

# Exploring self- study habits of school teachers: A case study from Vietnam

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**ABSTRACT:** *Self-study is crucial in the professional development of teachers to meet all the educational requirements. The context of educational reform in Vietnam has heightened the need for research about teachers' self-study habits. To examine current self-study habits of teachers as well as proposing some appropriate solutions, over 50 teachers, librarians and school administrators have been invited to interview, group discussions and fill in a questionnaire. The findings suggest that not only schools need to change to promote the movement of teachers' self-study but also teachers themselves need to plan and carry out self-study actively with stronger determination to meet the requirements of the new curriculum.*

**KEYWORDS:** Self-study; self-study habit; teacher; professional development; school; educational reform.

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## 1. Introduction

Self-study plays an important role in the maintenance of lifelong learning and ensuring success in life for all. School-time is extremely short compared to the amount of human knowledge that continuously develops in the Fourth Industrial Revolution. With teachers, self-study becomes more crucial given its importance in their professional development to meet the demand for learning outcomes of students (Hattie, 2012), especially in the context of educational change (Hoban, 2002). Vietnam education is undertaking a fundamental and comprehensive reform with the appearance of the new curriculum and sets of textbooks. Teachers in all education levels have to improve their professional capacity to meet all the new requirements. While waiting for the training programs from the Ministry of Education and Training, teachers should enhance self-learning to meet the urgent requirements of the education reform. The emergence of self-study for teachers leads to the need for assessing teachers' self-study habits and proposing the solutions to promote the movement in schools.

This paper examines the self-study habits of teachers through doing research in a K-12 school in Hanoi, Vietnam. The main aim of this investigation is to explore teachers' awareness

and habits of self-study associated and the affecting factors to provide recommendations to develop the teachers' capacity as well as the quality of education.

## 2. Literature review

The term 'self-study' is widely discussed in literature. According to a definition provided by Oxford dictionaries, self-study is the devotion of time and attention to gaining knowledge of an academic subject without assistance from a teacher or tutor. According to (Toan, 2004), self-study refers to brainstorming by ourselves, using the intellectual capacity (observation, comparison, classification...) and sometimes both muscles (when to use the tools) with his qualities, then the motivation, emotion, personal worldview (truthfulness, objectivity, desire for progress, perseverance and patience, passion for science, the will to turn difficulties into advantages) to occupy some sectors of humanity, to incorporate that area into their own possession. The national workshop organized by the Ho Chi Minh City Pedagogical University (2013) on the subject of developing self-study, self-research capacity for school teachers has stated "*Self-study means the way of seeking knowledge by themselves*". The term used by

Feldman (2003) also involves a thoughtful look at texts read, experiences had, people known, and ideas considered. Based on the consensus of the proposed concepts, self-study in this paper is defined as the effort to obtain knowledge and skills by oneself by using the intellectual capacity, the psychological qualities, sometimes even muscle. In such a way, self-study is a study activity conducted by oneself without any kind of help or supervision by a teacher or trainer, though the person studying may take help of some external sources like books, tutorials. It may be also defined as “learning on your own” or “by yourself” or being trainer of your self.

Regarding self-study habits and self-study habits of teachers, a large and growing body of literature has been published. Tidwell et al. (2005) pointed out the need of self-study for teachers that could be described in the words “should” and “must”. The ways to effective self-study have mentioned in the research such as study through the use of text, discourse and dialogue, visual representation as well as self-study on the impact of the practice on students. On the same vein, Hattie (2012) and Feiman-Nemser (2012) highlighted the role of learning with teachers in the book titled “teachers as learners”. The dimensions of teacher learning were revealed such as the nature and techniques of teacher learning in the teaching process such as mapping the field, lesson preparation, mentoring, induction. The authors mentioned that adjusting their teaching to pupils’ responses and taking responsibility for their own learning were key themes during student teaching. Self-study seems to be defined as a truly effective way for teacher education as mentioned in the research of Darling et al. (2007) that self-study should be promoted among teachers.

