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Book review: McDonagh, C., Roche, M., Sullivan, B., & Glenn, M. (2019). *Enhancing Practice through Classroom Research: A teacher's guide to professional development*. UK: Routledge.

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Structured in the form of an action research process with vignettes from the authors' research accounts, this highly-readable book includes five main sections: the process of a self-study action research project is described in the first four sections with the last one concerned with the contribution that action research can make towards well-being in the teaching profession. It features classroom action research which aims to support professional development and is a follow-up to Volume One, with the same title, published in McDonagh *et al.,* 2012.

In each of the first four sections, the author describes and explains the process, gives a personal example, and provides reflective questions and suggestions for further reading. Like Dewey (1933), they identify openmindedness, whole-heartedness and intellectual responsibility as qualities of reflective practitioners and add 'intellectual curiosity' to Dewey's list. Throughout the book, self-study action research and Living Theory are closely linked in using values as standards of judgement or criteria for evaluating the research, in the concept of 'experiencing oneself as a living contradiction' (Whitehead,1989) and in drawing frequently on Whitehead and McNiff (2006).

Section One: *Thinking Professionally - Reflecting on Practice.* Mary Roche identifies a research question and the rationale for choosing it as she asks:

> "how do I change what I'm doing so as to transform my classroom from a monological one, where I do most of the talking, to a more dialogical one where I provide opportunities for my students to talk?"

She takes us with her on her journey from 'talking at' primary school children to engaging them in discussion.

Section Two: *Critical Thinking about Practice.* Máirín Glenn outlines ideas around critical thinking and encourages readers to get inside the assumptions they make about their everyday work and problematise them. She emphasises the importance of having oneself as the focus for the research but cautions that action research can be a messy and non-linear process. Ideas around praxis, the role played by critical friends and the essential role of professional reading are examined. She saw herself as a living contradiction (Whitehead 1989), when she saw that her educational values around care and the recognition of the human nature of people were not enacted in her everyday work. When she taught in a very small rural primary school in Ireland in the late 1990s, digital technology was becoming more readily accessible for educational purposes. She found the way multimedia helped children whose learning-strengths were not of a mathematical or linguistic nature to find confidence in expressing their learning.

Section Three: *What to do about the questions identified?* Caitriona McDonagh puts forward a five-step practical plan to advance the chosen research topic, offers suggestions on data-gathering methods, including issues around validity and ethics, and how the writing of a research report can potentially contribute to the knowledge base of the teaching profession. She describes some practical examples from her classroom research between 1998 and early 2000 as she taught students aged four to twelve years who had special education needs. This chapter looks at the bigger picture of how research methodologies can help you, as a teacher-researcher, to formalise your actions, reflections and evaluations when she questions the practical relevance of three research paradigms: positive, interpretive and action research, as outlined by Kivunja and Kuyini (2017) and Bassey (1990). She shares that her research methodology is a personal, practical, context-driven, collaborative research approach that allows her to investigate her practice and resonates with the explanation of self-study and living theory action research approaches of over the past 13 years.

Section Four: *Generating Evidence from Data – Making Meaning.* Bernie Sullivan shares the process of analysing your data and using it to provide evidence of any enhancement that has been achieved by engaging in self-reflection, self-evaluation and triangulation. She explains that the knowledge created through this process can be explained as a new theory of practice. She stresses the importance of disseminating the research findings at conferences, in journals or as book chapters so that others may benefit from the new knowledge and be encouraged to engage in similar research projects. Bernie saw the impact on herself and her ten-year-old students as co-researchers as they focused on reducing off-task activities.

Section Five: *Promoting Well-being Through Self-study Action Research*. Drawing on the authors' stories, the connection between well-being and self-study action research, as well as some of the barriers and the role that reflective practice can have in overcoming these, is examined. Mary Roach says:

> "In retrospect, I see that doing self-study action research on my own practice led me to experience increased autonomy, job satisfaction, confidence and self-efficacy – in other words my sense of well-being was enhanced. Knowing that one's work is understood and appreciated and applied by others is immensely gratifying. There is a

definite sense of professional pride that enhances one's feelings of self-efficacy and well-being."

The book concludes with an invitation for readers to become part of their online community of educational action researchers in a safe space for support and conversation:

Web site www.eari.ie Educational Action Research Ireland
Contact NEARI at www.eari.ie or on Twitter @InfoNeari
Discussion Group: https://groups.google.com/d/forum/neari-group

In my opinion, this is a very enjoyable and informative book of great assistance for those wanting to engage in educational conversations, practice-based self-study and Living Theory research. I loved Caitriona McDonagh's wave metaphor:

The picture in my mind, or my visual metaphor, for an action research methodology, is that I see myself as a person standing in the sea of life, water up to my waist, waves and currents tugging at me. The waves gather momentum and change things dramatically as I work my way through my research (McDonagh 2009).

References

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