

**THE HIGH SCHOOL PRINCIPAL;  
Integrating Vision and Action**

An action research project by Annie McKenzie

## **The Context**

The context in which I conducted the action research project is West Springfield High School, where I am the principal. West Springfield High School is a large, comprehensive, urban/suburban high school in West Springfield, Massachusetts. The high school building encompasses 275,000 square feet. A series of building additions have been added to the original structure, resulting in a decentralized and disorganized design. I do not state this as strictly personal opinion. Recently an architectural firm conducted a building evaluation of the high school. The architects described the building as “confusing” and “an easy place to get lost.” While the building is physically large, we also serve a large student body. Approximately 1300 students attend West Springfield High School. 83% of the students are white and speak English as their first language. 10% of the students come from the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. The majority of these students speak Russian as their primary language. 4% of the students are Latino, 2% are African American, and less than one percent is Native American or Asian. The greatest diversity is evident in the socio-economic disparity between students. 20% of our students qualify for free and reduced lunch. At the same time, we have students at the high school who live in homes valued at nearly one million dollars.

Over one hundred educators work with our students as teachers, counselors, psychologists, specialists, and paraprofessionals.

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Ethnically and linguistically the faculty is fairly homogeneous. Currently two African Americans teach at West Springfield High School. We have one teacher from Russia, and one teacher from Spain. The remaining educators are white, English speaking, and from the United States. While they are linguistically and ethnically homogeneous, the faculty adheres to radically divergent philosophies regarding teaching, learning, and educational leadership. Some members of the faculty believe in teacher centered instruction, authoritarian policies, and a structured and inflexible institutional framework. Other educators embrace change, student centered pedagogy, and a flexible, fluid and participatory approach to decision making and organizational development.

The socioeconomic and linguistic diversity of the student body and the differing educational beliefs of the faculty have influenced my experiences during the past year. Often times I have felt frenzied, uncertain, and conflicted when making decisions. The needs and expectations of students and teachers frequently diverged. When I successfully addressed the concerns of one group or an individual, I would often receive criticism from an individual or individuals with opposing interests. My seeming inability to effectively satisfy all stakeholders (i.e. students, teachers, parents, community members, school committee members, and supervisors) and build consensus left me feeling exhausted, ineffective, and unfulfilled. The building climate reflected my personal

sentiments. Some students excelled at the high school while others failed and dropped out. Many teachers expressed their delight at proposed policy changes while others accused me of “destroying the standard of excellence at Westside.” On any given day, I could receive a phone call from a parent praising the work of the high school administration and the very next call could be from someone threatening to “have my job” once he was finished speaking with the superintendent.

In the face of multitudinous demands, I see my role as co creating solutions to issues involving student achievement and professional development for teachers. Another critical aspect of my job involves facilitating dialogue among students and adults about what Wilfred Carr (1997) refers to as a “philosophical understanding of the nature of ‘the good society’ and of the kind of cultural, political and economic roles that individuals must be educated to perform if such a society is to be created and sustained” (<http://search.epnet.com/direct.asp?an=9707271338&db=aph>). Prior to beginning this action research project, I defined my roles as a facilitator, organizational vision keeper, and teaching and learning coach as the meaningful and critical part of my work. Unfortunately - and I purposely say unfortunately because my desire to engage in this action research project stemmed from feelings of frustration – my role as a principal involves a number of oversight, managerial, and custodial responsibilities, in addition to fostering conditions that promote professionalism and positive student development. My custodial and managerial

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responsibilities include maintaining a safe and secure environment for the students, managing and reporting data for the state department of education, and ensuring that the staff behaves ethically, responsibly, and professionally.

Because these responsibilities typically involve reacting to the behaviors of others, it is difficult to foresee events which might require an inordinate amount of time and attention, thus compromising the time I would spend engaged in more thoughtful and intellectually critical activities.