It can be seen as a consensus among scholars about the role of self-study for teacher by the citations of Hoban (2002), Bates (2010) and Samaras (2010). To determine the specific effects of self-study, Berry & Hamilton (2013) provided an overview and discussion of self-study of teacher education practices. Self-study showed the role of the educator within the educational

environment. In some institutions of teacher education, self-study could be used as a form of practitioner research to study their teaching and their students’ learning. The self-study was suitable means to understand better the complex nature of the teaching process and conducting educational change. Self-study of the teachers included personal and public purposes that help the education be more innovative.

In Vietnam, there have been many studies about self-study; the scholars discussed the issues surrounding the concepts, methods and forms of self-study in general speaking. Toan (2003) in the book *Discussion and experience of self-study* affirmed that self-study objectively existed in humans and is a valuable resource to exploit. The author also gave suggestions on how to successfully self-study such as using self-study slogans, the will to learn. According to the author, scientific research is the pinnacle of self-study. From this, he proposed a number of policy recommendations to promote self-study movement in education programs in Vietnam schools.

In terms of the purpose of teachers’ self-study, many scholars have argued the urgency of this field in the context of reforming education in Vietnam. Chi (2013) investigated that self-study is not only a mean of developing oneself but also the opportunity to develop their careers. For teachers, this means a special need because of the requirements of teaching students. Supporting for the idea, Tho & Thuy (2013) affirmed that each lesson needs to be refreshed by teachers’ self-study capacity. This factor seems to be evaluated to ensure success for teachers. From the same perspective, Anh (2013) demonstrated the positive relation between the self-study of teachers and students. The three main reasons for teachers to self-study are given by Oanh (2013), including the very short period of pre-service training in the University; the amount of knowledge increases continuously over time; the rapid change of approaching methodology in education. Discussing factors influencing teachers’ self-study, Dan (2013) have found suggests that subjective factors such

as determination, psycho sphere play the most important role. Especially, Toan (2012) have found the decisive role of motivations, purposes, and needs to learn.

The current status of teachers' self-study in Vietnam has been represented that most teachers were acutely aware of the importance and significance of the self-study, however, they were not serious enough to practice the activity because of various reasons such as being satisfied with their knowledge and experience, or having no time. Therefore, some solutions were proposed by scholars, for example organizing self-study group for teachers by different professional groups (Huan & Yen (2012); mastering self-study tools such as English and ICT skills (Tung, 2013); issuing incentive policies to encourage teachers' self-study.

Overall, these studies highlight the need for teachers to self-study as well as indicating some strengths and weaknesses in teachers' self-study habits. However, all of the above research inclines to the theoretical issues or focusing on some certain dimension in self-study habit; just a few about self-study habits of teachers in particular contexts. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct a research to explore teachers' study habits in a particular case to have a deep look, from that contributing to enhancing teachers' capacity as well as the quality of education.

### 3. Methodology

The study is designed based on the objectives of the study is to find out the strategies adopted by teachers in doing their self-study as well as the factors affecting their practices. Some research questions have been given as follows:

- What is the teachers' awareness of self-study?
- What is the teachers' self-study habits?
- What factors affect teachers' self-study habits?

To find out the answer, the sample of 50 out of 82 teachers at a multistage government school were selected to participate in the research in October, 2020. The research tool includes a questionnaire and group discussion for

teachers. The questionnaire is divided into three main sections, asking teachers about background information, their perception and their habits relating to self-study such as purpose, means, methodology, contents and resources for self-study. In the group discussion, teachers shared their own experiences and practices relating to their self-study process. The collected data is then classified and analyzed before giving a conclusion and recommendations.

### 4. Research results and discussions

#### *Background of surveyed teachers*

Surveyed teachers include 82% of female teachers and 18% of male teachers as the general ratio in Vietnamese schools. Regarding qualifications, all the teachers got standard qualifications based on the Vietnam education law with almost all teachers obtained bachelor and master degree, respectively 54% and 44%, just a few teachers (2%) hold diploma degree. In terms of age, teachers under 40 years old accounted for 60% of surveyed subjects, especially the age group of 31-40 were 48%; followed by 24% of the 41-50 age group, 22% of under 30 and 6% of over 50 years old. Corresponding to the age, years of teaching from 5 to 10 accounted for 60%, less than 5 years accounted for 22%; above 10 year experience accounted for only 18% of the surveyed teachers. Based on the background information, relationship between age, teaching experience with their self-study habits will be revealed in the following section.

