

Foreword

It has been over 10 years since I was asked to write a foreword to the first edition of *Studying Your Own School*. Since that time, I have used the book many times in my courses in action research, which most often include school practitioners as well as graduate students headed toward positions in teacher education in universities here in the United States and abroad. There has been almost total agreement that the first edition was a really useful text. So I am very pleased to have been asked to write a foreword to this new edition. It is an opportunity to consider not only the work itself but the contextual changes in the field over the past decade. Much has changed, but much has also remained the same.

Over the past two decades there has been a quiet, yet substantive change in the role of practitioners in educational research. Grassroots efforts in action research and other forms of practitioner research have highlighted the importance of educators' own understanding of their practice, both in the United States and internationally. Research by practitioners in education has been widely recognized and accepted from the local level to conference presentations at the annual meetings of major research organizations. Within the research and teacher education institutions, and most recently from within the state, have come endorsements, exhortations, and reward structures claiming the benefits of researching one's own practice. This increasing attention from many levels has recognized action research (individual and collective) as a means for teacher development, knowledge generation, and educational reform, often including attention to the need for greater social justice in and through education. This remarkable growth in projects involving educational practitioners in various aspects of research has run parallel with increased understanding of the multiple meanings of terms such as "action research" and

x STUDYING YOUR OWN SCHOOL

“practitioner research.” Indeed, the shift in the use of the term “action research” from the earlier reference to “practitioner research” stands as evidence of a change in the context of research in education.

In this context, as in the context of the earlier edition, this new edition of *Studying Your Own School* makes new and important contributions. It draws on the scholarship on the comparative history of action research without assuming a parochial stance. The work highlights important and complex historical, epistemological, and methodological questions in an accessible style. Yet it also draws on the decade of work in presenting new material that responds to the needs of practitioners doing the work in schools and classrooms.

It is ironic that all too often the literature on practitioner research reproduces the same separation between theory and practice that it seeks to subvert. Those writing about it do so within the language and publication systems of universities. As such, there is a separation between abstract works about practitioner research and “practical” guides. In the latter, there is a tendency to reduce its complexities to the level of a “how to do it” manual, with brief references to the complex core of personal, ethical, and political dimensions that are central to practitioner research. In this book, however, there is a balance between thorough access to the vast international academic literature, a strong narrative text that allows readers to “feel” how research proceeds, and a good introduction to issues of data collection and analysis. Questions of paradigmatic status, validity, and the politics of knowledge production are addressed alongside examples of the lived experience of doing research. Methods of engaging in research are usefully summarized but within a framework, reminding us that the techniques for practitioner research are not merely a parroting of those of traditional social science but rather are emerging in response to educational lives and concerns. There are, in this new edition, materials related to the messiness of getting started on action research projects as well as attention to ethical issues specific to this research strategy and new insights into how issues such as “validity” should be considered.

Studying Your Own School can assist teachers and other educators, collaboratively as well as individually, in using research to improve both the quality and the justice of education in all of our

own schools. In the foreword to the first edition, I commented on the era as one in which the danger for practitioner research was clearly the same as that in other then contemporary reforms, such as shared decision making and school-based management. Yet the problems in education are not confined to school buildings. The larger political and economic context of schooling (which has worsened since the first edition) is one in which poverty and racism are central dynamics. For many works on practitioner research, the process of engaging in action research has been reduced to a few short steps, individually taken, to improve the technical efficiency of one's practice. In actual practice, practitioner research is much more. It can offer a collaborative means to richer understandings of education and to the identification of what I refer to in my own work as the "spaces for ethically defensible, politically strategic action" (Noffke, 1995). In decision making, in management, and in research there must be a focus on understanding technical, social, and political aspects of issues as they emerge in action.

The second edition of *Studying Your Own School* does what the first one did: it builds on the experiences of practitioners, potentially enhancing both understanding and action. Yet it also gives clues on how to respond to the current context in which "data-driven" reforms are sought as an antidote to institutional and structural and now global issues. It offers insights into how practitioners can ask, through action research, the really hard questions we all need. I look forward to using this new edition in my classes with both teachers and teacher educators.

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