**Book Review**


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In the Forward to *Using Action Inquiry in Engaged Research: An Organizing Guide* by Edward P. St. John, Kim Callahan Lijana, and Glenda D. Musoba, Timothy Eatman persuasively observes that the text “reads in part like a synthesized collection of professional development modules” (p. xii). Drawing on a series of case studies of initiatives to promote college access, which began in 2009, the authors explain and offer examples of their Action Inquiry Model (AIM). The model calls for partnerships among schools, universities, and nonprofit organizations to develop actionable theories to identify and address gaps in opportunity for students’ access to college.

The book contains useful strategies for partnerships that unite action and inquiry to improve student outcomes. However, the generalized nature of the case studies and the fragmented organization of the book require a high degree of concentration and commitment from the reader to benefit from its insights. Additionally, the authors make no connections between their model of action inquiry and the considerable body of scholarship on action research in education (Atweh, Weeks, & Kemmis, 1998; Coughlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014; Stringer, 2014). This surprising omission, along with the small number of academic references overall, contribute to the impression of the text as an expanded professional development manual, somewhat apart from scholarly tradition.

Intended as a guide to designing and assessing interventions to increase equity in educational systems and practices, *Using Action Inquiry in Engaged Research* describes the model used by a group of initiatives in Projects Promoting Equity in Higher and Urban Education, part of the National Center for Institutional Diversity. The projects range from systemic interventions such as the DC Research Consortium on College Access and Retention, to a qualitative assessment of mentoring programs at two schools in Detroit. Action inquiry, explained as “observations, reflections, and information from research,” undergirds each of the projects (p. 5). Author Edward St. John, professor emeritus at the University of Michigan’s Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education, has an extensive record of scholarship on school reform, and college access and retention programs, and appears to be the primary author of the action inquiry model. Co-authors, Kim Callahan Lijana, Associate Director at the Center for Educational Outreach at the University of Michigan, and Glenda Musoba, Associate Professor of Educational Administration and Human Resource Development at Texas A&M University, collaborated closely with St. John in the research on the action inquiry model. As such, the authors’ qualifications for writing this book are exemplary.

Following the introduction, the book is organized into five chapters, each focusing on one of the five phases of action inquiry: “Getting Started,” “Focus on Barriers to Social Justice,” “Organizing for Change,” “Using Information for Change,” and “Learning from Experience.” The introduction identifies the five phases, listing key steps under each phase that practitioners should use in partnership with researchers to “build knowledge and skills to inform the change process” (p. 1). Chapters two through five begin with a box listing the key steps associated with the respective phases. This format, while good in theory, is disconcerting and confusing in practice, since the list in each chapter’s box does not match the list offered in the book’s introduction for that chapter.

Chapters two through four include descriptions of steps for each phase, case studies from college access projects exemplifying these steps, and two sets of discussion prompts, one for practice, and one for reflection. Chapter two, focusing on barriers to social justice, begins with an insightful critique of the traditional use of research in education reform. The authors observe that data tends to be used for “control and regulation rather than for targeting reform at critical challenges;” and efforts to implement best practices fail to fully consider challenges of implementation, and erroneously treat all students the same, instead of considering local needs (p. 26). However, the sparse detail offered in the case studies that follow do not provide sufficient information for the broad and general discussion questions. For example, one question asks “How does the concentration of poverty and racial minorities in urban centers undermine efforts to promote equity in education” (p. 29)? While readers may have data from their own experience to respond to this question, the case
studies offer little insight into the very questions they are meant to help answer. The third chapter of the book, “Organizing for Change,” lists some general advice for bringing together diverse partners in system-wide reform efforts: “recognize strengths of partners . . . undertake feasible initiatives . . . and use action inquiry” (p. 41). Three case studies of systemic reform are presented: the Washington DC Consortium on College Access and Retention, the national network College for Every Student (CFES), and the Detroit Consortium. These studies, more detailed than those in the previous chapter, offer useful strategies for coordinating multiple parties to undertake reform and action inquiry together.

My primary concern with this chapter is that labeling this work as “organizing for social change” is misleading. This nomenclature evokes “community organizing,” an approach to education reform that is quite different from those in this book. Community organizing involves students, parents, educators, and community members in decision-making, research, action, and evaluation; and gives greater attention to changing the power arrangements that lead to inequalities in schooling than the approaches described in this book (Warren & Mapp, 2011).

The clearest and most useful chapter in the book is chapter four, which focuses on using information for change. The authors identify steps for this work: “build an understanding of the challenge . . . look internally and externally for solutions,” “assess possible solutions, and develop action plans” (pp. 71-72). The detailed and rich case studies offer strategies for data sharing among partners, and innovative approaches to sharing data with practitioners, such as “data road shows” with high school principals and their colleagues working on college access (p. 88). The chapter mentions action research as one method that can provide a source of data for action inquiry, listing basic steps in using this approach, with no citations for sources, and omission of the important values underlying it. In the final chapter of the book, each author shares insights about action inquiry garnered from their research on the projects.

In sum, educators, administrators, and scholar-practitioners of school reform can glean useful insights from Using Action Inquiry in Engaged Research. It may be worth their while to push past the book’s issues with organization to add some new strategies to their repertoires. However, I would recommend instead that those interested in partnerships to effect deep change in issues of equity in schools turn to the body of scholarship on Participatory Action Research (PAR) for education reform (Cammarota & Fine, 2010; Fox et al., 2010; Pyne, Scott, & Long, 2013). PAR elucidates the issues that are important to a community through dialogue and collaborative data collection and analysis, and then creates and implements a plan of action to address these issues. In contrast to the Action Inquiry Model, PAR is grounded in a rich, coherent conceptual framework, and engages a broader group of participants in research to address inequities in education.

References