#### *Surveyed teachers' awareness about self-study and the factors affecting*

100% of the teachers agreed with the given concept that "*self-study is the effort to obtain knowledge and skills by oneself by using the intellectual capacity, the psychological qualities, sometimes even muscle*". However, some teachers also added that self-study was an open concept, existing in many forms, self-study sometimes can be conducted with instructors. Mentioning the importance, 90% determined the very important role of self-study, 10% for the selection of 'important'. The evidence shows the thoughtful awareness of surveyed teachers relating to self-study. In the group discussion,

the teachers have affirmed that self-study is the path to learn new knowledge, to meet the new demands of the teaching reality. The present findings seem to be consistent with the previous research which found that teachers understand the value of self-study for themselves as well as their students (Toan, 2004; Feiman-Nemser, 2012).

In contrast to the high proportion in teachers' evaluation about the importance of self-study, the time they spent on the activity is quite little. The below pie chart displays the time used per week for self-study by 50 teachers:

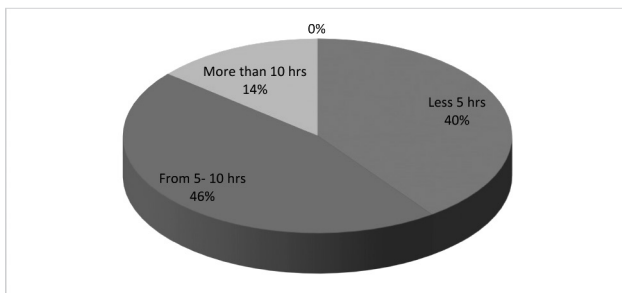


Figure 1: The percentage of spending time for self-study per week

As can be seen, only 14% of teachers spent more than 10 hours for self-study, 46 % spent from 5-10 hours, 40 % left spent less than 5 hours. There is a contradiction between awareness and real activities. The answer is revealed through a group discussion that they did not have enough time and conditions for self-study because a lot of time is spent for teaching, managing students and paperwork as well as no motivation for doing this. This finding agrees with Tung (2013) findings which showed that the time spent for self-study of teachers in Vietnam specialized schools is limited. Especially, 100% of teachers spent less than 5 hours for the self-study is female. A possible explanation for these results may be the role of Vietnamese women who have to spend more time than men taking care of children and doing the housework. The teachers shared the little time of self-study was due to staying up late at nights and saving their time at school.

The relationship between the age and self-study time is displayed in the following chart.

Figure 2 presents the relation between age

and teachers' self-study time with the result that middle-aged group from 30 to 50 years old spent more time for self-study than the youngest and oldest group. None of 50 years-old teachers spent more 10 hours for self-study. Analyzing from group discussion showed that because young teachers have just left universities, they are still confident with their knowledge, they spent a lot of time to socialize or on social network while the oldest age group had no more career ambitions, reaching retirement age makes them are not motivated to self-study. In addition, health and teaching experiences of the age group also hinder them to self-study. The findings expand the understanding of teachers' self-study habits in Vietnam which has not mentioned yet in the previous research of self-study (Chi, 2013; Anh, 2013).

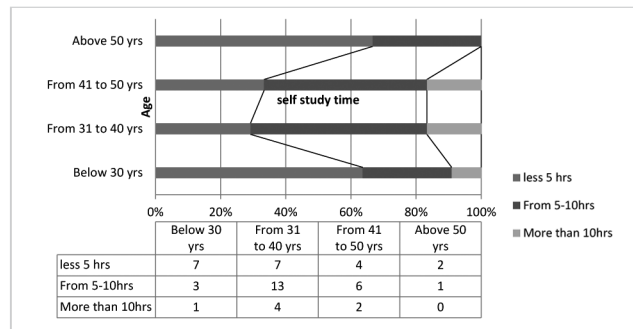


Figure 2: The relationship between teachers' age with their self-study time

According to the purpose of self-study, answers of responded teachers have shown in the following bar chart.

