

Category: [Vol. 3, 2009](#)

Don't Forget the Politics: The Broker's Role in Community Interventions

Hits: 2880

The South Shore Journal, Vol. 3, 2009, pp.51-85.

Don't Forget the Politics: The Broker's Role in Community Interventions

Daniel Lowery, Ph.D.
Calumet College of St. Joseph

Stanley Wigle, Ph.D.
Indiana University Northwest

Karen Evans, Ph.D.
Indiana University Northwest

Abstract

An initiative funded by a Community Outreach Partnership Center grant is examined. Those involved attempted to broker the construction of a co-located community center and elementary school with an innovative academic program in Gary, Indiana. The initiative proved to be highly political and eventually failed. Along the way, participants found themselves engaging in behaviors that seemed, at least on the surface, to violate the community intervention canon reflected in much of the literature. Reflections on this effort provide a foundation for a more sophisticated understanding of the concept of community engagement and the role of the change agent.

In his classic work, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (1983), Donald Schön describes professional work as “inherently unstable” (1983, p. 15). According to Schön, “complexity, uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and value conflicts [are] increasingly perceived as central to the world of professional practice” (1983, p. 14). Further, professionals who choose to engage in the “swampy lowlands” of professional work do so through a process of “trial and error, intuition, and muddling through” (1983, p. 43).

In this article, we describe a particular kind of professional work: community development. More

specifically, we describe our involvement in an initiative that took place in a poor and under-served neighborhood. As representatives of an institution of higher learning, we intervened as change agents over a period of several years in a setting characterized by complexity, inertia, and conflict. In the end, we were unable to overcome the politics that dogged the project from beginning to end.

As the initiative unfolded, we made a conscious choice to work within a decision-making framework that was highly centralized and quite political in nature; we exercised a kind of activism that is suspect in some academic circles; and we were forced to confront if not discard a value featured in much of the community development literature. Further, our efforts did not precisely reflect any of the three intervention models around which community development is often conceptualized. Indeed, we did not so much participate in a closely choreographed dance or adhere to a finely crafted script as “muddle through,” as Schön (1983, p. 43) describes it. In doing so, we developed an alternative metaphor for our work: the change agent as broker. And along the way, we learned some important lessons that should be of interest to scholars who choose to engage in community work.

We adopted action research as a meta-method through which to pursue our research. It proved uniquely appropriate to this effort. In the following pages, we employ a format suggested by Ernest T. Stringer as an alternative appropriate to evaluations based on action research (1999, p. 170). We begin with “focus and framing” (i.e., background information pertaining to the target neighborhood is presented together with a brief overview of the initiative). In the place of a conventional literature review, we examine¹ the nature of community work. This is followed by a brief description of the “methodology” employed (i.e., a journey analysis conducted within the context of an action research agenda). This is followed, in turn, by an analysis of certain critical incidents that occurred over the course of the three-year project. This “reconstruction” of the intervention replaces the results section of a conventional assessment. Finally, key lessons learned over the course of the project are examined. In effect, we turn to the academic literature in order to “contextualize” the perspectives of key participants.

Focus and Framing

Indiana University Northwest (IUN) applied for and received a Community Outreach Partnership Center (COPC) grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) in late 1999. Established in 1994, the COPC program provides grants of up to \$400,000 to institutions of higher learning to underwrite applied research and outreach to distressed communities. It is one of several federal programs designed to promote civic engagement of various kinds in colleges and universities. COPC-sponsored activities typically involve students and faculty in enterprises in community settings. Specific strategies include service-learning and other opportunities designed to promote the development of social capital, applied research, and change initiatives of various kinds in

the sponsoring colleges and universities (HUD Office of Policy Development and Research, 2000, p. 14).

IUN's three-year grant committed it to four distinct projects in Gary, Indiana's Glen Park neighborhood. One of those projects is examined here: an effort to mobilize support for the construction of a co-located community center and elementary school with an innovative academic program.

Glen Park is located to the immediate south of downtown Gary. It has experienced an increasing concentration of poverty, racial segregation, a severe loss of jobs and population, and a high level of gang activity and violence in recent years. Data from the U.S. Census Bureau indicate, for instance, that more than 30 percent of Glen Park's residents live in poverty. Additionally, approximately 15 percent of the buildings in the area are vacant, and 49 percent of the 3,740 occupied homes are rental units. Data secured from the Office of the U.S. Attorney for the Northern District of Indiana in support of a Department of Justice Weed and Seed grant indicate that 64 homicides were recorded in the Glen Park community in 2002 and some 200 homes were burglarized. Glen Park easily meets the community criteria typically associated with COPC projects.

With a few notable exceptions, IUN's relationship with the Glen Park community can best be described as one of mutual tolerance if not benign neglect. There is, in fact, little "towntown" conflict. Nevertheless, like other institutions of higher learning located in urban areas (Cox, 2000, p. 14), administrators at IUN have long worried about the impact of its setting on enrollment. Few tangible steps have been taken over the course of the last two decades, however, to dramatically improve the neighborhood. A single faculty member has represented IUN on the boards of a local community development corporation (CDC) and a citizen-led community-oriented policing (COP) organization. Neither of these organizations, however, has accomplished a great deal. The CDC has had minimal success, and the Glen Park community continues to experience high crime rates despite the efforts of the COP organization.

A notable exception to this general history of non-engagement involves an urban teachers development program. In fact, IUN's School of Education has enjoyed a positive and productive relationship with the only grade school located on the east side of the community. Unfortunately, Benjamin Franklin Elementary School reflects many of the challenges that confront the Glen Park community as a whole. During the 2002-2003 school year, over 70 percent of its students qualified for the free lunch program. Whereas 70.3 percent of the elementary school students in Indiana met standards established for English and mathematics during the 2002-2003 school year, only 26 percent of Franklin's students performed at required levels. Moreover, the performance of Franklin's students on the state's standardized test declined each of the five years prior to the start of the initiative (Indiana Department

of Education, 2003).

The education component of IUN's COPC grant originally included a tutoring program for grade school students and an adult education program. It also called for the adoption of a year-round academic calendar at Franklin School. As we shall see, however, this focus changed dramatically over the course of the intervention.

