

Inquiry as Intervention

Employing Action Research to Surface Intersubjective Theories-in-Use and Support an Organization's Capacity to Learn

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Social science can be practiced as a decidedly action-oriented and applied phenomenon, in particular within the context of organizational change and development. These practices are often prefaced by assumptions concerning the social construction of reality, the role of the researcher as an active agent for change, and the capacity of organizations to learn. This article recounts the attempts of social science researchers to employ an action research process to promote and support organizational learning within a public school setting. Addressing concerns with regard to the methodological challenges of translating individual perceptions into organizational themes or problems, the authors discuss the use of intersubjectively constructed accounts to support organizational learning.

Keywords: *organizational learning; organizational development; action research*

The role of action research in an organizational development and change process is often discussed within the context of organizational learning (Argyris & Schon, 1996; Brady & Levy, 1996; Carnevale, 2003; French & Bell, 1999; Greenwood & Levin, 1998; Hawkins, 2004). This article provides one account of an action research process, greatly informed by the work of Chris Argyris and Donald Schon, as it unfolded within a public school.

The action research process was presented to the school as a collaboration between the researchers and the staff at the school. It possessed explicit purposes and outcomes, namely, to use an action research thematic report to inform organizational practice and, ultimately, organizational learning. This thematic report provided an "intersubjectively" (Radigan, 2002) constructed picture of the school's "theories-in-use" (Argyris & Schon, 1996).

This picture was then presented back to the school in an effort to surface problems, recognize successes, and make decisions about future actions. This process would help them become conscious of their taken-for-granted assumptions and dispositions about their school and the people and practices that make it up. In some cases, this consciousness led to changes in behavior, attitude, and practice.

A detailed account of the action research methodology employed, including an exploration of some of the methodological challenges arising out of translating the perceptions of individuals into broader organizational themes or problems, is provided. An overview of the thematic report generated by the researchers follows. The article includes a detailed account of how one theme served to help certain members of the school to learn and act differently. A brief description of the resulting action emerging from release of an initial draft of the action research thematic report is rendered.

The realm of applied or action research has established itself as a legitimate form of research practice. Educational researchers use the term *action research* to imply that practitioners themselves, usually teachers, employ research methodologies to help them better understand their teaching practices (McNiff, 1992; Mills, 2000). Others beyond the discipline of education refer to the active involvement of practitioners in all phases of research as participatory action research (Park, Brydon-Miller, Hall, & Jackson, 1993; Whyte, 1991) or community-based research (Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker, & Donohue, 2003). An entire set of approaches has been derived for rural contexts, with terms such as rapid rural appraisal (Beebe, 1995), applied rural research (Whittaker & Banwell, 2002), and participatory rural appraisal (Campbell, 2001) being used to describe different variations of action research. Other terms are employed to describe similar methods, including rapid ethnographic assessment (Taplin, Scheld, & Low, 2002), participatory research (Brown, 1985; Hall, 1984), some genres of feminist research (Fonow & Cook, 1991; Smith, 1990), interaction research (Hendricks, 2003), empowerment evaluation (Fetterman, 2001), and utilization-focused evaluation (Patton, 1997). All of these approaches share an action orientation and an appreciation that the research process and the ultimate products of the research must have some measure of usefulness, purpose, and meaning to practitioners, and not just practitioners in general, but to the immediate subjects of the research being undertaken. To one degree or another, these forms of action research seek to transform individuals' perceptions of a given problem, practice, policy, program, or organization into data that can be used by practitioners to guide, dictate, or transform their practice. In some cases, the researchers themselves may become consultants or coaches in the process.

The action research cycle was first articulated by Kurt Lewin (1951) and encompasses a cyclical set of actions that includes concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. David Kolb (1984) has labeled this the “experiential learning cycle” and developed a learning styles inventory to place individuals’ and groups’ learning styles. The taking of lived experience, observing it, and using this reflection to inform future practice lies at the heart of the experiential learning process.

Applying these cycles to an action research process designed to promote organizational development and learning, French and Bell (1999) assert:

Action research is the process of systematically collecting research data about an ongoing system relative to some objective, goal, or need of that system; feeding these data back into the system; taking actions by altering selected variables within the system based both on the data and on hypothesis; and evaluating the results of actions by collecting more data. (p. 130)

The application of action research to the context of organizational learning was first championed by Chris Argyris and Donald Schon. Greenwood and Levin (1998) assert that “few books address the complex issues of action science and organizational learning as effectively as Argyris and Schon’s [*Organizational Learning II*]” (p. 200).

Argyris and Schon’s *Organizational Learning II*

Argyris and Schon’s (1989) work serves as a central analytical framework through which to explain and judge the action research process shared within this article. They provide this definition:

Action research takes its cues—its questions, puzzles, and problems—from the perceptions of practitioners within particular, local practice contexts. It bounds episodes of research according to the boundaries of the local context. It builds descriptions and theories within the practice context itself, and tests them there through *intervention experiments*—that is, through experiments that bear the double burden of testing hypotheses and effecting some (putatively) desirable change in the situation. (p. 613)

By linking data obtained through action research to a larger organizational change process, Argyris and Schon lay the foundations for an organizational development perspective embodied in the system-thinking approach

to organizational change popularized by Peter Senge (1990) and others (Attwood, Pedler, Pritchard, & Wilkinson, 2003; Capra, 1983).

