

Preface

With this book I teach you how to create your own meaningful action research in your classroom, school, and district. Hence the word practical in the title. To do action research, you use scientific methods to learn how well you are carrying out a practice new to you or to get in touch with your students' wishes for you to use new practices. When you do action research with your students continually and cyclically, you have attained a high level of professional maturity, the state of continuous improvement.

The hardest challenge of action research is getting started. In the first two chapters, I teach you how to get ready to do your own action research. I present information about two conditions of your readiness: (1) serious reflection on your own professional practice during which you focus on nagging frustrations and think about alternative practices and useful data to collect and (2) thoughtful use of a problem-solving method to convert your frustrations into solvable problems. For both introspective activities I offer specific concepts, procedures, and techniques to organize and systematize your preparation for action research.

Once you determine a focus for your action research, prepare a formal project plan. To help you implement action research, I give information and examples of its models, phases, and steps. To obtain sufficient knowledge to do action research well, you must read Chapters 3–6. From those four chapters, you will obtain practical knowledge about how to do action research. Among other things you will learn how to (1) distinguish action research from traditional research and know how the two overlap, (2) search for knowledge about new practices and useful research methods, (3) create research procedures tailored to your situation, (4) determine whether the proactive or responsive model is more appropriate for your project, (5) carry out every step of both models, and (6) cope with possible obstacles and pitfalls.

After you have mastered the ability to collaborate with your own students in doing action research, I believe you will be ready to explore projects larger in scope. Cooperative action research can occur among groups of administrators, teachers, specialists, classified personnel, students, parents, board members, and other community stakeholders. It is implemented at different system levels, ranging from one-on-one partnerships to statewide networks of educators and stakeholders. A significant difference between your own project and a larger cooperative effort is that the latter requires complex group-dynamics skills to be effective. So that you can take leadership in carrying out effective cooperative action research, I teach you how to apply specific group skills and offer illustrative case studies of many types.

I end where some critics think I should have started, with a historical discussion of prominent scholars who have written about the origins and growth of action research. I have not heeded their advice, because I believe that after you have a clear

understanding of how to do your own action research and how to communicate well with others in cooperative action research, you will become receptive to the ideas of those scholars and be motivated to read their works.

A chapter-by-chapter summary follows.

Chapter 1 teaches you how to reflect on your future, past, and present professional practices, offering questions and techniques to use in obtaining professional self-knowledge. Reflection offers a means to pinpoint a focus for your action research. To enhance the quality of your reflectiveness, the chapter explains ways to use solitary dialogue and personal journals. It describes how reflection can facilitate continuous professional improvement and presents several tools to use in thinking your way into your own action research.

Chapter 2 explains how reflection, problem solving, and action research serve as the three faces of your continuous improvement as an educator. It presents a seven-step problem-solving procedure along with an example of how a high school teacher successfully used it. It delineates differences between action and traditional research, points out the overlap between them, and describes a case study about how another high school teacher carried out action research in one of his classes.

Chapter 3 discusses action research: the contemporary need for it, a working definition of it, the relevance of group dynamics to its effectiveness, and the phases and steps of the proactive and responsive models. Now you should start your own initial plan for action research.

Chapter 4 explains how you can use research methods in action research. After a discussion of data collection procedures, it offers specific examples of questionnaires, interviews, observations, and documents. It addresses the special issues of validity, reliability, and precision; helps you avoid pitfalls that will occur; and presents do's and don'ts about the ethics of action research.

Chapter 5 explains how to conduct proactive action research, and Chapter 6 does the same for responsive action research. Those two chapters are the heart of the book. Now you should be ready to choose one of the two models to carry out an action research plan of your own.

Chapter 7 introduces the complex group dynamics of cooperative action research, and Chapter 8 describes the different types of cooperative action research in schools, districts, and communities. Now you should see how you can assume leadership with colleagues in carrying out action research on a larger scale.

Chapter 9 discusses the democratic philosophy undergirding educational action research. Although the ends of action research are higher student learning and strengthened professional practice, the means are democratic group procedures. The chapter goes on to describe the contributions of 15 prominent authors in the history of action research, recommends your reading Figure 9.6, *The Educator's Essential Action Research Library* (a list of ten seminal publications), and explains how the history of educational action research has developed into the teacher-research movement.

To help you apply the book's contents to your own situation, I end every chapter with personal journal-writing assignments.

I stand behind this book's organization and chapter sequence by returning to one of my caveats: "The hardest challenge of action research is getting started." The best place to start meaningful action research is inside your mind by reflecting on your own professional practice. Get in touch with and listen to your own internal voice; act out the dialogues within you. Pinpoint your frustrations; convert them into

solvable problems. Move on to do well-planned action research, tailored to your own situation. Take leadership in cooperating with colleagues to do action research in your own school, community, and state. Also, read the intelligent writing of published scholars to broaden and deepen your understanding and commitment to action research. Let us hope that by reading this book and related publications, you will become a more mature professional educator.

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