Preface to the 2nd Edition

As I approached the writing of the second edition of *The Action Research Guidebook: A Four-Stage Process for Educators and School Teams*, I spent considerable time reflecting on two questions.

1. What have I learned about the conduct of action research since the publication of the first edition? and

2. How had the context of education changed during this time?

My answer to the first question can be found in numerous subtle ways throughout this book. My experience working with educators over the past seven years has reinforced my view about the centrality of the four stages of the action research process: *Stage 1: Clarifying Vision and Targets; Stage 2: Articulating Theory; Stage 3: Implementing Action and Collecting Data; and Stage 4: Reflecting on Data and Planning Informed Action.* For that reason, the second edition, like the first edition, is organized around those four sequential stages. However, to reduce confusion for the reader, I have provided more examples and, in several cases, elaborated on and clarified instructions for the strategies presented.

While my beliefs regarding the basic process of action research haven't changed that much over the years, I have been impressed and pleased with the evolution of the professional environment where most educators do their work. Increasingly it is expected that our schools will be collaborative workplaces marked by school improvement initiatives driven by collegial teams. More and more I hear schools describing themselves as professional learning communities. This is a significant change. It wasn't that many years ago that Roland Barth (*Run School Run*, 1980) referred to the typical elementary school as a string of one-room schoolhouses connected by a corridor. It is now far more common to see groups of teachers collaborating as a grade level or through vertical teaming in an effort to discover answers to perplexing issues of practice.

The Action Research Guidebook: A Four-Stage Process for Educators and School Teams, 2nd Edition, is premised on a belief that all readers (in fact all educators) share the same ultimate vision: fostering universal student success. It is unlikely that any of us will ever consider our work complete until every student is accomplishing everything he or she is capable of accomplishing. Realizing that vision will require attention to three categories of action: changes in our students' and our own *performance*, changes in the *processes* we utilize, and changes in the *programs* we offer. In this book these three categories of action are called *performance targets*, *process targets*, and *program targets*. While it is possible for individual educators to utilize the action research process to succeed with projects focused on any of these areas, it is becoming increasingly the norm to find teams pursuing this work collaboratively. If you engage in action research collaboratively, you will experience several benefits. For starters, the product of multiple minds is inevitably better than one. Therefore, the very act of including more people and more perspectives in a study will make it more likely that the study will be insightful and robust.

Another benefit of working as a team is that it reduces professional isolation. Some years ago a long-term study was funded with the goal of tracking a cohort of new teachers as they progressed through their careers (Schlecty & Vance, 1983). The subjects in this study were the most academically able graduates of a prestigious university. These were young people who had an academic pedigree that would have enabled them to pursue any career they chose. They could easily have been accepted into law school, medical school, business school, or engineering. But this group was so motivated by a desire to help young people that they chose a career in education. Sadly, the study was brought to a premature halt because after a few years, virtually every one of these young people had left teaching. Why did this happen? When the researchers checked, they found out it had nothing to do with the remuneration teachers receive, and they found these young people were as concerned about students and their futures as they had been when they entered the classroom. It was the day-to-day work of teaching that drove them away. But what aspect of the day-to-day work was so problematic for these young people? As it turned out, they didn't find the work to be boring, routine, or easy. Quite the opposite, they found classroom teaching to be incredibly challenging and complex. What caused them to leave teaching for easier work in other "more prestigious" professions was the loneliness and isolation of teaching. This group of bright and creative young people understood that the challenges faced routinely by classroom teachers are simply too intellectually and emotionally challenging to be solved by any one person working in isolation.

There are several ways you may want to approach conducting action research collaboratively. However, it is strongly suggested that you find a method of collaboration that will work for you. The three most common forms of collaboration with educational action research are indicated by this continuum.

Type 1 Collaboration	Type 2 Collaboration	Type 3 Collaboration

Same four-stage process
Same focus
Same questions
Same theory of action
Same methods
	Same four-stage process
	Same focus
	Same questions
	Different theories of
	  action
	Same methods
		Same four-stage process
		Different foci
		Different questions
		Different theories of
		  action
		Different methods

Type 1 collaboration is where the researchers are conducting their action research as a team. The team shares the same theory of action and research questions, collects the same data, analyzes it as a group, and produces a single report. An example might be a team of teachers at the same grade level investigating the impact of a new textbook adoption on student concept acquisition.