The Nature of Community Development

Consistent with the analytic framework recommended by Stringer (1999), the nature of community development will now be examined. We will then attempt to locate our efforts pertaining to the Franklin School project in the context of this conceptual scheme. Based on an analysis of over 300 articles pertaining to community development, James A. Christenson (1989) identified three "themes" or strategies, all of which aspire to the "betterment of people" who live in distressed communities.² In effect, these themes serve as models within which the idea of a particular community intervention can be conceptualized. Each entails certain assumptions about the nature of power, the role of the change agent, and the efficacy of other alternatives.

The first theme, "technical assistance," revolves around institutions. In this view, a change agent's contribution is circumscribed, limited to the advice, counsel, and technical assistance he or she can provide to a representative of an established institution that controls a critical resource of one kind or another.

Conceptually, this strategy is closely associated with behavioralism, most notably the theoretical work of Herbert Simon (1997). Simon promoted managerial decision-making as a focal point for research (1997, p. xi), a perspective that achieved dominance in many practice fields in the last half of the 20th Century. In effect, Simon provided entrée for a productivity oriented perspective into the domains of professional, organizational, and community work.

At the same time, Simon contributed significantly to the separation of scholars from practitioners. Simon's critique of the managerial discipline's reliance on "proverbs" triggered a move away from the engaged attention of the engineer to the disinterested stance of the social scientist. He set the stage for the case study and the survey instrument – "scientific" techniques designed to describe rather than prescribe – to supplant the use of normative "proverbs" (McSwite, 1997, p. 184). An exception to this conscious distancing eventually developed in the form of organizational development (OD) strategies of various kinds. Nevertheless, scholars who engage in OD interventions have tended to draw on the same taproot of efficiency which has informed the work of Simon's more "scholarly" acolytes.

Simon's behavioralism also served to forestall incipient movements in the direction of more value-based theories of intervention. Indeed, Simon endorsed efficiency as a preeminent good.

What about the issues of fact that underlie (the administrator's) decisions? These are largely determined by a principle that is implied in all rational behavior: the criterion of efficiency... The criterion of efficiency is completely neutral as to what goals are to be attained (1997, p. 12). (It demands that, of two alternatives having the same cost, that one be chosen which will lead to the greater attainment of the organization's objectives; and that, of two alternatives leading to the same degree of attainment, that one be chosen which entails the lesser cost (1997, pp. 149-150).

Simon's approach thus dismisses any use of the terms "good and ought" as irrelevant to decision-making (1997, p. 57).

This view has been widely criticized as undemocratic and excessively instrumental (Christenson, 1989, p. 35). John Forester (1993), for instance, has advanced a formidable critique against the "instrumental rationality" and "rational scientific models" that are part and parcel of the planning profession. As we shall see, "technical assistance" as a community development strategy is naively dismissive, as well, of political factors that often come into play in community interventions of various kinds.

In contrast, Christenson's second theme, the "self-help strategy," assumes that people in distressed communities are able to take action to improve their own lives with little or no assistance. This view consciously "de-privileges" the perspectives of those who represent institutional interests. Self-help strategies tend to focus on processes rather than on particular projects or outcomes, and the change agent's role is limited to providing people with the "skills and knowledge to facilitate their decision-making process and the accomplishment of specific objectives" (Christenson, 1989, p. 34). The self-help perspective is embodied in much of the action research literature (Stringer, 1999). It is also reflected in a number of analyses pertaining specifically to HUD-sponsored Community Outreach Partnership Centers.

Conceptually, this second theme is consistent with Benjamin Barber's idea of "strong democracy" (1984, p. xix). Barber would undoubtedly dismiss Christenson's first theme as a "minimalist" perspective, one that encompasses a narrow jurisdictional range for community members. According to Barber, "(p)olitical life has been enervated rather than liberated [in recent years]. In the end, wary minimalists have been anemic democrats, proffering a politics as thin as the thinnest gruel" (Barber, 1984, p. 62). Barber is critical of the third theme articulated by Christenson as well. The idea that a common interest can emerge from the rough and tumble of identity politics is mistaken according to Barber. He dismisses this view as "deficient because it relies on the fictions of the free market and the

putative freedom and equality of bargaining agents; because it cannot generate public thinking or public ends of any kind; (and) because it is innocent about the real world of power..." (1984, p. 144).

Drawing on pragmatism, Barber invokes the ethos of communitarianism in his description of strong democracy:

(P)olitics in the participatory mode where conflict is resolved in the absence of an independent ground through a participatory process of ongoing, proximate self-legislation, and the creation of a political community capable of transforming dependent, private individuals into free citizens, and partial and private interests into public goods (1984, p. 132).

Strong democracy favors direct participation over indirect representation in public and civic affairs. It expresses a positive understanding of freedom. It also endorses a broad scope of action for communities of interest. Barber believes that communities of all kinds can, in fact, improve themselves. He is not alone in advancing this view. Bruce Ackerman, for instance, contends that "great mental acuity and loquacity" are not required in dialogic encounters aimed at achieving just outcomes (1980, p. 75).

Others are less sanguine. The self-help theme or strategy has been criticized for failing to acknowledge the formidable nature of power inequities that exist in poor and under-served communities and the important roles that institutions can play – or fail to play – with respect to community development. Jürgen Habermas thus contends that "communicative action" is difficult to achieve due to the inequitable distribution of power in modern societies (1984; 1987; 1989). According to Habermas, it is becoming more difficult to engage in discourse that is transparent and open. Hannah Arendt (1958; 1977a; 1977b) similarly describes the public sphere as shrinking. Similarly, Robert Putnam (1995a; 1995b) decries the ongoing attenuation of public life. They all lament a certain loss of "social capital," which Putnam (1995a and 1995b) defines as the civic infrastructure that makes it possible for a community to weather difficult circumstances. Social capital must be built up over time in the relationships people develop through their participation in the rich tapestry of associational life. As is noted above, Putnam believes that social capital in America is now in decline. Indeed, in some urban settings, the storehouse of social capital typically associated with vibrant communities (e.g., effective schools, opportunities for employment, responsive government, a strong nonprofit sector, engaged citizens, etc.) may be severely strained.

Christenson's third broad theme or strategy rejects the instrumental nature of the "technical assistance" perspective. It begins with a frank assessment of power and the role it plays in distressed communities. The "conflict strategy" is closely associated with the work of Saul Alinsky (Christenson, 1989, p. 37), and is often organized around a particular goal of one kind or another (e.g., social or environmental

justice). Like the “self-help” strategy, it tends to focus more on processes than on particular outcomes. It also assumes that those who control resources will not share them willingly. It thus eschews cooperative endeavors and views cooption as a persistent danger. The change agent “get(s) people together, to show them that they have power in numbers and that an organized, focused voice spoken by an active minority can influence what is done within a neighborhood or community” (Christenson, 1989, p. 37).

