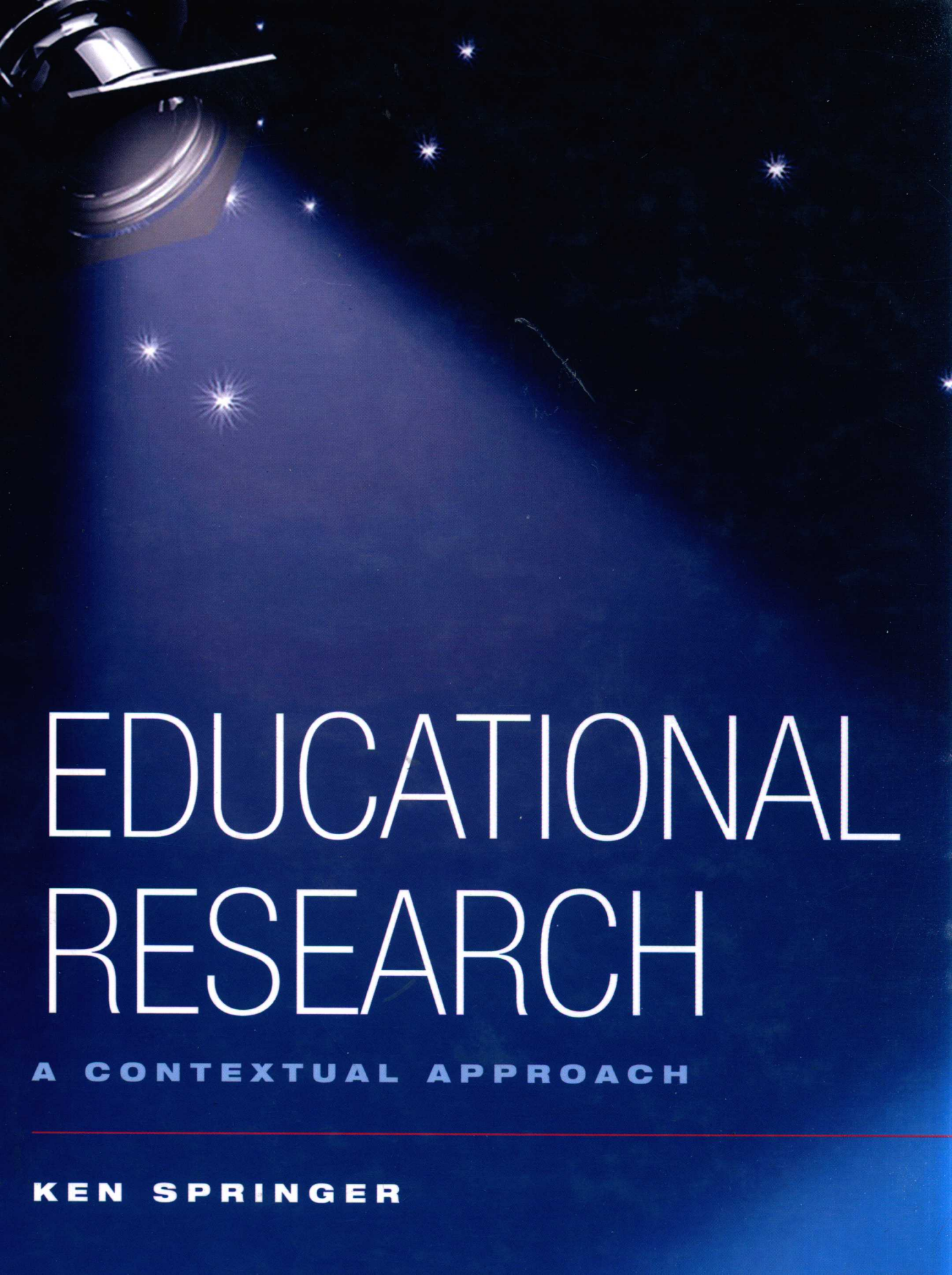

EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

A CONTEXTUAL APPROACH

KEN SPRINGER

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Educational Research

A Contextual Approach

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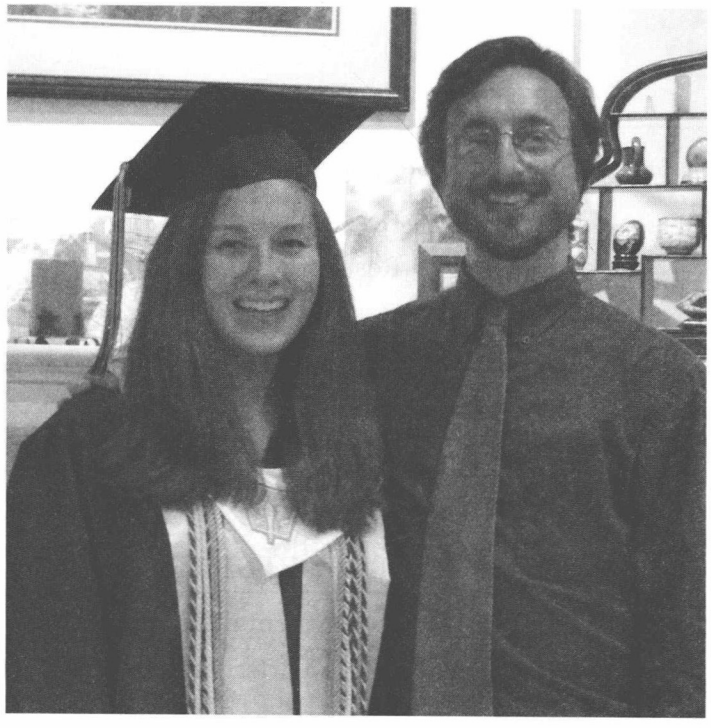
To Cecilia



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Purpose

This book is suitable for an introductory course in educational research. I wrote the book for students who are learning how to be consumers of research, as well as for those who will be planning their own research project. To be a successful researcher you need a variety of skills. You need to become a critical reader of published work, to learn about research methods and design—*and* to be able to put what you learn to use. I have tried to ensure that students would not only understand what the technical terms and concepts mean, but also be able to apply them.

Context

One of my basic assumptions in writing this book is that the knowledge and skills used by educational researchers are not context-independent. The topics we choose to study, the descriptive frameworks we use, the methods we deploy, and the analyses and interpretations of data we rely on are all informed by historical, political, and social trends. These trends might be thought of as "external" contexts, in the sense that they influence the process of scientific inquiry but are not intrinsic to it. An example would be the federal government's emphasis on using evidence-based research, and randomized trials in particular, as a basis for educational policy and practice. During the past decade, this emphasis has had an impact on the direction and evaluation of educational research. I wanted to give students a glimpse of external contexts such as this, rather than just presenting the material as a compendium of definitions and hypothetical examples.

The practice of educational research reflects a kind of subculture. Researchers are influenced by theoretical and conceptual assumptions that inform our research questions, methods, analyses, interpretations, and approaches to dissemination. These theoretical and conceptual assumptions provide the "internal" context for scientific inquiry. An obvious example is reflected in the differences between the assumptions of quantitative and qualitative researchers. In the book I wanted to draw out some of these assumptions, so that students would more readily understand the material and become acculturated as consumers and perhaps also producers of research.

Finally, educational research is not only influenced by, but also influences, the context in which it is created. The results of our studies influence the way subsequent research is carried out, and our results have an impact on educational policy and practice. Here too I wanted students to see how educational research not only shapes its own progress but also influences policy and practice. In the final chapter I address the issue of whether the research shapes educational practice as much as it should.

