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# Investigating the Effects of Facilitating a Participatory Action Research Study at a High School with Small Learning Communities

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

INVESTIGATING THE EFFECTS OF FACILITATING A  
PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH STUDY AT A HIGH SCHOOL  
WITH SMALL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION  
PROGRAM IN CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

BY

ELIZABETH W. FERRELL

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I would not be who I am today if it were not for my parents, both of whom have balanced their personal and professional passions all of my life. As business entrepreneurs and artists – music for my father, Bill, and painting for my mother, Stuart – I learned from them that in order to be personally and professionally fulfilled, I would have to pave my own path. I have been lucky to have so much support from my parents and to have an expanded cheerleading team with my stepmother, Yvonne, and stepfather, Chip. Thank you all for always asking me about my research and encouraging me to fight through stressful times to get to the finish line.

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being an amazing listener, brainstorming partner, and companion through the entirety of my doctoral adventures.

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my wife, Sarah. You have helped me find true happiness and fulfillment, and I cannot wait to see where life takes us.

I also dedicate this dissertation to classroom teachers who strive to improve their schools, often despite myriad obstacles. Without passionate and innovative educators using their local knowledge to change the lives of their students, I do not believe that school improvement is possible.

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## ABSTRACT

In this dissertation, I present three frameworks through which participatory action research (PAR) can be investigated. PAR is a cyclical process through which members of a community identify a problem, create a solution that is customized to their setting, implement their solution, and collect data to assess their improvement plan's effectiveness and to guide modifications for subsequent iterations. In each of three articles, I focus on one framework, its contributing theories, and present findings from my nine month study which took place at a high school on Chicago's northwest side. Each article and framework has its own guiding research questions, which allowed me to investigate the effects of facilitating a PAR group at Smith High School through three distinct lenses: northern hemispheric PAR, focused on organizational learning and the improvement of systems and procedures; southern hemispheric PAR, rooted in autonomy, empowerment, and giving voice to marginalized populations; and a reflective process that charges participants to look inward, at their immediate context, and at the larger landscape of public education. In separate yet corresponding articles, I hope to contribute to the literature on the potential of PAR as a vehicle for school improvement.

## INTRODUCTION

### **The Origins of my Dissertation Research**

From my experiences with participatory action research (PAR), I have come to value the PAR process as an effective way for teachers to select, study, and address school-wide problems. To date I have had three very different and influential experiences with PAR, beginning in 2009 with a teacher-driven initiation of a freshman support model, to a task force focused on absenteeism in 2012, and finally my dissertation study centered on school-wide expectations in the 2013-14 school year. In each PAR stage and cycle, I have grown more invested in promoting inclusive strategies that capitalize on teachers' knowledge of their students and their school context.

My experience with PAR began in 2009 when I was a part of a group of teachers who began meeting regularly and on our own accord to discuss the struggles that we all noticed among our freshman students at a selective enrollment high school on the southwest side of Chicago. These discussions generated the idea that we could start a freshman academy for the following school year; I was then enrolled in an Action Research course as part of my master's program at Loyola University Chicago, and used this very real school-wide problem as the focus for my graduate school assignments.

Before implementation, several teachers in our self-selected team visited other schools with freshman academies, and I read relevant studies and presented research summaries to the group. Over the summer we outlined the necessary people and systems needed, and as the first school year with a freshman academy began, we collected data

that we could loosely compare with previous years. We also interviewed and surveyed students to see how supported they felt and what they needed to succeed academically. After the first school year of structuring the ninth grade class into two houses, our colleagues and administration requested to add a sophomore academy, and the following year seventh and eighth grade houses were created for the school's Academic Center. The cycle continues to this day as the staff uses data to make modifications to improve the small learning communities experience for stakeholders each year in their grade-level houses.

My more recent experience with PAR was through a pilot study that I conducted at my current high school on Chicago's northwest side. About two months prior to the start of my pilot study, our staff had voted on a school problem that they wanted to address as part of a different initiative being attempted at my school. Since no action had occurred since the vote, the timing was perfect to try a PAR group. I revealed the winning issue – students cutting class – and summarized the purpose and structure of PAR at an all-staff professional development (PD) session. At that same PD I distributed an exit slip asking staff members for their feedback on what factors they thought might lead to students cutting class and what ideas they had for preventing it; the same slip asked for their interest in joining a task force (i.e., PAR group) to address this school problem. The Class Cutting Task Force was born, and met eight times over the course of ten weeks. I presented research summaries on the topic, and teachers involved decided to interview students and staff members in their small learning communities about the topic so that we could consider local as well as published information.



I facilitated a cause-and-effect fishbone through which the group decided on four root causes of cutting class, and then deciphered which root could be addressed with only one quarter left of the school year. The intervention was designed, vetted through administration and then security staff after which it was presented to the faculty, taught to students through a school wide lesson plan, and finally presented to families through a parent conference event. After all stakeholders learned about the changes in school policies that were going to be made in order to address students cutting class, they went into effect – first with a *soft* implementation for two weeks followed by a *hard* enforcement of the new policies for seven weeks. The task force decided on which data to collect each week (cuts per period and daily attendance rate), and made recommendations to administrators based on that data. The following school year, two task force members took ownership of leading the second and third PAR cycles, and they chose to revert back to the fishbone in order to select modifications to make to the intervention (for more information, see Ferrell, Nance, Torres, & Torres, 2014).

Through both experiences I broadened my experiences with both PAR and also small learning communities: I was a co-creator of the freshmen academy model that still exists at my former school, after which I managed a federal Smaller Learning Communities grant at my current school. Broadly speaking, an SLC is a group of a few hundred students cohorted according to college and career interests and supported by the same group of interdisciplinary teachers for all four years of high school (Oxley, 2008). In addition to regarding PAR as a structure through which school issues can be addressed, my experiences enhanced my belief that restructuring a school into SLCs can

have profound effects on staff and student rapport, school climate, and student success through more cohesive and concerted personalization supports.

It is with these beliefs and experiences that I began my dissertation journey. I contacted two of my Loyola professors, asking them to be a part of my committee: my chairperson, Dr. David Ensminger, was my professor for Action Research, Program Evaluation, and Doctoral Seminar, and had been a huge supporter during my first action research experience creating a Freshman Academy model; Dr. Ann Marie Ryan, a reader on my committee, had been my professor for History of Curriculum and Instruction at Loyola and became later my Academic Advisor, and I knew that her historical knowledge about school improvement would be vital to my study. As an outside reader and expert on small learning communities, I approached Dr. Diana Oxley; her vast experience with SLCs would be essential to the context of my study. With my committee intact, my proposal defended, and approval from both Loyola's Institutional Review Board and Chicago Public Schools' Research Review Board, I contacted a large neighborhood high school in Chicago which had been a part of the same SLC grant as my school and asked if they would be interested in allowing me to facilitate a participatory action research group at their school.

I reviewed the key tenets of PAR with Smith High School's administration, and emphasized that the teachers who volunteered for the group would be deciding on a school-wide problem to address, designing a solution for that problem, implementing their solution, and collecting data on the solution's effectiveness in order to hone it over the course of iterative cycles. I assured the administration that they would see a proposal of what the group wanted to address and how their plan would be implemented for their

feedback and approval, while also stressing that the goal of the PAR group was for teachers to lead a positive change initiative for their school. With the principal's approval, I began recruiting participants in May of 2013 and my data collection lasted into February of 2014.

### **Three-Article Dissertation Structure**

My study is unique in several ways. For one, I acted as an insider-outsider participant-researcher, which meant that I wore multiple metaphorical hats at once. I facilitated PAR meetings and participated in meeting activities as a PAR group member, but I also researched my participants' experiences of PAR throughout each stage and cycle. Research activities outside of my role as facilitator included conducting initial, midpoint, and exit interviews with each of my nine participants. Since I, too, was a participant, Dr. Ensminger acted as a critical friend and interviewed me using the initial, midpoint, and exit interview protocols that I created with some modifications to fit my blended role. While most of my study and findings focus on my participants, data from my own journaling, audio-reflections, and interviews is also present.

Many meeting activities, such as journaling and using PAR tools depending on our stage and cycle, were relevant as both a researcher and a facilitator. In addition to my unique research-participant role, my insider-outsider status also influenced my study. I shared some insider qualities with my participants as a fellow unionized teacher at a nearby school with similar demographics and also structured into SLCs, but my outsider qualities were always present as well: I did not work at Smith High School which meant that I did not know the school's history nor did I share any professional or personal experiences with my participants.

I designed my study as a three-prong approach to investigating the effects of facilitating a participatory action research group at Smith High School. Each of my primary research questions is connected to a different perspective of PAR, meaning that each lens also has its own theoretical influences. The three-article dissertation format fit my research style and study design most appropriately, and the result is three independent but related perspectives of my participants' experiences in the PAR group. The three-article format has allowed me to more deeply explore the three lenses I conceptualized for participatory action research, and each piece will appeal to different audiences which will hopefully expand the reach of my research.

**Article 1: Northern Hemispheric Participatory Action Research: How PAR Can Enhance Organizational Learning in a School with Small Learning Communities**

In my first article, I define a northern hemispheric perspective of participatory action research which I believe is influenced most by the work of Argyris and Schön (1996) and Torres and Preskill (2001). Organizational learning is a gradual process of using stakeholder input to guide changes to an organization's infrastructure, specifically targeting professional processes and outcomes (Torres & Preskill, 2001). According to Argyris and Schön (1996), organizational learning can be categorized in three ways: *single-loop learning*, which involves direct error correction; *double-loop learning*, which looks more to the root causes of an error in order to address underlying beliefs and assumptions; and *deuterolearning*, which takes place when professionals adopt new beliefs and strategies for learning that become engrained in institutional practices (Argyris & Schön, 1996; Frost, 2014; Visser, 2007). Looking at the potential for applying organizational learning theory to schools, and specifically in school with small learning

communities, I argue that the four-step PAR cycle is a promising way to engage teachers in organizational learning.

Looking at my nine month study through a northern hemispheric lens, I focused my data collection around school-wide processes and procedures before and during the PAR process. I first assessed the level of organizational learning already in place at Smith High School through initial interviews based on the assumption that restructuring a school into small learning communities necessitates some degree of adult learning and school change. In midpoint interviews, I asked questions related to each participant's understanding of the selected problem and its root causes, and gathered their initial reactions to the effectiveness of the intervention. In exit interviews, I asked more broadly about the PAR model and how it impacted each person's perception of the selected issue and their view of teachers' roles in organizational learning. In addition to interviews, group meetings were audio-recorded to capture participant contributions to the organizational learning process, and frequent independent journaling prompts allowed me to collect individuals' learning processes and ideas throughout the study.

The findings of this article highlight participants' understandings of the stages and cycles of PAR and their recommendation of PAR to other schools aiming to improve their school-wide structures and procedures. In each of the PAR group's three cycles, participants experienced each level of organizational learning. Their arrival at deuterolearning was reinforced by a participant's decision to facilitate the PAR group after my study officially ended in February 2014. The intended audience for this article is school administrators who may appreciate the procedural components of structuring a school for systemic improvement. While classroom teachers and teacher-coaches may

also be interested in the northern hemispheric lens, my hunch is that school structures are mostly under the domain of administrators who drive a school's foundation and skeleton. Administrators also engage in school improvement planning which can be informed by the PAR process. This article contributes to the literature in that organizational learning in schools is not prominent in published studies, and the need for effective school improvement processes is sorely needed.

### **Article 2: Southern Hemispheric Participatory Action Research: How PAR Can Foster Autonomy and Empowerment**

My second article looks at my study from a southern hemispheric lens, most heavily influenced by theories from Colombia, Tanzania, Australia, and India (Kindon, Pain, & Kesby, 2010). Most influential to my conceptualization of southern hemispheric PAR are constructivism, feminism, social justice, and critical theory. After explicating my perception of southern hemispheric participatory action research (PAR), I argue that its primary foci are autonomy and empowerment, with autonomy being the ability for community members to make decisions independently, and empowerment being an internalized feeling of trust, support, and authority to act on what community members believe is needed to improve their context.

I then explore my nine month study with nine participants from Smith High School from this southern hemispheric lens, first looking for evidence of autonomy and empowerment before the study through initial interviews, and then highlighting examples of increased autonomy and empowerment throughout the study. I strongly believe that PAR is a vehicle for giving voice to teachers, who are too often marginalized from school improvement design and implementation. From my participants' experiences in the PAR

group, they identify the cyclical improvement model as one that allowed them to make decisions at heightened levels and take actions with newfound confidence and independence.

This article is more geared towards classroom teachers and teacher-leaders who are looking for vehicles through which they can exercise voice and capitalize of their funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) to improve learning outcomes for their students. I believe that this article contributes to the literature by presenting a school reform design that respects and includes teachers and uses a systematic and measurable process that complements school improvement plans often led by administrators. I also propose that PAR can engage teachers in the work of constructivism, social justice, feminism, and critical theory in a way that is practical and accessible for busy practitioners.

### **Article 3: Reflection in Participatory Action Research: Mirrors, Microscopes, and Binoculars**

In my third article, I take a deeper look at the role of reflection in participatory action research (PAR), and use a three-tiered approach to explore my participants' reflective experiences influenced by Reason and Torbert (2001) and by Pine (2009). First-person reflection challenges an individual to look inward and engage in intrapersonal reflection regarding personal beliefs, assumptions, and influential experiences. By challenging participants to look in a *mirror*, they can learn more about themselves, why they think and act in certain ways, and how they want to grow moving forward. Second-person reflection involves looking through a *microscope* to examine a particular context or group of people in order to scrutinize interpersonal relationships.

Microscopic reflection encourages participants to look for ways they contributed to the larger group, ways in which group members influenced one another, and ways that the group's work influenced the setting. From a global third-person lens, reflective practices look out at the larger education landscape. So many school reform initiatives exist, and asking participants to place their own PAR efforts into the larger picture of public school improvement brings out global reflections only found by looking through *binoculars*.

While other accounts of the PAR cycle that took place at Smith High School focus on the processes and outcomes of the PAR study, this account will highlight the reflective practices in which participants engaged during interviews and PAR group meetings that were documented through personal journaling, transcribed meeting discussions and the researcher's observations. My hope in focusing solely on reflection here is to provide deeper insights to a critical component of action research – *reflection* – and to give more voice to participants rather than focusing on the PAR stages and outcomes. From my experiences with PAR, practitioners are often drawn to participating in research for emotional and personal reasons more so than anticipated systematic or procedural outcomes. However, most forms of reflection, which are now required elements of curricula and teacher evaluation systems, are more focused on outcomes than feelings, and lack authenticity for teachers (Fendler, 2003). In this article, I aim to highlight those often ignored feelings that participants experienced during this PAR study. In doing so, the intended audience for this piece is classroom teachers, teacher-coaches, and teacher evaluators, in effort to propose a three-tiered reflection process that my participants found to be both productive to the PAR process and meaningful to their personal and professional growth.



### **Concluding Thoughts**

My aim in designing my study with a three-prong approach to investigating the effects of facilitating a participatory action research group at Smith High School, and in writing a three-article dissertation, is to share the potential that PAR has for engaging teachers in school reform, especially in schools structured into small learning communities. In addition to the three articles, which emphasize three different frameworks for studying PAR, I also include a concluding chapter that explores my experience as the insider-outsider participant-researcher where I reflect on the implications for my study and my hopes for its dissemination into teachers' classrooms and collaboration meetings. The present study greatly influenced my beliefs as a person, a teacher, and a researcher; and it verified my confidence in the PAR model as an authentic vehicle for school improvement. By exploring my own journey using reflexive inquiry, I hope to model the reflective work in which teachers can engage while experimenting with PAR at their own schools.

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ARTICLE I: NORTHERN HEMISPHERIC PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH:  
HOW PAR CAN ENHANCE ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING  
IN A SCHOOL WITH SMALL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

**Introduction**

Education is a profession filled with change, as educators constantly strive to figure out the best ways to support students academically, socially, and emotionally. Schools are known for taking on new initiatives and programs in part due to top-down mandates but also with genuine hopes of increasing student outcomes, such as graduation rates and postsecondary enrollment. Unfortunately, much of what happens in federal, state, and district improvement initiatives is top-down; instead of leading staff in strategies that promote organizational learning and engage teachers in improving their schools, most education initiatives are mandated upon teachers with expectations of quick implementation. For school reform to work, teachers and school staff must learn improvement processes together so that they may identify gaps in student performance and design ways to close those gaps in their school setting.

It is no secret that American public schools are struggling to meet the needs of our learners. Reform efforts come in many different packages with catchy names, but despite school improvement attempts, a trend is clear: all too often, schools adopt new improvement strategies without engaging stakeholders in the process. What results is separation between school stakeholders and the initiatives impressed upon them, which decreases the sustainability of any given reform. When educators are able to both

contribute their knowledge and collectively learn new ways of structuring schools and supporting students, sustainable school improvement becomes possible.

### **Status Quo of Large Urban School Districts**

American public schools, especially in urban contexts, are striving to find ways to support diverse learners and to prepare students for postsecondary opportunities. Failing schools in this bureaucratic system (Cuban, 1990) often experience rotating doors of leaders with differing visions of improvement. Some educational researchers blame school leaders, others blame federal and state policies, lack of funding, or even American culture (e.g., Firestone, 2013; Hill, 1995; Hursh, 2007; Merrow, 2011). No matter the culprit, “[t]he past quarter century of failed reforms leaves little doubt that public schools are extraordinarily resistant to change” (Wilms, 2003, p. 607). This resistance most likely stems from the enormity and complexity of public schools; when reforms are mandated to a large district, the nature of an initiative may not fit with every school’s context, and the lack of adequate support prevents schools from full implementation.

In his text *So Much Reform, So Little Change*, Payne (2008) writes about the irrationality of imposing initiatives on schools, noting that educational policies are radically disconnected from realistic practices in urban public schools. More often than not, large districts adopt reform initiatives which are then mandated to all of its schools, often without consulting schools about the suitability or necessity of the improvement plan, and without assessing the school’s capacity for carrying out the reform. Similarly, Wilms (2003) echoes the lack of consultation of practitioners by policy makers and district leaders, even though they have the most experience with school stakeholders and know the inner workings of their schools. “Not surprisingly, teachers and administrators

either ignore the mandates or comply minimally, safe in the knowledge that, in time, the reforms will “blow over” (p. 606). In order for school-based problems to be addressed, solutions must be hand-tailored to fit the complexities of a school. Practitioners should be taught strategies for identifying and addressing issues that arise in their classrooms and across school settings in order to implement more appropriately targeted school reform.

### **Band-Aid Reforms**

Teachers and school leaders alike have become very accustomed to school improvement fads, which are heightened by high turnover of leaders. Wilms (2003) reports that, on average, superintendents of large American cities stay in office for fewer than three years. “The result has been to develop a generation of administrators who seize on ‘quick fixes’ - short term initiatives that may win board members’ approval. But most of these reforms rarely alter how teachers teach and children learn” (p. 607). *Quick fixes* generally address something visible and obvious instead of investigating the deep and complex roots of the problem, thus rendering little sustainable change. A short-term district leader may achieve a small *win* from this approach, and leave the three year position with accolades of accomplishment, but in reality such band-aid reforms only cover up root causes that worsen beneath the temporary bandage. Additionally, districts like Chicago Public Schools (CPS) have had five different district leaders in the past six years, each with different visions and accompanying reform movements. This constant change makes it difficult for school leaders and teachers to fully realize any one reform; instead, schools experience *initiative-itis* (Hendry, 1996) – the tendency to adopt multiple initiatives at once for short periods of time – and the belief that no new initiative will come to fruition.

Another form of band-aid reform occurs when a school is asked to improve student metrics (e.g., attendance rate, high-stakes test scores, graduation rate) without actually changing how the school is set up or structured. Payne (2008) discusses the mistake that school reformers often make of assuming that a school is organized rationally when an initiative is implemented. When a school is not organized for success and initiatives are implemented, the irrationality of the school is further exposed, in turn discouraging stakeholders; “[a]ll organizations are perfectly designed to achieve the results they are getting” (Senske, 2004, p. 90, cited in Ruebling, Clarke, Kayona, & Stow, 2006, p. 1). Wilms (2003) compares such ill-planned educational reforms to several failures in the auto industry wherein a factory was expected to make a higher-quality car using the same assembly line as its previous cars without restructuring the organization.

Both Wilms (2003) and Payne (2008) recommend that school administrators give more credibility and priority to improvement plans generated from within the school (and more specifically from within the classroom) in order to have lasting and successful effects on student outcomes. This approach suggests that school personnel are better equipped to address and solve the problems being experienced in the school. As personnel solve local problems, they generate their own knowledge about the effective solutions for their context.

### **The Need for Organizational Learning in Schools**

Organizational learning theory is rooted in the belief that learning occurs when individuals or groups within an organization engage in systematic examination of differences between expected outcomes and realized outcomes (Argyris & Schön, 1996). In a basic sense, organizational learning can be defined as “the detection and correction

of error” (Argyris & Schön, 1978). Organizational learning encompasses and integrates the learning done by individuals in a context to achieve heightened growth for the company “that is greater than the sum of its parts” (Starkey, 1996, p. 2). Stata (1996) outlines two important aspects of organizational learning: “First, organizational learning occurs through shared insights, knowledge, and mental models...Second, learning builds on past knowledge and experience” (p. 318). Reaching shared insights and understanding takes time and intentionally structured learning activities so that members of an organization can share their assumptions, beliefs, and experiences before reimagining their company’s improvement strategies.

### **Defining Organizational Learning**

Probst and Büshel’s definition encompasses the multifaceted tenets of organizational learning: “the ability of the institution as a whole to discover errors and correct them, and to change the organization’s knowledge base and values so as to generate new problem-solving skills and new capacity for action” (cited in Argyris & Schön, 1996, p. 167). The first part of their definition resonates with Argyris and Schön’s focus on error correction, which they later categorized as *single-loop learning* (Argyris & Schön, 1996). The second component of Probst and Büshel’s definition reaches deeper into an organization’s governing values, which was later categorized as *double-loop learning* (Argyris & Schön, 1996). When an organization has learned how to learn and hones their “problem-solving skills and new capacity for action” and applies organizational learning to new challenges, it has reached the highest level of *deuterolearning* (Argyris & Schön, 1996). By looking at the three levels of organizational

learning, I would argue that the absence of double-loop and deuterolearning contribute to the instability of educational reform efforts.

First defined and later categorized by Argyris and Schön (1996), there are three types of learning in which an organization can engage. Single-loop learning occurs when an error is corrected so that the espoused theory and the result are more closely linked; this type of learning is most common in school reform. Double-loop learning addresses an organization's values and operating strategies; instead of simply correcting an error that is occurring in one isolated instance (single-loop), the system through which errors were occurring is addressed. Lastly, deuterolearning occurs when an organization's members incorporate new strategies for learning that are continuous and largely unconscious because they are so engrained in institutional practices (Frost, 2014; Visser, 2007).

### **Organizational Learning and School Reform**

Most school reform initiatives are examples of single-loop learning, wherein a problem rises to the surface and is then corrected without actually identifying root causes or addressing the organization's thinking so as to prevent the problem from recurring. Schools need to adapt strategies for training stakeholders to engage in higher levels of organizational learning in order to avoid band-aid single-loop improvement plans. Through organizational learning, educators would be taught to look for discrepancies between espoused theory (formalized processes and policies) and theory-in-use (what actually occurs), and become positioned to design systemic ways to close those gaps as change agents. Such learning could empower teachers with skills to solve current and



future problems, and would positively impact a school's culture by influencing a staff to become a learning organization.

More often than engaging in long-term, cyclical inquiry groups, teachers usually attend professional development workshops about a new reform and then are expected to implement it accurately and with fidelity; the result is frequently a partial implementation by a fraction of a staff, while the rest wait for the reform to fail and get replaced by yet another initiative (Wilms, 2003). This pattern is captured in the term *reform du jour* (Keller & Reigeluth, 2004), or *reform of the day*. If school reform was reimagined to include an organizational learning framework, subsequent initiatives would have a better chance of being truly engrained into a school's operating system and in turn improving student outcomes (Finnegan & Daly, 2012). Schools can borrow meaningfully from organizational learning in that the model encourages ground-up change that is designed by the same people who will implement the change. Double-loop and deuterolearning also necessitate multiple inquiry cycles around the same organizational issue, much unlike the initiative-itis on which schools often fall back. Having teachers create improvement plans in tune with their contexts, resources, and initiatives already in place can allow for systematized, sustainable, and data-driven change. When teachers are positioned as drivers of change who intentionally study a selected problem and potential solutions, thoughtful improvement becomes part of a school's culture; such culture shift is not possible when teachers are positioned as the recipients of directives.

One drawback to the concept of organizational learning as it relates to the work of schools is that it was founded as a business model. Most literature about organizational learning can be found in business journals and studies about its use are often conducted

through graduate business programs. While school districts are becoming structured more like companies, and with business owners becoming more involved in opening and partnering with schools (Schmidt, 2011), there are inherent flaws in applying business improvement models to educational organizations. Entrepreneurial education reformers see low-performing schools as violators of free market theory that should go out of business, and high-performing schools as organizations that should be franchised and replicated (Schneider, 2011). While this idea may make sense to someone in finance, educators know that business concepts cannot be applied to the learning outcomes of children (Schmidt, 2011). While I argue that schools can greatly benefit from integrating double-loop and deuterolearning into their operational practices, as a practitioner I know that a model with concrete steps, as opposed to abstract theory, will have a greater impact on school settings. Participatory action research shows promise as a cyclical model with clear stages and activities that educators can incorporate into their teaching practices and leadership models to promote organizational learning in schools.

### **Participatory Action Research**

Participatory action research (PAR) is the process of engaging members of an organization in problem identification and solution generation for the betterment of their setting. Participants are key decision makers with regards to which problem to study, which data to collect and analyze, and how to design and monitor an intervention for addressing the problem. Key characteristics of PAR are its focus on actionable research topics (Lynch, McLinden, Douglas, & McCall, 2012) and its foundation as the “co-construction of research between researchers and people affected by the issues under study...and/or decision makers who apply research findings” (Jagash et al., 2012, p. 312).


The goal of PAR is two-fold in that participants aim to solve a problem in their organization, while also learning the cyclical process for addressing future systemic problems. A group of people who engage in PAR effectively take on the tenets of organizational learning through the action research stages. The context of the setting must drive the PAR cycle, and thus the solution created by the participants is custom-made for their organization (Stuttaford & Coe, 2010).

Characteristics of a functioning PAR group echo those of organizational learning. The group must communicate assumptions and beliefs effectively to ensure that individuals are learning, researching, and affecting change together (Stringer, 2007). In addition to communicating, methods and tools must be used to assist educators in the integration of using data to inform student supports and school-wide decision making. When educators know how to essentially investigate their own setting to expose weaknesses, research ways to address a chosen issue, effectively prepare the school for the improvement plan, and finally implement the intervention, the entire school community benefits (James, Milenkiewicz, & Bucknam, 2008). Collaborative reflection, research, and action are also key attributes of organizational learning.

Possible outcomes of using PAR include professional learning, collegiality, and school improvement as a result of the action research cycle. “When used as an organization-wide process for school improvement, action research changes the context and provides a way of organizing collective work so that professional expertise is tended and extended, helping to build a strong professional learning community” (Calhoun, 2002, p. 23). The PAR process can empower participants to address problems, more effectively utilize resources, and apply PAR tools in other situations (e.g., in the

classroom, in meetings with colleagues, with organizations outside of their workplace; Jagash et al., 2012). A PAR cycle with key tasks that should be accomplished in the each stage looks as follows in Figure 1. It is important to note that the goal of engaging in

PAR STAGE Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988)	MEETING ACTIVITIES (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010)
Reflect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review current practice</li> <li>• Identify an area for improvement</li> </ul>
Plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify one key question to guide improvement</li> <li>• Brainstorm improvement plans</li> <li>• Research possible improvement plans to guide selection</li> </ul>
Act	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Select one plan and communicate it to all stakeholders</li> <li>• Create data collection plan and schedule</li> <li>• Collect data during the intervention</li> <li>• Modify the intervention as influenced by the data collected</li> </ul>
Observe (cycle continues)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review and analyze data from first cycle</li> <li>• Elicit stakeholder feedback to guide modification for the subsequent cycle</li> <li>• Present cycle 1 process and outcomes, and plans for cycle 2 to stakeholders</li> </ul> <p>(cycle continues)</p>



*Figure 1.* Participatory Action Research Stages and Meeting Activities

multiple PAR cycles is reflective of deuterolearning: not only should participants address a selected organizational problem, but more importantly they should be empowered with a problem-solving framework that can be used as future problems arise. The components of building capacity with PAR group members and the promotion of symbiotic learning

are essential to the sustainability of a PAR project (Kwon, Rideout, Tseng, Islam, Cook, Ro, & Trinh-Shevrin, 2012) as well as fostering continued organizational learning.

### **Influential Frameworks**

One type of participatory action research focuses on changing procedures that drive an organization, thus referred to as research *for* institutions (Cameron, 2010) and for which countries of the northern hemisphere are more known. The primary goal of this strand of PAR is to recommend changes that the institution can make in order to more effectively meet the needs of the participants' community. While these projects can empower participants who make contributions to community-based solutions, the primary focus of systems-based PAR is to inform the institution, which will then drive organizational changes (Cameron, 2010).

### **Northern Hemispheric Participatory Action Research**

In order for a PAR group to be successful, PAR members need to know major variables and non-negotiables from their institution leaders in order to have a true opportunity to research *for* and *with* the organization (Argyris, 1976). The goal of northern hemispheric PAR rests in “transforming the practices of institutions (and indirectly changing people’s lives)” (Cameron, 2010, p. 213; also see Heron & Reason, 2006), which ties neatly with the tenets of double-loop learning and deuterolearning (Argyris & Schön, 1996). Northern hemispheric emphasis on processes, procedures, and essential tasks aligns well with organizational learning, which Senge and Sterman (1990) define as “the process whereby shared understandings and strategies change” (p. 1007). The intersection of northern hemispheric PAR and organizational learning lies in the way

each focuses on reforming organizational *structures*, with stakeholders driving the improvement processes designed by and for their context.

Hendry's organizational learning cycle (1996) mirrors the tenets of PAR and can be practically accomplished through the professional learning communities often found in school settings. In recommending *communities of practice*, Hendry hopes to address the tendency for organizations to layer initiatives, which he calls initiative-itis (also see Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010; Payne, 2008), and the frequency with which reforms are initiated and not completed or reflected upon by those involved; his lamentations resonate all too well with urban public school reforms. Hendry's three recommendations for organizational change are as follows: encourage communities of practice to identify and study an issue, after which they experiment with potential solutions and share their findings with the organization; focus on interventions that will affect organizational processes or products that are immediately relevant to the organization; and insist on "continuous shopfloor-led improvement" (Hendry, 1996, p. 637) to build capacity and impact the culture of a company. Hendry's recommended cycle marries organizational learning theory and participatory action research activities to bring systemic change to an organization.

Similar to communities of practice, Senge and Sterman (1990) recommend that organizations use *learning laboratories* which they compare to flight simulators for pilots: a computer-simulation through which a manager can practice a learning cycle attributed to John Dewey: Discover – Invent – Produce – Reflect. The objective is to allow participants the opportunity to study company problems, articulate potential solutions and reflect on their hypotheses alongside the simulated outcomes. "The result is

greater awareness of the assumptions underlying policies and strategies, better systems thinking skills, shared understanding of complex issues, and enhanced individual and group learning skills” (Senge & Sterman, 1990, p. 1008). Reported outcomes of learning laboratories include improved communication skills, expressed mental models, increased use of data to study an organizational change, and overall an acceleration in making the changes necessary to improve a company’s effectiveness. Again an intersection of organizational learning theory is evident in this learning cycle.

### **Northern Hemispheric PAR as a Vehicle for Organizational Learning**

According to Torres and Preskill (2001), organizational learning is an incremental and iterative process wherein a group of people elicit feedback about their professional processes and outcomes in order to create changes which are then incorporated into an organization’s infrastructure. This continual process engages employees in cohesive and collaborative improvement, thus aligning individuals’ values and attitudes. A professional organization doing this work must allot “time for reflection, examination of underlying assumptions, and dialog among evaluators, program staff, and organizational leaders” (p. 388). In order to actualize organizational learning, Torres and Preskill recommend a five-step approach:

- (1) status quo...
- (2) awareness of a need to change and the exploration of a new approach to evaluation,
- (3) transitioning to an organizational learning approach,
- (4) adoption and implementation of an organizational learning approach, and
- (5) predominance and refinement of the approach. (p. 389)

Relating the steps above to educational reform, it is really no wonder why schools are notorious for myriad improvement efforts without actualized improvement; reforms are usually commanded from outside of the school without understanding of the context or

staff members' input, hurried into action without preparation, and finally abandoned when the desired outcomes are not realized shortly after implementation. Additionally, many reforms aim to solve problems that are readily visible instead of investigating and addressing their root causes. What true organizational learning in schools, fostered through PAR cycles, can do differently is engage teachers and leaders in investigating the core causes of local problems, and challenge a staff to address those deeper problems in a systemic manner. Such a ground-up, contextualized approach to school improvement is seldom fostered, especially in large districts wrought with bureaucracy.

### **Methodology**

This study takes place in a Chicago Public School on the north side of the city which became a small learning communities high school through a federal grant in 2010. The goal of this study was to engage teachers from Smith High School in participatory action research cycles in order to address a school-wide issue of their choosing, and also to teach group members how to conduct future PAR cycles on their own. I was specifically interested in conducting this study at a high school that was implementing the small learning communities reform model to look for ways that PAR could influence an existing improvement effort.

### **Context**

Teachers in Chicago have had five different Chief Executive Officers since 2008, all of whom have had different visions and agendas. Top-down reforms du jour have been short-lived under such transient leadership, which influences how teachers react to new initiatives. In addition to changing CPS leadership, the district has received funding from the Department of Education for various reform initiatives, including SLC grants to



schools with enrollments over 1,000 students since 1999 (Oxley & Kassissieh, 2008).

What is unique about SLC grants is that schools are able to customize the model to fit the needs of their contexts, and use funds with some flexibility and autonomy (U.S.

Department of Education, 2010).

In the 2010 grant that secured a five-year monetary commitment from the U.S. Department of Education to assist five neighborhood high schools in Chicago, certain guidelines were given to integrate personalized learning strategies into existing school structures and cultures; key components of this reform model include vertical career-themed SLCs, looping, distinct physical space and identity, common planning time, and student advisory (Makinen, 2010).

**Smaller learning communities.** The smaller learning communities (SLC) model has the potential to engage teachers in organizational learning and has gained popularity domestically and internationally (Lee & Friedrich, 2007). SLCs are gaining recognition as a way to increase school connectedness through theme-based groupings of students who loop with a core group of teachers for the duration of their high school experience (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; Oxley, 2007). More specifically, an SLC is “an interdisciplinary team of teachers [that] shares a few hundred or fewer students in common for instruction, assumes responsibility for their educational progress across years of school, and exercises maximum flexibility to act on knowledge of students’ needs” (Oxley, 2006, p. 1). An underlying assumption of the SLC model is that the way most schools are traditionally organized is not ideal for teaching or learning (Ruebling, Clarke, Kayona, & Stow, 2006) and that engaging stakeholders in changing the structure of their school can beget improved student outcomes.

By reallocating the space in large, alienating schools into small and unique settings in which students work with the same group of teachers and peers, and study subjects in which they are truly interested, students can experience greater personalization and support from the heightened teacher collaboration and relevance of their coursework (David, 2008). Teachers and students also have more ownership of their experiences at an SLC school; teachers and staff members are often part of designing a school's SLC structure and have some voice in selecting the community in which they teach, and student choice is a critical tenet of this personalization reform (Oxley, 2004). Most schools with SLCs schedule common planning times for teaching teams to discuss shared students, school and community issues, and to plan interdisciplinary units or projects (Southern Regional Education Board, 2009). SLC common planning time gives interdisciplinary teacher teams the protected time that they need to engage in organizational learning. If the structure of a school is inextricably tied to the success of its students (Senske, 2004), much like Wilms (2003) compares to quality of cars, then changing said structure through SLC reform should impact student outcomes over time (Allensworth & Easton, 2007).

After reviewing research regarding characteristics associated with successful schools with small learning communities, Oxley (2007) created a framework to assist schools and districts in their implementation of SLCs. The five domains offered in her guide are as follows: (a) Interdisciplinary teaching and learning teams; (b) Rigorous, relevant curriculum and instruction; (c) Inclusive program and practices; (d) Continuous program improvement; and (e) Building/District-level support for SLCs. The Cycle of Continuous Program Improvement emphasizes the need to regularly examine school

practices in order to improve SLC implementation, ergo increasing student support and success. Oxley's steps (see Table 1) give more specificity to the ways in which a school staff can engage in organizational learning, which is necessary for practitioners who seldom receive training in systemic change. However, without dedicated building leadership, confident teacher-facilitators, and sufficient common planning time during which school staff can examine each of the seven steps of the continuous improvement cycle, organizational learning will not become a school-wide practice (Legters, Adams, & Williams, 2013).

The participatory action research (PAR) process can complement and enhance the organizational learning initiated through the small learning communities model. More specifically, a northern hemispheric lens of PAR, which focuses on organizational processes and outcomes, can encourage school stakeholders to leverage the organizational learning already taking place in SLCs in order to more effectively address school-wide and improve student outcomes. Participatory action research has promising alignment to the continuous improvement model in which SLC schools should engage. The following is a graphic representation of how the PAR cycle encompasses and complements the organizational learning that should be facilitated by the small learning communities cycle of continuous improvement (see Table 1). Using key activities from the PAR cycle in schools with SLCs can enable teachers to hone the SLC continuous improvement cycle proposed by Oxley while also moving beyond single-loop error correction to engage in double-loop and possibly deuterolearning to address root causes of, and misaligned thinking around, school problems. If school stakeholders could learn ways to iteratively study their challenges, research and design solutions, and carry out

interventions through their SLC structures, educational reforms like small learning communities might have increased sustainability, which would improve academic outcomes for American adolescents.

Table 1

*Comparison across Cyclical Improvement Models and Organizational Learning*

Participatory Action Research Cycle Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; McNiff & Whitehead, 2010	Small Learning Communities Cycle of Continuous Improvement Oxley, 2007	Stages of Change toward an Organizational Learning Approach Torres & Preskill, 2001
Reflect <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Review current practice</li> <li>Identify an area for improvement</li> </ul>	1. Take stock of existing practice	1. Status quo
	2. Identify gaps between existing and desired practice	2. Awareness of a need to change and the exploration of a new approach to evaluation
Plan <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Brainstorm and research possible improvement plans to guide selection</li> </ul>	3. Generate and study strategies to adopt	3. Transitioning to an organizational learning approach
	4. Develop consensus for adopting strategies	
	5. Devise implementation plan	
	6. Develop plan to monitor implementation	
Act <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Select one plan, communicate it to all stakeholders, and implement it</li> <li>Create and utilize data collection plan</li> </ul>	7. Implement plan	4. Adoption and implementation of an organizational learning approach
Observe <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Review and analyze data from first cycle</li> <li>Elicit stakeholder feedback to guide modification for the subsequent cycle</li> <li>Present cycle 1 process and outcomes, and plans for cycle 2 to stakeholders</li> </ul>	(Prepare for the next cycle)	5. Predominance and refinement of the approach

## Research Questions

Using the theoretical framework of northern hemispheric PAR and the premise that organizational learning is present to some degree in schools with small learning communities, the following research questions have guided data collection and analysis:

How can participatory action research further the organizational learning that a school experiences while implementing the smaller learning communities school reform model?

- a) How does the PAR process facilitate teachers' understandings of a school problem's root cause, potential solutions, and the effects of implementing an improvement plan?
- b) How does the PAR process inform school-wide processes and procedures in order to address challenges that the school is experiencing?

## Sample

Between May, 2013 and February, 2014 I facilitated PAR group meetings with nine participants from Smith High School (SHS) which has over 1,700 students and is divided into six small learning communities: International, Arts, Computers, Honors, Fitness, and Communications.<sup>1</sup> I presented the goals of the study and recruited voluntary participants during each of the schools six SLC meetings one day in May, and additionally emailed recruitment materials to those who were not present. Participants who consented for the study included seven teachers and two deans, with consultations with administrators at various points during the study. Participants' years of teaching

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<sup>1</sup>Pseudonyms.

experience ranged from two to 26 years, and they represented eight different content-area departments. The PAR group also represented four of the school's six SLCs.

### **Data Collection**

Aiming to assess the level of organizational learning already present through SLCs as well as new tools and processes learned through participatory action research, data collection included the following: three rounds of audio-recorded interviews and transcripts (initial, mid-point, exit); 14 audio-recorded meetings, agendas, meeting minutes, and transcripts; meeting entrance and exit slips, and journal entries; materials from presentations that the PAR group gave to their staff members; and the researcher's journal.

Interviews lasted between 25 and 75 minutes, and were semi-structured so that topics remained focused but open enough for participants to share information that they deemed relevant. Initial interviews took place in May and June, mid-point in November, and exit in February. During initial interviews I included personal questions to get to know participants' histories and viewpoints, and elicited what problems each person hoped the PAR group would address and why. During midpoint interviews I focused on learning how participants were experiencing the PAR process, asked for feedback about our meetings and how the improvement plan was going, and I prompted each person to set goals for the second PAR cycle. In exit interview questions I charged participants to reflect on the whole PAR process from the beginning to the end of the second cycle in order to highlight pivotal moments and to set goals for the third PAR cycle which would not be facilitated by me. Before each round of interviews, I used previous data to inform my final set of questions, and reviewed them with my dissertation advisor before

conducting interviews. Because of my positioning as a researcher-participant, in addition to interviewing nine participants three times each, I was also interviewed by my advisor each round, using modifications of the same questions I used with my participants.