Our initial conception of the Franklin School project embodied certain elements of both the “technical assistance strategy” and the “self-help strategy.” We did not anticipate the need to develop and deploy a “conflict strategy” as a complementary component of our change effort. Although members of the Glen Park community were invited to participate in meetings, individuals representing two powerful institutions (i.e., Indiana University Northwest and the Gary Schools) played dominant roles early on, and the Mayor and members of his administration and the Boys and Girls Club played key roles later on as the project unfolded. The initiative thus reflected a defining characteristic of the “technical assistance strategy.” At the same time, the selection of programs to be provided at the new Franklin School was led by a group of teachers and a highly involved parent. The search for model programs was not institutionally sanctioned, and representatives of the University played a limited role in this regard. This initial focus on process rather than particular outcomes was thus more reflective of the “self-help strategy” than the “technical assistance strategy.”

We recognized, however, that organizations already in place in the Glen Park community would not be able to offer very much in the way of assistance. The relative weakness of the Glen Park CDC and COP organizations has already been noted. A parallel effort to organize churches in the Glen Park community also struggled; they tend, in fact, to be small and under-funded, and, in several instances, their congregations are drawn from outside the community.

For these reasons, we determined that we would have to assume a proactive role. Indeed, our community intervention would require a heavier hand than the one reflected in much of the literature. At the same time, we eschewed the political activism of the “conflict strategy,” a decision that would eventually prove fatal to our efforts. Initially at least, we remained fully committed to the belief that much could be accomplished by “elicit(ing) the development of powers latent in [the community’s] members” (Boisvert, 1998, p. 56). Indeed, we explicitly endorsed John Dewey’s conception of democracy as less a set of political institutions and practices than “mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience” (Dewey, 1985, p. 93). To this end, we focused on the need to develop social capital in the Glen Park community. More specifically, we proposed the construction of a new neighborhood school featuring an innovative curriculum and a co-located community center, a site at which the “latent powers” of Glen Park residents could develop and find expression.

In fact, primary schools have longed played this role; indeed, they do more than prepare children intellectually for more advanced academic challenges.³ We concluded that a new Franklin School and community center could, in fact, provide space in which the various processes that create opportunities to establish common ground and cooperative activity could be nurtured and developed (Dewey, 1915, pp. 14-15). Indeed, we hoped that a new Franklin School would evolve into a social institution that would prepare young people to engage in active citizenship, an institution in which key relationships in the community – economic, social, and political – would be explored (Dewey, 1983, p. 158ff).

Methodology

The research described below was approached from within a constructivist paradigm. Pragmatism – most notably, the pragmatism of John Dewey – was adopted as our theoretical perspective,⁴ and action research⁵ served as a methodological framework for a journey analysis that relied on a detailed chronology of events and meeting notes.

As described by Hal Lawson (1999), journey analysis is appropriate to action research conducted in community settings. Developed by Cox and deFrees (1991) in the context of a school reform initiative, this technique employs detailed chronologies in the identification and analysis of key events, critical incidents, and epiphanies that occur over the course of a change initiative. Key questions are asked:

When did the initiative begin? Who started it? Why? What were the original purposes, goal, and objectives? Who determined them? How? Why? Are there special features of the local context that influenced the launching of the initiative? Why were they influential? Who convenes the partners? Do these people and organizations have a history of working together? Are there interagency agreements and contracts? Did the initiative begin with an evaluation plan? Why or why not (Lawson, 1999)?

Journey analysis is thus less a method than a framework for thinking about a community intervention.

A chronology of IUN's COPC initiative together with detailed notes of all meetings pertaining to the initiative's education program served as the basis for the journey analysis described below. The chronology was developed on an ongoing basis by the faculty member who administered the grant as a whole, and the meeting notes were drafted independently by the Dean of the School of Education, who oversaw the education component of the initiative. As an added check on validity, a draft of this evaluation was circulated for comment among several external parties who participated in the intervention. Finally, the various influences and decisions noted in the analysis that follows contributed to the kind of reflexive validity described by Turnock and Gibson (2001).

Construction

In January, 2001, Superintendent Mary Guinn of the Gary School Corporation, Dean Stan Wigle of the School of Education, Pam Sandoval of the School of Education, and Dan Lowery of the School of Public and Environmental Affairs, agreed to collaborate on a project at Franklin Elementary School. This initial meeting led to the creation of a Franklin School planning team consisting of Wigle, Sandoval, Lowery, and teachers and administrators from Franklin School. Initially, there was little agreement regarding the nature or scope of the project. However, the team affirmed that the project should meet three criteria. Most importantly, the project should promote academic achievement. Further, it should be “portable” so that lessons learned could be adopted by other schools in the school district. Finally, it should include a combination of several approaches. Indeed, a forced choice among several competing concepts should not be required. These criteria guided the planning team’s work throughout the initial stages of the project and contributed in a significant way to the proposal that eventually emerged from our deliberations.

As the Franklin Planning Team was launched, the need for a community center somewhere in Glen Park was being pursued by Lowery as part of an independent initiative. It was quickly recognized by everyone involved that a co-located elementary school and community center made sense. The planning team also agreed that a new building was needed at the Franklin School site. The current facility was overcrowded, old, in poor physical condition, and inadequate for the types of programs being investigated by the planning team. These two emerging ideas – the need for a co-located elementary school and community center and the need for a new physical plant – quickly coalesced.

Certain challenges immediately emerged. The Gary School Corporation had recently endorsed a bond issue to support the construction of three new schools, and Franklin Elementary School was not selected as one of these sites. As programming needs were identified, the importance of a new building became increasingly clear, however. Lowery, Sandoval, and Wigle agreed on the need to convince the school board to build at the Franklin site. To this end, Lowery and Wigle met with Michael Scott, the President of the school board, to explore ways in which a new school might be built, given the school corporation’s severe financial constraints. Although Scott was not encouraging, he recommended that the planning team explore a partnership with the City of Gary. To this end, Lowery and Wigle met with Superintendent Mary Guinn. They proposed that Mayor Scott King be approached regarding the construction of a new Franklin School. Guinn endorsed this strategy provided that the initial contact was made by IUN. Lowery and Wigle then asked Bruce Bergland, IUN’s Chancellor, to approach Mayor King regarding a partnership with the Gary School Corporation. He agreed. Bergland subsequently reported that the Mayor showed considerable interest in the idea and was willing to meet with officials from the school corporation.

