clear about. At least data collection is a bit smoother, but we struggle until we get things done [Uda-CT3].

I recall the first time I began conducting action research in my class. It was challenging for me to master the process because action research was not particularly taught or emphasised when I was in College. I also came to realise that even my senior colleagues from the University faced the same challenge. Until now, I cannot say that I am competent, though I try based on what I can do [Lola-CT5].

Based on the findings, it appears that most educational institutions in Tanzania that train teachers focus their programmes on teacher practices and subject expertise, but provide limited practical instruction about TAR as a professional learning method. Correspondingly, studies conducted by Mgaiwa (2018) and Mkumbo (2012) found that majority of teachers in Tanzania are underprepared and lack essential professional skills, including inquiry and problem-solving, necessary for



them to engage in TAR effectively. The findings from both studies further suggest that, during initial teacher training, student-teachers are less or negatively exposed to research theory and practice, particularly in TAR. As a result, the challenge amplified during in-service teaching as reported in numerous studies (Albalawi & Johnson, 2022; HakiElimu, 2021; Chacha & Onyango, 2022). On the other hand, the shortage of basic research competencies is identified as having adverse effects on teachers' academic writing protocols, as indicated in the extract of [Uda-CT3] and the Table. 1 (p. 7), that action research reports were missing from all participants.

Significantly, the study found that due to limited TAR skills, all six teachers involved in the study failed to achieve effective and regular inquiry practices, which further impacted their professional development and students' outcomes. Likewise, Albalawi and Johnson (2022) and Hairon (2017) found that some teachers perceived action research as a one-time project rather than a regular part of their job routine. In contrast, studies from Singapore, the Philippines, China, and other countries report that teachers regularly undertake action research and develop their vast experience (Chen, 2022; Hairon, 2017; Tindowen et al., 2019).

### ***Lack of confidence, collaboration, and networking in TAR***

Other challenges that emerged from the findings stemmed from a lack of self-confidence, collaboration, and networking in TAR practices. Nearly all teachers investigated declared a lack of self-confidence, especially when they saw a need to share their inquiry experience and the findings they obtained, so that others could learn from them. The practice of teachers was because they felt uncertain about their ability to conduct TAR. Other teachers preferred that TAR not reinforce the sharing pattern to avoid contradictions, since every teacher has their way of dealing with classroom problems. Teachers appeared fearful that their research work may not be "academic enough" or worried about making mistakes that will be known to others, as commented:

I would prefer that the sharing part not be necessary to avoid contradictions among us, since we know our skills vary. Some are complicated, such as writing dissertations, while others, like me, use simple methods. However, we all get what we are searching for [Bozi-CT6].

The extract from Bozi-CT6 suggests that a lack of self-confidence stems from teachers' insufficient exposure to research methodologies and negative past experiences with academic writing. Additionally, the findings also revealed that the majority of teachers in Tanzania are working in isolation when conducting TAR,

as opposed to collaboration being emphasised as a supportive measure to enhance their collegiality in a school-based professional learning culture. The findings are related to what James and Augustin (2017) found in their study, which revealed that factors such as willingness, trust, critical relationships, and autonomy are often lacking in many schools. Platforms such as collaborative inquiry, peer support, and student engagement in TAR research were hardly exhibited by teachers. In contrast, Garcés and Granada (2016) comment that teacher researchers who collaborate with other colleagues or students are likely to strengthen their collegiality and mutual relationship with their students.

Therefore, it is fundamental for teachers in support of their school leaders to establish those platforms in secondary schools and strengthen teachers' networking through online platforms such as "WhatsApp" groups, forming teacher research groups, co-author studies, joint classroom-based action research, etc. These initiatives can be significant for teachers to receive intervention and other related support in TAR.