Argyris and Schon (1996) originally placed the process of action research squarely within the context of organizational learning with their exploration of the “Mercury Case” in their now classic text, *Organizational Learning II*. Argyris and Schon assert that an organization is essentially a “theory of action,” socially constructed by its members and constituencies. An organization’s theory of action can be differentiated into two types of theorizing: *espoused theory* that is “advanced to explain or justify a given pattern of activity,” and *theory-in-use* that is “implicit in the performance of that pattern of activity” (p. 13).

An organization’s theory-in-use can only be surfaced through conscious inquiry. “Each member of the organization constructs his or her own representation, or image, of the theory-in-use of the whole,” Argyris and Schon (1996) assert, adding,

That picture is always incomplete. The organizational members strive continually to complete it, and to understand themselves in the context of the organization. . . . Others are continually engaged in similar inquiry. It is this continual concerted meshing of individual images of self and others, of one’s activity in the context of collective interactions, which constitutes an organization’s knowledge of theory-in-use. (p. 131)

The process of bringing organizational theories-in-use into focus, thereby aiding in “double loop learning,” can be supported through action research. In *Organizational Learning II*, Argyris and Schon (1996) discuss their roles as “consultant-researchers” who spent time within the Mercury Corporation listening to and eventually analyzing the stories told by its members.

As storytelling proceeded, it became apparent that the variety of stories the participants told could be grouped into a small number of basic types. When the stories began to display a high degree of redundancy, the consultant began to work with the participants to construct a model that revealed the themes that underlay the basic story types. (p. 60)

In essence, when a discernable pattern of story types was recognized, a set of coherent themes or problems could become articulated. As these problems were analyzed by the researchers-turned-consultants and eventually the organizational members themselves, significant insights into the nature of the organization and its embodiment as a learning system could be recognized (Argyris and Schon, 1996).

The consultant anticipated that as participants reviewed their stories of development, they would be likely to interpret them in different ways. Attempts to explain these differences could lead to insights into Mercury's learning system, and the members' reactions to the difference could provide evidence about Mercury's ways of setting and solving organizational problems. (p. 55)

Argyris and Schon (1996) then go on to discuss how the research process undertaken by the consultants provided the organization's members with an opportunity to reflect on their actions and advance the organizational learning process. This exchange was grounded in the assumption that the action research process was understood as a collaborative process.

We can think of organizational learning as a process mediated by the collaborative inquiry of individual members. . . . Their work as learning agents is unfinished until the results of their inquiry—their discoveries, invention, and evaluations—are recorded in the media of organizational memory, the images and maps which encode organizational theory-in-use. (p. 133)

By articulating the importance of recording and documenting the results of systematic inquiry, the results of action research can get translated into the "media of organizational memory." This process serves as the central feature of the action researcher's role in this process.

Proponents of the kind of action research process advocated by Argyris and Schon face a challenge, however, when they are (rightly) asked to document organizational learning and demonstrate that this process has led to any sustentative changes in practice. Raanan Lipshitz (2000) concludes that there exists a "conceptual confusion about organizational learning" that still persists that "results from a failure to specify in concrete form how learning by individual organizational members is transformed to organizational-level learning." Lipshitz adds,

Because the notion of organizational learning is not self-evident, serious discussion of this concept must address the problem of individual-versus organizational-level learning and the problem of anthropomorphism that underlies it. Put differently, one must demonstrate his or her conceptions of the process and the products of learning in a concrete, observable fashion. This way, discussions of organizational learning will be both theoretically sound and practically useful, by which I mean capable of informing practitioners' thinking and behavior. (p. 471)

This case study of an action research process employed within a school is an attempt to respond to Lipshitz's suggestions.

Academy Union School and the Research Methods Employed

Academy Union School (AU) was a K-12 school, with approximately 500 students from kindergarten to their senior year of high school in the same building. The school was administered by two coprincipals who oversaw all grade levels. All faculty and support staff met regularly for staff meetings. As a union school, two adjacent rural towns sent their children to be educated here.

Although future iterations of this action research process would combine quantitative measures with qualitative methods, the process highlighted here employed only qualitative methods: a series of semistructured interviews with school personnel, students, and a cross section of parents, school board members, and other volunteers; focus groups with students; and participant observations of school events and routine activities. Approximately 92 interviews lasting from 30 minutes to an hour with school staff, school board members, and the larger community were conducted at AU, accounting for 90% of the school staff and a very small portion of the larger community. In addition to these one-on-one interviews, about 20 focus groups involving students were conducted as well, accounting for approximately 120 students in grades 7 through 12 at AU (roughly 80% of the student body for these grades). In addition to these interviews and focus groups, the researchers conducted a variety of participant observations of school events, classroom activities, hallway interactions, and the front office environment.

