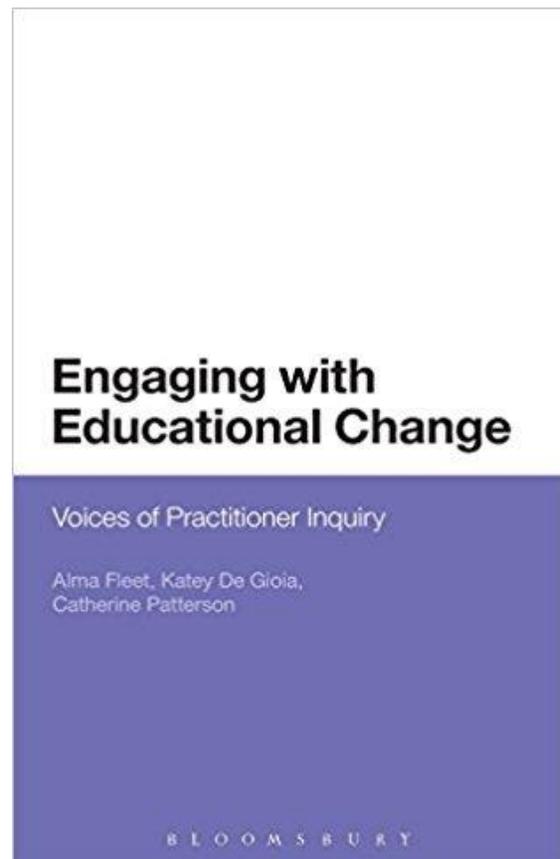




Fleet, A., De Gioia, K., & Patterson, C. (2016). *Engaging with educational change: Voices of practitioner inquiry*. London: Bloomsbury.
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Depending on whom you ask, the concept of practitioner inquiry has been around since John Dewey (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993) or goes back to ancient Aristotle (McFarland & Stansell, 1993). Prone to versions and variants that more or less overlap, practitioner inquiry is best understood as the intentional, systematic study of one's own work for the sake of making that work better. As applied to the field of education, practitioner inquiry as it is currently understood really began in earnest in the latter half of the twentieth century, enjoying worldwide appeal while also enduring far-reaching challenges. In *Engaging with Educational Change: Voices of Practitioner Inquiry*, Alma Fleet, Katey De Gioia, and Catherine Patterson (2016) demonstrate a keen understanding of the deep and tangled roots of inquiry, recognizing how seemingly innocuous overlapping perceptions of what it means to engage in practitioner research can at times negatively impact the process.



While the authors celebrate what practitioner inquiry offers teachers, students, and administrators—whole systems, even, they do not shy away from the significant setbacks that often hinder the powerful potential of this form of inquiry. The authors intentionally set out to amplify inquirers' voices, passionately proclaiming that “in considering the arts and practices of practitioner inquiry, [they] are not only considering the pragmatics of institutions and implementation, but both the humanity of the people involved and the larger educational conversations of which these initiatives are a part” (pp. 5-6). This presents readers with a remarkably realistic and multi-perspectival analysis of practitioner inquiry's role in effecting educational change.

For example, consider the rousing testimony of one teacher-leader, who not only came to appreciate the value of inquiry for improving her own practice, but was also able to share the process with others as a facilitator. She reflects,

When I get excited about research or ideas for improvement I am always enticing others to join and discuss options. Over the years this has instinctively lead [*sic*] me to be a mentor and a leader as I challenge the norm, ask questions that provoke thought, and initiate discussion. (p. 165)

This determined willingness to contest the status quo is part and parcel of adopting an inquiry stance, as conceptualized by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) and highlighted in this book's opening chapters. The teacher's budding leadership capacity is even more prominent when she addresses teachers and teacher educators head-on, admitting, “Educators will surprise you. You need to ask questions and be curious. I'd encourage you to take the step and have a go!” (p. 166). In this manner, Fleet, De Gioia, and Patterson deliberately yield the spotlight to teachers, affirming them as knowledgeable practitioners and delighting

readers with their contributors' frank and genuine voices. This approach is particularly significant considering the book's focus on early childhood contexts, all too often excluded from critical scholarly attention. Indeed, the authors lament the state of affairs that renders an already “undervalued work force” (p. 91) into “an educational sector [...] under-represented in professional initiatives” (p. 169). Fortunately, practitioner inquiry offers a ready remedy, and the teacher researchers featured throughout the book exemplify the rigorous, relevant, and empowering nature of the process.

