
Preface

The concept of action research has been around for ages, its roots in the work of John Dewey (1933), popularized by Kurt Lewin in the 1940s (Adelman, 1993), and shortly thereafter applied to the field of education by Stephen Corey (1953). Since its inception, many educational innovations have come and gone, but the systematic study of educators' own practice is a concept that has proved its staying power! Whether we refer to this process as action research, practitioner research, practitioner inquiry, or some other name, three main reasons exist for the longevity of this concept: (1) it has proven to be a powerful tool for teacher professional development (Zeichner, 2003), (2) the process has become an important vehicle for raising teachers' voices in educational reform (Meyers & Rust, 2003), and (3) it is a mechanism for expanding the knowledge base for teaching in important ways (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993).

While the concept of practitioner research was originally developed primarily with the teacher in mind, action research has recently gained favor among administrators, other school leaders, and school-based management teams as a way to improve schools (Glanz, 1998). Although there exists a plethora of books written to take teachers through the action research process, endless collections of teachers' reports of their classroom research, and numerous research studies published on the teacher as practitioner-researcher in educational journals, comparatively few materials exist that focus on the administrator:

- How do we apply what we know about the success of the teacher research movement to the field of administration?
- What actually *is* administrator action research, and what does it look like?
- Why is it important for administrators to engage in action research?

- What is the relationship between administrators' engagement in action research and their professional growth?
- In what ways can administrator action research inform school improvement efforts and enhance student achievement?

If you are a current assistant principal, principal, superintendent, or other school administrator or are studying to earn your principal certification and/or an advanced degree in educational leadership with the intention of joining the administrator ranks, the answers to these questions can help you grow, develop, and succeed in ways you may never have imagined. This book was thus created to take administrative professionals step by step through the process of inquiry, from developing an initial understanding of the process to completing and sharing your first piece of action research.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Using a journey metaphor, this text will take you through the process of inquiry step by step. You begin your journey with a brief introduction to administrator inquiry in Chapter 1 and then move in Chapter 2 to define your first research question. This chapter, appropriately titled “The Passions That Drive Your Journey: Finding a Wondering,” gets you started by exploring nine areas in a principal’s work life that are ripe for inquiry—staff development, curriculum development, interactions and relationships with individual teachers, interactions and relationships with individual students, community/culture building, leadership skills, management, school performance, and social justice. These nine areas, referred to as “passions,” are explored using examples from real administrator-inquirers I have worked with to illustrate how their wonderings emerged from the intersection of their real-world school experiences and one of the particular passions defined in Chapter 2. Exercises at the end of the chapter help you articulate and fine-tune your research question.

With a wondering developed, nine different strategies for collecting data to help you gain insights into your wondering are explored in Chapter 3, beginning with the quantitative measures of student achievement so prevalent and readily available in today’s schools and moving beyond this common form of data to explore field notes, interviews, documents/artifacts/student work, digital pictures, video, reflective journals or Weblogs, surveys, and literature. Throughout the discussion of these data collection strategies, I point to the ways each of them connects to what you already do in your life and work as an administrator. For example, the concept of Classroom Walk-Through notes

as a form of field notes is discussed. This discussion is important for you to be able to see how administrator inquiry is *a part of*, not *apart from*, the work you do as a principal. It is also important, in your incredibly busy life as an administrator, to see that the process is realistic and doable.

Chapter 4 tackles one of the most mysterious steps for administrator-researchers—data analysis. The use of metaphor serves to demystify and, once again, makes the process of administrator inquiry seem doable. If you enjoy jigsaw puzzles or scrapbooking, you will particularly enjoy your journey through this chapter as these metaphors are fully developed to describe the data analysis process step by step. In addition, one principal-inquirer's work is used to illustrate what data analysis might actually look like in practice.

Chapter 5 takes a close look at the who, what, when, where, and why of sharing your research with others. This chapter includes tips on developing and delivering PowerPoint presentations and multiple ways to present your research in written form, including the traditional dissertation or thesis (for those engaging in action research as a requirement for advanced study), journal articles, Weblogs, one-page bulleted summaries, templates, brochures, and executive research summaries.

Finally, Chapter 6 discusses how engagement in inquiry is connected to every individual administrator becoming the best he/she can be! One part of becoming the best you can be is reflecting on the quality of the practitioner research you produce. Chapter 6 offers five quality indicators and questions you can ask yourself as you reflect on your own and your colleagues' research.

As in Chapter 2, Chapters 3–6 end with exercises designed to guide you through each step of the process. These exercises will be extremely useful for incorporating into administrative team meetings, leadership team meetings, learning community work, or coursework at the university.

WHO IS THIS BOOK FOR?

Across the nation, administrators vary greatly in their experience with practitioner inquiry. Perhaps you are brand-new to the concept. Perhaps you have been engaged in inquiry for years as a teacher and wish to apply the process to your new role as an administrator. Perhaps you wish to further the development of action research in your school and realize that that process must begin with you. This book is for all administrators, wherever they are in their inquiry journey.

In addition, this book is for students in higher education (as well as their faculty advisors) who are pursuing graduate study to obtain an advanced degree in educational leadership. Inspired by the Carnegie

Initiative on the Doctorate, many institutions of higher education are currently rethinking their advanced degree programs, with a particular emphasis on the differences in doctoral degree programs and requirements for those preparing to be researchers at institutions of higher education and for those preparing to remain practitioners and take on significant leadership responsibilities in the world of schools. The completion of a rigorous, extensive piece of action research to fulfill the requirements for a dissertation or master's thesis is a sound alternative to engaging in traditional forms of research for those students planning to remain in schools, as well as a meaningful way for the student to fulfill the research requirement for an advanced degree. This book, coupled with other texts on educational research, can provide a solid start to the master's paper, thesis, or dissertation endeavor.

Finally, this book is for superintendents and other district leaders who are serious about providing meaningful professional development for their principals. Roland Barth (2001) described professional development for principals as a "wasteland." He called for those in charge of principal professional development to depart from traditional questions such as, "What should principals know and be able to do, and how can we get them to know and do it?" to "Under what conditions will school principals become committed, sustained, lifelong learners in their important work?" Engagement in principal inquiry is one way principals can achieve the latter. With this book as a guide, you can institute a meaningful program of professional learning and growth for the principals under your charge.

Whoever you are and wherever you may be in relationship to practitioner inquiry, I hope this text provides the impetus to develop as an inquirer and an innovative leader in our schools. Happy inquiring!