### **Institutional-Related Challenges**

Apart from teacher-related challenges, several specific institutional-related challenges were also identified, affecting the TAR processes in secondary schools. The following sub-sections further present the revealed challenges:

#### ***Lack of funds and administrative support***

Funds and administrative support are among the crucial factors that ensure the smooth running of various activities in schools, including TAR; however, this balance is disrupted when they are lacking. According to the findings from interviews with school heads, it was revealed that no specific funds had been allocated from Ubungu Municipality to support TAR activities in their schools. This challenge was further explained, as it was difficult for them to reallocate funds and support teachers when needs arose, to avoid auditing queries. During the interview in Juhudi, the head of school had the following to say:

I know I have to support teachers, mainly when they are engaged in activities related to teaching and learning at school, because our goal is to improve students' performance. However, the major challenge we currently face in our school is the lack of funds for these activities, and it has been this way for a long time. The funds we receive come with directives; strict adherence is required, as violation may lead to queries in audit reports [Gara-Head1].

The findings imply that school heads were willing to support teachers if funds were available. However, the exclusion of allocating funds for TAR activities in secondary schools underscores the fact that TAR is highly acknowledged externally but less invested and prioritised internally. The argument corroborates Hancock (1997) and Kunje and Stuart (2006), who suggest that in many schools, TAR fails to thrive due to a lack of administrative support and reliable funding to support teacher researchers.

Additionally, Mwakabenga (2021) found that due to the lack of funds needed by teachers to photocopy and purchase other materials required for the effective accomplishment of their research inquiry, teachers had to contribute money from their own pockets. It implies that teachers understand the benefits of TAR and are willing to make changes by overcoming barriers (Mwakabenga et al., 2022). However, the majority of them might be discouraged if they see that their money is being used in school-wide activities. Support provision for teacher researchers is necessary and mandatory from school heads. This is because the National Framework for Teachers' Continuous Professional Development articulates that *head of schools and ward education coordinators should encourage and support teachers to engage in action research* (MoEST, 2017). However, this role appeared to be unfulfilling to the school head. Similarly, as noted by Chen (2022), with appropriate support, more teachers are likely to engage in research-like activities, thereby enabling a wider dissemination of their findings to inform students' learning.

### ***Absence of school-based framework for professional learning and guidelines for supervising TAR activities***

Another significant challenge among school-wide challenges was the absence of a School-Based framework for guiding professional learning, as well as guidelines to ensure adequate supervision of TAR Activities. During the interviews, the school heads confirmed the absence of clear directives and school-based policies from their leaders that describe their roles as school administrators on how they should supervise and support TAR activities in their schools. The school heads further explained that it has become so challenging for them to support, promote, or integrate TAR activities in the school's annual action plans. They further declared that it was difficult for them to break down the related activities to be accomplished by teachers, and those to be monitored and evaluated by the school administration. It was also noted that this challenge further raised doubts among the school heads

on whether TAR was mandatory for teachers in secondary schools. One respondent had this to say:

Even if I decide to promote action research in my school, I'm unsure of where to begin. Neither directives nor guidelines have been made available to us by our leaders. At least there could be something like a framework or model to guide. We have KPIs (Key Performance Indicators) as our guide, but they don't spell out teachers' action research. Sometimes we tend to think that perhaps our leaders have not made it a priority in our schools [Kai-Head2].

The above findings suggest that, despite the recognition of TAR in the new Education and Training Policy (ETP) (URT, 2023) and the emphasis in subsequent curriculum frameworks (MoEST, 2019; 2017; 2015), institutionalisation has remained a problem in Tanzania. The presented findings highlight a significant discrepancy between what is being reinforced in the documents and the actual practice of TAR in schools. A similar case is reported in the Philippines and Singapore, where the government introduced action research to enhance teachers' skills in adapting to new curriculum reforms; however, complex bureaucratic structures still hindered teachers from smoothly implementing the process (Tindowen et al., 2019; Soh, 2011). This observation calls for serious government interventions to bridge the gap by ensuring that TAR is institutionalised in secondary schools in Tanzania, and necessary directives and guidelines are provided to school managers.

