

# Preface to the Second Edition

We began the preface to the first edition with the following quote from a teacher researcher and an optimistic prognosis for action research in education:

For me, it [teacher research] was part of learning how to be a learner again and thinking about what made that exciting for me. Then, when you get back into that mode, you think, How can I create that for my students? . . . I enjoy what I'm doing again, I'm not just making it through the day anymore.

Stephanie Mansdoerfer, teacher  
La Cueva High School, Albuquerque, NM

The above testimony by a high school teacher captures the kind of excitement we have encountered regarding action research, both within the academic research community and within the public school system. Practitioners are excited because such research can lead to professional renewal and improvement of practice. Academics are excited because action research represents, among other things, a more grounded approach to the creation of new knowledge about educational practices.

We have attempted to create a book that is the result of a dialogue between the experience-based insights from the world of practice and the methodological and theoretical insights of the academic community. Although representing different professional cultures, those who work in colleges of education and those

who work in schools are beginning to recognize that they each have a different kind of knowledge—each with its own criteria of validity—to share. School practitioners are beginning to demystify the hierarchical nature of the so-called expert knowledge of academics, and academics are beginning to realize that the old model of knowledge creation (in universities), dissemination (through academic journals), and utilization (by practitioners) is not working.

A growing number of teachers, counselors, and administrators are collaborating with universities in a variety of capacities. Colleges of education are increasingly demanding that their faculty have extensive and recent practitioner experience and that faculty spend greater amounts of time in schools. Although ivory tower college of education professors who have not set foot in a school in 20 years can still be found, they are nearing retirement.

As we reread the original preface of *Studying Your Own School* 12 years later, we were struck by how optimistic we were in 1994, in terms of both the extent to which action research would be a pathway to professional renewal for school practitioners and the extent to which university academics would embrace it. While in some ways the last 12 years has confirmed this optimism, in other ways there is room for considerable skepticism.

There is much evidence that school practitioners are embracing action research. Since 1994, there have been many advances in the number of publication venues, in theoretical developments, and in professional development opportunities. Several new action research journals have come into existence, and both academic and practitioner journals are publishing more action research. Although in 1994 books on action research were exclusively written by university academics, today there are many book-length action research studies written by school practitioners, published primarily by Teachers College Press and Heinemann Publishers. In 1994 we scoured dissertations, conference papers, and fugitive documents for examples of action research, but today we can point to a strong body of published action research scholarship. Theoretical developments in situated and distributed cognition and Freirian pedagogy have helped to justify the formation of practitioner “learning communities,” such as critical friends groups and teacher inquiry or study groups. Whole-school leadership teams have appropriated action

research's use of data and cycles of inquiry as a way to strengthen organizational learning. Finally, while old-style inservice "talking heads" still exist, teachers have tended to take greater control over their professional development hours and are increasingly likely to engage in group inquiry. Even individual teachers can often list classroom action research as part of their professional development plan in many school districts.

The context of teaching has changed, though, since we wrote the first edition of the book. We now live under No Child Left Behind legislation, which has intensified previous tendencies toward increased standardization, high-stakes testing, scripted instructional materials, and increased surveillance over teachers. In this context, the promotion of action research with its empowering potential for school practitioners can be a cause for concern to a top-down reform movement. When action research is incorporated into reform movements, its empowering potential is often stripped away. One of the most intractable problems in education is the difficulty of making successful practices more systemic, or what some refer to as "ramping up" innovations. Consultants who promise 5 or 7 or 10 steps to effective action research become a logical result of large-scale reform. In the context of pressures to meet Annual Yearly Progress under No Child Left Behind, action research becomes in some schools a popular name for merely poring over test score results. While action researchers would certainly not overlook test scores as a source of data, they would tend to see them as one among many indicators of student success. Innovative possibilities like action research become imposed on a school community and in the process run the risk of losing the sense of an organic change process instigated by invested stakeholders. As action research becomes mandated on a larger scale, it can become contrived, as teachers learn to implement the form without the substance.

The positive response of university academics is also a mixed blessing. While courses in action or teacher research have multiplied, particularly in teacher education departments, they are too often assigned to faculty with little experience with action research, because few university faculty have done action research or had any exposure to it in graduate school. In fact, this book was written in part for those very well-meaning faculty and their students who need a crash course in action research. In

some cases, because action research challenges their sense of expertise, faculty refuse to consider it genuine research. Institutional review boards, often staffed by faculty unfamiliar with this research approach, are often woefully unprepared to think through the ethical issues associated with it. "Suggestions" for improvement are offered or questions are posed that are baffling and/or unhelpful. These issues result in some universities and school districts all but banning action research as a legitimate form of research. Anderson (2002) and Anderson and Herr (1999) have written extensively on the ways that action research challenges the positivist assumptions built into the university's view of legitimate knowledge. So while we are encouraged by action research's growing popularity, our concern is that it be an empowering practice for school practitioners, not absorbed into or derailed by current accountability systems.