Historically the organizational structure of the high school has reflected an emphasis on maintaining order and monitoring adult behaviors. Prior to the 2004-2005 school year when I became the principal, the high school had two assistant principals and one vice principal. The primary responsibilities of the two assistants revolved around student discipline (i.e. breaking up fights, mediating verbal conflicts, searching lockers, supervising the lunch room, etc.). The role of the vice principal was to make certain that teachers fulfilled their responsibilities within specific deadlines (i.e. turning in grades, completing schedules, updating professional development plans, etc.). When I became the principal, I hired three new assistants or vice principals. We did away with the discipline/academic distinction between an assistant principal and vice principal and used the titles interchangeably. All three assistants work with students when they behave inappropriately and all three assistants supervise and evaluate teachers, as well as oversee some aspect of academics in the building (i.e. coordinating the program of studies, MCAS oversight, student activities coordination, etc.). In

addition to assistant principals, there are eleven department chairs at the high school. The duties of the department chairs have been limited to departmental budget oversight. Department chairs do not address issues of student discipline or supervision and do not supervise or evaluate teachers in their respective departments. When I examine the high school organizational chart it appears that there are a sufficient number of faculty members in leadership roles to support my role as principal. However the organizational structure feels haphazard and uncoordinated. These feelings, like my feelings of frustration around my perceived responsibilities, compelled me to analyze my role as the principal through action research.

### **Statement and Origin of Research Focus**

During the Action Research course, I synthesized the feedback that I received from several course assignments. Through this synthesis, my hypothesis has changed and the focus of my research has changed. When I started this project, my job as a high school principal overwhelmed me. I consistently felt as though “the tail wagged the dog” when I was at work. I spent the majority of my time at work in a reactive state, waiting for an unforeseen crisis to manage. Many of my day-to-day duties felt unimportant or uninteresting to me. Activities such as lunch duty, bus duty, and completing paperwork for the Department of Education did not inspire me. I experienced my job as high in stress and low in intellectual stimulation. My initial hypothesis for the action research project was, if I were to better balance the managerial aspects of my job

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(mundane, tedious, supervisory work) with the leadership aspects of my job (creative, intellectually stimulating, development work focused on teaching and learning) I would be a more effective and happier principal. I assumed that the problem was in the way in which I was prioritizing my daily tasks. After completing several course assignments and reflecting on the feedback I received, I thought that the problem had more to do with my perception of my work. I realized that the job of the high school principal is not the problem but perhaps how I perceive the job and thus experience the job represented the problem. At one point in the development and clarification of my research focus, I attempted to write a job description. As I wrote the description, I realized that I did not have a clear vision of what my job entails. I could only generate a list of unrelated tasks that I completed on any given day but I did not have a cohesive underlying framework that connected the tasks in any significant way. It became clear to me that perhaps my work felt purposeless because I had not defined the purpose of my work.

The photovoice project helped me to clarify my thinking. After doing the photovoice project, I sensed that what was lacking in my work was a sense of personal mission. In order for me to thrive in my job, I needed to feel as though I was engaged in work that connected with my mission as an educator. My mission as an educator is to educate young people in ways that prepare them to be engaged, free thinking, and socially responsible citizens in a democratic

society. In order for schools to contribute to this process, teachers and school leaders must focus on creating learning environments that foster dialogue, inquiry, problem solving, and interactions between individuals from diverse backgrounds.

Photovoice helped me to clarify and articulate my thinking. As a result, my thinking shifted midway through the course, which caused me to reframe my hypothesis and research questions. Initially my hypothesis was, “if I prioritize daily tasks more efficiently, I will be happier.” I reformulated my hypothesis to, “if I intellectualize my work, more of it will be meaningful.” My primary research question also changed from, “how do I balance my managerial and leadership duties?” to “how do I connect my actions at work to my vision of what it means to be an educator?”