### ***Lack of motivation and appreciation***

In the interviews, all six teachers declared that their morale in TAR was weakened since motivation and appreciation were lacking in their schools. It was further found that, regardless of intrinsic motivation, a positive mindset towards change, and self-directed skills acknowledged by teachers as key factors that influenced the majority of them to conduct TAR, a lack of motivation and appreciation was mentioned as affecting their consistency. Some participants expressed that, apart from the complex working environment and the efforts they are making to minimise classroom challenges by integrating action research, nobody appreciates their efforts. A History teacher from Maarifa Secondary School expressed that:

Every human being needs to be appreciated, especially when they do something good. From what I have learned from my colleagues, it is not that teachers do not want to conduct classroom-based action research often. We can achieve wonders compared to what we are doing now, but the challenge is that we are not motivated. We are trying our best, but in the end, we receive no appreciation; we are often blamed as a cause for students' failure [Bozi-CT6].

Based on the presented extract, the findings imply that there is often little recognition or reward for teachers who engage in TAR. This challenge has led some teachers to perceive TAR as an unnecessary burden rather than a professional development opportunity for them to thrive (Albalawi and Johnson, 2022). This occurrence may continue to exacerbate predicaments in limiting teachers' initiatives in TAR activities, particularly when teachers discuss what they do and the direct benefits they receive from the school (as individuals) and the broader community. Correspondingly, Hathorn and Dillon (2018) note that when motivation and appreciation are lacking for TAR in secondary schools, it increases the likelihood that teachers' enthusiasm will decline. Hence, schools and educational stakeholders must create an environment that values and rewards teachers-researchers in the secondary schools. Support such as mentorship programmes, encouragement for teachers to present at school forums, and rewards, including opportunities or grants, may serve not only as motivation but also as recognition for their impactful efforts.

### ***Overloaded school timetable within time constraints***

It was revealed from interviews that all participants shared a concern about having overloaded responsibilities within the limited time, while simultaneously trying to incorporate TAR into their daily routine activities. The school heads reported having too many office responsibilities, both within and outside the school, in addition to their regular classroom teaching routine. At Juhudi, teachers shared a similar view that their journey of undertaking TAR was very challenging, as it involved not only teaching, which was demanding, but also supervising students in extracurricular activities such as clubs, sports, and cleanliness. Achieving effective and regular TAR appeared to be difficult for teachers, as the majority of them held additional leadership roles, ranging from class to departmental levels.

Integrating classroom-based research into our timetable is like pressing a button to burst. Most of us use extra time during weekends and holidays to plan for research-related activities because time is often insufficient even for current formalised activities. We are spending extra working hours at school, on average, every day, at least to accomplish marking students' written assignments and supervising remedials [Uda-CT3].

While utilising time during the weekend was mentioned to help teachers in Juhudi address the challenge of time constraints, teachers in Maarifa had a contrasting perspective, stating that using weekend days to plan for TAR activities was still challenging for them due to family responsibilities. Consistent with the extant literature, Tindowen et al. (2019) revealed that additional workload and lack of time

were among the challenges hindering teachers from fully engaging in TAR. The implication is that, while teachers in some contexts share similar challenges, the case is opposite in other contexts, as found by Hairon (2017) and Garcés and Granada (2016), who revealed that teachers regularly engaged in action research to improve curriculum at the institutional level and enhanced their skills in problem-solving.

### ***Limited in-service professional development opportunities***

Teacher professional development is a continuous process that enables teachers to maintain up-to-date professional knowledge and pedagogy, achieve expected student outcomes, and enjoy autonomy within the teaching profession. However, the findings revealed a significant gap in in-service teacher professional development for secondary school teachers. It was further noted that participants considered the traditional approach to be dominant in in-service professional development, where workshops and seminars were the most commonly known opportunities to teachers, unlike other alternatives found in schools, including TAR. Regardless of this dominance, all participants declared that they were less beneficial for them, as they are minimal, unpredictable, and focus on the minority. Zoa from Maarifa narrated that:

Some of the challenges we face in conducting classroom-based research could have been resolved if we had been given opportunities such as workshops and seminars. I must say, the majority of us have not attended most of those workshops in years. If the opportunity arises, only a few are chosen; others are told to wait for their feedback, which doesn't happen in many cases. At least Science and Mathematics teachers somehow attend [Zoa-CT4].