The interview questions for the school were determined collaboratively with organizational leaders and several school subcommittees that had been charged with planning and implementing professional development opportunities. A brief interview schedule for the school was developed, made up of 11 open-ended questions concerning people's perceptions of their school with regard to the general school climate and culture, school mission, the school administrative leadership, decision-making and governance practices, parental and community involvement in the life of the school, student leadership, and needed school changes. The interview schedule for AU is provided in Table 1.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The researchers also took extensive notes during the interviews and participant observations. Each researcher reviewed the transcripts and their notes and coded them for major themes. These codes were derived using the grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) approach, in which the data, in this case, people's stories and perceptions articulated in their interviews and emerging from our field notes, generated the themes. Each researcher compiled a set of generative themes

Table 1
Interview Schedule for Academy Union School

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1. What distinguishes Academy Union School from other schools? What makes this school special or unique?
 2. What is the guiding principle or philosophy that provides a sense of purpose, meaning, and direction to your work here? Probe for school mission.
 3. What role do parents have in the life of the school? Are you satisfied with the level of interaction between home and school?
 4. What role do community members, who are not parents, have in the life of the school? Are you satisfied with the level of interaction between community and school?
 5. How are decisions made around here?
 6. What is your perspective on the school's leadership?
 7. What voice do staff or students have in making decisions?
 8. What kinds of interactions do you think students should have with the community?
 9. What changes have occurred at Academy Union School over the past years? What do you think about them? What successes would you build on?
 10. What barriers do you see to positive change?
 11. If you could wave a wand, garner the full support of your colleagues, and have adequate resources, what changes would be made at the school? Why?
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and shared them with the other. The compilation of these draft generative themes led to substantial conversations between the researchers with regard to their observations. Each theme was viewed from the perspective of relevant actors, leading to the triangulation of theme or problem from various points of view.

Qualitative researchers rely on the method of triangulation as one way to ensure the validity of their analysis. The term "is taken from land surveying. Knowing a single landmark only locates you somewhere along a line in a direction from the landmark, whereas with two landmarks you can take bearings in two directions and locate yourself at their intersection" (Fielding & Fielding, 1986, p. 23). Triangulation can take several forms, including the *triangulation of measures*, in which multiple measures are generated to assess the same phenomenon, *triangulation of methods*, in which a combination of research methodologies are employed to observe and assess the same phenomena, and *triangulation of observers*, in which an event or object is observed from a number of different perspectives (Neumann, 2000).

Within the context of our action research process, we relied on the triangulation of two different categories of observers to construct generative themes: the first order being the reflections and perceptions of active participants who experienced the organization firsthand, and the second order

being the two researchers' observations and reflections on the organizational members' firsthand accounts.

Themes were constructed by triangulating the observers' stories and perceptions. After each researcher generated a series of themes, he or she compared his or her reconstructed triangulated themes with the other. In some cases, the process of coming to an agreement on the definition of the problem or issue was carried out far beyond the initial issuing of the thematic report. We will explore this particular matter in great depth later in this article.

Both researchers collaborated in writing a brief one-paragraph description of each theme. Close attention was paid to the use of certain qualifying terms within these paragraphs, such as *some*, *most*, *a few* people, or *one* person to provide the reader with a sense of the frequency of the perceptions and the relative size and scope of the subgroups that held perceptions in common. Although we were not familiar with the construct of "communities of practice" (Wenger, 1998) at the time, we did approach these groupings and the labels we applied to these groupings with an appreciation for their "joint enterprise" (p. 77).

The researchers spent the 2 years following the initial release of the thematic report engaged in follow-up activities directly and indirectly stemming out of their year's work of research. Initially, they collected feedback on the thematic report and then worked with the school leadership to plan the next steps. Eventually, they began serving as facilitators of several subsequent planning and learning activities of various groupings of staff and students. During these years of follow up, the researchers took note of activities undertaken and kept in communication with many members of the school community.

The Thematic Report

In their attempts to assist the school in developing accounts of their "organizational memory," the researchers wrote a thematic report, a 12-page document drafted and redrafted by the researchers. This report was organized as an outline of major and subthemes (introduced by a bolded headline, followed by a descriptive paragraph within the report).

The draft thematic report went through various iterations as it was systematically reviewed by the school leadership, various subcommittees, and then the entire staff. The reports also were reviewed by the district superintendent and the school board. The review process served to both validate the findings as well as provide an opportunity to engage in a series of extended discussions about the school's theories-in-use.

Table 2 presents the themes as they were eventually determined in the column on the far left. The middle column of the table is a commentary created for this article that provides the context for the theme. The column on the far right is an account, again constructed for this article, of how actions or changes were undertaken that addressed the theme.

The Construction of Intersubjective Theories-in-Use

The action research process, beginning with the early stages of negotiating entry, to the construction of interview questions, to the interviews and analysis, ultimately led the organizational actors to approach their everyday assumptions about the organizational reality in a more rigorous fashion. Each theme represented in the thematic report provided a snapshot of some aspect of the school's intersubjective theories-in-use.

Through the dialogue generated through the participant reviews of the thematic report, people tested out their understandings of each other (Hummel, 2001), often placing themselves into the position of the Other in an effort to gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of each other. The reconstruction of the school's intersubjective theories-in-use hinged on the extent to which all of the actors implicated in the construction of meaning deem each other's perceptions as "valid" (Radigan, 2002).