PAR group meetings occurred weekly in June, September, and October, and bi-weekly in November, December, and January. Most meetings occurred before school, as chosen by group members. Each meeting had clear objectives which matched the PAR activities suggested by McNiff and Whitehead (2010). During group meetings, my guidance to the group as the facilitator was to encourage selecting a school-wide problem within the group's locus of control, meaning that participants could plausibly and realistically impact the chosen issue. Positioned as an insider-outsider researcher-participant, I was conscious of my shared experiences with participants while also making it clear that all decisions were up to group members; they knew their school best and would be implementing their solution, whereas I did not work at their school. I provided most research to the group, while always inviting group members to contribute articles, samples, or any other relevant information to our group meetings. All meetings were audio-recorded and later transcribed, and agendas and minutes were prepared by me as the facilitator; at the conclusion of each meeting, I would elicit ideas for the next meeting from the group so that participants were involved in the planning process. At least every other meeting included a journaling component, either through short answer questions or broader reflection prompts. After each interview and meeting, I recorded my reactions and reflections as a means of audio-journaling in addition to written reflections. The final group meeting occurred after exit interviews and took place mid-February.

From May 2013 to February 2014, the Smith High School PAR group experienced three participatory action research cycles. In the first cycle, the group learned about the PAR process itself, selected a problem area to focus on and designed an improvement plan upon which they built in subsequent cycles. Reflecting on their experiences and issues raised by their colleagues in order to select a topic within their locus of control were of utmost importance during the first cycle, as the group's initial decision making laid the foundation for their improvement plan. Each cycle, the group's starting point and goal was impacted by their previous work and by their evolving mindsets. The PAR group used all-staff professional development (PD) meetings as the primary means for communicating their change initiative with their colleagues. They initially presented their improvement plan in August, and at the end of first quarter they gave an update, fielded questions, and previewed an all-staff survey about their initiative before it was emailed. At the end of second semester, the PAR group presented new layers to their improvement plan again at an all-staff PD. Although some planning for these PD sessions occurred during PAR meetings, participants presented independently of me.

Data collected for this study was qualitative in nature, focusing on participants sharing their processes of learning about PAR and trying to solve the problem of their choosing: lack of consequences. Using codes related to my northern hemispheric research questions, I looked for emergent themes within codes and for triangulation across participants' experiences and reflections as reported during interviews and group meetings. Written journal entries and feedback forms also contributed to my data pool and allowed me to elicit feedback from quieter members of the group. Of the nine



participants, two were unable to make many of our meetings, but still contributed to the work of the PAR group outside of meeting times; their voices are not as present in my data analysis due to their low attendance. Of the remaining seven, five participants were present at every meeting; these salient cases are more heavily cited due to their high rates of involvement. Outside of my data collection, the PAR group created and administered two surveys during the study in order to collect both quantitative and qualitative data about the effectiveness of their improvement plan.

### **Findings**

In my findings, I will explore the status quo of Smith High School, examining participants' mindsets and reflections on school processes before the start of our PAR group. From each PAR cycle I will extract key components of organizational learning in which the group engaged, paying special attention to the PAR processes that facilitated the group's journey. In this section, I organize my findings chronologically by PAR cycle while focusing most explicitly on the process of actualizing organizational learning described by Torres and Preskill (2001) and Senge's (2005) five disciplines of a learning organization: systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, building shared vision, and team learning.

Because each cycle can be examined both on its own and as part of one larger change initiative, the five stages of change described by Torres and Preskill (2001) can be useful in delineating the contributions of each cycle to the whole change at Smith High School: status quo, awareness of a need to change, transition to an organizational learning approach, adoption of an organizational learning approach, and predominance and refinement of the organizational learning approach. These stages relate to different levels

of organizational learning: transitioning to an organizational learning approach can occur in a single loop, adoption of the organizational learning reflects a double loop, and predominance and refinement represent an organization that has embodied deuterolearning. During each PAR cycle I relate Smith's goals and outcomes to the three levels of organizational learning – single-loop, double-loop, and deuterolearning – as a way of indicating Smith's progress towards a sustainable organizational learning approach through participatory action research.

By looking at the group's progression from single-loop organizational learning in the first cycle, to double-loop learning in the second, and deuterolearning in the third, it is evident that the PAR process shows promise as a model through which teachers can not only engage in school improvement, but that its practicality and structure work well in a school setting. When the study began, the status quo at Smith reflected Payne (2008) and Wilms' (2003) description of ever changing initiatives: "This is my seventh year [teaching]. So every year, I have seen something different, except for the SLC now. This is our third year with the SLC. But besides that, I saw many other things coming in and leave at the end of the school year" (Tamara). Such ephemerality of previous initiatives led participants to see their roles as minimal in the change process and in the decision-making regarding school improvement. Caroline explained this feeling as a lack of a school's autonomy to make its own improvement plans: "I don't feel like schools have enough autonomy to get to choose exactly what would be good for them when we've got to like 'you have to do so much of this' or 'you have this' [district talking]." These findings show that the general status quo at the school involved teachers being told to adopt different initiatives without participation or longevity.

	<b>CYCLE 1 (June-October)</b>	<b>CYCLE 2 (November-January)</b>	<b>CYCLE 3 (February-June)</b>
<b>REFLECT</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Review current practice</li> <li>Identify 1 area for improvement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Staff shared potential problems in recruitment</li> <li>PAR group identified “lack of consequences” as over-arching issue</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>PAR group reflected on barriers to using the EL &amp; need for positive reinforcement</li> <li>Chose to re-teach CTRL + F and the most common uses of the EL to staff</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>PAR group reflected on barriers to using the EL &amp; need for positive reinforcement</li> <li>Chose to allow club sponsors/coaches to submit lists of kids with ID#s</li> <li>Alternative detentions would help decrease ineligible #</li> </ul>
<b>PLAN</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Research the selected problem and possible solutions</li> <li>Create improvement plan with data points</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>PAR group read articles about the issue &amp; reviewed samples of solutions used in other schools</li> <li>Smith’s Eligibility List criteria was drafted and approved by Admin</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>PAR group presented at Quarter 1 PD day with shout-outs of teachers using EL and review of why, how, what</li> <li>PAR group members reviewed clubs/sports and made notices for ineligible athletes</li> <li>PAR group wrote letter to local businesses to elicit donations of positive incentives</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>PAR group presented at Quarter 2 PD with new alternative detention process and GoogleForm for submitting students lists</li> <li><u>Idea</u>: pull ineligible students to Auditorium to review ways to become eligible</li> <li>Schoolwide competition to serve detentions before year-end</li> <li>Sign up for teachers to check EL at sports games and clubs (voluntary)</li> </ul>
<b>ACT</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Communicate plan to all stakeholders</li> <li>Implement plan</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>PAR group presented at staff PD</li> <li>Advisory lesson and video presented to students</li> <li>Student contracts signed with info to take home</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Eligibility Lists continued biweekly</li> <li>PAR group members divided list of local businesses to visit – prizes given out on Fridays</li> <li>PAR group began monitoring club and sports ineligibility</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Eligibility Lists continue biweekly with added filters</li> <li>Alternative detention forms in use</li> <li>Suspension for students with 10+ detentions</li> <li>Biggest Loser detention competition introduced Quarter 4</li> </ul>
<b>OBSERVE</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Analyze data about effectiveness of improvement plan</li> <li>Update stakeholders and elicit their feedback (cycle starts anew)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Quarter 1 survey created by PAR group and completed by SHS staff</li> <li>Clarity on field trips, clubs, and sports requested informally</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>PAR group reviewed detentions and Fs – need for alternative ways to serve detentions arose</li> <li>Alternate Detention form created and rolled out to staff at PD along with way to streamline filtering EL by club/sport</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Data collected on Biggest Loser competition</li> <li>Annual schoolwide events – use of EL monitored</li> <li>Ideas recorded for 2014-15 school year</li> </ul>

Figure 2. Smith High School’s Participatory Action Research Process, May 2013-February 2014

Although Smith staff members had voted to adopt the Small Learning Communities reform, the school's implementation of the grant was not exactly the way Oxley recommends; one finding from my interviews and group meetings was that participants' frustrations with SLCs were often in areas where Smith had veered from Oxley's (2005) recommendations. The recommendation most closely linked to the goal of participatory action research is the cycle of continuous improvement; although Smith had some feedback processes set up, there were not methods for reflection and improvement in their theories-in-use.

From what participants discussed, Smith High School did not have an explicit method of reflection geared towards improving their implementation of SLCs. However, some informal processes were in place. For example, the teacher-leaders of SLCs met monthly to discuss school-wide issues and make decisions then adopted by all SLCs. In this way, there was evidence of distributed leadership. The way that Oxley describes continuous improvement, though, is through regular reflection, discussing student work, and by eliciting feedback from stakeholders. Although there is an annual survey conducted by the district SLC office, there was no mention of regular reflection, use of student work, or feedback cycles being a part of SLC meetings for the participants in this study. The SLC teacher-leaders were mentioned as point persons to voice feedback to administration, but that is not analogous to an SLC engaging in its own inquiry cycle in order to improve its own effectiveness. In order for the SLC reform to live beyond the five-year grant, improvement practices must be engrained into the work of teacher teams. With this critical element missing, the participatory action research cycle had the potential to not only help Smith teachers address a pressing problem but to also influence

the work of small learning communities; participants represented four of the school's six SLCs, and the reflection practices in which we engaged were translatable to any collaborative setting.

### **PAR Cycle One: Beginning with Single-Loop Organizational Learning**

In the first PAR cycle, the foundation was laid for reflection and iterative problem solving, which was new to participants. Selecting a school wide problem to address began with participants sharing isolated experiences and defending their desired topics; while teachers appreciated having a venue for sharing their experiences and beliefs, the most important activity for the first cycle was charging participants to look for patterns among their own viewpoints. School-wide problems that participants identified during initial interviews included the following, grouped into emergent categories:

Table 2

#### *Emergent Themes Regarding Problems at Smith High School from Initial Interviews*

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tardies to 1<sup>st</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> periods</li> <li>• Absences</li> <li>• 1<sup>st</sup> period attendance and tardies</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students who fail everything</li> <li>• Students who do not want to be at school or try to pass classes</li> <li>• Students who do not care</li> <li>• Students' lack of commitment to studying</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disrespectful behavior</li> <li>• Students who talk back when asked to get to class</li> <li>• Lack of student respect</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hall-walkers</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discipline</li> <li>• Detentions</li> <li>• Teachers &amp; security working together</li> <li>• Lack of clear consequences that all staff members enforce</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of parent involvement</li> </ul>

My request for the group to zoom out to find relationships led to questions such as “What’s the catalyst that starts the rest?” (Melissa) which helped the group think about connections: “I think tardies and behavior go hand-in-hand” (Olivia). The group lamented over the fact that parent involvement was not truly within their locus of control, and also discussed that hall-walkers and disrespectful students represented a very small group of students. The theme identified by participants was the general lack of consequences at the school. As Megan stated, “Even if we didn’t change our policies, having clear consequences would make a difference.” The group was encouraged by the fact that clarifying existing school procedures and creating a system of consequences was a legitimate selection of a school problem to address through a PAR cycle; without challenging underlying school processes or operating beliefs just yet, they could lay the foundation for organizational learning with a single-loop.

Instead of being rooted in data, the group’s top issues were substantiated with individual experiences and assumptions; the group needed to understand the roots of the problem before crafting a solution to address it, which is not a common process for busy teachers. Key activities of the Reflect stage of the PAR process include considering an organization’s problems before selecting one focus area, and investigating the chosen problem’s root causes and complexities before designing a solution (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010). These PAR activities were realized through intentional agendas prepared for PAR group meetings, specific activities and protocols used during meetings, and through initial interview questions.

**Selecting a problem.** From participants’ initial interviews, the underlying reason that students were engaging in negative behaviors was because teachers and staff

members did not know what the consequences were, or did not enforce school rules and expectations. While group members initially blamed students, through facilitated group discussions and intentional use of research, PAR members saw how the adults played a large role in perpetuating negative behaviors. One example of this change in focus was the talk of hallways; initially participants blamed students for walking the halls instead of being punctual to class, but after zooming out to look at the passing period process as a whole, teachers in the PAR group realized that this process was not working because of an insufficient system of consequences: “The reason that hallsweeps don’t work is that we don’t even know the consequences” (Derek). Although participants mostly complained about the hallways during their initial interviews, the true problem was the lack of consequences that a student encountered if they did not get to class on time. Early introductions of systems thinking allowed participants to see that the root of the problem was unclear school consequences and inconsistent enforcement by adults, not students themselves.

Detentions are a common consequence used in response to undesirable behaviors in schools. For example, using inappropriate language: “‘You said this. And now you’re going to get a detention.’ Which our detentions and stuff is a joke” (Olivia). The fact that students continually repeated undesired behaviors was clearly wearing teachers down and discouraging them from trying new ways of addressing problematic behaviors. Both Derek and Megan later commented that students who repeated behaviors such as hall-walking had been enabled to do so by the school, showing recognition that school procedures and staff members also played a role:

We have a population of kids that wander around throughout periods...Like they come to school and don't go to class. And I think that we have allowed them to do that. And all it's [*sic*] taught them is that they can do whatever they want.  
(Megan)

Identifying that ineffective school systems were enabling the negative behavior was an early sign that participants' mental modes were evolving. Group members could easily name students who were misbehaving, and appreciated that an outsider cared to listen to their strife with such students, but they had not been asked to identify trends and look for inefficient systems in the past. "And that is why I want to be part of the group, is because I would feel bad thinking that [a small population of students is setting a bad example for the rest] and then not trying to change something" (Megan). Most participants felt like they had heard enough complaining from their colleagues and they wanted to initiate positive change around pervasive problems at the school. Individual interviews allowed me to hear participants' frustrations and their readiness to be proactive. Teachers who joined the PAR group wanted to change their status quo and were already aware of the need for change – what they had been lacking was a process to follow or guidance in leading necessary change.

**Identifying root causes.** During the Reflect stage, the group looked for patterns among identified issues and selected lack of consequences as their targeted school problem. After the focus area was chosen, I engaged participants in learning more deeply about root causes by providing research to corroborate their experiences and to challenge their understandings of the problem. Participants synthesized information from articles and their experiences at Smith to back-map the problem into categorized root causes. This action research tool called a *cause-and-effect fishbone* (Ishikawa, 1982) is used to



visually display and consider relationships between root causes of a problem, promoting informed decision-making about which root to target in the Plan stage.

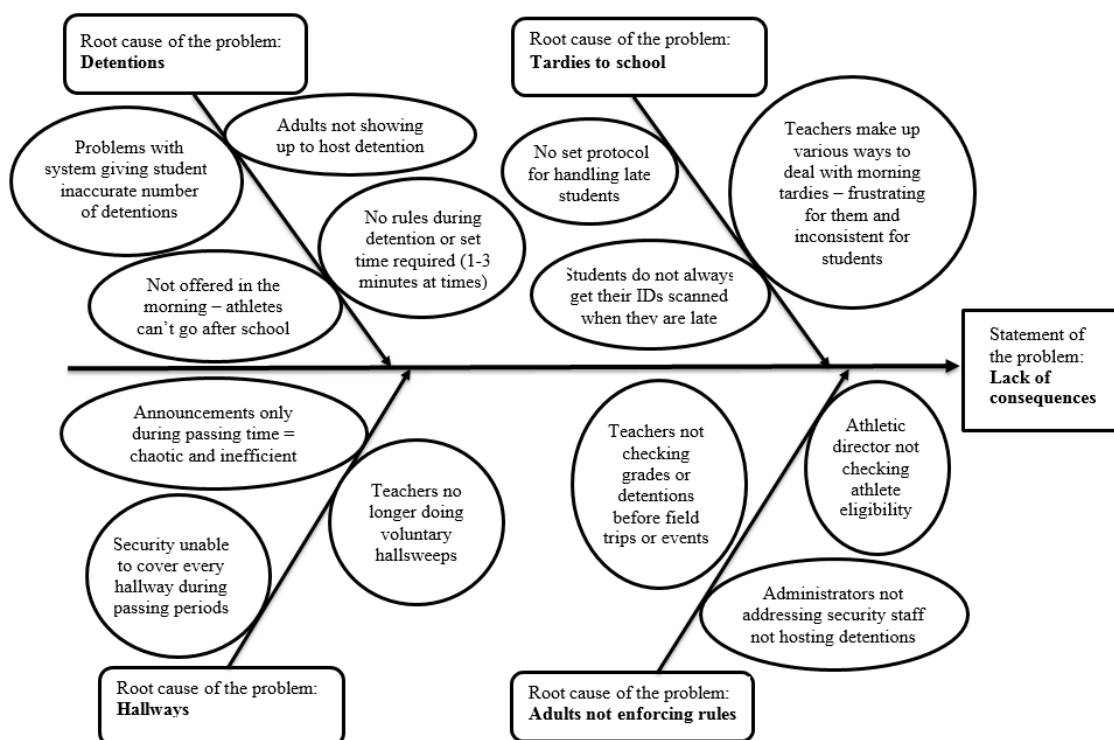


Figure 3. Smith High School Cause-and-Effect Fishbone

Identifying one problem within their locus of control and clearly labeling key causes of the problem contributed to a mind shift in participants from victims of a dysfunctional school system to change agents:

I use this as an example of why people should maybe not give up so easily...So many meetings devolve into everybody complaining and “you can’t do anything”...Where it’s like, “no, we can actually make small changes that have a big impact, so let’s remember that.” (Helen)

Creating the fishbone helped the group select a small component of the larger problem, making addressing the issue more feasible and sustainable.

As evidenced in the fishbone, participants initially pointed to school processes like Detentions, locations like Hallways, and phenomena like Tardies to school as causes leading to Lack of Consequences. As triads presented their fishbones in a group meeting, I found that participants were not linking underlying root causes initially: they mislabeled these three issues as causes of a larger problem instead of seeing them as evidence of the systemic problem. Sharing out fishbones and using them in midpoint interviews led participants to rethink cause-and-effect relationships; Detentions do not cause a Lack of Consequences, but adults' lacking consistency in hosting detentions and upholding clear expectations perpetuated a larger lack of consequences at Smith.

Also, the person who doesn't show up who is supposed to be there so the kids can serve detention - you got to find somebody who's reliable. In addition to that, the person who doesn't make the kids serve the full duration of the detention - these are all unforgivable things in my eyes and they don't add to kids' understanding that it's important to be on time. It mocks being on time is what it does. It doesn't add anything but I think it perhaps subtracts and that is not good. (Melissa)

Participant's assumptions about their school's problems were shifted during the Reflect stage because of PAR activities such as the fishbone. Instead of holding animosity for the individuals who marred the integrity of detentions at Smith, participants began to recognize that the staff as a whole needed a clear system of expectations and consequences to uphold in order to bring meaning back to school processes like detentions, passing time, and punctuality to school.

In addition to seeing whole-system needs instead of targeting specific offenders, the PAR group began making connections between different aspects of their school's lack of consequences: "I think it all goes with the mockery of the detention. Because they - it all starts with tardies that lead to detention. If you mock the detentions, then you're not

going to do anything about the tardy issue” (Melissa). The group agreed that students continue negative behaviors that earn them consequences until those consequences really mean something. Throughout these conversations participants started connecting observed actions to more deeply rooted and less obvious causes which showed the beginnings of systems thinking and emphasized the group’s need to address the lack of system-wide expectations and consequences.

When selecting a root cause of the problem, group members had to let go of their frustrations with district processes that frustrated them, such as the fact that students can enroll at neighborhood schools at any point in the school year. Completing fishbone diagrams followed by the charge to select causes within their locus of control then focused the group’s conversations on plausible solutions instead of fruitless complaining. Using PAR activities within each stage, I kept meeting objectives clear and with our short timeline for Reflect and Plan there was no sense in discussing district-wide rules that our PAR group would not be able to change. Participants’ grievances with district policies did, however, confirm the many ways in which neighborhood schools have the odds stacked against them and assert the need for teachers to be armed with processes to address problems that occur in their schools. Root causes within their control were associated with staff members and inconsistent school processes: broken systems could be repaired, and a staff could be trained on new procedures. Since relevance and urgency were established through the consensus built around key problems and the timing of these discussions in the last three weeks of school, I facilitated the matriculation into the Plan stage of the PAR cycle, during which the group created an improvement plan for Smith High School to implement at the start of the subsequent school year.

**Designing a solution.** Key activities of the Plan stage include brainstorming possible solutions to the chosen problem and researching existing possibilities. Ideally PAR group members will assist in researching different potential solutions, but since our Reflect and Plan stages took place in under one month, I provided sample solutions based on ideas that group members mentioned during initial interviews in addition to one program that the deans requested. The act of using research and sources from other schools was cited by PAR group members as something that made the group different from other school improvement initiatives: “researching issues at school that have also been issues at other schools where they have creative solutions...and then trying to create a specific plan for us using the research and then reviewing [it] throughout the year” were key components of PAR selected by Caroline. Crafting a solution was a process that took a lot of forethought in a short time period, thus I charged participants to narrow their focus and expectations about what they hoped to accomplish.

**Target audience.** In the Plan stage of the PAR cycle, participants must select one aspect of an organizational problem to address after researching and better understanding the problem and its potential solutions. The concept of starting with a small component of a problem in order to gradually address the entire problem over the course of several iterations was a new process to group members: “we’re starting off small so maybe this will snowball into something bigger and have lasting effect and maybe create some other changes or initiatives” (Derek). The thoughtfulness of and time required for this process is not something to which teachers are accustomed, and thus participants had to learn a new way of thinking about problem solving. In order to design an appropriate and feasible solution, the PAR group had to specify a target audience for their solution.

By asking the group to think about whom this intervention was for, the group came to terms with their targeted audience; at many schools, students at the top and bottom of their class get the most attention, and students who get average grades and are not star athletes or performers get very little attention. The PAR group realized that most of their student population fit this *middle kid* profile, with the next highest population being the kids who are involved in school sports, honors society, or plays, and their smallest population was comprised of the *frequent fliers* to the discipline office. They decided that setting up clear consequences that would speak to this *middle kid* group would be most beneficial to the school at large.

If you're in a neighborhood school and you're in the middle [average grades] you've probably avoided some bad stuff so you're not the bad kid... You're in the middle and I think that because [our district] is so into initiatives and all this kind of stuff those kids get really lost... those kids that are like just on the cusp of "should I be good? should I be bad?" Maybe one of them will be good now, do the right thing. (Megan)

Deciding to focus on the majority of Smith students and not on the small group of students who were causing the most obvious problems was an important step in framing their initiative to succeed as a new school-wide policy. This was also evidence of the group zooming out to consider the whole Smith community. Group members' mindsets began to evolve from complaining about the actions of the few to instead dedicating their planning efforts to solutions for the school community.

***Purpose of the intervention.*** The focus on solutions instead of problems was another important shift. One of the deans was an advocate for incorporating positive incentives and celebrating students who meet school expectations: "I think especially with us trying to make it a positive thing maybe those kids would see that they're going

to get recognized for doing something, for doing the right thing” (Megan). The group’s idea to make this improvement plan both a way to promote positive behavior and also discourage negative behaviors was influential. The purpose of their intervention became clear: set school-wide expectations which are rewarded with privileges when achieved, and met with clear consequences when not attained. With their target audience in mind and the dual purpose of their improvement plan set, the PAR group was ready to draft a solution to their most pressing problem: the lacking system of expectations and consequences.

*The Smith High School Eligibility List.* To promote positive and productive student behaviors, the PAR group borrowed from provided research to design their own Eligibility List (EL, see Appendix A) whereby all students would have to meet a minimum criteria in order to participate in school dances, field trips, clubs, events, sports (playing or watching), or performances (performing or watching). By establishing the criteria, the PAR group laid the foundation for school-wide expectations, which had not previously been explicit. From their work on the fishbone, participants believed that creating an Eligibility List would have a ripple effect onto other frustrations commonly brought up by teachers:

Helen: yeah, I feel like that’s something people complain the most about too...it doesn’t matter if [staff members] give a detention...detentions are meaningless.

Megan: It enforces consequences because then there are definite consequences to your actions.

Helen: And once there are consequences, then we can do other stuff. But it’s a good starting point.

Participants realized that starting small was practical as both creators and stakeholders of the EL, and saw that establishing clear consequences could later be a lever for additional

positive change initiatives. In order for this improvement plan to work, participants knew that the plan had to be feasible and manageable for their colleagues and themselves, and they understood that once the first step was established they could layer on additional changes. PAR group members represented four different SLCs, included three current coaches and two former coaches, and four club sponsors; their active participation as teacher sponsors meant that the criteria that they set would directly impact their roles in and outside of the classroom at Smith.

The PAR group wanted to make sure that the criteria were not so unrealistic that many students would become unable to participate in school activities, but they also wanted to establish “some kind of bare minimum to do anything” (Megan). Through the PAR group, the deans realized that by establishing a number of detentions that would exclude students from participating in anything at school outside of attending class, detentions had the potential to gain new meaning to students and actually get served. But setting the numbers for how many failing classes and how many unserved detentions required thoughtful planning in a short time span.

The group began by brainstorming more strict criteria than they ended up agreeing upon, such as “You can’t have more than 2 unserved detentions. You need to be passing 6 out of 7 classes” (Megan) and “I don’t think you should be able to do anything if you have an F. That’s ridiculous” (Derek). But with the group’s number of current and former coaches, the state’s varsity athletic rules were mentioned:

Olivia: The thing with the Fs we should think about, what are the [state’s varsity athletics] rules for – how many Fs?

Caroline: Three.

Olivia: So fewer than 3 Fs and you can still participate, if we agree with that.

Caroline: We could be more strict though.

Olivia: But that's going to be a big thing because you know there are coaches who are going to be like, "Heck no. My kid's got 3 Fs and he's playing."

Derek: Well I don't know why you'd want to reinvent something that's already put out there.

Megan: Well, would you want to drop it down to 3 for everybody else?

Joseph: If you do it for the athletes, you gotta do it for everybody.

Some group members felt that using the state's varsity athletics rules was too lenient, but the group also wanted all staff members to use the EL and for most Smith students to meet the criteria, so they decided that it was a good starting point.

For selecting the number of detentions for the EL, they considered the prime causes: being tardy to school and staff referrals. Joseph was adamant about tardies to school being the largest root cause of detentions. The PAR group decided that students could have up to four detentions for the first year. In the Plan stage the group began understanding that their first cycle was a starting point upon which they would layer additional components, and they realized that this gradual approach was likely to have a more effective and sustainable impact on their chosen problem than the reactionary and complex solutions that are often thrown at school problems. With the Eligibility List criteria set as four passing classes and four or fewer detentions, the plan was ready for administrative approval; although the PAR group worried that their thoughtful planning may not be well received, they were confident that their Eligibility List had the potential to address pressing issues at Smith.

*Communicating the new policy.* When we resumed meeting during professional development week of the 2013-14 school year, the group was excited that their communication plan had been accepted and their work was represented in school calendars for professional development (PD) and Advisory. Activities that were



embedded into PAR meeting agendas included drafting the PD presentation to roll out the policy that all teachers would need to enforce, and drafting a lesson plan for Advisory, for which the PAR group decided to make a video so that they knew the criteria would be explained correctly (Megan). Participants felt immense ownership for their improvement plan and wanted to ensure that the EL was introduced with fidelity to the Smith community.

Helen: We can show people late to school and like swiping in late.

Derek: They can check the list and then they go “I’m not on it.” And show where that list will be.

Tamara: Yes, we’ll have the student come in to you to for a field trip. They can double check and say, “I’m sorry you’re not eligible.”

Megan: We could have, like, an athlete. We could have the kid on a field trip. Kid going to, like, [a popular student club].

Derek: Some sort of dancer.

Megan: Yes, like one of the performances like [Culture Night] or something.

Helen: But it should be the sponsor checking the list, right?

Karla: And for the dance. Kids wanting to buy a ticket for the homecoming dance.

Tamara: Yes. And Homecoming is coming out tomorrow.

PAR group meetings provided participants the necessary time and space to make important decisions such as how to teach the intervention to the largest stakeholder: students. Had the group not been challenged to draft a communication plan, they may not have created a video showing examples of the EL in action in order to teach the new policy to their student body.

***Positive reinforcement.*** Just as the premise of the PAR group was to channel teachers’ energy around a problem into positive and productive solutions, the group itself wanted the Eligibility List to highlight students who met school expectations through publically posted lists and raffle prizes. “I don’t think that would be all that hard...Just say, ‘hey, we’re recognizing kids who are doing the right thing.’ Not just sending the

message that, ‘oh, if you’re late, you get a detention’” (Olivia). Because PAR group members wanted to raffle items to eligible students, I brought in sample letters asking local businesses to donate positive incentives to the school. Before the samples, some group members were conceptualizing a Smith Cash system that they would need to create, but the example letters to local businesses allowed them to see that businesses could donate items which would be raffled to eligible students instead of devising a new school-wide system for earning and redeeming Smith Cash:

Derek: If we can do something easier...everybody that’s on the eligible list gets in a raffle, you can get a sweatshirt.

Olivia: Yeah. That’s what I think we should do. So it should be a couple bigger drawings each week and be...

Helen: easier to manage.

Being challenged to think about the logistics and sustainability of proposed ideas like Smith Cash forced participants to think more systematically which allowed them to decide which ideas were most practical. Often school initiatives fail because the initial energy and time needed to get the new process going is not sustainable throughout the school year; the PAR group did not want the EL to be another failed initiative, but as the facilitator I had to prompt the group to take measures to prevent this trend from recurring. Manageable ideas followed my redirecting: “What if we did two free tickets to homecoming dance?” (Megan). Melissa later commented that students in her Advisory spoke more favorably of the school-based prizes, which can be easier for schools to afford: “I think we have to give rewards more like that. Talent show tickets, extra graduation ticket...I think if we make it kind of more school-oriented like that, that seems to be pretty successful with the kids” (Melissa). Student input encouraged PAR group

members that their time and effort was meaningful, and affirmed that motivating incentives do not need to be expensive or complicated.

**Impacts of teacher-driven change.** PAR group members were both shocked and encouraged by the lack of negative feedback they received from their colleagues. “It’s kind of weird. And I’m not just saying that...people usually complain to me, so I don’t know. Even when we taught – well, presented – again on Friday, it was fine. It’s weird. Very weird” (Helen). Participants were accustomed to resistance from colleagues, and saw the lack of pushback as a sign that their idea was sound and that it aimed to address issues about which teachers cared. “There weren’t any smart-alec answers, there weren’t any...like, ‘why are you doing this?’ There wasn’t any of that which I think is a good sign” (Megan). Presenting to their colleagues went far more smoothly than the PAR group had anticipated which they attributed to the logic, input, and simplicity of their improvement plan. The issue that the EL targeted was chosen and designed by participants, who in between our meetings had been asked to confer with colleagues as well. The PAR group had finally tried to address a problem that had come up often within the staff.

There are wonderful teachers here. And we’ve been bringing up the same...issues year after year after year. And that’s crazy. That’s just crazy. I wouldn’t- if I said that a lesson sucked four times throughout the day, the fifth time I would change it...So I think it’s insane that we have issues that most people see are problems and we don’t- we can’t figure out how to do anything about it. (Megan)

Megan’s quotation speaks to the lack of an established method for continuous improvement at Smith; participants felt that they had been without tools or processes to use to address salient school problems. PAR group members had all joined the study with similar motivations as Megan – to finally address problems that were not going away –

but the group had still worried that their colleagues would not be receptive to the changes they put in motion. “I think that they’re being more receptive than I thought they would be, maybe” (Derek). Group members were all pleasantly surprised by their improvement plan’s reception during the Act stage.

Students did not know how seriously to take the new Eligibility List guidelines at first, nor did they understand what to make of the raffles; the idea that they could randomly win things just for meeting certain criteria was a brand new concept that took time to grasp. Olivia put herself in charge of the eligibility raffles, and was frustrated that students did not understand how or why they won when they claimed their prizes. PAR group members were noticeably disheartened; they thought students would be instantly be excited about prizes and public recognition, but instead they were met with quizzical looks. Unlike the beginning of the PAR process during which group members would exchange their own proof of a negative experience, Megan immediately offered an idea to clarify and re-teach the EL criteria:

Megan: I think that we should get up at the [SLC Assemblies] and say something.  
Melissa: That’s a really good idea.  
Megan: Just to stand up and say like, “Hey kids, reminder, this is the Eligibility List. These are the things you can and can’t do if you’re on it. This is why we’re giving out prizes.”

The group had moved past corroborating negative stories to using such feedback as evidence that clarity was needed in order to move their improvement plan forward. Similar to the process that their colleagues went through of slowly bringing the EL in to their practices, students also needed time to adjust to the Eligibility List. During the Act stage it was evident that group members’ mindsets began more quickly contributing systemic solutions to new issues that arose during the implementation of their initiative.

Although students were not always certain why raffle prizes were happening, they did appreciate school-related clothing and event tickets. Because participants were teachers, coaches, tutors, and mentors to students, they knew which prizes would catch the attention of teenagers:

Olivia: They liked the homecoming free ticket. They were really excited. They were so cute.

Melissa: I had one kid win, and the other kids were like “OH, you won! You won!” Yeah, they were really excited about it.

Olivia: And [the principal] was there reading other announcements, and he went to get a few Homecoming t-shirts and he made one girl pick one because she was wearing another shirt. Yeah, [the principal] seemed excited...I think he wants it to work.

Helen, Megan: Yeah, he does.

Multiple participants shared that when one of their advisees won, he or she would report out all of the available prizes to their peers, which got other students excited about being possible winners; this unintended side effect of having winning students select their own prize from a bin of options started a buzz about the benefits of being eligible. And not only were students energized by Homecoming-related prizes and becoming eligible to attend the dance, but so was Smith’s principal about the potential of the PAR group’s plan; the group had not felt recognized by administration, so evidence that their work was valued added energy to PAR meetings.

Some students immediately embraced the EL. After the first list came out, seniors who wanted to have a Homecoming Pep Rally advocated that only eligible students should be able to attend, showing that students were embracing the idea of meeting minimal criteria in order to do certain school activities:

At first it was going to be for seniors, and it was going to be first period or something. And there was other kids, and it was actually good to hear, some random kids, they were like, “we don’t think that just the seniors should be able to

go, if they're not on the Eligibility List why do they get to go to the pep rally?" I was like, "that's a really good point, you should talk to [the principal]," so I sent them down there. (Olivia)

As participants anticipated, many students who usually passed classes and did not have detentions were glad that a standard had been put in place for their peers who had previously been able to participate in any school activity regardless of grades and detentions. Participants realized that students had also been frustrated by the gap between the espoused theory – if students do not behave as expected, there are consequences – versus the previous theory-in-use – students misbehave and continue negative behaviors due to an ineffective consequence system. Group members saw that they were changing Smith's theory-in-use with the Eligibility List that they created.

In the two weeks leading up to the Eligibility List used for the Homecoming Game and Dance, teachers and administrators noticed a slightly increased sense of urgency to get to school on time in order to be able to participate in those events:

[The principal] did say that he saw these kids running to get here by 8:00. He's like, it's the first time ever that he's seen kids running. He watched them run all the way down, across the street, and into the building. And they were still late. He was like, "I felt bad. I felt like just ushering them in because they ran." We're like, "No, run faster!"...Maybe it's having an effect. (Helen)

Within one month, students understood that in order to participate in big events like Homecoming, they needed to pass at least four of their classes and avoid getting detentions, which mostly came from being late to school. As PAR group members heard students talking about needing to be on the EL, and about students wanting to use the EL on their peers in order to attend the Pep Rally, they were encouraged and excited that the word was getting around the student body.

PAR group members felt validated for their time and efforts at the Homecoming Game and Dance which were the first large-scale instances of students being held to the Eligibility List criteria:

Megan: It was a good experience. Kids were happy to be on the list. A couple of kids we had to turn away and they didn't know. So many kids said, "Oh, I didn't really think you guys would care."

Caroline: Teachers were saying the same thing.

Megan: It was really, really good.

Before Homecoming, PAR group members had received positive feedback from colleagues and students, but participants who volunteered to check for eligibility at the game or dance got to see their ideas in action. The more stakeholders embraced the EL as a good idea for Smith High School, the more motivated the PAR group was to hone their improvement plan – but only if their stakeholders were ready for their first experience of double-loop organizational learning.

During the Observe stage, the group sent out a survey to gather staff input about how the Eligibility List was going, asking teachers about their understanding and usage of the EL. PAR group members wanted honest feedback, and they also wanted to get suggestions: "we should also collect their ideas – like, some teachers have good ideas that could be useful" (Olivia). From the teachers who completed the survey – which the PAR group reported to be over half of the staff – there were many encouraging comments that the group shared at one of our meetings:

Helen: Oh, there were some nice comments!

Olivia: Yeah, some people wrote "way to go!"

Karla: Someone wrote "3 Fs instead of 4." They want us to make it harder.

Helen: [One teacher wrote about having] a demote freshman kid who has a girlfriend at [another school] and wants to go to the Homecoming Dance, and so suddenly started to care about grades and whatnot for the sake of the dance.

During mid-point interviews at the conclusion of the first PAR cycle, most group members agreed with Tamara's statement: "I think most of the staff in the school is getting used to it and actually looking at the list" (Tamara). Survey data, lack of negative or "smart-alec answers" (Megan), and positive emails and hallway comments encouraged the PAR team that their colleagues appreciated and believed in their efforts: "[A teacher] has said that somebody asked how they could get their grade up so they could be Eligible to do things. I think things like that are pretty positive" (Helen). During Observe, the PAR group believed that it was too early to elicit student feedback since their main goal was to make more teachers implement the EL. Based on survey data, their observations of staff and students, and anecdotes from stakeholders, the group moved into its second cycle with their goal of clarifying the EL process and expectations of usage to the staff so that more students would understand the desirability of being eligible.

### **PAR Cycle Two: Double-Loop Organizational Learning**

In the first cycle, the PAR group completed a single organizational learning loop; a problem was thoughtfully identified and addressed through the Eligibility List. In the second PAR cycle, the group's mission was to move one step beyond the selected problem to also investigate barriers to implementing the solution and to consider school-wide norms and processes at play. A key feature of double-loop learning is that governing values are addressed during the problem-solving cycle, rendering a change process aimed more at an organization's core than its surface. Whereas single-loop learning can be viewed as error correction, double-loop learning involves more innovation. As the PAR group brainstormed ways to improve their initiative for the second iteration, they engaged in tenets of double-loop learning.



One governing value of the school that was present before the PAR group was the SLC initiative, through which teachers and students were broken up into college and career-themed academies. As part of the SLC reform, teachers were required to attend teacher team meetings to discuss students in their house and to plan supports, interventions, and celebrations. It was during the second cycle that the PAR group more explicitly modified the procedures of SLC meetings to improve the implementation of their initiative while better supporting students. The PAR group had two teacher-leaders of SLCs, and members of four different SLCs. The deans in the PAR group also supported three SLCs each, so in effect all SLCs were covered. SLC teacher-teams at Smith met every other week for two consecutive days, and one day each month was dedicated to student interventions.

When the EL was first created and some teachers were struggling with downloading and using the list, the PAR group brainstormed how to address this basic issue that needed to be resolved in order for the EL to be used staff-wide:

Megan: Let's all show how to use it in our SLCs!

Tamara: I can show mine [Computers].

Helen: [International SLC] in the house!

Melissa: I'm in [Arts SLC]

Betsy: So we have 3 SLCs covered. Olivia and Joseph, would you be able to visit others that aren't represented, to make sure people know what to do with it?

Olivia: Yeah

Since SLCs had dedicated time to meet which all teachers were required to attend, the meetings were seen as a useful way to re-teach the whole staff about the new initiative. Once teachers knew how to download the biweekly EL and find their Advisory's data, the potential of the initiative expanded to becoming the main data source used to target students for support.

**Changing the school-wide strategy for supporting students.** When we were first coming up with the criteria for the EL, Helen saw the potential for using the EL in SLC meetings: “I think [the Eligibility List] will give us something very specific to talk about with interventions which is good” (Helen). In the first quarter of the school year in which the EL was implemented, PAR members reported using the EL in their various SLC meetings as Helen had forecasted:

Karla: Our group has to look at the each of the kids that are on the [In]Eligibility List and say like, “Who’s going to talk to the student. We got to make sure that they’re not on this list.” Everyone’s kind of taking a kid or two or in certain cases we are...reaching out to the deans, counselor and the bilingual coordinator.

Betsy: That’s in...?

Karla: [Fitness SLC].

Helen: [One SLC Lead] has put together this flowchart of all the intervention steps. We have a standardized intervention process for the whole school now.

Betsy: Great.

Helen: The Eligibility List is referenced on there. It seems to be kind of the go-to data source. I think some people are starting to use it. We’ll see how that goes.

It’s in the language that people will be talking about it. At least that’s something.

The creation of the standardized Smith Student Intervention Flowchart was important evidence that the PAR group’s Eligibility List was being adopted by the school’s SLC structure as the “go-to data source” (Helen) for identifying students in need of intervention and support “because the kids who are not Eligible – that’s a stepping stone to them becoming eligible. So it’s used in SLC meetings all the time” (Helen). The fact that a non-participant created the flowchart also showed PAR members that their creation was meaningful to colleagues outside the group.

Another idea for SLC meetings arose when a dean mentioned that the list of ineligible students was growing. A few participants feared that some of their colleagues might not be using the EL in Advisory, and thus some students might really not know

that they are ineligible, nor would they know how to get back on the EL. Teachers in the group recognized that demands were high on teachers and that sometimes it can be difficult to complete Advisory activities, thus the group proposed using SLC intervention time to call the homes of ineligible students to make sure the parents and guardians knew that their students needed to work on their grades and serve detentions:

Helen: Maybe if we had SLCs take one meeting day and everybody goes and calls the kids on the [ineligibility] list in their homeroom, to use that meeting time for doing calls for them.

Caroline: On an intervention day?

Helen: Yeah.

Megan: I think that's a good idea.

This quotation shows two important ways in which the new organizational learning approach was being adopted at Smith High School. For one, teachers were being given meeting time to perform a new task that was being put on their plate because of the intervention that the PAR group created; granting teachers time to complete a new expectation increases the likelihood that it will occur, and decreases pushback and resentment from teachers. A second piece of evidence to note is that the PAR group immediately came up with a solution that would increase the implementation of their intervention instead of storytelling about colleagues who they thought to be incompetent. Without prompting from me, the PAR group went from the identified problem – not all teachers using the Eligibility List in Advisory – to a solution: giving teachers SLC meeting time to use the EL and reach out to the families of ineligible students.