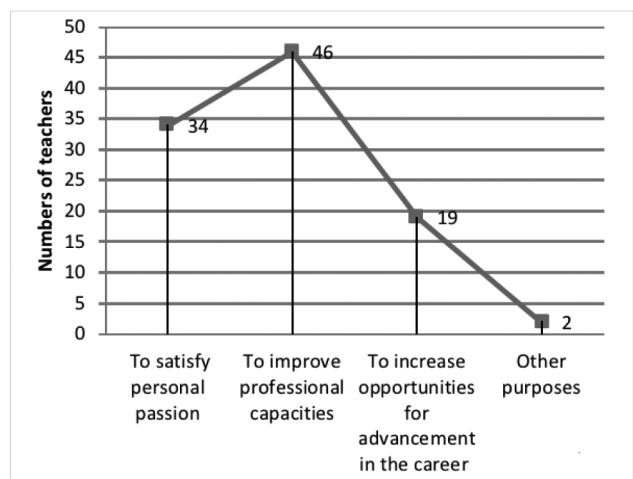


Figure 3: The purposes for self-study of the surveyed teachers



As can be seen, almost teachers chose the purpose of developing professional capacities with 46/50 options, 34/50 options for satisfying personal passion, and 19/ 50 for opportunities for advancement in the career. Most of the teachers were aware of the important role of self-study for their professional capacities that helped them teach and manage students better. These results match those observed in earlier studies that the purpose of developing teaching competences were their driving force to self-study.

In response to the question about places to self-study, most of those respondents chose home (49/50), just a few chose schools, libraries as their place for self-study. In the in-depth interview, the principal and librarian again confirmed the situation that just a small rate of teachers spent time in libraries with the length of visit time quite short, usually less than 1 hour, or just in the break time, between the lessons. The teachers explained the reasons in group

discussion that they need a quiet space and good infrastructure which schools or libraries could not meet their needs in terms of materials and space. Infrastructure and environment shortages are exactly barriers not only for teachers but also for other learners in practicing self-study that is acknowledged in some previous studies (Dan, 2013; Tung, 2013).

When the participants were asked about the frequency of planning for self-study, the majority with the proportion of 80% reported that they did not often plan self-study. This might impact negatively on the effectiveness of self-study. Discussing self-study sources, various resources were listed such as from friends, colleagues, library, internet, students, TV. However, the internet was defined as the most effective mean for self-study, while the library was only in the third position because of limited materials. This raises an urgent requirement about improving the quality of libraries in schools.

**Table 1: Frequency of the self-study contents**

No	The contents of self- study	Frequency					Mean value
		Never	Rarely	Some-times	Oft-en	Very often	
1.	Knowledge of political, economic, cultural, social problems, law documents including law of education	0	10	30	7	3	3.06
2.	Knowledge of the subjects that you are teaching in school	0	0	1	45	4	4.06
3.	Knowledge of the inspection and assessment of the results of student learning	0	1	12	35	2	3.76
4.	Knowledge of students' psychology	0	2	42	4	2	3.12
5.	Knowledge and skills to use ICT, modern equipment	5	15	25	4	1	2.52
6.	Methodology of teaching	0	3	14	23	10	3.8
7.	Organizational skills for extracurricular activities, management class	1	7	40	1	1	2.96
8.	Knowledge, skills of using foreign languages	10	11	18	5	6	2.52
9.	Life skills, communication skills	0	7	42	1	0	2.88
10.	Other contents .....	0	0	0	0	0	0

Regarding means for self-study such as ICT tools or foreign language, the most striking results is that the number of teachers never used ICT as well as foreign languages in their self-study occupied a relatively high rate. 40% of those never used foreign languages to learn and 30% never used ICT to self-study. The ratio mainly belonged to middle age group and old age group- above 40 years old. About the format of self-study, among the choices of individuals, groups, or a combination of both formats, the data showed that the majority learned independently, rarely in group. That may reflect a reality that self-study in the group have not explored in the school.

Regarding the frequency of the self-study

contents of 50 surveyed teachers, the results are displayed in the below table.

