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ABSTRACT

This paper examines collaborative action research in order to clarify the arguments and research base that either support or oppose the process. Proponents who advocate the institutionalization of collaborative action research point to its theoretical rationale, a growing research base that documents the value and outcomes of the process, and supporting research on educational change. Opponents cite lack of proof, possible negative effects of institutionalization, and the lack of necessary conditions for successful implementation as reasons against institutionalization. Suggestions for developing collaborative action research in schools include: (1) explicitly operationalize the process; (2) ensure that participants have the necessary attitudes, knowledge, skills, and access to resources; (3) provide teachers with incentives and released time, or restructure the school day; and (4) conduct additional research on the process and its effects. A conclusion is that collaborative action research is a teacher-friendly process that directly addresses educational practice over time. It directly, actively, and collaboratively involves practitioners in creating and studying change. (LMI)

The Future of Collaborative Action Research:

Promises, Problems, and Prospects

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Educational action research--systematic inquiry by collaborative, self-critical communities of educators (adapted from Watt & Watt, 1993)--is a growth industry in the 1990's.[1] Practitioners and scholars alike are generating a substantial practice and related literature building on the intuitive notion of trying something, studying its effects, and then trying it again. Examples of action research activity are numerous:

- Teachers in several communities are leading research collaboratives to study their ongoing practice (e.g., Levine, 1992; Youngerman, 1991; Watt & Watt, 1992);
- Numerous research collaborations between schools and universities (e.g., Georgia, Minnesota, Virginia, and Washington state and the province of Ontario) use action research as one mechanism for long-term school change;
- Participants in national projects, e.g., the Learning Labs sponsored by the NEA and the AFT's professional practice schools, are developing the notion of school-based inquiry;
- A number of school change approaches now available--e.g., the Middle Grades Assessment Program (Dorman, 1985); the Mathematics Assessment Process (Pechman, 1992); the Outcomes Accreditation model of the North Central Association (North Central Association, 1989); and the process used in the League of Professional Schools (National Dissemination Association, 1993)--apply action research ideas; and
- Publications related to practitioner research appear on a regular basis,

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[1] In this paper, we define collaborative action research as a cyclic, collaborative process that includes problem framing, planning, acting, observing, and reflecting in order to improve educational practice (see Carr & Kemmis, 1986). The formal acts of planning and observing and the process of collaboration in some cases distinguish collaborative action research from teacher research, which draws on teachers' study, experiences, and reflections, but not necessarily in a formal, cyclical, or collaborative manner. Our distinction here is meant to help us make sense of the process and potential of collaborative action research for changing schools as well as individual classroom practice within them.

including the 1993 NSSE Yearbook on teacher research (Hollingsworth & Sockett, in press); Educational Action Research, a new international journal; Teaching and Change, a new NEA journal for teachers' writing; and book-length works (e.g., Kincheloe, 1991, McTaggart, 1991, Sagor, 1992, Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993).

Despite such widespread interest, however, the fact remains that action research of any type is yet to become an integral part of the culture of most American schools. Not surprisingly, the multiple challenges facing action researchers have remained fairly similar from 1950 to the present. The purpose of this paper is to examine collaborative action research in order to clarify the arguments and research base that either support or oppose the process. Three sections address the following topics: the competing definitions and origins of action research; arguments and research support both for and against institutionalizing collaborative action research in school practice; and implications for its continued development in schools.

What Is Collaborative Action Research, and Where Did It Come From?

An innovation must be clearly specified if people are to adopt, implement, and institutionalize it. In the case of action research, as with many other innovations, this creates a challenge because the question of what form action research should take is not easily answered. Over a decade ago, Grundy (1982) identified three types of action research--technical, practical, and emancipatory--each pointing to different philosophical commitments and potential outcomes. In a summary of 50 years of action research writing, King and Lonnquist (1992) distinguish between two general approaches:

- Traditional action research, in which university-based researchers lead a process that simultaneously tackles a local problem and generates social science theory; and

- Practitioner-centered action research, in which practitioners take charge of the research process for their own purposes, perhaps generating a form of theory useful to other practitioners.

