



An On-line Journal  
for Teacher Research

## **A Starting Point for Practitioner Inquiry: A Review of *The Reflective Educator's Guide to Classroom Research***

**Christopher B. Crowley**

As a teacher, I generally tend to be skeptical of books that are intended “for teachers.” I often worry that some of these books talk down to teachers by overly focusing on how-to instructional approaches. That is to say, the tendency of certain books “for teachers” to emphasize quasi-prescriptive notions of “best practice” downplays the significance of teacher knowledge—essentially implying that a given instructional strategy or a particular approach will work for all students, if only teachers are able to implement it in the “right” way. Obviously I am not suggesting that learning a new instructional strategy is not a worthwhile endeavor. But, as teachers, one of the significant things that we must remember is that our professional work entails the challenging task of learning through reflective practice, inquiry, and collaboration.

In first part of this essay, I will introduce my discussion of *The Reflective Educator's Guide to Classroom Research* by describing my general impressions of the book. Next, I will provide a brief overview of the book and its main ideas. Finally, I will discuss some critical considerations that I believe are worth considering when discussing practitioner inquiry.

### **Initial Impressions**

*The Reflective Educator's Guide to Classroom Research* is largely intended for an audience of practicing teachers. Those interested in reading a post-structural analysis of reflective practice and teacher research will probably be disappointed by the prompts/exercises and the text-boxes with bulleted summaries of main

ideas. At the same time, this is not a book that necessarily downplays all of the complexities that are part of the processes of teaching and learning, so those interested in reading about quick-fix teaching strategies will also probably be left feeling dissatisfied. Instead, *The Reflective Educator's Guide to Classroom Research* offers a seemingly straightforward overview of practitioner research—one that I would argue is deceptively simple, insofar as it provides an almost step-by-step approach to beginning an inquiry into professional practice. That said, the book offers readers with an accessible discussion of practitioner inquiry. For those both new to the profession and those with many years of experience, the book provides numerous examples and exercises to consider throughout the process of inquiring into one's own practice.

### **Reflective Practice & Classroom Research**

The first part of the book focuses on the process of starting an inquiry and conducting classroom research. Beginning with a brief overview of practitioner inquiry, in addition to touching on some of the research that informs this tradition, the authors attempt to connect some current trends—data driven decision making, differentiated instruction, response to intervention—to the politics of education. By positioning teachers as generators of knowledge about teaching and learning, practitioner inquiry challenges the top-down dissemination of knowledge and aspects of certain forms of professional development that construct/view teachers as technicians. Dana and Yendol-Hoppey argue that the process of

conducting inquiries into practice helps to situate practitioners as active participants in shaping the direction of the profession.

With regards to beginning a systematic inquiry into practice, the authors choose to discuss the process of developing a research question in terms of “wonderings.” Dana and Yendol-Hoppey suggest that a practitioner’s “wonderings” are likely to emerge from at least one of eight “passions”: a child, the curriculum, content knowledge, teaching strategies, assumptions about practice, professional identity, issues of social justice, and the contexts of teaching and learning. The authors offer exercises/prompts for the reader, in addition to examples from teacher-researchers who discuss the concerns that framed their own inquiries.

Dana and Yendol-Hoppey emphasize the importance of collaboration when conducting practitioner research. As the authors recognize, teaching is complex and conducting research is difficult. Although the structure and organization of schools frequently represent obstacles to sustained collaboration, struggling against these challenges has the potential to become part of a shared or parallel inquiry.

As with all legitimate research, practitioner inquiry involves a systematic collection of data from a variety of sources. *The Reflective Educator’s Guide to Classroom Research* presents a series of strategies for gathering data from different sources: field notes, artifacts, interviews, video, journaling and blogging, conducting surveys, standardized test scores, feedback from a learning community, and the research of others. While it is absolutely true that taking an inquiry stance (Cochran-Smith & Lytle 1993, 2009) towards practice is valuable over the course of one’s professional career, establishing a timeframe for a study is also important because the amount of data collected can quickly become overwhelming. The authors note that it is important to be mindful of the point at which information over-saturation occurs and prevents further insight.

The second part of the book focuses on the process of sense-making/data analysis and situating an ongoing inquiry within broader contexts of education research. As Dana and Yendol-Hoppey remind the reader, analyzing data is not a straightforward matter. To make the task less daunting, the authors suggest a sequenced process of description, sense making, interpretation, and implication guiding teacher-researchers through data analysis. The examples included from teacher-researchers illustrate some of the various ways different types of data may be coded.