When I began this project, I focused on research literature that delineated the knowledge, dispositions, skills, and behaviors of effective leaders. I assessed my leadership qualities and leadership virtues based on the work of Jeffrey Glanz (2002). I studied Linda Lambert’s (2003) “essential principal behaviors for building leadership capacity” as well as her “15 leadership capacity action steps for principals.” Through engaging in self assessment and studying the leadership literature I hoped that I could identify what I was doing wrong to make myself so miserable. Subsequently, I would apply the right formula and voila a super and stress free leader would emerge. My commitment to figuring out how to do my job through studying the equivalent of every self help book for

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administrators continued. I read about understanding attitudes and influencing behaviors (Pryor and Pryor, 2005), how to enhance student achievement (Danielson, 2002), and how to translate research into action (Marzano, 2003). All of the texts that I read offered useful information but I consistently interpreted the message as, if I adopt all of the behaviors delineated on various checklists, I will be the principal that I aspire to be and discontentment will disappear. I was convinced that this was possible when I found Elaine McEwan's (2003), 7 Steps to Effective Instructional Leadership. McEwan's book not only boiled down leadership into seven manageable steps but it also included a checklist, which distilled the steps into convenient actions.

Ironically, the more I read the more overwhelmed and ineffective I felt. As I discussed this with my research notebook group, I experienced some remarkable insights. I connected our research notebook group conversations with class discussions on existentialism. My understanding of the concept was and still is rudimentary. Nonetheless, a profound connection became clear for me. I truly understood the goals of my action research project. I needed to understand myself as an educator and leader. It was not enough to analyze what I do; I needed to comprehend who I am as an educator/leader. I then needed to translate my understanding of myself as a practitioner into a personal vision and link my understanding of myself to my practice. Initially my focus had been to change my behavior. I knew that the most important work would be making the connection between self awareness and altering my behaviors.

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Reflexivity in action research requires analyzing the relationship between self awareness and action.

The discoveries that I experienced through the research notebook group meetings and class discussions, helped me to focus my action research further. My research project attempted to facilitate an awareness of myself as a principal, foster a deeper understanding of my personal mission, and forge a connection between my perception of my role and my attitude toward my duties. I knew that my data collection methods would include interviewing colleagues about these ideas. Since I was hoping to reignite a sense of passion and purpose around my work, I wanted the interviews to impel people to passionately share their purpose. I also hoped to gain a deeper understanding of myself as a leader and educator. In order to accomplish this, I needed to appreciate how others understood themselves in relation to their work and analyze my own experiences and feelings in relation to theirs. My desire for understanding and appreciation guided me to literature on Appreciative Inquiry (AI).

In their book Appreciative Inquiry, Cooperider and Whitney (1999) describe the process of Appreciative Inquiry,

“Appreciative Inquiry is an approach to organizational analysis and learning that is uniquely intended for discovering, understanding, and fostering innovations in social organizational arrangements and processes. Appreciative Inquiry refers to both a search for knowledge and a theory of intentional collective action which are designed to evolve the vision and will of a group, organization or society as a whole. It is an inquiry process that affirms our symbolic capacities of imagination and mind as well as our social capacity for conscious choice and cultural

evolution. The art of appreciation is the art of discovering and valuing those factors that give life to an organization or group. The process involves interviewing and storytelling to draw the best of the past to set the stage for effective visualization of what might be.”

I decided to incorporate the elements of Appreciative Inquiry process into my interviews. The Appreciative Inquiry process involves focusing on what an organization has done well in the past and is doing well in the present, and designing a better future. Designing the future requires looking at possibilities, expressed and latent, that provide opportunities for more vital and effective (vision and actions congruent) forms of practice. Reviewing literature in Appreciative Inquiry and effective educational leadership informed my research methods.

### **Methods**

Methods of data collection included interviews with teachers and students and journal entries. The interviews were semi structured and forty-five minutes in length on average. I interviewed four teachers. I asked the teachers to describe what it means to be an educator and discuss their personal mission as an educator. I then asked them to talk about the ways in which their daily behaviors reflected their understanding of what their work should entail. I asked the teachers to describe their ideal practice situation. In other words, what would their work look like if they did what they thought teachers should do. Lastly, I asked the teachers to depict what it means to be an effective high school principal.

