A CASE STUDY OF THE ACTION RESEARCH PROCESS IN A SCHOOL FOR AT-RISK STUDENTS

by

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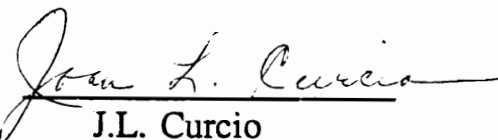
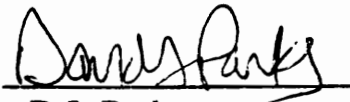## DOCTOR OF EDUCATION
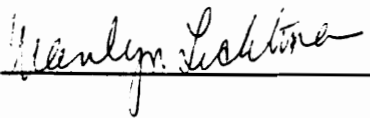
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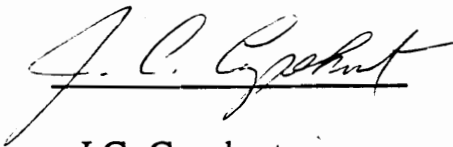
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(ABSTRACT)

This case study described how a team of teachers, students, a parent, and a principal applied action research to study issues in an alternative school for at-risk students. The literature review indicated that action research could be used for school renewal, school reform, and educational change. The purpose of this study was to (1) describe the action research process followed, (2) study the role of the principal in the action research process, and (3) observe the interactions of the participants in an action research team.

A case study methodology and a participant-observer technique was used in an action research team as the forum for implementing the process. The researcher in this single case study was the principal of the

school. Data collection documents were field notes of the researcher, journals of the participants, and transcribed notes from interviews of selected participants. Data was sorted into bins for analysis of recurring patterns and convergence of themes across different data sources.

Participants' perceptions indicated that the action research process was a tool for increasing teacher involvement in discussing school issues; however, teachers had difficulty involving students and parents in the action research team meetings. Data from teachers indicated that they wanted input and involvement from students and parents, but the teachers willingly participated in their silencing. Within the action research team, the participants recognized that teachers dominated the discussions and the issues studied. Though student voice and parental involvement were seen as important, minimal effort was made to maintain equity within the team. The principal's role as a participant-observer allowed the principal to see the issues "from the trenches." Participants accepted the participant-observer role, but some had difficulty separating the principal role from the participant-observer role.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this study to my mom, Jean K. Leonard, who will always be remembered and loved; and to my dad, Robert G. Leonard, Jr., who is a Virginia Tech graduate, Class of 1952. Dad, your dedication and commitment to public education has been an inspiration for me. To both of you, thank you for instilling in me a life-long passion for learning.

Acknowledgments

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CHAPTER ONE - AN INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Background

Action research is a strategy that increases active ownership in the improvement of programs and organizations. Action research in schools has been defined by Emily Calhoun (1994) as "a fancy way of saying let's study what's happening at our school and decide how to make it a better place" (p.20). The application of action research is useful in situations where there is a need for flexibility, a need to involve the people in the system being researched, and a wish to improve participants' understandings of their organization. Glickman (1990) stated that action research conducted by colleagues in schools resulted in improved instruction.

While many studies (Bennett, 1993; Burch & Palanski, 1994; King & Lonnquist, 1992; and Johnson, 1993) reported on teachers as researchers, this study described how a team, whose members were teachers, students, a parent and a principal, used action research in an alternative program for at-risk students. The action research process was the tool used by the research team to assess their alternative school and to

design appropriate interventions. Action research is typically cyclic, tends to be qualitative, participative, and critically reflective. Emily Calhoun (1994) used the analogy of comparing action research to the development of a picture. She believed that action research showed educators a picture of how students are doing in schools and illustrated ways to improve the picture.

Public school systems are under pressure to improve the quality of education for all, especially those students identified as at-risk. The National Center for Education Statistics (U.S. Department of Education, 1994) reported that the dropout rate has fallen over the last 20 years. However, Montgomery and Rossi (1994) reported that by the year 2020, about one-fourth of all children will live in poverty, and minority children will comprise more than half of the students in public schools.

In response to this pressure, educators have created alternative schools and programs as ways to reclaim youths who are dropping out or graduating with limited skills which often condemn them to a lower standard of living. Evaluations of alternative schools often measure outcomes in areas such as student truancy, credits earned towards

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graduation, and changes in student attitudes toward schooling. These evaluations have not encouraged stakeholders to actively participate as problem-solving entities in alternative schools.

There appears to be a need for student, parent and teacher involvement in program assessment. Sarason (1991) stated that "...it's hard to explain why we don't routinely ask kids--especially kids in trouble--about how to improve schools" (p.113). Nathan (1991) reported that schools that work best are those that ask questions, listen to all stakeholders, and respond in constructive ways. Argyris, Putnam, & Smith (1985) suggested that in action research, "agents [of change] design action to achieve intended consequences, and monitor themselves to learn if their actions are effective"(p.80). Hamilton (1995) added that since action research is an on-going, self-reflective process of teaching practices, it appears to improve teaching practices and student learning.

Purpose of the Study

Through a case study approach, it was reported how the action research process was used in an alternative school for at-risk students.

The purpose of this study specifically was to (1) describe the action

research process followed, (2) study the role of the principal, and

(3) observe the interactions of the participants.

Research Questions

1.   What were the participants' perceptions of the action research

process?

2.   What was the role of the principal in the action research process?

3.   How did this action research team work together?

Significance of the Study

This study describes how the action research process, used in a

collaborative manner with at-risk students, a parent, teachers and a

principal, worked in an alternative education program. Often decisions in

schools are made by the principal acting alone. Cunningham & Gresso

(1993) reported that organizational learning is improved when those most

affected have active ownership in the program. Action research is a tool

to increase the involvement of teachers, students and parents in the

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decision-making. As the name implies, action research is intended to achieve both action and research.

Educators of at-risk students at the middle and secondary school level may see the logic of using an alternative program for at-risk students as an appropriate setting for action research. Action research is a process that may encourage student governance in alternative programs. At-risk students may respond favorably to nontraditional schooling practices if they are allowed to be a part of the group which decides what their program will become.

The study benefits those individuals interested in school renewal where there is a sharing of power for decisions about schooling. Local school districts may use this study to examine the benefits of collaborative action research with students, parents and teachers in equal partnership with the building principal.

Ultimately, this study may be a springboard for a strategy to involve all members of the school community in school reform. Sagor (1992) believed that an action research model encourages meaningful discourse in a profession where solutions are ever changing, and absolute

solutions are usually not to be found. This model addresses changing the present paradigm in education where supervisors tell workers [teachers and students] how to do their work.

The intent of this study was to describe how an action research team used action research as a process for studying issues in one educational setting with possible implications for its application in other diverse educational settings. This study represented an attempt to bridge the gap between research and practice by encouraging stakeholders in schools to look critically at problems and reflect about their actions and research.

Assumptions

It was assumed that:

1. At-risk students would be able to articulate clearly their experience about the action research process.

2. Participants on the action research team wanted to do something to improve their own situation.

Limitations

1. One alternative program located in a high school in the northwestern region of Virginia was studied, which limits the ability to generalize the results of the study to schools in other communities.

2. This study was limited to the action research process and did not address the outcomes of the interventions developed by the action research team.

Operational Definitions

For the purposes of this study, the researcher established the following operational definitions:

Action Research was a process in which students, teachers, parents, and administrators worked together in a school for at-risk students. In using action research, participants identified an area of interest that focused on students and that looked at both immediate and cumulative effects. The participants collected, organized, and analyzed data to determine priority areas for action. They selected the best options for actions, implemented some actions immediately, and assessed the

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implementation of selected actions.

An <u>at-risk student</u> was one who is having limited success in the regular traditional middle and high school programs and was in jeopardy of dropping out of school.

The <u>participant-observer</u> was the principal of the high school in the study. His role was to initiate and orient the participants to the action research process, provide training in the action research process, and then become a member of the team. His subsequent role was as a participant in the team and an observer of the interactions among the team members.

The <u>facilitator</u> was a teacher in the alternative school for at-risk students. Her role was to assist the participants in discussions during team meetings as they applied the action research process.

The Setting of the Study

School Within A School or SWS as it was commonly called, was in its third year of existence as an alternative school for at-risk students. SWS was housed in the renovated first floor of a traditional high school during this study. The school's purpose was to meet the educational needs

of at-risk students who were not successful in the traditional classroom setting and for students who had dropped out of school.

Students were recommended by guidance counselors, child study teams and parents. Some students referred themselves and were interviewed by the SWS staff before entering the school. The school's enrollment of eighty students was served by eight teachers and one guidance counselor in five modular classrooms. One of the teachers was classified as a "lead teacher" and managed the administrative tasks of the school. The regular school day was 8:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. with sixty minute periods, Monday through Thursday. A GED program was offered on Tuesday and Thursday evenings. Fridays were make-up days for absences, make up work, and inappropriate behaviors.

Each student had an alternative educational plan in which they took three academic courses and completed several internships. Students attended school for one-half of the day and spent the rest of the day at an internship site. The school used nine week marking periods and offered mini-courses for each of the nine-weeks. Integrated within the courses was affective skill training, peer mediation classes, conflict resolution

seminars, and peer support groups. The students' plan culminated in a GED, a certificate, an alternative education diploma, or a high school diploma.

CHAPTER 2 - A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

This review of the literature provides an overview of the origins of action research in organizations and in schools, as well as its application to school environments. In schools, action research has been used to expand the teacher's role and to involve parents in program decisions. The final part of the review focuses on the setting for the case study research, a school for at-risk students.

Action Research

Action research is a deliberate, solution-oriented investigation that is group owned and conducted (Johnson, 1993). Deshler and Ewert (1995) advocated that the term "action" indicates that the research is intended to contribute directly to change efforts on the part of participants in specific situations. The term "research" indicates a systematic effort to generate knowledge. Kemmis and McTaggert (1982) wrote that linking the terms "action" and "research" highlighted the essential features of this method, which are to try out new ideas in practice as a means of

increasing knowledge about improving curriculum, teaching, and learning. Its primary purpose is to focus knowledge on desired changes in specific, often unique, situations.

Dana (1995) reported that action research attempts to alter the alienation between researchers and those studied. Teachers become researchers, develop reflective capacities, and interpret the impact of innovations. William Whyte (1991b) said that action research is "...not only scientifically legitimate to do, but that scientific progress requires more integration of theory and practice than has been customary in the academic establishment" (p.2).

Action research, as a process, encourages interaction and deliberation among people who share interests and commitment to common goals (Westheimer & Kahne, 1993). The process values consensus and divergent ideas. Westheimer and Kahne (1993) saw action research as an "engine of progress" in which reflection is encouraged and dissent is honored.

Action Research in Organizations

Action research was originally used by Collier to improve race relations at the community level when he was the Commissioner of Indian Affairs during the Roosevelt Administration from 1933 to 1945 (Deshler & Ewert, 1995). Collier felt that to act effectively in the area of race relations required a joint effort by researchers, practitioners, and people at the community level.

Action research was used after World War II as a method to solve problems in an applied setting (Cunningham, 1993). The Tavistock Institute of Human Relations emphasized collaborative problem-solving and joint learning. Lewin, a social psychologist, and others with the Center for Group Dynamics were concerned that research was seldom used by the very people it is intended to inform. He proposed that experimentation and theory building should be based upon practical human problems that are encountered on a daily basis (Clift, Veal, Holland, Johnson, & McCarthy, 1995). Lewin used action research in his studies on authoritarian, democratic, and leaderless groups; in studies of food habits in a community; and in efforts to reduce prejudices and

discrimination problems suffered by minority groups in communities (Deshler & Ewert, 1995).

William Foot Whyte, a researcher in the field of applied anthropology, was one of the early proponents of action research. Whyte addressed many community and organizational issues with action research, including management labor relations (Deshler & Ewert, 1995). In one case study, Whyte (1991a) reported that the Xerox Corporation was interested in reducing costs and saving jobs in its industry. Participatory action research strategies forced labor and management to study the problem together, with a researcher as a consultant. All participants learned from each other and Xerox was able to increase worker participation and organizational performance while reducing layoffs.

Whyte (1991b) advocated that researchers must work with members of an organization to diagnose problems so that they can draw upon the research literature as well as past experiences. Whyte (1991a) coined the term participatory action research and defined it as a process in which "... some of the people in the organization or community under study participate actively with the professional researcher throughout the

research process from the initial design to the final presentation of results and discussion of their action implication" (p.20).

In participatory action research, the researcher is more of a consultant--a coach in team-building--who moves participants toward continuous learning by challenging ideas and events that are occurring in the organization. Whyte (1991a) wrote that participatory action research challenges the traditional, standard model of social research which assumes that to meet the standards of science, the researcher should exercise the maximum control over the research process.

Action Research in Schools

Deshler and Ewert (1995) reported that the original application in schools can be traced to 1926 when Buckingham questioned the link between research and practice and claimed that this approach was not effective. Buckingham's main thesis was that practitioners were more likely to make better decisions and engage in more effective practices if they participated in their own research activities.

While early proponents, like Dewey, Lewin, and Whyte, introduced

the concept of action research, Corey and others at the Teachers College of Columbia University institutionalized the term "action research" in the educational community. However, during the 1950's and 1960's, interest in action research declined in U.S. schools due to methodological attacks and the infusion of federal funding for externally controlled research (Deshler & Ewert, 1995). Action research re-emerged in the 1970's in England during the teacher-as-researcher movement that was characterized by school-based curriculum reforms, and has been reintroduced in Australia and the United States since the early 1980's.

