REVIEW ESSAY


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The ambitious goal of *The Palgrave International Handbook on Action Research* is “to present a fairly comprehensive overview and illustrative examples of the work being done internationally by people affiliated with what we call the global action research community” (p. xi). The editors represent a breadth of AR experience: an editor of *Educational Action Research* and founding member of ARNA (Rowell), another founding member of ARNA and collaborative action researcher in schools (Bruce), Education Department chair and director of an AR-based graduate education program at Moravian College (Shosh), and the director of CCAR and co-editor of the *International Handbook of Action Research* (Riel). They emphasize that the Handbook is not a “How To” for organizing action research, but rather a compendium of information with the goal of contributing to an “alternative globalization,” (p. 5 and Chapter 49) one that would arise from the kind of “knowledge democracies” (p. xiii and Chapter 5) inspired by the work of Fals Borda, Freire, and others. The editors’ unabashed aim is to promote action research (AR) in the service of social justice (p. xvi).

The *Handbook* is available in both print and e-editions, with the latter offering the reader a bookmarked outline in the left margin, in-text reference links, and easy key word searches of the entire text. In keeping with the *Handbook’s* global focus, the chapters in each Part represent international examples of the ethical, political, and social challenges inherent in applying action research in and to a global context. The six Parts are: I. Background and Contexts; II. A World of Action Research; III. Action Research Networks in Local and Global Contexts; IV. Challenges, Tensions, and Issues in the Expanding Conceptions of Action Research; V. Case Studies in Action Research; and, VI. Looking Ahead.
Rather than being a cover-to-cover read, each Part offers a different focus on and facet of AR. This reviewer found Parts I and IV particularly useful—the former for the broad philosophical and historical background provided and the latter for the variety of topics ranging from IRB considerations to digital tools for action researchers. Part II presents a variety of action research histories from around the globe. Each shares a unique trajectory and takes on action research. Canadian readers will note Chapter 7, authored by this journal’s editor-in-chief, gives an informative overview of how action research practices have varied from province to province over time. Part III focuses on the emergence of action research networks and their potential for advancing the development of an “alternative globalization” (p. 10).

Part V presents five case studies. “Case” here refers not to the nature of the research, but to the fact that each chapter is a case of action research. Bruce (p. 694) offers three questions for the reader to consider across the five cases: “What is the fit of each case with the 3 characteristics of action research? What may be missing or limiting? Does each bring us to the ‘critical edge’ that asks uncomfortable questions or offers “unwelcome news”? These chapters once again take us around the world, from a recycling study in Brazil (Chapter 41) to school-community partnerships in South Africa (Chapter 45). Moreover, the cases raise questions about the role of AR in “identifying and challenging critical issues of injustice” (p. 694).

Finally, Part VI again takes up change on a global level and asks, “How can action research live up to its promise in the years and decades to come” (p. 786)? The chapters in this Part explore how AR is evolving, and culminate with a round letter among two of the editors and four additional AR notables. Their exchanges highlight three concerns:

1) Most AR training in North America occurs in higher education and especially teacher preparation, but the constraints of the teaching profession limit the implementation of AR once in the field.

2) There is still a gap between participatory research in communities and that which takes place in educational institutions.

3) There is need for a “refined spirit” of global AR awareness (p. 845).

Careful readers can trace themes across Parts and chapters. For example, as a teacher educator, I found Chapter 40 a must-read. Riel and Rowell show how current school contexts tend to denigrate and devalue teachers’ experience (in effect an “epistemicide” of teacher knowledge; see Chapters 5, p. 73 and 46) at a time when evidence consistently and overwhelmingly points to teacher expertise as the key factor in student success. So, how can teacher expertise be developed if all teachers are expected (or allowed) to do is teach to the curriculum and test? The cyclical inquiry at the heart of action research offers a way out. AR promotes the kind of meta-cognition Dewey described (see Chapter 8), which leads to “generative teaching and adaptive problem-solving”, in contrast to “improvised teaching for innovation” (a teacher who unreflectively tries out every new idea) or “scripted teaching for efficiency” (a teacher adept at delivering the curriculum as proscribed). As a result, Riel and Rowell define expertise not as highly refined technical [pedagogical] skills, but as a highly reflective ability to problem-solve (see also the reference to Dewey’s (1938).
and Schön’s (1983) work in Chapter 3). The implications for teacher development is its own area of study (cf., Sachs, 2016), but other critical themes like teacher expertise and practitioner inquiry can be followed through the Handbook’s chapters.

One might ask why another “handbook” dealing with AR is needed. At least two reasons come to mind. First, each comprehensive reference adds to the legitimacy of the AR paradigm (Zuber-Skerritt, p. 849). Second, this Handbook takes an unabashed perspective on both social justice and knowledge democracy, showing how AR is uniquely positioned to promote both. In sum, while the Handbook may not be essential for one’s personal library, it should be a required reference for institutions and organizations promoting AR and for anyone engaging in, or preparing others to engage in, action research.

REFERENCES