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In addition to interviewing teachers, I interviewed two students. I talked to the students to describe their best experience at West Springfield High School and to explain what made a particular experience so memorable. I then encouraged them to consider what our school would be like if it were the greatest high school imaginable. Lastly, I asked the students to elucidate what great principals do in great schools. The answers to my questions from both students and teachers were interesting and surprisingly similar. My research journal entries helped me to organize and evaluate data collected in the interviews. Other data collection and analysis methods included partial transcription of recordings, making data summaries, and developing categories and coding data (Altrichter, Posch, & Somekh, 1993).

Teachers focused on their roles as guides, facilitators, role models, and mentors. One teacher stated, "I don't teach them really. I mean not in the traditional sense of teaching, standing at the board lecturing, you know telling them what they should know. I prefer to think that I facilitate their discoveries." Another teacher said, "I would like to think of myself as a trusted guide. High school is a difficult journey. I want to help them get through it unharmed." Teachers did not spend much time talking about content when describing what it means to be a teacher. Instead they focused on their relationships with students. The students were the reason that teachers chose their profession.

The teachers also expressed dissatisfaction – a sense of dissatisfaction which mirrored my own. They did not have enough time to do the work that they identified as important. One teacher indicated,

“too much time is spent on trivial, housekeeping matters – doing the newest district mandate, or coming up with a ‘data driven’ school improvement plan. Not enough time is spent on getting to know the kids so that we can design learning experiences that are more meaningful. It’s not that we don’t want to. We don’t have any time.”

Other teachers whom I interviewed echoed this sentiment. They all expressed a desire to spend more time on building relationships with students and less time “tracking” students. Another teacher described a similar dilemma,

“Like take class cuts as an example. I can’t tell you how much time I spend tracking those stupid little slips. I spend all this time counting cuts and following up on them. What I really want to know is what is going on with the kid. Why isn’t he showing up and what can I do to help?”

An entry in my research journal demonstrates how I connected the experiences of the teachers to my own sentiments, “So we all race around all day like headless chickens, thinking that we are all alone. We all want something different but it stays the same. What would change look like?” As I continued to analyze transcripts, I found an answer.

Teachers and students described a great school as a place where people are happy and relaxed. Both groups emphasized the need to know each other beyond a strict teacher and student relationship. One student said, “I need to know that someone cares, if something goes wrong like, I got to know that I can go to someone. The teacher wants me to talk about The Grapes of Wrath, but I can’t unless I can unload some of this stuff.” Another student indicated that

relationship building does not have to happen at the expense of learning, “I am not saying that the stuff that we do isn’t important. I want to go to college. I just wish that they (teachers) would bring it back to my life, you know connect it to me.” Teachers expressed a desire for deeper collegial relationships, more collaboration, and positive relationships with students. The disparity between what students and teachers perceived as reality and what they expressed as an ideal reflected my own experiences. The realization that I was not alone was powerful and energizing. In my research journal I describe the energy that I received from the interviews,

“I have often described my job as putting on my armor day after day, walking into the arena, and hoping some of the lions are sick or just too tired to eat me. After talking to colleagues, I realize that there are others in the arena with me. We can fight the lions together. Better yet, we can join hands and walk out of the arena.”

Interviewing was both a data collection method and an intervention. Through the interview process, I was able to acquire information from teachers and students about how they see the role and function of the high school principal. As I talked with them, I connected what teachers and students said with my vision. From these conversations, I developed actions that reinforced the vision that I have of what it means to be a high school principal. For example, I conducted an interview in which a teacher indicated that the role of the principal was to support teachers when students misbehaved. I asked the teacher, “how does an effective principal support students?” He responded by saying that it was an interesting question. As we continued to talk, I pointed out

what seemed like a common theme in my interviews – essentially, that students and teachers have adversarial relationships that require mediation with an administrator. I asked him what our work would look like if we assumed that both the needs of the students and the teachers could be met. As a result of our conversation I wrote the following idea in my journal,

“Why not use tardy detention duty as a conversation space. Detentions don’t do anything to prevent students from being tardy. Instead teachers stare at students to make sure that they don’t talk to each other. I am thinking that we could use this time for teachers to schedule meetings with students with whom they have not successfully built a relationship. A guidance counselor or administrator could facilitate the discussions.”