Specific examples make clear the contrast between the approaches. For instance, a typical traditional action research project began with a central team of consultants based at a higher education institution selecting and coordinating a group of teachers who, with the faculty's guidance, examined the dilemma between teaching for understanding and teaching for assessment (Ebbut, 1986). By contrast, in practitioner-centered action research, practitioners run their own studies. For example, one teacher used action research to study and then improve her use of the whole language approach (Spring, 1990, Spring, 1991). Another group of teachers worked as an action research team to assist students having difficulties with the transition to middle school (Locke, 1991). Even in cases where a district or university sponsors or supports action research, teachers are engaged in practitioner-centered research if they themselves control the process.

To complicate matters further, different people have placed action research at differing levels (Calhoun, 1993), for example, in individual teachers' classroom practice (Stenhouse, 1975); within school communities (Reid, Hopkins, & Holly, 1987); or within emancipatory groups of teachers and critical friends both inside and outside the school (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). There is a basic distinction between classroom-based action research, through which teachers conduct studies to improve their individual classroom practice, and building- or program-wide action research, which studies practice across classrooms. In addition, advocates of emancipatory action research (e.g., McTaggart, 1991; Kincheloe, 1991) make strong claims for the relative merit of their approach, in which groups of practitioners with a critical (in the sense of critical theory) intent come together to develop simultaneous action and enlightenment.

Action research located at the individual classroom level can involve a few students

or the entire class. For example, when three students who persisted in inappropriate behaviors challenged a normally successful teacher, she used an action research process to assist the three in learning acceptable classroom behavior and created a better working environment for all students (Ybarra, 1991). In another case, a teacher who was concerned about her gender sensitivity learned through action research that she paid more attention to male students. As a result she worked to change her behavior as well as the students' expectations (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988).

In recent years, there are increasing reports of action research projects, also known as schoolwork research, at the building or program level. For example, in one case a group of five teachers employed action research to reflect on their own and their students' writing skills to improve their teaching abilities (Alvine, 1987). Another school involved its entire instructional staff in a multi-faceted program to teach social skills to students, using action research to monitor the process. After the second year of the project, they decided to make the program a permanent part of their curriculum (Alberts, 1990). Given the broad range of potential topics for study, action research can serve both as an overall strategy for stimulating school change in general and as a targeted strategy to promote specific types of change.

While it may be unrealistic and unwise to expect one "best" form of any innovation, the multiple possibilities for action research suggest the complexity of this potential change. What distinguishes collaborative action research from other approaches? A recent review points to the following characteristics (King & Lonnquist, 1992):

- Direct involvement and influence in the real world experience of practitioners. Collaborative action research takes place in the ongoing practice of schools and cannot exist outside of it because, as part of its process, it creates change. It frames problems in practice, determines possible solutions to them, enacts these solutions, and then studies the

results, all in situ.

- The active involvement of practitioners in the research process. These practitioners may be teachers, building-level or central office administrators, students, or even parents and community members who are immediately involved in the work of the school. Outsiders (e.g., university-based researchers or program evaluators) may, in some cases, facilitate the process, but practitioners necessarily play a central and critical role.
- A continuing cycle of research activities. Action researchers frequently describe a holistic and flexible process in which reflection and observation can immediately affect actions taken. However, in articles published from 1946 to 1986 (King & Lonnquist, 1992, p. 12), there are five linear steps common to action research approaches: problem framing; planning; acting; observing; and reflecting. The reflection of one cycle becomes the problem framing of the next cycle, so that, once initiated, action research is technically an ongoing process, distinguished from evaluation processes that end after accomplishing a given task.
- Collaboration. In contrast to other research approaches, collaborative action research is not a solitary activity. While the form and extent of the collaboration may vary, practitioners engaged in collaborative action research work together as a group.

These characteristics distinguish collaborative action research from other forms of research that, e.g., do not directly effect change, do not interact with the practitioners being studied except as sources of data, or require no collaboration. It is important to note that action research is methodologically eclectic (McKernan, 1988), using whichever methods best answer the questions asked in a given study. While it is often the case that qualitative methods most easily answer the types of questions asked in action research studies, there is

nothing per se that precludes the use of highly sophisticated quantitative design and analysis in such research.