While it seemed Science and Mathematics teachers in both schools benefit from the limited in-service teacher professional development, a Physics teacher from Juhudi commented that:

Let me clarify: even though science teachers are attending these workshops, it should not be taken as a regular occurrence. Most of the projects I attended were externally funded; once the project finished, it was over, and we were not taught about classroom-based action research [Nepa-CT1].

Due to the vital role of continuity in teachers' professional learning, the limited in-service teacher professional learning in Tanzania contradicts this fundamental narrative, thereby establishing a paradox. While cascade mode has been effectively utilised in other countries, it appears to be inactive and poorly managed in Tanzania.

Since the effective use of TAR can also address the challenge of inadequate workshops and seminars, it's high time for education stakeholders to promote it in secondary schools in Tanzania. Schools should establish and strengthen professional learning communities to enhance teachers' collaboration, the sharing of research ideas, and learning from one another. Additionally, there should be a balance in teacher recruitment based on their specialities and across urban and rural areas, with a focus on attending workshops where TAR is integrated into their training manuals.

### *Assessment-driven culture*

Teachers and school heads from both schools shared similar viewpoints on the ongoing assessment-driven culture prevalent in secondary schools in Tanzania. The primary concern revealed by the findings is that Tanzania's education system places a heavy emphasis on evaluation, particularly national examinations, unlike the learning process from which TAR emanated. During the interview, the school head from Juhudi was quoted:

It is very challenging to accommodate every activity in our formal school routine it is obvious that our leaders, parents, and the society in general are interested with students' high performance in national examinations this culture affects our priorities as school managers as well as teachers to the extent of focusing much on achieving results unlike the teaching and learning in the classroom [Gara-Head1].

Similarly, the school head from Maarifa also said:

Our school culture is very complex. As you observed, teachers are now very busy with invigilation, especially those who are teaching Form II, III, and IV, because our leaders have set the outcome level that our students need to achieve. Under this pressure, I usually tell teachers to focus on student assessment, and then they can do other activities when they are done [Kai-Head2].

In light of these findings, it appears that the existing culture in Tanzanian secondary schools prioritises preparing students for standardised tests rather than focusing on experimental or reflective teaching methods. This culture seemed to be challenging for teachers and school heads, especially when they strive to improve their teaching practices through engaging in TAR within the complex school culture. Teachers perceived that the existing school culture negatively influenced their choices, decisions, and practices of TAR. This reason was declared to weaken their engagement in implementing TAR. Although an assessment-driven culture may appear to meet the expectations of various groups in Tanzanian society, including

the government, this study found that it negatively affects the practical orientation of both teachers and students, particularly concerning the CBC. The above implication calls for policymakers to balance examination-driven education with research-informed teaching practices to achieve impactful student outcomes and support teachers' professional development.

### **Opportunities for Promoting Teachers' Action Research in Tanzania**

Despite the numerous challenges facing teachers in conducting action research in secondary schools in Tanzania, TAR has remained fundamental for teachers' self-led professional learning and improving students' outcomes. More teachers can develop the interest, skills, and readiness to conduct classroom-based action research effectively and regularly if the government, under the Ministry of Education, properly utilises the following opportunities.

#### ***Availability of universities around the schools***

The availability of higher institutions, such as Universities, around secondary schools can be used as an opportunity to collaborate and negotiate for the support of research experts. The vast experience that experts from Universities have in research can be translated to teachers in secondary schools. School heads can find an appropriate time in the school timetable when teachers can meet face-to-face with their mentor in intervals that they can agree on. This method has been used in many countries, including Tanzania, where Mwakabenga (2021; 2018) conducted interventions to support teachers who were not engaging in TAR. Through these interventions, the findings revealed that teachers were able to complete the research circle and develop new teaching methods. At the same time, teachers strengthened their teamwork and collegiality, while their communication and interaction with students were enhanced to have a positive impact.