The statistical table showed that most concern of the teachers related to their teaching work such as knowledge of the subjects (4.06/5); teaching methodology (3.8/5); inspection and assessment of students' learning outcome. Standing at the bottom of the list was the contents of ICT, foreign languages, the problems related to extracurricular activities, life skills and communication with the mean of about 2.5/5. It is clearly that the teachers had different priorities, through group discussion, teachers admitted that because of limited free time, they only wanted to focus on expertise. Lack of concern about the tool and soft skills can be a limitation in teachers' self-study capacity.

**Table 2: Frequency of self-study activities**

No	The forms of self-study	Frequency					Mean value
		Never	Rarely	Some-times	Often	Very often	
1	Listening, watching programs and news related to the education sector in the media	0	15	23	7	5	3.04
2	Reading books, materials online	8	7	17	16	2	2.94
3	Discussing with colleagues	0	4	13	23	10	3.78
4	Talking to students' parents, students	0	10	15	17	8	3.46
5	Attending other teachers' lessons	0	2	32	15	1	3.3
6	Participating in teacher organizations	25	21	2	2	0	1.62
7	Participating forums for teachers on the internet	13	30	6	1	0	1.9
8	Searching materials, courses	10	12	17	4	7	2.72
9	Updating new materials	0	16	16	13	5	3.14
10	Searching and taking more competitions for teachers by yourself	32	14	1	3	0	1.5
11	Researching a subject related to your work.	0	6	13	14	17	3.84
12	Participating workshop, seminars	3	15	25	7	0	2.72
13	Further education to obtain higher qualifications	13	12	11	7	7	2.66
14	Others	0	0	0	0	0	0

Regarding the frequency of self-study activities, the results are presented in the below table:

Looking at the statistics, we can see that the teacher conducted different forms of self-study. However, there also have a huge divergence between the frequencies of those forms. The most frequent activity was researching a subject related to work, then followed by discussing with colleagues and talking to students' parents or students. These are familiar activities with them as daily work. The selections of participating forums for teachers on the internet, taking more competitions for teachers or participating teacher organizations were not often done with the mean value of 1.5-1.9/5. The findings have not previously been described in the research in Vietnam teachers' self-study habits (Toan, 2012; Oanh, 2013). This is later explained by the teachers that they do not have enough skills and confidence to join online forums or aim for more challenging situations.

## 5. Conclusions and recommendations

The present study is designed to determine the school teachers of self-study habits. The study has shown the status of self-study habits of teachers in Vietnam through a case study research. The evidence from this study demonstrates that most teachers hold positive perspectives about the importance of self-study and showed high efforts such as trying to save time, self-equipped to self-study. The teachers were familiar with some forms and resources for self-study to approach the contents directly close and relevant to their teaching subject. Despite countless of difficulties and barriers to self-study from the time constraint, limited materials, lack of space; the teachers tried to overcome and improve themselves to enrich their knowledge and understanding for

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career development.

However, teachers' self-study habits remain much limited such as the short amount of time for self-study, rarely planning for self-study, or lack of frequency. It is obvious that the teachers have no directions and not enough perseverance and patience to self-study. In addition, in terms of self-study content, they only focus on content related to teaching subject while essential skills as life skills, communication skills, ICT skills are ignored. Their self-study skills are limited in individual format with private space instead of cooperating with peers. The reasons for these may come from difficulties of lacking time, materials as well as lack of self-study skills and determination themselves.

The findings of this research support the idea that every school needs to enhance teachers' self-study capacity to meet the requirements of reforming in education. Following is some suggestions that the schools can conduct: firstly, it is necessary to promote the role of teachers' self-study by considering this as a teacher evaluation criterion, supporting the teacher by rewards, proposing training courses of self-study skills, improving ICT and foreign language skills to explore rich materials. Secondly, designing self-study movements for teachers in various ways including group and individual learning. Lastly, there is a need to upgrade the system of infrastructure such as self-study materials, equipment, tools to improve the quality of self-study activities for teachers. For teachers to self-study effectively, they need to improve self-discipline as well as self-study skills by their own determination. Cultivating their skills and finding the active methods and forms of self-study may be the best ways for them to effectively exploiting the huge source of human knowledge as well as to meet the requirements of new curriculum.

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