Teachers as Researchers

The focus of teacher action research is to expand the teacher's role as inquirer about teaching and learning through systemic classroom research. Johnson (1993) suggested that participant-observation techniques and case study methodology in a research study team are supportive forums for sharing questions, concerns, and results. The purposes of teacher action research include school-based curriculum development, a professional development strategy, a systems planning

tool, and policy development. Oja and Smulyan (1989) advocated an action research approach for school restructuring. Action research can be used as an evaluative tool by individuals or institutions.

Teacher action research is a process by which teachers can be trained to be much more deliberate in documenting and evaluating their efforts. The process assists practitioners and stakeholders in identifying the needs, assessing the development processes, and evaluating the outcomes of the changes they define, design, and implement (Johnson, 1993). Johnson (1993) and King and Lonnquist (1992) suggested that action research provides teachers with an opportunity to gain knowledge and skill in research application and methods. Teachers will be more aware of options for change, will re-evaluate current practices, and may influence what is known about teaching, learning and schooling. Eisenhart and Borko (1993) encouraged the study of classrooms as a way of bringing about significant change. They suggested that the classroom setting is the crucial context for formal education and that the academic work and social relationships between students and teachers determine what is taught and what is learned.

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In one such study Weinstein, Madison, and Kulinski (1995) conducted action research with teachers of low-achieving students. Their analysis included the constraints perceived by teachers as they participated in a project to raise the academic expectancies of at-risk children. The participants recorded narratives of their experiences in weekly meetings of teachers, administrators, and researchers as they attempted several different interventions. Weinstein, et al., (1995) reported that the teachers saw few constraints that effected the interventions. More importantly, the action research model gave the participants a forum for examining the constraints.

In a survey of experienced teacher-researchers, Bennett (1993) found that most see many personal and professional benefits from conducting action research. Teachers reported an increase in collegiality, a sense of empowerment, and increased self-esteem. The survey also indicated that the researcher role was not a permanent role in many cases due to a lack of administrator and district support.

Parent-Teacher Action Research

Action research lends itself to increased involvement of other

stakeholders besides teachers. Parent-teacher action research is a process

that schools may use to improve family-school-community partnerships.

Burch (1993) described one such project in a school in Southside

Chicago. In 1991, the school principal recruited 20 African-American

businessmen to spend time with students to increase student self-esteem

and achievement by providing students with positive role models. Most

of the mentors grew up on the Southside and knew the challenges of the

streets. A smaller group of mentors, parents, and teachers met monthly to

talk about the mentoring strategies and what should be done next. In one

such instance, a decision was made to pair some adult mentors with

students who were identified as gang members and the school's worst

troublemakers. In another instance, women role models were recruited to

join the original all-male group.

This type of parent-teacher action research provided immediate

interventions to the mentoring program. As Burch (1993) wrote,

"...parent-teacher action research is helping the school assess the

program's impact while they are in the process of implementation" (p.12).

A similar example of parent-teacher action research was reported by Burch and Palanki (1994) in which a school district wanted to increase parent involvement. This school district created a parent-teacher action research team which conducted meetings to discuss ways to create a home visitation program. They studied how the visitation program might impact students' academic success. The data collection documents were parent and teacher notes, interviews of participants, surveys, and reflections. The team analyzed the data and summarized their work using a case study format.

The Case Study

Action research has the potential to generate the energy and knowledge to support healthy learning communities for at-risk students in alternative programs. A great need exists today for educators to use tools that seek to involve all stakeholders in education. Even though the drop-out rate has fallen over the last twenty years, approximately one million at-risk students drop out of our traditional school system each

year-- a system provided at considerable community expense (Morley, 1991). Some researchers (Dayton, Roby, Stern, and Weisburg, 1992) found fault within the current education system for not adequately addressing the needs of poor children and children of color. Cunningham and Gresso (1993) proposed that successful educators spend considerable time building a supportive culture that encourages a collaborative sharing among all participants of schools -- students, teachers, and parents. Schoolwide action research seeks to improve the organization as a problem-solving entity (Calhoun, 1993). With repeated cycles and the involvement of teachers, students, parents, and the general community, action research may be useful in changing the current education system. A participant-observer in action research must possess a general knowledge of the organization and structure of alternative programs for at-risk students in order to apply the process to this unique setting. Unfortunately, there are many different models of alternative programs for at-risk students in many different communities. While no typical model exists, Neumann (1994) described some common structures that included but are not limited to: voluntary membership, extended

teacher roles, student involvement in governance, and minimalized tracking and other types of labeling practices.

Alternative programs are similar in the manner in which they provide at-risk students with a community of support (Bates, 1993; Dayton, et al., 1992; Duckenfield, 1990; Morley, 1991; and Wehlage, 1991). In order to create a community of support, most alternative programs for at-risk students are small and have low student-to-teacher ratios (Bates, 1993; Gloria and Karr-Kidwell, 1993; Morley, 1991; Natriell, et al., 1985; and Quinn, 1991). Natriell, et al., (1985) felt that the small size allows for a more responsive environment, increases the opportunities for collaboration between students and staff, and gives at-risk students the personal attention they crave.

At the heart of this supportive community for at-risk students is a dedicated teacher who accepts an extended teaching role with a holistic view of educating the whole child (Morley, 1991 and Wehlage, 1983). Montgomery and Rossi (1994) suggested that at-risk students need teachers who are crazy about them, not teachers who are being driven crazy by them.

In Griffin's (1994) recent study of at-risk student perceptions of teachers in an alternative high school, at-risk students felt that their teachers were more concerned, less authoritarian, and more enthusiastic than teachers of the traditional high school that they had previously attended. Griffin found that the students felt that their teachers allowed them more input for decision-making.

In recent years many educators have engaged in productive curricular and instructional improvement through the application of action research. However, much of the literature on the assessments and subsequent evaluations of alternative programs for at-risk students measure student outcomes (Dayton, et al., 1992; Duckenfield, 1990; and Hayward, 1992). Griffin's (1994) study indicated that at-risk students in an alternative high school felt like they were a part of the decision-making process. Action research, which has been referred to by Johnson (1993) as a deliberate, solution-oriented investigation that is "group-owned," could be an effective tool for increasing student and staff involvement in an alternative school for at-risk students. Action research may link together stakeholders of an alternative school to form the

"community of support" characteristic of these educational settings.

Summary

Decisions about schooling need to be shared among the stakeholders. Dana (1995) reported that the failure of top-down approaches to education reform are due partly to the omission of teacher voice from reform efforts. The principal's role in school renewal must move to a more transformational leadership style; that is, a style that would have the principal more as a facilitator or coach of a process which allows teachers and students to become empowered (Parson, 1996). Action research is a tool for linking theory and practice in a "rolling" model of change, not a "lock-step" model for change (Clift, et al., 1995). In other words, there is no end to the process; participants take action, assess, and act again.

Calhoun (1994) stated:

Let's acknowledge that school renewal is tough work. But let's also acknowledge that with shared decision-making, collective study, and more informed decisions that lead to

concerted action, most faculties can create learning environments for their students and for themselves that are beyond the present reality (p.92).

Action research is an act of scientific research and an act of engagement with people experiencing problems (Calhoun, 1993). It is an opportunity to pool resources and ideas of clients and researchers It is a tool that encourages an on-going process of mutual engagement. It studies the dynamic nature of organizational problems and overcomes the difficulties involved in using traditional scientific research for practical organization development (Calhoun, 1993). In an alternative education school for at-risk students, the action research process may be an effective tool to increase the collaborative relationships between students, teachers, parents, and principals.

CHAPTER THREE - THE METHODS

Introduction

The purpose of the study was: (1) to describe the action research process followed by a team of students, parents, teachers, and a principal, (2) to study the role of the principal in the action research process, and (3) to report on the interactions of the action research team members. This chapter discusses the design of the study, how participants were selected, the participant-observer role of the researcher, and the phases of the action research process. Included in this chapter is a description of the qualitative analysis of data from the following data sources: the researcher's field notes, reflective journals of all participants, and interviews of selected participants.

Design of the Study

A case study of the action research process in a school for at-risk students was conducted. Yin (1989) suggested that a case study may be applied to describe the real-life context in which an intervention has occurred. He further explained that a case study is an empirical inquiry

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that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context when multiple sources of evidence are used. Case study research has had a long and distinguished history in behavioral science, and the detailed study of a single group allows the researcher to pull together information into a narrative description of the group (Leary, 1995).

The researcher chose action research as a tool for increasing the involvement of stakeholders in the decisions affecting the school. The researcher, who was the principal of the school in the study, assumed the role of participant-observer. The participant-observer role in the action research process increased the principal's sensitivity to participants' concerns, provided a holistic perspective on the alternative school, and gave the researcher a better opportunity to search for underlying themes and patterns.

The case studied was an alternative school for at-risk students. This site offered a unique opportunity to observe action research with participants who were charged with implementing a school within a school model. Ellen Brantlinger (1995) wrote, "[Reforms] that improve the school climate for alienated students include promoting integration,

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increasing student participation in school governance, and encouraging a sense of belonging by creating schools within schools" (p.3).

Selection of the Participants

The participants for this study were nine teachers, two students, one parent and the principal of the high school. These thirteen individuals made up the action research team. The researcher met with the lead teacher in August to discuss how to form an action research team. The lead teacher presented the results of the meeting to the rest of the School Within A School teaching staff, which is made up of nine teachers. These teachers assisted the researcher in developing the selection criteria for students and parents as well as deciding the number of student and parent representatives.

Selection of Teachers

Bernard (1994) suggested that two criteria for selection of participants in a study are that they are chosen based upon their competence and that they are asked to do things that they know. Bernard's

(1994) premise that participants selected "are asked to do things that they know" does not hold up for action research. Eight of the teachers selected for the study were willing to learn about action research and apply the process to their alternative school. Before the first meeting, the one teacher who had originally declined, joined the team.

The researcher met with teachers of the school, explained the purpose of the study, and provided an overview of the action research process. He explained the benefits of the study for them both professionally and personally, as well as the implications for looking at problems in their program in a collaborative manner with students, parents, and the principal. Teachers of the program were selected based upon two criteria:

(1)   They volunteered.

(2)   They were teachers in the school.

Selection of At-Risk Students

Since the study sought the participation of at-risk students, it was important to insure that they wanted to participate, were interested in

studying the program, and had the communication skills to articulate their opinions and feelings to the other participants. The SWS teachers chose the students without prior knowledge of the researcher. The criteria, developed jointly by the teachers and the researcher, for student selection were:

(1) It was their third year in the program.

(2) They had completed training in interpersonal skills and conflict resolution.

(3) They had participated in a student support group.

(4) They had demonstrated the ability to express themselves both orally and in written form.

(5) They volunteered.

The teachers generated a list of five students in the school that met the selection criteria. They felt that the team should be limited to two students. They were concerned that the team would be too large and had doubts about the student's being active participants in studying issues of the school.

Selection of Parents

All teachers of the alternative school participated in the selection of parents who had children in the program. The selection criteria, developed jointly by the teachers and the researcher, for parents were:

(1)   They had expressed an interest in being involved.

(2)   They volunteered.

(3)   They had no work conflicts.

(4)   The teachers had a positive professional working relationship with them.

Teachers generated a list of five parents who met the selection criteria and used the same rationale for parent membership as they had for student membership. One teacher, who was interested in increasing parental involvement, volunteered to contact the parents. From the original list, all parents were unable to attend the meetings. The teachers generated another list and the same teacher contacted these parents with the similar results. The teachers felt like this lack of parental involvement on the action research team was just another example of why these students were at-risk. Finally, a parent who worked in the cafeteria of the

school volunteered to participate in the meetings after being asked by several of SWS teachers.

The Researcher's Role

The researcher had two roles: one as principal and one as a participant-observer. Each role had clearly defined purposes.

Researcher as Principal

The researcher's initial role was to form a team of students, teachers, and parents. Once the team was formed, the researcher introduced the study to the participants, defined their roles and the role of the facilitator, and trained the participants in the action research process. The researcher conducted training in three one hour sessions during weekly meetings using simulations, role-playing, and scenarios of the process. He reviewed group dynamics, discussed confidentiality of issues, and explained how participants would keep a reflective journal. Appendix G displays agendas of these three meetings, a list of materials used, and instructional strategies.

Researcher as Participant-Observer

The researcher became a participant on the team and an observer of the action research process. The researcher, as a participant-observer, offered the advantage of making significant discoveries that were unanticipated (Whyte, 1984). Whyte also suggested that this role "...enables the field worker to place individuals in a group context and gain a realistic picture of the dynamics of individual and group behaviors" (p. 26). He supported the notion that participatory action research opened up researchers' minds to new information and new ideas and the collaborative involvement outweighed the potential disadvantages of researcher bias.

The researcher's role was a delicate balance as an observer, facilitator, participant, consultant, and coach. The case study described how the interactions among the participants influenced this balance.

Timeline for the Study

The team conducted weekly meetings during the 1996-97 school year. The first four meetings were an introduction to the study, the

selection of the team, and the training of the team in the action research process. In the remaining weeks, the team used Calhoun's model of the action research process.