#### ***Availability of the new education and training policy and curriculum framework***

The current practice and status of teachers' action research among teachers in secondary schools in Tanzania is attributed to the former ETP of 1995, which has less prioritised TAR. Although professional development of teachers was part of the emphasis in the 1995 ETP, the focus was not clearly on subjecting teachers to engage in TAR, as it is spelt and emphasised in the new edition of the 2023 ETP. In the new ETP, TAR is highly emphasised for teachers to align with the new focus of education, which emphasises evidence-based and outcome-based learning (URT, 2023). Additionally, with the use of subsequent curriculum and teacher professional development frameworks, the agenda of promoting TAR in secondary



schools through institutionalisation and bridging the gap between theory, literature, and practice will also enhance the development of competencies among students. Hence, TAR in secondary schools will form a strong foundation for transforming the existing school-based professional learning culture in Tanzania. School leaders at the District and Regional levels should ensure that policy and framework documents are easily accessible to teachers and engage them in translating these documents to enhance their understanding of their roles and ownership of what they are expected to implement.

### ***Availability of communities of learning in schools***

Communities of learning are a platform for teachers to initiate action research activities (Chen, 2022; Mjege et al., 2019). Since teachers meet for learning, they share challenges, experiences, values, and methods for dealing with problems; hence, TAR activities can emerge. The collaboration, trust, and sense of sharing that teachers develop in communities of learning are vital for their inquiry process to flourish. This strategy has also been suggested in the National Framework for Teachers Continuous Professional Development in Tanzania which states "in communities of learning, teachers should be encouraged to move towards analysing pupil/student results, and their teaching through collective or individual action research"..... "teachers should also analyse student work and conducting inquiry or action research projects" (MoEST, 2017 p. 8). Similarly, lessons are evident in countries such as China, which has also utilised professional learning communities to promote TAR experiences for many years, yielding tremendous results (Chen, 2022; Mjege et al., 2019). Since communities of learning shape the school's professional learning culture, teachers can adopt a lifelong learning approach as part of an emphasis on adult learning. Therefore, the government should establish proper management of communities of learning in secondary schools due to their multi-player effect in promoting TAR practices in Tanzania.

### ***Technological and digital advancement***

The advancement of digital technology plays a significant role in teaching and learning processes. It is fundamental for teachers to acknowledge this profound opportunity for them to utilise it and transform their professional learning in a more rewarding approach, MoEST. (2019). While support provision based on research expertise and resources continues to be challenging, teachers can utilise platforms such as Google Scholar, ResearchGate, and others to access relevant online learning materials necessary for TAR. Moreover, the utilisation of ICT should be

extended to support TAR activities. Smart mobile phones, tablets, laptops, and other devices are crucial tools that many teachers have access to, although they may be less or not be considered essential for helping them in research-related activities. Through those devices, teachers can conduct online surveys, mobile interviews, record interviews, and analyse data, which will make research activities easier for them and minimise challenges.

The improvement of ICT infrastructure to support students' learning in secondary schools should go hand in hand with teachers' consideration, as they are also integral to the learning process within their schools. Since ICT is acknowledged to enhance curiosity and interest in learning, it can also play a similar role in TAR, attracting more teachers to engage in the inquiry process. For example, watching classroom-based action research videos and tutorials from YouTube may arouse teachers' interest and readiness to try.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This study presents detailed findings based on the perspectives of teachers in Tanzania as revealed by eight teachers from two secondary schools. The findings are presented in two main categories: challenges in TAR and opportunities available in Tanzania that can promote the adoption of TAR. The findings revealed challenges in two sub-categories: teacher-related and institutional-related, as well as the available opportunities within and beyond the school context. Teacher-related challenges include limited research skills, lack of confidence, weak collaboration, poor networking, and institutional (lack of funds, lack of motivation, administrative disregard, assessment-driven culture, excessive workloads, limited professional training, and policy ambiguities in guiding TAR practices).