At the same time, the planning team organized site visits to schools that had already implemented

several academic programs then under consideration. Based on data gathered on these visits, the planning team identified three programs that would be incorporated into the proposal eventually recommended for adoption: Microsociety (i.e., a learning methodology in which students function in a simulated society and economy during a portion of the school day); an extended-year academic calendar; and a model mathematics and science curriculum.

The offsite visits included the Ralph Metcalf Elementary School in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, which employs a yearlong calendar. It is co-located with a community center operated by the Boys and Girls Club as well. The potential value of this kind of partnership was immediately recognized by the visit team. In fact, it led to another meeting with Mayor King in which the Metcalf School was proposed as a model for the Franklin School project. King recommended that a "high-level" team make a second visit to the Metcalf School. The successful meeting with King also led to a meeting with Superintendent Guinn in which the planning team's proposals were formally presented. The presentation included a recommendation for a co-located community center operated by the Boys and Girls Club. Knowing that the Mayor was now willing to participate as an active partner in this effort, Guinn endorsed the recommendation. The Mayor, Superintendent Guinn, three members of the school board, the chairman of the Boys and Girls Club's board of directors, Chancellor Bergland, and other community members joined the planning team in a second visit to the Metcalf Elementary School. Based on this experience, the Mayor sent a film crew back to Milwaukee to develop a video of the facility that was later used to promote the initiative.

With a strong coalition seemingly in place, it looked as though the project might proceed smoothly to a happy conclusion. However, a troubling concern developed not long after the second trip to Milwaukee. At a meeting with the planning team, Superintendent Guinn focused almost exclusively on the school corporation's budget concerns. She advised the team that the Franklin initiative could not proceed without a substantial commitment of funds from the City of Gary. This sobering caution foreshadowed the eventual demise of the project. In fact, the process that had been given such an enthusiastic boost with the second visit to the Metcalf School ground quickly to a halt.

Several months later, the planning team asked Chancellor Bergland to meet again with Mayor King to explore ways in which the impasse might be broken. Bergland welcomed the opportunity and, in a conversation with the Mayor, agreed to arrange a meeting with officials from the school corporation. While this intervention pumped new life into the project, the funding issue remained unresolved. At the subsequent meeting, the Mayor suggested that a small team composed of representatives from the City, the school corporation, IUN, and the Boys and Girls Club be formed to develop a funding strategy.

Prior to the team's first meeting, Wigle and Lowery met with Superintendent Guinn to formulate a

proposal that could serve as a point of departure for the team's deliberations. The resulting scheme provided for the City to bear 50 percent the project's cost, for 25 percent to be covered by private funds to be raised by IUN and the Boys and Girls Club, and for the remaining 25 percent to be financed by the school corporation. Guinn pledged her support to this plan and indicated that she would brief the school board.

At the first meeting of the high-level work team, however, Michael Scott, the president of the school board, adamantly maintained that the school corporation had no money to contribute. A breakdown in the team's deliberations was forestalled when it was explained that contributions from the various parties could be financed, thus averting the need for an immediate commitment of cash. Although Scott appeared to drop his objection to the draft funding plan, the matter was far from resolved.

Simultaneously, Lincoln Ellis, the new Executive Director of the Boys and Girls Club, and Superintendent Guinn met to further articulate the relationship that their organizations would share in the new facility. With staff support, they developed a preliminary operating plan for the new school and community center for presentation to the school board and the Mayor.

The work team then reconvened to bring the funding and operational plans together. The funding issue again proved to be a stumbling block. Surprisingly, Superintendent Guinn balked when the draft funding plan was presented. She argued that the other partners would have to absorb the full cost of the project. The intransigence with which the school corporation's position was presented created a great deal of concern among the other partners. Indeed, it looked as though the entire project might founder at this point. The meeting ended on a very discouraging note.

This development was reported to the Mayor, who then called all of the key parties together. He opened the meeting by asking each participant if he or she still supported the idea of building a new school with a model academic program that would be co-located with a Boys and Girls Club. In turn, everyone answered affirmatively. With a full appreciation of the moment's drama, the Mayor then proposed that the City assume the full \$16 million cost of construction project and that the other partners assume responsibility for the facility's furnishings, maintenance expenses, and utility fees. He noted that the City of Gary would have to retain ownership of the buildings for a time since the project would be financed using revenue bonds. Over this time period, the school system and the Boys and Girls Club would lease space at a cost of \$1 per year. At the end of the lease, the ownership of the building would revert to the school district.

After a moment of stunned silence, all of the partners agreed to the Mayor's proposal. Formal letters of commitment were forwarded to Mayor King within a week. The Franklin School project was then unveiled at a press conference. At this point, it seemed to the planning team that virtually every hurdle

had been surmounted.

The key partners then undertook the task of developing a formal memorandum of understanding (MOU) setting forth their respective commitments to the project and the nature of their responsibilities vis-à-vis one another. To this end, the City's legal counsel presented a draft MOU at a subsequent meeting involving representatives from the City, the school system, the Boys and Girls Club, and IUN. The discussion that followed focused on the City's ownership of the building, the terms of the lease, and the City's retention of naming rights for the school. Although questions were raised with respect to each of these matters, it seemed as though all of the partners were committed to their amicable resolution. In fact, a second meeting was scheduled to finalize the agreement.

At this second meeting, the school corporation presented an alternative version of the MOU. It stipulated that the school corporation would own the new building from the start, that the school corporation would name the facility, and that it alone would dictate the terms by which the community center would be leased to the Boys and Girls Club. At the conclusion of this presentation, representatives from the Mayor's office were visibly shaken. The City's legal counsel again explained that any building constructed using revenue bonds, by law, would have to be owned by the City until the bonds had been paid off. He further noted that, unless the school corporation and the City could work out their differences, the proposed language moved perilously close to a "deal breaker." The meeting ended without an agreement. However, the City's legal counsel agreed to attend a school board meeting to further explain the City's position.