Despite--or perhaps because of--the variety of forms espoused, the burgeoning interest in action research suggests the continuing appeal of a practitioner-centered research process. Current notions of reflective practice (Schön, 1983), teacher empowerment, and site-based decision-making, coupled with the increasing acceptance of qualitative methods, have provided new grounding for action research. In addition, action research finds a natural home in the inquiry tradition of progressive schools and the emergence of what Cuban (1992) calls a neo-progressive movement. Further, the development of critical theory suggests to some the re-emergence of a social role for action research through which local practitioners can recreate themselves, their schools, and their communities (e.g., Carr & Kemmis, 1986, McTaggart, 1991).

If, then, action research, however defined, appears to be an idea whose time has come, a brief glance at its history suggests that this is not its first time in the educational limelight. The term was coined in the 1940's when the intractable problems of racism and poverty, to name only two, pointed to the importance of a long-term process for effecting meaningful social change. Even then, Kurt Lewin's idea of people coupling action with inquiry was not new. Indeed, it built in part on the writings of a Commissioner of Indian Affairs named John Collier and the work of pragmatic philosopher John Dewey and his progressive followers (Noffke, 1990). What was new, after Lewin labelled such effort action research, was its almost immediate application to the practice of mainstream, traditional education. At the very time that progressive education was suffering its death throes (Cremin, 1961), the writings of Stephen Corey (Corey, 1953), Hilda Taba (Taba & Noel, 1957), and Abraham Shumsky (Shumsky, 1958) developed the practice of action research as a way to change American teachers and schools. As Corey (1953) put it,

> We are convinced that the disposition to study, as objectively as possible, the

> consequences of our own teaching is more likely to change and improve our practices than is reading about what someone else has discovered regarding the consequences of his teaching.

Noffke (1990) and McTaggart (1991) have documented the fate of action research in the years following the launch of Sputnik in 1957. It is certainly true that when the research, development, and dissemination (RD&D) model and related national curriculum projects received extensive federal funding, attention shifted away from the rather homely, classroom-based change process. The labcoat replaced chalky pockets, and outside "experts" replaced inside do-ers. The notion of a "teacher-proof" curriculum points to the extent of the change. From one perspective,

> The action research movement collapsed under its own triviality; except for a few dedicated exponents moved by a group-dynamics vision of inservice education and teacher involvement, little talent supported action research (Clifford, 1973, p. 37).

Suffice it to say, however, that rumors of the demise of action research were highly exaggerated. Although a review of major reform efforts from the '60's to the '80's surely supports McTaggart's claim (1991, p. 5) that "action research was almost killed off," it did not, in fact, disappear. For teachers working in the progressive tradition (e.g., Patricia Carini and her colleagues at the Prospect School), action research in the form of child study continued--and has always continued--apart from the comings and goings of national research movements. Noffke (1990, p. 208) notes that action research "remained a consistent and fairly frequent entry in the Education Index through the 1960's," and that such work continued in the '70's, for example, in community action programs and in language arts research.

However, despite continuing support for the concept and a variety of approaches to its implementation, action research has not, to date, taken root in the practice of mainstream

American education, nor are its future prospects assured.[2] The distinguishing characteristics of collaborative action research--direct involvement and influence in practice, an ongoing research cycle, the active involvement of practitioners in research, and face-to-face collaboration--find little place in the context of traditional education. In part this stems from long-held assumptions about educators' roles in research, i.e., that teachers and other school-based practitioners have little or no role to play in the generation of knowledge. Classroom teachers rarely learn the how to's of educational research, becoming at best consumers of research information created by people who typically work outside of schools, information that, from the classroom perspective, may have "the cutting edge of sponge" (Jones, 1989, p. 51). As a group, teachers often find research "distant, uninteresting, irrelevant, counter-intuitive, unusable, or used to blame them for the failings of the larger educational and socio-political systems" (King & Lonnquist, 1992, p. 24). Small wonder, then, that action research is less than appealing for many educators.