Type 2 collaboration is where the researchers share an interest in pursuing answers to the same question. For example, they might all be members of a Language Arts department trying to increase student proficiency with expository writing. This is a very common approach for teachers who work together on professional learning community (PLC) teams. What makes Type 2 different from Type 1 is that in this case, while the members of the team are pursuing the same goal (greater writing proficiency), it is assumed that they hold different perspectives on the best way to realize their shared goal. Therefore, while they share the same vision and will use the same criteria and data sources to measure their students' success, they may be attempting fundamentally different interventions. Elsewhere (Sagor, 2010), I have referred to this as the competing pilot projects model. The wonderful thing about Type 2 collaboration is that colleagues are empowered to be creative in their pursuit of common goals, yet everyone can learn from their teammates' unique experiences.

Type 3 collaboration operates much like an action research support group. Each participant is involved in a project of unique and personal passionate concern. In all likelihood he or she is the only one in the building pursuing action research on that particular topic. There is no question that it is invigorating and exciting to pursue an investigation into a project that you deeply care about. However, it can also be lonely if you have no one to discuss your ideas with. Finding a group of colleagues (perhaps classmates in a graduate class) to meet with on a bi-weekly basis for the sole purpose of sharing what you are doing and what you are learning can be incredibly reinforcing.

A second positive trend I've noticed in school environments in the years since the publication of the first edition is a positive flattening of the organizational structure of the schoolhouse. Opportunities for teacher leadership are expanding at an incredible rate (Reeves 2008). Initiatives that once were routinely created and directed by administrators are now frequently collaborative ventures or even entirely managed by teacher leaders. In the revisions for the second edition, I have attempted to provide

examples of work at each of the four stages and with each technique (where relevant) for both classroom teachers and school leaders. The reader will notice that the term used is "leader" or "school leadership" not school administrator. This choice in language was quite deliberate. Hopefully, school administrators reading this book will find the leadership examples helpful and relevant to the action research they will be conducting on their administrative work. In fact, one of the cases that will be followed throughout the book is a project conducted by a principal about her efforts to enhance faculty collaboration. However, her example wasn't included only for administrators. School leadership teams (made up of administrators and teachers) and teacher leaders working by themselves will find these strategies particularly helpful when pursuing process or program achievement targets.

As we look at the four-stage process, the discussion and procedures will address both classroom and leadership projects. Where I found it necessary to maintain the flow of the text and maintain continuity and felt there was only space for a single example, I provided a classroom application of the concept. I then followed that example with a comment pertaining to a leadership application and supporting materials in Resource C.

THE NEED FOR CREATIVE PROBLEM SOLVERS

Another significant change to the educational landscape since the publication of the first edition is the widespread acceptance of standards. Not only does it now seem that educators are largely in agreement that students should be expected to demonstrate proficiency on established standards of performance, but it now appears we may be reaching a national consensus on exactly what those standards should be. But knowing what we want our students to know, what skills we want them to attain, and what attributes we would like to see them acquire is only the starting point for school improvement.

While there may be increased acceptance of standards, professional educators are rightfully wary of standardization. I applaud this resistance to a "one size fits all" approach to instruction. Sadly there are some policy makers who continue to argue for the mandating of instructional and educational practices. As a school improvement strategy, educators are frequently told to implement "scientifically proven practices" and do so with "fidelity." Sadly, that approach is built on a myth. The myth being that one approach has ever or could ever be proven to work effectively for every student and every teacher in every classroom and every school. To understand the relevance of this issue, I find it helpful to use an analogy.

In all modern societies, there are legally binding construction standards. For purposes of safety and consumer protection, it is understood that all buildings, bridges, and infrastructures be built to withstand unforeseen threats such as fires, floods, and earthquakes. Yet no one would ever suggest that there is only one appropriate design for each

category of building or bridge. Not only would such a position produce an aesthetically appalling result, but it would result in the construction of many inappropriate projects. This is why our society needs architects. An architect is a professional who understands building standards and knows how to determine if a design meets those standards. But that's not all. More importantly, the architect is capable of creatively and artistically adapting everything that is known about civil engineering to the uniqueness of the site and the needs of the client.

I have begun thinking of the professional educator as an educational architect. While technical drawing is the major tool for the architect, action research is the essential tool for the educational architect. Our goal is to creatively design classroom interventions and school programs that will enable our students to demonstrate proficiency with standards. But, just as with our peers in the construction business, that will take more than knowledge of the standards and how to assess them. This challenge calls for all our creative insights in adapting what we have learned about the principles of teaching and learning to the unique characteristics of our current students, our classes, and our schools.

