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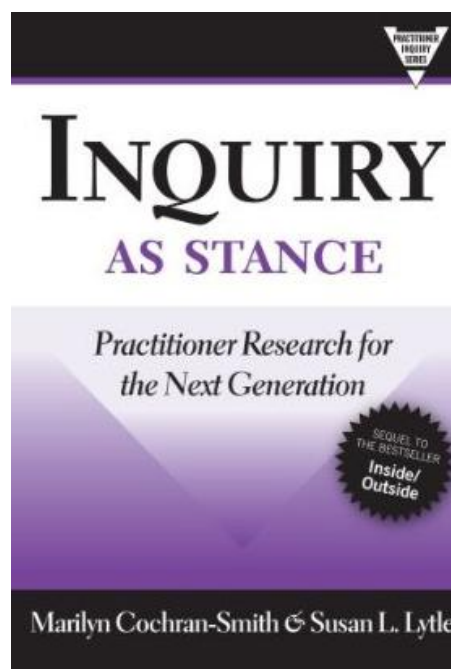
Cochran-Smith, Marilyn & Lytle, Susan (2009) *Inquiry as Stance: Practitioner Research for the Next Generation*. NY: Teachers College Press.

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Like many other innovations, teacher inquiry has run the risk of becoming the *reform du jour* and twisted into shapes so far from foundational roots as to be unrecognizable to pioneering thinkers. Just as the vapid, anything-goes practice ascribed to progressivism would be unrecognizable to John Dewey, or the outlawing of phonics and grammar in some classrooms would appall whole language pioneers, practices identified as *inquiry* have emerged in a variety of forms, including several alien to those imagined by early proponents. Conceptualizations now identified with such conflated labels as *teacher inquiry*, *practitioner inquiry*, *teacher research*, *practitioner research*, *self study*, *professional action research* and *professional learning communities* vary



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enormously, ranging from structured exercises in technical rationality to collaborative efforts to change the world. Even if Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan Lytle did nothing else in their new book but untangle the various distinctive threads within the inquiry genre, it would be an invaluable addition to the literature. However, *Inquiry as Stance: Practitioner Research for the Next Generation* goes beyond essential clarification (Part I) to offer exemplars of sophisticated practitioner research as the authors define it (Part II) and an innovative readers' theatre script giving striking voice to the wide range of practitioners and issues in Part II. Given the importance of its theorizing and the scope of its terrain, this work from the arguably most knowledgeable researchers and practitioners in the field—like their earlier *Inside/Outside: Teacher Research and Knowledge*—is likely to prove seminal.

Understanding the constraints on teachers in an era of accountability generally defined in terms of test scores, I wondered as I began reading whether the authors would acknowledge that the current climate is demonstrably hostile to inquiry's basic assumption that teachers can and should be trusted to identify immediate issues in their own classrooms and to devise their own responses to them, as inquiry proponents believe. All too familiar with current political realities, Cochran-Smith and Lytle confront the climate problem head on in Chapter One. Surveying developments over the last ten years, however, they find evidence for the "decidedly hopeful" message that "Despite all of the forces working against it, teacher research and the larger practitioner inquiry movement continue to flourish in the United States and many parts of the world" (6). This evidence includes: a growing body of published inquiry focused on equity issues; increasing work on conceptual frameworks by a broader range of participants; innovative new inquiry support strategies and communities; projects exploring school level change and seeking to inform policy; and, influences on university research and teaching as well as on university-school partnerships.

