

# Action Research: Improving Schools and Empowering Educators

## Book Review

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**Craig A. Mertler: *Action Research: Improving Schools and Empowering Educators*. 2020 (6<sup>th</sup> Edition). SAGE Publications. 329 pp. Paperback: \$57.00 or rent for 32.79 on Amazon. ISBN 978-1-5443-2439-5**

Our review of Craig Mertler's textbook *Action Research: Improving Schools and Empowering Educators* is written from the perspectives of an experienced university professor and doctoral advisor (Author 1) and a community college professor who is a graduate of a Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED) inspired doctoral program (Author 2). The book is a comprehensive resource that offers step-by-step guidance to practitioner researchers and graduate students. In its 6th edition, *Action Research* has become a valued resource to many educators in doctoral programs, educators in master's programs, and educators in other contexts who want to systematically improve their practice and grow as professionals and practitioner researchers. While the stated target audience is educators and practitioner researchers working in K-12 settings, we found much of the text relevant to community college and other higher education and community settings.

*Action Research: Improving Schools and Empowering Educators* could be used as an anchor text for a Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED) inspired doctoral program or as a research methods text in practice-focused education graduate programs. University faculty leading such classes or advising students working on dissertations-in-practice will find this book and its available web-based resources well-organized and useful. Graduate students and practitioner-researchers will also find this new edition a practical handbook and useful as they design and conduct action research.

As in his previous editions, Mertler highlights the *how to* of action research after clearly defining action research as the systematic inquiry of one's own practice. Action research, he states, is conducted for the purpose of learning about and improving one's own educational settings and practices. Mertler's writing is professional, yet conversational, and includes many in-text examples and features such as figures, tables and links to web-based resources. In this edition, these features have been streamlined and formatted more clearly. The appendices provide resources for action researchers of all experience levels and include sample action research reports and templates developed to support the planning

and implementation of action research described in the book's four sections.

*Part 1-What is action research?* Part 1 contains two chapters that provide an overview of action research. Mertler introduces action research, describes the nature of action research as systematic and cyclical, and provides a model that is meticulous, yet flexible and methodologically sound. The importance of and applications of action research is presented in a concise overview with the stages and processes of action research delineated. New to this edition is a short history of action research. This history situates action research among different research traditions and will help practitioner researchers develop a better understanding of action research and justify its use to address problems of practice. We found that the inclusion of the history of action research provides a significant foundation to justify the use of action research in the school and college/university settings. A strength of this section is Mertler's emphasis on research rigor. He offers numerous ways to ensure it, and warns, "*The extent to which it reaches a standard of quality is directly related to the usefulness of the research findings for its intended audience. In general, rigor refers to the quality, validity, accuracy, and credibility of action research and its findings.*" (Mertler, 2020, p.26)

*Part 2- How do I begin my action research?* In Part 2, Mertler takes the reader through the steps of planning and developing an action research plan. They are reminded, "*when you, as a teacher engage in classroom-based action research, you are doing it in order to benefit you and your students in your classroom*" (Mertler, 2020, p 116). He makes suggestions to assist practitioner researchers in identifying problems of practice and topics for research and provides a process to aid them as they think through the question, why does this problem occur? He advises them to examine research literature in order to develop a better understanding of their problem of practice and includes a section on how to search for relevant literature along with an updated list of searchable databases. Also in Part 2 is detailed information on research designs and research ethics and considerations. Embedded in this section are exemplars



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and templates for materials typically requested by institutional review boards.

*Part 3- What do I do with all these data?* The strength of Part 3 is the inclusion of qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis techniques and tips for reporting the results. If graduate students and practitioner researchers only had one resource available to them for data collection and analysis, this section should be it. Mertler includes samples and explanations of a variety of data sources, data collection methods, and ways to conduct qualitative and quantitative analyses. A concern is what could be considered as an overabundance of information related to quantitative and qualitative analysis procedures. However, the use of text features such as highlighted terms, tables, and in-text examples provide support for the reader and may make the large amount of information more manageable. New to Part 3 is a table designed to assist practitioner researchers align their research questions and data sources. Dissertation advisors may find this table helpful as they support students developing their action research plans.

*Part 4, I've got Results! Now what?* Part 4 includes three chapters: next steps and developing future action research plans, writing up an action report, and sharing and reflecting. The chapter on next steps and future action research plans is most interesting and offers students and practitioners researchers guidance in formulating a plan of action for the continuing and extending their action research. Students and novice practitioner researchers will find guidance in this part as they contemplate the "so what?" and the "what's next?" of their research process. Part 4 also offers readers ideas for disseminating their research projects and presents an updated list of refereed journals where practitioner research is often published.

The organization of the text is what makes *Action Research: Improving Schools and Empowering Educators* stand out. First, the chapters are arranged sequentially, in the same order one might expect to approach an action research project. Second and new to this edition, are excerpts from *Case Study 1* used to foreshadow what is to come in each chapter. The first excerpt, for example, is presented at the beginning of Chapter 1, *Introduction to Action Research*. It describes why and how five educators identified a problem of practice and planned their action research to address it. Excerpts from *Case Study 1* are then included at the beginning of each subsequent chapter, so by the end of the book an entire case study has unfolded chapter by chapter.

The third organizational feature we highlight is the newly organized section at the end of each chapter titled, *Conducting Educational Research*. This feature includes an action research checklist and excerpts from two additional case studies. Similar to the case study presented at the beginning of each chapter, these case studies follow two additional action research projects from start to finish. Thus, readers are able to follow three different action research projects in each subsequent chapter that exemplify the topic of each particular chapter. Also in this section are annotated excerpts from real action research reports that demonstrate how to write about their action research for academic purposes. Graduate advisors will find these excerpts particularly useful as mentor texts. Overall, we believe the reorganized *Conducting Educational Research* feature will prove beneficial for novice practitioner researchers and graduate students who have little experience

designing, implementing and writing research reports. We also believe that if short on time, the *Conducting Educational Research* section could stand alone and provide a quick review or support for more experienced action researchers.

Practitioner researchers will find several ways to utilize this text. They can read it from front to back in its entirety; they can read selected chapters when needed in their research process; they can read the case studies only; or they can read the figures, tables, and the appendices.

We would love to see the next edition as a spiral bound text in a flexible and tabbed version. Another helpful feature would be to include areas for notes, as many practitioners will build their projects while reading the text. And last but not least, we would love to see Dr. Mertler expand his audience to include practitioner researchers who conduct action research in community college and other higher education settings. Including a new case study and a few examples from these settings would provide the connection needed for these readers.

In closing, we recommend *Action Research: Improving Schools and Empowering Educators* as a textbook and research manual to practitioner researchers, university doctoral advisors and instructors, and education graduate students conducting action research. It will be a book that students and practitioner researchers alike will keep close to them as they pursue their action research adventures.