To understand the implicit, tacit validity claims, the [researcher] and the person participating in the dialogue must put herself intersubjectively into the other person's position and think as that individual thinks. It is this intersubjective recognition (the understanding of the other's objective, normative, and subjective claims) of each other's perspectives that allows nested epistemology to be productive. (p. 271)

Most problems arise in organizations (Hummel, 2001)

exactly because different people involved in a situation cannot agree. This is not because they are people of ill will, irrational, or anti-scientific, but because they are so placed in the organization that their roles give them specific perspectives and responsibilities that are not necessarily compatible. (p. 91)

The division of labor represented in any organization is responsible for creating a cacophony of varying perspectives. The key to rendering these differing perspectives intersubjectively lies not in getting people to accept another's perspective as "truth" but merely as one claim (among many) at validity.

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Table 2
Academy Union Themes and Actions Relating to Them

Generative Theme for Academy Union ^a	Commentary About This Theme	Subsequent Action Taken
1. General perceptions of the school and its uniqueness 1.1 Better times for Academy. A majority of the people interviewed voiced optimism about Academy's future. Some said that these were "good times" for the school and that the school was on the "up swing." 1.2 The school's pre K-12 character. Almost everyone interviewed noted how being a pre K-12 school distinguishes Academy from other schools. Some students spoke of the benefits and challenges to being with the same group of people for up to 12 years. Many school staff with roles and responsibilities extending across age groups claimed that the pre K-12 structure of the school led to complicated logistics in scheduling, space, specials, meals, meeting spaces, etc. 1.3 Appreciation for arts, music, and sports programs. Students, especially, were enthusiastic about these programs, with some also saying they wanted more materials and programs. Many students possessed a strong sense of identification with the school through its sports programs. Many expressed a desire to have more sports options and facilities. 1.4 No common use of mission statement. Most school staff and faculty said that they did not use the school's formal written mission statement as a daily guide for their work. However, some said that there is still a shared vision of dedication to the children.	an affirmation of general sense of goodwill an affirmation of the organizational structure and the opportunities and complexities that come with it a particular source of student pride, a statement of what is valued by them (and others) a statement concerning the extent to which the school staff shares a common understanding of their mission	This fact was collectively acknowledged within several public meetings, including a faculty and school board meeting. This fact was collectively acknowledged within several public meetings, including a faculty and school board meeting. No immediate actions could be cited. The school's mission statement was reviewed by a committee of school staff. No changes were made. The mission was posted in more prominent places throughout the school.

2. School as an inclusive/exclusive place			
2.1 Varied perceptions of special education. The special education opportunities offered at the school were generally appreciated, with a few feeling that special education, and special educators in particular, were marginalized or underappreciated. Special educators also cited federal and state regulations as challenging, stating that many others in the school and community do not fully understand these mandated and complicated processes. A small group of people said that special education receives too much of the school's resources, a concern expressed by a few community members.	a set of themes grouped together inductively; notions of inclusion and exclusion surfaced more explicitly a sensitive issue within any school, these varied perceptions suggest differences over equity and the costs associated with preserving it	The special education was reorganized during the year of study. Heightened attention to how this reorganization affected the other school staff was generated.	
2.2 Some elementary school teachers feel alienated. Some elementary school teachers spoke of feeling alienated from the rest of the school. A few said that they think that elementary grade teachers have a lower status than teachers of older kids. Some believed that high school and elementary teachers lack full understanding of each other's jobs. Many elementary school staff said they need more administrator presence and leadership in the elementary wing. Some talked about how it was not always easy for them to find someone to consult with when they have classroom problems.	points to a problem with leadership, the lack of presence of formal leadership, and as we eventually found out, an overwhelming presence and influence of an informal leader	stimulated a series of conversations and decisions; see below for deeper exploration	
2.3 Paraeducator inequities. Many paraeducators talked about the inadequacy of their pay and wanting to be treated more as part of an educational team—to be included (with pay) in meetings, for example. Several said they must hold a second job to stay at their job at the school.	gave voice to a common perception bubbling below the surface	No immediate action could be cited.	

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Table 2 (continued)

Generative Theme for Academy Union ^a	Commentary About This Theme	Subsequent Action Taken
2.4 Some support staff feel underappreciated. A number of school support staff (paraeducators, clerical workers, custodians, cafeteria workers) said they often felt unrecognized and/or underappreciated and looked down upon by some of the core teaching staff.	speaks to the differentiations drawn between groups of staff members	New staff recognition activities were created.
2.5 Student cliques exist, but students generally feel safe. Some students reported that student cliques existed, in particular in the older grades. However, many students also said they felt safe at the school—that there is not a lot of students picking on other students.	suggests that the school's smallness has generally led to deeper bonds and levels of appreciation between students	A schoolwide diversity awareness initiative was designed to provide new and existing students with a sense of safety and inclusion.
3. Expectations/needs of students	perceptions concerning students are surfaced and named; points to deeper underlying social dynamics.	No immediate action could be cited.
3.1 Increased student social needs. We heard from many about the increasing demands on teachers and staff to address students' "social needs." This was often recognized as a national phenomenon, occurring not just at Academy. These needs were experienced by many as very troubling because many believe the school does not have the resources to meet these needs and that students can not really learn as long as needs are unmet. Several teachers talked about seeing an increasing level of poverty among Academy families.	suggests a consciousness of changing social conditions for students, generally more negative in nature	Greater attention was paid to the student council and the cultivation of student leadership opportunities.
3.2 Students' perceptions of the larger community's perceptions of young people. A number of students, aged 7-12, felt that the community viewed them negatively (as drug users, gang members, etc.).	a student sentiment with deep implications for them, their school, and the quality of community life in general	

