

## Significant Books in Review

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► Corey, Stephen M., *Action Research to Improve School Practices*. New York: Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1953, 161 p.

For all the teachers, supervisors, superintendents and professional workers in education who are concerned about the improvement of educational practices and programs and who have been also somewhat confused by the recent stinging and fussing about "action research," Stephen M. Corey's new book *Action Research to Improve School Practices* is very timely.

The major educational faith giving point and purpose to this book is well-stated by Corey:

"Our schools cannot keep up with the life they are supposed to sustain and improve unless teachers, pupils, supervisors, administrators, and school patrons continuously examine what they are doing. Singly and in groups, they must use their imaginations creatively and constructively to identify the practices that must be changed to meet the needs and demands of modern life, courageously try out those practices that give better promise, and methodically and systematically gather evidence to test their worth." (p. viii)

The book reviews the thinking and programs developed by the Horace Mann-Lincoln Institute of School Experimentation and its cooperating school systems in attempting to give this faith some conscious reality. Chapter I presents a concept of action research distinguished from either traditional

research or just good common sense. Chapters II and III describe and illustrate the process of action research at both the supervisory level and at the level of classroom teaching. Chapters IV and V discuss the problem of quality in action research activities and describe the conditions favorable to such experimentation. Chapter VI describes the activities of a graduate seminar that employed action research procedures as a learning method. Chapter VII discusses the important problem of sampling so that the generalizations a teacher draws from his experiences with his present group of students may be applied with confidence to his future groups of students. A final short chapter summarizes the whole book tersely.

The book is not long, the style is clear and to the point and the manuscript shows many evidences of careful rewriting. It may be read with profit by anyone interested in making changes in his own teaching or in working with others to deal with mutual problems.

Simply, action research is an attempt to improve educational programs by encouraging the people responsible for such programs to become increasingly able to identify and define their significant educational problems and to deal with them on the basis of some evidence and testing of generalizations rather than on the basis of unthinking routine or wishful thinking. It is held that a growing competence to carry on this process is the best assurance for the continued improvement and development of both the professional person-

nel and the educational program. It is held further that when the problem is properly the concern of a number of people, cooperation among them not only supports and encourages the activities of individuals but also tends to enrich the contribution being made to the problem. Primary emphasis is placed on plans for change being always accompanied by responsible action in the sense that it is the intent that future behavior will be influenced by the findings of this experience.

The strength of this book is in its constant encouragement to teachers and school staffs to use the contributions of the scientific method in dealing with their educational problems. Its weakness stems primarily from what has been left unsaid. The details, the processes, the conditions which promote, and particularly the research techniques which might be used are merely sketched out or suggested only in relation to particular specific projects. One such gap, naturally, is in the area of research design, research techniques, and checks for determining levels of confidence in the prediction of future consequences. This book, therefore, should not be considered as a detailed manual on how to do action research—its major purpose is, primarily, to open up the possibilities of this approach to educational improvement to those who would be interested in trying it out in their own schools. With this purpose in mind, it is very well done.

### **Degree and Means**

Much of the argument about action research does not grow out of its essential orientation to research and to the scientific method. It mainly arises over (a) the enthusiastic claims by many of its advocates as to its newness and exclusiveness, (b) the extent and degree that quality can be achieved in research

where teachers are the active agents, (c) the extent to which the scientific method as a procedure for increasing knowledge and as a basis for improving practice should be limited to the research techniques of the physical sciences, and (d) the extent to which the findings of the specific experiences of a teacher and a group of children can be generalized. This kind of argument—which is essentially one of degree and means because of its basic agreement as to ends—is good as it should lead to constant improvement. The criticism of action research which grows out of a basic distrust of the scientific method as a means of better knowing and action, while not discussed here, must still be recognized as one of the obstacles to research in the social sciences in general and as an illustration of the differing conceptions as to what constitutes adequate authority in determining good or bad educational practices.

The first criticism is the least important, and is not discussed by Corey. Any attempt to do anything at all is always greeted with the cry, "The experimental method is as old as the hills; we tried that twenty years ago!" It is equally true that defenders and supporters of a program tend to become overly enthusiastic in their counter claims. It is hoped by the reviewer, therefore, that the present book can carry the final responsibility for defining what "action research" is with its major emphasis on action and teacher participation. Effort now should be spent on working on the problems involved in (a) providing the conditions for and developing the important processes in the scientific method of problem-solving and (b) perfecting the techniques and procedures of research method appropriate to a research problem which is constantly evolving from experience.

The second criticism is more serious. Corey spends a whole chapter in discussing how quality may be obtained in research where teachers are the active agents. As he says, this problem is primarily one of degree. No one in his right mind expects that teachers will have either the time, the training or the inclination to do "outstanding" research. It is expected, however, that there will be more quality to the educational decisions of teachers if these are based on some evidence and experience. The degree of quality expected, therefore, depends on which end of the continuum of research behavior is used. If the end of present educational practice is considered, the level of quality in the use of the scientific method and in the use of generalizations to give direction to instructional procedures can be enormously increased. If the end of the research specialist is the sole basis for quality, then the question becomes somewhat ridiculous.

The reviewer, therefore, cannot accept the two alternatives to action research given by Corey as the sole possibilities: either make changes on the basis of subjective impressions of the evidence or ask the professional educator to study problems and to suggest solutions. (p. 142) Would it not be possible to see solving problems through subjective impressions, action research, and research by the professional educator as being points on a continuum of research endeavor with the possibility that a third alternative be seen—that of the professional educator and his research contribution being happily combined with the action research programs of education staffs in particular school situations? Each would certainly need the other as being essential parts of any adequate research effort in education.

If the above would happen even to

a small degree, it would have sweeping implications for programs of teacher education, graduate programs in colleges of education, and for the research activities of professional educators.