Calhoun's Model

Calhoun's (1994) model of action research was chosen because it offered a practical guide for those who are interested in applying action research in a self-renewing school, whereas Whyte's (1991a, 1991b) work, though practical, was done in real-life situations and corporations. Her model used five phases of inquiry for continuous confrontation with data and included a list of activities to be considered in each phase. Calhoun's model of collective study in action with five phases was:

1. Select an area
     *Identify an area of interest
     *Focus on students
     *Look at both immediate and cumulative effects

2. Collect data
     *Collect existing archival data immediately, then move to
      conventional and inventive data sources
     *Use multiple data sources
     *Collect data regularly
     *Seek technical assistance if needed (or if things slow down)
     *Promote collective ownership of data

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  *Monitor data collection until it becomes normative

3. Organize data
  *Count instances, events, and artifacts
  *Display data in simple tables and charts
  *Arrange data by classroom, grade level, and school
  *Organize for staff analysis immediately
  *Seek technical assistance, if needed

4. Analyze and interpret data
  *Squeeze the data for maximum information
  *Analyze and question the data as a collective
  *Determine priority area(s) for action
  *Decide what can be celebrated

Prior to 5: Study the professional literature
  *Identify topics in the professional literature that relate to or
  match the school's area of interest
  *Gather research reports, research syntheses, articles, videotapes,
  etc.
  *Organize these materials for study
  *Analyze and interpret the information in these materials as aids to
  understanding and to action
  *Determine the most promising actions

5. Taking action
  *Combine information from data analysis with information from
  professional literature
  *Select "best" options for action
  *Craft short- and long-term action plans
  *Implement some actions immediately
  *Assess implementation of selected actions

1-5. Again and again
  *Use action research to assess effects
  *Use action research to select "new" actions (p.109)

Data Collection Procedures

The action research team of nine teachers, two students, a parent, and a principal was studied as they used the action research process. Looking at one case, a school for at-risk students, the researcher described what went on, how things proceeded, and explained why things occurred as they did within this action research team. Merriam (1991) stated that "by concentrating on a single phenomenon or entity (the case), this approach aims to uncover the interaction of significant factors characteristic of the phenomenon" (p.10). Langenbach, Vaughn, and Aagaard (1994) recommended that talking to and observing the people involved in the study and assessing what they said would be an accurate way to find out what was on their minds.

The researcher met with participants who volunteered for the study and wanted to learn about the use of action research as a tool for looking at school issues. These volunteers convened in an organizational meeting so that they could see other volunteers selected for the study and better understand the researcher's expectations. At a minimum, the participants agreed to attend all meetings, to prepare for the meetings by reading the

literature, and to keep a reflective journal about the study. In addition, they agreed to be interviewed by the researcher in a semi-structured setting.

After forming the team, the nine School Within A School teachers informed all sixty-five students about the study in a town meeting. The researcher was available to answer questions. The researcher developed the initial agendas for the team in order to train the team in action research, group process, and reflective journals. Information was presented in such a way as to engage the team in the action research process by using simulations and role-playing activities.

The team focused on issues that interested them after a consensus by all the participants confirmed that they were ready to use the action research process. In a brainstorming session, they listed these concerns and initiated subsequent phases of action research. At this point, the researcher assumed the participant-observer role in the action research process. During the meetings, the researcher kept a field diary on the events of the meetings as they related to the research questions in this case study.

The action research team met weekly for one hour on Monday or Thursday afternoons at 3:00 p.m. The team elected a manager, a recorder, a timekeeper, and a facilitator. The only permanent role for the entire study was the facilitator. The manager generated an agenda for each meeting. The recorder shared traditional minutes of the meetings with the rest of the team, and the facilitator allowed for the sharing of information by all participants. Other participants recorded notes on a chartpad and the chalkboard. The meeting time allowed participants to reflect in their journals for the last ten minutes of each meeting. The journals were collected by the researcher, copied and returned to each individual at the next meeting.

Sources of Data

Field Notes

The researcher began by logging and then describing his procedures clearly enough in field notes so that others could understand them, reconstruct them, and subject them to scrutiny. This "audit trail" determined the dependability and confirmability of the bookkeeping

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(Miles & Huberman, 1994). The researcher's audit trail included his observations about the action research process and the interactions among the participants during the research team meetings and agendas of the team meetings. Alasuutari (1995) confirmed that field notes are a self-evident part of a participant observation study. He added that a field diary is insightful in recording first impressions of the social environment, can be expanded into sections of the final product, and is valuable in identifying misinterpretations and false leads.

Reflective Journals

All participants kept a reflective journal. Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen (1994) suggested that the journal writing is a narrative technique that records events, thoughts and feelings that are important to the writer. Journals are personal documents that can be used as a research tool to capture reflections and encounters (Richards, 1989).

As a record kept by the participants, the journal entries informed the researcher about changing thoughts, new ideas, and the progression of learning the action research process. Participants wrote at least one page

per week, and many had twenty-four journal entries that corresponded to the number of team meetings. Appendix H lists the questions that participants reflected on. The journal entries addressed the original research questions and were used as a tool by which the participants could "free write" about other issues relating to the study. The entries were recorded on lined paper in which 1/3 of the margin was left free for coding of themes.

Interviews

A third source of data was the transcribed notes from interviews with some of the participants. Ten interviews were conducted at the beginning, middle, and end of the study. Representatives of the research team interviewed were the two students, one parent, and five teachers. A follow up interview was conducted with the parent and the teacher who facilitated the process. The interviews generated perceptions and attitudes on (1) getting action research started in the research team and (2) using action research.

First year teachers were interviewed to build a collegial relationship

within the contextual framework of applying the action research process to their school. The most experienced teachers were interviewed to gain insight about their perspective of using action research and to compare their attitudes to the inexperienced teachers. The Teacher/Facilitator was interviewed because of her unique and crucial role to the study. Follow-up interviews were conducted for clarification of participants' perceptions.

In-depth interviews produced concrete examples of how the participants acted and behaved in the action research process and served as clues for the analysis (Alasuutari, 1995). In a personal face-to-face interview, the researcher could see, hear and analyze descriptions about the respondents' group and the social setting that did not surface in the team meetings. The interviews added perspective on how others understood and interpreted their situation (Anderson, et al., 1994).

The interviews were semi-structured; that is, they utilized both open-ended and structured questions. Hitchcock and Hughes (1989) pointed out that the semi-structured interview depends heavily for its success on the relationship that is developed between the interviewer and respondent. In the beginning, the researcher asked the participants pre-

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prepared questions to make them feel at ease. In the second phase of the interview, the researcher developed descriptive open-ended questions which enabled participants to talk about what they did and why they did it. (See Appendix H) Spradley (1980) called these types of questions "descriptive" and "grand tour" questions.

Data Analysis

Data collection documents were the researcher's field notes, journals of participants, and transcribed notes from interviews. The data collected from different sources was used for description and generation of concepts and hypotheses about the use of action research (Langenbach, Vaughn, & Aagaard, 1994). Miles & Huberman (1994) recommended that "if it's in the notes, and not internally contradicted, summarize it and enter a phrase reflecting the summary" (p. 123).

The researcher began by sorting the essence of the participants' perceptions into three bins that were labeled: (1) the action research process, (2) the interactions among the participants, and (3) the role of the principal. Later in the analysis a fourth bin was created and labeled

unanticipated findings. The perceptions were analyzed across the three

data sources: field notes, journals, and interviews. (See Appendix G for

samples of the raw data excerpts and Appendix I for a list of themes from

the data sources)

To sort the data, the researcher used colored pencils to underline

and identify recurring patterns in each of the bins. A red color was used

for the action research bin. Blue was used for the interactions among the

participants bin and a green color for the role of the principal bin.

Finally, a brown color was used for the unanticipated findings bin. After

reading through the data several times, pertinent data in each bin was

further sorted into major themes that could be used to answer the three

original research questions.

To ensure that the research findings were of high quality, the

researcher converged pieces of data from at least two of the same or

different data sources (Ely, Anzul, Friedman, Garner, & Steinmetz, 1991).

All documents produced by the team were reviewed for recurring themes.

For example, in each team meeting the researcher recorded observations

in his field notes and participants reflected in their journals. To provide

richer data, selected participants were interviewed at different times during the study. By scanning through and across data in the journals, field notes, and interviews, convergence of data was confirmed.

CHAPTER FOUR - THE FINDINGS

Introduction

This section "tells the story" of how the team used action research to look at issues in their alternative school for at-risk students. A description of recurring patterns that emerged from the analysis is discussed within the headings of the action research process, the role of the principal in action research, the action research team, and unanticipated findings. The researcher chose to interweave the literature review as the findings were reported to pull together the events of this case study with supporting research.

The Action Research Process

Research Question #1: What are the participants' perceptions of the action research process?

Organizing for Action Research

Initial Meeting with Teachers

The researcher met with the lead teacher in August, 1996, to solicit her support for a study of the alternative school for at-risk students. She

made no promises, but agreed to give him some time at the staff meeting to make a brief presentation. The researcher approached the nine teachers of the

Teacher C: "I am suspicious, but I am not going to put something down at the very beginning. I am willing to listen. I can see this process allowing us to make some changes."

instructional staff of the School Within a School Alternative Education Program in August, 1996, with a proposal to conduct an applied research study with them. Despite the worries about self-fulfilling prophecies, observer biases and demand characteristics (Leary, 1995), the researcher discussed how he could train them in action research and then participate and observe them using an action research model to address concerns and issues in their school.

As the principal, the researcher felt that he needed to establish trust with the group by telling them up-front about the study, his expectations, and the benefits to teachers, students, and himself. Teachers were informed that not everyone had to participate or was obligated.

His commitment was that he would work with the staff for the entire school year and meet with them as long as they wanted his input on

decisions about the alternative school. He
explained that studies are sometimes made of
exemplary traditional schools, with an eye
toward understanding why these particular
schools are so good. Often times, however,

Teacher A: "I want to do this, but only if I will learn something. What I learn must benefit the kids in the program."

alternative schools for at-risk students are ignored.

The teachers asked questions about action research, the principal's role, parental involvement, the organizational structure of the meetings, and the participants on the team. The researcher's field notes reflected that Teacher D wanted to know what she could get from the study. She asked if the teachers could earn recertification points for participating in an educational project. Teacher F: "I still do not understand this action research process. I guess it will come to me as we use it." Two new teachers and one tenured teacher who was on formal evaluation expressed concern about how their involvement would affect their yearly teaching evaluation process. The new teachers were becoming acclimated to a new school setting and had reservations about how much time and effort they could devote to applying the action research process to their school.

Teacher B asked if "the ART [action research team] was a part of her teacher evaluation." The researcher reassured them that their participation would have no impact upon their evaluation. He explained that the school district's evaluation instrument of their teaching was not related to the application of action research. One new teacher wrote in his journal that "he did not care if the action research team was a part of his evaluation" and stated that "he was going to be the same person regardless of the fact that his evaluator was a participant-observer on the action research team."

Many of the teachers had other obligations that they felt might have an impact on their involvement and were worried about the time and effort they could devote to the study. Teacher A was taking night classes for teacher certification, Teachers B and G were coaches of athletic teams, and Teacher E was teaching night school and was the sponsor of the high school chess team.

In spite of these concerns, the lead teacher informed the researcher a few days later that the entire teaching staff, all nine teachers, wanted to participate. The field notes reflected that the teachers wanted to be involved in discussing issues relating to their alternative school beyond

their normal assigned duties and after their contractual time because they saw value in using action research as a team. When interviewed, Teacher A said: "I want to have a say in the improvement and restructuring of our alternative school, and I want to work with the other teachers and the principal."

Coordination with Teacher/Facilitator

In consultation with the lead teacher and based upon his prior work with one of the teachers in a student support group, the researcher approached Teacher H with the idea of her being the facilitator of the action research team meetings. Teacher H was the counselor for students in SWS. She coordinated parental contacts, taught conflict mediation classes, and offered one-on-one counseling services as needed. The researcher and the lead teacher believed that this teacher had the background and skills to fulfill this role and that the study would be more effective if someone from the teaching staff, not the researcher, could provide the facilitation for the team meetings. This teacher wanted to be the facilitator because of her interest in Lewin's work and her desire to

initiate greater parental involvement. Upon accepting this integral role, this "Teacher/Facilitator" asked for and received more training in using Calhoun's model of action research. The researcher went to the teachers and asked if they could accept Teacher H as the facilitator of the team meetings. All agreed that her skills would best serve the team in the role of the facilitator.

Follow up

In response to Teacher/Facilitator's request for more training, the researcher provided her with books and articles on action research during the months of September and October. Teacher/Facilitator was commuting an hour and a half one way to school and was having difficulty finding the time to read through the material. The researcher created an audiotape summary of Calhoun's action research model and the other materials that she could listen to during her commute. The researcher met with Teacher/Facilitator on numerous occasions to discuss the action research process and to develop a training plan for the team. She coordinated the selection process of parents and students with the other

teachers, using the selection criteria outlined in Chapter 3.

By the middle of October, two students had been selected, but the five parents from the first list were not able to meet in the afternoon. Teacher/ Facilitator went back to the teachers and asked them to generate another list of parents that she could contact. She also asked them if they were willing to change the meeting time from the afternoon to the evening. The teachers generated a new parent list, but felt like the afternoon meeting was best for them. The researcher encouraged the teachers to meet in the evenings but they, as a group, refused to change their meeting time.

When asked to participate, Student A replied: "I would be honored."

Teacher/Facilitator questioned the researcher about the participant-observer role and how they would deal with the dynamics of team discussions. The researcher was directed by the teachers to contact the students to see if they were interested. From a list of five students generated by the teachers, he contacted the first two student names on the list. Both students wanted to be on the team. Parents of these students

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were contacted and permission forms were signed and returned.

Training the Action Research Team

The researcher collected information on how to run a successful meeting, agenda-setting, group processes and roles, journaling, team-building exercises, and Calhoun's model of the action research process. The training component was shared and discussed with Teacher/Facilitator (See Appendix G for more information on the training portion).

The first action research team meeting convened on October 17, 1996. The researcher modeled the expected behaviors of a group manager and provided everyone with an agenda. Items discussed at this meeting included an introduction of the principal, an introduction to the study, and an overview of the action research process.