Despite the numerous challenges prevalent in Tanzania's TAR, this study identified opportunities that can be implemented to improve the current situation. The availability of opportunities, such as higher learning institutions near schools, the new ETP of 2023, frameworks, digital tools, and communities of learning, has been revealed to promote TAR in Tanzania. This study further advocates for formalising TAR through structured administrative support, strengthening teacher autonomy in technology use, and transforming sporadic inquiries into systematic research.

The above findings establish a strong need for national initiatives to ensure policy implementation through institutionalising TAR, as well as teachers' engagement in translating the current ETP 2023 and subsequent curriculum frameworks, which strongly emphasise evidence-based and outcome-based teaching. Together with

promoting policy implementation on TAR, there is a need to ensure that communities of learning are actively established in secondary schools, providing teachers with a formal platform that fosters their knowledge sharing and professional development through TAR. It is strongly believed that, if educational leaders at all levels implement their willpower towards addressing the identified challenges through the proper utilisation of available opportunities, more teachers will be able to engage in classroom research and embrace lifelong learning. Regardless of the detailed profundity of the findings in this study, they cannot be generalised because of the varying nature of schools, leadership styles, teachers' attributes, and other factors. Further studies can be conducted in the same area to expand the scope, increase the sample size, and refine the methodology for broader and in-depth triangulation of the findings.

With a declaration of account for this study, the following recommendations are made available for further actions;

First, Tanzanian government under the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST), Universities, Tanzania Institute of Education (TIE), and the Institute of Adult Education (IAE) should review the teacher education curriculum to evaluate whether TAR has been integrated and well captures in terms of scope and methodology that teacher educators at all levels will use to deliver to novice and upgrading teachers. To achieve this, it also requires strong initiative on the part of the government to allocate sufficient funds, enabling MoEST and its sub-sectors to accomplish the goal.

Second, Institutional support for TAR should be offered by Ward, District, and Regional Educational Officers, who should also facilitate school heads in establishing structured support mechanisms to promote TAR at the school, ward, and district levels. The initiatives include fostering collaboration with nearby universities to provide expert guidance and enhance research capacity among teachers.

Third, School heads and teachers should utilise online platforms (e.g., YouTube tutorials, academic websites, etc.) to learn about TAR. This interim measure can help transition from irregular to regular and informal inquiry to formal research practices while awaiting institutionalised training programmes.

Fourth, Teachers should consider their role as adult learners responsible for self-guiding their professional learning. Their intrinsic motivation needs to be developed so that they can take challenges as opportunities rather than limitations.

An adult learner needs to clear the path while walking it, as reflection, experience, creativity, and determination are crucial tools that adult learners are expected to possess. Since TAR provides immediate answers to teachers' daily challenges, it has established the primary motive for teachers to step in and improve their classroom practices while embracing the inquiry process, rather than escaping it.

