REVIEW ESSAY


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*It is a rare school or district that hasn’t developed a vision and mission statement, backed-up by a strategic plan. Those things are important, but inspiring words and elaborate plans are not what make an organization successful; rather, what makes a real difference in school performance are the routine habits of adult behavior that are consistent with an organization’s core values. (Sagor, 2011, p. 192)*

Sagor speaks to teachers and principals in a way to which they can clearly relate. He begins his book by explaining how action research is different from other forms of scholarly research: it is self-focused, it is aimed at improving one’s future actions, and it leads to improvement.

The *Action Research Guidebook* contains 11 chapters which cover Sagor’s four-step process to conducting an action research project. These four stages are: “1. clarifying vision and targets, 2. articulating theory, 3. implementing and collecting data, and 4. reflecting on the data and planning informed action” (pp. 3-4).

In stage one, Sagor helps the action researcher to define the purpose of conducting an action research project. In order to do this successfully, the action researcher needs to uncover the issues that are important enough to make him or her want to follow the project through to completion. In chapter 2, the author provides strategies for helping the action researcher realize what these issues are. Some of these include journal writing, reflective interviews with a colleague, analytic discourse, and team reflection. The action researcher is helped to refine the focus of an action research project in chapter 3 by examining what is successful and by analyzing what is not successful. The action researcher then develops
evaluation criteria to help him or her to be able to clarify what success means. Sagor gives the reader step-by-step instructions for creating rating scales for a project.

In stage two, articulating theory, Sagor helps the action researcher to develop strategies that will ultimately lead to improvement. Chapter 4 includes a discussion on identifying the independent and dependent variables in a potential project. The action researcher is then guided through the stages of identifying which variables are important, summarizing theory, ranking the variables according to importance, and graphically representing theory. The graphic representation is continued in Chapter 5 where the action researcher is shown how to diagram the theory in order to make it clear to others, guide the project, and inform stakeholders. By articulating the theory and diagramming it, Sagor teaches the action researcher how to form meaningful research questions that map out the remainder of an action research project in Chapter 6.

Data collection is covered in Chapter 7. Sagor has a practical approach to data collection which asks teachers to look first to data that they are already collecting and to use it for research purposes. This includes data from sources such as test scores, lesson plans, student self-assessments, and anecdotal notes. He clearly describes triangulation in a comprehensive way that even those with little research experience can easily understand.

The remaining chapters of the book cover reflecting on data and informing future action. Sagor discusses data analysis in Chapter 8. He breaks analysis into three generic questions: “What did we do?” (p. 130), “What changes occurred regarding the achievement targets?” (p. 138), and “What was the relationship between actions taken and any changes in the performance on the targets?” (p. 143). These basic questions guide the data analysis. In Chapter 9, Sagor explains how the findings of the project should guide future action. Chapter 10 is about sharing the findings of the project with others. Whether sharing the project with a small group of colleagues in the staffroom or writing it up for publication in a journal, Sagor provides a presentation sequence. Additionally, he also has included an excellent template to help action researchers write an abstract for their project.

This book has numerous strengths. It is written in a language with which educators and principals can easily identify and is very respectful of their experience. Professionals are methodically taken through the steps of an action research project in a way that is neither reductionist, nor overly complicated. It uses clear, consistent examples repeatedly throughout the chapters so that the reader can envision multiple types of action research projects. Sagor includes blank charts and graphs so that owners of the book can create their own action research projects. The chapter on data collection is different from other action research texts in that it focuses on data that most educators naturally collect and can easily analyze and interpret. The book also has a glossary, index, and references.

I have one reservation with this book; Sagor does not cover ethical considerations at all. In my opinion, not considering the ethical channels of a research project or failing to consult school review boards is highly problematic for anyone who is conducting school-based research. A principal or a teacher needs to seek the proper channels. This omission does
not detract from the content of the book; however, anyone considering a project should seek out information on school-related ethics elsewhere.

This book is a great resource for reflective teachers wishing to answer a research question or an administrator who wishes to guide teachers through one.