

Imagination at Work: A Book Review of *The Power of Practice-Based Literacy Research: A Tool for Teachers*

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Sailors, M., & Hoffman, J. V. (2019). *The power of practice-based literacy research: A tool for teachers*. Routledge.

Choosing how to describe the process of conducting studies into our own worlds in education is oft-contested territory. In this exciting first-edition text, practice-based research is (re)defined as a fresh method of practitioner inquiry. Practice-based research combines the traditions of action research and design-development research inside of a transformative paradigm. In doing so, it entails iterative research conducted by insiders in their teaching contexts that is shaped by repeated refinement of practice, and gives substantial attention to issues of inclusion, equity, and access. In addition, the notion of “practice-based” work centers teachers’ worlds and actions as sites of innovation and imagination. Although imagination is something commonly associated with the joy, creativity, and spirit of young children, Sailors and Hoffman argue that teachers and researchers actively rely on imagination as they envision and work toward new possibilities in their practice. According to the authors, our experiences in classrooms influence the things we see in our “minds’ eye,” (p.12) and in turn, our imagination has the potential to reshape the world around us through our engagement in practice-based research. While there is certainly a history of research that has been done *on* teaching and teachers, rather than *with* teachers and *inside of* teaching, authors Sailors and Hoffman use this text to reclaim and redefine what constitutes legitimate, powerful research.

Generally, the purpose of the text is to provide support for professionals who want to strengthen their practices. The text is designed with both in-service and pre-service teachers in mind as an audience; however, it could easily be used by instructional coaches, administrators,

and even teacher educators. Sailors and Hoffman both have extensive expertise in literacy, so the examples throughout the text often come from Hoffman's teaching with pre-service teachers and Sailors' teaching with in-service teachers. Nevertheless, the potential of practice-based research is not limited to any one content area, context, or grade level.

The book is divided into two parts: one which provides a background on practice-based research as a method that combines action, design-development, and transformative research practices and theories, and a second, which provides an outline for actually conducting practice-based research, including formulating a research question, using other research literature, designing a study, collecting and analyzing data, and sharing your work with others.

In Part One, Chapter Two, the authors explain that practice-based research can serve the purpose of better understanding what one is already doing in the classroom. Sailors and Hoffman encourage readers to attend to the underlying activity structures that make up the basis for their instructional routines "on a good day" and in their "ideal classrooms" (p.28). By purposefully documenting their ideal activity structures, teachers can construct the basis for activating their radical imaginations and asking, "What if?" questions as they challenge, append, and re-make existing practices. Chapters Three, Four, and Five outline the ways action research, design-development research, and transformative research, respectively, can be used to further inquire into and explore the classroom context. By the conclusion of Part One, it is clear that bringing together the traditions and histories of several research methodologies gives teachers the flexibility to find the research processes that are the best fit for their unique questions and classroom contexts.

In Part Two, a framework is outlined for conducting practice-based research. In Chapter Seven, Sailors and Hoffman discuss the process of determining a research question, and in

Chapter Eight, they outline the process of reviewing the literature and making adjustments to a proposed study, a process which they describe as “situating your research alongside the work of others” (p.91). While they confess that the chapter is long and complex, readers will find the authors’ inclusion of screenshots (e.g., “output of Google Scholar search,” p. 96) and comprehensive discussion of different journals and literature review structures quite helpful. Throughout Part Two, the authors continuously highlight what different aspects of the research process could look like through positivist, interpretivist, and transformative paradigms. By including examples of each, the value and process of transformative practice-based research becomes even more evident. Part Two concludes with a discussion of pathways to share practice-based research with other audiences. This section even includes a list of “twenty-first century affordances” (p.159) including social media, blogging/ vlogging, and unconferences as possible virtual outlets for creating conversations around one’s findings.

In an era of increased accountability and reform, where teachers are often pushed to implement programs with fidelity rather than innovate, design, and conduct research on their own teaching, this text offers both an ethos of hope and concrete strategies for teachers working to grow their practices. The authors conclude with a powerful reminder that it is a moral imperative that our teaching informs our research and our research informs our teaching. They point out that, as Myles Horton and Paulo Freire once said, “We make the road by walking” (1990, p.166). With this book, Sailors and Hoffman invite all of us to put our imaginations to work and join in walking with them as practice-based researchers.

Reference

Horton, M., & Freire, P. (1990). *We make the road by walking: Conversations on education and social change*. Temple University Press.