Besides the usual updating and revising associated with second editions, we have made some significant changes to the book. First, we have added Chapter 5, titled "The Research Question, Ethical Considerations, and Research Design." Practitioner action research is a complex undertaking, and we wanted to honor the complexity in discussing at length some of the initial issues to be taken into consideration. These include the early evolution of a research question and some sense of the ethical dilemmas that one encounters along the way. This early stage of research is often the longest and most difficult for many practitioners. In addition, we have added some new examples of action research studies reflecting the development of the field and how the context of schools has changed, based on the reality of current educational reforms.

## **TOWARD A NEW PARADIGM OF SOCIAL INQUIRY**

The conventional weapons of research are cumbersome; heavy field pieces dragged slowly into position hardly suitable for the swift-moving, rapidly changing targets of an action programme. (Smith, 1975, p. 94)

For too long researchers in colleges of education have felt like second-class citizens with regard to their university colleagues in

the arts and sciences. They have sensed that their research in action-oriented settings and their split commitment between the scientific and practitioner communities made their research not so much inferior as fundamentally different. School practitioners, who could be characterized as third-class citizens in this academic pecking order, felt the same tensions with regard to educational researchers in universities. Most graduate courses in research are designed to teach practitioners how to consume research done by academic researchers. Seldom is it even suggested that practitioners could do research themselves unless they were to enroll in a university doctoral program.

Books have been written by academic researchers in the last 30 years about the differences between positivistic and naturalistic (qualitative) paradigms. By now, most educational researchers have made their peace—at least rhetorically—with the legitimacy of both. Now academics are watching the emergence of a third way of knowing education—research done by educational practitioners. Although it bears some resemblance to the naturalistic paradigm, it differs in several important ways:

1. Knowledge is not produced only for a scientific community but rather for a broader community, consisting primarily—though not exclusively—of school practitioners.
2. Unlike naturalistic research, which involves the observation, description, and interpretation of educational settings, action research aims primarily at the transformation of these settings.
3. Unlike naturalistic research, action research is done within an action-oriented setting in which reflection on action is the driving force of the research. This tension inherent in combining action and research is captured in the term traditionally used to describe this type of inquiry: *action research*.

We believe it is time for educators—both academics and practitioners—to stop apologizing for our research and clinging to paradigms that do not necessarily fit our reality. Lindblom and Cohen (1979) long ago called into question the usefulness of most social science research, which approaches social change through top-down, outside-in models of “social engineering” like the current

No Child Left Behind reforms. Modernist paradigms in the arts and sciences are falling like dominos. When the smoke clears, social scientists may understand that while they have been defending their modernist canon, educators, researchers, and practitioners have collaboratively been exploring a new paradigm of research with the potential to bring about social change from the bottom up and the inside out. We hope this book moves us closer to that goal.

## DESCRIPTION OF CONTENTS

In Chapter 1, we provide the reader with a loose definition of practitioner action research. The purpose of providing a definition is not to fix parameters but to give the reader who may be encountering action research for the first time some general categories with which to approach subsequent chapters. We also lay out a series of assumptions about teacher research. These are themes that serve as a subtext for the rest of the book.

Educational practitioners have been doing some form of systematic inquiry for as long as there have been schools. However, the notion of inquiring practitioners has been written about and studied only relatively recently. In the first section of Chapter 2, we provide a review of the various ways that action research has manifested itself in different times and social contexts. It is a paradigm of research that has surfaced at different times and in different places over the past 100 years. We feel it is important that the beginning action researcher be aware that he or she is engaging in work that has a long, important, and controversial history.

In the second and third sections of Chapter 2, we provide the reader with a sense of the epistemological and political issues associated with action research. We agree with Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993, 1999) that teacher research represents a potential new knowledge base in education and that we must begin to discuss how this new knowledge, which emerges from action and from inside schools, is created and shared. We also discuss the ways that action research is political. By political we mean not only the ways that action research can be viewed as a threat within institutional and district politics but also the “politics of

knowledge,” in which school practitioners struggle to legitimate the currently devalued knowledge base that exists in schools.

In Chapter 3, we present a diversity of current approaches to action research by summarizing a variety of action research studies. Throughout the book we cite numerous other studies that the reader can access. We believe that the best thing aspiring action researchers can do is to read other practitioners’ studies. For the first time since action research appeared many decades ago, there is a critical mass of published books, articles, and conference papers that report action research in education.

In Chapter 4, we bring previous themes together through a process-oriented narrative of a three-year action research study undertaken by coauthor Herr. This chapter focuses on the research process with an eye to opening a window onto the decision making of an action researcher as Herr encounters the ever-changing, action-oriented, and political nature of the setting in which she was both practitioner and researcher. Herr describes the ways that goals of empowerment and the defensive mechanisms of institutions create an environment in which the action researcher must tread with care. This chapter also graphically illustrates what we reiterate several times throughout the book—that action research is seldom neat and tidy.

Chapter 5 fills a gap in the first edition of the book. The biggest struggle for most action researchers is getting clear on the focus of the study and developing initial research questions. In this chapter, we focus on areas for consideration prior to beginning the research, including research question creation, ethical considerations, and processes of gaining approval from research offices for the inquiry.

In teaching courses on action research, we have found that practitioners have made important modifications to traditional qualitative research methods. In Chapter 6 we provide the reader with a user-friendly guide to qualitative methods while at the same time indicating how practitioners are modifying these methods to meet the constraints and opportunities they encounter in their schools.