3.3 Elementary—high school student interactions. Older students' behavior in halls was talked about as recently improved by some, and for others, as worse. Some elementary school teachers are concerned about teens being poor role models for the younger students, in particular in common hallways.	points out some of the complexities and resulting problems that can arise in a K-12 setting	A cross-grade mentoring program was discussed and is yet to be implemented.
3.4 Mixed perceptions about the open campus policy. A vast majority of high school students valued the school's open campus policy. Some staff believed that it is healthy to give students freedom, whereas other staff felt that the open campus policy leads to the use of some spaces in inappropriate ways (e.g., sitting in hallways, using gym, etc., exposing young children to see and hear older students' swearing and displaying affection). To counter these concerns, many students proposed the designation of a student lounge in the cafeteria. A few staff members also cited concerns about the school's safety and the safety of students in reference to the open campus policy.	highlights how a school policy can be perceived differently	No immediate action could be cited.
4. Physical limitations of space		
4.1 Space limitations. The issue of space limitations was the most frequently cited need. Congestion and lack of space in the front office, art and shop spaces, and student lounge were cited as problems. Some teachers did not have their own classrooms. Limited space in the lunch room makes it necessary to cycle through many groups of children and makes meal time hurried and stressful for all. There is no welcoming place for visitors (especially parents). Some free resources can not be used because of lack of space.	states a common perception	A design to use the existing space more creatively was generated. Plans to construct a second gym were initiated.
5. Curricular connections		
5.1 Deeper curricular coordination and support sought. Some school staff members described the curriculum as compartmentalized, with not much cross-curricular or grade	an admittedly weak section of the data collection process, due in large part to a greater	The school schedule was reviewed and modified to accommodate better collaboration.

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Table 2 (continued)

Generative Theme for Academy Union ^a	Commentary About This Theme	Subsequent Action Taken
activities nor continuity across the curriculum. Others cited positive examples of coteaching and connections between classes and grades. Some people thought that a return to more access to the school administrator's curricular expertise would be helpful.	focus within the interview schedule; this section only scrapes the surface of perceptions concerning curriculum and instruction	
5.2 Strong desire for more community-based learning. Many, especially nonteaching staff, expressed a strong interest in more community-based service learning. We found some examples of community-oriented curriculum (service-learning and personalized learning). Transportation, lack of coordination, scheduling, and time considerations were cited as obstacles. The 7-3 reading buddies program was often cited as an example of service-learning. Many commented with enthusiasm about the elder/kid reading project. There existed enthusiasm among many nonteaching staff for more community connections and also a desire to help with their implementation. The Community Options Program is seen by some as an important new option for some students; others see it as underused and not accessible to some types of students.	suggests path for the school to take in aligning their curriculum and offering more opportunities for collaboration	A plan to create a community coordinator position was developed. Some external grant funds were secured to support increased service-learning opportunities.
5.3 Teaching advisory groups received mixed reviews. Some staff said that TAs lacked a purpose and structure, claiming that it is a good idea if some refinements are done. Some students liked it, whereas others said they were not sure of its purpose.	shedding light on a recently created initiative surfaces an area to focus more attention on	A personalized learning plan initiative was launched to provide students with multiple pathways through which to learn. The teaching advisory format was to be used to facilitate this process.

6. Communications	a section highlighting themes related to how information, decisions, and supports are shared	A more streamlined method of communicating with all staff was created.
6.1 Distribution of information inequitable. With regard to internal communication, some said there appeared to be distinctions between teachers and paraeducators as to who receives what information.	raises the question of information, to whom, and how it should be conveyed	
6.2 Common calendar needed. A desire for a common calendar listing all school events and activities was mentioned by several school staff members.	surfaces a structural need to better coordinate and align activities with questions pertaining to who has power to make decisions and how that power is used, this section raises important questions concerning the school's governance and role of the formal leaders	Roles were clarified around who does the scheduling.
7. Leadership and decision making		
7.1 The toll of high administrative turnover. Many school veterans claimed that the years of administrative turnover have been challenging but have led to the development of strengths such as the ability to work independently and to make the best of constantly changing initiatives. These turnovers have also left scars leading to a slowness to trust new leadership and a hesitance to be enthusiastic about new initiatives.	acknowledges a tumultuous past; identifies sources of potential problematic patterns	The existing leadership was praised in several public meetings.
7.2 Guarded optimism about the Leadership Group. Many expressed a guarded optimism about the role of the Leadership Group, with a range of opinions about the role of	perceptions concerning the effectiveness of the leadership suggest a climate	The role of the Leadership Group was clarified.