After describing Calhoun's model, the researcher explained the purpose of the action research team, the role of the principal, the facilitation within the team meetings, and the roles of each team member. The basic principles of effective group process were discussed, as well as the procedures for handling confidentiality in journal entries and

interviews. The team established meeting times and dates. The team asked that the journal writings be a part of the meetings. The researcher explained that he would ask one or two questions about the meeting as it related to the study, and each participant would respond to the questions (See Appendix H for sample journal questions). He also encouraged the participants to "free write;" that is, they could express their feelings without conforming to the specific questions. Every member of the team was present except for the parent who missed the first meeting.

In three subsequent meetings, the researcher acted as the manager for the group and the trainer in action research. In his journal, he wrote: "The simulation of using the issue of peer tutoring in Calhoun's model of action research seemed to work today. Many of the team members are ready to tackle real issues." When interviewed, Teacher H stated: "Action research is beginning to come alive and people are starting to have a sense of how it can work." In another interview Teacher A said: "We need to get going. Let's see how it works." In Teacher C's journal, he wrote, "I learn best by trying it on. I need an opportunity to practice."

Teacher E supported Teacher C's position by writing, "I won't feel comfortable until I actually use it." Teacher I reported that he is "anxious to get on with the process."

Teacher D: "Students are overwhelmed."

However, Student A was confused. In an interview, she said, "I thought we were going to come together to try to help students who had problems and that I was like the lead person. But action research is not like that. The team is trying to make SWS better. I thought the action research team was like a big support group." Student B had a better understanding of action research. He said, "It [action research] is a thing where you hear other people's stories about different things going on with the alternative school and ways to make it better."

Using Action Research

Selecting an Area

In early November, the action research team felt that they were ready to apply Calhoun's model of action research to a specific problem in the alternative school. The first issues it chose to study were student

attendance for the night school component and then student attendance for the day school component.

Teacher/Facilitator asked members of the team to brainstorm areas of interest that focused on students and would have an immediate and cumulative effect on the SWS program. Narrowing the area and reaching a consensus on what to study took two meetings. The team narrowed the area to attendance because they believed that getting at-risk students to come to school was an on-going problem.

All teachers and students felt as though it took the team a long time to select an area; however, in reality, it only took two separate meetings. Teacher G wrote in her journal that she wanted to practice action research on an easy issue first in order to become familiar with the process. Teachers A and C concurred in their journals. Teacher B was anxious to identify the problem and in using the analogy of peeling an onion to pinpointing an area, she said, "I peel the onion a little faster than most." Teacher F reported that she was still confused and felt that the team was going in circles. The team decided to delegate to a smaller subgroup of teachers the task of writing a rough draft of the new attendance

interventions. The team was going to observe the outcomes the following school year and determine how they would measure the effectiveness of the policy.

In February, the team decided to move to another issue while the subgroup worked on the wording of the attendance interventions. Reaching a consensus on the second issue took longer than the first issue. In his field notes the researcher reported that problem clarification and identification and group consensus on this phase of action research were the most time-consuming and emotionally-draining parts of using action research. The reflections of Teachers A, B, D, and G in their journals supported the researcher's perceptions.

This issue, to restructure the SWS program, was finally agreed upon after members of the team gathered data on the creation of the school and shared information about accreditation standards and credits for diplomas. Some of the data collected and shared with the team included documents from the State Department of Education on the new Standards of Accreditation, Standards of Learning testing, and credit requirements for high school graduates. The restructuring of SWS was a "hot issue" for

the team to take on because it affected the very core of the school's culture and one of its intended outcomes for at-risk students.

The researcher, as principal, identified the available resources to support the alternative school. SWS would have the same classroom space at the high school, and no other rooms would be available for program expansion. Due to a discontinuation of a particular program, the school would gain two-fifths of a teaching position. The school would be limited to eighty students. Within these parameters, the action research team was charged with the development of a plan to restructure their alternative school for the 1997-98 school year and beyond.

During the discussions about the restructuring of the alternative school, Teacher/Facilitator asked the researcher to review Calhoun's action research model with the team

Teacher F wrote: "The review helped those of us who are concrete sequential learners. I was glad to get un-confused. We are going in circles about this issue, but I understand the circle."

again because the team had become stalled in the process. Sagor (1992) wrote, "the premise of action research is that best practice continues to evolve and differs from context to context" (p.77). All of the team

members wrote in their journals that the review of the process helped them focus on the matters at hand. Teacher E wrote, "The review helped us see where we are and become more focused."

Collecting, Organizing, and Interpreting Data

After selecting the areas of student attendance and program restructuring, the team looked through the attendance records from the two previous years, reviewed student alternative education plans, collected attendance policies from other schools, and interviewed parents and students on their views of these two issues. For the school attendance issue, which was the first area examined, team members were hesitant about collecting existing archival data, surveying the students and parents, and contacting other schools. As Sagor (1992) reported, they were biased for action before research and were encouraged by the researcher to "get their hands dirty" based only on information from their craft knowledge, prior education, and reflective discussions. As Teacher D said on numerous occasions, "I have been there and done that."

After a few unproductive meetings, the Teacher/Facilitator

suggested that members of the team take on certain data sources and organize them to be presented to the group. Teacher E surveyed local businesses about their

Teacher C remarked, "Research is important. I found out that we are on the right path and that you may be able to pick up a couple of things."

attendance standards. Teacher G contacted Cities in Schools, an alternative school program in New York City, whose program SWS had been modeled after. Teacher I along with Teacher G researched end of the year reports on student attendance to count the number of students with attendance problems for the past two years. Student B surveyed other students about their understanding of the current attendance policy and their feelings about possible interventions. The parent said she would call other parents, but she did not follow through. In a follow-up interview, the parent said that she did not know many of the other parents and felt uncomfortable talking to them on the phone. Also, she said, " I work until eight in the evening, and I simply do not have the energy to talk to parents about this stuff."

For the second issue, the restructuring of SWS, the team moved

directly into the "data" phase. Some of the members volunteered to conduct an ERIC search. Some used various search engines on the Internet; others called different alternative schools, and one reviewed the literature database from a local university. As Teacher B said in an interview, "Research is worthwhile. It was meaningful for me to look in areas for different ideas of how to address a particular problem." Student A said that he "gathers research by talking to other students." The parent felt hearing the research presented by others "was a plus."

Studying the Professional Literature

There was a reluctance by the team members to avoid the "research" step of the action research process. Teachers were primarily interested in matters of practice, not research. After several reviews of the action research process, encouragement by some of the teachers, and the advice of the researcher, the teachers actively sought information from different sources. The researcher recorded in his notes that once the team members became immersed in the research, their views changed. For example, Teacher A presented an attendance policy in the beginning of

this study that would give an at-risk student a failing grade for missing a certain number of days from school. She also felt poor attendance was a big problem for these students.

In response to Teacher A's perceptions, Teacher G presented data that showed that less than five per cent of the students from the past two years were attendance problems. After hearing these data and the research from her colleagues, Teacher A decided to work with a smaller teacher-only subgroup to write an attendance policy that had several levels of immediate interventions with no failing grade consequence.

Taking Action

Once the deliberations of selecting an area were concluded, data had been collected, and research had been done, the team was ready for action. The word "action" meant that the team had to move forward on an issue instead of just debating the merits of it. As Teacher C explained, "You are on the line. You have to explain why you are doing things."

Many team members reflected that they should "get off the dime, stay focused, and spend less time on selecting an area and collecting of data." In the field notes, the

> Teacher A remarked, "We should see how it works and if it doesn't work, we will come back and start from scratch and try all over again."

researcher wrote: "The interventions are so clear. Why is it taking the team so long to recognize that?"

About the Process

Teacher B said, "Action research gave us a nice, neat guideline to follow." During Teacher C's interview, he said, "Action research gives us a framework to work as a team to focus on our school. We feel like it's working, and; therefore, it has value."

This idea that the action research process was a framework or tool for studying issues was a recurring theme throughout the data collected in the study. McLean (1995) wrote, "Action research is not a program or a specific intervention, but a process for determining what works best"(p.3).

Six teachers used the phrase "effective tool" to describe one of the benefits of using the

> Teacher B said, "We really do not know we are using action research because it is a natural way of going at problems."

action research process. In a follow-up interview with Teacher/Facilitator, she believed that the team would not have been able to focus on restructuring SWS without a working knowledge of action research that came from working on the first issue.

In the beginning, the participants felt the process was taking too long. In journals, Student B and Teachers E and I wrote that the action research process was "time-consuming" and that "it was time to move on to another issue." On the positive side of time, Teacher C said that the action research team meetings gave the participants "time to think without worrying about coming away with right answers or having to make a snap decision. It creates an opportunity for an exchange of ideas that might not occur otherwise." Teacher A's journal and interview supported Teacher C's perceptions in that he said, "Time-wise, I have been fine." "Time and effort are worthwhile," was Teacher G's comment.

When asked about the researcher's role, Teacher D responded that

"it takes time to learn your ways in working with us." This teacher was more concerned about the group processes and group roles than the time it took to work on issues using the action research process.

The Role of the Principal in Action Research

Research Question #2: What was the role of the principal in the action research process?

As a Participant-Observer

The principal became a participant in the team meetings

> Student A said, "You are always the head man."

and an observer of the process; however, this role was not clearly defined. Some of the team members could not or would not separate the participant-observer role from the principal role. However, Student A saw a difference once the team began using action research. Student A explained: "When we first started the meetings, Teacher H and you were in charge. Now [12/11/96] everybody is the same, and we are coming together more as a team." Teacher F wrote in her journal, "Could you

[the principal] share more of your ideas since you are a part of the team?" Teacher D

Teacher F wrote, "In a perfect world we would be able to divorce Rick the principal from Rick the team member."

stated in her interview that "the principal's role influenced the behavior of other team members and their willingness to participate in the discussions in the beginning. If you are an evaluator and you are in an action research team, I think it is more difficult to separate yourself from the principal role. Although the feeling that you are the boss has faded quite a lot, in the back of my mind, and others probably, you still have power over us."

Other participants felt like they would never see the principal in the principal's role again in this team setting. The researcher became accepted as a native of this team in an overt role; that is, the team members knew he was doing a study (Whyte, 1991b). Teachers E and G and Student B wrote in their journals that there was no problem with the principal being a participant-observer. Teacher E stated that "all will be equal." Teacher C

Teacher C explained, " The barrier of being the principal has been removed in that setting."

explained that "People have become familiar with you. You have made yourself accessible. You are not pushing the position of being principal. You have made yourself one of the group." Teacher B concurred with Teacher C when she said, "It is hard to separate the roles of principal and participant-observer. Knowing the type of person you are makes the difference."

As a Coach

The principal was expected to be the "consultant" in the action research process by the other members of the action research team. They asked him to review and clarify the process several different times during the study. Teachers involved in action research often feel like they do not possess the proper skills (Calhoun, 1994; McLean, 1995; and Sagor, 1992). Often, the reflections of some of the members indicated that they were not sure if they were applying action research correctly. Teacher F asked, "Are we doing this right?" Calhoun (1994) responded that the skills needed for action research are the same ones needed to assess student learning, assign grades, and make administrative decisions. With

these skills, participants should possess a desire to improve the practice of education.

The first time they questioned whether action research was being used correctly was immediately following the training when the team struggled with phases 2 and 3 of Calhoun's action research model. Each of these phases dealt with data; that is, how to collect, organize, analyze and interpret data. Teacher E wrote, "The review and reminders of the action research process keep us on task." As Teacher B explained, "It would be helpful to us, if you, as the trainer of the action research process, could clarify at times where the team is in regards to that process."

A second episode of questioning occurred when the team asked the researcher to define and give examples of appropriate interventions on the areas they selected. The researcher wrote in his journal, "It is difficult for me to decide whether I am being asked for my opinions as the coach, as a participant, or as the principal." As Teacher B explained in an interview, "At times you need to step in as the principal because everybody is sitting there waiting for you to say something and you do not say anything."

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The parent agreed with Teacher B's perceptions. In the parent's first interview she said, "You [the principal] should take more action to keep the group moving on the issue." As Teacher C wrote, "It is easier to have a dictator and complain about the decisions he made."

The third time questions arose was to clear up confusion about when the team should study the professional literature. From the field notes on a meeting in February, Teacher/Facilitator asked the researcher to clear up some confusion about the "research" portion of the action research model. The researcher explained that action research was a continuous process that never stops, and they should not assume that action research will always fit into a particular phase as illustrated by Calhoun's model.

As a Team-Builder

The principal had to consistently stress the importance of team work to the

> Teacher G wrote, "I trust you - at least to this point."

participants. A recurring perception in many journals was the

trusting environment existed within the action research team. Teacher F wrote [10/17/96], "I believe I can be honest, and will be listened to. Besides, the assistant principal is my evaluator and I have tenure." In February, she wrote, "Trust takes a long time to build for me, especially after being burned by [the past principal]. Teacher G wrote in October, "[To the principal], you have been many things over the years, but one thing you have not been is a liar. I believe that I can say what I want to you or in front of you and that you will give an honest reaction. Afterwards, life goes on, and the issue is over."

Whether or not people pull together as a team, as Zenger, Musselwhite, Hurson, & Perrin (1994) wrote, depended on the mutual trust that the leader helps to create. In Teacher C's journal, he wrote, "You have done a good job in making it possible to voice opinions without taking too much risk in doing so. I am very comfortable letting it hang out." Other participants' writings coincided with Teacher C's in that they also did not feel threatened by the person in the position of principal. As Teacher G wrote, "I am glad that you are a part of the action research process."

Another recurring pattern sorted from the interviews and journals was that the principal came to the team with credibility. Half of the teachers had known the principal as a teacher and an assistant principal in the high school. His experience as a successful teacher of at-risk students gave him an equal footing with the other teachers. In addition, the previous school year he served as a student support group facilitator for at-risk students with Teacher H. A third measure of his credibility was that two years prior to the study, he served as a mentor to one of the at-risk students in the alternative school. These "credibility indicators" proved to be helpful in becoming accepted into the team. As Teacher C said, "You are not an ordinary principal. You have had students in your classroom that we have, and so you have experience with at-risk students. I see you in a different way."