After a hiatus of nearly a month, a meeting between the City's legal counsel and the school board was arranged. The City's positions pertaining to ownership, naming rights, lease arrangements, and financing were carefully explained. There was no immediate response from the board. However, in a subsequent meeting, the school board voted four-to-three to accept the City's version of the MOU. This action seemed to clear the way for the Franklin School project to move forward.

We would later recognize this development as the high water mark in our involvement with the Franklin School project. Local and state politics would quickly intervene and overcome efforts to build a new elementary school and co-located community center. Three distinct but interrelated threads in this unfortunate denouement will be addressed in turn.

First, the school board was quickly swamped by internal squabbling over several issues that linger to this day. Most importantly, infighting among members of the school board regarding Superintendent Guinn emerged early in 2003. Her contract was not renewed just two months after the City's version of the MOU was accepted. Three new school board members were then elected on a reform platform in 2004. In the interregnum, the outgoing school board signed an internal candidate, Mary Steele-

Agee, to a five-year contract, a move that was roundly criticized by Darren Washington, one of the new school board members who would eventually serve a controversial albeit brief term as board president. Mary Steele-Agee's short tenure as Superintendent of the Gary Schools was punctuated by well-documented struggles with the school board over school closings, labor relations, contract, and other issues.

The school board has also been plagued by a number of well-publicized scandals, all of which have sapped time away from opportunities like the Franklin School project. In 2006, Michael Scott, who continues to play an influential role on the school board, was investigated by Indiana's Attorney General for an alleged misappropriation of grant funds unrelated to the Gary Schools. Several school board members then became embroiled in a scandal involving the use of credit cards and reimbursement for travel. In fact, this embarrassment would lead to the election of three new school board members – again on a reform platform – in May 2008.

Meanwhile, Gary's schools continue to languish. An already poor relationship with the teachers union deteriorated after its contract expired in December 2004. This led to a bitter strike in August 2006. Although an agreement was eventually signed, tensions have been slow to subside. Further, it has long been accepted that the district needs to close several schools. Enrollments have fallen by nearly 50 percent over the course of the last 20 years. Virtually all of the district's existing facilities are outdated, however, and loyalties to particular schools have stymied efforts to consolidate facilities. Still further, standardized test scores remain low. In fact, the Indiana Department of Education has put the entire school district on probation. Moreover, there is open talk about a state takeover of the Gary schools. Finally, the Gary schools have been hard hit by changes in the state's property tax system. As a result, the district will need to trim \$9.2 million from its budget over the course of the next two years. Given these developments, there has been little time for initiatives like the Franklin School project.

Politics emerged in another way in March 2006 when Mayor Scott King resigned unexpectedly, ostensibly to pursue a job opportunity that would better meet his family's financial needs. Speculation about his "true" motives quickly surfaced. It was rumored, for instance, that the U.S. Attorney for the Northern District of Indiana was investigating the construction of a minor league baseball stadium in Gary. Although the Mayor was never implicated, his chief political lieutenant, Jewell Harris, would eventually be sentenced to a substantial prison term for his involvement in a double billing scheme. Others surmised that Mayor King had come to accept the inevitability of an emerging financial crisis. Still others speculated that the job was no longer "fun" for the Mayor, a maverick politician who had often boasted that he had the best job in the world. In this view, a long series of political and financial woes had finally taken their toll.

Although Mayor King seemed to genuinely embrace the Franklin School Project over time, the

planning team had long recognized that the initiative served his political interests as well. Mayor King had been involved in a difficult primary election in 2004 when he approved the allocation of \$16 million toward the project. A key issue involved the City's use of public funds to construct a minor league baseball field. The Franklin School project, because it focused on education, insulated Mayor King, at least to some extent, from this criticism. Whatever his true motives for resigning, however, the Franklin School project lost a champion when Mayor King resigned.

His successor, Rudy Clay, had played no role in the conception or development of the Franklin School project. Indeed, he and Mayor King had often been at odds politically. Additionally, Don Barden, a staunch ally of Mayor King who operated a casino boat in Gary, was soon at odds with Mayor Clay. The \$6 million that Mr. Barden contributed to the City's coffers each year was soon tied up in escrow as lawsuits worked their way through the courts. This is important because Mayor King intended to use a portion of these funds to finance the Franklin School project. Finally, the financial crisis that Mayor King had foreseen would soon tie Mayor Clay's hands.

Indeed, in 2007 and 2008, property taxes emerged as a major public policy concern throughout the state. Several "fixes," in fact, had already constrained local officials. In December 1998, the Indiana Supreme Court ruled that the way in which assessors in the Hoosier state had long calculated home values was unconstitutional. As a result, Indiana joined other states in the use of "market values" to assess property. Since then, a number of changes were adopted either to ameliorate the impacts of resulting shifts in tax burdens or to promote economic development. In 2002 and 2003, a statewide reassessment was conducted. In 2002, the General Assembly launched a gradual phase out of the inventory tax. This shifted a greater proportion of the property tax bill to homeowners. In 2006, a two percent property tax cap or circuit breaker was enacted for residential properties. In 2007, assessors began using a new technique to assess the value of residential properties: trending. In effect, home values calculated in terms of 1999 prices were updated to reflect 2005 prices. As a result of these changes, property tax bills increased by some 24 percent statewide in 2007. A taxpayer revolt ensued, and the General Assembly responded in 2008 by adopting caps of one, two, and three percent on the assessed values of homesteads, rental properties, and commercial properties respectively. The new caps will be phased in over a two year period.

The result has been nothing short of devastating for some units of local government. The impact on the Gary school district has already been noted. The City of Gary will be forced to reduce expenditures by some \$36.7 million over the course of the next two years. The situation is so dire, in fact, that Mayor Clay recently proposed a 20 percent pay cut for all municipal employees. Needless to say, there is little room in the City's current budget for new projects.

Together, these several developments undermined support for the Franklin School project. It didn't

matter that an MOU had been signed or that a press conference had already been convened. In fact, contracts had not yet been finalized and funds had not yet been committed, and it is unlikely that they will be for some time to come. These kinds of political factors are not well accounted for in the community development literature pertaining to “technical assistance” and “self-help.” Nevertheless, political exigencies like infighting, abrupt changes in the cast of characters involved in projects, and perfect storms like the property tax crisis that engulfed Indiana in 2007 and 2008 can be formidable.