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Table 2 (continued)

Generative Theme for Academy Union ^a	Commentary About This Theme	Subsequent Action Taken
representatives and their abilities to communicate with their constituencies. There were some worries that the Leadership Group could further confuse and encumber the decision-making process.	of trust in the identified leaders.	
7.3 Confusion over administrator roles. Many staff and students are unclear about the breakdown of roles of the school's two coadministrators. Sometimes interviewees said they are unclear about the hows, whats, and whos of decision making. "Where does the buck stop?" was a phrase we heard repeated. People said that they tend to go to the person they feel most comfortable with. There was a great deal of recognition of the difficulty of administrative work, with people expressing worries that administrators are worn out, overwhelmed, and easily burnt out. Some staff said they felt rebuffed when they seek administrative help, support, or decisions.	with coprincipals, lines of authority and spheres of influence can be confusing; this theme suggests the need to define roles and responsibilities more clearly	The roles of the two coprincipals were clarified for the students and staff.
7.4 Negative consequences of unilateral decisions. There existed a general problem with how certain unilateral decisions were made—people could use more justifications (e.g., room changes/space allocation and middle level restructuring). Unilateral decision making is often seen as bringing down morale and undermining values expressed by administrative leaders.	highlights an anticipated tension between shared leadership and ultimate authority	No immediate action could be cited.
7.5 Leadership around discipline issues. Most school staff appreciates the school administrators' roles as disciplinarians. Some students feel that they are fair and	points to an area of strength and importance	A restorative justice model for discipline was explored. The existing discipline system has been kept in place.

responsive; others feel that they do not listen to them or favor some over others.

7.6 The accessibility of school administrators. Several staff members cited some difficulties with their interactions with a school administrator. Some felt that the administration was unapproachable or difficult to converse with, whereas others expressed a desire to see more presence of both school administrators in the halls and in their classrooms.

7.7 Perception of parental involvement starting high, decreasing as you go up the grades. We heard a lot of enthusiasm about parent involvement in elementary grades, with many examples given. We heard that parents were less involved in the high school. Some think there should be more involvement; others think that this is an appropriate amount for high school level and age. Many commented on how hard it was for working parents to be involved. Some staff and teachers said that they think that a few parents had too much power in influencing decisions.

7.8 Student voice stronger now than in past. Staff and students frequently commented that student voice was stronger than it has been in the past, often citing the efforts of some administrators and teachers to stimulate student voice and leadership. However, a number of high school students told us they feel disconnected from student council.

points to the participatory style of leadership exhibited by the school's formal leaders; an important contributor to the open school climate

an assessment of parental involvement in the school; points to some trends in parent participation

With the clarification of coprincipal roles came a larger presence of a formal leadership across all parts of the school.

A plan to garner deeper parental involvement in the life of the school was set in place.

fostered through a great amount of work on the part of key teachers and administrators to foster greater student leadership

The student council held a retreat to review its role and level of responsiveness to the student body.

a. As originally presented in thematic report.

Within this action research process, the researchers were yet another set of actors trying to make claims concerning the validity of individuals' perceptions of events and activities. They needed the consent of the other actors (all of those we interviewed) to validate and thereby certify the thematic report as a legitimate representation of the organizational reality.

Ideally, when problems are constructed intersubjectively (Hummel, 2001),

all agree to respect each other's definition of the problem and, by respecting this, puzzle out a synthesis that leads to a solution. To do otherwise would often mean to ask participants to surrender their position of professional standing, power or of entitlement, that sets the perspectives from which each views a problem. (p. 91)

Whereas, "the more complex the problem and the greater the number of value perspectives brought to bear, the greater the need for localized solutions and for value innovations, both of which call for broadly based participation in decision processes" (Korton, 2001, p. 485). These localized solutions necessarily lead "to a search for system structures which facilitate local level decision making through exchange and bargaining processes involving many minds, structures able to gain full advantage of the creative potentials of the system's many members" (p. 485). Using an example from AU, we will illustrate how the posing of an intersubjectively constructed reality led to the derivation of local solutions.

As the researchers interviewed elementary school teachers and staff, it became apparent that most of them possessed a strong feeling of marginalization. The elementary school wing had been built some 10 years earlier, leading to the elementary school moving from its own building down the road to this newly constructed wing off of the combined high school and middle school. Along with the physical relocation, the administrative structure of the elementary school was dismantled and folded into the larger operation, leaving no administrative leader solely devoted to elementary school needs. The following theme and descriptive paragraph was jointly constructed by the researchers and refined through a series of follow-up conversations with elementary teachers and staff:

Some Elementary School Teachers Feel Alienated. Some elementary school teachers spoke of feeling alienated from the rest of the school. A few said that they think that elementary grade teachers have a lower status than teachers of older kids. Some believed that high school and elementary teachers lack full understanding of each other's jobs. Many elementary

school staff said they need more administrator presence and leadership in the elementary wing. Some talked about how it was not always easy for them to find someone to consult with when they have classroom problems.

The original paragraph submitted to the school read, "Some *veteran* elementary school teachers feel alienated. . . ." As the elementary school teachers reviewed this original wording, they expressed a concern that (a) by singling out veteran teachers, the researchers were clearly identifying specific people (something those who held this perception did not want stated so explicitly) and that (b) these concerns of alienation were, in fact, felt by other teachers and support staff as well.

This example can illustrate how the negotiation of meaning between researchers and organizational actors can take place. The dialogue that ensued around this issue helped the implicated actors to express their perceptions more accurately.

