

Action research in education (2nd edition)
Vivienne Baumfield, Elaine Hall and Kate Wall
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This is the 2013 second edition of an already well-established book on educational action research. The text, and the authors, genuinely appreciate the benefits, pitfalls and difficulties of action research in general, and these are specifically applied to the contexts of professional learning and the professional practice of those in education. This applies whether they are qualified teachers undertaking action research for continuing professional development, or student teachers undertaking action research as part of an Initial Teacher Education qualification.

To support both potential readerships of the book, the authors offer a practical yet highly theoretically informed step-by-step approach which is easy to follow and readable yet packed with important information. I currently use this text with my pre-service teachers undertaking action research assignments and they find it to be highly accessible whilst offering a depth which underpins both theory and context. The book positions teachers and student teachers as 'practitioner enquirers' and as such offers a wide range of different models, or, as the authors put it, different 'ways of being'. There is a strong connection running all the way through this book which links together action research, teacher learning, pupil impact and pupil voice. While this might be expected from texts of this nature, this book tackles these aspects particularly well, especially in chapter 5 'Taking account of learner perspectives in your enquiry'. The themes covered here are sometimes either omitted or glossed over in other books on this topic.

The book starts with a careful consideration of what 'enquiry' is, before teasing out and identifying both the links between teacher and student enquiry and their benefits. The very first sentence, 'Teachers are problem solvers,' sets the scene for the rest of the book, which sees teachers as active agents who seek to create their own authoritative knowledge and make claims about their practice which are both rooted in methods of enquiry and linked to pupil voice.

After a brief history of action research, the book settles down to explore the action research cycle which is often conceived as a series of action steps following questioning and fact-finding. The focus is always on the practice of action research to inform the practice of learning and teaching. As such, the book always underpins its discussions of research within a conversation about the links between practitioner enquiry and pedagogy. In my opinion it does this convincingly without falling into the trap of making unsubstantiated claims about the power and worth of practitioner enquiry. In this regard, the book is both realistic and inspirational.

After the opening chapters, the book explores how practitioners might develop a research question (chapter 3) and then moves on to finding an approach that meets the needs of the context and professional learning in question (chapter 4). Chapters 5–7 variously discuss the stakeholders in educational contexts and how their needs and positions can be incorporated into practitioner enquiry. The final chapters (8 and 9) explore concluding the research and ensuring it has impact. This last point – impact – is crucial, and one that this book does well to explore and develop, which again is something that singles this text out from other books in this field.

As already noted, I currently use this book in my teaching. My students, as a professional learning audience, really appreciate the case studies. They feel these studies bring ‘alive’ the world of possibilities that this approach can provide, in a concrete and meaningful way. In fact, I think this is frequently the problem, not just with books on practitioner enquiry/action research, but with the process itself in more general terms, and that knowing what to do, why and what the possibilities are is something very daunting for professionals in practice. This can often be the case particularly when encountering and studying books on this type of research activity for the first time. The tone of this book, its coverage and practical application are certainly useful in helping readers to move away from the paralysis of choice that this research approach can often seem to provide.

To conclude, this is an excellent contribution to an increasingly crowded field, but one that certainly in my own teaching I have come to really value. In Chapter 2 of the book the authors suggest that a way to explore the quality of research is to assess both its ‘rigour’ and also its ‘warrant’. Using this as a tool to think about this book and its role in the market place of other action research titles, its quality and usefulness shine through.