

11-18-2013

## Action research in education: A practical guide—a book review

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### Recommended Citation

Rademaker, Linnea. (2013). Action research in education: A practical guide—a book review. *i.e.: inquiry in education: Vol. 4: Iss. 2, Article 6*.

Retrieved from: <http://digitalcommons.nl.edu/ie/vol4/iss2/6>

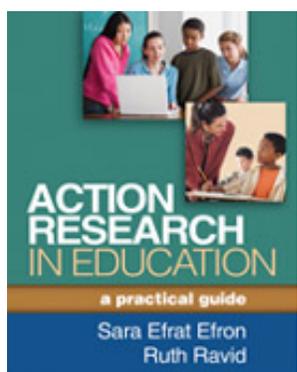
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*i.e.: inquiry in education* is published by the Center for Practitioner Research at the National College of Education, National-Louis University, Chicago, IL.

## Book Review

Efron, S. E., & Ravid, R. (2013). *Action research in education: A practical guide*. New York, NY: The Guilford Press. 268 pages.

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Sara Efrat Efron and Ruth Ravid (2013) have composed an intriguing entry into the plethora of textbooks available to help guide novices to an understanding and implementation of action research. I have known the authors as action research educators (we were colleagues together at the same university for a number of years), and believe that they care very deeply about the teaching of action research. Together they use their strengths—Ravid’s as a quantitative expert (See her book, *Practical Statistics for Educators*, now in its fourth edition.) and Efron’s as a qualitative expert—to provide a much needed melding of the two approaches in a practical guide for novice researchers. They also demonstrate their passion for helping pre-service and in-service

educators implement rigorous action research projects, and support action researchers through their involvement in the Center for Practitioner Research at National Louis University. I asked to review this book for several reasons. One reason is that I share their passion for action research. Another important reason is my relationship with the authors as trusted colleagues and friends. And, lastly, I have taught action research for several years, and often found myself needing to supplement available texts with material on assessment and other contextual issues relevant to teaching.

The text is organized into eight chapters, which should make it easy to adapt to a variety of class scheduling designs. Depending upon your students’ capabilities and learning needs, you could spend more or less time on individual chapters. Each chapter includes brief writing examples, a few graphics where needed to help explain the text, and chapter summaries. The authors also added chapter exercises and additional resources. Unlike some other action research texts, Efron and Ravid do not rely heavily on visuals or concept maps, although there are a few scattered throughout. There seems to be more emphasis placed on providing writing samples for the issues addressed in each chapter.

Together they used their strengths...to provide a much needed ...practical guide for novice researchers.

As I read the text, I found myself smiling as I saw how they incorporated elements from conversations we had when the authors and I were colleagues at the same university. We frequently discussed our teaching of action research, and worked together in our university-based

center devoted to supporting practitioner researchers. In this review I would like to discuss two features of the book that I found particularly helpful and somewhat unique within the realm of action research textbooks. The first is the chapter devoted to the literature review, and the second is the chapter devoted to the use of classroom assessment data in action research.

The idea of situating a particular research problem within current and past literature is not a new idea, especially to seasoned researchers. However, in my work as a teacher I found that many novice researchers, especially pre-service teachers, found it hard to understand the need to read research studies, much less to write their own literature reviews. I spent several weeks with novice researchers helping them decipher the format and text of published research studies, and modeling how to conceptualize and write a literature review. For years the literature review was the culminating, or major assignment for the action research class, as we all recognized that data collection and analysis could take longer than the course-prescribed ten weeks. In Efron and Ravid's text, however, they devote an entire chapter (Chapter 2) to the literature review. The chapter is entitled "Choosing and Learning About Your Research Topic," which encompasses both the conceptualization process of choosing a topic, and the inquiry phase of learning about the topic by studying what others have already studied. They gently describe why the literature is important to a rigorous action research project, and lead the reader through the steps of finding and organizing the literature. My favorite part of this chapter is the apparent devotion to modeling writing, and their ability to break down the process of writing a literature review into parts. Instead of including an entire literature review (which seems unnecessary due to the availability of current literature in full-text format via library databases), the authors chose to excerpt model paragraphs, and give them labels to provide examples of component parts of a good literature review. Both concept map visuals, as well as linear outline examples are used to

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appeal to multiple learning styles. They end the chapter by connecting research questions to possible study designs (qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods approaches), which segues into more detailed explanations of each in Chapter 3.

The second feature I would like to discuss, and probably the most significant one that I believe is absent in other texts on action research, is Chapter 6, which the authors devote to the use of assessment data in action research. This is significant because teachers are inundated with assessment data. It is a natural and always available source of data in public schools, and one that is not addressed well in many action research texts. I have had many teachers tell me over the years that they don't have time to collect more data, and that they already have "tons of data" for use in their classroom.

The authors begin the chapter with this assertion, which I would suggest is common knowledge in the U.S.:

Assessment data are an integral part of life in schools. With the heavy emphasis on accountability, evidence-based decision making, and students' scores from standardized tests, you are surrounded by test data. Although most of these data are designed to monitor students' progress and performance, they are also used to evaluate teachers and schools. (p. 135)

The authors explain different types of tests, including the difference between “norm-referenced” and “criterion-referenced” standardized commercial tests, providing a table of the main “advantages and disadvantages” of these types of tests. They also include a lengthy discussion of teacher-made tests, and directions on how to create such tests so that they are rigorous and objective driven. Such information is important to empower teachers to create and give assessments that are relevant to classroom curricula and context. The authors then include a table of the main “advantages and disadvantages” of teacher-made assessments, again giving teachers information they can use to make decisions about what types of tests to make and/or give. Also included are discussions of performance assessment, curriculum-based measures, rubrics, and portfolios as alternative types of assessment. In the chapter exercises are suggestions that students create items for different types of assessment, a valuable practice for novice and in-service teachers.

If I have one negative comment, it would be that little time is spent discussing the ‘recursive’ nature of action research. The issue of the cyclical nature of action research is addressed in the first chapter, which is devoted to the discussion, “What is action research?” and how action research fits into the overarching umbrella of educational research. The cyclical nature is noted as one of the “unique” characteristics of action research, and the authors highlight the chosen delimitation of the book as being focused on the single cycle to help novice researchers learn and implement the process. There is a small section devoted to this topic at the very end of Chapter 8, under the heading “Implementing the Research Findings.”

As the cycle of action research ends—with the implementation of the study’s findings—a new cycle of inquiry begins, with more questions to pursue and additional issues to explore. This is because as you put your research conclusions into action you need to monitor the impact of these actions. It is possible that your intended objectives will not be fully achieved or that new, unforeseen problems will present themselves. In these cases, some modifications will be required. (p. 238)

While acknowledging that the cycle of action research is continuous in nature, the authors have chosen to devote the book to the first or initial cycle in which the novice researcher begins their lifetime of inquiry into their practice. In my opinion, this is a minor issue that should be addressed by the professor on a contextual basis.

If you are teaching a research class to novice researchers, especially those in education, I would highly recommend this book for its practical approach, and the emphasis on writing and the use of assessment data. Teachers are often overwhelmed with available data in their classrooms and schools—understanding as well as the data. This text provides much needed practical instructions for both issues.

## References

Efron, S. E., & Ravid, R. (2013). *Action research in education: A practical guide*. New York, NY: The Guilford Press.