Although the preceding journey analysis may make the flow of events seem orderly, indeed linear, in nature, in reality, it was anything but. Initial discussions pertaining to the project stretched back into early fall of 2000. The entire process took nearly five years. At times, critical events followed quickly upon one another. At other times, lulls between key events proved maddening. This uneven pace, coupled with the pas de deux played out among the parties, was a source of considerable frustration, discouragement, and, at times, despair. During those few moments when our goal seemed in sight, however, the project’s unfolding elicited great joy, professional satisfaction, and a sense of fulfillment.

Our journey analysis may also make it seem that the decisions made over the course of the project focused primarily on programmatic and financial concerns. This would be in keeping, of course, with the “technical assistance” and “self-help” strategies employed by the planning team. As is noted above, however, political developments rather than challenges pertaining specifically to “technical assistance” or to the promotion of “self-help” strategies eventually led to the project’s demise.

Contextualization

Following Stringer (1999), we will now attempt to “relocate” our observations in the broader social context by comparing and contrasting our accounts with existing academic and institutional interpretations of the kinds of issues we faced. Four observations are pertinent in this regard.

First, interventions involving educational institutions in urban settings are inherently political in nature. Indeed, several highly publicized mayoral takeovers of school systems in recent years and the increasingly short tenure of superintendents suggest that effective school governance can be difficult to achieve and maintain. Donald R. McAdams (2006) has promoted the recruitment and development of school board members and superintendents who can assert their prerogatives in a forthright manner while still functioning within a team concept. He identifies micromanagement and corruption as the banes of effective school governance and notes that these kinds of problems are particularly pronounced in urban settings. We certainly encountered these kinds of challenges in our dealings with the Gary schools. In the end, we did not have a partner capable of striking when the opportune moment presented itself.

Second, to be effective, some interventions may require a level of involvement that goes beyond roles reflected – somewhat naively, we think – in the literature. We had to engage in a great deal of work behind the scenes. In a few instances, we had to participate in activities that seemed to violate conventional understandings of the term “partnership.” For instance, we were party to a number of sensitive “sidebar” conversations over the course of the intervention. As a result, we were required, at times, to withhold information from other partners as the project unfolded.

This particular behavior stands at odds with both the “technical assistance” and “selfhelp” strategies noted above. According to Christenson (1989), the change agent works at the direction of a sponsor, typically an elected or appointed official, in the first model. In the second, community members themselves select a project and assume the lead. In both schemes, the change agent functions in a supporting role. In both instances, “sidebar” conversations of the kind in which we engaged could be viewed as inappropriate.

Further, it seemed that our efforts, on their face, drew perilously close to transgressing a key value embodied in a list of “competencies” attributed to “leaders who facilitate successful community building initiatives.” The list was included in a report developed by the Development Training Institute on behalf of the National Center for Community Building, United Way of America, and the Anne E. Casey Foundation (2000). Based on a review of the literature, two panels identified a number of competencies that were then organized under eight broad themes: visioning; community partnering; community understanding; leadership; information sharing; initiative; conceptual mapping; and listening and understanding. Although we demonstrated a number of these competencies over the course of the initiative (e.g., shows persistence, recognizes and acts quickly on current opportunities, understands underlying issues, etc.), information was withheld at times. The free sharing of information is identified as a key competency. Moreover, it represents a value that is infused throughout the entire report.

How then should we understand the role we played as change agents in the Franklin School project? As is noted above, our actions were unconventional at times, at least with respect to the community development literature. Our efforts did not precisely fit any of the models identified by Christensen. They were consistent, however, with a view now emerging in the public administration literature. Bellone and Goerl, for instance, draw on the work of John Burke and Terry Cooper in encouraging public administrators – and, by extension, scholars involved in interventions like the Franklin School project – to engage the community as “active agents of democratic education and reform” (1992, p. 130). Similarly, Lan (1997) holds that public administrators can serve at times as mediators or arbitrators. A mediator alternately engages parties in a dispute as “a coach, an evaluator, or an evangelist” (William L. Ury, Jeanne M. Brett and Stephen B. Goldberg quoted in Buntz, 1991, p. 106),

roles we were often called upon to perform over the course of the Franklin School project. Indeed, the kinds of sidebar conversations described above are part and parcel of the mediation process (Fisher and Ury, 1991). Mediators only share information they are given permission to share. The role that best defines the nature of our efforts is suggested by Skok (1995), however. He predicts that public administrators will increasingly be asked to serve as “knowledge broker(s)” and “policy entrepreneur(s).” They will be asked to engage competing interests directly within increasingly complex policy issue networks. In fact, we assumed each of these roles at various times over the course of our COPC initiative. From this perspective, we acted appropriately throughout the course of IUN’s COPC initiative. We assumed very active roles that can best be described as a kind of social “brokering.”

Our third observation pertains to the need for patience when engaging in community work. We often found ourselves waiting for the opportune moment to present itself. A chance conversation with a Boys and Girls Club employee led to a visit to the Milwaukee site which would eventually serve as the model for the new Franklin facility. An off-hand comment by the president of the school board precipitated a conversation with Mayor King that subsequently led to the City’s commitment to finance the project. The appointment of Lincoln Ellis as the Boys and Girls Club’s new Executive Director could not have been foreseen; nevertheless, his participation proved critical at a key point in our negotiations with the school board. Finally, the Mayor’s need during an election year to demonstrate that casino revenues were being used to support schools as well as other kinds of capital projects prompted the City’s \$16 million contribution to the project. Indeed, we “muddled” through.

It takes a great deal of work to move a project from the proposal stage to completion. After all, project proposals are just that: proposals. Circumstances evolve as additional information about the community is gathered, as participants in the effort come and go, as unanticipated obstacles present themselves, and as unforeseen opportunities emerge. Indeed, community interventions are dynamic processes requiring great patience and a deft hand.

Even now, it is not entirely certain that the Franklin School project will not be resurrected at some future point in time. The need for a co-located elementary school and community center in the Glen Park community still exists. The Boys and Girls Club remains committed to the project. And three members of the school board were voted out of office in a highly contested election in May 2008. Although it is now in hiatus, we remain hopeful that new players and an improved fiscal environment will eventually breath new life into the project.

Our fourth observation pertains to the evaluation of community interventions. Our COPC initiative clearly demonstrates why traditional summative evaluations may be of limited use in assessing interventions conducted in community settings. As is noted above, the process can be very dynamic.