**Influencing SLC objectives.** Beginning in the third year of implementing the SLC grant, each SLC was asked to set a goal for their work to further focus their meetings and broader purpose. During the second PAR cycle, SLCs were asked to set a

goal for the first semester, and SLC teacher-leaders identified the EL as a great data source to use: “Most of the SLC Leads are using [the EL] to create their SMART goals...I think out of the six houses, five houses used it for the semester one SMART goal” (Tamara). In a midpoint interview, Caroline echoed the use of the EL in her SLC to identify students in need of support and then set goals as an SLC of how many additional students they hoped to get on the EL:

We’re using those lists to help determine if our kids are passing so many classes, or having so many detentions. We can see from that list how many Fs people have even if it’s not four we knock it down to two. Then we can filter and use it that way. (Caroline)

Through PAR meeting objectives to hone the improvement plan and increase the use of the EL across the staff, participants devised ways to leverage the school’s reform model to improve teacher use of the EL through SLC meeting time. Reteaching staff to download and find students’ eligibility statuses, and using required meeting time to call the homes of ineligible students drastically increased teachers’ use of the EL.

Additionally, the identification of the EL as the primary data sources for SLCs to use for identifying students in need of support revived the purpose of SLCs; in this cycle, the PAR initiative moved beyond error correction to refocus teachers on student interventions. Although the creation of the school-wide intervention process did involve two PAR members who were also SLC teacher-leaders, the proposal to use the EL as the driving data source was made by a non-PAR member, reflecting that after just one cycle the PAR group’s improvement plan was being adopted as a school-wide practice.

### **PAR Cycle Three: Deuterolearning Begins**

For the second semester, some SLCs wanted to focus on detentions in addition to failing grades, because the school had a history of clearing all outstanding detentions at the end of a school year, which meant that students could get away with never serving detentions at all. Before revisiting the need to rethink detentions at SHS, the PAR group wanted to try one more way to get more coaches and club sponsors to use the Eligibility List. Participants could easily think of ineligible athletes who were still playing in games, and of ineligible students who had recently been on field trips. Instead of harping on which staff members were not doing their jobs, the group came up with an accessible way to make checking the EL easier for club and sport sponsors:

Tamara: I was thinking that maybe to enforce coaches and the clubs to look at the Eligibility List, we should have a list of the students who are in each club and they just can filter by the club name. That is easier for them, they don't have to go through it. But for that, they have to give me a list.

Olivia: Well people have asked us for that and -

Helen: Yeah, but we weren't sure how it would work.

Tamara: They need to provide the lists. With ID numbers.

Karla: Just make sure to say that they need the ID number... If it's the wrong ID, then you're going to pull the wrong kid.

Tamara, who already ran data reports for Smith, created an easy online form for coaches and sponsors to use. By entering student ID numbers one time, a filter was added to each biweekly EL thereafter for every student group submitted (e.g., Football, Chess). The PAR group came up with a way to make checking the list easier for the school organizations that had not been using it; by now participants had learned how to be more efficient in using the EL and in predicting what would make their colleagues' work easier. The group focused on eliminating barriers, demonstrating a transition to an

organizational learning lens; they reflected on why something was not working, pinpointed a cause for the problem, and addressed the problem to remove the barrier.

With regards to club sponsors not using the EL, PAR members thought about the school's largest annual event – Culture Night – in which most of the school's clubs performed. Even after Tamara's form went to the staff, the number of club sponsors who completed it was very low. The group also reflected on the possible penalty that came with submitting a list of students:

Derek: You're almost penalizing people that are doing their job.

Megan: Are doing it, yeah, because now you're going to tell the [Pacific Islander] Club, "oh, hey, good job, you actually give us your kids and now half of them can't do it." I just feel like it's unfair.

Caroline: "Hey, other club, you didn't send it in. Take them all to [Culture Night]"... We need consistent enforcement, otherwise it's not going to mean anything.

So the group addressed this issue by gaining administrative support that all clubs performing in Culture Night had to submit a list of students by a specific date, or else their club could not perform at all. The PAR group really honed its practices and ironed outstanding issues leading into their third cycle, demonstrating predominance and refinement of a process that was stable enough to fine-tune.

Since the SLC intervention flowchart was being used school-wide, participants revisited their fishbone (see Figure 2) to identify additional components of their selected problem to address in the third cycle. Thus far the intervention had targeted Tardies to School which were the leading cause of detentions. The EL addressed Adults Not Enforcing Rules by teaching staff members how to utilize the EL in their classes and extracurricular on several occasions; using SLC meeting time to use the EL also embedded the policy into the work week. Detentions had not explicitly been addressed

yet, however. They were still being hosted by security guards who did not uphold the expectations that PAR group members deemed necessary, and during the first cycle detentions had not occurred at all due to lack of funding. Participants decided that the third cycle was the time to address problems with detentions; the school's system for serving detentions was not working, which negatively impacted other school expectations and consequences. PAR group members were able to see the benefits of layering improvement efforts from the first to the second cycle, and now they were ready to add another layer which they would implement without my facilitation.

**Rethinking school processes.** Even in the spring during the PAR group's first Plan stage, the ideas of using student-led yoga and teacher tutoring as ways for students to serve detentions had been raised. When I explained the PAR process as iterative cycles and with the group's understanding of their colleagues' capacities for change, participants had decided to save the implementation of alternative detentions for later. After the first cycle, some participants wanted to introduce this process, but the group knew that some of their colleagues were not yet using the EL, which needed to happen before another component was added. During the second cycle, group members had evidence that ELs were being used, and also had evidence that detentions were still not being run in a way that held students accountable for the actions that earned them detentions. The third PAR cycle was an appropriate time to roll out a new layer to the school-wide improvement plan, and the PAR group had time during the PD session at the end of semester one (and end of Cycle 2) to explain the new process.

Olivia: I'd like to add the additional ways for students to serve detentions because we still have like thousands of unserved detentions. I know you [Helen] talked

about your yoga thing...and tutoring, I know that we've said we need some form and it's super easy to clear detentions if you have kids' ID numbers...

Helen: I think my kids...would be willing to do something. They're- we finished all the training and then right now they are...practicing the yoga together. We're going to try it out at my homeroom next week.

Olivia already had a simple form made for getting information to clear student detentions, and she proposed using this same form on a different color paper for alternative detentions. The PAR group thought that the simplicity would be well received, and they knew it was important to tell the staff that nothing new was being introduced; "rather than create something new" (Megan), the PAR group wanted existing processes like tutoring and student-led yoga to count as alternate ways to serve detentions.

The current and former coaches in the PAR group knew that athletes went to practice after school instead of going to tutoring, but they also recognized that for teachers to offer tutoring during their periods off from teaching would be too much to ask of their colleagues. From this dilemma came the solution of student-led tutoring that was already taking place in the school's library during lunch periods:

Megan: I wish we could offer tutoring during the lunch periods, because I think more kids will go to tutoring when they're already at school.

Helen: Well there's [student-led Honors Club] tutoring.

Olivia: Yeah and that could count.

Megan: During lunch, but I want, I'm saying I wonder if we could use that as the

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Olivia: I know those kids could totally sign, I have no problem.

Helen: They would be honest, I totally think they would.

Since Helen was involved with the Honors Club and knew the teacher-sponsor of the club would take this alternative detention option seriously, the group had a feasible solution to the lack of teacher-led tutoring during the school day. Now the student body had multiple options for serving detentions: go to security-led detention after school on Wednesdays



and Fridays, go to any teacher before or after school for at least 20 minutes for tutoring, go to the library during lunch for student-led tutoring, or go to student-led yoga on Fridays after school. After its introduction to the staff at the end of semester one, the alternative detention process was ready for implementation at the beginning of semester two.

**Leveraging SLC structure.** In the final meeting facilitated by me at the beginning of second semester, group members talked about the importance of using the EL for annual events in the spring, for senior activities and graduation, and for targeting unserved detentions before the end of the school year. One of the deans and the assistant principal over discipline brought up the difficulty with rolling detentions into a new school year, and how in the past they had to clear detentions and give students a clean slate. This gave PAR group members added motivation to think of ways to hold students accountable to the actions that gave them detentions so that they would not be given a free pass at the end of the school year, which would make the EL lose traction in the subsequent school year.

We have to give our message this year at the end of semester two. It has to be a strong message for the students and the school that we are taking this seriously, otherwise it's not going to work for next year. As soon as they come back they will say, "Okay, you know, I didn't serve my detention last year and nothing happened to me, so why do I care about serving it now?" (Tamara)

The group agreed that if students were to get away without serving detentions one year that their improvement plan would be ineffective the following year. In order to prevent students leaving for summer with unserved detentions, the group thought that an inter-SLC competition based on serving detentions could be a new school-wide process for hyping up students (and teachers) to serve detentions before the end of the school year.

Tamara: Maybe competition, the [Advisory] with the less detentions.

Helen: Does the teacher get something?

Olivia: The teacher gets a party.

Tamara: Maybe instead of doing it by [Advisory], do it by [SLCs].

Megan: [International SLC] is going to lose that one.

Helen: We would be the first loser.

PAR group members felt that this type of competition would favor the Honors and Computers SLCs, which housed selective programs. Instead of letting the group complain about the inequity of their SLCs, my role was to keep them solution-oriented: “Well, you could also do it as more of a growth model, like which house decreases the most” (Betsy). Both Megan and Helen replied, “Then we could win!”, and thus a Biggest Loser competition based on SLCs serving the most detentions was born. The group decided that there should be a prize for the winning students and also for their Advisory teachers so that teachers would get more involved in the competition. Similar to how the Eligibility List was communicated to students through Advisory, the PAR group also decided to write an Advisory lesson and make a video to introduce the Biggest Loser detention competition to the whole school.

At first the group wanted to start the competition right away – towards the beginning of second semester – in reaction to the growing problem of unserved detentions. But just like the PAR group had been thoughtful about planning the Eligibility List, one group member stopped the reactionary planning by proposing a more thoughtful process:

What if we gave ourselves a whole bunch of time and said by the end of the third quarter, we came up with like a PowerPoint or another little mini movie that introduced the Biggest Loser thing and then reminded kids of ways to clear detentions and moved it all together? Then we would have the actual time to put something together. (Megan)

The group reacted well to Megan's idea of planning a lesson over the course of six weeks instead of throwing something together quickly; at this point participants had seen the fruits of thoughtful planning and they knew that implementing a school-wide process with insufficient planning would not be effective. The way in which Megan halted the reactionary planning that teachers initiated reflected her understanding of the thoughtfulness that the PAR process necessitates in order to yield sustainable changes; a group needs to Reflect and Plan before Acting, which Megan encouraged the group to do without any prompting.

**Evidence of sustainable organizational learning.** Many PAR members brought up making the criteria a little bit more difficult each year. The group also agreed that staff and student feedback should be collected before making decisions about how much the eligibility criteria should change. Most PAR members mentioned wanting to take on an additional school problem in the following school year, assuming that the Eligibility List would stay in place and that it would be stable enough for the group to take on a new school-wide issue.

Betsy: How do you predict this issue will look next year?

Caroline: Hopefully we keep it. Because I think one of our main concerns was there aren't actual consequences for kids. Instead of making new crazy things we just said "enforce what's already here." Maybe we would expand it to choose another issue, and actually have maybe specific consequences: "if you're caught in the hall without an ID it's an automatic detention." Because now the detention means something.

Even if the next issue was not students wearing their IDs, Caroline thought the group would have the capacity to reach out to the staff for a new problem to tackle: "I think we can really hammer down this detention thing, and eligibility, and then figure out what's our next big issue, or what's still driving teachers nuts. I don't see why we couldn't"

(Caroline). Caroline's change from suggesting her own pet peeve (students not wearing IDs) to finding out "what's still driving teachers nuts" reflects the democratic process that was used in identifying the PAR group's first issue. Her goals for future PAR cycles demonstrate her understanding of the iterative nature of PAR, and the organizational learning premises of starting small, challenging the status quo, and changing the way an organization operates. Melissa suggested that instead of the PAR group taking on an additional issue, a different PAR group could form to take on something new – her pick would be cell phones – while the original group ensured that the first initiative remained stable. Many participants, like Melissa, believed that the success of the PAR group would inspire staff participation and support in future PAR activities.

Participants had myriad ideas for the Eligibility List both for the remainder of the school year and for subsequent school years as well. I elicited their goals for the PAR group in exit interviews and presented them in the final group meeting that I facilitated.

Table 3

*Planning for Cycle 2*

**Thinking ahead to Quarter 4 & 2014-15 school year (ideas from Exit Interviews):**

- Eligibility List use for [Culture Night]
- Detention for tardy to class (not just tardy to school)
- Automatic phone calls home to ineligible students
- EL contract in summer orientation packet, letter home to parents
- Eligibility List criteria for next year – make it more strict?
- Increased student accountability: if a student knows s/he is ineligible and yet still participates in a field trip, sports game, club, etc., then s/he is banned from that activity

Participants knew that their ideas would not be simple to implement, but they were ambitious in setting goals for future PAR cycles. At this meeting the group also needed to decide who would facilitate moving forward. While the assistant principal present suggested that the group rotate facilitating and share the responsibilities, Caroline volunteered to run meetings for the rest of that school year, after which the group could revisit facilitation for the following year. In her exit interview, Caroline selected the visual of the PAR cycle with key activities (see Figure 1) as a driving artifact of their work; her self-selection as the facilitator after me showed her high comfort level with the model.

### **Discussion**

The aim of this study was to investigate the ways in which participatory action research could enhance the organizational learning already present to some degree from Smith's implementation of the small learning communities reform. PAR activities during each stage and cycle noticeably changed participants' conceptualizations of problem solving in schools. The research and thoughtfulness involved in selecting a problem and then learning about that problem's root causes prior to designing a solution were new experiences for teachers who were accustomed to band-aid solutions and reforms du jour. As Caroline pointed out in her exit interview, participants appreciated that each stage of each cycle had a clear purpose, which focused our group meetings:

I like that there was always something going on and that everything had a purpose. It's like we're in the planning stage, we really planned, and throughout, we acted, and then gave it some time to actually see what happens, and then come back and revisit and see what's working and what's not working. (Caroline)

Megan also discussed having the realization that initiatives needed follow-up and could not be quickly implemented and then forgotten. “So I think that that the PAR process, like the looking at it throughout cycles and after cycles was important. And I think that’s kind of maybe what we’ve been lacking, so that was productive for us” (Megan). This sentiment also speaks to the ways that participants had been habituated with single-loop improvement plans that were implemented quickly. Smith had been lacking a process through which staff members could engage in continuous improvement, and the PAR stages and cycles provided the structure that participants needed. She went on to explain that the amount of follow-through involved in the PAR process was critical to the initiative’s success and differed greatly from typical school reform efforts:

it’s not just a solution but it’s like monitoring the solution and...finding things you can change to make it better, like that sort of thing. Not just the first part, “okay, we had a problem and now we had a solution and so we are done”. I think continuing to meet, continuing to look at it, continuing to ask people if they are using it, all that kind of stuff, I think that was the good part that I would suggest [to] other schools. (Megan)

Here Megan emphasizes how PAR went beyond the single-loop of addressing a problem to focusing on issues more thoroughly through iterative cycles which resulted in a sustainable systemic change.

### **Identifying Root Causes**

In order to explore my larger topic of participants experiencing organizational learning, my first focus was on the PAR process impacting teachers’ understandings of a school problem’s root causes and potential solutions, and the effects of implementing an improvement plan. Many teachers identified the fishbone activity as a critical artifact of our cycles; back-mapping a problem to identify its roots was not something they had

done before, but in doing so participants experienced the benefits of carefully selecting one manageable component of a larger problem. Such representation of a problem on a more holistic level encourages systems thinking which Senge (1990) describes as “a discipline for seeing wholes. It is a framework for seeing interrelationships rather than things, for seeing patterns of changes rather than static ‘snapshots’” (p. 68). Engaging participants in this reflective process of understanding a problem in order to more effectively address it revealed the group’s lack of experience with the continuous improvement model recommended by Oxley (2005); Smith did not have a structure for reviewing and strengthening SLC practices which had perhaps contributed to participants’ perceptions of SLC meetings as useless (Melissa).

In compiling their experiences and perceived cause-and-effect relationships involving school problems of personal concern, PAR group members started seeing structural problems instead of individual or personal weaknesses; facilitated discussions during the Reflect stage initiated “a shift of mind from seeing parts to seeing wholes, from seeing people as helpless reactors to seeing them as active participants in shaping their reality, from reacting to the present to creating the future” (Senge, 1990, p. 69). Back-mapping the problem to its root causes also encouraged participants to view their status quo more methodically than emotionally, and investigating the problem increased the group’s awareness of the need to change and improved (Torres & Preskill, 2001). Once the need to drive change was salient, the PAR process emphasized incremental problem solving. Identifying one problem within their locus of control with clearly labeled branches of the problem that linked multiple observable school problems contributed to a mind shift from victims to change agents. Only after completing the

fishbone and deciphering the relationships between different root causes, the group was able to select one specific problem that would have a ripple effect onto other salient issues. “Systems thinking is a discipline for seeing the ‘structures’ that underlie complex situations, and for discerning high from low leverage change” (Senge, 2006, p. 69).

Participants knew their colleagues were overwhelmed and could easily think of people who would not implement a change that was too complicated or time-consuming.

Group members used each person’s understanding of the chosen topic and of colleagues’ strengths and weaknesses in order to develop a solution that was highly catered to their context. Through the fishbone, the PAR group “accesse[d] a larger ‘pool of common meaning,’ which cannot be accessed individually. ‘The whole organizes the parts,’ rather than trying to pull the parts into the whole” (Bohm, 1965 as cited in Senge, 2006, p. 223). Participants began understanding school systems differently through PAR meeting activities, and discussions changed from complaining about coworkers to strategizing positive change efforts based on their new understanding of pressing school problems.

### **Designing a Solution**

When the PAR group created the Eligibility List and its criteria, their process revealed evidence of systems thinking and transition to an organizational learning approach. Although participants bemoaned the lack of administrative presence at PAR meetings, in exit interviews most members talked about the benefits of teacher-driven change initiatives which reflected a complete reversal in perspective: “I think if you do it where it’s bottom up with teachers leading and the administrators being the support behind that, I think you get more effective change that way” (Melissa). Participants’



beliefs in the benefits of teacher-driven change, as revealed in exit interviews, showed a drastic shift in their mental models: from dependence on administration and positioning themselves as victims of bureaucracy, to believing that improvement plans designed by teachers had a higher likelihood of impacting a problem and positioning themselves as change agents.

Ultimately, the payoff from integrating systems thinking and mental models will be not only improving our mental models (what we think) but altering our ways of thinking: shifting from mental models dominated by events to mental models that recognize longer-term patterns of change and the underlying structures producing those patterns. (Senge, 1990, p. 190)

The first PAR cycle started with recounts of negative events at Smith. But through the PAR process, the group identified patterns and root causes of salient problems before creating a systemic improvement plan which was gradually implemented over the course of several cycles. Because of their experiences using participatory action research to address an issue they identified, and leveraging their school's SLC structure to strengthen implementation, the mental models of participants evolved from their first single-loop PAR cycle, to their second double-loop iteration, and finally to deuterolearning when the group continued with their third cycle without my facilitation. The change in meeting foci from negative events and sentiments of powerlessness to proactive conversations about making their initiative work stemmed from the new mental models that the PAR model impressed upon participants, and from their experiences with increasingly complex organizational learning models.

### **Influencing School-Wide Processes and Procedures**

The second question which provided focus to my inquiry about PAR increasing participants' operational use of organizational learning was as follows: How does the

PAR process inform school-wide processes and procedures in order to address challenges that the school is experiencing? Through each of its cycles, the PAR group greatly impacted school-wide processes and procedures. In the first Reflect stage, they identified systems that were not working like detentions, school processes that were underutilized such as SLC interventions and teacher tutoring, and areas where no structures existed, for instance allowing any student to perform, attend a dance, or participate on a field trip. Through carefully implemented layers, participants addressed all three types of school systems – broken, underused, and absent – in strategically planned iterations that did not overburden their colleagues.

The first step in successfully influencing school-wide procedures was selecting the right issue and using staff members' input on what to address. Participants credited the lack of pushback to the selection of a problem that many teachers wanted to address: "I mean, this has been a frustrating thing now at [Smith] for a long time. I think that our target point was one of high interest to the whole staff" (Melissa). Through the PAR group's process, including the meeting time and space, dedicated teachers, and research practices, "a culture that promotes inquiry and challenging our thinking" (Senge, 2006, p. 171) was fostered and embraced by participants. They were motivated to fix the problem they selected, and with each small success such as getting their policy published in the student handbook, hearing the principal promote the Eligibility List, and seeing "Must be Eligible to Attend" on event flyers, the group's energy increased.

In the first cycle, the group engaged in single-loop learning and implemented a school-wide Eligibility List which was their direct solution to the problem: lack of consequences. The EL served as both school-wide expectations and consequences at the

same time: in order to earn the privileges of participating in field trips, sports, dances, clubs, and other extracurricular activities, a student has to be passing at least four classes and also have fewer than four outstanding detentions. Participants aimed to correct the errors they identified in their first Reflect and Plan stages in this cycle, and to begin addressing the mismatches between the school's espoused theory – students who do not meet expectations cannot exercise privileges – and their theory-in-use before the PAR group – all students can participate in everything. Their single-loop greatly impacted Smith High School by presenting stakeholders with a new school policy. In subsequent levels of organizational learning, the policy became sustainable.

The second cycle was an example of double-loop learning, during which participants retaught teachers how to use the EL, but more importantly deepened teachers' practices of supporting students through small learning communities. In this cycle, a school-wide intervention flowchart was created using the Eligibility List as the foundational data source. What was initially created to give Smith students "a bare minimum to do anything" (Megan) actually challenged teachers to construct supports and action plans with students who did not meet eligibility requirements. The core purpose of SLCs was revived during the second cycle, and the root causes for failing grades and detentions were brought into question.

Deuterolearning began in the Reflect stage of the third PAR cycle, in which participants redesigned the school's process for serving detentions by adding teacher- and student-led tutoring as more positive and productive ways for students to also work on their grades. The group addressed the problem of teachers and coaches not taking the time to look up their students. They created a process for coaches and club sponsors to

submit a list of their students one time, after which a special filter was available on subsequent biweekly lists to ease the process of checking eligibility and increase the use of each EL. In order to leverage the school's SLC structure and create friendly rivalry, the PAR group also designed a Biggest Loser competition to see which SLC could serve the most detentions before the end of the school year. In this cycle, participants took the reins of problem solving; they redesigned school structures, created a new process to increase implementation of their initiative, and designed a competition to instill more purpose and urgency to each Eligibility List.

From each cycle to the next, more stakeholders became a part of the PAR group's initiative, as evidenced in school posters, announcements, and flyers. The shared vision amongst participants was gradually shared by colleagues and students: "shared visions derive their power from a common caring" (Senge, 2006, p. 192). Once the PAR group felt support from multiple stakeholders, the momentum within the PAR group grew and the EL was accepted as an SHS school-wide procedure. Although participants saw themselves as "spokespeople for the rest of the staff with some of these things that are frustrating to us" (Melissa), they felt the implementation of the EL become more of a staff-wide effort over time.

### **Next Steps**

The Eligibility List is set to continue next year at Smith High School. Administrators at Smith are very excited by the result of the first year of implementation, and this summer participants will plan changes to the criteria for the next school year. With seven teachers and two deans, and through their motivation, collaboration, and an organized and iterative process, Smith's school-wide processes and culture of problem

solving were changed. From each cycle to the next, participants progressed from studying their context to realizing the need to change school processes, and then from adopting an organizational learning approach to fully embracing and fine-tuning it (Torres & Preskill, 2001). Through the PAR process, participants engaged in three levels of organizational learning, the highest of which was evidenced by the learning taking place beyond the PAR group itself. Participatory action research has immense potential for schools like Smith, as a process through which teachers can learn how to problem-solve differently while also addressing barriers to student success.

### **Conclusion**

Although education researchers like Wilms (2003) and Payne (2008) recommend that administrators give priority to school improvement plans designed by their staff, large districts continue mandating reforms onto schools. In order for a school to position itself for sustainable improvement despite external forces and ever-changing superintendents, staff members should be trained on ways to participate in action research. Participatory action research has immense potential for engaging teachers in organizational learning, and for deepening school improvement far beyond the single-loop reforms with which educators are too familiar.

By engaging school stakeholders in the process of identifying obstacles to teaching and learning, the real experts take the reins of positive school change. In school improvement models like smaller learning communities, PAR is a viable method for involving teachers in cycles of continuous improvement. According to my participants, the four-step PAR cycle was accessible and practical and the gradual layering of their schoolwide initiative made it more manageable for teachers in and outside of the PAR

group. The ways in which the PAR group capitalized on the existing SLC model at Smith, and created new processes for school events also speaks to the importance of stakeholders from within a context leading reform for their context.

In order to better meet the needs of American public school students, teachers and staff members must be involved in identifying problems and designing contextually sensitive solutions for their school settings. When teachers utilize organizational learning tools and processes for addressing systemic issues, the results are seen not only in a school's metrics, but also in the ways teachers feel about their profession and in the ways students perceive going to school. Once educators can contribute their professional knowledge and their personal understandings of their learners towards learning gaps and achievement deficits, sustainable school improvement is possible.

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ARTICLE II: SOUTHERN HEMISPHERIC PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH:  
HOW PAR CAN FOSTER AUTONOMY AND EMPOWERMENT

**Introduction**

One problem with recent education reform movements is the development of initiatives outside of school contexts, thus resulting in disconnected improvement efforts being impressed upon educators (Anderson, 1998; Miller & Pine, 1990; Payne, 2008). Broad sweeping reform efforts often take away autonomy from individual schools and classroom teachers (Miller & Pine, 1990), and frequently top-down reforms do not match the needs of every school to which they are mandated (Payne, 2008). Teachers' decreased autonomy in recent reforms has led to some pushback from schools and from districts; most notably, the Chicago Teachers' Union went on strike in 2012 in hopes of gaining voice and participation in district processes. Instead of being told how to improve their schools, teachers want to be a part of those conversations as the professionals who know their classroom needs more than district office employees.

Although there is more language about teacher participation in school reform in the last quarter century, often participatory reform is superficial and more of a façade than reality (Anderson, 1998). There is also a growing understanding of the need for culture shifts to precede or at least accompany organizational changes in practice and expectation; professional behaviors may alter when teachers are given new expectations, but if the culture of a school and within the professional learning community does not change, such adjustments will not be engrained in educators' belief systems (Cochran-

Smith & Boston College Evidence Team, 2009). Another façade that often occurs in school are falsely inclusive change initiatives: “despite the language, some current efforts look more like top-down implementation of predetermined policies than they do organic and broadly participatory culture-building processes” (p. 458). When teachers are told that their input will help shape decision making only to find that a path has already been chosen, trust and morale within a staff decrease rapidly.

Teachers are becoming accustomed to receiving mandates about what and how they should teach, which results in decreased autonomy and professional decision making in their classrooms. “[Teachers] have been socialized to receive knowledge generated by others rather than trust their own capacities to assign meaning through action and reflection” (Miller & Pine, 1990, p. 56). As one of my participants explained the current landscape for public school teachers, “there used to be trust that if you were a teacher, you knew what you were doing. And now everything’s, you know, weights and measures and check and double check and no one trusts that you know what you’re doing” (Melissa). The lack of trust and dependence on checklists has led to a very business-like model for schools, often using managerial hierarchies.

Tired of being left out of conversations about how to improve their schools, students, parents, and teachers protested the centralization of Chicago Public Schools and the decreased control that local stakeholders had as a result. One goal of the strike, which instigated outcries from other cities as well, was “to engage communities in finding their own solutions to improve public education” and in order “to launch a nationwide fight against government-led school reform efforts that...are only making public education worse” (Associated Press, 2012). Educators recognized that their schools needed to

improve student outcomes, but they wanted to be a part of the solution instead of being told what to do by district leaders who did not understand the inner workings of their schools: “[teachers] are increasingly calling for more authentic ways to participate in the governance of their schools. School practitioners are less and less willing to give time to participation schemes they see as inauthentic” (Anderson, 1998, p. 573). The underlying argument of teachers on strike was that school improvement should be led locally and not centrally, and that teachers’ expertise on their students and their subject matter should be respected and utilized towards improving student outcomes. Teachers, especially those at the beginning of their careers, actively seek strategies and techniques for improving instruction and managing their classrooms (Mitchell, Reilly, & Logue, 2009). Educators want to improve their practices to, in turn, improve student learning outcomes, “[b]ut this emancipatory foundation of practitioner inquiry is currently under threat by efforts to limit the focus of this engaged form of knowledge generation to narrowly defined and decontextualized problems, disconnected from critiques of unjust and inequitable social conditions” (Brydon-Miller & Maguire, 2009, p. 79). Teachers want to be a part of school improvement through authentic participation that is specific to the needs of their students in their school context, and which is also feasible with their teaching responsibilities.

Teachers have funds of knowledge, as individuals and professionals that can greatly increase students’ learning outcomes. When solicited, teachers can be empowered to use their knowledge and experiences to address issues in their classrooms and school-wide: “teachers are increasingly willing to take power when spaces are created” (Anderson, 1998, p. 593). When teachers are trusted as professionals and experts, and are able to use their experiences and knowledge to drive school improvement, sustainable

solutions are possible and teachers' job satisfaction and fulfillment rises immensely (Miller & Pine, 1990). Centralized reforms that neglect teacher input disservice students and educators alike; "if effective teaching is to occur, teachers must have a central role in the development of knowledge that affects the care, education, and development of children" (p. 59). In place of inauthentic participatory reform efforts, models that actually engage teachers in applying their professional knowledge towards school improvement need to have greater presence in school reform.

Participatory action research (PAR) shows promise as a structured process that can engage educators in school improvement in an authentic, organized, and practical manner. PAR empowers teachers to engage in systematic inquiry of their classroom contexts, and to take responsibility for improving their teaching practices and subsequently student learning (Miller & Pine, 2009). In PAR, a wide range of stakeholders can partake in each stage of the research cycle, as daily experiences and personal beliefs are valuable data in this research paradigm (Brydon-Miller & Maguire, 2009). In addition to involving stakeholders and focusing on a specific context, PAR informs professional knowledge and beliefs: "The intentional focus on collaborative research, action for social change, and participant education shifts inquiry from an individual to a collective endeavor, intentionally aimed at transformative personal, organizational, and structural change" (p. 79). Such transformation positively impacts educators' senses of belonging and effectiveness, which can be infectious to their students.

Through iterative cycles that engage participants in reflection and action, PAR has traditionally given voice to marginalized members of a community by empowering them

to drive contextualized change initiatives that address a problem identified by the community and not by outsiders. Although “[e]ducation, information, research and scientific work have been geared to the upkeep of unjust power structures” (Fals Borda, 2001, p. 34), participatory action research is an improvement model that challenges the power structures that are preventing teachers from authentically participating in school improvement. “Because PAR results in the personal empowerment of participants, the impact of this approach reaches beyond the goals of a specific project. It generates change in individuals’ sense of themselves and also increases community resources” (Ditrano & Silverstein, 2006, p. 366). PAR aims to engage participants in structured reflection and dialogue through which they can change their realities for the better while also internalizing tools of empowerment that can be used in situations outside the PAR cycle.

### **Participatory Action Research as Framework for Involving Stakeholders**

In order for reform efforts to be crafted to meet a school’s needs, educators should follow a structure or process so that they make informed decisions that can be data-driven and tracked for effectiveness. Participatory action research (PAR), a four-step cycle driven by community stakeholders, may be a vehicle through which teachers can exercise voice in school reform. Historically, PAR has been utilized as a process to unite marginalized persons to make decisions for their communities, and through which participants can be empowered to design and measure social change (Burgess, 2006). “PAR is an approach to research in which local perspectives, needs, and knowledge are prioritized through collaborations with community members throughout the research process” (Smith, Rosenzweig, & Schmidt, 2010, p. 1116). Local community members are

essential to participatory action research, which is conducted *by* and *for* the context in which it is set. It is through the PAR cycle – Reflect, Plan, Act, Observe (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988) – that teachers themselves can become pioneers in changing their educational contexts (James, Milenkiewicz, & Bucknam, 2008).

In PAR, participants' knowledge of their setting is critical to reflecting on the status quo and identifying an area in need of improvement (Reflect), and for designing an intervention that will be practical and effective for the context (Plan). For teachers, this means that their knowledge of their school, community, and their students is immensely valuable and necessary to driving school improvement. After thoughtful reflection and careful planning, during which teachers consider other reforms and challenges at their school, a PAR group implements their improvement plan (Act) and collects data on its effectiveness from all stakeholders involved (Observe). Using this feedback, the group begins a new cycle, constantly improving upon their own work over time.

In its iterative cycles, PAR “treats participants as competent and reflexive agents capable of participating in all aspects of the research process; is context-bound and addresses real-life problems” (Kendon, Pain, & Kesby, 2010, p. 14). Honoring teachers' knowledge as valuable in the research process is an important characteristic of PAR because the validation of people's experiences and viewpoints can further engage participants and lead to the creation of community improvement plans that may not otherwise have been initiated (Stringer, 2007). PAR also differs greatly from mandated reforms that position teachers as the recipients of improvements plans instead of creators of such plans. Designing a study around a teacher's or a school's specific context make this research paradigm doubly attractive for educators: not only do participants gain a



deeper understanding of their context and its operating systems and power dynamics, but they also learn a practical process through which they can investigate other issues that arise in their classrooms or communities after the initial project (Reason, 2001, cited in Stuttaford & Coe, 2010).

### **Southern Hemispheric Participatory Action Research**

In the early 1970s, forms of participatory action research (PAR) became increasingly used in Africa, India, and Latin America, all areas that experienced colonization, representing a “new epistemology of practice grounded in people’s struggles and local knowledges” (Kindon, Pain, & Kesby, 2010, p. 10). Many key terms now used when discussing PAR were coined in the southern hemisphere: *participatory research* by Marja-Liisa Swantz in Tanzania; *community-based research* in India by Rajesh Tandon; *participatory action research* by Orlando Fals-Borda in Colombia (Kindon, Pain, & Kesby, 2010); and *emancipatory research* from Stephen Kemmis in Australia (Fals Borda, 2001, p. 30). Whereas participatory action research out of the northern hemisphere focuses mostly on procedures that can increase efficiency and production in a business setting (Argyris & Schön, 1996; Stringer, 2014), southern hemispheric PAR is rooted in emancipating individuals from oppression in their daily lives. “[Participatory Research] work, especially in the South of the world, [combines] praxis and ethics, academic knowledge and popular wisdom, the rational and the existential, the regular and the fractal” (Fals Borda, 2001, p. 32). In teaching marginalized community members the four-step PAR process, individuals can come to view their knowledge and experiences as empowering and liberating. Influential frameworks on southern hemispheric participatory action research include

constructivism, social justice, feminism, and critical theory. By looking at the intersections with each theoretical stance, my goal in this section is to highlight the guiding tenets of southern hemispheric PAR – autonomy and empowerment – while also looking at contributing features from established theoretical lenses. To guide this exploration of theory, Table 1 is an overview of how I conceptualize autonomy and empowerment in each theory. By looking at each theory, I aim to highlight the roles that autonomy and empowerment play due to their central roles in southern hemispheric PAR.

Table 1

*Conceptualization of Autonomy and Empowerment in the Southern Hemisphere*

	AUTONOMY	EMPOWERMENT
Constructivism	Creative and unbounded learning and sharing of experiences leads to new knowledge generation	Any person can participate in knowledge generation, and everyday experiences become valuable areas of expertise
Feminism	Marginalized groups experience unprecedented decision making abilities	Community members learn how to change power structures so that they may have a voice
Social Justice	Decision making is grounded in self-examination and conscious raising about the context	Focus on sustainability by teaching community members how to continue exercising voice on their own
Critical Theory	Community members engage in democratic decision making and dialogue	The goal is liberation and transformation by seeking equal participation in society

### **Constructivism**

One major tenet of constructivism is that there is no one, objective way of looking at the world around us. “Thus, ‘reality’, ‘truth’ (including truth viewed as a ‘regulatory ideal’), and ‘fact’ are all relative concepts – they are themselves semiotic signs that are

relative to the person(s) who hold particular sense-makings, constructions, or meanings” (Lincoln & Guba, 2013, p. 46). Political, social, educational, and cultural experiences all shape individuals’ understandings of their contexts, also called *constructions*, which are apt to evolve over time in response to new experiences. Knowledge is understood by constructivists as “the end product of sense-making” (p. 55) and is tied to individuals’ realities and constructions, and is therefore also connected to one’s context.

Constructivism embraces knowledge and learning as ever-evolving in response to new experiences by individuals and by groups of people.

Participatory action research embraces many tenets of constructivism, especially the notion that participants’ knowledge and experiences are critical data to a researcher’s understanding of the context of a PAR study. “Local methods for knowledge gathering must be recognized as valid, as should local processes for coming to consensus and taking action... It is an access to the expert knowledge of the participants—their expertise of their world” (Kidd & Kral, 2005, p. 189). PAR is focused on the co-construction of knowledge in order to solve a problem identified by members of a community.

Constructivists view a problem as “some aspect of a selected focus that imposes a barrier to sense-making at some point in the evolution of the needed or desired construction or reconstruction, and thus calls for inquiry” (Lincoln & Guba, 2013, p. 62). In order to select a meaningful problem in any context, a PAR group must first use participants’ experiences and understandings of the context as instructive data to inform the decision making process. “Local knowledge is essential to accurate understanding of problems and the construction of effective interventions; knowledge is embedded in local contexts” (Hughes, 2003, p. 39). Starting with participants’ stories and experiences initiates raising

critical consciousness and building a community of learners in a given setting (Ditrano & Silverstein, 2006); once consciousness is raised, the community can then investigate solutions and design an intervention for their selected problem. Important to PAR's constructivism is the knowledge that is generated because of participants' engagement in action research, which creates new understandings and experiences that influence participants' realities and contextualized knowledge.

In his text, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), Freire promotes the use of *conscientização* – a process through which marginalized individuals can gain a greater understanding of the social and political influences on their realities before eventually taking action to participate – and *praxis*: “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (p. 36). Freire's problem-posing method (1970, 1973) consists of three phases: identifying a problem after spending time in the setting and compiling generative codes; deciphering the causes of the identified problem with community members; and designing and reflecting upon solutions to the problem with stakeholders. His three-phase process – See, Analyze, Act – has clear similarities to the stages of participatory action research - Reflect, Plan, Act, and Observe – and the experiences of conscientization and praxis are only possible through dialogue.

Freire's *dialogical method of liberatory education* (1987) is a way of conceptualizing the role of dialogue in heightening what we know and how we learn. “In a problem-posing participatory format, the teacher and students transform learning into a collaborative process to illuminate and act on reality. This process is situated in the thought, language, aspirations, and conditions of the students” (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 11). Freire's belief in dialogue as a vehicle through which *new* meanings can be reached,

unattainable to participants before their sharing of ideas, echoes his liberating view of students as teachers and vice versa. “Through dialogue, reflecting together on what we know and don’t know, we can then act critically to transform reality” (p. 13). Not only does Freire’s model incorporate the constructivist belief in crafting knowledge through experience but it also mirrors the goal of PAR: participation and reflection driving change desired by a community.

The guiding belief driving participatory action research (PAR) is that participants from a community must use their knowledge and experiences from their context to challenge the status quo. Through democratic dialogue, participants learn, research, and construct understanding together (Burgess, 2006) to gain heightened awareness of power structures in their context. The cyclical process is rooted in the constructivist belief that there is not a single reality, but rather that individuals create their own versions of the world around them, and that different contexts influence actions and perceptions of that context. One principle of PAR is that participants would not gain such elevated understanding of themselves, their colleagues, or their shared setting without dialogicity, or the “cooperation, unity, organization, and cultural synthesis” (Freire, 1970, p. 6), through which change is possible. PAR is the creation of actionable improvement plans rooted in participant’s experiences and realities; contextual knowledge can drive positive change when people engage in cyclical improvement (Kindon, Pain, & Kesby, 2010).

### **Feminist Theory**

Feminism has expanded over time from focusing on the inequity and marginalization of women to include other oppressed groups with broader inclusions of gender, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status (Maguire,

2001; Reid, Tom, & Frisby, 2006). Feminists have always focused on redistributing power to include marginalized groups, in the process aiming “to uncover and disrupt silencing mechanisms, subtle and overt, in knowledge creation and organizational change efforts” (Maguire, 2001, p. 65). Through democratic processes that engage silenced voices, feminist theory hopes to empower participants and engage them in transformational personal and structural actions that reshape the social context (Maguire, 2001). “At its core, feminism and its scholarship is a political movement for social, structural and personal transformation. Feminist and action research share an avowed intent to work for social justice and democratization” (Atweh, Kemmis, & Weeks, 1998; Greenwood & Levin, 1998; Lather, 1991, cited in Maguire, 2001, p. 61). Feminism has many common goals with action research, and many feminists believe that more credit is due for the ways in which feminism has influenced action research.

Knowledge is inextricably tied to power and positioning, and traditionally the relationship between researchers and participants perpetuates existing power inequities (Erickson, 1995; Foucault, 1979). PAR reframes such power relations and puts researchers and participants on the same level, often prioritizing the knowledge of local actors over the researcher who may not originate from the setting; not only is mutual respect sought after, but the direction of a PAR study is entirely in the hands of community members which challenges traditional power dynamics immensely (Erickson, 1995). “In contrast to traditional approaches, action research posits a dynamic and context-based view requiring the exercise of professional judgment...Rather than being the subjects of research, teachers become articulate experts whose expertise reflects a dynamic blend of experience and reflective knowledge” (Miller & Pine, 1990, p. 58).