The Action Research Team

Research Question #3: How did this action research team work together?

Teacher Dominance and Conflict

Teams will fuss and fight, and this action research team was no

different. In the field notes, the researcher wrote, "There

Teacher B said, "The team can work together with some facilitation."

are some underlying personality issues among some of the teachers, particularly among Teachers A, D, and G." In an interview, Teacher H remarked, "There is a conflict between Teachers D and G over who is going to run the show. It is going to come out no matter whether you are there or not." In December, Teacher A said, "My main issue right now is struggling with my relationships with the other teachers."

Cunningham & Gresso (1993) wrote that the longer a team is together, the stronger is a sense of bonding and cohesiveness. In January, Teacher D explained, "The team experience taught me a lesson. I can learn from listening to people's ideas, and anything that will help us work with these at-risk kids, I am all for." In a discussion with Teacher G about her relationship with Teacher D, Teacher G confessed, "I will be surprised if she becomes a part of the team for the goal of improving the school." On the other hand, Teacher C recognized, "Everyone has strengths and weaknesses. Certain people in the team are more difficult to work with."

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With nine teachers on the action research team, conflicts were expected and some tense moments occurred. For example, when the team looked at student attendance, five teachers and the parent wrote in their journals that they wanted an attendance policy with a failing grade as a consequence. The other teachers and Student B were comfortable with a more liberal, "let's do all we can before we drop them from our school" approach. Student A said, "If students do not want to come to school, then why should we chase after them. I come to school and I do not want them to bother my goals, point blank!"

Lastly, the members of the team -- nine teachers, two students, one parent, and a principal -- created a setting in which teachers dominated the dialogue and controlled the application of the action research process to their alternative school. In his journal, the researcher wrote, "The team is dominated by teacher talk." Later in the process he added, "Teacher G controlled Teacher E's discussion today about internship restructuring." Some of the teachers felt like the team was too large to reach a consensus, yet offered no alternatives to remedy the situation. Also, no one wanted to leave the action research team.

Student Voice

As noted earlier, teachers dominated the process. They

> Teacher B said, "Students are being heard, but not listened to."

knew that students were not being actively involved, and yet did very little to change the make up of the team or the meeting times. Teacher/Facilitator confessed, "It is going to be really hard for student issues to be studied because their issues are going to be very different than teacher issues. My feeling is that they are going to be snowed over every time they bring something up." From the phase of selecting an area, student issues of a year long physical education class, peer teaching, field trips, improving the school's facilities, and blending in with the regular high school were not studied. Teacher I wrote in his journal, "Student issues should be studied outside of the action research team." Student B's journal reported, "It is hard for [Student A] and me to be heard, but we do get to make a lot of decisions on things."

Student voices were heard, but not listened to. Teacher B remarked, "Students are being heard, but I do not think they really understand what we are doing." However, in the interviews of the

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students, they felt like they were being heard. Student B said, "Nobody is left out; however, teachers have more power. There are more teachers than anybody else. You can put your point of view in, but it really does not get said." In Student A's first interview, he said, "I do not think I am being ignored. Everybody is listening to me." However, in a follow-up interview, Student A remarked, "I wish we would have looked at some of the stuff that I was interested in, like how we might blend in with the kids upstairs more."

Students felt like they were a part of the team, but at many of the meetings they did not say anything. The researcher wrote in his field notes and journal that "often times Teachers A, C, and H would ask the students directly for their thoughts, but the students had little to add." As Teacher C said, "Having different segments in the group is important. It is always nice to hear from the people actually getting manipulated. It is natural for students to be reluctant to give input."

In the field notes, the researcher wrote, "Both Student A and Student B had some difficulty communicating their feelings about certain issues. Both expressed their feelings better in the interviews than in their

journals or in the meetings. It took the students a little longer to grasp the action research process, to get comfortable with all the team members, and to understand the issue of restructuring the school." Student B attended eight of the twenty-four scheduled meetings and had difficulty expressing himself at times in his journal. When asked about why he missed so many meetings, he said, "I kept forgetting."

Parental Involvement

Most participants said that parental involvement was

> The parent said, "I did not feel like my input was important enough."

important; however, teachers did not take action to increase parent participation. A parent joined the action research team in November and left the team in early February. Teacher D wrote, "The make up of the team is intimidating for parents and students. The parent feels uncomfortable." Teachers C, E, and I wrote that they need more input from parents and students. Teacher A said, "I would like to see us get more parents to the meetings."

The parent was reluctant in expressing her views in the action

research team meetings. In interviews with the parent, she said, "Most of the time I feel isolated. It is not the group's fault. I am just not as familiar with the program as I would like to be." Teacher B said, "I listen to the parent, but she has not said a lot. Our team is teacher-heavy. There is a risk factor in speaking her mind with her daughter being in the program. This fact will hinder her a little bit." The parent remarked, "I would rather state an opinion without creating a conflict."   Student A said, "The parent should not have come in later, point blank. She really does not understand what she is there for." The parent shared

these thoughts in her interview, "I did not exactly know what it is they really expect of me."

> The parent said, "I felt like I was sitting in a doctor's office hearing a lot of medical terms, except in these meetings I was hearing a lot of teacher terms."

To improve parent involvement, Teacher C recommended "night meetings at a neutral location. I always like face-to-face much better than over the phones. We have to sell ourselves in a way. The problem with this group of students is that the parents are the problem sometimes. I would like to see more parents in our action research team meetings." The parent suggested

that "the teachers write parent letters, have an open house, or create a newsletter and ask for parent comments." In regards to helping parents understand the discussions, the parent suggested that teachers should communicate in simple terms. In the end, the parent said, "I felt good about being included and bad that I just did not understand."

In the field notes, the researcher wrote, "The teachers say they want parental involvement, but they do not actively seek their input and participation." When interviewed, Teacher D said, "Parents of at-risk students do not understand school and will not become involved. I guess that is why these kids have so many problems." Teacher B explained, "Part of the reason these kids are in an alternative school is because their parents are unavailable to help them deal with typical adolescent development issues. It does not surprise me that no parents will meet with us after school."

<div align="center">Unanticipated Findings</div>

<div align="center">Group Process and Group Roles</div>

Initially, some participants believed that the training on group process and group roles was the action research process. In an early

interview with Teacher D in December, she said, "The action research process is a glorified parliamentary procedure. It assigns you a role within the team." Student A thought that action research was "a big support group."

The researcher met with Teacher D and Student A and clarified the group process principles from the action research process to correct this misconception. After the interview and follow-up interview, the researcher wrote in his field notes, "The group process and group roles are just as important as the application of the action research process. Without the group process, action research could not be used." Teacher/Facilitator confirmed this observation when she said, " The application of the action research process would not have been possible without the training in group dynamics."

Facilitator's Role

As part of these group roles, teacher perceptions as reported in the interviews and journals was that a facilitator of the process was crucial to this study. The researcher wrote that he "would not have been able to

facilitate the meetings, record notes, and coach the action research process." Teacher/Facilitator proved her worth as an excellent facilitator. Teacher C said, "The facilitator keeps things moving, keeps things from getting personal, and keeps us from getting bogged down. It requires some training."

After one month of meetings, the team experimented with assigning the facilitator role to others in the team. The group process was not as effective and Teacher/Facilitator quickly stepped in and resumed her role. As part of this story, Teacher/Facilitator informed the teachers of the alternative school in December that she would not be returning to the school next year because she had moved out of the area and wanted to find a job closer to her new home. Even though she did not have as great of a stake in the outcome, Teacher/Facilitator continued in the facilitator role.

Teacher-Only Meetings

Another unexpected finding of the study was the application of the action research process to teacher-only staff meetings that occurred on each Friday. The teachers adopted the action research team proceedings

and applied these strategies in their staff meetings. Issues discussed in the action research meetings became issues of the teacher-only meetings. As a result, the teachers would come to the action research team meetings with a "teacher consensus" about an issue before the rest of the team had an opportunity to discuss it. Teacher A and D wrote, "We [the teachers] have all ready decided on the attendance policy last week at our staff meeting." Student A complained in an interview that "sometimes the teachers have all ready made up their minds before the meeting." The researcher reflected that "at least the teachers value the action research process enough that they applied it as an operational strategy in their teacher-only staff meetings .

Summary

Applying the action research process to an alternative school for at-risk students required organization, team-building among the team, and training of the team. Time for these activities must be built into the process. A teacher with skills as a facilitator was an important and unanticipated benefit to the application of action research. Phase One--

Selecting an Area-- required the most time and energy, and Phase Four --

Reviewing the Literature-- demanded the encouragement of the researcher

and Teacher/Facilitator.

It was difficult to separate the roles of principal and participant-

observer, but the effort to work within these roles was worth the benefits

for empowering and involving the stakeholders of this alternative school.

Empowerment of the participants using action research brought the

collective creativity and brainpower of all team members to bear on the

problem (Cunningham & Gresso, 1993). Participants, for the most part,

were open about their perceptions and receptive to the roles. Many of the

participants felt that the principal was the "expert" about how the team

should use the action research process, and at times asked him to clarify if

"they were doing it right." Team-building skills were essential to this

study.

Teacher dominance and participant conflict in the team were

anticipated and expected. Power struggles and personal hostilities were

present in the beginning, but slowly dissolved away. Teachers did not

search for constructive ways to encourage more "student voice" and

parental involvement.

CHAPTER 5 - CONCLUSIONS, DISCUSSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

This case study described how a team of teachers, students, a parent and a principal applied action research to an alternative school for at-risk students. Calhoun's (1994) model of action research provided a process upon which team members, particularly teachers, felt more involved as active participants in understanding school issues and in making recommendations for improving their school. There was a need for at-risk students, parents, and teachers to increase their involvement in the decisions about their school. Future schools may have collaborative groups of teachers organizing and conducting learning, perhaps without the presence of a principal as we now know the role (Fullan, 1991).

Looking at a single case, the researcher described what went on, how things proceeded, and offered explanations for why things occurred as they did, based upon the perceptions of the participants. The team met weekly after school from October until May and applied the action research process to issues in their school. Data were collected from the

researcher's field notes, the participants' journals, and interviews of selected participants. The data were used for description and for the generation of concepts about the use of action research.

Conclusions and Discussion

The perceptions of the participants in the action research team supported earlier research and assumptions. From the interviews, journals and field notes the following conclusions emerged.

The Action Research Process

Conclusion 1: The action research process was a tool for teacher involvement, and teachers on the team saw it as an appropriate framework for disciplined inquiry.

The participants in this study saw value in using the action research process, and teachers perceived it as an effective tool. The development of a new attendance policy and a restructured program were evidence of the value teachers saw in the action research process. Several teachers described the action research process as an "effective tool" and Teacher C

said, "The process gave us an opportunity to exchange ideas." The application of action research with these teachers confirmed Cunningham and Gresso's (1993) findings on improved organizational learning. Calhoun (1994) compared action research to the development of a photograph. In this study, the process showed the participants a picture of their attendance policy and their school's program of studies and provided them a strategy for improving the picture.

While the review of the literature (Bennett, 1993; Burch & Palanski, 1994; King & Lonnquist, 1992; and Johnson, 1993) reported on teachers using action research, this study created a team of nine teachers, two students, a parent and a principal. Participant perceptions indicate that the action research process did not effectively increase student and parent involvement. As reported in the journal writings and interviews, student voices were ignored and parental participation was limited. Of the thirteen team members, nine were teachers, which represented the entire School Within A School instructional staff. Both students felt like their issues were dismissed from the team and that teachers dominated the process. The parent could not understand the "teacher talk."

Conclusion 2: Sufficient time for problem identification is essential.

Phase One of Calhoun's (1994) action research model, Selecting an Area, was the most time-consuming and emotionally-draining phase of the process. In several journals, participants commented on how long it took to identify an issue and narrow it down. Teacher F often complained about the team "going in circles" and "not getting anywhere." Difficulty in reaching a consensus about the problem is a naturally occurring and necessary phenomenon in action research teams. Sagor (1992) wrote, "Our experience has shown that teachers who take time to reflect on and define their problem are more likely to pursue questions yielding meaningful results" (p.12). Seven teachers wrote in their journals that they felt like the time spent selecting an area was worthwhile and beneficial because they were able to move forward as a team with a common goal.

Conclusion 3: Participants need encouragement to research an issue before they act.

Teachers are more conditioned to practice than research. Participants were reluctant at first to review the attendance records and

other archival data, which is typical of practitioners' patterns (Sagor, 1992); however, with encouragement, they researched data sources before they developed interventions. For example, they reviewed the student attendance data from previous years and other attendance policies as part of their research before they developed a new attendance policy.

Sagor (1992) wrote that in his experience with practitioners, he found that after one successful research project, action researchers will choose to consult the knowledge base in a more formal fashion when they engage in future studies. Calhoun's model provided a list of data sources from which the participants could initiate their research. As Teacher C remarked, "Research is important."

Conclusion 4: The principles of effective group process and team-building activities were as important to the work of the group as the application of the action research process.

The application of the action research process would not have been possible without the development of "operating ground rules" for the participants. The literature reported on how to use action research (McLean, 1995; Calhoun, 1994; Sagor, 1992), but did not address the

issue of how to build relationships within the team. With student voices silenced and parental participation limited, the team was not as much of a team as they thought. As reported in the findings, teachers confessed that they experienced hostilities with other teachers, were not convinced that parental participation was signficant to the process, and expressed reluctance that the students would not fully understand action research or their role in the process.