Projects can undergo profound transformations over time. It should not be surprising, therefore, that alternative approaches to evaluation are now being considered. With respect to campus-community partnerships, for instance, Victor Rubin (2000) has identified several approaches in the literature, most of which are qualitative rather than quantitative in nature. Participant surveys, case studies, and self-study accounts in which participants describe their involvement in partnerships predominate. And tentative steps have been taken toward comparisons between and among two or more community interventions.

As important as this work may be, little effort has been devoted toward a complete articulation of the paradigms, theoretical perspectives, methods, and techniques and data sources appropriate to applied research involving broad-scale community interventions. Yet it seems that greater consensus on these issues will be needed if scholarship of this kind is to prove useful over the long term.

In this assessment, we have consciously adopted a constructivist paradigm. We have selected pragmatism as a theoretical perspective from within which to conduct our analysis. Further, action research has served as a methodological framework for use in conducting a journey analysis. We believe that these several elements in our assessment are fully complementary to each other. Additionally, they are appropriate to the dynamic environment of action research conducted in community settings. Finally, we believe the analytic framework suggested by Ernest T. Stringer (1999) lends itself to scholarly work of this kind.

Community engagement, including work as change agents in distressed settings, is rapidly achieving status as scholarly work. We are just now beginning to appreciate the complex and often highly political nature of this work, however. It is one thing to enter a community as a neutral observer and then steal away to write a paper few if any in the community will ever see. It is an entirely different prospect to engage in the rough and tumble of this work, which often involves personal and institutional commitments to individuals, high levels of uncertainty, and the need to engage in political processes of various kinds. Those who pursue community work are also challenged to proceed in a scholarly fashion, that is, to consider how a particular intervention can contribute to knowledge in their respective fields. In fact, the methods and presentation formats appropriate to scholarly work of this kind are still in the process of being developed.

In the above analysis, we have attempted to add to our collective understanding of community work. In doing so, we have engaged in what Donald Schön (1983) refers to as reflection-in-action. We trust that our efforts will serve to broaden our conception of the various roles scholars can play with respect to community work.

Cited Literature

- Ackerman, B. A. (1980). *Social Justice in the Liberal State*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Arendt, H. (1958). *The Human Condition*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Arendt, H. (1977a). *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.
- Arendt, H. (1977b). *On Revolution*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.
- Barber, B. (1984). *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Bellone, C. and Goerl, G. F. (1992). "Reconciling Public Entrepreneurship and Democracy." *Public Administration Review*, vol. 52, pp. 130-134.
- Boisvert, Raymond D., 1998. *John Dewey: Rethinking Our Time*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Buntz, C. G. (1991). "The Public Manager as Dispute Resolver: A Cluster Review." *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, vol. 1, pp. 104-110.
- Christenson, James and Robinson, Jr., Jerry W., 1989. "Themes of Community Development. In *Community Development in Perspective*. Christenson and Robinson, Ed. Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press.
- Cox, David A., 2000. "Developing a Framework for Understanding University-Community Partnerships." *Cityscape: A Journal of Policy Development and Research*, vol. 5, pp. 9-26.
- Cox, P.L., & deFrees, J., 1991. *Work in Progress: Restructuring in Ten Maine Schools*. Andover, MA: The Regional Laboratory for Educational Improvement of the Northeast and Islands
- Development Training Institute, 2000. "Competency Study of Leaders Who Facilitate Successful Community Building Initiative." *Teaching and Learning for Community Building: New Roles, New Skills, and Stronger Partnerships*. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Washington D.C.
- Dewey, John, 1915. *The School and Society*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Dewey, John, 1983. *The Middle Works, 1899-1924, Vol. 15 (Essays on Politics and Society)*, Jo Ann Boydston, Ed. Carbondale, IL: University of Southern Illinois Press.

Dewey, John, 1985. *The Middle Works, 1899-1924, Vol. 9 (Democracy and Education)*, Jo Ann Boydston, Ed. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

Fisher, Roger and Ury, William, 1991. *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.

Forester, John, 1993. *Critical Theory, Public Policy, and Planning Practice*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Habermas, J. (1984). *The Theory of Communicative Action: Reason and the Rationalization of Society, Vol. 1*, trans. T. McCarthy. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Habermas, J. (1987). *The Theory of Communicative Action: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason, Vol. 2*, trans. T. McCarthy. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Habermas, J. (1989). *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. T. Burger & F. Lawrence. Cambridge, MA: Polity Press.

House, Ernest R. and Howe, Kenneth R (1999). *Values in Evaluation and Social Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA, Sage Publications.

HUD Office of Policy Development and Research, 2000. *Gateway to the American Dream: The State of the Community Outreach Partnership Centers Program*. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Washington D.C.

Indiana Department of Education. *Indiana K-12 School Data*:
<http://mustang.doe.state.in.us/in.us/SEARCH/snapshot.cfm?schl=4089>.

Lan, Z. (1997). "A Conflict Resolution Approach to Public Administration," *Public Administration Review*, Vol. 57, pp. 27-35.

Lawson, Hal A., 1999. "Journey Analysis: A Framework for Integrating Consultation and Evaluation in Complex Change." *Journal of Educational & Psychological Consultation*, vol. 10, pp. 145-173.

McAdams, Donald R., 2006. *What School Boards Can Do: Reform Governance for Urban Schools*..

Teachers College Press, New York, NY.

McSwite, O.C., 1997. *Legitimacy in Public Administration: A Discourse Analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Meyer, Julienne, Pope, Catherine, and Mays, Nicholas, 2000. "Using Qualitative Methods in Health Related Action Research." *British Medical Journal*, vol. 320, pp. 178-182.

Putnam, Robert D. , 1995a. "Bowling Alone." *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 6, pp. 65-78. Putnam, Robert D., 1995b. "Bowling Alone Revisited." *The Responsive Community*, vol. 5, Spring, pp. 18-33.

Rubin, Victor, 2000. "Evaluating University-Community Partnerships: An Examination of the Evolution of Questions and Approaches." *Cityscape*, vol. 5, pp. 219-230.

Schön, Donald A., 1983. *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Simon, Herbert A., 1997. *Administrative Behavior*. New York, NY: The Free Press.

Skok, J. (1995). "Policy Issue Networks and the Public Policy Cycle: A Structural-Functional Framework for Public Administration," *Public Administration Review*, Vol. 55, pp. 325-332.