Positioning silenced community members in the driver's seat of systemic change initiatives and giving voice to their stories of oppression in order to transform the context are goals of both feminist and action research (Maguire, 2001). "The telling of, listening to, affirming of, reflecting on, and analysis of personal stories and experiences 'from the ground up' are potentially empowering action research strategies drawn from women's organizing" (p. 64). Both feminism and southern hemispheric PAR aim to emancipate oppressed persons and to challenge the power structures that are at the heart of oppressive systems.

Like feminist theory, the southern hemispheric lens of PAR challenges participants to consider broader power structures that can bring about inequity, and to create contextualized solutions while keeping the larger system in mind (Kendon, Pain, & Kesby, 2010). Feminist theory aligns with southern hemispheric PAR in the belief that power structures should be challenged, and that knowledge and truth need be examined as socially and contextually grounded. Like Freire, feminists focus on the experiences of persons who have been marginalized, perhaps in relation to race, socioeconomic class, or gender, and value such perspective as "most complete because it reflects the experience of the disadvantaged within the dominant culture" (Wuest, 1995, p. 126). Feminists posit that marginalized populations have unique insights to oppressive structures, especially as outsiders to the dominant framework, and thus can expose viewpoints that might otherwise be invisible (Henwood & Pidgeon, 1995). Other tenets of feminism that relate to the southern hemispheric lens of participatory action research include seeking participants' emic understandings of their settings (Henwood & Pidgeon, 1995), facilitating knowledge production that is relevant and actionable, utilizing research

methods that empower participants, and encouraging reflection on personal and group levels throughout the duration of a project (Wuest, 1995). Feminist researchers also aim to study *for* and *with* participants rather than *on* them. Raising consciousness and changing social structures that oppress and marginalize certain populations are broader goals of feminism that resonate with southern hemispheric PAR.

### **Social Justice**

Southern hemispheric PAR has historically focused on social justice, which can be defined as “scholarship and professional action designed to change societal values, structures, policies, and practices, such that disadvantaged groups gain increased access to these tools of self-determination” (Goodman, Liang, Helms, Latta, Sparks, & Weintraub, 2004, p. 795). Six foundational tenets of social justice include: “ongoing self-examination, sharing power, giving voice, facilitating consciousness raising, building on strengths, and leaving people with tools for social change. All of these descriptors can be applied to the process of PAR” (Smith, Rosenzweig, & Schmidt, 2010, p. 1117). The PAR process itself begins with the Reflect stage, during which participants engage in self-examination and consciousness raising about their context. The Plan stage focuses on using all voices and perspectives to democratically create an improvement strategy tailored to the setting. And by involving local stakeholders in each stage of each PAR cycle, participants learn a four-step process that they can apply beyond their first action research experience, which empowers practitioners as problem-solvers who can continue using “tools for social change” beyond a researcher’s involvement. “[PAR] is an approach to research that makes an explicit commitment to working with members of communities that have traditionally been exploited and oppressed, in a united effort to



bring about fundamental social change (Maguire, 1987, cited in Brydon-Miller, 1997, p. 658). The goal of PAR is sustainable participation in social change and in leveling avenues of participation for all members of a context. Each of the four stages encompasses the six foundational tenets of social justice, and PAR additionally provides explicit steps through which participants can experience abstract ideologies.

In a collaborative research setting, consciousness about the problem is raised through shared experiences, personal and organizational practices are examined and challenged, and most importantly the status quo is changed by the improvement plan that practitioners construct to meet the needs of their school. By following the PAR process, participants gain “the opportunity to explore their own sociocultural locations, to create an experience of collective efficacy, to create and implement action for social change, and to enhance their own social and emotional well-being in the process” (Smith, Rosenzweig, & Schmidt, 2010, p. 1117). PAR practices and processes facilitate the ongoing self-examination that is a part of the social justice tenets. Through cyclical reflection, research, collaboration, and action, a PAR group can initiate improved learning outcomes as well as result in group members understanding how to facilitate future cycles for continued improvement. Through structured cycles, participants can become instilled “with a sense of hope and the drive to challenge inequities limiting their potential to help themselves as well as others to experience a full, unmitigated humanity” (Cammarota & Romero, 2011, p. 494). PAR can be a process for bringing about socially just practices to a community, much in part due to its foundational roots in the principles of social justice.

A key goal of participatory action research is that participants are able to initiate their own PAR cycles in order to challenge structures that maintain injustice (McTaggart, 1997, cited in Kindon, Pain, & Kesby, 2010). Southern hemispheric PAR specifically “involves key stakeholders in a particular site, institution, or community who conduct research for initiating critical changes that produce great social justice” (Cammarota & Romero, 2011, p. 489). By giving voice to disempowered members of a society and instilling them with a process to become change agents, social justice is approached and hopefully sustained through future cycles initiated by community members. In school settings specifically, action research can promote democracy and challenge hierarchies (Pine, 2009). Equipped with knowledge of the PAR cycle, educators and their students become more apt to “change the ways they interact in their social world, democratize education and the research process, change power relations in the educational and social world through the production of ‘people’s’ knowledge, and empower oppressed groups to change their lives and circumstances” (Pine, 2009, p. 53). Because PAR is driven by community members who may not otherwise engage in decision making, it has the potential to include unheard voices and lay the groundwork for socially just practices in an organization.

### **Critical Theory**

Principles that can lead to emancipation such as conscientization and dialogicity stem from Freire’s work in the 1970s and the work of Marcuse in the 1960s which shaped the critical philosophy. “The main tenet of research based on critical theory is the emancipation of those researched by making aware of their oppression based on social, cultural, political, economic, gender, sexual, ethnic, or racial values (Guba & Lincoln,

2005; Merriam, 1991; Schwandt, 2001, cited in Lincoln & Guba, 2013, p. 88). Through dialogue between the researcher and the researched, participants experience praxis in which their awareness of their context and the ways in which they can participate are altered. Basic precepts of critical theory include beliefs that realities are constructed and influenced by structures of power in addition to social, political, and historical contexts, and that truly democratic participation in society can be achieved through dialectical interaction (Ponterotto, 2005); though the emphasis on creating new knowledge resonates with constructivism, criticalists take a more political stance: “[c]ritical theorists insist that we continuously question the values and assumptions underlying all government programs and measures” (Oldfield, 2010, p. 451). By reflecting up on and investigating power structures that prevent marginalized community members from exerting power, individuals can challenge oppressive systems and create new channels of participation for themselves. “Critically informed inquiry generates a form of knowledge that results in and grows out of the liberation of those generating the knowledge; it is simultaneously knowledge based in action and action based in knowledge” (Brydon-Miller, 1997, p. 660). Critical theory resonates with action research in that participants must engage in reflection and action at the same time in order to improve their context.

The driving principles of critical theory align directly with those of action research as outlined by Stringer (2007): “it is *democratic*, enabling the participation of all people; it is *equitable*, acknowledging people’s equality of worth; it is *liberating*, providing freedom from oppressive, debilitating conditions; it is life *enhancing*, enabling the expression of people’s full human potential” (p. 11, emphasis in original). Through individuals participating in action research, they are able to see their past experiences and

knowledge as powerful understandings that can influence their context. By valuing and learning from one another, a group of marginalized community members can change the power dynamics of their context and participate in the community with new-found voice and power, and aim to equalize participation and wealth in their society (Oldfield, 2010). Although terms like *democratic* and *liberating* align the beliefs of critical theorists and participatory action researchers, PAR does not neatly fit into the critical paradigm. One arena in which the critical paradigm does not align as well as the constructivist is the role of the researcher.

### **The Role of the Researcher in Southern Hemispheric PAR**

Constructivism posits the researcher as a learner trying to gain participants' *emic* views on how their realities operate. Critical theory, however, views the researcher as the instigator of emancipation: "the researcher's proactive values are central to the task, purpose, and methods of research" (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 129). Some researchers criticize the critical paradigm for reinforcing disequilibrium of power rather than facilitating true democracy because of the researcher's control. The critical researcher has a heavier hand in shaping research than does a constructivist researcher: "Criticalists emphasize a dialectic stance on the research-participant interaction that aims to empower participants to work toward egalitarian and democratic change and transformation" (Tolman & Brydon-Miller, 2001, in Ponterotto, 2005, p. 130). According to critical researchers like Oldfield (2010), if criticalists did not challenge community members to investigate "the country's unexamined *truths*" (p. 451, emphasis in original), then social and political imbalance will continue with those born into elite status continuing to drive normative culture. "In short, without deep knowledge of social class matters, we can never attain the

fairer division of opportunities and resources that critical theorists deem integral to meaningful democracy” (p. 453). While critical researchers do approach PAR with a bias towards equalizing participation in society, criticalists would argue that their goal resonates with that of PAR and more broadly with the tenets of democracy, and that their trained eyes can instigate a deeper exploration of inequities among community members and can reveal forms of injustice that participants may not otherwise consider.

PAR facilitators aim to foster democratically developed change initiatives, similar to criticalists, and hope that participants will unveil inequities on their own through sharing their experiences and beliefs. The purpose and outcomes of PAR cycles, however, are entirely driven by participants. PAR aims to be “genuinely democratic and non-coercive research with and for, rather than on, participants” (Kendon, Pain, & Kesby, 2010, p. 2). Both critical theory and participatory action research focus on the lives of the participants, their realities, and their desires to change the status quo; a key difference is that injustices are uncovered and all subsequent decisions are made by participants and not by the researcher (Kidd & Kral, 2005). Constructivists and criticalists similarly believe in the reciprocal relationship between a community’s contexts, the actions and beliefs of community members, and the ability for participants to redefine the ways they can participate in their community; the latter resonates with social justice in giving participants voice in their context, and equipping them to learn how to lead PAR cycles on their own. PAR falls most heavily into the constructivist paradigm, with hints of emancipation and transformation from the critical ideology, the belief in giving voice to silenced groups from feminist theory, and the emphasis on teaching community members how to lead change efforts in a sustainable manner from social justice.

## Examining Southern Hemispheric PAR

For this study, I have conceptualized participatory action research as having important roots in theoretical perspectives from the southern hemisphere: constructivism, feminism, social justice, and critical theory. I believe each contributing theory to have noteworthy intersections with participatory action research, all of which center around autonomy and empowerment. In many ways, my conceptualization of southern hemispheric PAR can be visualized as a tree (see Figure 1):

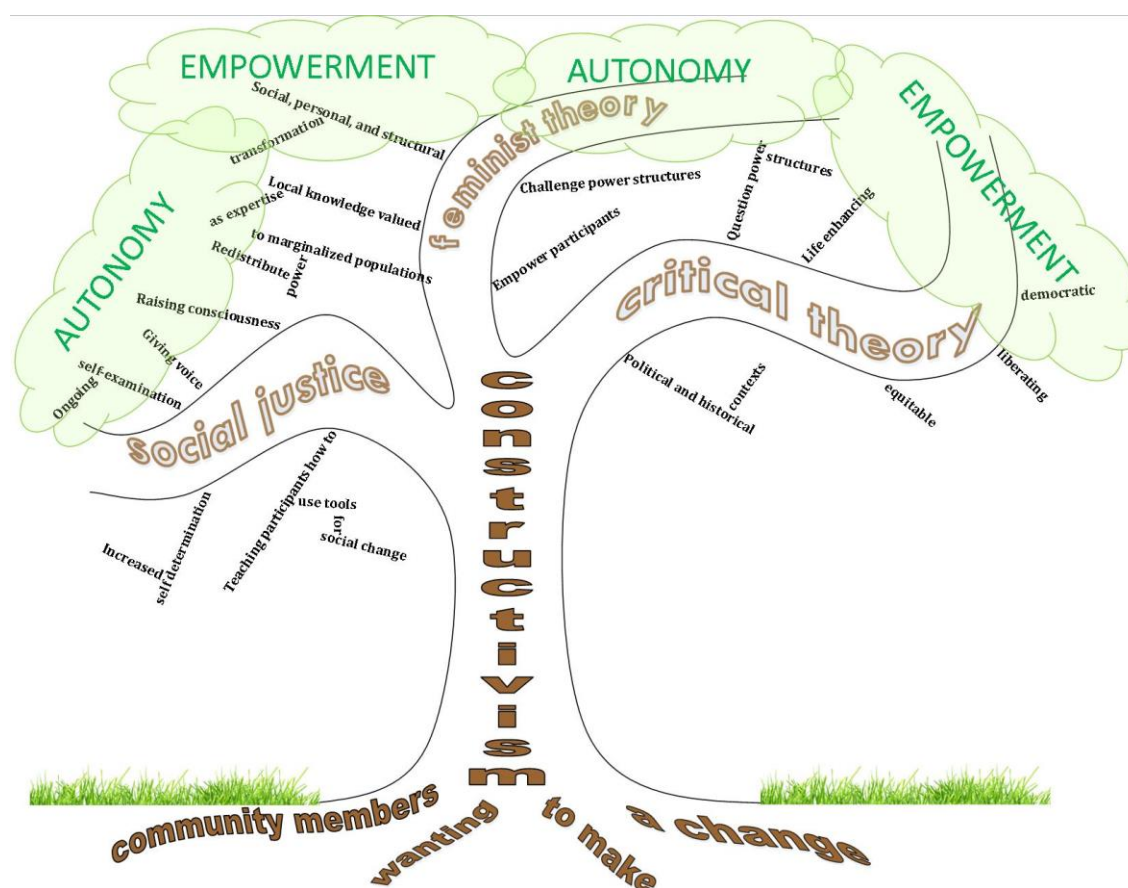


Figure 1. Southern Hemispheric Perspective of Participatory Action Research

As I have described my theoretical framework for this lens of my study, the southern hemispheric perspective of participatory action research is influenced by

constructivism, feminism, social justice, and critical theory. What binds these frameworks together, as seen in the tree's roots, is the belief that community members can change their circumstances and take active roles in improving their lives. The trunk is constructivism due to action research being rooted in participants' beliefs, experiences, realities, and local knowledge and because action research embodies the ontology, epistemology, and axiology of constructivism. The tree's primary branches are feminism, critical theory, and social justice. On each branch, key features of every contributing theory are represented as smaller branches. The roots of the tree are local actors who want to change their context in order to improve communal outcomes. Finally, the foliage is both autonomy and empowerment because those are the two aims and attributes of all four theories contributing to the southern hemispheric perspective of participatory action research, and they guided my investigation of a group of nine educators engaging in PAR at their school.

I did not enter my study by advertising or promising autonomy and empowerment to prospective participants during my recruitment presentations. I did, however, want to study the ways in which my participants could exercise autonomy as defined by their decision-making abilities at their school, and I believed that empowerment would be noticeable in teachers' confidence in themselves and trust from their administration to make those decisions. My belief in giving voice to marginalized community members, along with my experiences as a teacher who has felt silenced and excluded from participating in school reform, have influenced my integration of southern hemispheric theories into the construct of participatory action research that will be examined in this article. By looking at the ways in which participants experienced tenets of constructivism,

social justice, critical theory, and feminism, I argue that southern hemispheric participatory action research is both influenced by these theoretical frameworks and it can also be a process through which educators experience the guiding principles of autonomy and empowerment.

### **Understanding the Context**

One essential component of southern hemispheric participatory action research that separates it from other problem-solving strategies is that the setting of a PAR study is inextricably linked with every stage of each PAR cycle. Because the context is such an important determinant of the problem selected as well as the solution that is hand-tailored to address the chosen issues, community stakeholders are in the best position to lead PAR. My role in this PAR study was that of a facilitator and teacher of the PAR process; the only decision makers, though, were participants from the context who used their knowledge of the setting to guide improvements and also learned how to facilitate future PAR cycles.

### **Smith High School's Small Learning Communities**

Smith High School received a Small Learning Communities federal grant from 2010-2014. Funded by the Department of Education since 1999, the Small Learning Communities Program (SLCP) has presence in schools domestically and internationally. What is unique about this improvement effort, and specifically the 2010 Cohort in Chicago, is that school staffs had to vote before being added to the application, and all major decisions have been made at each school site with support from a small team located in Chicago Public Schools. In the language of the federal grant, schools are encouraged to make choices that meet their local needs (United States Department of



Education, 2010), and a goal of the Chicago Public Schools' SLC Office has been to build capacity in each SLC school so that key leaders of the reform are classroom teachers. The ways in which this national reform effort focuses on local decision making and personalization differs greatly from the top-down mandates that education stakeholders have been opposing.

The premise of the SLC model is that when interdisciplinary groups of teachers are able to teach one group of students and are given time to plan together around their students' needs, then the team's approach to teaching and supporting students will result in increased investment in and results from students. Other characteristics include "autonomous learning environments for improving educational outcomes within their larger extant structures" (Lee & Friedrich, 2007, p. 265) which are set in designated areas of a larger school building; teachers and students in an SLC should essentially have a section of a school building dedicated to *their* community, which they can make *their own*. Such ownership of a space, and of curricular and intervention decisions that occur within that space to support kids in an SLC, are unique to this reform model, and offer teachers more decision making capabilities than most school improvement plans.

**Teacher autonomy in SLCs.** Noteworthy terms of the SLC model as described in the *Federal Register* (2010) including *flexibility*, *responsibility*, and *autonomy* have the potential to excite teachers asking for voice and participation in school reform. The first of five distinguishable conditions and practices of successful SLCs cited by Cotton (2001) is Self-determination which is described as "[a]utonomy in decision making, physical separateness, self-selection of teachers and students, and flexible scheduling must all be present to allow small learning community members to create and realize

their own vision” (cited in Oxley, 2007). After an SLC can exercise the described autonomy, subsequent practices include Identity, Personalization, Support for Teaching, and Functional Accountability (Cotton, 2001). The autonomy in decision making that Cotton touts as a key to successful SLC implementation reflects the power that teachers are asking to have in school improvement. I created this study on the premise that teachers at Smith High School should experience some degree of autonomy through SLCs, and that they may benefit from a process to help them make meaningful and collaborative decisions since teachers are not accustomed to such empowerment (Christman, Cohen, & Macpherson, 1997; Levine, 2010). I believe that participatory action research is a promising vehicle for empowering teachers to realize the full potential of *autonomy*, *flexibility*, and *responsibility* described in the SLC model. Additionally, I believe PAR can engage teachers in organizational learning and continuous improvement of the SLC model, which necessitates heightened levels of autonomy and empowerment (see Ferrell, 2014a). In designing the present study, I wanted to investigate how learning the PAR cycle would impact teachers’ autonomy and empowerment at SHS.

### **Methodology**

The underlying theoretical frameworks of southern hemispheric PAR – constructivism, social justice, critical theory, and feminism – have greatly influenced my examination of the effects of facilitating participatory action research cycles at a neighborhood public high school in Chicago. The research questions that were used to investigate participants’ experiences of the PAR process are as follows:

How does participation in the PAR process increase teachers' consciousness and awareness of power structures and decision making in their school community?

- a) How does participation in a PAR cycle impact teachers' views of their roles in decision making and the actions they take in their school?
- b) How do PAR tools and processes encourage autonomy and empowerment in participants' actions within and outside of the PAR group?

### **Sample**

During my recruitment presentation, I told the Smith staff that the voluntary participants in my study would identify a problem and craft a solution, while I would be there to guide, assist, and teach the group about the PAR model so that they could continue the work after my time facilitating the study ended. I hosted PAR group meetings with nine participants from Smith High School (SHS) between May 2013 and February 2014. SHS has over 1,700 students and is divided into six small learning communities. I presented the goals of the study and recruited voluntary participants during each of the school's six SLC meetings one day in May, and additionally emailed recruitment materials to those who were not present. Participants who consented for the study included seven teachers and two deans, with consultations with administrators at various points during the study. Participants' years of teaching experience ranged from two to 26 years, and certifications included computer science, English, math, physical education, social science, special education, and world language. The PAR group represented four of the school's six SLCs.

## **Data Collection**

Aiming to assess the level of autonomy and decision making already present through SLCs, as well as investigating new tools and processes learned through participatory action research, data collection included the following: interviews (initial, mid-point, exit), meeting agendas and notes, transcripts of audio-recorded meetings, meeting entrance and exit slips, materials from presentations that the PAR group gave to their staff members, and the researcher's journal as well. Data collected for this study was qualitative in nature, focusing on participants sharing their experiences regarding decision making and empowerment while in the process of using participatory action research to solve a problem they selected.

Group meetings and interviews were the primary method of data collection. Interviews lasted between 25 and 75 minutes, and were semi-structured so that topics remained focused but open enough for participants to share information that they felt to be relevant. Initial interviews took place in May and June, mid-point in November, and exit in February. PAR group meetings occurred weekly in June, September, and October, and then bi-weekly in November, December, and January. All meetings were audio-recorded and later transcribed, and I prepared all meeting agendas and minutes using input from participants. At least every other meeting had a journaling component, either through short answer questions or reflection prompts. After each interview and meeting, I recorded reactions and reflections as a means of audio-journaling in addition to written reflections.

## **Data Analysis**

Although PAR is a paradigm and not a method, the four-step cycle does act in many ways like a methodical process that guides the work of each stage. Using qualitative methods influenced by constructivism, feminism, social justice, and critical theory, I looked for emergent themes tied to my research questions. Interview questions and PAR group agendas were shaped in accordance with my perception of southern hemispheric participatory action research, as was analysis of the data I collected over the course of nine months. In my study, I not only facilitated PAR cycles and taught participants how to continue the work of PAR on their own, but I also studied my participants' experiences and beliefs throughout each cycle. As a participant-researcher-observer, I sought to gain an emic understanding of my participants' levels of autonomy and empowerment at Smith, before and while learning the PAR process. On a third level, I also studied myself and how my facilitation techniques and selected PAR tools influenced participants' understandings of what PAR is and how it could be used to drive change at Smith High School.

Using codes aligned to my research question and two sub-questions, I analyzed data pertaining to participants' roles in decision making, actions they chose to make in varying capacities at Smith, and PAR tools they identified as essential to affording autonomy and empowerment. Looking at the work of the PAR group itself, the experiences my participants had while engaging in PAR, and my own journey as a participant-researcher-observer, my conceptualization of southern hemispheric PAR became more defined, and the branches of the tree (see Figure 1) that were most salient in my data analysis will be presented as findings in the coming section.

### **Findings and Discussion: Autonomy and Empowerment before the Study**

When narrowing the southern hemispheric lens to key principles, autonomy and empowerment stand out as essential components that enable emancipation from an oppressive system that diminishes and neglects teacher voice. The SLC reform includes extensive language about granting interdisciplinary teacher teams the autonomy they need to make their SLC unique, personalized, and responsive to students' needs. Autonomy includes teachers' abilities to make decisions on their own, both for themselves and for and with their students, while empowerment embodies authority and validation. During initial interviews, I learned about existing forms of autonomy and empowerment that participants experienced just before joining the PAR study. Both positive and negative instances impacted why and how teachers decided to join the study, and the perspective that each participant brought to the group.

#### **Autonomy at Smith High School before the study**

In my initial interviews with participants, I wanted to get a sense of how much autonomy teachers could exercise at Smith High School. In response to initial interview questions, participants reported different types of decision making that they were and were not able to exercise at Smith. Most shared that they had the greatest freedom to make decisions in their classroom teaching – not about the skills or standards that they needed to teach, but about delivery of instruction, building classroom community, and handling student behaviors. “For me, as far as my classroom I can choose the lessons and units...They give me the freedom to do that...Decisions. I think how to handle classroom situations obviously” (Derek). Participants shared the most information about decision making with regards to their classroom instruction and management.

Participants also talked about aspects of teaching that were out of their control and instead required by the district. When asked about something in her daily work that she could not control, Helen immediately replied, “I think paperwork. It’s kind of useless stuff that doesn’t relate to the classroom that we’re forced to do all the time” which she clarified as forms and tasks required by the district. Derek got more specific about why doing district paperwork was his least favorite component of his job:

I would say it’s decisions and policies put in place by non-teachers. People that haven’t been in the classroom who just say “do this” and...it doesn’t make very much sense if you really get into it. I don’t like doing unnecessary things, projects, papers, [evaluation]-type of things that have no bearing on the students’ learning experiences.

Teachers agreed that mandated paperwork took time away from focusing on their students, thus bringing frustration to teachers who lost valuable time completing involuntary tasks. According to my participants, such time-consuming and insignificant paperwork, or *administrivia*, decreases teachers’ autonomy.

Although Melissa had mentioned decisions she could make in her classes, she felt that “Anything that really matters, you aren’t really allowed to make a decision about” (Melissa). When asked to explain more about what she meant, she expounded: “What will count for your evaluation. Who’s evaluating you...What classes you teach. Your schedule. The curriculum” (Melissa). Melissa felt that the decisions she could make were trivial compared to those she could not make. Caroline also mentioned that schools and teachers generally were not able to exercise much choice: “it’s a district thing. I don’t feel like schools have enough autonomy to get to choose exactly what would be good for them” (Caroline). Feeling that one’s school cannot make decisions for itself had a noticeable ripple effect onto teachers who feel little to no choice about “anything that

really matters” as a result. This finding resonates with Miller and Pine (2009) and Brydon-Miller and Maguire (2009) who write about insincere efforts to allow teachers to make decisions that will benefit their students most. Participants generally felt that district mandates decreased their autonomy.

**Decision making in SLCs.** Teachers in the PAR group had varying opinions about the ways in which choice could be exercised in their small learning communities. Most participants cited some instance of decision making that they or their SLC team could make: “our house gets to make decisions for town hall meetings or service learning projects we want to do with the kids. And we have a lot of autonomy with that, with any service learning we’re going to do, we can” (Caroline). But Helen had a contradictory feeling about planning and decisions regarding town hall meetings, which are assemblies with an SLC together in one space during an Advisory period, and she provided an example of being given autonomy and then having it taken away:

We had to do town halls so [teachers in the SLC] are researching stuff, but then they [administrators] change the focus: “it has to be specifically post-secondary.” It’s like, “well if you wanted that, then why didn’t you just tell us to do that?”

As an SLC teacher-leader herself, Helen shared frustrations with being told that she could lead her teachers in making decisions, and then being told that their choices were wrong or not feasible. “It’s supposed to be, like, a teacher-led process...whatever. We come up with all these things like detentions, yada, yada, yada. We did that a couple of years ago. We had all these plans, and then [administration] shot them all down” (Helen). Helen was not alone in sharing that teacher-led decisions had been met with “no” as the answer, which she believed resulted in making teachers cynical about SLCs as a whole. Even still she was not ready to give up on the autonomy that was supposed to come with SLCs: “In



theory I think through SLCs we can do a lot...I think people are a little jaded and so we're not doing as much as we could. But I think you could do stuff through SLCs" (Helen).

Two teachers in the PAR group had new SLCs when I interviewed them. Derek had been placed in an SLC without being consulted and was not sure how SLCs worked at Smith when I interviewed him with one month left of the school year: "I still don't really know what the whole process is. I don't even know what Small Learning Communities we have here" (Derek). Melissa experienced an SLC switch when she received her schedule at the beginning of that school year. This lack of autonomy in the SLC selection process is not what Cotton (2001) and Oxley (2008) lay out as best practices for building effective SLCs. Self-determination, as Cotton (2001) describes it, had not been realized according to the teachers in my study, which may explain comments like Megan's: "I also would say that I would choose to not have SLCs, and that is a choice I cannot make" (Megan). SLC teacher teams had tried to exercise autonomy unsuccessfully, which is counter to suggested implementation of the model. As I learned through initial interviews, collecting data on the existing power structures in place at Smith and the history of the SLC model being adopted were invaluable to understanding the context of my study. Knowing teachers' varying experiences with autonomy were also important in setting the stage for introducing PAR to my participants.

**Pseudo decision making.** All participants talked about an attempt to address discipline issues which had taken place six weeks prior to initial interviews. Teachers had contacted administrators about problematic student behaviors, and the response was to

make teachers choose to be on one of three committees to address the issues they identified. “[Deans] were sort of in charge, not by choice...we kind of created three discipline groups within the school. You know, it was like a PD. Well, you had to choose one to go to” (Olivia). Derek recalled that PD in his interview as being very rushed and unproductive. He lamented that there was not time to reflect or really think about how to address the issues that teachers really did want to solve. Each group also had over 30 people, and most teachers did not continue working on their “chosen” issue beyond the PD session. And the groups that did come up with action plans were told that their ideas were not feasible:

I just don’t think that they were fully behind it. I think it was more to appease people...So [administrators] could say, “well, we tried and you guys didn’t follow through with it.” Well, we didn’t follow through with it because when we say, “Oh, we want to change this,” [then the administration says] “Well, you can’t do that. You can’t do that. You can’t do this”...So, what can we do? When you make change...you need full support from everybody. (Joseph)

Teachers were discouraged by hearing “no” to their ideas: “I don’t think any big changes can really be made without [administration’s] approval...I feel like it’s very frequently a ‘no’ answer. ‘No, it’s not going to work.’ ‘No, we can’t do that’” (Olivia). But teachers like Olivia and Helen tried not to be discouraged by these experiences; they saw the potential from their colleagues who truly wanted to be a part of positive changes at Smith, and in my recruitment presentation they heard a new avenue that they could try in order to make necessary changes at their school.

### **Empowerment at Smith High School before the Study**

Before looking at any empowerment that teachers experienced through the participatory action research process, it is important to note existing forms of

empowerment in place before the study began as revealed during initial interviews. Here, I define empowerment as an internalized mindset wherein individuals or a group exude confidence in their authority and decision making; unlike autonomy, which does include decision making, teachers experience empowerment when they have confidence in themselves and make decisions that will benefit their school community without second-guessing themselves. Empowerment is expressed through confidently made autonomous decisions with meaning and purpose.

For the two deans at Smith that joined the PAR group, they experienced some empowerment from enforcing the district's disciplinary code; both felt that they had authority to use the code to guide decision making with students, and that they had administrative backing. But a cause of frustration for them, and an example of disempowerment was the lacking process for serving detentions at Smith. For every third time a student was tardy to school, a detention would get automatically assigned: "Today, there will be students that have detentions. They come in with the little [Tardy] slip. And they've been tardy twice [already]. So they have a detention, but they don't have anywhere to serve it" (Olivia). Discipline and attendance were ostensibly under the deans' jurisdiction, but there was no support for a system of serving detentions which in effect decreased the legitimacy and weight of earning detentions in the first place. Both Olivia and Joseph struggled with this lack of empowerment; they both had autonomy to make decisions about student repercussions, but the primary consequence (detention) was something that students could not serve and that deans could not address.

During initial interviews, participants highlighted ways in which they felt disempowered from being able to do their jobs well. Over half of my participants brought

up hallsweeps, which is a process of clearing the hallways after the bell has rung; it is both preventative and reactive. At Smith, a teacher had set up an online spreadsheet where teachers could sign up to assist with hallsweeps. This teacher-led effort had occurred several months before my study:

There were a few of us that were doing it but it didn't have any administrative support. It was like "Oh, if you want to do it that's great." Although, you [administrators] need to say that this is an important thing if it's going to help. It all goes back to that. The administration not only saying "sure, go do it," but giving it a little more legitimacy than that. (Helen)

The teacher who started hallsweeps and those who had signed up had exercised autonomy in deciding to be a part of a new school process. But Helen's point is that autonomy is not synonymous with empowerment; those involved in hallsweeps did not have authority or backing from administrators, who treated it more like an optional pet project.

As it relates to autonomy and empowerment, participants did not feel that they could make the decisions that they wanted to make (e.g., their schedule, curriculum) and in instances where they could make autonomous decisions (e.g., SLC Town Halls, hallsweeps) they often were not empowered with authority or trust to make their decisions into realities. Although the SLC model is grounded in a constructivist premise that teachers can learn from one another and better support their students through collaboration, my participants had come to see the autonomy and empowerment advertised in SLC literature as a façade, and most participants saw SLC meetings as a waste of time instead of a place to learn and grow. Unlike the focus of social justice, little reflection or self-examination occurred during SLC meetings, but rather teacher groups used the time to complete district administrivia. The SLC teacher-leaders in my study

aimed to facilitate democratic decision making in their meetings much in tune with Critical Theory, but they struggled to engage all twenty-something members of their SLCs due to decreased investment in the mandated meetings. Although my participants did consider themselves marginalized and beneath their administration and district leadership, which is often the setting for feminist inquiry, and referred to themselves as “just teachers” on multiple occasions, the examples that group members had about teachers trying to participate in school improvement each had defeating results. I began our PAR group meetings by using data from initial interviews to validate participants’ experiences and beliefs, and to ensure group members knew that their ideas and voices were essential to this process.

### **Setting the Stage for PAR**

This was the context for my study as gathered through initial interviews: teachers felt unable to make decisions about “anything that really matters” (Melissa), and recent examples of teachers trying to drive change and had not received administrative backing. Participants shared a unified belief that their administration was not supporting them enough, and that decisions needed to be made by administrators in order for issues to get addressed. Their passive self-positioning was indubitably impacted by instances in which teachers felt that changes were done *to* them rather than *with* them, and instances of being told to make decisions which then received little to no support. What the staff had not tried, in SLCs or in teacher-led initiatives, was a cyclical process to help them make thoughtful and sustainable plans for addressing a school-wide problem. Participants all mentioned the great staff that Smith had, and they agreed that there were many issues that needed to be addressed.

## **Findings and Discussion: Autonomy and Empowerment through Participatory Action Research**

By looking specifically for evidence of constructivism, feminism, social justice, and critical theory, I can examine components of southern hemispheric PAR that promoted autonomy and empowerment according to my participants. By triangulating data between participants' interviews and contributions to PAR group meetings, and focusing on tenets of each theoretical framework that contributes to southern hemispheric PAR, I will investigate each finding separately, while also highlighting PAR tools that afforded autonomy and empowerment. Throughout our PAR cycles, I selected specific meeting protocols and activities to promote the group's exploration of their context, their selected problem and possible solutions, and their broader exploration of autonomy and empowerment. As a reminder, my first research sub-question focused on teachers' views of themselves as decision-makers and actors at Smith. My second sub-question centered on the ways in which PAR tools and processes allowed group members to participate in their school community in unprecedented ways.

### **Empowerment: Local Knowledge Valued as Expertise**

Through initial interviews I was able to ask participants about their backgrounds, beliefs, and experiences at Smith. I also asked each person about problems that they wanted the PAR group to address, their experiences with those problems, and possible solutions; everyone's experiences were valid data, which aligns to feminism, which helped me better understand the historical and political context at Smith (critical theory). Similar to the work of feminist researchers, I used participants' stories in our first group meeting in hopes of showing them that their beliefs, ideas, and experiences were essential

to the PAR process. Group members had varying experiences with school-wide problems, thus participants were able to start learning from one another during group meetings in order to build consensus and community before selecting their issue and crafting a solution: “[H]ow realistic and open everyone was with ‘this works, that doesn’t work’ considering our resources and what could actually happen here. It was cool we took everyone’s ideas, but still made it manageable” (Caroline). This constructivist process of making meaning together through shared experiences began with initial interviews and our first group meetings. As a researcher, my strategy was to first ensure participants that their voices mattered and gave them power to change their school, and then to introduce decision making.

### **Autonomy: Democratic Decision Making**

All decision making took place during group meetings through structured meeting objectives and discussions. In addition to decision making involving all members of the PAR group, participants also made these decisions on their own and without administrative presence. Democratic decision making is therefore an expression of autonomy, because the group was deciding on ways to address a schoolwide program which they independently identified and selected as the focus for their PAR work. Unlike recent experiences in which participants had been told “no” on multiple occasions, their administration had approved the formation of a PAR group and participants slowly grew comfortable with making decisions that included all voices in the group instead of looking outside the group for administrative approval. Meetings were held before school in a participants’ classroom, which was familiar and comfortable to group members; participants felt safe in our meeting space and were therefore more likely to engage in

*ongoing self-examination* and *equitable* sharing of their beliefs and experiences openly and honestly. Because participation and inclusivity are so important in PAR, and specifically in fostering democratic decision making, I asked participants to decide on when and where to meet so that meetings were based on their availability and preferences. Olivia summarized the PAR group's decision making process in her midpoint interview:

You sit together as a group and you mull over some issues or problems that are going on with it - in our case the school - and pick one that you want to focus on. Then, I guess just like it's a whole process of...identifying the problem, coming up with some sort of solution, maybe gathering some data. Then, we put our [Eligibility] List that we created into practice. Then now we're reflecting on how that's going and making changes...so, identifying kind of a problem, figuring out ways to fix it and implementing it and then going back to reflect on how that's working and change it where it needs to be changed.

In her explanation, Olivia highlighted the ways in which group members made decisions democratically and after which examined the impacts of their decisions as a group.

Participants embraced the pronoun "we" very early in the process; people felt heard and appreciated in our group's decision making processes.

In their exit interviews, participants highlighted realistic and inclusive decision making as critical to their group's success: "We talked about everything and we really judged the manageability of it. I think we started off with huge ideals that would be cool, [then] talked through it all and recognized what could work" (Caroline). She went on to say that the group's discussions of "what could work" allowed them to design a plan that had a higher chance of working, rather than their ideal hopes: "[We] set goals that we thought would be successful. We set ourselves up, I think, and used that as our guide instead of just what we hoped" (Caroline). Participants' contextual knowledge of their



colleagues and their school was essential in warding off ideal plans that would not last, like many initiatives before; their use of the historical and political background of their school resonated with the work of criticalists and guided their practical decision making. Each group member worked in different departments and small learning communities, which made the inclusion of everyone's contextual knowledge essential to capturing a full picture of Smith High School. Megan commented on the importance of choosing a topic that matters to teachers and designing a solution that does not require much of their time in order for it to be successful: "I think that choosing something, deciding, making sure that what you decide you're going to do is something that you *can* do is important because otherwise I just think everything would have flopped" (Megan). Were it not for valuing participants' understandings of their context and prioritizing their voices and ideas for their context in the decision making process, the PAR group's intervention may have failed like many of its predecessors.

In their individual exit interviews, I asked participants to give me feedback on their experiences in the PAR group using semi-structured questions. Almost everyone mentioned the democratic nature of the group and feeling that their voices mattered; their sentiments mirrored the democratic nature of critical theory and giving voice which is essential to social justice.

I like this group because I feel like everybody has a voice and it's not just one or two people who make the decisions. I've learned that you can have a group of people and you can come to a decision which everyone agrees on. That's what I like about this group and I don't think I've seen this in any other group I've really been involved in because I feel like everybody listens and we all come to a decision that we're happy with. (Melissa)

Melissa highlighted democratic and inclusive decision making when she says that “everybody has a voice” and “everybody listens and we all come to a decision that we’re happy with.” and she juxtaposed the PAR group with other teachers teams at Smith in which “one or two people” make all of the group’s decisions. Derek attributed the inclusivity of decision making to the common reason that participants joined the PAR group: because they wanted to solve a school problem: “people that are in the PAR Group are all there for common reasons. So I think suggestions are great, or you will take a suggestion and manipulate it a little bit to include different aspects of what everyone has said” (Derek). As Derek mentions, there were many instances of adjusting one person’s idea to incorporate contributions from other group members.

The democracy that group members experienced in making decisions with which all participants were satisfied was a new experience for most. Participants reported feeling heard, like their voices mattered, and that their group had a higher purpose. From their collective decisions, the PAR group wrote a thoughtful improvement plan for their school, which was approved and implemented; previously marginalized voices were heard and formerly unsolicited ideas were blended through group meetings to create an improvement plan which was validated by the school’s administration. Teachers in the PAR group were able to make decisions and exercise unprecedented levels of power through the cyclical improvement model.

### **Autonomy: Prioritizing Equity**

A series of decisions that participants made which reflected the ideals of social justice was regarding detentions. During the first cycle, a few participants wanted to initiate an alternative detention process, but as a collective they knew they needed to wait

until the Eligibility List policy settled first. During the second cycle, though, participants knew it was time; students who tried to serve detentions often had nowhere to serve them, and the act of sitting in a classroom with a security guard did not really address the causes of detentions. In order to reframe detention as a time to be productive, work on grades, and re-think the behaviors which earn detentions, the PAR group decided that teacher-led tutoring before and after school should count as serving detentions. An issue of equity and access was raised, though, because students who must drop off and pick up younger siblings as well as athletes and students with after-school jobs would not be able to access this new process. One participant raised the idea of allowing student-led lunch tutoring to count in addition to teacher-led tutoring, and her idea was readily embraced. Through this lunch option, every Smith student would have equal access to alternative detentions, which were arguably more beneficial to all stakeholders.

Another issue of equity was the expectation that club sponsors and coaches would look up each of their participating students' eligibility status every other week. Participants felt badly for some club sponsors who had very large groups of students and who also taught multiple courses and held leadership roles at Smith. In trying to make the process of checking the EL more fair, the group brainstormed ways to streamline the process, which resulted in Tamara creating a sign up form for clubs and sports; once sponsors submitted lists of students one time, they never had to search for individual students again. Since many participants were coaches and club sponsors themselves, they were aware of the obstacles to enforcing the policy and wanted to give teachers easier access to their initiative.

**Rejecting autonomy.** While group members appreciated having their ideas and beliefs valued, and agree that their group made decisions that incorporated all participants' contributions, the road to embracing the autonomy that the group was being offered was bumpy. During midpoint interviews, I heard a lot about the absence of administration at PAR meetings and in the group's initiative. I reminded participants that the point of PAR is ground-up change, but they were sure that administration needed to be more involved. "We're like, 'okay, that was a good [meeting]. Okay. That would have been a great moment for [administrators] to be here,' but they're busy. So are we, but I don't know when would be a good meeting for them" (Karla). This notion that administrators needed to be present in order for their good meeting or ideas to be recognized was a dependence that I had not anticipated. My role was to promote teacher-driven change, but in many instances the group wanted to wait for administrative input or blessing. "We can make decisions. We can get things in motion. Ultimately, again, it does go back to administration" (Helen). In Helen's quotation, she mentions the group embracing their autonomy by saying "we can make decisions," but participants did not feel that they had the empowerment to implement their decisions with confidence or authority. Another example is that each time the group planned a professional development presentation; participants advocated that an administrator stand next to them even though the information was being presented by the PAR group.

Similarly, the group decided that there should be an assembly for ineligible students during an Advisory period in order to explain why they were not eligible, what that meant for school activities, and how they could become eligible. The choice to have this assembly and the topics to be covered at the assembly were all determined by the

PAR group, but participants wanted to give those topics to an administrator instead of running the assembly themselves, or present next to the principal:

Caroline: Or even if one of us explains it [the principal]'s standing next to us.