However, participants gained courage from the relationships, agreed to try new approaches to increase the school's effectiveness in regards to student attendance and its program of studies, and became excited about their efforts. Similar findings were reported in Cunningham and Gresso's (1993) work with vertical teams. All nine teachers and one student attended the twenty-four weekly meetings after school from October until May. At-risk student and parent populations make it more difficult to get them involved in school issues.

Conclusion 5: Participants require training in the action research process.

The training of Teacher/Facilitator in action research before the first

team meeting and the subsequent training sessions with the team were critical to using action research. Much of the literature (Dana, 1995; Deshler & Ewert, 1995; Weinstein, et al., 1995; Whyte, 1991a; and Whyte, 1991b) reported on researchers conducting action research with members of an organization or teachers of a school. The researchers provided the training for the participants. In this study, the principal and a teacher were the consultants on how to use the action research process.

Through the use of an audiotape summary of journal articles, created by the researcher, and books on action research, which was created by the researcher, Teacher/Facilitator understood the process and how it could be used in the SWS. Even after the initial training for the action research team, some participants required additional review at each phase and with each SWS issue that was studied.

The Principal's Role in Action Research

Conclusion 6: The principal's role as a participant-observer was difficult to maintain.

Perceptions of the participants were mixed as to whether there was

a true separation between the participant-observer role and the principal role. In Whyte's (1991b) research, he explained how a participant-observer moves from a "non-participatory observer" to a "non-observing participant." Confirming Whyte's research, the researcher reported in the field notes that he had to constantly work to balance his "participation" in the action research process with his "observations" of the action research process during this study.

Within the principal role, the researcher acted as a coach of the action research process, a manager of the resources, and a builder of an effective work team. At times, particularly when the team stalled in the action research process, the researcher slipped into the principal role to provide direction and establish parameters. As reported in the perceptions of Student B and the parent, they could only see the researcher as the principal regardless of the team environment. However, Teacher C said, "I enjoy seeing the principal in the trenches with us so that he will know the way it really is." Other teachers felt the principal was an equal participant along with the other team members. Fullan (1991) writes that it is difficult for the principal to be an instructional leader with the current

demands of the job; however, being a participant-observer on an action research team may be a role worthy of principals interested in "working in the trenches" with teachers, students, and parents.

Conclusion 7: The principal must create a trusting environment, which is not an easy process.

Most teacher participants felt that they could freely express their opinions. Part of the explanation for this attitude is that the one-half of the teachers had known him as a teacher of at-risk students, others had worked with him as a group facilitator of at-risk students and in other group studies. Teacher D stated, "The principal's role influenced the behavior of some of the participants." Teacher F suggested, "The feeling that you are the boss has faded quite a lot." Teacher C said, "You [the principal] have made yourself one of the group."

People's perceptions of one another are important determinants of how well they communicate with one another (Cunningham & Gresso, 1993). The researcher did not set the agendas for the meetings or dominate the discussions, and allowed the team to work through the process. Some of the participants encouraged the researcher to take a

more active role. As the parent said, "I want to know what the principal thinks."

The Action Research Team

Conclusion 8: Teachers on the action research team felt more power to determine interventions.

Initially, and as reported in the journal writings of several of the participants, there were some "growing pains" as the team put the action research process into practice. As work teams are formed, one can expect an evolution of the team through developmental stages which hopefully will end with a level of teamwork in which tasks get done collaboratively. Many teachers in their journals felt like the attendance policy and restructure program were outcomes of their work in this action research team. Developing collaborative work teams reduces the professional isolation of teachers (Fullan, 1991).

Disagreements were taken for granted but not emphasized. Cunningham and Gresso (1993) wrote, "empowered people do not have to do their work, they choose to" (p.218). The teachers and one student

chose to come to all the team meetings, contributed to the shared vision of how to make SWS better, and placed their efforts on strengthening the alternative school in the areas of a student attendance policy and program restructuring.

Conclusion 9: Action researchers need the help and support of a facilitator.

Sagor (1992) described the benefits of introducing a third party into projects that are under study. He referred to this third party as a "critical friend" and believed that this person has the team's interests at heart. The participants in this study used a teacher to facilitate the proceedings of the weekly meetings. In December, Teacher/Facilitator told the team that she would not be returning to the school for the next school year but wanted to continue as the facilitator.

In Weinstein's, et al., (1995) study with teachers of at-risk students and Whyte's (1991a) study with the Xerox corporation, an outside researcher facilitated the application of action research with representatives of the organizations. In this study, the Teacher/Facilitator, a member of the SWS staff, a trained counselor and social worker,

assumed this role and was crucial to the application of action research in this setting. Her facilitation allowed the researcher to record observations and participate more effectively in the proceedings of the meetings.

Schools, unlike major corporations, do not always have the luxury of an outside researcher or consultant who can facilitate the process as well as participate simultaneously, as described in certain studies in the literature (Burch & Palanki, 1994; Calhoun, 1994; Dana, 1995; Deshler & Ewert, 1995; Weinstein, et al., 1995; Whyte, 1984).. Efforts by the researcher to simulantaneously facilitate and participate would have limited the findings of this study. Therefore, school leaders need to find alternatives, such as identifying a teacher with group process skills or soliciting a volunteer who wants to learn the skills of group process.

Conclusion 10: Teachers dominated the discussions and issues.

Often, issues from the action research team meetings spilled over into the teacher-only meetings the following day. Teachers would come to the next action research team meeting with a "teacher consensus" and fully expected the other participants to agree to it, to which the others often did not. The facilitator would immediately ask for input from the

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students, parent, and principal.

It was difficult for the students and parent to participate in a shared culture (Cunningham & Gresso, 1993) when important information was exchanged and decisions were made in the teacher-only meetings. Also, teachers kept the culture from being shared because they substantially outnumbered students and parent. Student attendance and program restructuring were the issues studied in the action research team meetings. As the parent said, "Often times I do not understand all this teacher-talk."

Conclusion 11: Student voices were heard but were disregarded.

Students were involved and expressed opinions, but often were overwhelmed by the issues being studied. Though the teachers felt like student involvement was important, and the literature supported this value (Griffin, 1994; Nathan, 1991; Sarason, 1991), the findings in this case study contradicted the literature and the teachers' responses. SWS teachers limited the number of students who could participate on the action research team. They said they valued student involvement, but ignored student issues. Several teachers commented in their journals and interviews that they did not think that the students would be able to

understand the action research process or be able to apply the process to the team meetings. The result was that the majority of the action research team members were teachers. Some effort was made to share the minutes of the meeting with the other sixty SWS students.

Conclusion 12: Teachers articulated that they valued parental involvement but did not work to build relationships.

The parent felt isolated and ignored and left the team after three months. Though the literature (Cunningham & Gresso, 1993; Fullan, 1991; Nathan 1991; Parson, 1996; Sarason, 1991) supported parental involvement and teachers' articulated this value in their journals and interviews, the findings in this study show that the teachers of this action research team did not take action to improve communication with parents.

During several meetings, Teacher/Facilitator asked the team how they could encourage more parents to participate. Though many good suggestions were generated, a conflict emerged between the value of parental input and the possible threat to teacher control. In their journals, teachers wrote, "We do not have enough parents;" "We need more parents;" and "More input from parents." When Teacher/Facilitator and

Teacher D suggested that the team meet in the evening, the rest of the teachers opposed the idea to move the location and time of the action research meetings to accommodate more parental involvement. The parent wrote in her first meeting that "she was looking forward to working with the group." In the parent's last journal entry, she wrote, "I am really lost here. It's hard for me to apply myself."

Conclusion 13: Teachers were willing to invest their own time in the application of the action research process to their school.

The action research team meetings were in the afternoons, beyond the contractual time of the teachers. The team met twenty-four times from October to May. In interviews and journals, all teachers said that they valued the process enough to meet on a weekly basis, after school; however, most of them were not willing to meet in the evenings to accommodate parents. These findings supported Bennett's (1993) survey of experienced teacher-researchers in which most saw many personal and professional benefits from conducting action research.

Limitations

A case study of a single school does not allow generalization of the findings and conclusions; however, the participant-observer role of the principal allowed students, teachers, and parents to see him as a member of the action research team. As the principal of the school and a participant-observer of the process, researcher bias might be seen as a limiting factor in this study. Finally, the study was limited to the application of one particular model of the action research process.

The researcher did not report on the interventions proposed by the action research team because the scope of this study was limited to the use of action research. The recommendations of the team on the issues of student attendance and program restructuring were being formalized to be in place for the start of the 1997-98 school year. The teachers and the principal on the action research team are responsible for the final products. The teachers will develop ways to measure the outcomes of these interventions and monitor the measures during the course of the next school year. For a brief report on the interventions decided upon by the team, see the Epilogue.

Recommendations for Other Schools

Based on the review of the literature and the findings from this case study of an action research team in an alternative school for at-risk students, the following recommendations are offered for other schools who use the action research process:

1.   Encourage tenured teachers to participate in action research teams with the principal to avoid the linkage of teacher evaluation with the evaluation of school issues that are to be studied.

2. Adopt a model of the action research process as the framework for the workings of school improvement teams.

3. Train school improvement teams, department chairs, team leaders, and various committees in the action research process, the principles of group process, the principles of conducting effective meetings, and strategies for building relationships.

4. Use action research as a method for principals to participate with teachers and other stakeholders in a "team study" of school issues, instead of making "top-down" decisions.

5. Seek strategies to involve more students and parents in such a

way that there is a more equal representation of all stakeholders.

Recommendations for Future Studies

Based on the literature review and the findings of this case study, the following recommendations are offered for future studies:

1. A replication of the present study in different school settings, possibly at the elementary and middle school levels.

2. A cross case analysis of different action research studies in schools.

3. A longitudinal study that focuses on the action research process and assesses the effectiveness of the interventions.

4. A study of the action research process done with an outside researcher.

5. A study by a third party on how action research might have changed the culture of the school.

6. A study of the principal's role as a participant-observer in which the principal establishes more guidelines for the team membership.

Researcher's Reflections

The design of this study gave me, the principal, an opportunity to participate directly with the SWS teachers and students over a nine month period. Though researcher bias may be a concern for some, I feel that the advantages of this practical, applied research study should diminish those concerns. The participation, discussions, and reflections with colleagues, at-risk students, and a parent reinforced my beliefs in actively seeking out the views of the groups schools serve.

The positive experience of using action research in an alternative school for at-risk students lent credibility to using action research in other settings. In the regular high school program, I used the principles of action research and group process in departmental meetings and in administrative team meetings. This process was a natural way for me to study school issues.

My difficulty was struggling with the dual roles of principal and participant-observer. For example, as the principal, I could have mandated that teachers were to meet in the evening as a strategy for accommodating more parents; however, if I had made the decision for the

teachers, I felt like I would have overstepped my "equal partner" role. Therefore, I chose to make suggestions, but not to force this issue, and as a result, the teachers did not make any concessions for more parental involvement. As the principal in other settings, I can establish more guidelines that may increase parental involvement and act on student concerns.

Calhoun's (1994) model of action research was useful in this study; however, at times, team members had difficulty understanding when they should be researching and when they should be taking action. During the course of this study, I used a simpler diagram to illustrate the action research process. My adaptation of Calhoun's model was to use the terms "action," "research," and "reaction," repeatedly as shown below:

ACTION ---------- RESEARCH---------- REACTION------- ACTION-------
-- RESEARCH--------- REACTION ------------- ACTION ... and so on ...

By the term "action," I stressed that the team had to produce a product within a specified time frame. Participants were urged to run efficient meetings that focused on narrowing their concerns to one

problem and to discover strategies to address the problem. Action also meant that they had to figure out how to measure the effectiveness of the intervention that they were putting in place. For example, after identifying the 5% "hard core truants" next year, the new policy should increase the attendance of some students.

With the word "research," I urged the participants to gather information from as many sources as they could. I suggested that they survey and interview students, parents, and future employers in the community. I encourage the teachers to go to the literature to find data upon which they could base an intervention. Of greatest importance was stressing to the participants that the research should be on-going throughout the process. Like the cyclic nature of action research, there is no end to gathering information.

By "reaction," I meant that the participants should reflect on how effective the recommended intervention was. I reminded them that they should improve upon the intervention and take additional action. Again, my diagram illustrated the action research cycle, where as Calhoun's model of phases depicted a more sequential application of action research

in which some of the team members applied action research in steps and failed to recognize the freedom of "going in circles" on issues.

I believe that this study has had an impact on how SWS teachers will look at future issues in their school. First-year teachers on the action research team grew professionally and personally. One emerged as a leader and advocate of the action research process and often times helped facilitate the meetings. Experienced teachers saw value in "revisiting" issues and hearing the opinions of others. The teachers saw that their students could participate in the decision-making process. I recognized that if teachers truly value parental involvement, then they need to be more proactive in seeking out parental support. I have encouraged them to meet at night or to collect information over the phone. I am encouraged that a few of the teachers began to see that involving parents of at-risk students is no easy task, but it is a task worth more effort. The team began to understand the cyclic nature of school change and that there was no "end" to the process.

Epilogue

During this study, the action research team focused upon two

issues: (1) a student attendance policy and (2) program restructuring. The scope of this study was to examine the action research process; however, the "rest of the story" when conducting action research is the products produced as a result of using the process. This section briefly reviews the team's interventions for the issues studied.

In regards to the student attendance policy, a smaller subgroup of teachers (Teachers A,C, I, and F) from the team drafted a policy and presented it to the rest of the team. The team approved the policy, but suggested to the subgroup that they state the policy in simpler terms that SWS students and parents could understand. The subgroup wrote a second draft which was approved by the team.