Stringer, Ernest T. (1999). *Action Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA, Sage Publications.

Sullivan, William M., 2000. "Institutional Identity and Social Responsibility in Higher Education." *Civic Responsibility and Higher Education*, Thomas Ehrlich, Ed. Oryx Press: Westport, CT.

Turnock, Christopher and Gibson, Vanessa, 2001. "Validity in Action Research: A Discussion on Theoretical and Practice Issues Encountered Whilst Using Observation to Collect Data." *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, vol. 36, pp. 471-478.

Zlotkowski, Edward., 2000. "Civic Engagement and Academic Disciplines." *Civic Responsibility and Higher Education*, Thomas Ehrlich, Ed. Oryx Press: Westport, CT.

¹Stringer prefers the term "deconstruction" to "examination." In fact, he draws explicitly

on postmodern themes, citing Foucault, Lyotard, Derrida, and other postmodern theorists in reflecting on his work (1999, pp. 196ff). In moving beyond the power analyses that are central to postmodern theory, Stringer draws on other perspectives as well, however, including the critical theory of Jürgen Habermas, which is clearly informed by pragmatism. We believe that the format recommended by Stringer may be applicable to action research conducted from a number of different paradigms and theoretical perspectives, including constructivism and pragmatism. In action research, a situation must be understood before an intervention can be designed and implemented; moreover, an experience is typically located in theory during and after the intervention in question rather than beforehand in a traditional literature review. At the same time, we recognize that Stringer's use of the term "deconstruction" can cause confusion because it is so closely associated with a particular point of view: postmodernism. For this reason, we have substituted the term "examination" in place of the term "deconstruction." Since it is unlikely that the latter term can be pried away from its roots in postmodern theory, we believe that alternative language is needed to demonstrate the potentially broad applicability of the format recommended by Stringer.

²Christianson's framework is adopted here because it pertains specifically to community development. The limited reach of other frameworks that focus more explicitly on evaluation are equally problematic, however, with respect to certain challenges we faced in advancing the Franklin School project. Ernest R. House and Kenneth R. Howe (1999), for instance, promote a "deliberative democratic view" as an alternative to the two "prominent views" reflected in the literature: (1) the "received view," which includes both strict value neutrality and interest group participation; and (2) interpretivist strategies, which encompass various dialogical approaches to evaluation, radical constructivism, and postmodernism. Their "deliberative democratic view" embraces inclusion, dialogue, and deliberation both as values and practices. From an evaluation perspective, these concepts are certainly appealing. From a community development perspective, however, they may provide limited guidance. For instance, what should one do if dialogue has been effectively stifled by political agendas of one kind or another? How should we proceed if power relationships are so unequal that protest is not an option? At what point can the role of external catalyst actually impinge on the development of social capital within the community itself? Indeed, should those who promote an intervention from the outside withdraw if the stars are not appropriately aligned in some critical way? Questions of this kind can confront those who engage directly in community development – including those who engage in action research – in a much more direct fashion than they do those who approach evaluation from more conventional perspectives.

³Schools, in fact, are socializing institutions; they transmit social values from one generation to the next; they serve as the bonding in a community's social structure (Dewey, 1983, p. 150). "Society... may fairly be said to exist in transmission, in communication" (Dewey, 1985, p. 7). The transmission

and communication to which Dewey refers takes place in schools. Dewey also argued that we live in community by virtue of the things that we have in common, such as “aims, beliefs, aspirations, knowledge – a common understanding” (Dewey, 1985, p. 7) and that schools can play a pivotal role in the development of this common ground.

⁴The pertinence of a constructivist paradigm to community work is explained by Donald Schön in an explication of reflection-in-action, the kind of knowing that is embodied in much of the literature on civic engagement. “Underlying this view of the practitioner’s reflection-in-action is a constructionist view of the reality with which the practitioner deals – a view that leads us to see the practitioner as constructing situations of his practice, not only in the exercise of professional artistry but also in all other modes of professional competence. Technical rationality rests on an objectivist view of the relation of the knowing practitioner to the reality he knows. In this view, facts are what they are, and the truth of beliefs is strictly resolvable, at least in principle, by reference to the facts. And professional knowledge rests on a foundation of facts. In the constructionist view, our perceptions, appreciations and beliefs are rooted in our making that we come to accept as reality” (1987, p. 36). This reference pertains both to scholars who engage in community work and their partners. In fact, in the context of community partnerships and civic engagement, this constructivist view is social in nature. “The alternative to the socially detached, positivist conception of knowledge and learning emphasizes the fusion of fact and value in practical experience, the interconnection of means and ends. Without denying individual talent or insight, this alternative model insists that knowledge grows out of the activities of a “community of inquirers,” in the terminology of American pragmatist C.S. Peirce. The animating idea of this alternative conception of investigation and learning is that rationality is finally always practical, rooted in the practices of some social group. Knowing is an aspect of the overall effort by members of a society to orient themselves within the world” (Sullivan, 2000, pp. 29-30). The reference to Peirce links the constructivist paradigm that guides our work to the theoretical perspective that we employ: pragmatism. Indeed, William M. Sullivan (2000, p. 30), Edward Zlotkowski (2000, p. 316), David N. Cox (2000) and others have noted the affinity between the movement toward greater civic engagement among institutions of higher learning and American pragmatism. “Applied research and knowledge focuses on the practical. What are real-world opportunities or problems? What works in treating them? Research questions are inspired by needs and opportunities identified by community and society. Usefulness is the criterion for guiding and assessing applied research and knowledge. The focus of knowledge produced is on what works” (Cox, 2000, p. 15).

⁵At the level of method, action research is consistent both with a constructivist paradigm and pragmatism. Ernest Stringer thus describes a process in which a community of inquirers look (i.e., gather relevant data and build a picture that describes a current state), think (i.e., explore, analyze, interpret, explain, and theorize about the situation), and act (i.e., plan, implement, and evaluate one or

more changes) (1999, p. 18). Notoriously difficult to define, action research is often described in terms of its three distinguishing features: its participatory character; the democratic ethos that guides it; and its simultaneous focus on knowledge creation and social change (Meyer, Pope, and Mays, 2000). It is a process that is both hermeneutic and cyclical in nature, involving joint constructions of a reality that is shared and interventions that are provisional and thus subject to change as the situation warrants.

Copyright © The South Shore Journal (TM), 2009