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Book Review of Surviving and thriving with teacher action research: Reflections and advice from the field

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Book Review

Lattimer, H., & Caillier, S. (Eds). (2015). *Surviving and thriving with teacher action research: Reflections and advice from the field.*
New York, NY: Peter Lang. 209 pages.

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Introduction

“Why do I stand up here? Anybody? I stand upon my desk to remind myself that we must look at things in a different way.”

Excerpts from *Dead Poets Society*

Professor Keating’s speech from *Dead Poets Society* to his students, “*Carpe diem*, seize the day boys, make your lives extraordinary,” kept flashing through my mind as I went through the book, *Surviving and Thriving with Teacher Action Research*, chapter by chapter, totally enraptured with the information shared by 32 unconventional groups of educators from varied expertise, each revealing a different story of dilemma, frustration, and achievement. According to Kanter, “My favorite moment was when a student stopped a whole class discussion because he needed help understanding an idea another student had presented...he wasn’t sure he agreed, but wanted to know more...” (p. 103).

Lattimer and Caillier concede that action research can be exhilarating and exhausting, however, the end results are rewarding.

Each of their stories makes one pause and think:

What is education? Is it just running on the tight rope of prescriptive standards and curriculum guidelines, or is it something more beyond that? The book, *Surviving and Thriving with Teacher Action Research*, compiled by Lattimer and Caillier, looks into these questions. In this book, educators of different levels of teaching and learning experiences designed their own research questions pertaining to their individual teaching needs, and found solutions. Lattimer and Caillier concede that action research can be exhilarating and exhausting, however, the end results are rewarding:

It pushes us to reconsider our beliefs and helps us arrive at new revelations. It requires us to have faith in the process to persevere through frustration and self-doubt. It inspires us to see our students and colleagues through new eyes, and to recommit to the hard but deeply meaningful work of teaching and learning. From developing questions, to crafting research designs, to making sense of our data, to finding our voice so that we can share our learning, action research continually pushes us to become more thoughtful about our practice and more engaged in the professional dialogue about education. (p. xii-xiii)

Action Research: A Journey

Surviving and Thriving with Teacher Action Research presents the journeys of 32 educators from elementary schools to universities who through this book have come to share their own varied experiences. Their journeys start with the “fierce Wonderings” (p. 7), leading into self-doubt and dilemma, “...perplexed as to how [they] would be able to do research...in a thorough, meaningful, and effective way,” until finally reaching the “big ‘Aha!’” moment (p. 61). Each traveler’s journey is unique in its own way, but the goal remains the same: to improve or refine his/her actions pertaining to the particular situation. The book is divided into five sections:

1. Journey Toward a Research Question
2. Designing Action Research
3. Engaging Student Voice
4. Trusting the Process
5. Sharing the Work

Journey Toward a Research Question

This section looks into a realm of issues: What is my goal? How can I overcome my anxiety? How do we formulate and launch a workable action research question? What tools can we use to collect data? Vasquez confirmed:

Ironically, as I began my action research, I too wondered if my students would be able to succeed with my goals. I worried about failing...With a research question focused around student experience, I was able to let my students’ voices guide me through the research process...As a result, I learned much about what works and what doesn’t. (p. 42)

Designing Action Research

This section urges us to define our own goals and theories. Once we have decided on our research questions, we look into how the action research can be implemented. This section also emphasizes how our data collection and analysis methods could be part of our teaching and learning. Hamilton concluded:

Like all good researchers, action researchers incorporate previous theory and findings into their work, and systematically try to probe, and even disprove their own ideas. Then, when they report what they have learned clearly, and compellingly, they can improve their own practice and that of others, and add their contribution to the continuing discourse among scholars. (p. 86-87)

Engaging Student Voice

This section confirms that learning is more powerful when it is meaningful to students and related to their real life experiences. Hans admitted, “I am a recovering control freak” (p. 93). She confirmed, “Having choice made students feel invested in their learning” (p. 99).

Trusting the Process

Lattimer and Callier’s “Questions to Ponder” is the core of this section:

- What assumptions do you bring to your research?
- How you feel about your research?
- How is what you are learning informing your next steps, both in data collection/analysis and in actions?
- Who can you invite to join you on your journey to help you analyze your data, unpack what it means, and reflect on the process?
- Knowing that your research may take you in different directions than you had anticipated, where do you want to arrive? What do you want to understand more deeply when you get there? In other words, what is at the “core” of your research? (p. 124-125)

Rademaker, a university professor of action research, Henry, a special education teacher, and Gustafson, a second grade teacher, emphasized the importance of a collaborative action research plan:

Critical to this learning is the need to reflect on both the participation and process of action research implementation. By taking the time to reflect on the entire process, and not just the test scores, we were able to uncover some unexpected improvements in the context and in the students. (p.152)

Rademaker further reflected, “Continued participation in action research, particularly reflection, can assist researchers in looking towards the future, scanning for problems, and trying out solutions.” (p. 153).

Sharing the Work

Lattimer and Callier encapsulated the gist of this section in the following lines:

Too often, as teachers we struggle to find our voice. We are comfortable and confident using our voices in the classroom, but when it comes to policy discussions, reform initiatives, or advocacy, we find ourselves silenced...Doing and sharing action research helps us find our voices. Systematically investigating our classroom practice, collection and analyzing of data, critically reading others’ research, and talking through our work with students, colleagues, and mentors—all of these practices help to give us evidence and the language needed to engage in the conversation. (p. 161)

Conclusion

In today’s education system, most of the schools are running on standards-driven accountability; education is more context-based rather than student-centered, and often meaningless. “One size fits all” education policy often results in unfavorable, and unpleasant consequences: (a) students become unmotivated towards learning, and face failure; (b) teachers are burnt out by increasing pressure to meet the expectations, with more work for less support; and (c) schools face ridicule and loss of funding if they do not meet the prescribed expectations. Action research is a breath of fresh air, a powerful tool to bring the change. It could invigorate the education system with more

meaningful and rewarding experiences for both teachers and students. I fully agree with Ernest Morrell's review of the book, found on the back cover:

Lattimer and Caillier have assembled a dynamic volume filled with voices of classroom teachers who are intimately involved in the action research process. The honesty, insight, and passion come through in each of these narratives, and collectively they articulate how action research can be used to facilitate teacher empowerment and academic development.

I thoroughly enjoyed reading the short, informative, and clearly written chapters. Returning to the advice of Professor Keating from *Dead Poets Society*, "There is a time for daring, and there is time for caution, and a wise man understands which is called for," I challenge this is the time of daring, when action research should become a norm in the school system. I highly recommend this book to all educators, policy makers, and those interested in the field of education.

Meenakshi Mohan has taught in several universities including Roosevelt University in Chicago, IL, National Louis University in Chicago, IL, Wheelock College in Boston, MA, and most recently Towson University in Towson, MD. She authored a children's book, The Gift (2014), and edited Tamam Shud: Poems of Kshitij Mohan in English and Hindi (2010). Her articles are published regularly in various journals, including Confluence UK. Some of her paintings are in private collections.

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