Effective for the 1997-98 school year, the SWS attendance policy became an obligation of the student as a part of the "performance contract." In this signed agreement, students must attend school, internships, and community service assignments on a regular basis and call the school if they are absent or tardy. Poor student attendance would result in several interventions which included: (1) Teachers calling home; (2) Teachers making home visits to locate the student; (3) Conferences

with teachers, student, and counselor; and, (4) Conferences with teachers, student, parents, and counselor.

Should these interventions be ineffective, the policy allows for the SWS staff to modify the student's alternative educational plan. Some of the modifications would be the following: (1) Students lose the privilege of participating in the internships or community service activities; (2) Students would be required to attend "Friday school," which is an additional day of attendance; and (3) Students would be limited to "night school." If these interventions do not change the pattern of poor attendance, then the SWS staff would review the student's file and recommend a final intervention or dismiss the student from the alternative school.

On the second issue, restructuring of SWS, the team decided that SWS would be a program that "wraps around the student" instead of the student "fitting into" the school. Each student would have an alternative educational plan, and the plan would be based upon testing the student in the areas of science, math, English, and social studies, and would also include teacher recommendations for placement in certain classes.

Students would earn academic credits and vocational credits by attending school for one-half of the day and attending an internship for one-half of the day. The final outcome for students could be an alternative education plan (AEP) diploma, a GED, or a combination of an AEP diploma and GED. The team decided that SWS students would not be able to earn a standard high school diploma.

The team was working on how they will "test" students and how many credits will need to be earned for an (AEP) diploma. This "AEP-driven" school will be structured on the needs of each student, offer several educational options, and may encourage students to continue with their education.

I can not predict how action research will be used in this school in the future. In interviews and journal writings, teachers said they will continue to use the principles of Calhoun's model though they might not use specific phases or terminology. All felt like the principles of group process learned as a result of this study would continue to be used in their teacher-only meetings.

In regards to parental involvement and student voice, I, as the

principal, will encourage the teachers to establish smaller groups by suggesting that they have a school objective of communicating the interventions to all parents and seek their opinions about the interventions at the end of each semester through home visits or brief surveys. Teacher goals should be to create a smaller team with a more equal representation that will meet in the evenings, perhaps in an advisory capacity using the action research process in some form. The findings of this case study have shown that teachers articulate the value of parental involvement, but they are not willing to "take action" to increase parental participation.

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APPENDIXES

Appendix A: Letter to the Superintendent Requesting Permission to Conduct Research

Appendix B: Approval Letter From the Superintendent

Appendix C: Human Subject Request to VPI

Appendix D: Human Subject Approval from VPI

Appendix E: Letter to Parents of Student Participants

Appendix F: Letter to Parent Participants

Appendix G: Raw Data Excerpts

Appendix H: Samples of Interview and Journal Questions

Appendix I: Themes from Data Sources

APPENDIX A

PERMISSION TO CONDUCT THE RESEARCH
LETTER TO THE SUPERINTENDENT

October , 1996

Dr. Glenn Burdick
Superintendent of Winchester Public Schools
12 N. Washington Street
Winchester, VA 22601

Dear Dr. Burdick:

This letter is to formally request your permission to conduct research for my doctoral program at John Handley High School. I will do a case study of the action research process in the school for at-risk students. I will be a participant and an observer in the process of forming a team of teachers, at-risk students, and parents who will use an action research model to look at what they are doing and act on improving certain aspects of their program.

This study will increase student, parent and teacher involvement in the decisions that affect their school. In addition, it will demonstrate my commitment to working with individuals for group consensus on issues relating to the teaching and learning process. I have met with the School Within A School staff. They are very supportive of my proposal. Of course, all records and data collection documents will be confidential. Should you have questions or concerns, please contact me.

Sincerely,

Ricky L. Leonard
Principal

APPENDIX B

APPROVAL TO CONDUCT THE RESEARCH

LETTER FROM THE SUPERINTENDENT

October , 1996

Mr. Ricky L. Leonard
John Handley High School
P.O. Box 910
Winchester, VA 22604

Dear Mr. Leonard:

I fully endorse your proposal to conduct research for your doctoral program in the School Within A School. Your study of the action research process and the involvement of teachers, at-risk students and parents sounds exciting.

Please keep me informed as you proceed with your study. I wish you the best in the dissertation process.

Sincerely,

Glenn R. Burdick
Superintendent

APPENDIX C

HUMAN SUBJECT REQUEST TO VIRGINIA TECH

APPLICATION FOR APPROVAL OF

RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS

THE PROTOCOL

Justification of Project:

Through a case study it will be determined how one action research team worked in a school for at-risk students. The purpose of this study will be to (1) describe the action research process followed, (2) observe the interactions of the participants, and (3) study the role of the principal. The intent is to describe how action research can be used as a process for studying issues in one educational setting with possible implications for its application in other diverse educational settings. Action research may be a tool which can be used to involve all members of the school community in school reform.

The research team will be made up of at-risk students, teachers, parents, and a principal. Their participation in using an action research model is the major framework for this study.

Procedures:

The subject pool for this study are at-risk students, parents of at-risk students, teachers, and the school principal. The students are ages 16-18. The research team will have two parents, two at-risk students, five teachers, and the principal who is the researcher. The teachers of the school for at-risk students will select students to participate based upon the following criteria: (1) Volunteered; (2) Completed an affective skills class; (3) Participated in a student support group; (4) Third year in the school; and (5) Demonstrated an ability to express themselves both orally and in written form. Teachers will be selected if they volunteered and

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were teaching in the school for at-risk students. The selection criteria for parents will be that they: (1) Volunteered; (2) Had no work conflicts; and (3) Had expressed an interest in being involved.

The research team will meet on a weekly basis for one hour. In the first four meetings the principal (as the researcher) will introduce the study, share his expectations, and train the team in the action research process. The team will then use the action research process to look at issues that concern their school--the SCHOOL WITHIN A SCHOOL. The study will be completed in eighteen weeks. All team members will keep a journal of the process and agree to give the researcher a copy of their journal entries. Representatives from the team will be interviewed by the researcher on three separate occasions-- the beginning of the process, in the middle, and at the end of the study. The interview will be semi-structured with general questions being asked about the action research process, interactions with other participants, and the role of the principal.

Risks and Benefits:

There is no risk to the participants. The research will be conducted in the participants' school, and the action research model will be studied as it is used to address issues related to school improvement.

The study will benefit the school climate by involving all the stakeholders in decisions about their school. Students may earn .25 credits for participating. Teachers may earn up to 45 recertification points for participating in this educational project. The major benefit to all participants is that they gain ownership of their school and work collaboratively with the principal to improve the school.

Confidentiality/Anonymity:

The participants' journals will be identified by a number code and this code will be secured by the researcher in a locked cabinet. Only the researcher and the writer will read the journals. The essence of the writings will be sorted out and the researcher promises not to divulge the identity of the participant.

The interviews will be audiotaped and the tape transcribed by the

researcher. The tapes will be secured in the same locked cabinet and erased after the researcher obtains a written record of the conversations. These transcribed notes will have the same number code and security.

Informed consent:

(See attachments)

Biographical Sketch:

Ricky L. Leonard

    The primary investigator is Ricky L. Leonard, the researcher, who is the principal of the school to be studied. He has been an educator for sixteen years as a high school science teacher, assistant principal and principal. He has completed an undergraduate degree in biology from James Madison University, a graduate degree in educational administration and supervision from George Mason University, and a CAGs degree in educational administration from Virginia Tech. He has served as an advisor on numerous high school student science projects and a member of the Human Subjects Committee.

Dr. Stephen R. Parson

INFORMED CONSENT FOR PARTICIPANTS
OF INVESTIGATIVE PROJECTS

Title of the project: **A CASE STUDY OF THE ACTION RESEARCH PROCESS IN A SCHOOL FOR AT-RISK STUDENTS**

Investigator(s): Ricky L. Leonard & Dr. Stephen R. Parson

I. The purpose of this Research/Project

The purpose of this study will be to (1) describe the action research process followed, (2) observe the interactions of the participants, and (3) study the role of the principal. The intent is to describe how action research can be used as a process for studying issues in a school for at-risk students.

II. Procedures

A research team composed of two students, two parents, eight teachers, one counselor, and the principal will meet on a weekly basis to learn about action research and then to apply this process to areas of interest within our School Within A School. The study will be completed in eighteen weeks. You will keep a journal of the process and agree to give the researcher a copy of your journal entries. Representatives from the team will be interviewed by the principal (as researcher) on three separate occasions-- the beginning of the process, in the middle, and at the end of the study. The interview will be semi-structured with general questions being asked about the action research process, interactions with other participants, and the role of the principal. The research will be conducted in your school, and the action research model will be studied as it is used to address issues related to school improvement.

III. Risks

There is no risk to you. The research team is charged with working together to improve your school.

IV. Benefits of this Project

The study will benefit the school climate by involving all the stakeholders in decisions about their school. Students may earn .25 credits for participating. Teachers may earn up to 45 recertification points for participating in this educational project. The major benefit to all participants is that they gain ownership of their school and work collaboratively with the principal to improve the school.

No promise or guarantee of benefits has been made to encourage you to participate. You may contact me at a later time for a summary of the research results.

V. Extent of Anonymity and Confidentiality

Your journals will be identified by a number code and this code will be secured by the researcher in a locked cabinet. Only the researcher and you will read the journals. The essence of the writings will be sorted out and the researcher promises not to divulge your identity.

The interviews will be audiotaped and the tape transcribed by the researcher. The tapes will be secured in the same locked cabinet and erased after the researcher obtains a written record of the conversations. These transcribed notes will have the same number code and security.

VI. Compensation

There is no compensation for participating as a subject in this research.

VII. Freedom to Withdraw

You are free to withdraw from this study at any time without penalty. You are free not to answer any questions that you choose without penalty.

VIII. Approval of Research

This research project has been approved, as required, by the

Institutional Review Board for Research Involving Human Subjects at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, by the College of Human Resources and Education, and Winchester Public Schools.

IX. Subject's Responsibilities

I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I have the following responsibilities:

Attend and participate in all meetings (if possible), keep a journal and give the researcher a copy, and consent to be interviewed.

X. Subject's Permission

I have read and understand the Informed Consent and conditions of this project. I have had all my questions answered. I hereby acknowledge the above and give my voluntary consent for participation in this project.

If I participate, I may withdraw at any time without penalty. I agree to abide by the rules of this project.

———————————————————————   ———————————————————————
      Signature   Date

Should I have any questions about this research or its conduct, I may contact:

Ricky L. Leonard, Investigator   540-662-3471

Dr. Stephen R. Parson, Faculty Advisor   540-231-9722

Thomas Hurd, Chair IRB, Research Division   540-231-9359

APPENDIX D

HUMAN SUBJECT APPROVAL FROM VIRGINIA TECH

Virginia Tech
VIRGINIA POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE
AND STATE UNIVERSITY

Office of Sponsored Programs

301 Burruss Hall
Blacksburg, Virginia 24061-0249
(540) 231-5013 Fax: (540) 231-4384

March 12, 1997

M E M O R A N D U M

TO: Ricky L. Leonard and Stephen R Parson
             Education Administration

FROM: Tom Hurd, Director

SUBJECT: IRB Request - "A Case Study of the Action Research Process in
             School for At-Risk Students - IRB #96-288

    I have reviewed the changes you have submitted and on behalf of
The Institutional Review Board, I have given your request final approval for
the above referenced project.

    The approval is valid for 12 months. If the involvement with human
subjects is not complete within 12 months, the project must be resubmitted
for re-approval. We will prompt you about 10 months from now. If there are
significant changes in the protocol involving human subjects, those changes
must be approved before proceeding.

    Best wishes.

HTH/pli

cc: J. Nespor

APPENDIX E

LETTER TO PARENTS OF STUDENT PARTICIPANTS

October , 1996

Dear Mr. and Mrs :

_____ wants to join with the SWS staff as a member of a team that will study how to improve our current program. The team will consist of other students, parents, teachers, and me. The formation of the team and the use of an action research model is part of my doctoral program. We plan on meeting weekly for one hour on Thursdays.

_____ will use many skills that s/he has been taught. We expect her to attend all meetings, keep a journal, and consent to interviews about the experience. As an added incentive, s/he may earn .25 credits.

All information gathered will be confidential and all reporting out about the meetings will be anonymous. I encourage you to support _____'s efforts as we work together to make our alternative school better. Please confirm your support by calling Betty Kerr or sending a note to school.

Should you have any questions, please feel free to call me.

Cordially,

Ricky L. Leonard
Principal

APPENDIX F

LETTER TO PARENT PARTICIPANTS

October , 1996

Dear Mrs. :

This letter is to confirm your commitment to serve as a member of our team that will study how to improve our School Within A School. The team will consist of students, parents, teachers, and me. Our meetings will be on Thursday afternoons at 3:00 pm in the faculty lounge.

I am forming this research team as a part of my doctoral program. I am interested in how the action research process works in this educational setting. My expectation is that you will be able to attend all meetings, keep a journal, and be available for an interview about the process.

All information gathered will be confidential and all reporting out about the meetings will be anonymous.

Thank you for your support. I look forward to working with you.

Cordially,

Ricky L. Leonard
Principal

APPENDIX G

RAW DATA EXCERPTS

Training Excerpts

(A)   Agendas:

October 17, 1996, @ 3:00 pm

1.   Introductions: The Principal, The study, Calhoun's model

2.   Purpose of the Action Research Team: The Process, The Product

3.   Roles of: The Principal, The Facilitator, The Participants

4.   Participant Commitment and Expectations

5.   Basic Principles of Group Process

6.   Confidentiality Issues

7.   Meeting Times & Dates

8.   For the next meeting start recording some areas of interest that focus on students and would improve our alternative school?