This book was written to serve as guide for the next generation of educational architects. More than anything, I believe that the practice of education is a thoughtful and creative endeavor. The tool of action research is a flexible and pliable tool toward that end. There is no one approach for engaging in this process, hence I organized this book around the following four stages:

1. Clarifying vision and targets

2. Articulating theory

3. Implementing action and collecting data

4. Reflecting on data and planning informed action

My principal reason for using this organizational strategy was to create a handbook that would provide a busy educator wanting to experience the action research process with an easy-to-follow template, one that could be readily adapted to a variety of professional interests and foci. I hope I succeeded in accomplishing that goal. In writing this book, my goal was to provide the reader with two things:

1. Examples and step-by-step instructions for carrying out the action research process

2. A discussion of the rationale for and function of each of the components that make up the action research process

If you are new to action research, I hope the step-by-step instructions will enable you to have a productive and professionally fulfilling first-time experience with practitioner research. Furthermore, I hope the discussion

of the rationale for these procedures will help you creatively incorporate each of the four stages of the process into the particular context of your work and adapt them to your own priorities. Later, as you become a more experienced action researcher, you will undoubtedly choose to modify and customize the strategies presented here, as well as invent new ones, as you use the four stages of the action research process to realize your own professional goals.

If you are already an experienced action researcher, I encourage you to look at the activities provided in this book as illustrative suggestions from a fellow educator. Use this book as a potpourri of ideas, which you might choose to try out as written or use to stimulate alternative creative approaches that support your search for answers to the perplexing questions of practice that you are struggling with.

As a handbook, this text was written to be used *while* you are working your way through the action research process. I don't recommend that you sit down and read through the entire book at once. Rather, I envision you reading through a section as you are preparing to work through that stage of your action research project. The intent of each chapter is to provide concrete strategies for immediate use.

Consequently, the book has been organized sequentially, and each activity as well as each discussion is conceptually built on what has gone before. If you are using the handbook in this way—as a personal guidebook to provide guidance as you work your way through an action research project—it likely means that there may be several days, weeks, or even months between the reading of chapters. For this reason, most chapters start with a brief review of previous material to provide continuity.

One of the wonderful things about the action research process is that it is relevant to all professionals, not just educators, who wish to improve their practices. I have attempted to capture the range of educational applications for action research. In the pages that follow, you will meet a teacher attempting to improve student reading skills, a fifth-grade teacher struggling with an ADHD student, a principal trying to transform a school into a more collegial workplace, as well as a middle school language arts teacher attempting to improve his students' proficiency writing five-paragraph persuasive essays.

In each of these examples, the researchers use the same four-stage process; however, you will see them using it in a manner that fits their particular priorities. Each example has been drawn from the work of real educators whom I've had the pleasure of working with or have observed while they conducted their action research projects. I have turned these folks into hypothetical examples by liberally combining bits and pieces of different projects to better illustrate each concept.

As you proceed through the book, you will see that while action research can be undertaken by everyone—teachers, administrators, counselors, and specialists, from people with building responsibilities to those with district duties—their fundamental rationale for engaging in this work may differ on one dimension. There are two principal categories of action

research: *descriptive research,* studies whose purpose is to illuminate what is occurring in a particular setting; and *quasi-experimental research,* inquiries designed to test a hypothesis or examine a chosen innovation being implemented by the practitioner. This is another case where my goal as the author was to be inclusive. I attempted to address both types of action research, as much as space permitted.

Considering all the pressure today's educators face, it would be nice if they could call a time-out in order to get definitive answers to all their perplexing problems. But since that isn't possible, they are frequently obliged to simply go with what seems best. As a result, when most educators first engage in action research, their goal is to determine if the actions they have decided to take (their hypotheses) are working as they had hoped, which explains why most action research ends up being quasi-experimental. For this reason, I will introduce each topic in terms of how it applies to quasi-experimental research and then follow with examples of how it can be used with descriptive research, should the process be different.

Hopefully, conducting action research will help you better understand the efficacy of your practice as you document the impact of your work on the variety of learners with whom you work. Every day, you receive feedback through the dynamic relationship of teacher and learner, and that feedback fuels growth.

I, too, have a need to grow professionally and would very much appreciate your feedback on the effectiveness of this handbook. As I wrote it, I imagined myself interacting with each of you. So, as you explore the ideas in this book, I would love to know about your experiences. Please write and share your ideas, your experience, and your wisdom.

In closing, I want to extend to each of you my very best wishes. I hope you find action research to be as enriching as I have. I hope this book proves helpful as you explore and enrich your work and endeavor to enrich the lives of those you work with. But most of all, I hope your work provides you every ounce of joy, fulfillment, and satisfaction that is humanly possible.