This is a critical chapter, as it offers hope in a time that many practitioners at all levels are experiencing with despair,

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especially since the hope that new president would move quickly to undo the damage of Bush-era policies died an early death. Yet, to say that there has been progress is not to say the future is certain. This, too, the authors acknowledge:

The prospects for practitioner research as a movement going forward into the next decade likely depends in part on orchestrated efforts to preach beyond the choir and to make the value of this work more obvious to the gatekeepers, policymakers, and politicians who control the discourse about what counts, who knows, and what we should do about it. (p. 35)

Realists as well as optimists, they note several contradictions that will have to be resolved in an effort to gain influence on a national level. Notably, these include reconciling inquiry's essential focus on the local with the need to develop a global perspective, and reconciling inescapably diverse initiatives with the need to develop criteria and methods for assessing them. While—like everyone else who has pondered such issues seriously—the authors have no definitive answers, they believe the balance of the book provides “grist within and beyond the practitioner research movement to debate, invent, and act” on them in the future. I would agree the following chapters do a great deal to move thinking forward by providing some much needed clarification as well as by pointing out some important complexities.

Chapter Two, which schematizes conceptions of inquiry, is likely to be of greatest interest to many readers and of lasting import to the field. It accomplishes two essential tasks: 1) it names five genres of inquiry, detailing both characteristics that unify them and the characteristics that differentiate them from traditional forms of educational research, and 2) it makes a clear distinction between practitioner inquiry and currently popular professional learning communities, which may resemble each other in some superficial ways but which have critical differences that make it essential to discriminate between them. Genres that Cochran-Smith and Lytle identify as clear

inquiry strands include action research/participatory action research; teacher research; self-study; the scholarship of teaching; and practice as research site. These vary in such areas as the scope and site of inquiry and the goals pursued, but the authors find eight shared characteristics:

- Practitioner as researcher
- Core assumptions about links of knowledge, knowers, and knowing
- Professional context as site for study
- Community and collaboration
- Blurred boundaries between inquiry and practice
- New conceptions of validity and generalizability
- Systematicity, including data collection and analysis
- Publicity, public knowledge, and critique (39)

A useful chart offers an outline not only of the genres and their unifying characteristics, but also of the criticisms most often leveled at practitioner inquiry that point to its essential differences from traditional educational research. These include charges that inquiry doesn't generate legitimate knowledge, that it is idiosyncratic rather than scientific, that it is potentially unethical (posing conflicts of interest), and that too often it is advocacy rather than research. A reader working to develop a good understanding of the essentials of inquiry would do well to spend time with this chapter developing a deep understanding of this charted material.

The second half of the chapter is equally important in developing an understanding of why it is critical to understand the shared characteristics of inquiry sufficiently well to differentiate between it and some practices that may appear similar but that actually incorporate radically different assumptions and pursue radically different goals. Specifically, the many iterations of professional learning communities all involve teachers working together in school based-groups that use student and school data to strategize to improve student performance. Again, the authors use graphics to good effect when they offer a Venn diagram indicating similarities and critical differences between

practitioner inquiry and professional learning communities (p. 53). The most striking differences include that while inquiry practitioners draw data from a wide variety of sources (such as student work, observation of students, classroom artifacts, practitioner talk), professional learning communities focus almost exclusively on assessment data, especially tests. And, whereas in inquiry practitioners pursue such diverse and complementary goals as questioning their own assumptions and constructing new curricula to promote better learning experiences and, yes, better lives for their students, professional learning communities focus on improving student outcomes in the interest of better school performance. While practitioner inquiry is widely perceived as crucially advancing teacher professionalism and influence, professional learning communities actually are a tool of those who see teachers more as part of the problem than as the solution. Professional learning communities “mesh neatly with the current rhetoric and reality of school reform and fit easily inside the dominant test-based accountability regime” (55). Indeed, the authors note Hargreaves’ caution that “rather than enriching students’ learning, some communities become vehicles for simply boosting test scores or for surveillance of teachers and monitoring their compliance with school and district mandates” (56). It is essential that anyone engaged in any way with practitioner inquiry understand that the rhetoric of the professional learning community, rich with such appealing terms as *inquiry*, *community*, and *culture*, can in fact create theoretical confusion masking what is essentially a practice inherently disrespectful of, and disempowering to, teachers.