Karla: Then he, yes.

Megan: I think there needs to be like a presence of somebody that's above a teacher.

The last notion of “somebody that's above a teacher” was prevalent in group meetings during the first cycle and in mid-point interviews. Participants did not see that their knowledge, experiences, and ideas were in many ways more valuable than what administrators could bring to their conversations; participants knew their students and school issues better than administrators, but lacked confidence to accept the autonomy being offered to them.

Even still, group members were often fixated on what they did not know: “We don't know the constraints on schools and we don't know what you can and can't do. I think there's just a point where we can't... We don't know what decision to make. We get stuck” (Megan). While there is validity in needing to know about school resources and constraints, the group often decided that they were “stuck” when they were in the midst of making very thoughtful and informed decisions. Participants' positioning of themselves below administrators slowed their process of embracing their autonomy and becoming empowered through PAR.

With regards to making decisions, Derek and Megan both mentioned that they wished administration had given them a description of how much power they had at the beginning of the PAR process: “I think that there would have to be some sort of conversation in the beginning of what power a group would have from the administration.

Because then I think that you would be able to decide things more easily” (Megan). But her very next statement is not about power as much as it is purpose: “Maybe ‘here’s the thing’ or like, direction even. ‘Here’s what we would like you to do’ or ‘this is definitely off the table.’ Just any sort of thing” (Megan). Derek had the same idea when he stated, “As long as they come and say this is what we can and can’t do. That should be the first step so then we have to play around, go around that.” Karla also positioned herself and the group as needing to do the work that their administrators want: “What do [administrators] see or would like for us to help with. I really feel like [the principal]’s the chef and we’re his sous chefs. We’re there to help. I’m sure he’s grateful, and he sees it” (Karla). During midpoint interviews, I worried that my participants did not fully understand the premise of participatory action research; they had already designed and implemented a school-wide improvement plan based on an issue they selected, but there was still a lot of doubt revealed in their individual interviews. But between mid-point and exit interviews, participants showed more expressions of empowerment; it took time and validation from school stakeholders for group members to find confidence in their improvement process and to embrace the new voice and participation in positive change that they created.

### **Empowerment: Questioning Power Structures**

Derek summarized the work of the PAR group as “Us coming up with what affects the school setting here and then coming up with the decisions and ideas of what we wanted to do to fix it within.” Participants embraced the pronouns “us” and “we” within the first month of the study, as a result of their common reasons for wanting to join the study. “I liked the idea of teachers getting together, collaborating to discover a

focal point and working towards that focal point, accomplishing whatever the goal is. I like that idea. That's probably why I joined the group" (Joseph). Like Joseph, people joined because they wanted to choose what issue to target and how to address the problem. Such autonomy and self-determination had not been offered to Smith teachers in such a manner before. "We chose the problem because it was the most that affected us and our school...it was our personal choice to do it...To be in the group, to choose the problem, to choose the solution" (Megan). Participants were accustomed to working in SLCs teacher teams, each with about 20 teachers, and in teacher course teams which had about 8 teachers each, but in these teacher teams each group's purpose was predetermined. With PAR, the participants had to decide on their purpose: "we understood as members of the group, 'Hey, everybody's going to have to take an active role.' It was open to us kind of how we wanted to take that active role and what we wanted to do with it" (Melissa). In getting to shape their own purpose and path, participants' knowledge and experiences became sources of power and positive change.

Through the PAR process, participants were positioned to take the reins and decide to address a selected issue however they deemed feasible. Instead of being silenced and ignored, group members discussed generative themes which brought out participants' philosophies on school behaviors and consequences; once they narrowed in on the need for consequences, their conversations were a dynamic mix of sharing ideals and beliefs and grounding their decisions in reality. The lack of a consequence system had been disempowering teachers, and had left them without authority. A primary teacher complaint was that detentions were not meaningful; students felt no urgency to serve them, and sometimes would show up to serve them and find no adult there to host it. The

group determined that the lack of meaning behind detentions was a catalyst for other student misbehaviors (Olivia, Melissa) and a process that disempowered teachers (All). For the first time, teachers' experiences were not only solicited, but participants' voices were used as a vehicle for positive change.

**Participants finding their voices.** Before giving their plan to administration for approval, I encouraged the group to have a clear procedure for sharing their initiative to the staff, their students, and families as well. The group jumped into action with Helen turning on a projector and hooking it up to her laptop, and Megan recapping the group's ideas. This document (see Appendix A) was important to the group in that it represented the processes they had already navigated and the decisions they had made in order to improve their school. As a group, participants wrote out the criteria for the Smith Eligibility List, highlighting what each stakeholder needed to do in order for the EL to be effectively implemented; participants were careful to balance demands on teachers, security staff, support staff, and administrators. During our second meeting, the group suggested they meet independently to fine tune their ideas and draft a proposal, demonstrating autonomy and thoughtful planning:

Megan: What if we got together and tried to come up with, like, a basic sketch of what we thought the policy would be. Could we try to do that?

Joseph: Absolutely

Megan: And then we could meet with you [Betsy] next Thursday and at least we could come in then with a little bit of a starting point.

They wrote out a contract that would be presented during an Advisory lesson – pending administrative approval and a lesson date granted to them by the Advisory curriculum team – and they wrote a description of the EL for the student planner which contained important school rules and expectations each year: “So we’ll have the contract distributed



first week with the Advisory lesson. We want this print in that agenda [book], and we want [Administration] to say it's a good idea and that they support us" (Megan). The importance of their written communication plan was increased because administration did not attend our last meeting before the school year ended as invited; the group was not able to present their ideas in person, and thus had to word their plan thoughtfully and with details that would address administrators' questions. Near the end of this meeting, Megan announced, "Wait, so this is done. So we can show this to boss people" (see Appendix A for full proposal). Participants positioned themselves below the "boss people" but were still making decisions for which they wanted support.

After the proposal was approved, the group finalized the presentation for staff, the lesson plan for students, and the plan for informing parents. Once again, all decisions were democratically made by the PAR group. The staff presentation introduced PAR members, summarized their process thus far, and reviewed the approved proposal outlining the first Smith Eligibility List. In planning their PD session, the group split up parts of the presentation so that everyone was involved except me; this presentation was led by the Smith PAR group for the Smith staff, and I chose not to be in attendance. After presentation parts were distributed, Caroline added a reminder to the group that impacted the tone and purpose of their presentation:

Caroline: And I think when we present to the staff too, we need to remember that we've all been asking for consequences to mean something. This is our opportunity to make them mean something and it's going to take every single member of the building.

Megan: You're either working with us or you are...against helping the kids.

Helen: And then you can't complain about it.

In this moment, Caroline reminded the PAR group that out of the entire staff at Smith, *they* had chosen to join the PAR group to try solving a school problem in a new way. Group members were anticipating pushback from their colleagues since they were presenting something new that teachers would be expected to do, even though staff members had complained about the PAR group's selected problem area. Caroline's sentiment as well as Megan and Helen's follow up comments show ownership and pride which the group was beginning to form. In preparing for their first presentation of the Eligibility List, participants repositioned themselves as representatives of the staff who were leading a positive change initiative; instead of being "just teachers," participants placed themselves between their colleagues and their administrators. To the group's surprise, they were asked some clarifying questions, but did not receive any oppositional or negative remarks.

The PAR group had the student contract approved, but still needed to create a 40-minute lesson for introducing the Eligibility List to students and their families. Instead of writing out how to explain the EL to students, the group decided to create a video that all Advisory teachers could show: "I think we need a video and not just depend on teachers explaining. I think we need one thing that everybody is going to see so that we make sure that it's presented the right way" (Megan). The group agreed that a video would more effectively ensure that students heard the same message about the EL criteria, how students could get on the list, and what happened when students were not on the EL. After that meeting, Megan and Helen decided to use their students in a few scenes (students checking list in cafeteria, students trying to enter the homecoming dance), and they also recruited a few teachers who were not in the PAR group to participate (student

trying to attend a book club meeting, teacher giving out field trip permission slips to eligible students). Also important to note is that Helen filmed Smith's principal introducing the EL at the beginning of the video, explaining to students that being eligible meant that they were being a good Smith student and were meeting the expectations of the school.

Previewing the video in a PAR meeting a few days before it was used in an Advisory lesson was a pivotal moment for me as the outside researcher; I had not brought in samples for them to use in this instance, but rather the entire idea and execution of the video was solely theirs. The group exercised autonomy on a higher level when they created the Eligibility video and were empowered in the process since the lesson plan date had been approved; participants did not have to seek more administrative approval in how they wanted the lesson plan go, but instead were trusted to teach their approved Eligibility List policy however they deemed fit.

They recruited kids to act in it and it was then taking all of these ideas and turning them into their own lesson plan and video portrayal for the school. That was a big moment for me because it was like the first time that they took the reins and made something themselves. Until then, I had been bringing in samples of things and then they would kind of pick and choose and brainstorm, but that was, like, that was a really big artifact for this whole project. (Betsy)

The independence that participants demonstrated in creating the Advisory lesson video was also an early sign of sustainability, which is an important component of social justice through participatory action research and of emancipation sought after by feminists. Through the group's communication plan, staff, students, and families had all learned about the PAR group's Smith High School Eligibility List by the end of the third week of school.

**Redistributing power to marginalized groups.** During the second cycle, the PAR team asked for lists of students in every club and sport at Smith, and Joseph got the group started by checking winter athletes on his own. With rosters marked with each athlete's number of failing grades and detentions, the group knew that something needed to be done.

Derek: I say we should start doing spot checks.

Helen: But then we become the experts.

Olivia: But Megan's right. Maybe the clubs need to be checked by-

Helen: Admin.

Olivia: But maybe we could-

Helen: Everything at [Smith] eventually breaks down because the Admin doesn't back it up. That's why these issues exist to begin with.

While Helen was adamant that administration had to check the sports practices and club meetings, other PAR members were ready to do spot checks themselves since they had already brought the issue to administration. When a group member asked how they should approach teacher-sponsors with ineligible students participating, Karla's answer was simple: "This is a school-wide initiative" (Karla). Megan's response got back to the heart of their initiative:

Our whole point is that we wanted kids to clear detentions and pass more classes. So we're not trying to get kids *not* to play basketball or football or track or whatever. We're trying to get them to do the right thing to be able to do that. I just don't know that everybody understands that, because if they did, I feel like why wouldn't you want to enforce the list? (Megan)

Megan's point that the group was not trying to get students kicked off of teams or out of clubs, but that their goal – the staff's goal – was to make consequences matter. After that meeting, Joseph and Olivia created a form that could be given to ineligible students explaining why they were not eligible and what they needed to do in order to participate again. The group also decided to ask for their colleagues' help in monitoring the use of

Eligibility Lists by putting a sign-up sheet in the teacher work room, on which any teacher could volunteer to check a sports game or practice or a club meeting. The group did not want to be the sole enforcers of the Eligibility List, which was, as Karla reminded everyone, a school-wide initiative. Instead, participants were changing social structures to enforce accountability between and among colleagues in an unchartered manner.

Although a few group members felt adamant that their administrators should be the ones to check practices and club meetings, the voted-upon decision was that the PAR group did not want to rely solely on others; since they had created the EL, they positioned themselves to check for implementation.

Derek: Because you want to keep this stuff out of the administration's hands...because I feel as if they would...

Caroline: Mess it up?

Derek: Yeah. And maybe not mess it up necessarily...but just be like...

Caroline: Not do it?

Helen: We're doing it because it needs to be there. Done.

Important to note is that participants made the decisions to check sports practices and clubs and to recruit their colleagues for help without seeking administrative approval first; in the second cycle, the PAR group began trusting itself and finding new ways to exert power at Smith. In deciding to do enforcement checks, participants were voluntarily taking on more work which seemed indicative of *life enhancement* from the PAR group which is important to criticalists; had participants not found this work to be important and meaningful, they would not have added more time and effort to their improvement plan. Making decisions to hold their peers accountable for their intervention also revealed *increased self determination* and *sustainable use of tools for social change* from a social justice perspective; participants had increased confidence in the potential of the

Eligibility Lists to improve Smith High School, and thus added layers to their initiative that would move their colleagues closer to desired outcomes.

### **Empowerment: Challenging Power Structures**

Early in the Plan stage of the first PAR cycle, an assistant principal came to part of a PAR meeting to answer questions and to show that administration knew this group was meeting and trying to solve an issue of their choosing. An assistant principal (AP) also emphasized the school's pending budget cuts as a reminder that the group should not create a plan that depended on funding or additional personnel, as neither would be available the following school year. After she left, group members felt the weight of their challenge, but Derek saw their group's purpose in new light: "this is the only way it's going to make a difference: if they allow us to help. We're already here and they're not going to be able to bring somebody else in. You have to use the staff that's here" (Derek). He saw new power in the PAR group, because participants were offering to help their administration with issues they otherwise could not take on. PAR group members had already signed up to volunteer their time to address school-wide issues, and in Derek's mind that meant that the administration needed to let the PAR group participate in school change.

In the first Act stage at the beginning of the 2013-14 school year, PAR members advocated that students have their identification cards scanned when they came late to school so that students knew that their failure to arrive on time was acknowledged and had consequences. Despite their request, scanning tardy students had not begun and tardiness to school was a salient problem that the PAR group wanted to address in conjunction with implementing the EL policy.

Joseph: Well I think we should put pressure on [administration], saying we want to start scanning and we want to start scanning at what time?

Megan: Eight.

Joseph: Really?

Megan: 8:00:00

Karla: 7:58!

Joseph: I agree. But we may get opposition from the administration, so we better start at 8:10.

Megan: You know what, it's really good though because [Administrators] seem to like us to do things, and not them, and so if we get to make the decision then that's our decision.

Megan's last statement is indicative of the new power that PAR group members wanted to exercise; they were making decisions every time we met in order to create and implement their improvement plan, and since tardiness to school was the main reason that students earned detentions which could accrue and make them ineligible, the group experienced a ripple effect into new arenas of decision making. As participants saw it, and in tune with feminism, power was being redistributed to the once-marginalized group of teachers.

Near the end of the first cycle, the group wanted to get feedback from their colleagues about how the improvement plan was going, mostly to see if people were using the biweekly ELs and to learn about any barriers to using the lists. With a staff in-service day already scheduled at the end of the first quarter, the group created a short survey that they could preview during the PD and explain why they wanted everyone to take it. The group decided that a visual demonstration of how to download and use an EL was necessary once again, but they also wanted to use informal feedback from colleagues to clarify how to use the EL for field trips, club meetings, sports practices, and school events.

Megan: What if we were able to do like the PD day and we said like, “Okay, for clubs, Caroline is going to tell all the club teachers what to do.” You would say “all the field trip people, this is what you do.” “Now coaches, here is what you’re supposed to do.” We break it down that way so that we’re telling people, “Okay, you’re responsible for doing something outside the classroom.”

Helen: “This is your job.”

Megan: “Beyond the classroom, this is your responsibility.”

One can hear some of the frustration that Helen and Megan were feeling towards their colleagues, but what is also noteworthy is the PAR group’s expectation that their colleagues fully implement the plan that they created. As opposed to naming teachers who do not take their responsibilities seriously like the group had in our Reflect and Plan stages, the group grew confidence in what they created and would not give up on getting their colleagues to use their improvement plan. After deciding on their PD presentation, Megan had a final suggestion to celebrate the teachers who had used the EL for Homecoming events, and to point out that the PAR group had “been working on going out in the community and trying to get prizes. So that we can say like it’s not like we’re sitting here telling you what to do and not doing [stuff] ourselves” (Megan). Caroline added to this point by wanting to tell staff members that the group was meeting often and welcomed input:

Caroline: And maybe tell them we meet twice a month so if they have any suggestions or concerns they should let us know and we’ll talk about it. Just like let them know it’s ongoing and we still do work.

Helen: Yeah, emphasize the fact that we meet every other Thursday morning and have done all this extra voluntary work.

Participants focused on teaching their colleagues how to use the EL process effectively in their second cycle, and wanted to collect colleagues’ feedback in order to improve their initiative. The tools that enabled refinement included professional development time to



communicate with the staff, and a survey to collect teachers' anonymous feedback and suggestions (see "Teaching participants how to use tools for social change").

After deciding on PAR group-led enforcement of the EL at practices and club meetings, the group also decided on criteria for participating in Smith's biggest annual event: Culture Night. Almost every student club at Smith performed in Culture Night through traditional dances, music, and art from their countries of origin. But PAR group members could easily think of ineligible students who were already rehearsing for the event. For the third PAR cycle, Tamara created an online form for coaches and club sponsors to submit a list of their students so that when biweekly lists came out, sponsors could filter easily to look at their students' eligibility. The PAR group created a way for teacher sponsors to check the EL more easily, but the response from club sponsors was very low. Participants knew that this would not end well; sponsors who submitted their lists would end up revealing ineligible students who could not perform, and sponsors who did not submit lists would probably end up allowing ineligible students to participate. So the PAR group took on a new level of decision making once again: "that's something we can send out to all the clubs. 'If you anticipate being in [Culture Night], you need to have your list sent to Tamara by this date and it comes as part of your registration for [Culture Night]'" (Caroline). None of the PAR members were in charge of Culture Night, but it was the school's largest event and their administration was not ensuring that club sponsors checked the EL every other week. The group made the problem their own, once again revealing *self determination* of social justice in that the participants revised what they believed was in their locus of control, and created a new registration process for Culture Night that would force club sponsors to use the Eligibility List. The PAR group

was not only owning the power their initiative had over school processes, but they were learning how to use their improvement tool to instigate farther-reaching social changes at Smith. Once participants challenged power structures and exuded power beyond that of “just teachers,” the group decided that its locus of control expanded to include annual school events that could potentially compromise their initiative. The growth of the PAR group’s power was evidence of the *social, personal, and structural transformation* of feminism, as well independently *using tools for social change* by applying their interventions on a larger scale and moving towards the desired sustainability of social justice.

Group members found new ways to participate in their school’s power structures from being in the PAR group; some were directly tied with the PAR cycle which necessitates decision making, but the examples above highlight instances of exercising power outside of the immediate PAR process. Over the course of three cycles, participants became noticeably more comfortable with making decisions as their conceptualizations of their social, personal, and political power transformed, and their confidence grew as they witnessed their solution in action. In feminist studies, researchers aim to lead participants in *social, personal, and structural transformation* in hopes that the study’s setting will be permanently changed as community members grow their own power and influence. In many ways participants were *liberated* through their experiences as change agents, which is *life enhancing* for educators who have been striving to participate in school reform; both liberation and life enhancement are goals of critical theorists who aim to empower community members to take control in their contexts. Seeing their Eligibility List begin to address the lack of consequences at Smith

led participants to make decisions that impacted larger school processes such as serving alternative detentions through tutoring and yoga, and regulating school events like Culture Night; both examples were relevant to the PAR group through the cause-and-effect relationships they had with student eligibility, but were also instances of the PAR group growing its own power and expanding its influence.

### **Embracing Autonomy and Empowerment**

In mid-point interviews, many PAR members moaned about the lack of administrative presence in the meetings, with some members saying they thought an administrator should be at every meeting to be a part of decision making and should present at professional development so that teachers take the group's work more seriously. But during exit interviews, many participants expressed a different sentiment: that administration should support whatever they decide, and that PAR is a teacher-led movement. "I think if you do it where it's bottom up with teachers leading and the administrators being the support behind that, I think you get more effective change that way" (Melissa). Melissa's favorite part of the PAR process was that it was not top-down. It was her first experience leading a positive change effort in almost three decades of teaching: "I've seen a lot of things rolled out and get lost by the wayside or they're preempted, dynamic changes, and it just doesn't work. I think that this way of trying to make change is effective" (Melissa). Unlike other change initiatives, Melissa appreciated the social justice components of PAR, which were grounded in teachers' experiences and used their voices to determine necessary changes that were feasible for their school. As someone who had originally advocated that administration be present at every meeting, Melissa's exit interview revealed large mind shifts.

Caroline had been upset by the lack of administrative presence during initial PAR meetings as well. But in her exit interview, she stated that administration should support what the PAR group decides, instead of saying they should be part of the decision making process. When asked to describe an ideal relationship between a PAR group and a school's administration, Caroline responded,

Whatever the group decides, the administration is there to support it and if they need the admin to step in and do something they'll do it...And just really pushing whatever it is that the group comes up with. (Caroline)

By the end of my facilitation of the PAR group, Caroline saw that the process should be driven by teachers, but also acknowledged that a school's administration needed to support the group's decisions and enforce what they created in order for the improvement plan to be effective. Now that participants had realized their autonomy to drive a school improvement process, they began to feel empowered by the trust they were granted and adopted new beliefs that school improvement is most effective when driven by teachers and supported by administrators. At my last group meeting, Caroline offered to become the facilitator through the end of that school year; her decision to take on this role showed that a sustainable process had been learned, and that participants felt they could continue the work of PAR on their own. In tune with social justice, Caroline felt confident with the tools and processes of PAR, and thus she wanted to lead the group moving forward.

The findings from this study suggest that participatory action research is an effective way to engage teachers in school improvement, resulting in contextually appropriate and feasible initiatives that also empower teachers. Due to the lack of empowerment and autonomy offered to teachers at Smith before the study, even in a school with small learning communities, the process for participants to find their voice

and exercise their autonomy took time. A PAR facilitator should not expect teachers to embrace decision making readily, as teachers are used to being positioned below their administrators and district officials. In my study, participants were very uncertain about their autonomy until they started to see the results of their decision making in action. Participants' comfort levels with their autonomy changed over time, especially in planning for the third cycle when participants made decisions before administrative consultation: online submission of club and sports participants for easier filtering of data, mandatory registration for Culture Night, spot checks during extracurricular meetings (see Appendix D), and alternative methods of serving detentions through tutoring and yoga. In the Reflect and Plan stages for their third cycle, when a participant volunteered to take my place as the facilitator, it was clear that participants were comfortable in their new positions as decision makers on behalf of and for the benefit of the entire Smith High School community.

### **Tools Promoting Autonomy and Empowerment**

The PAR processes, in this study, contributed to my participants' development of autonomy and empowerment. The members of the PAR group engaged in ongoing self-examination and equitable sharing of their beliefs and increased their self-determination that shaped personal, social and structural transformation. Specific tools and activities used in the PAR process helped to foster autonomy and empowerment and to establish the personal, social and structural transformation. The following section describes tools identified by participants as being central to the PAR processes and contributing to their autonomy and empowerment.

**Tools that encouraged democratic decision-making.** Some individuals are naturally more outspoken or soft spoken, which is where facilitation becomes important, as do protocols such as asking everyone to journal about a specific topic and then share what they wrote. Tools that were particularly useful for positioning group members as valued equals in the study included Compass Points (National School Reform Faculty, 2014), journaling, and using a cause-and-effect fishbone (Ishikawa, 1982).

**Compass points.** At the first group meeting I facilitated the Compass Points (National School Reform Faculty, 2014) protocol with group members so that they could get to know each person's preferences for group work. By having everyone select a compass point (north, south, east, west) which matched their collaboration style, answer questions about their styles and present to the group, participants got to learn about one another and start building community. Beginning the PAR process with a protocol in which everyone had to participate and reveal their preferences for working with others set a different tone than other instances of collaboration with which Smith teachers were familiar. The protocol and subsequent discussions also revealed that each person's style was valued and important to decision making in the group.

I remember like north, west, east, and all that, the Compass Protocol of like what type of personality are you, and how you might relate that to working with others. I think these are all different tools to definitely use with groups that are trying to solve something, or just groups that are trying to organize something. (Karla)

Participants learned new things about one another through Compass Points, and they collectively learned that the PAR process would require participation and collaboration from everyone.

**Journaling.** After initial interviews and the Compass Points protocol, I knew that some people were louder and more energetic than others, and I also knew that it would be hard to capture nine people's thoughts and ideas in discussions. To ensure that all voices were heard at meetings, I incorporated journaling into meetings, which Helen picked out as a great way to focus everyone on the objectives of the meeting: "You always have us write something, which I think is really good and it helps to focus the conversations" (Helen). Participants would come into the meeting room and find a breakfast buffet, desks arranged in one circle, and journal prompts already on the desks. While they ate and settled in, I would allot time for people to independently record their responses. Often I would initiate the collaborative part of our meetings with an opener for each person to share a written response to one prompt in order to begin a focused discussion. While there were often comments to the tune of "I feel like I'm taking a test" when I first asked for journaling during meetings, the commentary died down as the group saw how the independent writing was a way to get their ideas on paper before having discussions:

I think that what I have liked about this group is that everything actually seems to be useful. I think sometimes I fill out stuff in other meetings and I'm kind of like "this doesn't matter" but I feel like the stuff that we do... It actually then ties in directly into the discussion that we end up having... I spend a little bit more time actually filling out the paperwork because I think that I've seen that it gets me thinking about what we're going to actually talk about. (Megan)

Although Megan equates journaling to "paperwork" here, she still realized that it was different from the other paperwork in her daily routines at Smith, and she saw value in taking journal writing seriously. Likewise, Olivia saw journaling activities as ways to promote thoughtful sharing during democratic decision making: "filling out the chart thing yesterday [Identity Chart], just like being able to kind of plan things out

methodically before sometimes just wanting to jump in.” If collaborative groups are not planned well, they can lead to people sharing off-task stories instead of contributing to the focus of the decision. Participants agreed that journaling before decision making made the process more efficient and thoughtful, and allowed everyone to gather their thoughts before opening the discussion.

**Cause-and-effect fishbone.** A tool for assisting a PAR group in democratically selecting a specific component of their chosen problem to address in their cycles is a cause-and-effect fishbone (Ishikawa, 1982), which is a method of graphically representing a problem and its root causes. I asked participants to fill them out independently to ensure that everyone’s ideas and experiences were included, after which they worked in triads to discuss and solidify what they believed to be the contributing factors to the group’s selected problem. In this pattern of individual, triad, whole group, everyone got to voice their viewpoints and brainstorm which components of their problem were within the group’s locus of control, and would be supported by their colleagues. Once again, the criticalist focus on Smith’s historical and political context, and the feminist belief that local knowledge should be valued as expertise were prominent in the Reflect and Plan stages of the group’s first PAR cycle. And because each participant had varying experiences, beliefs, and assumptions regarding their selected problem area, the fishbone was a tool for capturing everyone’s viewpoints before sharing and democratically selecting root causes to address. Meeting tools like the fishbone encouraged the group to engage in a careful assessment of root causes to school problems before selecting their issue and designing their solution as a democratic unit. The way I facilitated using the tool as individuals first, followed by triads, and finally in a



whole group discussion truly promoted inclusivity and democracy in the groups decision making process.

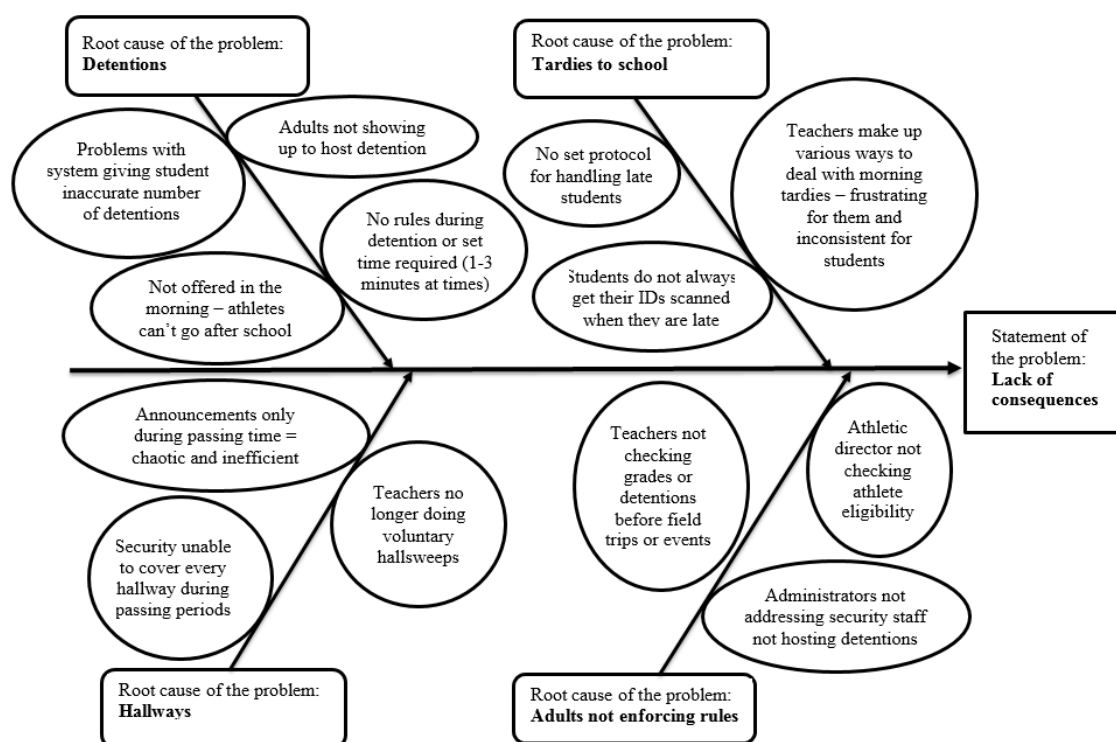


Figure 2. Smith High School Cause-and-Effect Fishbone

### **Empowerment: Teaching Participants How to Use Tools for Social Change**

A primary goal of participatory action research is to teach participants how to facilitate cycles on their own, which is the ultimate realization of autonomy and empowerment. Creating the first Eligibility List involved some technical coaching on how to use certain reports available in the district, and how to merge and organize data using specific software. Although one group member was well versed in using these programs, other group members wanted to learn how to make and manipulate Eligibility Lists so that they could teach others:

[Betsy] could teach us all how to do that, then there could at least be one person for every house. Even if that person taught one other person then you could have 2 people for every house doing it, and you'd only do something twice a month...as far as sustaining. (Megan)

Group members not only wanted their improvement plan to work, but they also wanted to be experts on different facets of their initiative so that they could teach their SLCs how to use the EL, and would have the skills needed to sustain their efforts.

When the group decided to create a teacher survey about the EL after first quarter, another instance of empowering participants with tools needed to drive school improvement occurred. Olivia had used the group's input to write a survey which was emailed to the Smith staff and was not part of my data collection. But the data gathered from the survey was not as useful as it could have been because of the wording of some of the questions. Olivia's frustration with teachers "taking the survey incorrectly," in her view, became an opportunity to talk about how to write survey questions well so that the results are useful. She also was not sure how to manipulate survey data, which was an opportunity to train her for future reference.

Betsy: Do you want to download the Excel, and then we can more easily sort stuff?

Olivia: Yes. How do I do that?

Betsy: Go to File and then Download As. Then, we can sort alpha and have all the YESes in a row and then the NOs in a row. Then easily get a number for that.

Olivia: Which one am I doing, the first one?

Betsy: Yeah. Let's just sort that one.

Olivia: Sorry. I don't know how to do this.

Betsy: That's okay.

It was important to train PAR members on research processes that they would need to use in the future, after my facilitation ended. The group later talked about doing a survey or focus group with students before making changes to the EL for the following school year;

having learned from their first survey and armed with PAR tools and protocols from our group meetings, participants had a repertoire of tools to use in the future.

Participants like Karla and Caroline also spoke of using PAR tools outside of the group, and bringing them into their classrooms. Karla even joked that her condominium association board would benefit from protocols we used in meetings, but she mostly wanted to use PAR tools with her students:

We can use this fishbone, definitely. Even outside of the group in my classes [I would] definitely use that. The other one I remember like north, west, east, and all that, the Compass Protocol of like what type of personality are you, and how you might relate that to working with others. I think these are all different tools to definitely use with groups that are trying to solve something, or just groups that are trying to organize something. (Karla)

Part of empowerment from a researcher's perspective in the southern hemisphere, and especially in social justice, is to equip participants to continue research on their own, and to be able to start new PAR cycles independently. Participants identified processes and tools that were most useful to them during the PAR group, and those which could be used outside of meetings as well.

### **Conclusion: Recommending Southern Hemispheric PAR**

The PAR process, when conceptualized with influences from the southern hemisphere, aims to empower community stakeholders by teaching them a cyclical process through which contextual issues can be identified and addressed. Through PAR, participants can come to embrace decision making that capitalizes upon their professional knowledge and experiences. In a school setting, teachers can become change agents for the betterment of their students and their schools. Every teacher in my study recommended the PAR process to other educators based on their experiences.

Participants felt heard and supported in the PAR group, and they were able to apply their knowledge of Smith students and school processes in order to generate positive change and improved outcomes.

I feel pretty empowered with this group...I like having a voice in this group and helping make decisions...We picked something, we have ownership of the issue and of the solution or our foreseen solution, and are working to get [administrative] support and working to get teacher support. It's nice to feel like something is happening instead of just complaining. (Caroline)

Teacher voice can often be taken as unproductive complaining, and sometimes it is. But more often than not, practitioners are in the best positions to identify and address school-wide problems. Through participatory action research, teachers' experiences were valued in shaping the direction of the study and group members worked democratically to make decisions that would improve their school. Looking at southern hemispheric perspectives, participants gained new confidence in themselves and their decision making abilities, eventually to the point of impacting school-wide events and structures just outside the immediate topic of the PAR study. The theoretical elements of constructivism, social justice, feminism, and critical theory were evident throughout each PAR cycle, with participants learning to embrace their autonomy and ultimately feeling empowered through the study.

From the very first group meeting, participants wrote in their journals that the PAR process was going to be different from other attempts they had made to address school issues. Before joining the PAR group, participants had recently experienced failed attempts to solve prominent problems, but through participatory action research they were able to approach problem solving differently and use their experiences and ideas to address salient issues. In exit interviews, I asked participants if they would recommend

the PAR process to other schools, and all nine replied that they would. Participants cited different reasons that they would recommend it, such as the way it gives teachers voice and how the process encourages follow through and sustainability. Most participants mentioned teacher-driven decision making as a highlight of PAR and a stark contrast to the top-down decisions that teachers usually receive. Participants also juxtaposed the cyclical PAR process to the tendency that many school districts have to hop from one initiative to the next. PAR is different in that participants revise and hone their initiative through cycles, which gives participants more confidence in leading their improvement effort and making decisions for other school-wide efforts as well.

Despite the local and federal funding being poured into low-performing schools and school districts, the American public education system is still in crisis. If school reforms are going to work, teachers need to be a part of problem solving so that improvement plans are contextually relevant and sustainable. PAR practices legitimize educators' knowledge and allow teacher to become learners, researchers, and change agents. This cyclical process could be well received in a time when teachers are asking to be a part of designing improvement plans for their schools. Teachers are hungry to participate in school reform and to become recognized agents of change rather than recipients of mandates; there could be no better climate to introduce a research- and data-informed change process wherein contextual knowledge can lead to problem solving.

Through a southern hemispheric lens of participatory action research, as influenced by constructivism, social justice, critical theory, and feminist theory, PAR has the capacity to emancipate marginalized teachers from the barriers that prevent them from participating in school improvement. Through structured dialogue, participants'

knowledge of and experiences in their setting becomes valuable data used to generate themes about pressing problems in order to select one focus for the group's work. Such liberatory dialogue takes place in tandem with participatory learning from one another and from research about their chosen problem; participants marry their collective knowledge of their context with research in order to craft a solution that is practical and realistic. By creating and implementing their own solution to a problem of their choosing, participants are able to partake in school-wide decision making in unparalleled ways. Their newfound ability to drive change offers teachers voice in school improvement; they get to decide how to make their school better instead of receiving orders from detached administrators and district officials.

In school reform initiatives that promote give teachers autonomy such as the small learning communities model, teachers still need guidance in order to fully realize their decision-making abilities. Teachers are not accustomed to empowerment with so many district mandates at play and must learn how to find their voices and use them for school improvement. The participants in my study identified PAR as a process that allowed them to use their ideas to drive change instead of just complaining and being told that their ideas would not work. All of my participants recommend participatory action research as a process that empowers teachers to drive school improvement, citing their own successes as evidence. More teacher-driven research and bottom-up change is needed in order for urban public schools like Smith to be able to improve themselves as new problems arise.

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ARTICLE III: REFLECTION IN PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH:  
MIRRORS, MICROSCOPES, AND BINOCULARS

**Introduction: The Call for Reflection**

Although teacher preparation programs and educator evaluation processes include reflective components, the process of said reflection is not always meaningful to teachers. Educators may complete reflective exercises in order to fulfill an assignment or compulsory form for their district, but the *why* and *how* of teacher reflection is often nebulous. “Most educators have been exposed to the idea of reflection, perhaps even so much that the term elicits little personal meaning” (Hendricks, 2013, p. 28). Without meaning, reflection is not likely to be authentic or genuine which negates much of its purpose. Teachers need to know more about the purpose of each type of reflection, and they need scaffolds for engaging in reflection in order to make it significant and feasible.

In the present study, I facilitated a participatory action research group at a large urban high school in Chicago. Because reflection plays such an essential role in action research, one component of my study was to specifically investigate the ways in which my participants engaged in multiple levels of reflection. In this article, I will first review various reflective traditions and the role of reflection in action research before presenting my framework for reflection in participatory action research and the findings from my participants.

## Reflection in Education

The history of reflection in education dates back to John Dewey (1933) who stressed that thinking about an issue in the classroom or school environment was an initial step of reflection (Hendricks, 2013). After Dewey's problem-solving definition came Schön's proposal (1983) that teachers can learn and improve their practices by reflecting on everyday lessons, and Freire's belief (1970) that educators could gain critical consciousness through reflection. A commonality in these definitions of reflection is that reflective inquiry can inform an educator's subsequent actions. Hendricks (2013) also considers reflection to be a *habit of mind*:

through reflection, educators think about and make sense of their practice and how to improve it, they connect this thinking and knowing to an ethical stance that focuses on what they believe and value, and they take action in the direction of those values. (p. 29)

While all of the aforementioned conceptualizations of reflection sound beneficial to both teachers and their students, there is little direction on how teachers can engage in reflection. Without guidance on the purposes and processes for reflecting on their practice, teachers are not likely to make time for authentic reflection.

**Reflection in teacher development.** Reflection is a large component of action research, and it has also become a ubiquitous component of teaching. Since reflection has many conceptual approaches, it is important to explore the many types and definitions of reflection before settling on the operating definition for this study. Because the implications and purposes of reflecting can differ so greatly, there is cause for clarification when any researcher highlights *reflection* as part of a study.

Today's discourse of reflection incorporates an array of meanings: a demonstration of self consciousness, a scientific approach to planning for the

future, a tacit and intuitive understanding of practice, a discipline to become more professional, a way to tap into one's authentic inner voice, a means to become a more effective teacher, and a strategy to redress injustices in society. (Fendler, 2003, p. 20)

From Dewey to the present, much has been published about the need for reflection in education, but with each author the meaning of reflection has taken on myriad meanings, some of which contradict or provide some dissonance with others.

Reflection is a practice through which teachers can arrive at heightened self-awareness, which in turn leads to more thoughtful professional decision making (Fendler, 2003). For Dewey, reflection is seen as a good practice for teachers because it forces them to slow down and act out of reason and science rather than instinct or impulse (cited in Fendler, 2003), and thus allows educators to add clarity and coherence to situations that might at first be obscure and conflicting (Pine, 2009). Schön's definition of reflection is that it is a vehicle to teachers' intuition and allows for creative, new ways of seeing often over-thought concepts. For teachers and researchers alike, there are many types of and purposes for reflection.

Unfortunately for teachers, at times the demand placed on them by others that they reflect on their teaching can result in unauthentic or superficial levels of reflection. Whether these mandates look like checkboxes on weekly or daily lesson plan templates, or complicated matrixes which administrators use to complete teacher evaluations, such processes do not allow for genuine and honest reflection (Fendler, 2003). Some practitioners also take the mandates for reflective practices as insinuating that they are not reflective by nature while others see that processes are needed to scaffold the integration of reflection in a teacher's regular practice (Pine, 2009). One major purpose

for utilizing reflection protocols is so that one is challenged beyond simply reinforcing his or her existing beliefs (Fendler, 2003). So although there is some contradiction in the fact that many curricula and evaluation systems demand reflection, using reflection protocols can help a practitioner to challenge her or his beliefs and stretch thinking and understanding beyond what is comfortable.

### **Reflection in Action Research**

In all forms of action research, reflection is tied to action. By engaging in action research, participants are charged to reflect on what they believe, how they view themselves, how they view others, and how they understand the chosen problem – not just at the microscopic [school] level, but in the larger discussion about education as well. There are multiple types of reflection in action research, varied both by action research activity and by reflective style and contextual influence. Schön (1987) differentiated types of reflection in action research when he separated reflection into two methods: reflection *in* action, and reflection *on* action. Reflection *in* action occurs during research activities and guides spontaneous decision making, whereas reflection *on* action occurs afterwards when a researcher can deliberate about an action that already took place. Additionally, reflection *for* action takes place before an action when a researcher considers potential solutions and outcomes (Pine, 2009). At each stage of the action research process, the researcher is reflecting before, during, or after an action.

Three forms of reflection identified by Koch, Mann, Kralik, and van Loon (2005) are as follows: descriptive reflection pertains to individual's reactions to events and responses during discussions; evaluation reflection assesses and critiques actions, feelings, and thoughts; and practical reflection takes place when feedback is given that can

be used to guide subsequent actions. Reflection can also be technical if it focuses on a researcher's skillset, or critical if the reflective inquiry explores broader social, ethical, and moral issues.

Another framework for reflection less about action research stages or components, but about ways to reflect on oneself either in a *mirror*, a *microscope*, or through *binoculars* (Pine, 2009). In the mirror, a researcher reflects on one's own beliefs, values, assumptions, and biases in order to learn more about a contextual problem or to learn more about oneself. Action researchers use a microscope to reflect on events or isolated experiences to explore the impacts that one's contributions made on an outcome. And through binoculars, an action researcher can look at larger issues related to the context-based study to see how the local is influenced by the global and vice versa. Whether looking for clarity regarding oneself, a small group or event, or a large movement outside of a study's context, there are many types of reflection to consider in action research.