## References

- Albalawi, A., & Johnson, L. N. (2022). Action research skills among public school teachers: A cross-cultural study. *International Journal of Research in Education Science*, 8(2), 286-310. <https://doi.org/10.46328/ijres.2548>
- Al-Mahdi, O. (2019). Action research and teachers' professional development: Examples and reflections. *International Educational Research*, 2(3), 37-p37. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.30560/ier.v2n3p37>
- Anangisyse, W. A. (2010). "Revisiting the alternative responses to the perceived quality 'decline' in basic education" in Tanzania. *KEDI Journal of Educational Policy*, 7(1), 115-183.
- Anderson, J. (2016). Inquiry-based learnin. In *Teaching Secondary Mathematics* (pp. 117-45). Cambridge University Press.
- Banegas, D., Pavese, A., Velázquez, A., & Vélez, S. M. (2013). Teacher professional development through collaborative action research: Impact on foreign English language teaching and learning. *Educational Action Research*, 21(2), 185-201. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2013.789717>
- Borko, H., Jacobs, J., & Koellner, K. (2010). Contemporary approaches to teacher professional development. In P. Peterson, E. Baker, & B. McGaw, *International Encyclopaedia of Education* (Vol. 7, pp. 548-556). Elsevier.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2023). Toward good practice in thematic analysis: Avoiding common problems and be(com)ing a knowing researcher. *International Journal of Transgender Health*, 24(1), 1-6. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/26895269.2022.2129597>
- Chacha, J., & Onyango, D. (2022). Challenges faced by teachers in implementing competence-based Chemistry curriculum in Public secondary schools in Nyamagana District, Mwanza, Tanzania. *Journal of Research Innovation and Implications in Education*, 6(1), 346-358.
- Chen, L. (2022). Facilitating teacher learning in professional learning communities through action research: A qualitative case study in China. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2022.103875>

- Christensen, L. B., Johnson, R. B., & Turner, L. A. (2015). *Research methods, design, and analysis* (12th ed.). Pearson Education.
- Craft, A. (2000). *Continuing professional development: A practical guide for teachers and schools*. Routledge Flamer.
- Dadi, H. (2015). Teacher professional development: Experiences of three selected African countries and the lessons based on Chinese Practices. *International Journal of African and Asian Studies*, 6, 63-72.
- Darling-Hammond, L. (2006). Constructing 21st-Century teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 57, 300-314.
- Darling-Hammond, L., Wei, R. C., Andree, A., Richardson, N., & Orphanos, S. (2009). Professional learning in the learning profession: A status report on teacher development in the United States and abroad. *Dallas, TX: National Staff Development Council*. <http://learningforward.org/docs/pdf/nsdcstudy2009.pdf>.
- Elliott, J. (1991). *Action research for educational change*. Open University Press.
- Falk, B., & Blumenreich, M. (2005). *The power of questions: A guide to teacher and student research*. Heinemann Educational Books.
- Garcés, A. Y., & Granada, L. M. (2016). The role of collaborative action research in teachers' professional development. *Profile Issue in Teachers Professional Development*, 18(1), 39-54. doi:<https://doi.org/10.15446/profile.v18n1.49148>
- Guskey, T. R. (2002). Professional development and teacher change. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, 8(3/4), 381-391.
- Hairon, S. (2017). Action research in Singapore: Where are we now? *Asia-Pacific Science Education*, 3(5). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41029-017-0016-x>.
- Haiyan, Q., & Allan, W. (2021). Creating conditions for professional learning communities (PLCs) in schools in China: The role of school principals. *Professional Development in Education*, 47(4), 586-598. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2020.1770839>
- HakiElimu. (2021). *The educationee want: A critical analysis of Education and Training Policy (2014), issues, and recommendations*. HakiElimu.
- Halliday, A. J., Kern, M. L., Garrett, D. K., & Turnbull, D. A. (2019). The student voice in well-being: A case study of participatory action research in positive education. *Educational Action Research*, 27(2), 173-196. doi:[10.1080/09650792.2018.1436079](https://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2018.1436079)
- Hancock, R. (1997). Why are class teachers reluctant to become researchers? *British Journal of In-service Education*, 23(1), 85-99. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13674589700200009>