With this clarification made, a second set of concerns with regard to the validity of this paragraph surfaced. These concerns were not raised during the initial interviews or the immediate review of the thematic report but emerged several months later within dialogues between some elementary teachers and one of the school's coprincipals. The thematic paragraph clearly articulated that the elementary school teachers' sense of alienation was directed toward the school administrative leadership. In an effort to address these feelings, one of the coprincipals made a concerted effort to improve communications and visibility with the elementary school staff. As more routine meetings became the norm, a new intersubjective reality came to the fore, one that was not expressed, at all, to the researchers during the interviews. With a leadership vacuum at the elementary school level, one veteran specialist had filled the void, taking up the mantle of an informal, yet powerfully authoritative, leader among the elementary school staff. In follow-up conversations with researchers, several elementary teachers spoke of the increased sense of control that this special educator had imposed on them, to the point of dictating class schedules, leading to the micromanagement of their classrooms.

That these concerns did not surface in the original interviews was telling. Either they did not feel comfortable enough with the researchers to express these concerns, and instead focused on the lack of administrative presence in the wing, or they had not come to fully comprehend what was happening to them, meaning that they had taken for granted the role that this informal, well-intentioned, yet authoritative figure had imposed on them.

By being provided with an opportunity to discuss their concerns, these teachers were freed to critically reflect on their perceptions. One of the

researchers was asked to facilitate a series of retreats beginning with some of the core elementary school teachers who most deeply felt this concern about their informal leader. Together, they planned a way to share their concerns with this person, inviting her into a session in which the issues were delicately raised. The end result was a new, formally recognized governance structure that included a stronger administrative presence; an identified teacher representative to the administration; stronger teacher autonomy over their classes; and an increased sense of goodwill between the teachers and the special educator.

A key part of this communicative process included hearing from the special educator about what she perceived her emergent role to be. Reacting to a leadership void, possessing strong organizational skills herself, and possessing an expertise in reading, she felt that she had incrementally taken on these responsibilities without being fully conscious of how her role was perceived by others. Although we did not consciously reconstruct the “ladder of inference” exercise first laid out by Argyris and Schon (1996), it was very apparent that by the end of the discussion, all parties involved had come to a deeper understanding of how assumptions built on one another to form the basis of an informal, yet very potent leadership structure. The role of naming a problem in writing—of negotiating and ultimately deepening its meaning, in bringing about needed change—speaks to the potential place of action research within the organizational change process.

Additional Subsequent Actions

A series of other actions were undertaken within the school over the course of the next 2 years. Some of these actions could, like the case highlighted above, be directly ascribed to the action research process. Other actions may have been only indirectly related to the process. And of course, organizational life in general is made up of a series of many actions, the overwhelming majority of which would have occurred whether the action research process was undertaken or not. With this qualifier in mind, a set of actions undertaken in the following 2 years were identified by the researchers that could at least indirectly be tied to the action research process, whether it be new policies designed to address a problem that surfaced in the report or a commitment to continue the line of inquiry begun when the first interviews were held.

Several people commented to the researchers on how the interview process itself allowed them the opportunity to reflect on their actions and

observations, supporting their development as reflective practitioners (Schon, 1983). The researchers came to appreciate their role as active listeners who, by expressing a willingness to listen, allowed participants to think about their thinking, expressing what they take for granted, and airing deeply held feelings and beliefs in a safe environment. In follow-up interviews and informal discussions, some of the people interviewed spoke of how their involvement in the interview led to an active evolution of their thinking.

As we look to explain the other ways in which the action research process resulted in action, we are left to ask, how can learning be evidenced? One such way is through the documentation of action. We are hesitant to ascribe a clear chain of causality stemming from the surfacing of problems through the action research process to new activities and changed attitudes. That said, we have attempted to identify the ways in which some of the themes that surfaced in the thematic report were addressed (see the list of ascribed actions found in the far right column of Table 2).

The ultimate effect of the action research process remains to be seen. The school's coprincipals, in collaboration with members of their leadership team and the school board, went on to initiate a series of discussions and planning activities to advance the school's development. A series of subsequent activities is briefly listed in Table 3.

At least three activities in this list point to the adoption of practices that involved extensive discussion and planning. We believe the "critical friends group" (CFG) process, a study circle process, and a strategic planning undertaken by AU in the subsequent 2 years following the action research study most centrally advanced the organization's capacity to learn.

A CFG (Bambino, 2002) was started for new faculty and facilitated by one of the researchers during the 2 years following the release of the thematic report. Drawing on a series of protocols designed to bring teachers together to talk openly about their practice, the CFG provided these faculty with opportunities to support one another and conceive of ways to inform the school's development.