### **Reflection in Participatory Action Research**

In participatory action research (PAR), reflection plays a central role to each stage and cycle of the process. Because PAR is driven by members of a community, for their community, reflective practices should be practical in that they are related to participants' everyday lives (Koch et al., 2005). "[Participatory action research] principles are based on the assumption that people are self-determining authors of their own actions, who can and do learn to reflect on their world and their experiences within it" (p. 262). Even though PAR necessitates a group of participants, self-reflection is still central to the research process because it fosters shared meaning making and understanding between

and among group members. In order to reach consensus on which community problem to select, for example, individuals must share their experiences, beliefs, and assumptions pertaining to a variety of community issues before deciding on one as a group. Sharing self-reflections is a key component of PAR, and thus building a safe community within a PAR group is essential to fostering this level of reflection (Koch et al., 2005). At the heart of PAR, is “collective, self reflective inquiry that researchers and participants undertake, so they can understand and improve upon the practices in which they participate and the situations in which they find themselves” (Baum, MacDougall, & Smith, 2006, p. 854). Once participants reflect on their organizational practices and beliefs, in addition to the history and culture of the setting, then they are positioned to take actions within that context while continuing to reflect on the influences those actions have on the context.

In the four-stage participatory action research cycle that I conceptualized for this study – Reflect, Plan, Act, Observe – PAR group members begin by using structured and critical reflection in order to evaluate their status quo and identify a problem to address in their setting. Reflection is also part of the Plan stage because a school’s existing processes and interventions as well as operating assumptions and biases must be carefully considered while creating an improvement plan for the identified issue. During Act, group members must be reflective about how the plan is implemented and whether it is adequately explained to all stakeholders. And the Observe stage is filled with reflection as PAR group members consider questions such as the following: Is our intervention addressing the problem? Is the plan fair to all stakeholders and harmonious with existing school processes? How can the improvement plan address the problem even more in the



next cycle? Throughout each stage and cycle, participatory action researchers must reflect both inwardly and outwardly with the assistance of prompts and protocols; when structured and facilitated well, “a reflexive dialogue occurs amongst participants, where they examine their motivations, assumptions, various roles, tensions and power imbalances, to create a congruence and credibility in what and how is researched” (Naylor et al., 2002; Rowan, 2001, cited in Burgess, 2006, p. 427). Reflection should directly influence action in ongoing loops throughout a participatory action research study.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Since the PAR model is intended to use reflection before selecting a research focus and during each phase of the action research cycle, using a framework for reflection can greatly enhance the frequency and depth of reflection. Many reflective approaches are multifaceted and charge participants to look inward, outward, and beyond their study’s context. A three-level approach can charge both the researcher and participants to consider different types of reflection (Pine, 2009; Reason & Torbert, 2001).

In my exploration of reflection, I will use Pine’s three-tiered approach to reflection – mirror, microscope, binoculars – and I will explore influential theories that have shaped my perceptions and understandings of what reflection looks like and does on intrapersonal, interpersonal, and global levels. These three levels are sometimes referred to as first-, second-, and third-person research activities, as explained by Reason and Torbert (2001):

First-person action research fosters self-inquiry and increasing awareness of the researcher’s own everyday life as the process unfolds. Second-person action research focuses on interpersonal encounters, and the researcher’s ability to

collaborate with others in their community of inquiry. Third-person research activities extend the inquiry within a wider community with intent to transform the politics of the issue. (cited in Burgess, 2006, p. 423)

Each level of reflection contributes meaningfully to a PAR study. Additionally, each level impacts the reflective practices of other levels; for example, once individuals engage in mirror reflection, they are likely to approach interpersonal relationships and reflective practices differently now that their self-concept has deepened.

In many ways, reflection can be fluid and have nebulous boundaries, but for the sake of studying the reflective practices of nine participants engaged in PAR, it helps to delineate the individual, group, and societal reflection levels and to specify influential theoretical frameworks for each:

Table 1

*Reflection in Participatory Action Research*

<b>Name of reflection</b>	<b>Type of reflection</b>	<b>Influential theoretical frameworks</b>
Mirror	Intrapersonal: each participant critically studies his/her own beliefs, assumptions, biases, experiences, and personal histories.	Transformative Learning Theory Psychodynamic Theory
Microscope	Interpersonal: participants evaluate their individual contributions to the PAR group and critiques the group's processes, experiences, and assumptions.	Social Emancipatory Theory
Binoculars	Global: individuals and whole group consider their work in the larger context of education reform.	Transformative Learning Theory

Because PAR is dependent upon having a group of individuals working to improve their context, the importance of capturing individual and whole group reflection was central to my research design and methodology. In addition to collecting three levels of reflective

data from my participants, I also had to collect data on my own three-tiered reflections; as an insider-outsider participant-researcher, my positionality influenced my actions in the PAR group. After exploring each level of reflection and influential frameworks, I will scrutinize my positionality and how it shaped my role in the PAR group that I facilitated.

### **Intrapersonal Reflection: Looking into a Mirror**

The first-person lens focuses on self-awareness and inquiry during the PAR process and can be documented through tools like personal journals and interviews; such subjective data can be used by participants to inform their next steps (Chandler & Torbert, 2003) and is particularly important for rising leaders (Pine, 2009). This process is also referred to as using a *mirror* to challenge researchers to reflect inward:

“[r]eflection as a mirror helps you to understand yourself, your values, your assumptions, and your biases, and to see how your experience has helped you learn more about these dimensions of yourself” (Pine, 2009, p. 182). Because one objective of participating in action research is to grow from the experience, the mirror may be the most obvious way for some participants to reflect on and recognize their growth.

**Transformative learning theory.** Transformative learning is another theory that provides structure to the process of reflection, which can be seen as an important first step to changes in one’s viewpoints and beliefs. Through the lens of transformational learning theory, reflection can be the instigator to transformation: “Becoming critically reflective of one’s own assumptions is the key to transforming one’s taken-for-granted frame of reference, an indispensable dimension of learning for adapting to change” (Mezirow, 1997, p. 9). Additionally, becoming more aware and critical of the assumptions and beliefs of others is essential to collaborating effectively. Such personal

and group reflection are likely to occur if the environment is conducive; to create such an environment, group norms should be drafted by the group which include respect, equal participation, welcoming diversity, and fostering collaboration (Mezirow, 1997). Through inward reflection, an individual can acknowledge his or her assumptions and beliefs in order to re-frame and transform personal perspectives according to new learning and insights.

Another ideal situation that fosters transformative learning is that the facilitator, or *provocateur*, gradually releases leadership onto the group and becomes more of an equal to other group members, while the group takes charge of the research cycle (Mezirow, 1997). The process of transformative learning for adults is described much like a participatory action research cycle, and selected perspectives within the theory can become lenses through which individual, interpersonal, and global reflection can be examined.

**Psychodynamic.** For examination of each participant's journey through the transformative learning involved in participatory action research, *psychoanalytical* and *psychodevelopmental* views (Taylor, 2008) are most appropriate for targeting the individual. The former focuses on a person's path to understanding oneself by way of intellectual structures (e.g., ego, persona) of which a person is composed. This process of individuation involves "discovery of new talents, a sense of empowerment and confidence, a deeper understanding of one's inner self, and a greater sense of self-responsibility" (p. 7). Another conception of transformative learning that focuses on the individual is psychodevelopment, which looks more specifically at reflecting on epistemological change over time alongside the roles of context and interpersonal

relationships in personal growth. One essential process of learning is “an internal psychological process of elaboration and acquisition in which new impulses are connected with the results of prior learning” (Illeris, 2004, p. 81). Thus, it is necessary to charge participants with scrutinizing their intellectual growth in order to capture their reflections on this process. Both psychoanalytic and psychodevelopmental lenses of transformative learning can help a facilitator guide individual reflections regarding intrapersonal understanding and changes in how each person makes meaning as impacted by the PAR study.

Similarly, psychodynamic theorists look for the ways in which unconscious beliefs and processes impact relationships between participants in a study, the researcher, and the topic and data being collected (Finlay, 2002). “They recommend the use of both introspection and self-reflection...as research tools to enable researchers to become aware of the emotional investment they have in the research concerned” (p. 535). By encouraging participants to think about their unconscious operating systems, PAR group members can more aptly identify beliefs that shape their own participation in research, and which influence their interactions with others. Such inward reflection is not an end in itself, but rather it is a vehicle that leads to deeper conversations and insights both for individuals and for a group of people engaged in collaboration.

### **Interpersonal Reflection: Using a Microscope**

The second-person vantage point of a PAR study highlights interpersonal encounters, looking at the researcher’s interactions with participants and at participants’ levels of collaboration with one another; this tier of data can allow participants to “appreciate their multiple perspectives and to change how they work together” (Chandler

& Torbert, 2003, p. 135). Due to the group nature of PAR, it is important to closely examine relationalities and emotionalities during this type of reflection and to note points of resistance and tension among participants (Pain, Kesby, & Kindon, 2010). “Together they discover and co-author knowledge, create innovation, and validate their collective efforts, by mobilization of others and transformation of systems and social culture” (Reason & Bradbury, 2001, cited in Burgess, 2006, p. 431). The high levels of participation and collaboration demanded by PAR lead to shared learning and meaning-making, and the progression from each PAR stage to the next is contingent upon interpersonal dialogue, reflection, and decision making.

Other than considering group dynamics, the second-person level also challenges participants to think about the ways in which their contributions to the group affected others; this *microscopic* viewpoint asks participants to reflect on events and turning points that occurred during the PAR process, and to assess their own roles and impacts on the group’s actions (Pine, 2009). While this process might highlight different levels of participation, it charges group members to think about group interactions on several levels. This type of reflection also relates to the constructivist and social learning theories, which argue that people can arrive at new and different knowledge in group settings than they can as individuals. Charging participants to specifically reflect through microscopes on the interpersonal relationships and outcomes of the PAR group can lead to deeper reflection than that which participants engage in without such a targeted focus.

**Social emancipatory.** To facilitate concerted reflection around interpersonal relationships through the PAR process, the *social-emancipatory* view, tied to Freire’s (1970) work, focuses on the roles of praxis (reflection and action), dialogicity around

articulating realities and raising consciousness, and educators as political advocates and colearners with students (Taylor, 2008). During data collection focused on social-emancipatory viewpoints, individual and group questions can be posed about the ways in which group members challenged each other's perspectives, taught one another, and the ways in which the group collectively achieved levels of conscientization that each individual may not have experienced otherwise. Through critical reflection regarding their understandings of the context throughout the PAR process (e.g., power dynamics, social and political factors), participants can share their levels of voice and agency and how those elements impact their personal and professional experiences; the key is intentionally collecting data to assess group members' experiences of the PAR process.

### **Global Reflection: Using Binoculars**

The third-person *binocular* lens extends beyond the inquiry of the PAR cycle and looks at how the study affected the broader community and also how the researcher and participants view their roles as actors in the larger community. This type of reflection can expand participants' vision beyond the issues in their school, and encourage them to zoom out to larger issues and consider how their work in the PAR group may have implications in the broader education system (Pine, 2009). Taking on a third-person reflective lens can also lead participants "to envision future developments and to change future behaviors, attitudes, and decisions" (p. 182). This stage asks participants to zoom out and consider how their topic and the PAR process fits into the larger conversation about school reform, urban schooling, and the roles of teachers in school improvement. Using binoculars also encourages group members to look at a larger web of beliefs

around their selected topic, and to identify channels of influence between their school and the broader field of education (Wadsworth, 2001).

**Transformative learning theory.** Another layer of transformative learning is the interaction between an individual and her or his greater environment: physical, social, and cultural (Illeris, 2004). The *planetary* view of transformative learning focuses on the whole picture, including educational, political, and social systems that are affected by new understandings (Taylor, 2008). From this vantage point, the goal of transformational learning is to reorganize the social, political, and educational systems of which the world is comprised. The planetary view goes beyond the social-emancipatory in that it concentrates on changes in global systems and variations in how each participant encounters that global system. The emphasis on positionality challenges participants and facilitators alike to consider their “relationship to both the process and the practice of transformative learning” (p. 10) and allows group members to view the PAR cycle through *binoculars*.

### **Positionality of the Researcher**

I began my study believing that teachers can be change agents who address school-wide problems when given time and space to discuss and identify issues, review research, devise a plan, then implement, monitor, and modify that plan as data is analyzed. Constructivists believe that a researcher cannot divorce his or her beliefs and experiences from a study that he or she conducts (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 132), and in transformative learning theory one must be critically reflective of and upfront about one’s assumptions and beliefs. The awareness and transparency I maintained with myself and my participants was vital to relationship building with my participants, and also with



increasing the validity of my study: “Being authentic about who I am and what I bring to the research is a measure of research validity” (Heen, 2005; Heron & Reason, 2001; Schein, 2001; Whitehead et al., 2003, cited in Burgess, 2006, p. 424). I am conscious of the influences that my biases have on my research design, and on how my positionality as an insider-outsider researcher-participant shaped my study.

According to Dwyer and Buckle (2009), an *insider researcher* shares membership to the community of participants and therefore also has semblances in identity and experience with PAR group members (p. 28). I have inside knowledge about small learning communities, which is the reform model that Smith High School was implementing during the study; not only have I done extensive research through my graduate coursework and through my PAR experiences, but as an SLC coach I know the details of the SLC grant, issued by the Department of Education, and I work closely with the SLC Central Office Team. Another part of my insider status is more general; I am a teacher, not an administrator or Central Office staff member. In union lingo, the teachers from another school who participated in this study are my *brothers and sisters*.

My outsider qualities include my role as the researcher and facilitator as opposed to being a participant, my unfamiliarity with the setting and the history of Smith High School, the implementation of SLCs at that school, and the daily experiences of school stakeholders. Every school has its idiosyncrasies, and thus my goal was to keep a “close awareness of [my] own personal biases and perspectives” (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p. 59) while aiming to gain an *emic* understanding of how participants experience their school, the school problem that becomes the focus of the PAR cycle, and small learning communities. Researchers like Breen (2007) have found that residing *in the middle* can

make it easier to question the data, notice nuances and dynamics that might go unnoticed by insiders, understand topics enough to gain credibility sooner than outsiders, and generally “maximize the advantages of each while minimising [*sic*] the potential for disadvantages” (p. 171). Through reflective and transparent practices, I aimed to learn and grow from participants and through the topic that they choose to address at their school.

As a researcher-participant, my positionality was further complicated. I was the facilitator and the resident expert on participatory action research, but at the same time I was a central decision maker; my outside status meant that I was not a community member, and the work of PAR is meant to be driven by a community for that community. Even though I did not work at Smith, I still cared about the group’s success in addressing the problem that they selected. My investment in the group’s success was genuine, and it was also important to building trust with the insiders from my outsider position; “The facilitator must demonstrate compassion and genuine empathy or the group will not develop the trust required for effective PAR group work” (Koch et al., 2005, p. 271). While facilitating each PAR stage and cycle, my goals were to teach group members how to navigate the key research activities so that they would be positioned to continue future PAR cycles without me. All at once I was facilitating real-time PAR activities and engaging in PAR as a participant in the group, teaching participants the *why* and *how* of everything we did so that their work was sustainable, while also researching the participants’ experiences of PAR and engaging group members in three levels of reflection.

**Role of the researcher in PAR.** Reflection on the researcher's part is critical to the research process and to transformative learning through the study and beyond. Guidelines recommended to the facilitator of transformative learning include maintaining a nonhierarchical position in the group (truly being a coresearcher), establishing norms and goals that are meaningful and authentic for participants, and giving participants nonevaluative feedback (Taylor, 2008). A researcher should model the reflection that she or he expects from participants, which additionally will result in more profound insight about the self, the participants, and the research process: "without developing a deeper awareness of our own frames of reference and how they shape practice, there is little likelihood that [transformative educators] can foster change in others" (p. 13). A facilitator must also critically reflect on the same individual (psychoanalytical and psychodevelopmental), interpersonal (social-emancipatory), and planetary levels and therefore demand of themselves the same courage they request from participants.

### **Methodology**

By collecting all participants' reflections on three levels throughout the PAR process, my aim was to investigate participant's reflective journeys throughout the study. In order to tell the stories of participants engaged in PAR, I relied on their voices as recorded in written journal entries and from audio-recorded meetings and interviews. Written and oral prompts were specifically devised to facilitate reflection at three levels: intrapersonal (mirror; transformative and psychodevelopmental), interpersonal (microscope; social-emancipatory), and global (binoculars; transformative).

**Context**

This study took place at Smith High School, a large neighborhood school on the northwest side of Chicago. SHS was the recipient of a Smaller Learning Communities grant in 2010 which was funded by the Department of Education until September 30, 2014. Under this grant, Smith focused on personalization based on six college- and career-themed houses within the school. All students and teachers were a part of an SLC.

**Sample**

There were nine participants in this study, all of whom were employed as teachers at Smith High School. Two of the nine teachers acted as deans and were not in the classroom during this study. Seven participants were teaching four to five classes each, and were members of four different small learning communities and eight different academic departments. Participants' years of experience ranged from two to 26 years, and two participants were teachers by career changes.

**Research Questions**

On a broad level, my guiding research question was the following: How do teachers change as a result of their experiences in the PAR cycle? In order to get more specific data regarding anticipated types of change, I had three sub-questions:

- a) How do teachers' perceptions of themselves and their actions change from their engagement in a participatory action research cycle?
- b) How does participating in a PAR cycle influence teacher's views of the larger discussion of school reform and improvement?

- c) How does the act of facilitating a PAR cycle impact the researcher's view of herself as a learner, her interactions with others, and her global perception of participatory action research?

By devising specific codes for each sub-question, I was able to more easily organize instances of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and global reflection.

### **Data Collection**

In order to encourage participants to look inwardly and reflect on their own beliefs, assumptions, and perceptions of self, I used multiple forms of data collection during the PAR study. Throughout the nine month study, I used journal prompts during meetings, feedback forms after meetings, and individual interview questions to collect data on various levels of reflection through the PAR study. Using individual journal writing before group discussions allowed for me to gather powerful data from all participants, including those who did not talk as much as others and those who could not make every meeting. Written responses also encouraged thoughtful reflection prior to group conversations (Koch et al., 2005) and focused participants on the objective for that meeting. I also maintained written and oral journal entries throughout the PAR process, and a critical friend outside of the study's context used my interview questions for initial, mid-point, and exit interviews in order to interview me.

During initial interviews I asked participants to identify at least five words that describe themselves so that I could get to know them better while also seeing how each person labeled themselves. To guide this task, I used a modified Identity Chart (Facing History & Ourselves, 2014). Over half of my participants asked if I wanted words related to them as teachers or as people, which is telling in itself; many teachers see their

profession as part of their personal identity and not just as something that they do. I also asked each person to tell me about their path to become educators, their responsibilities at Smith High School, and their daily decision making abilities. Responses revealed various leadership roles, teaching styles, and experiences with collaboration. Additionally, I wanted to know each person's reasons for joining the PAR group, their anticipated contributions to the study, and their desired outcomes as well.

In midpoint interviews I asked individuals to describe their understanding of the PAR process and newly learned skills or tools that might use beyond the study. I also asked about their individual fishbone diagrams so as to discuss the cause-and-effect relationships which they identified as contributing to the selected problem. By inquiring about their roles in school reform both at Smith and beyond, I charged participants to think about themselves, the group, and the larger picture of education. My last set of questions focused on self-assessment around participation in the group by asking them to rate their contributions to the group and to set goals for the second PAR cycle; this prompt instigated reflection on personal actions and behaviors which could not be done in a group setting.

In exit interviews, I asked participants to tell me about what they had learned about themselves as learners, as collaborators, and about the PAR process. To aid with these questions, I requested that each person select three artifacts from the PAR study that would help them describe their stages of learning and understanding. I then more directly asked how their views of themselves had changed from their participation in the PAR process, and whether or not their view of colleagues had changed. Lastly, I inquired

as to whether each person would recommend PAR to other educators, and also what level of involvement they believed that teachers should have in school reform.

### **Intrapersonal Findings: What Participants Learned about Themselves**

Using data from individual interviews and journal entries, as well as dialogue from group meetings, I was able to code instances of participants engaging in intrapersonal reflection over the course of the PAR study. While many individual journeys differed, certain themes emerged in the data: participants became proactive and took on new roles due to the PAR group; they were challenged to reflect upon themselves as educators and individuals; and every group member felt valued for what they could contribute to the group and for what they accomplished through the study.

### **Reflective**

Certain protocols that I facilitated in our group meetings encouraged participants to reflect on their beliefs, assumptions, practices, and ideas for change in new ways. Through written journaling protocols (see Appendix C), discussion questions, and individual interview prompts (see Appendix E), I challenged participants to think about how PAR activities impacted their views of themselves, of others, and of school improvement. In initial interviews I asked participants to share at least five descriptors of themselves so that I could get to know them and hear their self-identified key attributes; through this activity I was encouraging the critical inward reflection that can lead to transformation, per transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1997). One example from Joseph's interview was selecting the word "dad"; not only is he a father, but he chose to write "dad" to represent his work as a dean because many Smith students "don't have two-parent families, so if some of them don't have dads, I'm not going to replace their

dad, but I think I can give them guidance on what a dad would do to help them out” (Joseph). Such reflective prompts and follow-up probes were not questions that my participants were usually asked to consider and explain, but such self-reflection added great depth to my understanding of each person and our relationship building as well; by acting as a *provocateur*, I charged participants to think more deeply about their beliefs and how unconscious operating systems impacting their identities (Taylor, 2008).

At the first group meeting, I used a group collaboration protocol that is both productive for adults to do before group work and also has a reflective component. The Compass Points protocol (National School Reform Faculty, 2014) asks individuals to self-select a working style and once in those styles, small groups answer questions about their style’s strengths, weaknesses, complementary and clashing styles, and things they want other styles to know about them. After this activity, I asked participants to complete a written exit ticket that encouraged intrapersonal reflection: What did you learn about yourself through the Compass Points protocol?

Helen: That I shared similar traits to a few people that I hadn’t realized and that the hard to work with style was occupied by someone who I have had conflict with before.

Megan: I’m not caring (just kidding). Many people I work close with have same “compass” as me (West or East). Maybe I need to try to be a little more North so things get done.

Caroline: I’m a planner – I have aspects of all of the points but definitely gravitate to planning. I’m least likely to “care.” I feel that if everyone is professional and respectful, the group should not need to focus on feelings.

Tamara: That most people find difficult to work with me.

Derek: It seems as if I like to observe, prior to acting. I would agree with this.

Karla: That I am able to work with others, although a bit hesitant “to jump in” and that am more of a detail, and caring person.

Many group members talked about the benefits of engaging in the Compass Points protocols in their mid-point and exit interviews, and Helen even reported that she



recommended the protocol to other teacher collaboration groups at Smith. By facilitating the group in increasing their awareness of their own beliefs and preferences, our group was more adequately prepared to enter into collaboration with one another (Mezirow, 1997). The process of reflecting on how each person operates, and then considering a group's dynamics was an experience that participants deemed to be beneficial to their collaboration in and outside of the PAR group.

In mid-point interviews, I asked participants to evaluate their participation in the group, and to set goals for the second PAR cycle. Some participants whose attendance was lower than others set goals of coming to more meetings, and other quieter participants set goals to speak up more:

I'm doing okay. I think I could do more...I'm definitely not the leader of the group, of the pact, and I'm completely fine with that. I just want to know how I can support us as a whole more. I don't want them to think that I'm just kind of laying back, and not doing anything, so I need to do that. (Karla)

Such reflections like Karla's about contributing more to the group, or aiming to attend more meetings (Melissa, Joseph) demonstrated that participants were being critical of themselves as collaborators and colleagues. By thinking about their own egos and personas through psychoanalytical reflection (Mezirow, 1997), half of my participants set goals for themselves to increase participants and attendance in order to reach their own potentials as PAR group members.

In midpoint interviews I also asked participants about any new things they were learning about themselves as learners and collaborators from the PAR process. This prompt and follow-up probes led to very interesting observations that participants made

about themselves, and it revealed psychodevelopmental reflection since participants were experiencing new impulses based on activities we did in the PAR group (Finlay, 2002):

I think I need to map things out a little more...like this [cause-and-effect fishbone], except the way my brain does it to figure out what makes sense or what doesn't, taking it down a path...like a chain reaction to everything that we do. And really looking at it through and pinpointing what's the exact spot we can do something about. I think I am more visual than I had known. (Caroline)

Realizing she was a more visual learner from our work in the PAR group was a great intrapersonal discovery that came to Caroline through psychoanalytical interview prompts, and having time and space to think about herself. Megan also learned about herself as a collaborator: "I think that I really like being part of committees. I feel like I'm a worker bee. I am not a leader bee, I'm not the queen bee" (Megan). She also reflected on her own beliefs towards the Eligibility List during her exit interview: "these are awesome opportunities that you can become a part of...Before I always said the Ineligible list and now I say the Eligible List because I think of like okay, 'now you get to do this'" (Megan). By being asked to think about any changed perceptions of herself or the group's work through PAR, participants like Megan were able to look into the mirror and consider changed viewpoints from their experience.

For Olivia, looking in the mirror allowed her to realize that she thrives in collaborative groups because she doubts herself and rarely makes decisions alone: "I tend to doubt myself about most things...I like running ideas by other people. If we have the same ideas, I think it helps validate that I think that it's a good point or something that we should work on" (Olivia). Her increased awareness of her need for validation increased her belief in collaborating with others, much like the work of transformational learning theory. Caroline also realized her motivation to participate in teacher teams alters

according to the productivity of the group: “I think it confirmed for me that if the group works well, I’ll work a lot in the group. If the group doesn’t, I’ll check out... When it works well, I really want to do stuff and help it” (Caroline). Likewise, looking more critically inward at her behaviors and beliefs allowed Caroline to learn more about herself as a collaborator. Personal interviews really afforded the time and space to ask participants to look within themselves with a reflective lens in order to bring out new learning and understandings of themselves; it is rare that teachers engage in deep reflective practices in their work day, and I would argue that it is difficult to push oneself to this level without prompting from someone else, like a provocateur (Mezirow, 1997).

Other reflections from the group that I collected during interviews unintentionally were about my facilitation. During midpoint and exit interviews I asked more general questions about how they thought the PAR group was going, and often the responses were about me:

I think that you’re good person for this because you’ve made the group what they are which is comfortable and respectful of one another. A lot of it has to do with what is the role of a facilitator. I mean you kind of steer it but you aren’t this Nazi facilitator and I think that helps a lot. I think that keeps people coming back because just the way you do it. (Melissa)

Megan and Helen also shared impromptu accolades about my facilitation during their midpoint interviews; although my interview questions were geared towards participants’ reflections on themselves and the PAR process, their interpersonal reflections on my role in the group reinforced my insider-outsider positioning while also raising my confidence in my ability to lead this work and thus impacting my intrapersonal reflections, psychodevelopment, and transformation into a more confident facilitator.

In my own interviews with my dissertation chair, I had to answer the questions I wrote for my participants. This process encouraged my own reflection to deepen far beyond my personal audio reflections and journal entries which reinforce my belief that it is difficult to truly reflect alone:

I think it's harder for that reflection to really come out when you are meeting right before school or you're meeting in the middle of the school day or just after school. I think it's hard to fully realize that reflexivity about who you are and what you believe in because you're in an environment that has bells ringing and announcements going. I love reflection, obviously, but I think that's harder to realize. (Betsy)

Through participatory action research activities – namely the Reflect and Observe stages – and through my data collection process which included individual journaling and individual interviews, I believe I was able to engage my participants in levels of reflection that otherwise are not experienced by teachers.

### **Activist**

For some PAR group members, joining the group made them feel like activists; unlike their colleagues who heard the recruitment presentation and thought about problems to solve but who did not select to join the study, participants decided to take on yet another responsibility at their school in order to make it better. One of my codes guiding data collection and analysis was to look for new actions that participants took because of joining the PAR group; I used a broad concept of *action* to catch any ways that participants identified as new ways of acting attributed to our group.

I mean that's my whole interest in being in this group: I think if you're going to complain about a problem you should try to solve it or you should stop complaining. So I don't want to complain about things and then there be a committee that would be able to solve it and not be a part of it. (Megan)

Even before we had begun our PAR work, participants like Megan already felt like they were taking a step beyond their peers to not only point out problems, but to also make steps to solve them. Identifying this internal belief that they had gone above the efforts of their colleagues by joining the PAR group impacted participants' perceptions of themselves and eventually led them to find more confidence in their roles as change agents and their responsibility to enforce the initiative they created.

In her mid-point interview, Melissa attributed the activism of the group to the voluntary nature of joining the study. Since every group member, like Megan, chose to take a step beyond their colleagues' complaining, their motivations for participation were all action-orientated: "Because I think everybody comes with kind of, like, a hopeful attitude like 'We can make a change,' and 'We are making a change.' I think people feel good about it" (Melissa). In their exit interviews, all participants attributed the productivity of the group its voluntariness; the only people who signed up to be participants and who came week after week to meetings were teachers who felt like they could affect positive change through the PAR group. I believe this mentality to connect back to psychoanalytical work in which participants were engaging; by adopting the persona of a volunteer who was surrendering his or her time for a cause, participants grew to discover new talents as leaders of a positive change at their school.

Once the Eligibility List policy was implemented and started to make sense to students – as in, they understood what being eligible meant and what criteria they needed to meet – the initiative began to instigate changed behavior in Smith students. The principal told participants excitedly that he saw students running to get into the school building before the bell for first period (as reported by Helen). Joseph and Olivia, Smith's

deans, also saw the highest attendance to after school detention in years: “I mean more kids have been doing detentions to stay off the ineligible list. In years past we’d have one or two kids showing up for detention. We got as many as 22 kids now showing up at detention time” (Joseph). When participants saw and heard the evidence that their policy was changing student behavior, their energy in group meetings increased as did their desire to make additional improvements to their intervention.

Another action that participants identified as being central to PAR was the gradual, authentic nature of the improvement cycle. One important element of creating and implementing a successful intervention that Megan identified was the iterative nature of the improvement model. Because PAR is a cyclical model, the intervention crafted in the first cycle is improved upon in future iterations, using data and feedback from stakeholders. Participants found the iterative process to greatly contrast typical single-loop improvement strategies (see Ferrell, 2014a), and thus taking on a new model that was grounded in teachers’ realities made them feel like activists.

Sometimes when people are backed into a corner and they don’t have a solution, they either make something up or they become defensive and I think we’ve done a good job of being like “listen, it wasn’t perfect. We told you that when we rolled it out. There’s things that we obviously couldn’t think about and we’ll change it for next time.” I think that’s been good too because I think it makes us look like we’re trying to be, or we’re trying to do, something real. (Megan)

In PAR, there is no quick fix. Community stakeholders make thoughtful decisions about which problem to select and how to address it, but through multiple cycles the solution is honed for improved effectiveness. Megan felt that knowing this from the beginning, and telling colleagues about the intention for multiple cycles, made the solution a work in progress instead of a high stakes promise to solve all issues at once which often occurs in

schools. Honesty was a value that she identified as being critical to the way in which the group collaborated, and the way participants represented themselves and the group to their colleagues.

For most participants, they had not experienced positive teacher-driven change before. Only two months before my study, several teacher-generated improvement plans had fallen flat at Smith, so participants like Helen identified the PAR group's success as "reassuring after being in many groups where sometimes it feels like we're spinning our wheels and not getting anything done which can be frustrating... This is definitely ...positive in that you can be part of- you can do things" (Helen). In interviews, participants revealed their negative assumptions about teacher-led initiatives based on their recent experiences. In many ways, airing said assumptions allowed participants to move into a new collaborative experience with honest hesitation. But over time, participants were able to transform into a ground-up task force that none of them had experienced before. The notion that teachers can "do things" was another way that participants characterized the actions they could take because of the PAR group.

**Taking on new roles.** Because of their work in the PAR group, many participants took on new roles outside of the PAR group as well. While participants did not volunteer to join the PAR study in hopes of adding more to their plates, many of the additional roles that group members took on came naturally with the improvement plan that they designed. For example, Tamara had already been disseminating school-wide data to teachers, but she pointed out in her midpoint interview that "Being in the PAR Group helps me to actually provide more data to the teachers" (Tamara). Data was already part of her ego and persona at Smith, so for her the work of the PAR group was an extension

of what she had been doing before, but the PAR initiative gave her a wider reach amongst the staff; such psychoanalytical reflections were again captured in individual interviews.

For Olivia, who had become a dean a few months before the study began, the Eligibility List became a direct part of her job, which she was struggling to transition into at the start of the study. “I check the List every week and...pay attention for certain kids that are on there that maybe I know and kind of remind them if I see them” (Olivia). The EL data helped her support students as one of the school’s deans, and it assisted in student conferences as well. More important than her outward actions as a dean was her internal struggle to be herself in this new role; her goal had been to promote positive expectations and supports for students as a dean, but until the PAR group she was unsure about how to be a positive impact as a dean.

I think me taking a leadership role in some of these things is good because people are like okay she’s still and that maybe selfish that I’m like “I still want people to think good of me.” Yeah, I do. It’s important to me. So I like that I’m out there trying to do things for the benefit of the school and that people hopefully notice that. (Olivia)

By leading the creation of school-wide expectations, Olivia was able to engage in professional identity work, and find ways to sustain her reputation and also hold students accountable to the CPS Code of Conduct. During this midpoint interview, Olivia shared the type of critical reflection that enabled her own transformation (Mezirow, 1997) into the dean she was not confident whether she could be. It took prompts and probes in an individual interview in order for her to look inward and work on herself. Finding a way to make her colleagues and former students “think good of me” was also personally important to Olivia, which came out in her individual reflections.



As classroom teachers and student advisors, Megan and Melissa both mentioned the ways in which the PAR group's efforts influenced their existing roles. Right after the Advisory lesson that introduced all students to the Eligibility List, Melissa took the opportunity to discuss the new policy with her English classes, and to answer their questions as well: "I had the opportunity to talk to my classes and students about the detentions and eligibility and all that. Because kids were talking and I wanted to talk with them about it" (Melissa). Megan also highlighted the ways that the Eligibility List influenced the conversations that she had with her Advisory students, especially regarding detentions: "I do think with my homeroom kids I've talked more about having detentions, serving detentions, 'why do you have that?' I think that the list for teachers has made that kind of come back into my talk with kids" (Megan). While teaching and advising were not new roles for PAR group members, the topics they covered with students were influenced in new ways because of the EL policy. The conversations that Advisors facilitated with students because of the PAR initiative shaped Advisors' roles and the types of conversations they had with their advisees. Although this was more professional than personal reflection, several participants noted changes in their own behaviors and responsibilities as Advisory teachers because of the PAR initiative.

In some instances, though, PAR group members acted in new ways because of their school improvement efforts. The first example occurred at the Homecoming football game, where four group members volunteered to check for Eligibility at the entrance to the game. Many group members had not attended school football games before, and others who had gone had attended as spectators who did not have any tasks. "When I went to the football game, or I think that when I've gone places because of the group,

I've had more of an active role while I've been there" (Megan). Being more visible and active at school events was a byproduct of initiating the Eligibility List policy at Smith High School. Megan, Olivia, Caroline, and Derek did not have to attend that football game, but they wanted to see their policy enforced with fidelity, and they wanted students to know that this new rule was serious. Their actions in this case involve a new perception of their roles at Smith; spending time beyond the school day in order to hold students accountable to the Eligibility List represented a shift in how participants carried themselves and the importance of their work in the PAR group. Psychoanalytically, participants' newly adapted personas as change agents led them to adopt new responsibilities for their initiative (Taylor, 2008). The importance of representing their initiative during and outside of school revealed an internalization of being a PAR group member.

Also related to athletics, Smith had some coaches who did not teach at Smith, and therefore did not know all Smith policies. As part of the group's efforts to enforce their policy, participants requested enforcement of the EL policy by all coaches, and better communication to non-Smith employees. Such a request is not something that teachers usually ask of their administrators, so again the PAR process encouraged teachers to act in new manners; participants wanted to see to the success of their initiative and forecasted challenges, such as non-Smith teachers who coached – and were proactive about preventing possible inconsistencies. Participants also requested to their administration that checking the Eligibility List become a mandatory component of the Smith field trip application, which was then approved by the administrators. Over time, participants more confidently embraced their comfort level with requesting action and support from their

administration. Additionally, they grew more comfortable calling on their colleagues to enforce the Eligibility List policy:

Megan: What if we were able to present on the [Professional Development] day and we said like, “Okay, for clubs, Caroline is going to tell all the club teachers what to do.” You would say all the field trip people, “This is what you do.” Now coaches, “Here is what you’re supposed to do.” We break it down that way so that we’re telling people, “Okay, you’re responsible for doing something outside the classroom.”

Helen: “This is your job.”

Megan: “Beyond the classroom, this is your responsibility.”

At the beginning of the PAR group, participants were very cautious about giving their peers any directives with relation to the EL. Near the end of the first cycle when the group devised a presentation for the staff to gather feedback about the first cycle and explain changes for the second cycle, they were very comfortable being direct about what their peers needed to do. Participants saw themselves in their respective mirrors very differently at the start of the study compared with at the end of their first PAR cycle, and as they grew more confident in their new roles as change agents, participants’ impulsive, psychodevelopmental reactions regarding what needed to occur next transformed noticeably. Part of this increase in confidence came from individuals seeing the success of their EL policy with their own students and advisees, and part of it came from the group’s collective assurance that their policy was beneficial to Smith High School.

### **Valuable**

From participants’ intrapersonal reflections, there was a clear theme that the work of the PAR group made them feel valuable as individuals, and as teachers whose ideas were finally being taken seriously. In their initial interviews, I asked participants to share the personal qualities they had which would benefit the PAR group. In responding,

participants identified some of their personal and professional attributes that would contribute to our collaborative efforts. For Karla, she identified her previous experience as the school's scheduler, her current participation in two departments at Smith, and her recent counseling degree as beneficial to the PAR group. Another intrapersonal reflection was that her bilingualism and biculturalism were personal lenses that would contribute to group decisions. Joseph's understanding of students and their hardships, as captured through his role as dean, was a lens that he offered as adding value to the PAR group: "The kids will wear their emotions on their sleeves coming into school and will react sometimes in a negative manner. You got to understand that and take that into consideration" (Joseph). Joseph's extensive experience as dean meant that he knew many students' stories and obstacles, which he believed would help the group design an effective improvement plan for Smith's large student body.

Tamara identified her role as the leader of the data team as an extremely valuable to the PAR group: "What would happen if they don't have the data? They can't do anything... I'm not saying they are not important but if you don't have the data you can't manipulate it... it will be hard to actually run the program" (Tamara). Tamara saw her professional savvy with data as a skill that afforded the PAR group with more capacity to run and manipulate data in order to monitor the Eligibility Lists; without Tamara running the reports every other week, the group would have had to rely on someone outside the group, or may have designed a different intervention. Similarly, Olivia decided that Eligibility List raffles on Fridays were part of her responsibilities, and both Olivia and Jill were a part of the Advisory Team which helped the group reserve dates on which they could design special lessons about their intervention. Participants were able to see their

personal and professional strengths in new light through strategic interview questions that prompted intrapersonal reflection.

As the group's intervention was implemented and started taking hold amongst the staff, members of the PAR group felt even more valuable for positively impacting Smith's school culture. After the first cycle, the group devised a survey to collect feedback from their colleagues about the Eligibility List. Although participants were nervous that they would receive negative comments, especially with the anonymous nature of the survey, they were pleasantly surprised that their colleagues shared positive feedback which increased the group's confidence in the effectiveness of their intervention:

Helen: Oh, there were some nice comments!

Olivia: Yeah, some people wrote "way to go!"

Karla: Someone wrote 3 Fs instead of. They want us to make it harder.

Caroline: "Awesome job, PAR!"

Once group members knew that their colleagues supported their work, the group's belief in its work as effective and valuable increased immensely. Another validation of the PAR group's work was the creation of a Smith Intervention Plan which depended on the Eligibility List as the school's key data source: "We have a standardized intervention process for the whole school now...The Eligibility List is referenced on there. It seems to be kind of the go to data source...It's in the language that people will be talking about it" (Helen). The intervention process was written by a teacher outside of the PAR group, which demonstrated that participants were not alone in promoting the use of Eligibility Lists. It was validating and value-enhancing for group members to see their work becoming recognized and utilized school-wide.

In addition to participants feeling valued through the work of the PAR group, I also felt like my contributions to the Smith PAR study were meaningful and important. After each interview and group meeting, I kept an audio journal about my immediate reactions and reflections. Often after group meetings especially, my audio journals were about my feelings of value and encouragement based on things that participants said. For example, during just our second group meeting, participants asked me if they could take information that I had presented and meet one time in between the meetings that I facilitated in order to draft out a plan for applying the research to their school: “I do feel valued and like I’m contributing something important to the group, but that’s a sign of some group ownership of the process, that they want to meet on their own time” (Betsy). They also wanted to meet this time without me because they valued my time and did not want for me to travel to their school more than necessary. This was also an early example of beginning the gradual release of leadership to participants (Mezirow, 1997).

Often during group discussions, different participants would look at me to ask if they were on the right track, or if they were forgetting anything. They positioned me as an expert and wanted reassurance that their planning process incorporated my recommendations. As a researcher-participant, the instances of checking in with me made me feel valued in that group members did not just want my resources and research, but they also wanted for me to be a part of their decision making.

Caroline looks at me and said, “Are we forgetting anything?” They still want my guidance or my stamps of approval, which makes me feel like they appreciate my leadership and guidance, and I’m trying to provide examples and things that they can use to create their own products and not start from nothing. So far that seems to increase their trust and their belief that I’m a useful part of this group.

Bringing in relevant and practical research and offering examples from my own experiences with PAR allowed me to build credibility with my participants. Recognizing their obstacles and devising creative ways to approach those barriers also showed my *insider* side; I am a teacher at my school, and not an administrator, and I know firsthand how difficult it can be to get the support that a teacher needs. I also work in a school with similar demographics and challenges as Smith, which also increased my insider status with the group. When participants made me feel like an insider, it noticeably raised my sense of value in the PAR group and my confidence as the facilitator.