October 28, 1996, @ 3:00 pm

1.   A Review of the Organizational Meeting

2.   Issue to be Discussed: Parental Involvement and Meeting Times

3. More about Action Research-- Simulation of "Kathy as Teacher"

4. Journals: What, How, When, to write?

5. Interviews: Protocol, Who will be interviewed?

6. Group Process

7. Feedback: What other types of training/explanation do you need?

8. Shift from Process to Product: What are some areas of interest that focus on students and would improve our alternative school?

November 7, 1996, @ 3:00 pm

1. Review of last week's meeting

2. Questions & Concerns

3. Recertification Points

4. Issue Raised: Parental Involvement

5. Journal Writing: A suggestion

6. Shift from Process to Product

(B)   Handouts:

    1.   Calhoun's Model of Action Research

    2.   Principles of Group Process:

        a.   Ingredients of a Successful Meeting

        b.   Role of the Manager

        c.   Role of the Facilitator

        d.   Role of the Recorder

        e.   Role of the Team Member

    3.   A Draft of the New Standards of Accreditation

(C)   Strategies:

    1.   Simulation of peer tutoring-- "Kathy as Teacher"-- using the phases of Calhoun's model. Participants were asked to identify how they would use the model with this issue. Notes were recorded on the chalkboard and at their seats.

    2.   Icebreakers: [Example] We gathered in a circle, introduced ourselves, and stated what each one hoped to gain from this experience.

    3.   Recorder: Traditional minutes. A second person wrote the major points on a chartpad.

    4.   Small group discussions within the team meetings helped with the size of the team--thirteen members.

Excerpts of Field Notes

I presented my proposal for using action research with the SWS teachers. I explained that not everyone had to participate and that they were not obligated in any way.

Teacher/Facilitator wants to contact the parents and invite them to our first meeting. She is very interested in involving parents in our discussions.

Teacher/Facilitator has not been able to get parents to come to our meetings. She said that most are working in the afternoon, but would be willing to meet in the evening. We decided that we will suggest evening meetings to the teachers and students in our team.

There are some obvious hostilities among the teacher participants. Perhaps this teacher group is not the "team" it thinks it is? Two years ago, the past administration thrust these teachers together and told them to create an alternative school. We did not provide them with training, nor did we show much interest in what they did in the beginning.

I drew the action research cycle on the chalkboard and with the help of the participants inserted Calhoun's phases into the cycle. Most of the teachers nodded their heads that they understood the process; however, the students looked confused.

Teacher/Facilitator said that both first year teachers had fears that they would not be able to handle the team meetings along with making the transition to a classroom teacher. She suggested that I meet with them individually to discuss their options.

Teachers are dominating the conversation. A suggestion for others is to have a smaller group with more equal representation.

I introduced a "free write" journal entry to the participants. They simply reflect on what they are feeling about the process thus far.

The discussions of the team members are less hostile and aggressive. I get the sense that they are beginning to use the principles of group process. It is interesting to note that the activities of the Action Research Team meetings are spilling over into the teacher staff meetings on Friday morning.

At one point in our meeting today, the teachers asked for the administration's view of attendance interventions and at-risk students. I gave them my opinion which may be different than other administrators.

To the team: Research in Calhoun's model is a continuous process. We should have begun researching student attendance before we decided on the interventions for the night program; however, many of you felt like you could draw on your own knowledge of the situation. You are still researching when you call other alternative schools about how they handle students who are attendance problems. Gathering information does not stop, and I do not see it fitting into a particular step as shown in Calhoun's model.

I exerted my Principal role today after seeing the frustration on the faces of many of the participants. The frustrated participants want to take action and not rehash the same issues. Therefore, I established the following parameters for SWS: Same facility, teaching staff, and student enrollment for the 1997-98 school year. To the teachers, I asked them to decide how we should use our team meetings.

The teachers asked me to meet with them in their teacher-only meeting to explain the draft proposal of the new Standards of Accreditation and its possible impact on the School Within a School. The teachers felt like I would confuse the students and parent who would not be able to understand our discussion. Can you believe this?

Excerpts from Journals

Teacher E: Action research is a systematic method of choosing an area of study and finding ways to improve upon that area. It involves data collection, analysis, and interpretation.

Teacher E: I have no problem working with the principal in the action research team meetings. I think it could be a good way to make program improvements.

Teacher E: It might be a good idea if we could see examples of how action research was used in industry or in another school setting.

Teacher E: I will probably be careful to make statements that are in line with the beliefs, goals, and values of the team. This will result in less friction and consequences for me.

Teacher A: I am comfortable with the action research process. I think it will help us to be focused and follow through.

Teacher B: I think one of the worthwhile things we accomplished today was that we now have a parent who can be actively involved in the group.

Teacher C: Our two students participated more this week than they have in the past and that is a good thing.

Teacher G: One of the problems in our team is that some of the members have more weight in making decisions and thus affecting outcomes.

Teacher D: Mr. Leonard's role was different today. He had to step outside the group instead of being part of the group.

Teacher E: I think we should try to find another parent. If after two weeks we can not find one, we should abandon the parent involvement.

Teacher C: I believe it will take time and effort to make action research successful; however, the results may be worth it.

Teacher F: I am glad that you [the principal] are a part of the process.

Teacher G: My major fear is that one person will dominate the meeting.

Teacher G: I have a clearer understanding of how action research works. Let us practice another real issue that may be easier before attempting a more complicated topic.

Teacher G: I am concerned that I will miss part of the meetings if we do not wrap up on time.

Teacher G: The review of Calhoun's model helped the concrete sequentials among us.

Teacher G: I believe that as big as the group is, it is taking an enormous amount of time to cover even very small issues.

Teacher G: As far as the principal role is concerned, I do not feel threatened in the least. When we need guidance, you are there. I also feel like I can give my opinion openly and have no negative consequences from the principal as a result.

Teacher C: I feel like we need input from everyone, and we are not getting it, particularly from the students and the parent.

Teacher G: We need to do some research on how other alternative schools award diplomas and certificates.

Teacher G: I would consider asking other parents. We have seven or eight new students and perhaps one or more of these parents may be interested.

Teacher G: The phases of data collection and taking action have worked

well. Selecting an area is always tough. Organizing and analyzing data were a struggle.

Teacher G: How long are you [the principal] going to be here to support these changes?

Teacher C: We might have to meet at different times, different places to make it easier for a parent to be involve. Also, we must do everything to make parents comfortable by not professionalizing.

Teacher C: Your role today was a central one because in spite of it all, you are in charge of this school. You are in a position to either make or break us. I see you as our advocate.

Teacher C: Action research gives us a guide to follow and a method of evaluation. In this team setting, it is difficult, risky, sometimes self-critical, but also rewarding.

Teacher C: Research can definitely help to clarify issues.

Teacher C: Action research certainly gives us a framework for making good group decisions.

Excerpts from Interviews

Teacher H: I think that using action research has been extremely beneficial and is probably the best thing that could happen to the school.

Teacher H: There was enough training. Some of us, myself included, obsessed a little bit about getting it right and that held us back a little bit. The group should be encouraged to just go on and try it and not worry so much about getting it right.

Teacher H: I am not sure that some members of the team are capable of seeing someone in your position [principal] outside of that position of authority. I am not convinced that people have been completely out front and at ease with their opinions and all in the team.

Teacher H: The two students are both perfectly capable, but I do not think they are accustomed to being assertive or operating in the way that would have gotten us more input.

Teacher H: Next time, I would definitely work harder to draw in the parents of the students. I would limit the number of teachers involved. We have so many teacher voices that it has drowned out the voice of the parent and students. Our parents are not necessarily comfortable sitting with a group of teachers and expressing their opinions.

Parent: I would suggest that SWS teachers send out a letter or something to the parents which would explain on a monthly basis the things they have done or things they hope to achieve in the future. Parents need to feel that they are more involved instead of just coming in on the meetings once a week. More than one parent would help.

Teacher C: There has to be group process because in order to get the best ideas I think that there has to be some sort of communication where everybody feels comfortable in giving their ideas.

Teacher C: Our at-risk students and parents are usually reluctant to give input; I think that is natural. With the teacher and student, there is always a power issue and; therefore, I think a lot of students do not know how to deal with that on a regular basis.

Teacher C: You are not an ordinary principal. You had classroom situations, you had at-risk students in your classroom, and so with your past experiences, I see you in a different way.

Teacher C: Action research is a good framework for raising issues.

Student A: I know you are doing this to help us make SWS a better school. I think it is a really good idea because you get the teachers' point of view and you get the principal's point of view and you get the parents' point of view and then you get the students' point of view. Nobody is left out.

Student A: There are more teachers than anyone else. So you can put your point of view in, but it doesn't get heard.

Student A: Your role [as principal] is cool. You are like the boundary person. If someone steps out of bounds, you are like OK, you can't do that or whatever. It is good that you come down to make SWS better too.

APPENDIX H

SAMPLES OF INTERVIEW AND JOURNAL QUESTIONS

Interview Questions

1.   How is your school year going so far?

2.   How long have you been with the School Within A School?

3.   What do you think of your school?

4.   Do you have any questions or concerns that you would like to share with me before we begin?

5.   How would you explain Calhoun's model of action research?

6.   What concerns do you have about using this model to look at SWS issues?

7.   What opinions do you have about using action research in this teacher-majority team?

8.   Can you describe specific interactions among the participants that influenced you in some way?

9.   How do you feel about the principal being a participant-observer in this team as we apply action research?

10.   Has the training in Calhoun's model of action research and principles of group process been beneficial to you? If so, would you explain how? How could I have improved the training meetings?

11.   How important is parental involvement?

12. How is my presence, the principal, affecting the team and the issues being studied?

13. Are student voices being heard? Why or why not?

14. Do you have anything else to share or other concerns that I have not asked you about?

15. What are your opinions about the action research process? About my role in the team? About the interactions of the team members?

16. What advice would you give to other teachers and principals who might want to try using action research in their schools?

1. What is your understanding of Calhoun's model of action research?

2. How do you feel about the principal participating as a member of the team?

3. What other training do you need on action research?

4. What concerns do you have at this time?

5. What are some areas that interest you that you would like the team to address?

6. How do you feel about the transition from learning about action research to using action research?

7. Free write about ... [a] the issue of attendance
   [b] the issue of program restructuring
   [c] the benefits of your participation

8. How helpful was the review of Calhoun's model?

9. How are we working as a team within the roles of student, teacher, parent, and principal?

10. Within Calhoun's model, what is your understanding of the attendance interventions we will use for the third quarter?

11. How did the sharing of the research help the process today?

12. What are some positive and negative experiences of using action research in this team thus far?

13.   Reflect on my role as the principal in this meeting?

14.   What changes would you recommend to others who might want to apply action research in a similar setting?

15.   Our parent has not attended the last couple of meetings. What should we do about it?

16.   How will you measure or monitor the effectiveness of the new attendance policy intervention?

17.   How will you get student and parent feedback about the new attendance policy?

18.   Which phases of Calhoun's model have worked well? Why?

APPENDIX I

THEMES FROM DATA SOURCES

Bin 1: The Action Research Process

1.   Teachers were unsure of using action research in the beginning of the study.

2.   First year teachers were concerned that the team meetings would be a part of their evaluation.

3.   All teachers participated in the study for eight months.

4.   Teachers agreed with using a facilitator.

5.   Teacher H, a trained facilitator, social worker and counselor, was chosen by the researcher, lead teacher, and the other seven teachers to facilitate our meetings.

6.   The researcher spent several weeks training the facilitator on Calhoun's model of action research.

7.   Teachers developed student and parent selection criteria and generated a list of possible participants.

8.   Training sessions were difficult for students and some teachers.

9.   The team selected two issues to be studied-- student attendance and program restructuring.

10.   A review of Calhoun's model of action research occurred several times during the study.

11.   Participants were reluctant to research.

12. Participants thought that the process provided guidance.

13. Participants liked the action research framework as a means to focus on a specific issue.

14. The process gave the participants an opportunity to exchange ideas in a neutral setting.

Bin 2: The Role of the Principal

1. The principal role was not clearly defined.

2. Students saw the principal as the authority figure or boss all the time.

3. Some teachers saw the principal as a participant with power.

4. Some teachers thought the principal's role influenced the behaviors of other team members.

5. Some teachers felt the principal was an equal participant.

6. The principal was a trainer and a consultant of the action research process.

7. The principal was a team-builder.

8. The principal resolved team and individual conflicts.

9. The principal established parameters and guidelines.

10. The principal attempted to create a trusting environment.

11. The principal was a source to clarify Calhoun's model.

12. The principal came to the team with a great deal of credibility.

Bin 3: Interaction of the Participants

1.   There are personality conflicts between teachers.

2.   Some teachers dominated the discussions.

3.   Facilitator had difficulty involving all participants, particularly students and parent.

4.   Student voices were disregarded.

5.   Teachers used "teacher talk."

6.   Teacher-only staff meetings were a carry-over of the action research meetings and contributed to teacher domination of the process.

7.   At-risk students had difficulty understanding action research.

8.   Student participation was not encouraged by the teachers.

9.   Students had difficulty expressing themselves.

10.   Parental involvement was limited.

11.   Teachers did not seek ways to increase parental involvement.

12.   The parent was reluctant to express her views.

13.   The make up of the team was not representative of the stakeholders, i.e. nine teachers, two students, one parent, one principal.

14.   Teachers would not move the afternoon meeting time.

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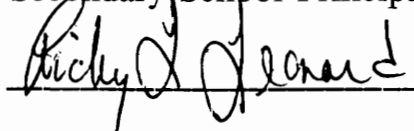Principal, Handley High School, Winchester, VA................ 1996-Present

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