The potential failure of action research, a process that routinely requires time, is also built into the structure of traditional schools. Unlike the work of other professionals, teachers' work is not organized to allow time to frame problems, to collect data, or to make collective sense of what is happening in classrooms or schools (Goodlad, 1984; Zeichner, 1986). Bird and Little (1986, p. 504) write that "the most important resource for improvement is time with colleagues: time for [faculties] to examine, debate and improve their norms of civility, instruction and improvement." To date, school structures have not

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[2] Noffke (1990, p. 208) raises an important issue when she writes, "It is as yet unclear exactly how prevalent the practice [of action research] was even in its 'heyday.'" While the volume of scholarly writing on the topic in the years surrounding the 1950's suggests that many practitioners engaged in action research, little documentation of widespread implementation at that time exists. The same issue is relevant today. Numerous publications point to both scholarly and practical interest in action research, as do the growing number of research collaborations sponsored either by colleges and universities or by independent groups of teachers. However, it is not entirely clear how widespread the practice of action research is, nor to what extent it is embedded in the ongoing cultures of the schools in which it is practiced.

by and large changed to reflect these values, although an increasing number of people have noted this need. In the words of Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1991, p. 12), "Doing teacher research cannot simply be an additional task added to the already crowded teachers' day . . ." McTaggart (1991), however, holds little hope for the prospects of educational action research when he writes, "For the time being at least, teachers and principals may not have conditions which allow (or encourage) continuous engagement with action research projects" (p. 66). If action research has failed to become part of traditional practice, it is for good reason.

In summary, several versions of action research currently compete in the educational arena, although there now seems to be fairly widespread interest in integrating some form of action research--school-based, practitioner-centered, cyclical, and (from our perspective) collaborative--into the ongoing practice of schools. What remains to be discussed is whether or not such a research process--regardless of its appeal--should or can be institutionalized in schools.

To Institutionalize or Not to Institutionalize: That Is the Question

What would it mean to institutionalize the action research process in schools? On the one hand, it is hard to argue against putting in place some version of the intuitive notion of action research--planning meaningful action, taking that action, collecting information on its effects, and reflecting before further action. Such a concept is hard to speak against in a society that purports to value rationality. On the other hand, proposing institutionalization is not without risk since its possible consequences are varied. In some cases, certain practices (e.g., instruction organized as units, the project method) have become part of educational practice over time--"institutionalized"--in positive, integrative ways through incentives, teacher acceptance, and cultural support. But in others, bureaucratic mandates have led to constraining mandates, checklists and forms, and the almost mindless

application of what once might have been good ideas.

If action research is to deliver on the potential its supporters claim, then it must be effectively institutionalized as part of educational practice. Evidence at this point in the development of the process suggests a wide range of interest and the possibility, for the first time in history, that action research could become a viable part of ongoing practice in schools. But the bandwagon mentality of American educational reform is a fact of school life, and Fullan (1982/1991, p. 18) points to the obvious--and often overlooked--problem of schools' adopting innovations that do not work. Before adding wheels to yet another bandwagon, therefore, the issue of whether or not American educators should try to institutionalize the collaborative action research process and the likelihood of that possibility deserve careful examination. Two questions in particular require answers: What are the arguments both for and against the institutionalization of action research; and what evidence supports these claims?

Arguments For. Three broad arguments support the institutionalization of collaborative action research in educational practice: its conceptual rationale; a growing research base that documents the value of the process and its outcomes; and research about the change process that has direct implications for the value of collaborative action research.

The first argument supporting action research is found in its theoretical rationale, generated over the past 50 or more years. The rationale includes four interrelated areas of potential benefit deriving from the action research process: benefits to individuals; improved practice; more practical theory; and social change (King & Lonnquist, 1992). Advocates have suggested that individuals can benefit both personally and professionally from participation, including as outcomes increased understanding of specific actions and of change more generally, the development of research or collaboration skills, and empowerment stemming from the creation of practice-based theory. Action research can purportedly lead to improved practice because action is an explicit component of the

research process, helping people to develop on-site, realistic solutions to practical problems and increasing their commitment either to refining existing practice or to making needed changes. Whether or not theory generated through action research is "better" than other theory, the rationale for the claim is fairly clear: To the extent that theory, generated either by university or practitioner researchers, emerges directly from "real" situations, it will necessarily and unavoidably be more connected to ongoing practice. Finally, some theorists have argued that action research is a process allowing people to tackle large social issues in their lives, creating a self-controlled mechanism for social change over time. The theoretical rationale supporting action research points to reasons for the continuing appeal of the process, despite a fairly thin research base documenting the claims to date.