- Hardman, J. (2017). School-based teacher professional development in Africa: Emerging lessons from Kenya and Tanzania. In A. Matoko & G. LeTendre, *International handbook of teacher quality and policy* (pp. 517-527). Routledge. doi:orcid.org/0000-0001-6404-8837
- Hathorn, C., & Dillon, A. M. (2018). Action research as professional development: Its role in education reform in the United Arab Emirates. *Issues in Education Research*, 28(1), 99-119.
- Hine, G. S. (2013). The importance of action research in teacher education programs. *Issues in Education Research*, 23(2), 151-163.
- Hyun, H. (2014). *How to design and evaluate research in education*. Education-Europe.
- James, F., & Augustin, D. S. (2017). Improving teachers' pedagogical and instructional practice through action research: potential and problems. *Educational Action Research*, 26(2), 333-348. doi:10.1080/09650792.2017.1332655
- Jovanova-Mitkovska, S. (2010). The need for continuous professional teacher development. *Procedia Social and Behavioural Sciences*, 2, 2921–2926.
- Kafyulilo, A. C. (2013). Professional development through teacher collaboration: An approach to enhance teaching and learning in Science and Mathematics in Tanzania. *Africa Education Review*, 10(4), 671-688.
- Kemmis, S. (2009). Action research as a practice-based practice. *Educational Action Research*, 17(3), 463-474.
- Knowles, M. (1984). *The adult learner: A neglected species (3rd Ed.)*. Gulf Publishing.
- Komba, S. C., & Mwakabenga, R. J. (2019). Teacher professional development in Tanzania: Challenges and opportunities. *Educational Leadership*.
- Kunje, D., & Stuart, J. (2006). Action research in developing African education systems: Is the glass half full or half empty? *Educational Action Research*, 6(3), 377-393. https://doi.org/10.1080/09650799800200071
- Lewin, K. (1946). Action research and minority problem. *Journal of Social Issues*, 2(4), 34-98.
- Lewin, K. (1958). *Group decision and social change*. Holk, Rinehart and Winston.
- Losioki, B. E. (2020). Professional development and empowerment among secondary school teachers in Mkuranga District, Tanzania. *Journal of Education and Practice*, 11, 92-98.
- Mgaiwa, J. S. (2018). Emerging fundamental issues of teacher education in Tanzania: A reflection of practices. *Educational Process: International Journal*, 7(4), 246-264.

- Mizell, H. (2010). Why professional development matters. *Learning Forward: Advancing professional learning for student success*, 1-28. <https://learningforward.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/professional-development-matters.pdf>
- Mjege, K., Kavenuke, P. S., & Mwakabenga, R. J. (2019). Promoting teacher professional learning in Tanzanian schools: Lessons from Chinese school-based professional learning communities. *Research Gate*, 8(1), 47-63.
- Mkumbo, K. (2012). Teachers' commitment to, and experiences of, the teaching profession in Tanzania: Findings of focus group research.. *International Education Studies*, 5(3), 222-227.
- MoEST. (2017). *National framework for teachers' continuous professional development*. Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology.
- MoEST. (2019). *National curriculum framework for basic education and teacher education*. Tanzania Institute of Education.
- Morales, M. P., Abulon, E. L., Soriano, P. R., David, A. P., Victoria, M. C., Hermosisima, & Gerund, M. G. (2016). Examining teachers' conceptions of and needs on action research. *Issues in Educational Research*, 26(15), 464-489.
- Mwakabenga, R. J. (2018). *Developing teacher-led professional learning in a Tanzanian secondary school (thesis)*. Massey University.
- Mwakabenga, R. J. (2021). Secondary school teachers' experience of using action research in classroom practices. *African Journal Online (AJOL)*, 39(2), 119-139.
- Mwakabenga, R. J., Hansen, S., & Sewell, A. (2022). Teachers' efforts to overcome barriers in their professional learning activities: A case of teacher professional programs in Tanzania. *Journal of African Education*, 3(1), 11.
- Tindowen, D. J., Guzman, J., & Macanang, D. (2019). Teachers' Conception of difficulties in doing action research. *Universal Journal of Education Research*, 7(8), 1787-1794.
- UNESCO. (2014). *UNESCO Education Strategy 2014-2021*. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation.
- URT. (2023). *Education and Training Policy 2014 (Edition 2023)*. Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology.
- World Economic Forum. (2015). *New Vision for Education: Unlocking the potential of technology*. World Economic Forum.
- Zhao, Y., & Watterston, J. (2021). The changes we need: Education post-COVID-19. *Journal of Educational Change*, 22(1), 3–12. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-021-09417-3>