

St. John, E. P., Lijana, K. C., & Musoba, G. D. (2017). *Using action inquiry in engaged research: An organizing guide*. Sterling, VA: Stylus. 166 pp.

Review by Jessica V. Barnes-Najor



Engaged research is a broad term used to classify research endeavors that involve researchers and community members partnering to address a community-relevant question (Doberneck, Glass, & Schweitzer, 2010). Given the focus on community relevance, engaged research is generally used as a mechanism to support action to address questions posed by the community. Because many different disciplines and sectors employ engaged research approaches to gather information to support our understanding of what happens in natural settings, the terms used to describe the participatory process are varied and wide-reaching. Some of the terms used to describe such efforts include *community-based participatory research*, *community-based research*, *tribal participatory research*, *systemic action research*, *participatory action research*, *action inquiry*, and *participatory rapid appraisal* (Burns, 2007; Fisher & Ball, 2003; Israel, Schulz, Parker, & Becker, 1998; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; Wallerstein & Duran, 2017). In St. John, Lijana, and Musoba's *Using Action Inquiry in Engaged Research: An Organizing Guide* (2017), engaged research and action inquiry are used to describe distinct elements of the engaged process in the study of promoting social justice in education.

In the Introduction, St. John, Lijana, and Musoba provide definitions of *action inquiry* and *engaged scholarship* specific to their research field, and in the five subsequent chapters, the authors further define the terms and provide examples of these definitions in use. As stated in the Introduction, "Action inquiry provides a means for designing and evaluating intervention in education systems and practices to promote equity" (p. 1). The authors then define *engaged scholarship* as "a strategy that educators, administrators, and students can use in

partnerships with researchers to build knowledge and skills to support and inform the change process" (p. 1). It is interesting that the authors define *engaged scholarship* as a strategy used by community (educators, administrators, and students). Others who have explored the features of engaged scholarship have described the processes and strategies as those actively used by community and research partners alike (Fisher & Ball, 2003; Israel, Schulz, Parker, & Becker, 1998; Wallerstein & Duran, 2017). This perspective is likely driven by the tightly bound disciplinary focus of the book. Although the work is focused exclusively on action inquiry and engaged research in promoting equity in the education system, many of the organizing principles and key points are relevant across disciplines. In this review, I will explore the organizing principles and key points in each of the five chapters, describing how they apply to engaged research broadly.

In "Getting Started," Chapter 1, the authors provide a broader definition of *action inquiry*, one in which *action inquiry* is "defined as observations, reflections, and information from research" (p. 5). Using this broader definition, they describe how the initial processes of action inquiry can be used to support efforts to reduce educational inequities. They outline three initial processes important for the approach within the field, which, when broadly defined, are certainly critical in supporting engaged research in any discipline: (1) Develop an actionable theory of change, (2) identify committed partners and form networks, and (3) gather information about community challenges and strengths.

Providing guidance for developing action within *action inquiry* in Chapter 2, "Focus on Barriers to Social Justice," the authors highlight ways to address underlying causes

of identified problems rather than focusing on the symptoms of those problems. The authors describe three necessary practices that can be described in broad, interdisciplinary terms: (1) Identifying barriers that can be addressed by intervention, (2) gathering existing data to inform the development of the intervention, and (3) analyzing data to understand challenges and identify potential interventions. Although these three practices can be used to support the initial planning phases for intervention projects across disciplines or sectors without using engaged processes, the examples in Chapter 2 illustrate how the collaboration within an engaged process allows resource and knowledge sharing.

In “Organizing for Change,” Chapter 3, organizing is described as a core process within *action inquiry*. Four tasks critical for organizing change are presented, and examples are provided to illustrate how these tasks can be used to support equity in education. The four tasks presented are actionable steps that are important for engaged intervention research across disciplines. The first of these four tasks, organizing workgroups with a variety of stakeholders, is a critical first step, as these partnerships combine the knowledge of practitioners, policy advocates, and researchers to guide action. Within the alignment of partnerships, workgroups are then able to participate in activities related to the second task, identifying feasible projects that will provide rapid results. Once projects are identified, workgroups are encouraged to engage in the third task, planning and conducting evaluation activities that can guide and support the development of the project. The fourth task identified in this chapter is focused on the use and dissemination of findings. Throughout all four tasks, the partnership is integral to the success of the project. It is through the partnership that the work is conducted. This is reflected clearly in the case examples provided at the end of Chapter 3.