The second argument favoring the institutionalization of action research rests on this research base and stems from action research's demonstrated outcomes. A growing volume of anecdotal evidence and the results of case studies and other "second-order" action research[3] (e.g., Oja & Smulyan, 1989; Elliott, 1991; Lonnquist et al., 1992) suggest the power of action research to affect individual teachers, with their finding the process "a source of professional renewal rather than burnout" (Watt & Watt, 1992, p. 5). Specific examples from action research studies document its benefits to individuals, direct changes in practice, and, in some cases, its effects on students. At the individual teacher level, for example, Oja & Smulyan (1989, p. 207) report that

> Teachers engaged in action research emphasize that personal and professional growth result from participation in the process of collaborative action research. They frequently suggested that their understanding of the process was ultimately a

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[3] Second-order action research is action research that studies the process and products of action research (Elliott, 1985). For the purpose of this discussion, we have cast a broad net to include as many examples as possible. We have therefore included examples of individual teachers' action research projects, even though we advocate a collaborative process throughout the paper.

more valuable outcome than the research project itself.

Noffke and Zeichner (1987, p. 3) note, "In almost every report of an action research project, claims are made by researchers and/or facilitators about the value of action research in promoting changes in teacher thinking." Classroom-based action researchers write of the effect of the process on them: "I have become increasingly aware of myself as both participant and 'stranger' within the classroom" (Cummings, 1986, p. 232); "[The research process] has become a way of life" (Alvine, 1987).

At the level of practice, the write-up of virtually every classroom-based action research project provides instances of how action research directly affected practice, with the results linked directly to perceived improvements. Action research encourages teachers to focus directly on their students' knowledge and understanding, helping them to become more aware of what is happening in their classroom and adjusting accordingly. After a second grade teacher studied the whole language process in her classroom, for example, she recognized the need to incorporate more higher level skills for some children, while creating specific activities in collaboration with a reading specialist for low achievers (Spring, 1990; Spring, 1991). In another case, based on data they collected, three teachers who studied the effects of home visits incorporated such trips into their ongoing practice (Beebe, Morton, & Peiffer, 1991). A team of teachers in an urban high school found support for their use of peer mediation and conflict management in an action research study, leading to their increased use of the processes (Lonnquist et al., 1992).

While changes in practice are clearly important, the effects of action research on students are also important to documenting its ultimate value. Although sometimes reporting anecdotal data and almost always a fairly short time-span, certain action researchers have noted how the process improves achievement or other student outcomes. For example, teacher collaborators in a writing project documented how their students' writing had improved (Alvine, 1987). Student participants in a school-wide social skills

program reported they could make new friends more easily, were better able to solve arguments and to get along with their parents and teachers (Alberts, 1990). In their study of learning disabled students mainstreamed in reading, Mackay and Wilson (1991) documented dramatic gains in sight word pronunciation over the four months of their study. Melahn (1991) noted how the self esteem of her students rose when their academic success was highlighted.

Despite the conceptual and methodological difficulties of tackling this work, there is little doubt that additional study of the action research process is needed. The growing body of research currently available points to the positive effects of action research on individual teachers conducting studies, on direct changes in practice, and, to some extent, on improvements in student outcomes. Additional research may suggest more precisely how such effects relate to the empowerment of teachers, to improved practice over time, and to broader questions of practical theory and school improvement, providing further support for institutionalizing the process.

In contrast to the results of action research, the third argument in support of institutionalization comes from what research has taught us about educational change more generally. Research on the implementation of innovations (Fullan, 1982/1991, Fullan, 1993a, 1993b) and on the development of professional community in schools (Kruse & Louis, 1993) points to the potential of collaborative action research because integral to its process are the characteristics that distinguish successful change efforts in schools. In brief, this literature has identified a number of characteristics that distinguish successful innovation from less successful innovation, including the following:

- Shared values- Participants in a change effort must base their work on mutually held beliefs and norms about teaching, learning, and effective educational practice;
- Leadership for change- Everyone involved must accept responsibility for

the change and "take charge" of developing it in his or her own practice;

- Monitoring and adjusting- Successful change efforts pay attention to themselves, noting what is not working well and making continuing adjustments as needed;
- Practice made public- Classroom doors open so that those involved in effecting the change make visible the process and its effects on students;
- Ongoing interactive dialogue- People interactively and without risk discuss the continuing change process as part of monitoring, problem-solving, and reflective dialogue; and
- Evolutionary planning- Effective change efforts acknowledge the limits of initial planning and allow the implementation outcomes to shape the direction of the change over time.

