A Review of *Inquiry as Stance: Practitioner Research for the Next Generation* by Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan L. Lytle

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When Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan L. Lytle's *Inside/Outside: Teacher Research and Knowledge* was published in 1993, it challenged the assumption that pedagogical knowledge is generated from the "outside-in" by university-based researchers and only then imparted to teachers. By arguing for the validity and necessity of practitioner research, Cochran-Smith and Lytle rejected prevalent power hierarchies in education as well as transmission models of teaching and teacher professional development.

In *Inquiry as Stance: Practitioner Research for the Next Generation*, the sequel to *Inside/Outside*, the authors note that educators now find themselves teaching and learning in "trying times" (p. 5). Marked by test-based accountability, annual school progress reports, and pay-for-performance, the era of No Child Left Behind often threatens to undermine the agency and pedagogy of educators. But at the same time, Cochran-Smith and Lytle point out that "more and more practitioners are now expected to be the gatherers and interpreters of school and classroom data as part of larger initiatives to improve school achievement" (p. 1). Rather than leaving decisions in the hands of policymakers or administrators, Cochran-Smith and Lytle suggest that educators can play key roles in the design, implementation, and evaluation of educational reforms. As a result, practitioner research should be considered vital for the success of large-scale reforms as well as for the development of teacher knowledge and practice. In using the phrase "inquiry as stance," the authors posit that educators' learning, knowing, doing, and being are also part and parcel of broader movements for social change and social justice.

Inquiry as Stance: Practitioner Research for the Next Generation is divided into three parts. Part I: Theorizing and Contextualizing Practitioner Research defines and details practitioner research, which the authors use in an expansive way to include teachers as well as administrators, university faculty, community-based educators and activists, and parents. Cochran-Smith and Lytle note the diverse historical and epistemological roots of practitioner inquiry and argue that, at its heart, "most versions of practitioner inquiry share a sense of the practitioner as knower and agent for educational and social change" (p. 37). In much of the research on instruction and leadership, practitioners serve as informants or objects of study for university-based researchers. While such research can be valuable, the authors argue that practitioner research is instrumental in questioning our fundamental assumptions about teaching and learning. Consequently, practitioner research problematizes the "ends question" (p. 9) in education.

Cochran-Smith and Lytle highlight five themes evident in practitioner research over the past decade: (1) the emphasis on issues of equity, engagement, and agency; (2) the development of new conceptual frameworks; (3) the continued growth and reinvention of inquiry communities; (4) the use of practitioner research to shape school and district reform and educational policy; and (5) the persistence of efforts to alter the relationships of research and practice in universities" (p. 11). Taken together, these elements have the potential to give educators the tools necessary to foster student learning and implement educational reforms successfully. However, the authors caution that school-based inquiry can be co-opted and turned into a top-down process that fails to meaningfully address school issues. As Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen (2007) note, many school districts equate practitioner research as "poring over test scores" (p. xvii). In contrast, practitioner research draws on multiple data sources to tackle local problems that educators have encountered in the course of their pedagogical practice. Often in collaboration with other members of the school community, teacher researchers then work intentionally and systematically to identify and address problems related to teaching and learning.

Here, the concepts of community and collaboration are of critical importance. The authors cite several large-scale studies that have found a link between a strong community focus in schools and students' performance on achievement tests (Bryk, Camburn, & Louis, 1999; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). Cochran-Smith and Lytle state that "from a perspective of practitioner inquiry, communities are understood as both means toward larger goals and as ends in themselves" (p. 54). Rather than focusing on short-term goals or quick fixes, practitioner inquiry aims to disrupt existing structures of power and privilege that serve to marginalize students and their lived experiences. In writing a sequel to *Inside/Outside*, Cochran-Smith and Lytle point out the troubling image of teachers and teacher knowledge present in No Child Left Behind legislation. They focus on two core problems: the restrictive and outdated view of subject matter knowledge and the notion that there is a specific set of scientifically-based instructional practices. Cochran-Smith and Lytle argue that "making the teacher 'the answer to the problems of education' detracts attention away from under-resourced schools and other systematic factors, such as poverty and racism" (p. 73). By addressing issues related to No Child Left Behind, the authors offer insights into the current climate of educational reform and the role of educators are expected to play in enacting change.

University-based education researchers will also find *Inquiry as Stance* useful. Cochran-Smith and Lytle draw on their own experiences to explore the process of "working the dialectic" (p. 87) between inquiry and practice within the culture of research-focused universities. When a professor works with his or her students and uses a university course as a site of inquiry or when a graduate student opts to use practitioner inquiry for his or her dissertation, he or she is engaging in the constructive disruption of university culture, Cochran-Smith and Lytle argue. This disruption is critical for K-12 schools as well as for universities. As educators are inundated with "scripted curricula and teacher-proof materials" (p. 125), they must constantly work to engage in a cycle of questioning, observing, acting, and learning. Moreover, such work cannot happen in isolation—its success often depends on ongoing collaboration and dialogue with other members of the school community.