Individual interviews turned out to be fulfilling as a researcher collecting data and also as a person spending time with individuals from another school. Many participants told me about personal challenges that they were experiencing – divorce, flooding of a home, moving, dieting, finance struggles – and they also shared milestones with me – engagements, wedding plans. In my audio reflections after interviews, I often recalled personal connections that I felt were made through the dialogue in addition to the data points that I collected for different research questions. An important reflection for me was that participants sharing personal anecdotes made me feel more valued as a participant in the PAR group. A more obvious way that I felt valued during individual interviews came from compliments that I received. For instance, at the beginning of Helen’s midpoint interview, before I asked a question, she told me that group members had been talking about how much they liked our PAR meetings:

Helen said, “Yeah, we just really like your meetings - people really look forward to them.” That made me feel really good. I really respect this awesome group of educators and they like coming to my meetings; it’s a complete win. That makes me smile inside and out because I know that in schools no one has the extra time so...that compliment really makes me feel like I’m doing something right.

My psychoanalytical reflection on Helen's compliment reveals how valued I felt from my facilitation of the PAR group; going in to the study I had some confidence that PAR was a good model to follow and that I could lead the work well, but getting direct feedback from participants increased my belief in the improvement model and in myself tremendously. During exit interviews, I also received many unprompted compliments: "I thought it was great. This is the best group I've ever been in, and it's because you lead it so well...It was pleasant to work on something that I cared about and then felt like something was working. Thanks" (Caroline). Additionally, many participants thanked me for spending so much time at Smith, and for helping them create and implement a practical and sustainable solution to their chosen problem. I was told by some that I would be missed, I received a round of applause at the last group meeting that I facilitated, and the group asked if they could come to my doctoral graduation. "You make a difference. I don't think, without you, maybe we wouldn't be working as a group, honestly" (Tamara). On many levels, facilitating this work made me feel valued in ways that I had never experienced before, professionally or personally.

### **Interpersonal Findings: What Participants Learned about Others**

In addition to reflecting in the mirror to learn more about themselves, I also encouraged participants to engage in interpersonal reflection to evaluate their personal contributions to the PAR group, and to reflect on the group's processes, experiences, and assumptions with a critical lens. By looking through a microscope at the PAR group specifically and Smith High School more broadly, it was clear that participants' views of one another, of their colleagues at Smith, and of their administration changed because of the PAR study. Through focused prompts, participants identified relationalities and



emotionalities that emerged from the PAR group, and early in the process embraced the co-authorship that participants had of the Eligibility List policy. By discussing school problems and possible solutions, and learning together about various improvement plans, the PAR group engaged in praxis (Freire, 1970) and eventually social emancipatory view of their work. Whereas I perceived the group's recommendations for other schools to be global reflections, I categorized all reflection specific to Smith High School as the microcosm for interpersonal reflection.

### **Administration**

At the beginning of the PAR study, participants did not have high regard for all of their administrators, and the assistant principal over discipline and attendance was seen as someone who was not helpful or supportive of teachers. There was resistance and tension (Pain, Kesby, & Kindon, 2010) and it took concerted efforts of fostering dialogicity and validating their concerns and ideas for improvement (Burgess, 2006) on my part. As the study progressed, participants began viewing their administrators differently and eventually felt more supported and in tune with their beliefs. By the end of my facilitation of the PAR group, participants and administrators were on the same page about the Eligibility List at Smith and in brainstorming how to improve its implementation. The journey from initial negativity towards administration to eventual understanding was a drastic interpersonal shift, for which data was captured in group meetings and individual interviews.

The beginning of the PAR process was wholly run by participants, who were all employed as teachers. While they often asked why their administrators were not present, to which I consistently responded that PAR is a ground-up initiative, group members

grew to understand that they were to select the problem and craft the solution before presenting their plan to administration. Their plan was approved in its entirety and published in the school handbook, which was a pleasant surprise to participants and a validation of their thoughtful planning efforts. In the fall when the Eligibility List was used for the homecoming game and dance, however, group members were shocked by what they perceived to be a lack of administrative support. An ineligible student was not allowed to enter the football stadium and was later found watching the game. PAR group members who were volunteering their time to check for eligibility told their administrator over discipline and attendance about the student who snuck in, and did not get the response they expected:

Caroline: “Well, I’ve never seen that list. How did he get in? You guys must have let him in, so I’m not going to kick him out now,” which he didn’t do anything. He didn’t even move. It was like, “I support you, but I’m not going to do anything.”

Melissa: That’s not being supportive.

Helen: No.

Caroline: I didn’t even go to the dance to [check for eligibility] because I was so mad.

Megan: Not to be a Debbie Downer, there’s no point for us to continue if the person in charge of discipline at the school does not want to be a part of because it’s never going to become a real consequence.

This meeting was a low point for the PAR group’s first cycle; their momentum had been steadily increasing since the start of the school year, but hearing about the lack of enforcement at the football game brought reduced belief in the PAR model’s potential at Smith High School. In this challenging moment for the group, I challenged participants to focus on what they could control, and to remain confident in their improvement plan. Megan volunteered to address the assistant principal about his inactions at the football

game, which resulted in new understandings of this administrator and his vision for the

PAR group:

I now see that he wants – his reason for being hands-off is because he wants teachers to have authority, so I think that’s good to realize. I think that I realized that he is more behind what we’re trying to do than what I think we originally thought...we [eventually] knew that whatever we decided he was going to stand behind, and maybe not exactly the way we wanted, but you knew that he was going to stand behind it. (Megan)

By reflecting on whether her viewpoints of anyone had changed from her PAR experience, Megan was able to pinpoint the evolution of the group’s perception of this administrator. She also learned that teachers needed to specify what they needed from their administrators in order to get the support that they want, and that otherwise their expectations would not be met. Through dialogicity both within the group and between the group and administration, tensions were addressed. Through individual interviews, reflections on the group’s dynamics and the group’s perceptions of administrators were captured.

The first meeting that the assistant principal over discipline and attendance came to, he sat outside the circle of desks, which sent unsupportive and evaluative signals to group members. But when this AP joined us at the last meeting I facilitated, which I planned according to his schedule, he sat with the group and shared his belief in and support for the Eligibility List very clearly:

What was so powerful was when he said...“Out of all the different initiatives, I really think this one has a chance to stay,” and, “It’s right for kids,” and, “We need more teachers using it,” and “It’s simple, it’s not complicated, but we just need teachers to be consistent and then this will really last”...That was a really big moment, in my opinion. For me having been the outsider to hear that the insiders and one of their administrators, the main administrator over what this initiative targeted, is saying “out of all the initiatives this one’s got hope for working.” That was really powerful. (Betsy, post meeting 14)

PAR group members heard the support they had been craving during the last meeting that I facilitated, which marked a large change in perception of this AP in both the participants and in myself. From the disconnected and at times oppositional view of administration in the beginning of the study, to a mutual understanding and support at the end, participants' reflections on their views of others revealed a meaningful change in their perceptions of their administrators. The group eventually experience social emancipation and validation for their work; increased confidence in their improvement plan seemed to increase group members' confidence in the importance of their work, and eventually they spoke to administrators directly about their needs instead of complaining about the lack of support they received.

### **Colleagues in the PAR Group**

For many participants, the PAR process changed their perspectives of their colleagues, both those in the study and at the school at large. Some participants already knew each other well before the start of the study, but since teachers expressed interest on recruitment forms in six different SLC meetings, it was not until the first group meeting that participants knew who had signed up. Pleasantly surprised by the caliber and motivation of their colleagues who signed up, group members were excited about one another and commented on existing relationalities and emotionalities in their midpoint interviews:

the other people that joined the group are good group of people. So I think that that had a lot to do with it too. I mean if we didn't have Tamara, I don't know what we would have done...And Karla knows a lot, too...having a dean whose is new but wanting to make change [Olivia], I think that was good. So I think that the other people on the group too. (Megan)

Megan pointed out specific attributes of group members, such as Tamara running data reports, Karla's knowledge of programming and counseling, Olivia's new role as a dean, and generally have a group of teachers from different SLCs and departments, with different skill sets.

Derek highlighted the PAR group's sense of collective responsibility: "I think everybody's taking it like a squad: 'You do this. You know what's going on there.' We do this because we have an idea. Everybody's accommodating...Everybody takes it upon themselves, makes choices or decisions on the fly" (Derek). Since the group as a whole had not worked together previously, the PAR experience allowed participants like Derek to see how well people can collaborate around a selected goal. Karla echoed that sentiment in her exit interview:

I think it says a lot when you're able to come together with a target goal and say, 'well yeah I think we all have that in common'... You have to have a really strong group, or just a group of people that really are passionate about moving the school forward. (Karla)

Group members who had not known other participants well gained immense respect for fellow participatory action researchers. Reflective activities such as journaling and sharing out allowed participants to hear each other's beliefs and motivators, and brainstorming the intervention and subsequent revisions brought out different people's experiences and ideas – all with the goal of making Smith a better school by being co-researchers, co-learners, and co-creators of a positive change initiative (Burgess, 2006; Taylor, 2008).

Every participant attributed the strong sense of community and motivation for making their intervention successful to the voluntary nature of the study. As Melissa

explained in her exit interview, collaboration works best when teachers work on issues about which they are passionate: “I’ve learned that you can have a group of people come to a decision which everyone agrees on...I don’t think I’ve seen this in any other group...we all care about the issue or we wouldn’t be in the group” (Melissa). Helen had the unique experience to see three members of her SLC participate differently in the PAR group than in the meetings she ran for her house: “It’s like the same people that are in SLCs, were completely different. It was interesting from my perspective seeing how they acted in some of our [PAR] meetings...we just changed the venue and expectation and it was interesting” (Helen). Compared with the mandatory SLC meetings, members of Helen’s SLC were much more active and engaged participants during PAR meetings. Instead of being perturbed by this, Helen thought it validated the power of volunteering to collaborate versus being forced to do so. All group members said that their views of and relationalities and emotionalities with other participants were positively influenced through the PAR cycles, and that they got to know colleagues in new and different ways: “it’s nice to work with people in a different vein. Yeah, I feel like it’s helped me have better rapport with my colleagues” (Melissa).

### **Colleagues at Smith High School**

While perceptions of fellow participants changed positively, reflections about their views of colleagues outside of the group varied widely. For some group members who were leading a school-wide change effort for the first time, participants were frustrated with staff members who did not support their initiative. For participants who had experience leading change efforts, they were pleasantly surprised by colleagues who embraced the Eligibility List and less shocked by staff members who took longer to

support their efforts. One of the group's obstacles was mathematical: "As great as an initiative like this can be, I guess it's working a bit, but not as good as I think we want it...it's really hard just when you have 100 and some teachers and countless other school personnel" (Olivia). No matter the initiative, it is extremely difficult to get over 100 people to implement a new improvement plan, and devising strategies to increase teacher involvement brought tension to the group at times. When some participants were getting discouraged by their colleagues who were not enforcing the Eligibility List, Megan reminded the group to think realistically: "I feel like if we can get the good teachers on board in a routine, that it'll be OK. And screw the ten that won't do it" (Megan).

Teachers like Megan and Helen had experience with school improvement initiatives, and did not want other participants to lose faith in their improvement plan. Megan validated other group members' frustrations, and offered that the "good teachers" far outnumbered "the ten that won't do it"; this example also shows participants emerging as leaders.

But sometimes, the teachers and coaches who were not enforcing the EL policy deflated the group. Seeing ineligible student athletes playing in games instilled anger in group members towards their coaches, as well as teachers taking ineligible students on field trips: "I know everybody's not using it because a kid went on a field trip yesterday, who had 14 unserved detentions, so teachers aren't looking at it" (Joseph). Derek and Joseph brought up the idea of doing spot checks during sports practices and club meetings to let their colleagues know that their lack of EL enforcement was noticed. Participants were flustered and embarrassed by the need to police their coworkers, who they viewed as "just as important implementing it as anyone else. If [some teachers] are not doing it, it doesn't matter if five teachers do it. Equal implementation responsibility

would be their roles” (Caroline). Tamara suggested that the group review the process of checking eligibility at every all-staff meeting to continue reteaching and reminding colleagues of their role in school improvement, and Megan proposed having a tutorial in all SLC meetings for small-group reinforcement. While some participants’ views of a select group of their colleague changed negatively because of the PAR process, other teachers embraced the EL policy without any reminders from the group.

When the teacher sponsoring the homecoming dance had “Must be Eligible to attend” on all of the posters and flyers, participants were ecstatic. Football games, open gym for basketball, a winter dance, and the school’s talent show also advertised the criteria for students to participant – none of those school event sponsors were members of the PAR group. “I really appreciated the people who made the extra efforts to recognize the Eligibility List, and made it in their announcements to put on their posters. It was really nice to feel that much support from the staff” (Caroline). Most group members mentioned feeling validated and supported by the colleagues who enforced the EL with little to no reminders from PAR group members. And veteran teachers like Tamara, Melissa, and Helen saw the examples of instant support and enforcement as rare compared to most school initiatives. Overall, the group focused on getting “the good teachers” (Megan) on board, and modeled for and re-taught the less supportive teachers to join the school improvement initiative.

In trying to help other teacher-leaders at Smith see the benefits of the PAR group, Helen even referenced our work in other collaboration teams at Smith: “I use this as an example of why people should maybe not give up so easily a couple times in meetings, and I’ve referenced things that we’ve done” (Helen). Participants labeled the PAR model



as one that allows teachers to make real change, and as a process worth sharing to their colleagues.

I think that we have made a bit of a difference and if we can stick with it and make some changes and hopefully get more people involved then I think it could be something that really maybe will help impact our school positively. I like being a part of that. (Olivia)

In addition to positively impacting Smith and addressing their selected problem, the successes of the PAR group gave participants new hope that bottom-up change is possible when teachers are solution-oriented and have a focused process to follow. “It’s reminded me that I really enjoy working with people here...It has re-energized me a little bit that we can still change things which I think I needed. Yeah. Re-energized I would say” (Megan). Through the PAR study and the experience of co-authoring a change initiative that incorporated action, reflection, and dialogicity, participants become change agents at Smith. After coming to realize the tenets of social emancipation through PAR, most participants aimed to find ways to share their new energy with other colleagues.

During interviews, many participants share interpersonal reflections, notably about the functionality, productivity, and positivity of the PAR group as a whole. For Melissa, her realization was more about the power of collaboration than new understandings about her learning preferences.

I’ve learned that it really is a great thing when you’re in a group of people who are like-minded. Yeah. Some groups, you get thrown together with people and it just doesn’t work but if it’s voluntary and it’s for a cause and everyone is there because they’re like-minded about the situation, that can really work. It’s pretty cool. It’s pretty amazing. (Melissa)

Melissa’s reflection here is both interpersonal and global: she learned new things about working with teachers at her school, but more broadly she came to believe that teacher

collaboration works best when people volunteer to be a part of an initiative. Caroline had similar interpersonal reflections about how successful collaboration was afforded by the motivated and proactive nature of participants: “I feel like everyone listens and I think it’s really easy to be a member of this group...It’s very encouraging and everyone really tries to find solutions instead of pointing out anything negative” (Caroline). Most participants reported that the PAR group was their first successful collaboration experience in a long time or ever; many recent teacher-led initiatives at Smith had failed to become implemented, and thus group members were excited to point out reasons why this experience was different and why they would recommend it to other schools.

### **Global Findings: What Participants Learned about School Reform**

While my participants all felt the need for teachers to participate in school improvement before the start of the study, hence their decisions to join the PAR group, their perspectives on how teachers can engage in reform changed from their PAR experiences. By asking specific questions about participants’ perceptions of the teacher’s role in the larger political, social, and educational context, I was able to collect specific data related to transformational learning theory on a global level. Almost every participant felt that school improvement had to be driven by administrators in their initial interviews, but in exit interviews most group members stated that reform should be driven by teachers and supported by administrators. Other trends in my participants’ global perspectives about school reform and improvement included the following: use an organized process, approach change incrementally, and involve school stakeholders in efforts led by volunteers. All nine of my participants specifically recommended the

participatory action research process as an effective way for schools to engage in sustainable improvement.

It is important to note that my goal as the researcher had been to teach participants a tool for leading sustainable school improvement at Smith. It should then not be surprising that group members had more to say about the implications of PAR on school reform than other types of reflection. Also noteworthy is the fact that teachers lack meaningful and authentic experiences with personal reflection (Hendricks, 2013), but can share global reflections from a more distanced position. Group members seemed to enjoy giving advice to schools that would theoretically use PAR, and sharing their *must haves* in order for a PAR group to have what it needs to be successful.

### **Driven by Teacher Volunteers**

When I asked participants what schools need in order to have a successful PAR group, the trend was that PAR groups should consist of five to nine teachers who volunteer to be a part of the group, and that administrative support and parameters be clarified at the start of the group. At the start of the study, most group members expressed their belief that administrators needed to be at every meeting and assist in decision making, but during exit interviews the sentiment was quite different: “I think that teachers identifying problems is important, and teachers trying to find the solutions is important because we are the ones that see the kids the most” (Megan). Derek echoed this idea in his exit interview: “teachers should be involved in school improvement because we’re the ones that see the kids, we’re the ones that can influence them the most” (Derek). Although participants initially looked to their administrators to make decisions, the PAR process allowed them to see the effects of ground-up improvement planning.

When asked to broaden their view of school improvement beyond Smith's context, participants spoke more generally about the power they believed teachers should have in school reform. But what was more of a realization than having teachers drive school change was that those teachers needed to be a part of said efforts by choice and without extrinsic rewards.

Having teachers volunteer for PAR was a theme for eight of my nine participants. While participants probably would have appreciated additional funds for their time and effort, the lack of extrinsic motivators was cited as a key component of a successful PAR group. As Melissa explained it, making PAR voluntary meant that teachers would only join if they truly cared about addressing a school problem: "people who volunteered really were interested... You just got the feeling from the very beginning that people were invested in it and that they really wanted to make a change and they were will willing to do it" (Melissa). Helen also pointed out that when the only reward is improving one's school, the change initiative attracts a more motivated group of teachers to join: "we weren't getting paid... there's no other extrinsic motivators other than, you know, just getting something done, like accomplishing something and doing something for the good of the school, is the only thing you're getting out of it" (Helen). She contrasted the high productivity of PAR meetings to less engaged participation in mandatory SLC meetings as a sample channel of influence (Wadsworth, 2001) highlighting teachers deciding to be a part of an initiative for no other reason than their desire to positively impact their school.

With teacher volunteers at the forefront of PAR, group members also realized how much teachers can accomplish towards school improvement without explicit

administrative support. This is not to say that the PAR group recommends teachers going behind their administrators' backs, but rather that teachers should not feel like all improvement efforts depend on administrators. When the PAR group struggled to get their administration to commit to checking sports practices, games, and club meetings, Olivia reminded the group that they could recruit their colleagues to help: "Even if we didn't have administrative support, if we had 100 teachers that were like 'I'm going to go to one game this week and I'm going check on this club meeting' it would be great" (Olivia). The group's idea already had administrative approval in word, but there was not adequate support in deed. Participants realized that school reform can still move forward through teacher participation. In her exit interview, Melissa also commented on the general power of teachers working in unison towards a desired outcome. As a veteran teacher of over 25 years, she highlighted the PAR process as both unique and promising:

I feel like, at least with the PAR group, I can make some change. People don't understand that you can really have effective change if you have enough people. You can change anything and everything if you have enough people. That's what I like about PAR is that, I feel it's an opportunity to really change things and it isn't top down and I haven't seen anything like that any other time in my career. That's why I value it and that's why I'm involved in it. Because when it comes from the top down, there's never any effective change made. Maybe this is a way to have an effective change. (Melissa)

Melissa's statements about PAR focus on the fact that it is ground-up and dependent upon getting a large group of people to implement the same initiative, rather than the typical top-down mandates that teachers are expected to follow coupled with consequences if they do not. Multiple times in her exit interview, Melissa repeated that PAR was the first successful teacher-driven change effort that she had even seen or been a part of, and thus she very highly recommended it as a school improvement model for

other schools. Helen also said it was the first time she had experience an authentic ground-up reform: “It was kind of refreshing to have teachers leading – truly leading – something” (Helen). Upon global reflection about PAR’s potential for school improvement, participants’ support for and promotion of PAR was overwhelmingly positive.

**Stakeholder involvement.** In addition to having teachers volunteer to lead PAR, participants also cited the need to include school stakeholders in shaping the study’s focal issue and improvement plan. During meetings, the group was encouraged to consult research articles and school reform models that I presented, and between meetings they put it upon themselves to share that information and consult with their colleagues. The group also wrote a survey for teachers to take after the first cycle in order to use their ideas, questions, and concerns to guide revisions for the second cycle. School improvement efforts, participants felt, are more successful when teachers are a part of designing them. Although the first cycle relied on research, school data, and input from teachers, Karla’s goal was to get feedback from students and possibly families in future cycles:

I think other than admin [and] teachers, we haven’t really seen the input from students. For this example, this first one that we did the tardies and all that, I think was we just went off of data and input from teachers. I think it would be much more inclusive...the next time around, get input from students. (Karla)

Karla zoomed out to see which stakeholder groups their initiative had not reached, and reflected more broadly on the importance of including families and students themselves in school reform. When my facilitation of the PAR group ended at the beginning of their third cycle, participants were thinking about creating a survey for students to take at the

end of the school year to collect their input about the Eligibility List policy, and to also ask them about other school problems they felt necessitated attention.

**Administrative support.** The last essential piece of PAR being teacher-led, according to my participants, is clearly defined support from administrators. Participants desired varying amounts of time and energy from administrators, but the general theme was two-fold: administrative support for a teacher-led initiative adds legitimacy and continuity to the PAR group's school improvement efforts, and it encourages less intrinsically-motivated teachers to implement the reform. Tamara spoke to the potential for disconnected efforts without administrative support: "If we don't have the backup of the administration, then we're lacking communication or we have some gaps, I don't think we are going to be able to solve the problem" (Tamara). Communication, especially in large schools, is essential to keeping a teaching staff informed and united in their efforts. Tamara's point in her interview was that the PAR group and the administration needed to share cohesive messages in order for the group's chosen issue to get addressed. Similarly, Olivia wanted for an administrator to present with the group during all-staff meetings to add legitimacy to their improvement plan: "we should have [an administrator] be the one to address the staff on the things that we're asking [teachers] to do...because then it's more of a directive than just coming from us being like, 'Hey, this is a good idea'" (Olivia). Participants themselves needed to hear that their administration expected the whole staff to implement the Eligibility List, and many PAR members felt that some teachers would only support the initiative if it was a directive. Channels of influence differed for various teachers, and although some tension still existed about the type of administrative support that would be idea, group members were able to envision

future developments all the same. The group all agreed, however, that in addition to consistent messaging and support for the EL, administrative participation is needed for those teachers who have less intrinsic motivation to go beyond their classroom job to improve their school.

### **The Necessity of an Organized Process**

Once a school has a group of teacher volunteers with methods for incorporating stakeholder input and administrative backing, the second essential to school improvement, according to my participants, is an organized process. PAR group members were adamant that teachers with full class loads, extracurricular responsibilities, and lives outside of work need clear steps to follow in order to practically and sustainably engage in reform. In their exit interviews, over half of my participants described the PAR model itself as simple and easy to follow: “It wasn’t complicated...we talked about problems for a while...decided how we are going to really figure out what the problem was...we figured out the next step...I think it was very productive and it was very easy to follow” (Megan). Caroline also appreciated the clearly defined activities within each stage of the PAR cycle, as they added focus and purpose to each group meeting. Although the group accomplished an immense amount of positive change in each cycle, the separate stages made the reform process manageable:

I like seeing [the PAR stages] broken up and like what we’re doing every time. The Reflect, Plan, Act, Observe, I thought it was a really cool process. I’d never heard of it...I like that there was always something going on and that everything had a purpose...We had a goal to accomplish and then it was done. There is a set goal for the next time, that had to do with everything before, but nothing was repetitive. I think it worked really well. (Caroline)



Because time is so precious for teachers who must attend many meetings during their planning time, participants like Caroline appreciated that their time never felt wasted because our meeting objectives were clear, and each stage had a specific role in the larger PAR cycle. Having this clarity and focus were elements that Caroline believes teachers at any school would appreciate. Participants highly recommend PAR to other schools because it made leading a change effort possible in addition to group members' additional responsibilities.

Another driving component of PAR that group members appreciated was their ownership of the initiative, and their role in school improvement. Group members felt that teachers should participate in school reform prior to the study, but the PAR model allowed them to drive an initiative from beginning to end in an authentic manner:

It's a process that can be utilized more just based upon the fact that there's no one person in charge, really, of the group so it's not like you have to report to such and such. Everybody feels like they have - anything they say is just as important as the person next to them...the equality thing is big. (Derek)

Participants all agreed that the collaboration they experienced in the PAR group was beyond that of principal-directed teacher planning meetings, in part from the voluntary nature of participating, but also due to the truly democratic nature of the improvement model. Karla also believed that the autonomy the group had in selecting the problem to address and creating the solution instilled a different kind of responsibility in participants: “[PAR] also gives, I think, students and staff more of accountability on whatever the problem area or challenging area is. It helps the administrators reach their goals and work with the group in order to improve the school” (Karla). While helping school administrators work towards improved metrics, the PAR cycles and stages call for

teachers to drive each step of the initiative, making them the owners of the results and subsequent actions.

**Start small.** Mentioned as an important part of the PAR process was the incremental nature of PAR. Whether or not participants found the model to be “easy,” all group members appreciated that PAR is rooted in iterative cycles; such gradual change calls for smaller alterations which build upon themselves over time, and it reduces the stress of trying to address a problem in one attempt. Participants agree that starting small was a smart idea for any school-wide initiative. Derek described the Eligibility List as a snowball effort: “I mean, it could lead into something a lot more productive but now we’re starting off small so maybe this will snowball into something bigger and have lasting effect and maybe create some other changes or initiatives” (Derek). In both his midpoint and exit interviews, Derek pinpointed the gradual layering of each PAR cycle to be a large asset of the improvement plan: “I think we’ve picked a good starting point, it’s a good issue and I think we can build off of this into bigger initiatives” (Derek). Almost every participant expressed that having a strong foundation upon which they could gradually layer additional components to the initiative was a key reason for the EL’s success.

Megan was also enthusiastic about starting small, as it took some pressure off of group members and it also encouraged the group to save some good ideas until the school was ready. During the first cycle, many sound ideas for improvement related to the problem – lack of consequences – were shared by group members: alternative detentions through tutoring and yoga were prime examples that got participants excited. But since PAR is iterative, group members knew that “rather than do them at the beginning, it was

like just get the kind of the idea of the program out and then add all that stuff. So I think that was good” (Megan). Saving alternative detentions for their third cycle allowed participants to build a strong base before they added more complicated components which may have jeopardized their improvement plan had they included all of the layers in the first cycle.

I think in this we were really conscious of ‘we can’t fail, we want this to be successful’ so let’s make sure that it’s something that...Not that it’s insignificant, but smaller, controllable...I think that 1) it’s made me happy that I got involved, and 2) it’s made me just think about how change in [our district] is kind of still possible if you go about it the right way. (Megan)

Not only did Megan believe that starting small made the Eligibility List work at her school, but she believes more broadly that school districts will have more successful reform if efforts are rolled out gradually.

**Change takes time.** Along with starting small, participants realized that school improvement takes time – both in layering components that generate meaningful results, and in getting stakeholders on board with the improvement plan. In the first Act stage I asked participants to journal their predictions for the first cycle, and many entries were about the need to be patient and give the initiative time to settle: “I feel like it’s going to take a long time for it to be institutionalized. It’s a long process with a lot of details” (Caroline). And of course, they were right. But the cyclical nature of PAR and the fact that my facilitation of the study was more than a semester long meant that the group had time and need not rush through the growing pains and initial implementation dip that accompany change. “Some of it is just getting used to it...implementing something. But there are some of these questions are coming up as we go along” (Helen). Having

multiple cycles meant that unanticipated questions were not signs of weakness, but rather means to hone the Eligibility List with each iteration.

**Power of positivity.** The last characteristic of the organized process identified by participants as essential to the model's success at Smith is the influence of attitude. Melissa attributed the positive energy with which I begin the study as a contributing factor to the group's achievements: "You started out with a good karma, a good feeling, a good attitude, and I think that kind of grabbed hold and you're really consistent with that. I think that that is a major contributing factor" (Melissa). She felt that my "good karma" paired with teachers volunteering to join the study fostered a larger positive productivity: "I think everybody comes with kind a like a hopeful attitude like 'We can make a change,' and 'We are making a change.' I think people feel good about it" (Melissa). Attending PAR meetings was an uplifting experience for participants, which made group member want to come back each week, and continuing volunteering their mornings in order to improve their school. This positive energy also fostered more creativity in problem solving, according to Karla: "I thought that was amazing how as a group we can come up with different ways of viewing [a problem], and coming up with a resolution to something" (Karla). Had the group been initiated with a different tone, and had participants not chosen to design a school-wide solution, the positivity that attracted and motivated group members would not have been present.

### **Discussion and Recommendations**

I believe that the findings of my study show how powerful reflection can be for educators. Educational researchers like Dewey (1933), Schön (1983), and Pine (2009) have written about the promises of teacher reflection, but as a classroom teacher myself I

do feel that I have ever reflected in the ways they suggest. In many schools like mine and like Smith, instances of reflection are inauthentic (Hendricks, 2013), such as being asked to reflect on how a lesson went during a post-observation meeting with an administrator. Inevitably, the teacher shares what she or he thought went well and what she or he would do differently in the future, and a box is checked off and the reflection portion of the form is completed. Now having studied different frameworks for reflection and various contributing theories on reflection, I understand why teachers are not engaging in meaningful reflection: without being offered structure, writing and discussion prompts, trained facilitators or provocateurs, time, and space, teachers cannot be reflective practitioners.

The participatory action research process provided a clear structure for reflection. Not only is the Reflect stage an important time when participants must engage in intrapersonal and interpersonal reflection in order to reveal assumptions, beliefs, and experiences about salient problems in the school, but during Plan, Act, and Observe there are also reflective components that drive the work of PAR. Many participants, such as Caroline, appreciated my visual representation of the PAR cycle with stages and key activities (see Appendix B) because it provided a guiding structure for each of our meetings; participants could see what we had accomplished, where we were at that time, and what was coming next at all times. The chart provided a *why* to our meetings and to the reflective activities that I facilitated during our meetings.

Meeting activities were created and facilitated very intentionally. If I had participants respond to individual writing prompts at the start of a meeting, it was to foster intrapersonal reflection to think about their own beliefs and assumptions prior to

participants sharing and eventually learning to collaborate more effectively with one another (Mezirow, 1997). Many participants, like Helen, grew to appreciate the process of thinking and writing independently before jumping into a discussion with ten people. She felt our discussions were more focused after journaling, and that people were able to plan their contributions more thoughtfully, which was a more global suggestion for effective teacher collaboration. “It is important to recognise that a person must be given an opportunity to reflect before responding to questions raised by others” (Koch et al., 2005, p. 275). Research activities such as the three rounds of interviews and audiorecording meetings and interviews were also purposeful in fostering reflection. Initial interview questions were more about each participant’s background, driving beliefs, key experiences, and hopes for the PAR group; by charging participants to turn a critical eye onto themselves, the opportunity to transform that self eventually into a change agent became possible (Mezirow, 1997; Taylor, 2008). Midpoint interviews were more about interpersonal reflection and hearing how each person thought they were contributing to the group, what the group was achieving, and goal setting for the second PAR cycle; exploring relationalities and emotionalities, and the outcomes of the group’s dialogicity, emphasized the rich feeling of co-ownership that participants shared for their Eligibility List. Finally, exit interview questions were more broadly about education reform and how participants’ experiences in the PAR group had influenced their views on teacher participation in school improvement. Global questions made participants think beyond their PAR cycles at Smith and to envision future use of PAR in the broader educational landscape. My plan for each meeting and interview was intentional and provided a *how* that encouraged certain levels of reflection.

My role as the group facilitator is something my participants identified as a key to making a PAR group work. About half of the group thought it was especially helpful that I did not work at Smith, because I did not have any preconceived ideas about the school nor any biases about the problem the group selected to address. I received more compliments than anticipated, usually during individual interviews, with participants saying that my personality, positivity, and knowledge base made me a great facilitator for the PAR group. Teachers in the PAR group were confident that they would not have achieved so much positive school change had it not been for having a knowledgeable facilitator or provocateur (Mezirow, 1997) and dedicated time and space to doing PAR.

Teachers are rarely given the time and space they need in order to get work done. In a given week, teachers in my district have about six hours during school hours to work on lesson plans, grading, preparing classroom materials, and conferencing with or calling students and parents. Much of the work of a teacher occurs on his or her own time. The same was true with the PAR group; in order for us to meet, we gathered in a participant's classroom one hour before school began weekly at first and then biweekly for the second and third cycles. Participants were not compensated for their time, but it was important to them that the PAR group has a clear schedule and that participants prioritize coming to meetings. Meeting time and place consistency had a very positive impact on participants' attendance, preparation, and dedication. They also realized that it took many meetings to make thoughtful decisions, and on several occasions the group met without me in order to get more work done. "Participants begin to understand that change is often slow and subtle. Participants decide what to do with what they have learned and think for

themselves” (Koch et al., 2005, p. 275). As time progressed and PAR activities became more natural to group members, they created additional time to work on their initiative.

During exit interviews, I asked each participant if she or he recommended participatory action research as a process for school improvement, and every person said they did. I then asked participants to give recommendations to schools considering starting a PAR group. Themes arose from the data, and I selected one quotation for each category:

Table 2

*Recommendations for Starting a PAR Group*

“Administrative support and clear parameters” (Derek)
“Positive people...I would say people that are willing to go beyond the mile that they’re supposed to” (Karla)
“Voluntary participation with no extrinsic reward” (Helen)
“Start small, start simple, something attainable” (Megan)
“The fact that meetings are positive and productive, that’s why they keep coming and so that would be my major recommendation that an outside facilitator know how to recognize people’s feelings but also not let meetings turn into complaint sessions because people aren’t going to come back to complaint sessions” (Betsy).
“Making sure that objectives are always crystal clear each meeting and even a few days before meetings, I send out reminders with like, ‘This is what we’re going to accomplish on Thursday morning.’ People really like that action focus” (Betsy).

It is important to note that it did not cost Smith High School anything to have a PAR group. Participants volunteered their time to have the opportunity to address a problem that they identified as impeding teaching and learning at Smith. And from their intrapersonal, interpersonal, and global reflections on the work they accomplished and on the PAR process itself, participants were personally and professionally fulfilled from their experiences.



## Conclusion

When offered a structure for engaging in reflection with a clear purpose (*why*) and processes and prompts to follow (*how*) along with a dedicated facilitator to push people outside of their comfort zones, authentic and meaningful reflection is possible in schools. Time and space to think are also hard to find in schools and must be provided for the levels of reflection that were experienced in my study. Participatory action research is a process deeply rooted in reflection, and its stages and key activities necessitate reflection. When paired with a three-tiered reflective framework and corresponding research activities, teachers can experience new and authentic forms of reflection.

When thoughtfully planned and facilitated by a provocateur who gradually releases leadership to group members, a PAR group can be a structure through which teachers experience real reflection. Utilizing a three-tiered reflection during the process can directly complement the work of each stage and cycle, and also ensure that participants internalize the process of learning how to lead a school improvement initiative. Starting with a mirror, teachers are rarely asked to sincerely consider who they are, what they believe in, or how their unconscious operating system affords or obstructs them new experiences. Guiding teachers through intrapersonal reflection can not only be fulfilling for teachers, but it could lead to utilizing such prompts and probes with students in order to assist in their self-discovery process. Looking through a microscope, teachers can look at relationships between and among adults and students, identify areas of tensions and opportunity, and thereafter engage in dialogicity to move the group towards social emancipation. And finally, using binoculars, educators can offer immense insight

into the social, educational, and political contexts that affect schools. Eliciting their visions for school reform strategies that are sustainable can be transformational in itself.

Moving forward, specific strategies for engaging in reflection need to be offered to teachers in order for this important work to happen on professional and personal levels. As it stands, reflection is a nebulous concept with little guidance or discussion. Hopefully the proposed framework can offer useful suggestions to school practitioners, administrators, and teacher coaches as we navigate the meaning of practitioner reflection in the future.

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## CONCLUSION

### **Synthesizing the Three-Article Dissertation**

In each of the three articles included in this dissertation, I have presented a different framework for participatory action research (PAR), including its influential theories and relevant findings from my nine month study at Smith High School. I strongly believe that each framework contributes to the literature on PAR in unique ways, and offers practitioners a different lens through which they can study their own journey in cyclical and sustainable school improvement.

In Article 1, I highlight influential theories that inform the northern hemispheric lens of PAR, which stem from organizational learning theory and are most influenced by Argyris and Schön (1996) and Torres and Preskill (2001). By looking at the stages involved in selecting organizational problems and proposing solutions in order to make systems and procedures run more efficiently, I propose that the incorporation of organizational learning into school-wide protocols can improve student supports. Argyris and Schön (1996) were the first to break organizational learning into multiple levels, coining the divide between *single-loop learning*, which most directly resembles error-correction school improvement plans, and *double-loop learning*, through which organizations dig deeper to address root causes of prominent problems. *Deuterolearning* was defined as the highest form of organizational learning, which can only occur when members of the organization have adapted a new framework for learning and improving practices that looks at root causes and continually seeks to improve (Argyris & Schön,

1996; Frost, 2014; Visser, 2007). More recently, Torres and Preskill (2001) devised a five-step approach for engaging in organizational learning which includes examining the status quo, becoming aware of the need for change, learning a new organizational learning approach, adopting and implementing said approach, and finally refining the approach and embedding it in organizational practices. The fifth stage of their approach is similar to Arygris and Schön's (1996) deuterolearning, but their preceding steps provide little direction on how a group of teachers can achieve the final goal. In Article 1, I argue that the PAR model can lead teachers to achieve the goals of both Arygris and Schön's deuterolearning and Torres and Preskill's (2001) dominance and refinement of organizational learning.

As my findings indicate in Article 1, the Smith High School PAR group experienced each level of organizational learning in their PAR cycles. In Cycle 1 they aimed to directly solve a salient problem – lack of school-wide consequences – by adding new meaning to detentions and failing grades. After reflecting on the status quo at SHS and realizing the need to implement a new approach to addressing school-wide problems, the group selected a problem that was meaningful to school stakeholders. Although they investigated root causes before selecting their problem and designing their solution, the aim of the first cycle was much like commonly implemented single-loop education reforms: correcting negative student behaviors. The group crafted a solution using local and published research, and predicted that their improvement plan would correct student behaviors. In their second cycle, the PAR group looked more deeply at adult behaviors that enable the negative student behaviors which they were trying to address; participants knew that they had to work more intentionally with root causes before they expected a

change among students, which revealed a progression to double-loop learning. By reverting back to root causes and devising more targeted supports for adults and school processes that were perpetuating the problem, participants began refining their solution. In planning for their third cycle, the PAR group reached a new level of sustainability and ingenuity; they moved beyond their direct mission to implement consequences to focusing on multiple ways for students to serve detentions and raise their grades, and they required the use of the Eligibility List policy they created for annual school-wide events. In this third cycle, participants had truly embraced the power of their contextually-grounded solution, and found ways to expand the reach of their intervention without my assistance. The PAR model facilitated the growth of participants' organizational learning. The four-step cycle also led them through Torres and Preskill's (2001) five-stage approach to organizational learning in an accessible and practical manner.

In Article 2, I break down my perception of southern hemispheric PAR into four influential frameworks: constructivism, social justice, feminism, and critical theory, all of which connect to imperialized regions of the world in which marginalized persons had to fight to gain voice and participation in their communities. This framework, which focuses on autonomy and empowerment, has direct relevance to teachers, who are often excluded from decision making in their schools, and who are even more often neglected in the creation of school reform strategies. I argue that teachers' funds of knowledge are essential to school improvement, and that PAR is a promising vehicle through which teachers can share their beliefs, ideas, and experiences in order to become positive change agents in their contexts. In my findings for Article 2, I delineate the ways in which participants experienced autonomy in the decision making that was necessary

during each PAR stage and cycle, and the group's increase in empowerment over the course of each cycle. Although embracing the autonomy that PAR offered them took time, participants grew their own power when they planned the third iteration of their improvement plan. The PAR model did empower participants to believe in their own importance as educators who could solve problems that afflicted their school most.

My third article explored a three-tiered approach to reflection, which is just as essential to PAR as taking action. By charging participants to look within themselves using a mirror, to look at the PAR group and changing interpersonal perceptions using a microscope, and to look at the work of the group in the larger context of educational reform using binoculars, group members experienced reflective practices on a heightened level. Too often in education, teachers are told to reflect on instructional practices with little to no guidance, and come to regard reflection as a meaningless mandate. But through guided journaling prompts, facilitated discussions, and protected time and space to explore complicated issues, teachers can experience the power of reflection. I argue that without those structures, reflection is not likely to be a priority in teachers' hectic schedules.

### **My Journey as an Insider-Outsider Researcher-Participant**

In my dissertation study, I managed many roles at once. While building rapport with my participants, I highlighted the commonalities that made me an insider: four years of teaching experience and three years of managing the same SLC grant under way at Smith High School, and employment status as a fellow unionized teacher. But I was also upfront about my outsider qualities, never pretending that I knew what it was like to work at SHS. As a researcher, I planned my study, crafted my own theoretical perceptions of



participatory action research (PAR) and carefully crafted my research questions in order to collect data on each of three lenses of PAR. But as the PAR facilitator, I was a member of the PAR group who both kept the group on task according to our cycle and stage and also contributed ideas and research to inform decision making. As a participant myself, it was important that my journey be documented much like my participants. From my initial, midpoint, and exit interviews with Dr. Ensminger, and my own journaling and audio-reflecting after every meeting and interview, there are certain findings amongst my data that stand apart from my participants. It is the themes that emerged from my own experience that I will highlight in this concluding chapter, which I hope will entice other practitioners to lead this work, which I have consistently found to be meaningful and inspiring, both professionally and personally.