These research-based characteristics of successful change help explain why action research may be of value, both immediate and long-term, for those interested in improving schools. Its very process brings these characteristics to life in schools. Ideally, when action research becomes part of school culture, collective visions at both the classroom and building level broaden to include the research process. Collaborative action research brings together like-minded professionals committed to working together to make sense of the change they create through their actions. They share common beliefs in this research process, i.e., in data-based, continuous improvement, and in the need for improving practice either by validating current good practice or by studying desired changes.

Action researchers not only share values; they take charge of their own change destiny. Through action research, practitioners are empowered to take the initiative and both make and study changes in their practice. Fullan (1993a, p. 22) writes that for meaningful change to occur every person must be a change agent, suggesting the importance of the immediate and active involvement of classroom teachers in creating their

own future. In action research teachers study themselves, insuring the "deep ownership . . . that arises from full engagement in solving problems" (Fullan, 1993a, p. 31). The observation and data collection that are part of the action research cycle provide practitioners immediate information on how a change effort is going, and the reflection that follows enables people to think about and address problems that arise. From a constructivist perspective, this ongoing coping helps teachers make meaning of their experiences by receiving information of various sorts, interpreting it collectively, and relating it to other knowledge. If one of the lessons of change is that "problems are our friends" (Fullan, 1993b, p. 126), action research greets these at the door and provides a way to address them positively.

Kruse and Louis (1992) note the importance of the deprivitization of practice in the development of professional community. Action research makes teachers' practice public through discussion of specific concerns and the collaborative use of other teachers' expertise to frame problems, plan actions and data collection strategies, and analyze data. Through action research, teachers have a direct means of focusing on student learning and intervening directly in the instructional process (e.g., through implementing specific instructional strategies or alternative assessment techniques). The public, but protected nature of the conversations swings open the classroom door and engages teachers in discussions of teaching and learning.

Fullan (1982/1991, p. 85) writes that "most forms of in-service training are not designed to provide the ongoing, interactive, cumulative learning necessary to develop new conceptions, skills, and behavior." By contrast, collaborative action research can play a central role in staff development efforts. When it functions as a form of teacher-directed in-service development, its interactive, reflective process can lead to cumulative learning for those involved. Necessary resources are identified during the planning and reflection processes and used to implement change. Continuing reflective dialogue among teacher-

creates a necessary condition for change: teachers working with other teachers (Fullan, 1993a, p. 128). Restructuring may create the time necessary for people to conduct action research during the school day without detracting from student experiences and learning. Action research may also facilitate long-term organizational learning (Louis, 1992) if practitioners, committed to its continuation, include ongoing research in their notion of professional practice and allow change efforts to evolve over time. In collaborative action research, one cycle of research feeds directly into the next, and questions are reframed as data become available. It is, by definition, evolutionary planning.

Based on what we now know, then, using collaborative action research as a vehicle for both creating and understanding change--i.e., as a learning experience for those involved--makes intuitive sense. Collaborative action research is the innovation's innovation because, regardless of what action is proposed--e.g., a major or minor revision of current practice or the validation of existing good practice--it can help educators in a given context study what happens. It can be coupled effectively with virtually any other innovation. It potentially alters the concept of "failure." An action has not failed if teachers identify what seemed to go wrong and apply that information in future planning. Special education inclusion, site-based management, service learning, outcome-based education--any topic is researchable as long as practitioners open their change effort to systematic, cyclic, and collaborative study.

Programs based on extremely different approaches can be candidates for action research. At the school level, for example, a group of primary teachers implementing a whole language approach for the first time might examine the process and effects of the change; another group might study the effects of a new basal reading series; yet another could explore the continuation of an existing literacy program. The results could provide in-depth information about how these programs function in a specific context. By engaging like-minded practitioners in a public and collaborative dialogue around issues of student

learning, action research may, over time, become an active agent in the development of professional community. The strength of the rationale for action research, its growing base of research support, and support for its process in the educational change literature provide three good reasons for recommending its support.

Arguments Against. In reviewing the action research literature, one is unavoidably struck by the unbroken line of persuasive theorists, starting with John Dewey and Stephen Collier, who for over 50 years have advocated some version of the approach. Indeed, its simplest definition--planning, acting, observing, reflecting--links it directly with Dewey's notion of problem-solving and hence with intelligent behavior. Who would oppose such activity for teachers? The question then becomes why, with this continuous line of advocacy coupled with such intuitive appeal, action research has yet to become integral to the functioning of schools. The answer lies in the powerful arguments that raise questions about whether we should seek to institutionalize the action research process and, more practically, whether we could even if we wanted to.