Part II: Practitioners on Teaching, Learning, and School Leadership consists of eight chapters written by individuals engaged in practitioner research in K-12 schools or in teacher education programs. These chapters are distinct in content and tone, and all offer key insights into the process of practitioner research. Gary McPhail, an elementary teacher in Massachusetts, discusses the Writer's Workshop model and notes that, very often, literacy is constructed as a feminized activity that values personal narratives above other genres. By focusing on David, a "bad boy" in his class, McPhail argues that educators need to include other forms of nonfiction, for example letter writing and multimodal texts, such as comic books, in Writer's Workshop. An elementary teacher in Philadelphia, Gillian Maimon, shares her written reflections on an at-risk student in her classroom. She notes, "I intentionally observe and describe day-to-day life in

my classroom in order to extend the boundaries of what I am able to perceive" (p. 214). Kelly A. Harper, an assistant professor at Canisius College, works to use children's literature to extend her students' thinking beyond their own raced and classed experiences. Along the same lines, Delvin Dinkins examines his own positionality as an African-American school administrator working to address issues of race, class, and achievement with classroom teachers. He focuses on the discourses that surround these issues and notes that educators in his school often "othered" African-American students while failing to interrogate their own dominant cultural ideologies.

Also in Part II, Rob Simon, a PhD candidate at the University of Pennsylvania, discusses his work with pre-service teachers around the concept and practice of transparency in the classroom. He argues that concepts like transparency, which invite openness between educators and students, are socially-constructed and negotiated over time rather than being fixed entities. In another example, by reflecting on her experiences as a child of immigrants, a student, a teacher, and a researcher, Swati Mehta uses the lens of cultural hybridity. A Ph.D. candidate at Boston University, she states, "It was only through research that I began to find spaces where I could 'work the hyphens'" (p. 297) and embrace the multiple aspects of identity. Like Mehta, Diane Waff also takes a look back at her experiences inside the classroom and out. Now at the University of Pennsylvania, she notes the importance of practitioner inquiry to promote collaborative learning and critical thinking. Finally, Gerald Campano, an assistant professor at Indiana University, conceptualizes teacher research as a collective struggle for humanization. He concludes "as long as students are disenfranchised because of their identities, the work of the teacher researcher movement should continue" (p. 338). While Part I of Inquiry as Stance laid the groundwork for readers to understand the historical, theoretical, and pedagogical implications of practitioner inquiry, Part II shows how educators have employed this form of research and reflection in their own classrooms. Through their diverse voices and perspectives, the contributors to Part II offer key insights into the processes and purposes of practitioner inquiry. As always, the self is at the center of practitioner inquiry; Part II illustrates how educators can use such research in order to critically examine their own positionality and practices.

Part III: Practitioners' Voices is a reader's theater script that incorporates the experiences, insights, and reflections of twenty educators. In conjunction with the publication of *Inside/Outside* in 1993, Cochran-Smith and Lytle organized the first performance of Practitioners' Voices at the Ethnography in Education Research Forum at the University of Pennsylvania. The reader's theater script in Part III includes 20 educators who work in K-12 school and universities, including authors of earlier chapters. Cochran Smith and Lytle explain that the script "juxtaposes related and contrasting perspectives on practitioner research and makes visible some of the many personal, professional, and political decisions and struggles practitioners face every day in their work in classrooms, schools, and other educational contexts" (p. 344).

Taken together, the three parts of *Inquiry as Stance: Practitioner Research for the Next Generation* illustrate how practitioner inquiry raises questions about the fundamental purposes of teaching and learning, uncovers best practices, and promotes schools as sites of innovation. Not only does it speak to the experiences of current educators and university researchers, it also serves as a valuable resource for preservice teachers who are entering the field in these trying times. In fact, it should be required reading in our nation's teacher education programs. This volume reviews the theoretical and empirical work on practitioner inquiry to date, and it offers clearly-written, well-supported arguments for the importance of practitioner inquiry as we move ahead. More than ever, practitioner inquiry provides a way for educators to understand and address pressing issues in schools, including the pressure of high stakes testing, the needs of English language learners and the role of digital media in content area learning. Perhaps the only question we can ask is why any school would fail to promote practitioner inquiry as an institutional practice that informs classroom instruction and that shapes professional development.

References

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