The emphasis on “action” within action inquiry, as described by St. John, Lijana, and Musoba, is a central tenet throughout the book. What is the purpose of research on education if not to help us make positive changes in our educational system? In order to make such changes, action must be taken. Chapter 4 serves as a guide for how research can be used to support taking action for creating change through policy

and practice. At the heart of action research is the notion that there is a team, or workgroup as discussed by the authors, consisting of community members, practitioners, and researchers who partner to codevelop an understanding of the problem, identify and assess potential solutions, and develop an action plan to address it. Research is described as an integral and parallel process that informs the workgroup. After providing case examples of how action research and action inquiry inform change agents in school settings, Chapter 5 presents an integrative summary of these processes through reflections on the authors' own experiences.

What is most intriguing about this book is the way engaged research, action inquiry, and action research are described broadly and then applied very specifically to the field of education and the challenge of equity in the U.S. education system. Consequently, this book might be most useful for those new to employing engaged research practices to address equity in the education system. For those considering reading the book, there are two primary critiques of the work to consider: (1) the challenging readability and flow of the text and (2) the lack of depth of the content. First, it is difficult for the reader to follow the examples provided, as they are described in pieces across different chapters, requiring the reader to move back and forth through the book. This is complicated by the use of a plethora of acronyms that are introduced in early chapters and then returned to in later chapters. Readers will need to look up the acronyms to recall their meaning and understand later portions of the text. Although this critique is focused on the readability of the book, it is related to the second critique regarding the depth of the content. Perhaps in part due to the lack of continuity and flow through the book, the reader never quite gets a sense of the whole or the big picture of what it means to use action inquiry in engaged research. The lists of the principles and ways to engage community in research that are offered across the chapters, without additional supporting text, lack the depth necessary to provide readers with an understanding of the intricacies of the interconnections within an engaged research project. Still, notwithstanding these criticisms, the book provides a helpful starting point for readers new to these concepts.

For those wanting a deeper dive into these concepts, a number of interrelated literature

bases extend St. John, Lijana, and Musoba's book. Recent work has illuminated the vast discrepancies in educational outcomes for students of different socioeconomic backgrounds, racial and ethnic backgrounds, and gender identities (Ahram, Fergus & Noguera, 2011; Skiba et al., 2011). School-based teacher teams working in tandem with researchers to use data to inform racial equity efforts (Coburn & Russell, 2008; Sun, Loeb, & Grissom, 2017; Sun, Penuel, Frank, Gallagher, & Youngs, 2013) serve as an interesting and tangible example of the work discussed by St. John, Lijana, and Musoba. These school-based teams work to change, at a fundamental level, how the education system functions, disrupting disproportionalities in pedagogy and student discipline practices (Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Sullivan, Artiles, & Hernandez-Saca, 2015). The goal of such efforts is to change the education system by addressing individual, collective, and structural policies and practices; such systemic changes are challenging to enact. Extending the model of school-based teams, some researchers are including teams in the process of codesigning systems change ef-

forts (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016; Engestrom, 2011; Ishimaru, Rajendran, Nolan, & Bang, 2018).

These efforts highlight the importance of the principles and practices described in this book, and they also provide a more in-depth exploration regarding what we need to know about conducting engaged research to create systems change broadly. Although focused on supporting equity in educational systems, the principles and practices are similar across disciplines and sectors. Engaged research in disciplines as diverse as medicine, fisheries and wildlife, and psychology has moved toward practices that involve teams of researchers, practitioners, and community members (Collins et al., 2018; Hartley & Robertson, 2006; McGreavy, Randall, Quiring, Hathaway, & Hillyer, 2018; Schmittdiel, Grumbach, & Selby, 2010; Vaughn et al., 2018). The goal of these efforts is to cocreate knowledge that will inform the practices, policies, and regulations structuring the system of focus.



About the Reviewer

Jessica V. Barnes-Najor is director for community partnerships in the Office for Public Engagement and Scholarship at Michigan State University. Her current research interests include collaborative approaches to building and supporting research networks with American Indian and Alaska Native early childhood education programs, cultural alignment of research measurement, and supporting young children's development through high-quality interactions. She received her Ph.D. in psychology from Michigan State University.

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