We should not. Those who speak against adding action research as a means of educational change can marshall evidence in two areas: current lack of "proof" as to its value and the difficulty of ever mounting such proof; and the negative potential some see in the institutionalization process. For some, the value of action research has yet to be demonstrated, despite its growing base of research support. From this perspective, the prospect of institutionalizing an "unproven" research process so different from traditional research is simply not sensible. The history of action research in this country points clearly to a continuing reluctance to accept as valid the notion that educational practitioners can study their own practice and develop practical theory.[4] Can a physician in general practice,

[4] Traditional action research, in which university researchers control the research process and insure its "scientific" rigor, is in an important sense a category of applied social science and, as such, does not raise these issues. The critical question is who generates the knowledge, and when the answer to that question is "the practitioner," traditional researchers may question the outcomes

the analogous argument goes, conduct medical research of sufficient quality to merit its use by others? Over the years, some in the research community (e.g., Hodgkinson, 1957) have rejected outright the claim that practitioners can generate "valid" theory through action research.

In part the problem stems from the character of action research that makes demonstrating its value problematic. How would we know if action research was an effective innovation meriting widespread use? A fairly standard approach would be to review the existing research literature and sum across studies, noting those that supported the process and those that did not. In the case of action research, herein lie multiple rubs. First, the broad range of conceptual interpretations and activities that are labeled action research points to the difficulty of deciding what, exactly, might count as exemplars. The obvious contrast between traditional action research, which looks much like standard social science research, and practitioner-centered action research, which from the traditional perspective is less "rigorous," makes this point. Second, because action research, unlike traditional quantitative or qualitative research, does not hold publication in refereed journals as a standard of excellence and because many teachers have neither the time nor the inclination to publish, its results may remain only in the professional communities that conduct the studies. As a result, the available research base to date is fairly small.[5]

Third, even if action research results are formally published, King and Lonnquist (1992, p. 2) note, "The very process of action research makes a comparison of studies using its method across time and place relatively meaningless." The results of action research have local validity and speak of local meanings that raise questions for readers,

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on several grounds.

[5] The increasing number of action research reports coupled with the recent creation of two refereed journals for reporting the results of action research suggest that over time this may no longer be the case.

rather than providing definitive examples of "what works" in classrooms generally. It is inappropriate, therefore, to apply traditional criteria for summing across studies in order to make statements about "what the results of action research have proven."

A fourth problem in proving the value of action research concerns its effect on students. In this view, it is not sufficient to demonstrate that action research invigorates teachers or makes them feel professionally empowered; the bottom line rests with student learning. But how can supporters of action research "prove" that practitioner-centered action research improves student learning when such questions unavoidably draw them into philosophical debates about causation and the use of the very methods they may find of limited value? Given the string of causal connections needed to link an action research process with improvements in student outcomes, how might teachers design studies to "prove" the direct effect of action research on students? While action researchers might well object to using traditional means of demonstrating the value of their work, case study data of the type beginning to appear is a helpful beginning. However, the unavoidable problems of demonstrating causation in the messy world of practice suggest the nature of the challenge.[6] Notwithstanding the growing research base that suggests the merit of action research, the prospects of definitively "proving" its value in both practice and theory remain

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6 It is important to note that for some in the action research community, the notion of creating such proof is aversive. For those espousing emancipatory action research, critical theory provides a perspective that renders meaningless the notion of an interpretive literature on the implementation of action research. For example, McTaggart (1991, p. 36) attacks the theoretical position of Fullan (1982/1991) as "fundamentally flawed, and inimical to the idea of action research" because

> The interpretive approach accepts (and unwittingly confirms) the status quo in order to interpret it. Trying to understand conditions which might be conducive or oppositional to action research from the perspective taken by Fullan involves an obvious contradiction and is clearly unsatisfactory.

For McTaggart traditional "proof" is unacceptable. By contrast, he maintains that the approach he advocates, emancipatory action research, is worthwhile by definition because it is conceptualized broadly in terms of social theory. The point to be emphasized here is that for one group of action research advocates, the process of justifying the process's value requires a conceptual framework dramatically different from the interpretive frame typically used to discuss the implementation of educational innovations.

daunting. Just because teachers find the process exhilarating, the argument goes, is insufficient evidence of its merit. For skeptics, this point suggests the inappropriateness of recommending its use.