The year following the action research process, a year-long effort to solicit input from school staff, students, and wider community members was undertaken. A series of roundtable discussions using the study circle process was initiated using materials from the Study Circle Resource Center (www.studycircles.org). Over the course of several months, a dozen study circles met to discuss a series of focusing questions concerning the school's future. These conversations were recorded, analyzed, and represented back to the school community. The study circle process allowed an enlarged circle of stakeholders to express their opinions and hopes about

Table 3
Subsequent Activities Undertaken by the School

The school communication policies were modified to be more inclusive of all staff.
A common calendar for events and meetings was created.
Support staff involvement in decision making was expanded.
Administrative leadership roles were clarified and shared with the staff.
The school leadership team's role and functions were clarified.
An all school theme was adopted to provide a common learning experience for all students in the building.
Retreats and other common professional development opportunities were undertaken for different segments of the school staff.
Routine meeting times were established and coordinated among all of the segments of the school (in particular among grade levels, e.g., elementary, middle, and high school).
The school mission statement was reviewed by a committee and posted throughout the school.
The student council met to revisit its mission.
A critical friends group was started.
The study circle process was undertaken involving a wide array of student, staff, parent, and community member input.
"Academy's Future Matters" strategic planning document was created.

the school's future. This feedback was factored into the school's strategic plan along with the findings from the thematic report.

A strategic plan titled "Academy's Future Matters" was developed and focused on the topics of communication, curriculum, diversity, parent and community, and the facility. Specific responses to particular themes raised within the thematic report can be found in Table 2.

At AU, the action research process supported an intervention involving the researchers as organizational consultants. Following oral reports on the thematic report to the school faculty and school board, the researchers engaged these groups in extensive conversations about possible actions. The researchers met with the principals, superintendent, school board, maintenance workers, support staff, and new teachers. Using the thematic report as a foundation for discussion, these meetings were an opportunity to better understand the school and to identify a few issues the school might begin working on. They were invited to facilitate staff retreats for the elementary and middle school staff, the student council, and a group of new school personnel. They also facilitated CFGs, in which teachers shared student work in an effort to address pedagogical dilemmas. Their understanding and appreciation of the theories-in-use employed by members of the school community helped various members of the school community to work through a variety of organizational problems.

The two coprincipals took many of the problems that surfaced in the report seriously, commencing a series of actions geared toward responding to some of them. Since the very outset of the process, they exhibited many qualities of transformational leadership (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990). They were open and transparent with the contents of the report and the process undertaken to generate it. The thematic report was cited in the strategic plan that was to be developed the following year, pieces of the report were published in the school newsletter that went out to the entire community, and some findings from the report served as an impetus for focused interventions, some of which have been highlighted above.

AU was an organization that was held together through “loose coupling” (Weick, 2001). The formal leadership attempted to exert minimal pressure and direct oversight of the staff. With power more decentralized, the formal leaders took on characteristics of transformational leadership. The result was that the formal leadership was in a better position to use the action research process effectively, in particular because they were open to critical feedback and wanted to have an honest account of their school’s organizational reality. This loose coupling, however, had its negative effects on the school, as recognized in the confusion of leadership roles, a lack of presence within some parts of the school, and uneven modes of communication.

Conclusion

The case study of this action research process provides us with an important example of the possible relationship that can be developed between action research and organizational learning. By focusing on methodological rigor—triangulating and garnering feedback to improve validity and paying careful attention to the construction of intersubjective themes relating to AU’s theories-in-use—we believe we have responded to Lipshitz’s call for more examples of the ways in which individual learning can be translated into organizational learning.

It is certain that public schools differ substantially from other organizational settings. In many respects, schools are complex public organizations with more diverse constituencies and more ambiguous objectives (this despite the federal government’s efforts to standardize a national curriculum) than other organizations. Regardless of these differences, the lessons learned from this analysis can be extrapolated to other organizational settings. Within the themes, we recognize universal issues relating to supervision and employee motivation, the place and purpose of the organizational mission, and the importance that communication plays in the pursuit of collective action.

We believe the process outlined here can be improved along several lines. Future iterations of this design will include the triangulation of different data collection methods. In addition to the qualitative data collection methods, we suggest using instruments such as school climate surveys and self-assessment rubrics as well. The data culled from these instruments can then be compared to the qualitative observations or vice versa, thereby improving the validity and generalizability of the themes as they are reported. Quantitative measures will dampen the grounded theory approach to creating the generative themes. However, the ability to render more accurate generalizations with regard to staff perceptions will help to clarify and focus areas of need more efficiently.

The action research design employed here consumed a great deal of time and resources that other action researchers may not have at their disposal. Efforts are under way to improve the turnaround time—by limiting the number of days a researcher is on site. One tradeoff is that by spending fewer days on site, not as many people will be interviewed and less organizational activities get observed. It is hoped that by adding quantitative measures, these shortcomings will be compensated for.

The action research process at AU was not tied to any long-term, structured, external supports for organizational change. We would suggest situating the action research process within a wider school renewal initiative that includes the action research process as the first stage of a structured intervention. The action research process will help to identify the best intervention tools to be used, given the challenges facing the organization. Some of these tools include staff retreats, strategic planning, professional development opportunities, and organizational change “coaches” (McDonald, 1989). Conceptually, we are looking to apply and build on Wenger’s (1998) community of practice theory, a theoretical framework that we believe will be very useful in mapping and evaluating the practices of different groupings of actors.

Noted sociologist C. Wright Mills (1967) once claimed that the political purpose of the social sciences should be “the transformation of private troubles into public issues.” The action research design presented here provides an example of how social science can aid in transforming private troubles into public issues that can inform how an organization like Academy Union School can learn something about itself and use this learning to transform itself.

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