I realized that such a dramatic change may make some teachers uncomfortable. I was operating under the assumption that all teachers wanted to build relationships with students when I had only interviewed four teachers. Instead of trying my idea, I decided that all of the administrators would offer facilitation as an option. If a student who had a tardy detention was having difficulty in a class, we would ask the student and teacher if they wanted to use the opportunity to meet and talk about what was happening in the class. Several teachers and students took advantage of the opportunity. Both teachers and students expressed that the meetings were more beneficial than tardy detentions.

### **Findings**

Since beginning my action research project, I have discovered a great deal. The most salient discovery that I have made is reflexivity and critical reflection cannot occur without self awareness. I could not have changed my

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behaviors in order to change my experiences without first being clear about what I wanted my job to look like and why I had chosen to be a principal in the first place. Once I understood my motivations and attitudes, I was able to consciously select actions that were congruent with my vision and values.

In our class we discussed freedom in terms of existentialism. We talked about how people complain of constraints on their freedom when in fact external constraints do not impede our freedom. The fear of responsibility circumscribes action and freedom for most of us, far more than any imagined restraint. At some point in my action research, I realized this concept so profoundly that it felt revelatory – I mean like of biblical proportions. I had an “aha” moment that I can only liken to finally “getting” how to drive a stick shift. I got it – my experience mirrors my perception; I do not derive my perception from my experience.

I found that the methods involved in action research – reflection on experience, action, observation, and reflection – could improve my conditions at work. By integrating the processes of reflection, action, and observation with the ideas of Appreciative Inquiry (discovering what is effective and imagining how to expand it), I was able to rediscover a sense of purpose and engage others in a similar process.

I am not finished with my action research. My understanding of action research is still in its nascent stages. I need to develop additional actions from the interviews and from my journal, apply the actions, observe the results, and continue the process of reflection. In some cases, I will apply actions next year.

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For example, we will have an advisory period two times a week next year to foster personal relationships between students and teachers. After monitoring the effect of advisories on teachers' and students' attitudes compared with the interview data that I collected for this project, I will reflect on how well advisories provide opportunities for relationship building.

Because I wish to contribute to positive social change, I would like to reconfigure my action research to be more socially critical. Socially critical action research can be described in terms of five characteristics: participation, direction, consciousness, constraints, and outcomes (Tripp, 1990). I could have analyzed and delineated constraints with greater specificity. With regard to direction, consciousness, and outcomes, I believe that this action research project was socially critical. Regarding participation, my research project did not involve mutually supporting groups of administrators. I would be interested in having a discussion about vision, mission, roles, and responsibilities with other principals. In particular, I would like to discuss the role of the high school principal with other female principals. It would be interesting to see how gender plays into the perceptions, attitudes, and practices of female administrators.

Although my research project represents a preliminary attempt to practice action research, I accomplished what I intended. I have a deeper awareness of myself as a principal. At the conclusion of this project, I was reminded that I am an educational leader who cares about students, not only how they perform but

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also how they experience their education. I am also clearer about what drives me to execute the role of the principal. I want to foster an environment that reflects the promise of democracy - a place where students and teachers improve conditions through dialogue and partnership. I see a connection between who I am as an educator and what I do as an educator. Engaging in this research project has changed my thinking. Changes in thinking have profound implications. To paraphrase Ralph Waldo Emerson, the ancestor of every accomplishment is a thought. When we change our thinking we change our world. I would like to think that I am on the way to changing the world.