Chapter Three details the “Troubling Images of Teaching in No Child Left Behind,” which are likely already familiar to anyone knowledgeable about contemporary American education but which might be eye-opening for novice readers like pre-service teachers. Chapter Four’s focus on inquiry and the academy is also perhaps of less general interest, with most import for university faculty. That audience will find, however, an interesting discussion of the ways in which inquiry has challenged understandings of research and teaching in the academy.

Chapter Five, which closes Part I, unpacks the book's title idea, "inquiry as stance." In the first part of the chapter, Cochran-Smith and Lytle offer definition beyond that provided in the early pages. Of the several elements detailed, what emerges most clearly is "the position that the overarching purpose of practitioner inquiry is to provide education for a more just and democratic society" (pp. 126-7). That inquiry—like education itself—is inherently political is an idea the authors are clear about:

Fundamental to the notion of inquiry as stance is the idea that educational practice is not simply instrumental in the sense of figuring out how to get things done, but also and more importantly, it is social and political in the sense of deliberating about what to get done, why to get it done, who decides, and whose interests are served. (p. 121)

Writing just after Obama's election, when the authors had some hope for improved conditions, they nevertheless felt "the importance of collective work and of organizing cannot be over-emphasized at this time" (p. 164). How much more urgent the need is now, when federal policy promotes linkages between teacher pay and student test scores and when the President supported the mass firing of teachers in Providence, Rhode Island because of low test scores. The authors point to four specific directions: continuing to deepen local efforts while simultaneously linking various communities; reinventing professionalism to recognize practitioners' collective intellectual capacity; renegotiating relationships among research, policy and practice; and, connecting practitioner inquiry to larger transformative social agendas. Readers who understand the critical need to actively push back against current policy directions will find much here to help them consider immediate strategies for resistance.

In Part II, the collection of practitioner inquiry pieces, the authors get out of the way and let the power of the practice speak for itself. Authors of the chapters represent a broad spectrum of practitioners that range from an early elementary teacher exploring the impact of gender in the writing workshop to a school administrator looking closely

at high school teachers' discussions of race and student achievement. The approaches, data and narratives are equally varied, making clear how adaptable—and useful—inquiry can be to any context and to any concern. These chapters will clearly illuminate for those unfamiliar with the process the many ways that theory may be manifested in practice. While that will be incredibly useful to many readers, what I found most striking about this segment was what it revealed about teachers and teaching. That is: it is inconceivable to me that anyone could read these narratives and doubt that teaching is, above all, a *human* experience and that teachers are—must be, as the authors have claimed earlier—professionals. These authors take note of fleeting nuance in classrooms; they revisit decisions that must be made in the moment, asking whether they did the best thing or something less, and if something less, how things might be made better tomorrow; they hear what students say and what is left unsaid; they draw upon a wide ranging knowledge of research and theory while finding their own ways forward in days and places no other practitioner can know. They are smart. They are passionate. They are committed. They are eloquent. After these glimpses into teachers' classrooms, minds and hearts, no reader could have any doubt about the enormity of the insult delivered whenever the question of *whether* teaching is a profession is asked. If we can't get policy makers to walk in teachers' shoes for a week, or even a day, getting them to actually read such work might go a long way to helping them begin to imagine the richly textured world of the classroom now caricatured in the bubble-sheeted world of simplistic accountability and scripted performance.

Because it is drawn from the stunning work in Part II, the readers' theater in Part III offers a similarly powerful way to render the reality of the teaching life to those outside it. In addition, it offers practitioners who may be isolated in their daily realities the precious knowledge that they are not alone in their questioning, their despair and their joy.

This text as a whole is a journey into conviction and commitment so clear that I suspect that no reader who spends serious time with it will turn the last page unchanged.

It is an essential addition to the library of anyone who believes that children and teachers, learning and growth, democracy and social justice deserve not only our deepest thinking but also our most committed and active support.

About the Reviewer

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