The third criticism of action research—that it should utilize or be limited to the research techniques of the physical sciences is not a valid criticism. Any research problem should dictate the kind of data and techniques which are appropriate to its solution. The test of the wisdom of the selection of the data and of the techniques of analysis lies in the extent to which the consequences of the conclusions drawn from the data can be predicted. The question is not physical sciences or no, but whether the ingenuity of man is able to identify the appropriate data and to select—or even invent—and use the research techniques which will permit some confidence in knowing what should come next.

### **Common Responsibilities**

A real criticism of action research and of research in curriculum and instructional procedures in general—and one which is not discussed too well by Corey—has been its hesitancy to acknowledge the special nature of its problems and to feel free to explore and develop means of observation and analysis appropriate to deal with them. Three special problems of research confront action research workers: (a) the fact that much of their data cannot be easily categorized, counted and scaled—frequently all that can be said of it is the expressed judgment that one behavior is different from another and that it reflects higher quality; (b) the fact that much of the data observed in instructional situations is highly interrelated and dynamic. Patterns of interaction among rather gross variables are frequently studied rather than small

unitary aspects of behavior operating in simple patterns of cause and effect; and (c) the fact that much of the data observed involves people, purposes and varying action patterns operating over a considerable period of time. The non-unitary character of much of the observed behavior, its dynamic inter-related character and its continuity over time present even the most skilled research worker with tough problems of research design and analysis. These above problems, moreover, confront all educational research workers and are thus common responsibilities of all. There is little need, therefore, to fuss with action research workers unduly about their present level of operation in this respect.

While there is great need in all behavioral research for improved techniques to deal with the above problems which are not unique to action research at all, a significant contribution can be made to action research by the professional research individual who is willing to work with action research groups. He can ferret out the techniques or develop new ones which can handle simply and with some confidence the kind of rough data frequently considered. He can help teachers become more skilled in not attempting to use "a micrometer for measuring lumber for a work bench."

The fourth criticism—the lack of generalizing capacity—is well considered in the chapter on statistics and the sampling problem. Generalizations from a given experience can be made in many directions on different levels of confidence—to groups of the same kind in similar situations, to groups of the same kind but in different locales, to different groups, etc. The safeguard of action research is in its emphasis on trying out the generalizations in future instructional activities. This check on the

predictability of a given conclusion is very healthy but there is real need, however, to exploit the findings of action research in as many directions as possible. It is the conviction of the reviewer that the findings of action research programs have much greater application power than is now claimed. Better research design may be one help but even more promising is a thorough-going analysis of the nature of the generalizations—applications to be made.

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#### OTHER PUBLICATIONS OF INTEREST

**Elementary education.** Recently the Educational Testing Service, the Office of Education, the Department of Elementary School Principals, and the Russell Sage Foundation were teamed in a cooperative project to advance agreement with regard to what children should learn, remember and understand. The result is a particularly readable report by Nolan C. Kearney, *Elementary School Objectives* (Russell Sage Foundation, 1953). Following a brief background statement in part one the book is devoted first to recommended goals for the elementary school and finally to implications for practice. Although somewhat simple for the mature student, this is a report certain to be widely read. Its points are well made and quite helpful.

Leigh Peck's *Child Psychology* (Heath, 1953) is a competently written, thoroughly understandable volume that will be appreciated by students and their instructors alike. One of its strengths is the way in which the author adroitly relates principles to practice in education. A more specialized but equally valuable book in its field is by Celia B. Stendler and William E. Martin: *Intergroup Education in Kindergarten-Primary Grades* (Macmillan,

1953). Unlike many recent theoretical or research-type studies, the Stendler-Martin book "gets down to cases"—i.e., it has a "how to do it" flavor that many teachers will appreciate as they face gritty, real-life problems of how to make ". . . democratic education . . . play an increasingly important role in reducing intergroup tensions." (p. 126)

**Guidance.** S. A. Hamrin has produced another of the sensitive treatments of guidance in which he communicates to such good effect with teachers. *Initiating and Administering Guidance Services* (McKnight & McKnight, 1953) seems to have been written with the superintendent and principal in mind. It should prove of particular importance to those administrators who also must double as guidance workers and to those who wish better to understand a field outside the realm of their area of preparation.

**Research.** Two new books are strong contenders for a place on the bookshelves of those who work with statistics. Helen Walker and Joseph Lev recently completed *Statistical Inference* (Henry Holt, 1953) and E. F. Lindquist has produced *Design and Analysis of Experiments in Psychology and Education* (Houghton Mifflin, 1953). Within the limitations imposed by his background this reviewer was impressed by the clarity and quality of presentations in both books.

**Miscellaneous.** The following are representative of worthy books which cannot be discussed to the degree they merit either because of previously scheduled reviews or because of the timing of their arrival at the ASCD offices. Three excellent introductory-type volumes are G. C. Lee's *Education in Modern America* (Holt, 1953), J. U. Michaelis and P. R. Grim's *The Student Teacher in the Elementary School* (Prentice-Hall, 1953), and

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W. R. Lueck's *An Introduction To Teaching* (Holt, 1953). A first-rate comprehensive Yearbook, *Science for Today's Children*, has come from the Department of Elementary School Principals, NEA. A pleasant descriptive approach is used and dozens of school workers have contributed their experiences with children to this 32nd Yearbook. Finally, mention must be made of W. O. Stanley's scholarly *Education and Social Integration* (Teachers College, Columbia University, 1953). The invariably absorbing views Dr. Stanley presents add up to an understanding of his point (p. 254) that, ". . . the clarification of the foundations of order and coherence in American public education is the paramount problem facing the educational profession today."

—HAROLD G. SHANE, professor of education, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois.

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