The illustrative example above also encapsulates the book's consistent emphasis on the benefits of system-wide inquiry endeavors, marked by participation and buy-in from administrators and teachers alike. There is certainly a two-way onus for achieving this goal, but the ideal culture of inquiry as described throughout the book is largely teacher-centered; the teachers, in turn, operate from student-centered motivations. The authors openly embrace this ecological approach and offer countless examples of and justifications for the resulting culture of inquiry, even and especially when, that means exposing messy complexities. This, too, can be attributed to their careful design choices. Through frequent and varied narrative portrayals of teachers, “We hear their voices, sharing their struggles and concerns throughout the process” (p. 75). Moreover, we witness, through them, how a culture of inquiry provides the means of combatting obstacles related to sustainability and system-wide commitment. Every challenge, every instance of confusion or frustration, becomes an opportunity for learning.

The book's rich and multifaceted portrayals of how a culture of inquiry can be fostered and maintained in the face of these challenges are presented “to encourage people who are in similar pursuit of authentic agentic educational change” (p. 14). That said, Fleet, De Gioia, and Patterson may get in the way of

their own goal by recommending an unusual method of reading the text. At the outset, the authors “invite readers to engage with the content in this book in ways that are personally relevant,” adamantly insisting, “it is not necessary to read the whole book in a linear fashion” (p. xii). While their intent to appeal to a wide audience is certainly understandable, and their ability to make an Australian context readily accessible to global readers is admirable, I encourage readers to consider a linear approach in spite of the authorial caveat, so as to grasp more fully the “threads of empowerment” (p. 15) woven so expertly from chapter to chapter.

On the surface, it appears as though readers might indeed be able to navigate to the sections of most interest to them. However, even someone purportedly well-versed in practitioner inquiry stands to gain from perusing Part One: Exploring Practitioner Inquiry, wherein the authors astutely align critical components of inquiry with key principles of adult learning. Ostensibly provided for those who are new to inquiry, these elements nevertheless offer experienced inquirers—whether teachers or teacher educators—a chance to review and reflect on their own practice, which is always time well spent. Moreover, encountering these introductory notes with novice inquirers in mind allows facilitators, as those who are “scaffolding the development of inquiry approaches,” the chance “to be sensitive” to formidable concerns and seek out equitable, democratic solutions (p. 23). One helpful suggestion is to teach the cyclical process of inquiry through a spiraling approach, such that form follows function.

In that spirit, Part Two: Illustrating Inquiry Initiatives, ably builds on and extends the principles elucidated in Part One. These lively tales “of delight and excitement, of challenge and uncertainty” are arguably the heart of the book, as they “deepen our understanding of how the puzzle of teacher research may come together to create effective

and lasting change” (p. 42). Further appealing to a wide audience consisting of all levels of familiarity with practitioner inquiry, one chapter explains how teachers evolved from saying they did not have time for teacher research to “How can we change things to make time?” (p. 95). Witnessing the process that prompted this transformation and the eager contagion that even spread to some parents is truly inspirational, whether you are a newcomer who doubts that inquiry is even feasible, or a veteran facilitator, constantly battling this critique.

In Part Three: Critical Reflections, Fleet, De Gioia, and Patterson stay true to their word to present an authentic account of practitioner inquiry, which means acknowledging that it is by no means a cure-all. The final chapters thus offer an important complement to the preceding section, rife with such wonderful accounts of teacher researchers’ own lived experiences. Because the third section articulates and reflects on the book’s central themes, I maintain that all readers should strive for a cover-to-cover approach.

Readers outside of Australia who wonder if this book is a good fit should consider whether they, too, operate within “a climate of measurement, funding concerns and politically driven agendas” (p. 5). Odds are, far too many of us experience what Fleet, De Gioia, and Patterson decry as “climates of constraint” (p. 9), intimately or even unwittingly acquainted with “the resistance of bureaucracies to institutional change” (p. 18). Franceyn O’Connor, one of their contributors, demonstrates how these stifling, stagnant school climates can in fact be ripe for inquiry, so long as we lend an ear to the voices of those most acutely affected: teachers and students. *Engaging with Educational Change: Voices of Practitioner Inquiry* models this practice and encourages educational stakeholders from all corners and contexts to indeed “take the step and have a go!” (p. 166). For those unfamiliar with practitioner inquiry, the book

provides the means to dive in, whereas those as experienced with the concept should allow Fleet, De Gioia, and Patterson to provoke

critical contemplation about how to become ever better inquirers.

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