Writing is part of the sense-making process. Not only does this entail describing the study and articulating findings, but it also involves further reflection. Dana and Yendol-Hoppey highlight particular aspects that teacher-researchers must address in the write-up of an inquiry: the context of the study and relevant background information, a description of the research design, a presentation of findings and implications, and the questions raised by the study. Although formally writing-up an inquiry might feel like an unnecessary step for practitioners primarily interested in improving their individual teaching, taking the time to do this encourages further collaboration among educators and helps in the process of making research public.

Obviously concerns about research quality are not unique to practitioner research, and people familiar with teacher research and practitioner inquiry recognize that there can be wide variations regarding the quality of a study. While practitioner research offers important contributions to the field, it remains important not to romanticize this work. Dana and Yendol-Hoppey suggest assessing the quality of practitioner inquiry according to several dimensions. These include the context of the study and the extent to which the site of an inquiry is adequately described and taken into account, the dissonance at the base of the inquiry as well as the purpose of the study, the research design and the thorough collection of data, the contributions of the study to professional learning and reflective practice, and lastly the implications of the research. Furthermore, I would suggest that part of

assessing the quality of a study involves the extent to which the factors mentioned above address the gritty materialities of teaching and learning in today's schools.

Making an inquiry public is an important aspect of practitioner research. For one, sharing research helps to make the complexities of practice visible by presenting aspects of the intellectual work involved in teaching—work which often tends to be less visible within the largely compartmentalized structure of schooling. Teaching is political work, and practitioner research offers important contributions, especially given current pressures to script and standardize instruction. Dana and Yendol-Hoppey argue, in part, that the process of sharing inquiries helps to position practitioner-researchers as active contributors to professional knowledge about teaching and learning. Moreover, by participating in broader conversations about educational research, educators have the potential to take a larger role in shaping the profession, rather than merely reacting to policy mandates that are passed down from above. The authors note several forums and conferences at which to present practitioner inquiries. They also mention examples of annual events organized by/for teacher-researchers. Dana and Yendol-Hoppey conclude the book by encouraging teachers to participate in these professional research communities.

### **Critical Considerations**

As I have discussed throughout this essay, both teaching and practitioner inquiry require difficult work. I do not romanticize the challenging tasks of reflective teaching and practitioner research when considering the larger social and political contexts of education. Some circumstances involve beginning the process of conducting classroom research by inquiring into one's own practices and having to confront directly the demands of particular reform agendas. These reforms may simplistically focus on the implementation of "what works" without taking into serious consideration the professional learning required to understand difficult questions

related to issues of why, how, and for whom. *The Reflective Educator's Guide to Classroom Research* takes an important step towards addressing these and similar concerns by encouraging practitioners, to continue to reflect on the complexities of our ongoing work in classrooms, schools, and communities.

Although the authors acknowledge some of the challenges and complexities of conducting practitioner research, I believe that the perspective described in *The Reflective Educator's Guide to Classroom Research* is deceptively simple in what it asks. It is important to keep in mind that while this book presents a seemingly linear approach, practitioner inquiry is not nearly as straightforward as it might initially seem. The process of making one's own knowledge problematic is by no means an easy task. For example, it can be easy to have "wonderings" about something for which one has a ready-made solution already in mind. In other words, the process of designing practitioner research around an implied answer or an uninterrogated assumption will limit an argument to confirming existing teaching practices and beliefs, instead of encouraging a genuine inquiry into practice. However, as a starting point for an evolving inquiry, the exercises, prompts, and anecdotes from teacher-researchers in the book offer quick examples and useful suggestions for practitioners engaged in this kind of critical work.

Delving into a sustained inquiry is neither a means to an end nor a matter of transitioning from novice to expert. Rather, such work is valuable to the kinds of learning that take place throughout one's professional career. Although I have concerns about the text's, step-by-step guide to practitioner inquiry, if it ultimately encourages more fellow teachers to explore further the complexities of our evolving work and the dissonances that we encounter in the classrooms each day, I believe this book makes a timely and worthwhile contribution.

## References

- Cochran-Smith, M. & Lytle, S. L. (1993). *Inside/Outside: Teacher Research and Knowledge*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Cochran-Smith, M. & Lytle, S. L. (2009). *Inquiry as Stance: Practitioner Research for the Next Generation*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Dana, N. F., & Yendol-Hoppey, D. (2009). *The Reflective Educator's Guide to Classroom Research: Learning to Teach and Teaching to Learn Through Practitioner Inquiry*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.