Complexity

Another key assumption informing this book is that both consumers and producers of educational research need many different kinds of knowledge, skills, and strategies in order to appreciate the study of educational issues. Educational research is becoming more interdisciplinary and complex. For this reason, quantitative,

qualitative, and mixed-methods research are all discussed throughout the book, and I made an effort to be inclusive of a variety of both traditional and contemporary concepts and paradigms.

Organization

Broadly speaking, the book consists of three parts. The first six chapters cover introductory material, the second six chapters focus on quantitative design and analysis, while the final six chapters concern qualitative, mixed-methods, and applied research.

The chapters are also organized into smaller groups of three:

- Chapters 1–3 introduce the field of educational research and address preliminary considerations such as the selection of research topics, the dissemination of research reports, and the literature review.
- Chapters 4–6 introduce methodological concepts of importance in the early stages of a study, including research ethics, sampling, measurement, and reliability and validity.
- Chapters 7–9 introduce quantitative research designs.
- Chapters 10–12 introduce statistical analysis and representation.
- Chapters 13–15 introduce qualitative and mixed-methods research.
- Chapters 16–18 deal with applied research activities, including action research, program evaluation, and strategies for bridging the research–practice gap.

Although there is considerable cross-referencing, each chapter stands alone. If an instructor prefers to introduce statistics before design, for example, the statistical chapters can be read before the chapters on quantitative design.

Distinctive Features

This book contains several characteristics that distinguish it from the current textbooks available for this course.

Contextual Information

Along with the first and last chapters, which provide information about the contemporary state of educational research, contextual information is available through several sources:

- Each chapter has three "Spotlight on Research" features that consist of an excerpt from a published article that illustrates chapter content. As students progress through the book and acquire more capacity for understanding research, the Spotlight features increase in length accordingly.

- There are many discussions of research studies in the main text, along with illustrations and anecdotes that provide a meaningful context for the material.
- Each chapter closes with suggestions for further reading. The Resource Guide on the companion website provides the full text of articles as well as links to other resources that provide contextual information.

Comprehensiveness and Balance

This text is comprehensive, in the sense that it covers all major topics of importance typically covered in books of this genre. In addition, certain topics receive greater coverage than most texts provide. These topics include research ethics (Chapter 4), statistical representation in tables and figures (Chapter 12), and program evaluation (Chapter 17). Statistical material is treated more thoroughly than in most texts, with two long chapters devoted to descriptive and inferential statistics (Chapters 10 and 11), and part of one chapter devoted to advanced statistical modeling (Chapter 12). Chapter 18 provides an extended discussion of the research–practice gap and how that gap might be bridged. Finally, although the book provides a standard, full-length introduction to quantitative research, qualitative approaches to sampling, measurement, and design are discussed throughout the book, and three chapters are devoted exclusively to qualitative and mixed-methods approaches (Chapters 13, 14, and 15).

Applications

Throughout the book I provide students with support for applying their newly acquired knowledge and skills. For example, Chapter 2 provides detailed guidance on using ERIC to conduct a literature review, Chapters 10–12 each lead the student through the process of creating and analyzing a small dataset, and Chapter 18 closes with a summary of how to plan and conduct a study. Each chapter in the book opens with a brief description of learning objectives. At the end of each chapter is a feature entitled "Applications: A Guide for the Beginning Researcher" in which I summarize ideas from the chapter that will help students begin their research. Exercises at the end of each chapter allow students to apply what they have learned, and further exercises and activities can be found in the Study Guide on the companion website.

Supplementary Materials

All of the supplementary materials for instructors and students are available on the companion website at *www.wiley.com/college/springer.*

- The Study Guide contains exercises, problems, and other activities designed to help students apply what they have learned from each chapter.
- The Resource Guide provides both students and instructors with the full text of articles, as well as links and other resources that help provide context for the material presented in the chapters.
- The Instructor's Manual and Test Bank provide tips and strategies for introducing chapter content, as well as handouts and test items for each chapter.

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