### **What I Learned about Myself**

Wearing so many metaphorical hats at once is difficult, and can be stressful at times. When looking in the mirror during interviews, journaling, and audio-reflecting, I often focused on my own struggle to navigate my positionality, balance my life as a doctoral student, adjunct professor, and CPS employee, and as a regular person, too. I also learned more about my own facilitation style through calculated trial and error, and I acknowledged my weaknesses in order to focus on areas of improvement. I have always been hard on myself, so taking on multiple roles and trying to do my absolute best at everything for nine straight months was intense, not to mention the seven months of coding, analyzing, and writing since then. But through my dissertation study and overall journey as a doctoral student, I have learned a lot about myself as an educator, as a researcher, and as a person. Thanks to my critical friend and dissertation advisor, Dr.

Ensminger, I was pushed to reflect on my many roles through interviews that challenged my thinking far beyond the reflection I documented on my own.

**Navigating positionality.** From the beginning of my study, I knew that I would not be able to anticipate my exact role as an insider-outsider researcher-participant. I also had no idea how I would be received by Smith High School administrators or teachers, and I wanted to make sure that the administration knew that the PAR study would ideally complement improvement efforts already in motion at Smith. As the study began with initial interviews, I learned about past initiatives and also heard about a lot of problems that my participants proposed for our group to address. Since I am a problem solver by nature, it was difficult to decide what to do with all of the information that I collected; of course our group would address one problem, but some of their complaints would not get addressed through the PAR group. Many of their complaints were about administrators, which were also difficult to navigate; the group needed some administrative support and approval in order to implement their solution, but my participants had many stories about teacher-led initiatives that were denied approval.

They have experienced a lot of “Nos” at their school, and a lot of them separately brought up in interviews, “We came up with this great idea and all we heard was, ‘No, you can’t do that. No, you can’t do that.’” On one hand, they see me as, “Ooh, maybe Betsy can somehow get a ‘yes’ because administration has given her permission to be here.” On the other hand, they feel kind of slighted like, “Why do we need an outsider to come in so we can do stuff that we’ve already tried to do?” They’re trying to figure out how much power I have. I’m trying to figure out how much power I have. I don’t know yet, really (Initial).

Most participants were surprised that I had received the approval to lead a teacher-driven problem-solving group, and since the group’s formation was approved and its premise

was known, it took time for all of us to figure out how often we needed to check in with administration.

I found one assistant principal, whom I had known from my master's program, to be accessible and helpful, but it was hard at times to decipher how much to tell her. Every few weeks she would ask me how the group was going and whether there were any updates that she needed to know. I would usually summarize our meetings for her and let her know which PAR cycle and stage we were on, and then tell her anticipated support I thought that the group might need from administration. I tried to avoid telling her any specific ways that I thought she or other administrators should act, but I also advocated for the groups as well. After the first cycle's Act stage, participants had complained about the lack of praise or attention for their hard work, which I was not certain how to handle:

They need some strokes, pats on the back. And they also really deserve some praise. But I don't want to come off as if I'm telling her how to do her job, so I need to find a creative subtle way to tell her. And maybe it will be her idea, and then she'll feel great about it. (post meeting 7)

During meetings like this one when participants complained about a lack of support from administrators, I would act as both a sympathetic listener and an objectives-focused facilitator. With the assistant principal, I was navigating a friendship along with being a visitor to her school who was grateful for her help with securing Smith as the site for my study.

Another difficult component of my positionality was my connection to Smith's SLC Coach; because my school was a part of the same SLC grant as Smith, I knew their SLC Coach fairly well and felt awkward when my participants complained about the implementation of SLCs at SHS. There was also one PAR meeting that fell on a day

when Smith's SLC teacher-leaders had a meeting, so two PAR group members were at that meeting instead. One of them sent a text message to a participant in our PAR meeting saying that PAR meetings far exceeded SLC meetings and that she wished she was in our meeting instead.

I thought that was a fun compliment, but it also puts me in a weird place... On the one hand, that's not my problem, but on the other hand, [the SLC teacher-leaders meeting facilitator] is my colleague and I don't want people to think her meetings are terrible, so I don't know. I'll have to think about that. (post meeting 8)

In the end I decided that the text message was not relevant to the PAR study itself, and that I did not have a place giving their SLC Coach advice based on one person's commentary. But in that case, something that made me an insider to Smith made my positionality and obligations unclear.

Within the group, I also grew to embrace the expert status that group members gave me. I had experienced two PAR studies and they had not, and often group members would ask me whether I thought they were on the right track, if they were making the right decisions, and whether they were forgetting anything. While I would consistently remind participants that there were not "right" or "wrong" decisions in PAR, and that *they* were the experts on their school, it also took time for me to be comfortable with how much authority they gave me.

I am younger than anyone in the group. That happens to me at work a lot too. I seem to be the only one who's hyper aware of the fact that I'm younger than anyone. When I'm giving that expert position, it's both exciting and it's kind of uncomfortable so, I am growing into it. (Initial)

Most of my participants had far more teaching experience than I did, and I regarded them as experts on many levels. Embracing their perception of me took time, mostly because of my hyperawareness of my outsider qualities and my age. Over time I grew into their

regard for me as an expert, and participants' confidence in their own expertise also increased.

**Life balance.** Many of my audio-journaling entries were about the difficulty I experienced in trying to balance the work of my dissertation study with my job as SLC Coach at my own school, which was particularly stressful with my principal leaving mid-year, and my other job as an adjunct professor at Loyola. I was extremely tired at all times, and my audio-journaling was often rife with yawning.

I'm sure I'll talk about this all the time but having this like triple life of researcher, practitioner and teacher at Loyola, I mean what on earth did I sign up for? It's crazy but it's going to be fine. I'm going to get it all done. I just- I'm anticipating grey hairs any second. (post meeting 6)

All my life I have been involved with myriad things at once, so my family members and friends were not surprised at my triple life during my study, but the stress level was far beyond anything I had ever experienced.

Another reason that balancing these three roles was challenging was the fact that my own administrators were exuding very little leadership and my principal was planning his exit strategy instead of being fully committed to my school. As a teacher coach, my supports were in higher demand than usual, and the work I did with teachers mostly went unrecognized.

To go from just being thrown random tasks, and feeling like the work I do at [my school] is really not valued, to being at Smith where I feel like my work is super valued, and I can do some really great things, there's just this huge pull and contrast in how my time is spent, and it really toys with my emotions to be honest. (post meeting 2)

I often audio-journaled about wanting to stay at Smith and not go to my school, because my participants gave me so much positive reinforcement and the group's work was

obviously making a positive change in the school that it was hard to leave. My journaling entries almost always took place in the car as I drove from Smith to my school, and I was usually late to my school because of my morning meetings at Smith.

I was super flattered at the end of the meeting when Megan looked at me and said, “This was an awesome meeting. Thanks.” Sure, I might be in trouble right now at [my school], if they have even figured out that I’m not there, but this work is moving and it’s exciting. (post meeting 3)

It was pretty impossible for me to balance my life during my dissertation study, which I am sure is a common problem for doctoral students. Having a particularly stressful school year and also teaching a graduate school course for the first time were very strenuous additions to already challenging line up.

**Facilitation style and demeanor.** Over the course of interviews and group meetings, I learned a lot about myself as a PAR facilitator and researcher. I always wanted my participants to be glad that they came to group meetings, to look forward to future meetings, and to know that I valued their participation and contributions. In order for this to happen, I had to plan meeting agendas very strategically and always follow through with any promises that I made. My participants were choosing to volunteer their time before school and spend it with me, so I felt obligated to make the most of their time. According to my participants, I did make people want to come to meetings, which Melissa attributed to my positive energy: “You started out with a good karma, a good feeling, has a good attitude and I think that kind of grabbed hold and you’re really consistent with that. I think that that is a major contributing factor.” No matter how stressful my lack of life balance was, I had to approach group meetings and interviews in a positive and productive manner which was contagious to my participants.

My objectives for each meeting to both to facilitate the PAR stage and cycle we were in, and also to explain our work clearly so that the PAR group would be sustainable: “I’m providing a lot of information, but trying to deliver it in manageable chunks that make sense with the action research steps, and teach the group why we’re doing it that day so that they can keep the process going” (initial). My personal focus was always on the PAR cycle, and I had to repeat many times that the issue the group selected and the improvement plan they created were entirely up to them. In her exit interview, Megan contrasted my strategy with most education consultants who often have a more scripted agenda:

You were really, really good at facilitating things. And like you let us decide things, but you also had a lot of information to give us...I think there is a lot of times in education when you have people come in from the outside, and it’s like you just feel like they are kind of full of it. So I think that originally I thought it was going to be like somebody coming in and just wanting us eventually to get to their way, rather than, “okay here’s a method I want you to use, you can get wherever you want to, I really don’t care.” (Megan)

Megan’s feedback here made me feel like I had truly achieved my goal of teaching participants a process for school improvement and having them drive all decision making within that process. Hearing such validation also increased my confidence as a PAR facilitator and as a researcher.

Dr. Ensminger charged me to think about my decision to engage in participatory action research as opposed to another paradigm of research. His questioning really made me think about my personality and my tendency to help other people fix their problems, and my strong personal beliefs in teachers as change agents. In my exit interview, he asked me to evaluate my successes as a PAR facilitator and researcher:

Seeing that when I take charge and facilitate a change, it does seem to work so if I know how to do that, I should keep doing that. I think that reenergized me. Some of it is the positive action research experiences and knowing that this really can make a difference and right now there's a problem that needs a difference and I know of some ways to get there, but then part of it is just my personality and I want to fix things. (exit interview)

Were it not for his probing, I may not have made the connection between my personality as a person and my decisions as a researcher. The ways in which he challenged me to look in the mirror for connections between who I am and how I research really helped me learn more about myself.

**Room to improve.** Another area of reflection in which I often engaged was identifying ways I could improve as a researcher. I knew going into the study that many aspects of being a researcher can only be developed through practice, such as being a good interviewer and finding a balance between objectives and flexibility during group meetings; for instance, I often over-planned for group meetings and had to prioritize in the moment, and other times I planned well but an recent event at Smith would beg attention and debriefing. One example of this was when the group finally heard back from their administration about when they could present to the staff. Although I had planned for us to back-map their selected problem, participants wanted to use the meeting time to plan their presentation, which I agreed was a good use of the meeting time.

I skipped the cause-and-effect fishbone activity. I don't know if I'm going to regret that later or if it's something that the group could do later. I think it's a powerful thing to back-map why a problem exists, but... That should have some space and time and not be rushed. I think I made the right choice, but I'll have to figure out if there's a way to weave it in at a later point. (post meeting 4)

I always wanted to be responsive to the group's needs, and had to be flexible and accept that new events or needs would trump my meeting objectives. Becoming comfortable



with this flexibility and learning to anticipate participants' needs was an area of improvement for me.

I also believe there is an art and science to interviewing well. It is important to build rapport with participants which makes them want to open up and share beyond a direct response, and at the same time I also had to keep track of how much data I was collecting for each of my three research questions. This is another balancing act of growing personal relationships and monitoring three research agendas: "I'm learning how to interview better, how to facilitate, how to transcribe, code, and I really am enjoying the work" (midpoint). I tried different note taking strategies during initial, midpoint, and exit interviews so that I could be fully present and trust my audio recorder and also ensure that I had data for each of my articles. At times I tried to go "off script" and make my interview questions sound more conversational, but I learned that I was not very good at that: "I did catch myself – twice I think – trying to re-phrase questions and basically not read my protocol....it did not go well. I need to read to my protocol and not put things into a different version of my own words" (post midpoint interview). I knew the ways in which I wanted to grow as a researcher, and interview techniques was one of my foci.

Another area of improvement was staying organized. Nine months of data collection is a long time, and having nine participants also generates a wealth of information.

I'm still not as organized as I need to be so I need to learn better systems for time management. The sheer volume of this project and how much data I have and how much stuff I have is very overwhelming. I'm still learning how to be a more organized researcher. (midpoint)

I will admit that I still need better systems of organization before I begin my next study, but I learned through trial and error how to keep data electronically and physically, how and where to store research articles, and how and where to save files on hard drives and the internet. Losing two flashdrives on a plane at the beginning of my study taught me a quick lesson in file storage, and I know in the future I will have better systems in place before beginning data collection.

In the writing process, I have had to learn how to select only the most important information to share since my data is so plentiful. Through multiple drafts and by pairing down each article immensely, I have realized that I struggle with selecting only the most important data to include.

A lot as a researcher has been that kind of self-control and focus that I don't think one can understand until you're in that moment and you're realizing that this juicy quotation doesn't fit anywhere. (midpoint)

I was often distracted by case-study-like data about certain participants, but luckily Dr. Ensminger helped me focus my findings. I still hope to use my data in new ways after my dissertation, but an area of growth for me has been figuring out how to be succinct while also honoring my participants' voices and my own experiences.

### **Others: My Changes in Perception of Group Members**

It was very interesting for me to be an outsider to the other members of the PAR group; my two previous PAR experiences were both with colleagues, and thus building rapport with strangers was a new research task for me. Over the course of our nine study, I got to know my participants very well. Divorce, flooded condos, Movember (growing a mustache for charity), and engagements all occurred in participants' personal lives, and

the ending of one school year and the beginning of the next also come with professional ups and downs.

One participant who showed the greatest range in attitude towards me and the PAR group was Megan. She came to an interest meeting I held before initial interviews and was one of two people to attend. She had circled “NO” on her interest form; brought her laptop, and typed the entire time I tried to facilitate a meeting of the three of us. After my initial interview and during our first PAR group meeting when she saw that many of her colleague-friends were in the group, her attitude changed completely. “‘I don’t even know if I want to be here’. One person told me that during the first meeting, yeah. Then, she was leading the group and got the marker and was going crazy once they had an idea” (initial interview). She was often the first to share out after journaling, and would organize the group when we planned professional development presentations. Megan transformed from being inconsiderate and seemingly disinterested to an active and enthusiastic participant.

Another participant who became more active over time was Caroline. Her contributions at meetings increased in frequency, and at the last meeting I facilitated she offered to be the facilitator in my place, which surprised everyone:

Megan: Should we pick like the first Thursday of every month, or something like that, and then just rotate?

Helen: Yeah.

Megan: From one, at the last meeting we’ll decide who’s going to be in charge of the next meeting, they’re in charge of coming up with an agenda.

Caroline: I would volunteer to do this this year...for the rest of this year. I would do it this year. Then we’ll see for next year.

In my audio-reflection after the meeting, I put together where her motivation for becoming the facilitator may have originated: “She told me that when she can be in

charge of things, she's much more motivated...I know she really appreciates the PAR cycle and the steps of the cycle" (post meeting 14). Caroline's self-nomination as PAR facilitator, even after a proposed alternative had been presented, marked a large change in my understanding of who she is.

Aside from individuals, watching the PAR group become more comfortable with one another, and grow into their own autonomy and empowerment. As I learned more about individuals through morning chit-chat over breakfast and through individual journaling and interviews, we realized commonalities that linked our personalities, beliefs, and values.

I have a lot of doers...very proactive, for the most part very positive and everyone's motivation to fix this issue is really so that kids know that they are going to be held accountable...I like them- Not only do I like how the group is going but I like each person for different reasons so I feel really lucky. (midpoint interview)

In addition to learning about participants as people and educators, I also got to witness their first experiences with PAR; it took time for them to embrace their power and have confidence that this school improvement tool could be different from others: "I think people are starting to feel like, 'Oh, maybe our idea will go somewhere. Maybe we won't be told 'no' this time'" (initial interview). The group's mentality changed greatly from thinking that their efforts would be for naught to expanding the reach of their initiative.

### **Global: Reflections on the Potential of PAR**

As my third experience with participatory action research, I approached the study with optimism. But what I learned far exceeded feeling good about PAR; my participants helped me see how translatable and practical the cyclical improvement process really is. Having never led a research effort outside of my own school, the successes of the Smith

PAR group have important implications for the future of school improvement planning and practitioner research more broadly. My experience with PAR at Smith increased my confidence in the PAR model's applicability to the school setting, and my belief in the intersection of PAR and small learning communities as well.

During my initial interview with Dr. Ensminger I highlighted that "if I had to pick my favorite thing [about action research], it's seeing change because of your work" (initial). By the time of my exit interview, my belief in PAR had grown stronger: "I think more research needs to happen where it's embedded in a normal school day in a neighborhood public school and you're teaching teachers how to do research themselves" (exit). My confidence in the power of teacher-led research indubitably increased because of the incredible participants I had; they took charge full responsibility for everything the group shared with their colleagues, and they exhibited sincere ownership of their initiative. In my midpoint interview, I commented that any school had the potential to engage in PAR:

I guess I feel like where there's motivated people and there's a need for change, change can happen, but you still need a process...I think it just kind of reaffirms my belief that this is a good system for leading schools in reform as long as you have people who really want to be there to do the work. (midpoint)

My reflection above may have been very different if I had different participants. But truthfully they reaffirmed my commitment to teacher-driven participatory action research.

According to my participants, there are certain components that a PAR group must have; while this list is not exhaustive, their suggestions are informative to the broader idea of using PAR in schools. After my final interviews with participants, during which I asked participants to identify recommendations for a school considering using

PAR, I summarized my group's suggestions in my own exit interview with Dr.

Ensminger:

Key elements of it are that it's voluntary, you have like-minded people who are intrinsically motivated to solve this problem. They're also motivated because they're choosing which problem. It helps that it's voluntary because it's not a requirement or a mandate and also no one is expecting any money or anything out of it, other than the thrill of actually making a difference in your school. (exit)

Keeping these guidelines in mind, I feel obligated to share my findings and best practices with others; when practitioners can read the trials and errors of other schools, it makes the reader's plans progress *so* much more quickly. I hope my three-article format will lead to at least three separate, published pieces, so that I reach the largest audience possible.

### **Reference List**

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APPENDIX A  
SMITH HIGH SCHOOL ELIGIBILITY LIST

## **PAR Eligibility List Proposal**

1. Contract will be distributed the first week of school and explained to students during advisory period.
2. Automated call to parents regarding contract.
3. The following text will be included in the 2013-2014 student agenda book:

### **Eligibility List**

Students must have 4 or fewer unserved detentions and be currently passing 4 or more classes in order to participate in any extracurricular activity or school function outside of the classroom.

These activities include but are not limited to field trips, sports, plays, clubs, sporting events, **senior activities**, Homecoming activities, Ethnic Fest and school dances.

Eligibility list will be generated every 2 weeks and will be posted in the cafeteria. If your name is not on the list, then you will remain ineligible until the next list is generated.

1. For Senior activities, students must be eligible to both purchase tickets and to attend events. Senior contract will detail these policy changes, which will also be posted on the Smith website.
2. Eligibility List will be generated every two weeks and posted in the cafeteria and on the Smith website. Copies will also be provided to all staff members and posted on our Google Drive. SLCs will review the list during intervention days and use data to inform interventions.
3. Students not on the list will be unable to participate in any of the aforementioned activities.
4. As the program develops, if coaches or teachers have issues with students not on the Eligibility List they should see Joseph or Olivia.
5. The PAR team will present the changes in policy for senior activities to all senior homerooms during an assembly at the start of the school year.
6. The PAR team will present an overview of the Eligibility List initiative during the first week of school in August 2013.
7. Other aspects of this program will be developed throughout the school year; we would like to see tutoring coupons, student-led yoga alternative detention program, and morning detention options for athletes. Raffle prizes, funded through SLCs, will be awarded during quarterly town hall meetings through SLC houses. We are also interested in the possibility of tying the scanning of IDs to the eligibility list, which would make it easier for security to identify ineligible students.

Created by PAR group, June 2013

Caroline, Derek, Helen, Joseph, Karla, Megan, Melissa, Olivia, and Tamara



Smith High School  
Student/Guardian Eligibility List Agreement

Eligibility List

Students must have 4 or fewer unserved detentions and be currently passing 4 or more classes in order to participate in any extracurricular activity or school function outside of the classroom.

These activities include but are not limited to field trips, sports, plays, clubs, sporting events, Senior activities, Homecoming activities, [Culture Night] and school dances.

Eligibility List will be generated every 2 weeks and will be posted in the cafeteria. If your name is not on the list, then you will remain ineligible until the next list is generated.

Students will also be deemed ineligible if this contract is not submitted to the homeroom teacher by Friday, August 30, 2013.

I have read, fully understand, and agree to the terms of the Eligibility List.

Student Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Student Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Parent/Guardian Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Parent/Guardian Signature \_\_\_\_\_

## Proposed text for Student Handbook:

## Eligibility List

Students must have 4 or fewer unserved detentions and be currently passing 4 or more classes in order to participate in any extracurricular activity or school function outside of the classroom.

These activities include but are not limited to field trips, sports, plays, clubs, sporting events, Senior activities, Homecoming activities, [Culture Night] and school dances. Eligibility List will be generated every 2 weeks and will be posted in the cafeteria. If your name is not on the list, then you will remain ineligible until the next list is generated.

Sample Eligibility List:

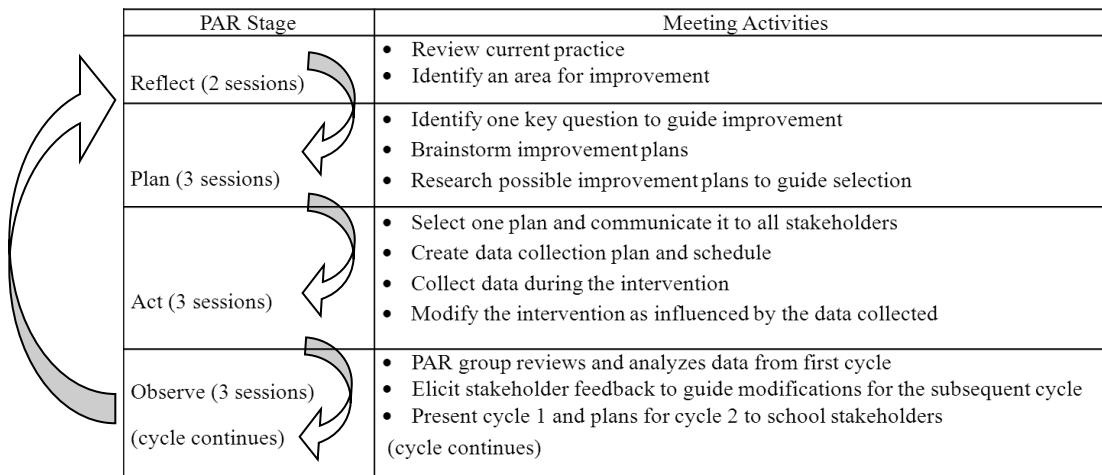
Student Name	Homeroom	Total Fs	Pending Detentions	Eligible
Student 1	385	0	6	No
Student 2	442	0	0	Yes
Student 3	765	1	0	Yes
Student 4	754	0	0	Yes
Student 5	383	4	1	No
Student 6	418	0	0	Yes
Student 7	662	2	0	Yes
Student 8	636	3	2	Yes

APPENDIX B  
SMITH HIGH SCHOOL PAR GROUP MEETING TEMPLATE AND  
GUIDING CYCLE WITH KEY ACTIVITIES

Smith PAR Group – Meeting #__		
<b>Date:</b> <b>Time:</b> <b>Location:</b>		
<b>Topic:</b> Using PAR to guide school improvement <b>PAR stage:</b>		<b>Attendees:</b> Smith PAR Team <b>Facilitator:</b> <b>Recorder:</b>
<b>Meeting Objectives:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> </ul>		
<b>To prepare for this meeting, please:</b>		
<b>Materials we will use at the meeting:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> </ul>		
Schedule [ ]		
Time	Min	Activity
		<b>Welcome:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meeting opener:</li> <li>• Review meeting objectives</li> </ul>
		<b>Meeting Topic 1</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> </ul>
		<b>Meeting Topic 2</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> </ul>
		<b>Review Action Items and Next Steps</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> </ul> <b>Next Steps:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Next meeting date for PAR group: _____</li> <li>• Time: _____</li> <li>• Location: _____</li> <li>• Objectives (ideas): _____</li> </ul>



## PAR Stages and key activities



PAR Stage	Meeting Activities
Reflect (2 sessions)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review current practice</li> <li>• Identify an area for improvement</li> </ul>
Plan (3 sessions)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify one key question to guide improvement</li> <li>• Brainstorm improvement plans</li> <li>• Research possible improvement plans to guide selection</li> </ul>
Act (3 sessions)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Select one plan and communicate it to all stakeholders</li> <li>• Create data collection plan and schedule</li> <li>• Collect data during the intervention</li> <li>• Modify the intervention as influenced by the data collected</li> </ul>
Observe (3 sessions) (cycle continues)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PAR group reviews and analyzes data from first cycle</li> <li>• Elicit stakeholder feedback to guide modifications for the subsequent cycle</li> <li>• Present cycle 1 and plans for cycle 2 to school stakeholders</li> </ul> <p>(cycle continues)</p>

APPENDIX C  
SAMPLE JOURNALING PROMPTS

Journal Entry #1

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

What did you learn about yourself through the Compass Points protocol?

What have you learned about the Participatory Action Research process thus far?

What do you hope to learn about the PAR process at the next meeting?

What tools and/or skills from this week's meeting could be used in other aspects of your job?

Any other comments or feedback about today's meeting:



## Journal Questions

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

June 21, 2013

1. In your own words, what is the school problem that the PAR group has decided to target?
2. In your own words, describe the solution that the PAR group has drafted thus far:
3. What positive results might Smith experience after this solution is put into place?
4. What problems/issues do you think will *not* be resolved through this solution?
5. Name 1 Hope and 1 Fear you have as the PAR group moves forward:

HOPE	FEAR

Meeting 4 Reflection

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

August 19, 2013

1. Name at least 1 thing you liked about today's meeting, and at least 1 thing you would like to change for the next meeting:

+ PLUS +	Δ DELTA Δ

2. In your own words, what is the school problem that the PAR group has decided to target? In what way, if any, did the fishbone activity influence your understanding of the chosen school problem?

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3. What role are you playing in the creation of school change? Explain.

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4a. How do you think the Smith Activities Eligibility List will be received by the staff?

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4b. How do you think the Smith Activities Eligibility List will be received by the students?

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5. If you could travel anywhere in the world for 2 weeks, where would you go and why?

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Meeting 5 Reflection

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

September 5, 2013

1. How did the PD presentation go on August 22?

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2. How was the Smith Activities Eligibility List received by the staff? How did people react?

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3. How did it feel to present a policy that you created with your PAR group colleagues to the rest of the staff?

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4. What questions or concerns did teachers express about the Activities Eligibility List, and how can the PAR group address them?

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5. How would you rate your experience (0 - 5) in the PAR group thus far, with a 0 meaning it's a terrible waste of time and 5 meaning it's an amazing experience of which you can't get enough: \_\_\_\_\_

Explain your # choice: \_\_\_\_\_

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6. How could your PAR experience be better?

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Any other comments or questions?

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*Thank you so much for sharing your thoughts!*

Semester 1 PAR Reflection

Participatory Action Researcher: \_\_\_\_\_

With regards to the Eligibility List, what's working?

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With regards to the Eligibility List, what's not working and why not?

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How is implementation of the Eligibility List going with...

- Clubs? \_\_\_\_\_

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- Sports? \_\_\_\_\_

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- SLCs? \_\_\_\_\_

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- TCTs and Departments? \_\_\_\_\_

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- Field trip sponsors? \_\_\_\_\_

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- Other school groups/functions? (be specific) \_\_\_\_\_

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Looking at your responses on how things are going and thinking ahead to Semester 2, what modifications to the Eligibility List process at Smith do you think are feasible and would improve the goal of clarifying & enforcing consequences?

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APPENDIX D  
SPOT CHECK FORM

Club or Sport: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Smith HS Eligibility: School-Wide Implementation Checkpoint!**

Club sponsor/coach checks Eligibility List each time it comes out: Y N

If No, why not?

Does not know how

Forgot

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Club sponsor/coach only allows eligible students to participate: Y N

If No, what is the reason given that ineligible students are able to participate?

If No, is the club sponsor/coach aware of which students are not eligible, and that enforcing the Eligibility List is a school-wide expectation? Y N

What support is needed from the club sponsor/coach moving forward?

What questions does the sponsor/coach have?

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Follow up needed/recommended:

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_



APPENDIX E  
INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

## **Semi-Structured Initial Interview Protocol**

### **Introduction:**

“You are being interviewed today because of your interested in joining the Smith High School Participatory Action Research study. This interview should take between 45 and 60 minutes to complete. When I transcribe this interview – type up the audiorecording with your responses – I will replace your name with a pseudonym, and both the audio file and the transcription will be saved on a password-protected hard drive, only accessible to me.

Today’s questions range from basic questions so that I can get to know you better, to more specific questions about how decisions are made at Smith, what schoolwide problem you find to be most problematic, and what you hope to get out of participating in this study.

Do you have any questions before we begin?”

### **Background questions – getting to know the participant:**

- Let’s start with your Identity Map so that I can get to know you better. Tell me about yourself, and about the terms you chose for your map.
- What/who influenced your path to become an educator?
- What subject do you teach now, and how did you select that content area?
  - Probe: What is your favorite thing about teaching?
  - Probe: What is your least favorite thing about teaching?
- How would you explain your roles and responsibilities at this school?
  - Probe: Walk me through a typical day
  - Probe: Walk me through an ideal day

### **Background questions – getting to know more about Smith High School:**

- How would you describe the Small Learning Communities school reform at Smith High School to a stranger?
  - Probe: In other words, how do SLCs operate are your school?
- What processes and procedures are in place right now at Smith High School in effort to organize the school for improvement?
  - Probe: List any schoolwide initiatives that Smith is using and describe the purpose behind each one, if you can.

### **Decision making at Smith High School:**

- What roles do you and other teachers play in school improvement at your school? Please distinguish between roles *you* play versus other teachers.
- What role do you and other teachers play in school reform/improvement at district, state, and national levels? Please distinguish between roles *you* play versus other teachers.

- What kinds of decisions are you able to make at your school, and why?
  - Probe: Talk about a time in which you were able to do something you felt was necessary and what people and/or processes allowed you to make such a decision.
- What kinds of decisions are you *not* able to make at your school, and why?
  - Probe: Talk about a time in which you were *not* able to do something you felt was necessary and what barriers were in your way

**Schoolwide Problems:**

On your Interest and Availability Sheet, you mentioned \_\_\_\_\_ as the most problematic issue at Smith High School OR What do you consider to be the main problems at Smith High School which impede teaching and learning?

- What do you know about \_\_ (chosen school problem) \_\_? In other words, what experiences have you had with it thus far?
- What do you think \_\_ (chosen school problem) \_\_ is an issue at Smith High School?
- What have you done to address this problem in the past? Why?
- If you were in charge, how would you address this problem?
- What/Who might contribute to this being a problem, and what/who might help decrease its existence as a school problem?
- What influences, if any, might this problem have on your classroom teaching? On other schoolwide problems? On other community problems?

**Joining the PAR Group:**

- What do you have to contribute to this PAR group?
- What do you hope to get out of this experience?
- What skills and/or tools are you hoping to gain from your experience in this study?

**Final:** Is there anything else you would like to add?

**NAME:** \_\_\_\_\_

**DATE:** \_\_\_\_\_

**IDENTITY CHART**

The diagram consists of 20 empty ovals arranged in a circular pattern around a central empty rectangle. The ovals are organized into four rows: the top row has 4 ovals, the second row has 3 ovals, the third row has 4 ovals, and the bottom row has 4 ovals. The central rectangle is positioned between the second and third rows of ovals.

Initial Interview verbal prompt: Please fill in the rectangle with your name (full name, nick name, initials – up to you) and at least 5 ovals with nouns or adjectives that describe you. Note: This protocol is adapted from Facing History & Ourselves

### Semi-Structured Midpoint Interview Protocol

**Introduction:** “You are being interviewed today because of your involvement in the Smith High School Participatory Action Research study. This interview should take between 45 and 60 minutes to complete. You do not have to answer any questions that make you feel uncomfortable. When I transcribe this interview – type up the audiorecording with your responses – I will replace your name with a pseudonym, and both the audio file and the transcription will be saved on a password-protected hard drive, only accessible to me. Do you have any questions before we begin?”

	<b>Article 1</b>	<b>Article 2</b>	<b>Article 3</b>
Research questions	<p>How can participatory action research further the <b>organizational learning</b> that a school experiences while implementing the smaller learning communities school reform model?</p> <p>a) understandings of a school problem’s root cause, potential solutions, and the effects of plan</p> <p>b) school-wide processes and procedures in order to address challenges</p>	<p>How does participation in the PAR process increase <b>teachers’ consciousness and awareness of power structures and decision making</b> in their school community?</p> <p>a) impact teachers’ views of their roles in decision making and their actions?</p> <p>b) use PAR tools and processes in their practices outside of the PAR group</p>	<p>How do <b>teachers change</b> as a result of their experiences in the PAR cycle?</p> <p>a) perceptions of themselves and their actions change</p> <p>b) influence views of the larger discussion of school reform/ improvement</p>
Tallies and notes			

## QUESTIONS

### Understanding the PAR process:

- Describe the PAR process as you understand it thus far.
- What skills and/or tools have been or might be of use to you outside of the PAR group?
- What are you learning about schoolwide initiatives, both existing and the new PAR intervention?

### Understanding the school problem:

- Using your cause-and-effect fishbone, describe what you have learned thus far about the PAR group's targeted problem?
  - How has your understanding of the problem grown so far?
  - What are root causes of this problem? (use fishbone)
  - Which root causes of this problem came out while making the cause-and-effect fishbone that you had not considered before, if any?
- How do you think this problem could be addressed at your school?
- What have you learned about the schoolwide issue as it relates to your work in your classroom?

### Decision Making:

- How do you see your role in school reform since starting with the PAR group?
- How do you see your role and other teachers' roles in the broader discussion about school reform since starting with the PAR group?
- Describe what you have learned thus far about decision making at MHS.
  - Who makes decisions that relate to the chosen schoolwide problem?
  - How do they make these decisions and how do you find out about them?
  - What role, if any, do *you* have in these decisions?
- How do the school's decision making structures affect your teaching and students' learning?
- What changes in decision making at MHS need to happen, and what are your suggestions for making these changes occur? How would such changes in decision making impact others?

### Understanding of self:

- Self-evaluation –
  - How do you think you are doing as a meeting participant?
  - How could you improve and/or challenge other participants to improve?
- What have you learned about yourself thus far?
  - What kind of learner are you?
  - What kind of collaborator are you?
  - What kinds of beliefs do you hold about solving school problems?
  - What kind of role do you want to play in solving school problems?
  - What kind of role do you want other teachers to play in solving school problems?

**Feedback about the PAR group:**

- What questions do you have about the PAR process that have not been answered, if any?
- Is participating in the PAR group meeting, exceeding, or falling short of your expectations?  
Please explain.
- Do you have any questions or suggestions for the PAR group before you go?

## EXIT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

**Introduction:** “You are being interviewed today because of your involvement in the Smith High School Participatory Action Research study. This interview should take about 40 minutes to complete. You do not have to answer any questions that make you feel uncomfortable. When I transcribe this interview – type up the audiorecording with your responses – I will replace your name with a pseudonym, and both the audio file and the transcription will be saved on a password-protected hard drive, only accessible to me. Do you have any questions before we begin?”

Past interviews focused on getting to know about you and about Smith, and the midpoint interview centered on decision making and checking for understanding about the PAR process. Today’s interview will focus on your experiences and reflections, specifically looking at ways that participating in the study has impacted you.

### **Personal reflection:**

- Using your artifacts from June to January, walk me through your different stages of learning and understanding the PAR process.
  - Select 3 artifacts that stand out to you and explain why you chose them
    - How was that artifact an important part of the PAR process?
    - How have you changed since you wrote what’s on that artifact?
    - Is this a skill or tool that you would use again? How?
  - Now that you have reviewed everything we did,
    - Has your view of yourself changed at all after being a part of a Participatory Action Research study? (3)
    - Have your actions at Smith changed as a result of being a PAR member? (2)
    - Have your views of your colleagues or any Smith stakeholders changed at all after being a part of a Participatory Action Research study? (3)
    - How has your experience in this PAR group influenced the level of participation that you plan take regarding future school-wide problems? (2)
    - How has your participation in the PAR group influenced your view of teachers’ roles in school reform, on the local and national level? (3)

### **Definition work (next page):**

- Read the three definitions of an action researcher and select one that resonates with you the most.
  - Why did you choose that one?
  - What about the other two definitions made you *not* choose them?



**Lasting influences:**

- What intersections does PAR have with other school improvement initiatives that Smith High School is implementing? Has the work of the PAR group complemented any other improvement efforts? (1)
- How do you think that the PAR process could be used outside of our study? (1)
- How do you predict that this school issue will look next school year? (1)
- Would you recommend using the PAR model to educators at another high school? (2)
  - if “yes”, why? And what would be specific “must haves” before during and after using the PAR model?
  - If “no”, what about the PAR process prevents you from recommending it to other schools?

**Back Up Bank:**

- From June until now, how would you describe your experience in the PAR study group? (2)
- What did you learn from participating in this study about participatory action research? (1)
- How did you learn from participating in this study...
  - ...about using research to influence school change? (2)
  - ...about working with colleagues in a new way? (2)
  - ...about *your* decision making abilities at your school? (2)

## PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH DEFINITIONS

### OPTION 1:

Participatory Action Research is the process of engaging in action research with participants from the setting in which a problem or issue will be addressed; the participants are key decision makers with regards to which problem to study, which data to collect and analyze, and how to design and monitor an intervention for addressing the problem.

“Participatory research is defined as systematic inquiry, with the collaboration of those affected by the issue being studied, for purposes of education and taking action or effecting change” (Green et al., 2003, p. 419).

“The result is greater awareness of the assumptions underlying policies and strategies, better systems thinking skills, shared understanding of complex issues, and enhanced individual and group learning skills” (Senge & Sterman, 1990, p. 1008).

### OPTION 2:

PAR is an empowering process wherein the members of the group use their personal experiences in the context along with outside sources to solve a self-selected problem through democratic decision making.

“**Participatory Action Research** brings people together to define for themselves what problems they face in their community, find solutions through talking with and gathering data from their peers, and then implementing those solutions through strategic and informed actions” (Minor et al., 2013).

“The process of PAR should be empowering and lead to people having increased control over their lives” (adapted from Minkler & Wallerstein, 2003; Grbich, 1997).

### OPTION 3:

By engaging in Participatory Action Research, participants are charged to reflect on what they believe, how they view themselves, how they view others, and how they understand the chosen problem – not just at the microscopic [school] level, but in the larger discussion about education as well.

“PAR seeks to understand and improve the world by changing it. At its heart is collective, self reflective inquiry that researchers and participants undertake, so they can understand and improve upon the practices in which they participate and the situations in which they find themselves. The reflective process is directly linked to action, influenced by understanding of history, culture, and local context and embedded in social relationships” (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2003; Grbich, 1997).

APPENDIX F  
DISSERTATION CODE LIST

**Article 1**

How can participatory action research further the organizational learning that a school experiences while implementing the smaller learning communities school reform model?

SLC-OrgLrn(1)

- a) How does the PAR process facilitate teachers' understandings of a school problem's root cause, potential solutions, and the effects of implementing an improvement plan?
  - PAR-RootProb (1a)
  - PAR-PotSol (1a)
  - PAR-EffPlan (1a)
- b) How does the PAR process inform school-wide processes and procedures in order to address challenges that the school is experiencing?
  - PAR-SWP&P (1b)
  - PAR-AddProb (1b)

**Article 2**

How does participation in the PAR process increase teachers' consciousness and awareness of power structures and decision making in their school community?

PAR-ConsPS&DM

- a) How does participation in a PAR cycle impact teachers' views of their roles in decision making and the actions they take in their school?
  - PAR-RoleDM(2a)
  - PAR-RoleAct(2a)
  - PAR-Empower(2a)
- b) How do PAR tools and processes encourage autonomy and empowerment in participants' actions within and outside of the PAR group?
  - PAR-UseTools(2b)
  - PAR-EffectTools(2b)
  - PAR-EmpowTools(2b)

**Article 3**

How do teachers change as a result of their experiences in the PAR cycle?

PAR-ChgTs(3)

- a) How do teachers' perceptions of themselves and their actions change from their engagement in a participatory action research cycle?
  - PAR-ChgPercSelf(3a)
  - PAR-ChgPercOthers(3a)
  - PAR-ChgPercAct(3a)
- b) How does participating in a PAR cycle influence teacher's views of the larger discussion of school reform and improvement?
  - PAR-InfViewsSchRef(3b)
  - PAR-InfViewSchImp(3b)
- c) How does the act of facilitating a PAR cycle impact the researcher's view of herself as a learner, her interactions with others, and her global perception of participatory action research?
  - Fac-ImpactRViewSelf(3c)
  - Fac-ImpactRInterOthers(3c)
  - Fac-ImpactPercPAR(3c)

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## VITA

Elizabeth Willingham Ferrell was born on February 22, 1984 in New York City to William Ferrell and Stuart Weismiller. Raised in Greenwich, CT with her brother, William G. Ferrell, Jr., Elizabeth attended Greenwich Academy (GA) for 14 years and graduated in 2002. At GA, Elizabeth grew a passion for learning, community service, and singing. Elizabeth is grateful for the many inspirational teachers she had at GA, as they have been role models in her journey to becoming a teacher.

Elizabeth graduated from Wake Forest University in 2006 with a Bachelor of Arts in English and a minor in Secondary Education. After teaching English as a Foreign Language in Prague, Elizabeth moved to Chicago to become a Chicago Public Schools teacher at Harlan Community Academy High School while completing her Master of Education from Loyola University Chicago in 2008. Elizabeth began her Doctor of Education program in the summer of 2009, and also worked as an English teacher at Lindblom Math and Science Academy followed by her role as the Small Learning Communities Coach at Roosevelt High School (RHS).

Elizabeth currently teaches English and supports school-wide initiatives and early college opportunities at RHS. Additionally, she teaches Action Research at Loyola University Chicago as an adjunct professor. Outside of teaching and researching, Elizabeth enjoys yoga; rugby; singing karaoke; and spending time with her wife, dog, and friends.

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