This essentially leaves conservative action researchers only one choice. Compromising advocates can adopt a more traditional research approach that conforms to the standards of quantitative or qualitative science and draw back from questions of practical theory. By choosing this path and ignoring the conceptual battle, however, action researchers may sidestep the question of practical theory, but unavoidably relegate action research to second-class status. Those interested in action research and teacher research (e.g., McTaggart, 1991; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993) directly question this status, supporting instead what they see as a research process with direct and immediate applicability in the classroom.

A second broad argument against institutionalizing action research comes not from those who question its process, but rather from those who support it. For some advocates, even if action research were accepted as effective, the value of institutionalizing it in schools would be risky, given the potential negative outcomes. It is not that all institutionalization is bad; if action research is to survive, the likelihood will be greatly increased if it becomes part of classroom and school practice. But, from one perspective, the very act of institutionalization could unwittingly and unavoidably alter the process. In this view, the means may not justify the end. One lesson in school change given by Fullan (1993a, p. 22) is that "you can't mandate what matters." Mandating action research--installing it as a component in a bureaucratic system--holds the potential to eliminate its effectiveness, and action research projects hemmed in by institutional constraints could make a mockery of the process. As McTaggart (1991, p. 51) writes, "Institutionalisation produces bureaucratisation and routinisation--hierarchy, inertia, and compliance with technical procedure." The act of going through mandated action research motions may not engage

teachers in the type of deep discussion and problem solving that characterizes meaningful change, so to the extent that action research becomes someone's external mandate, it may not be the vehicle of empowerment and change that is implicit in its promise. At the extreme, in its emancipatory form (McTaggart, 1991, p. 52, emphasis in original):

> Action research immediately throws into question the capacity of the institution to fulfill its promises, to live up to its principles. It problematises the values of the institution by questioning both collective institutional practices and the context the institution affords for the construction and reconstruction of practices.

While not all action research efforts focus on institutional issues, the freedom to do so is an important option for teachers seeking to make collective sense of their practice.

Another negative possibility of institutionalization stems from the possible co-optation of a mandated action research process. Just how action research will look in practice depends largely on whose values prevail in selecting the questions and actions to be taken. To the extent that influential people co-opt the action research process to their own ends--regardless of good intentions--they may pervert its ideal and limit its potential. If, for example, an administrator requires teachers to engage in action research as they implemented a mandatory results-oriented curriculum or a checklist of Madeline Hunter effective teaching characteristics, the research outcomes may or may not answer teachers' questions about the value of the innovation or its implementation. Noffke (1990) points to an ongoing, potent tension in action research between its use for social engineering, i.e., helping practitioners to determine pre-selected "truths," and its use for the development of truly autonomous professionals. To the extent that classroom teachers are required to change in ways that others determine, they may become the victims of social engineering.[7]

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[7] However, it must be noted that there is similar potential for control when emancipatory action research theorists demand that teachers engage in broad-based social criticism (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992, p. 377).

This is not to say, however, that teachers should have complete control of the action research process. What is required is a balance, with districts or schools setting broad parameters for change and, within those, teachers having the power to determine and study actions appropriate to their given students and setting.[8]

These potential problems with the long-term institutionalization of action research--the possible effects of its bureaucratization and its possible co-optation--point to a dilemma of institutionalization (King, in press). On the one hand, action research may forever remain outside of traditional practice unless it becomes part of the structure of schools. But on the other hand, the mere act of institutionalizing it may unavoidably alter its process and limit its effectiveness. The history of school change in this country points to the sometimes negative effects of institutionalization, and those who support action research clearly want to avoid this potential consequence.

In summary, then, arguments against the institutionalization of action research separate those who see the process as unavoidably flawed because practitioners conduct the research and those who value the process but question the potential effects of its institutionalization. Depending on how it is institutionalized, each may question the merit of adding action research to the ongoing practice of schools. Apart from the issue of whether or not we <u>should</u> seek to institutionalize action research, however, there is the prior question of whether or not--even if we decided it was a good idea--we could do so successfully.

<u>We cannot</u>. Louis (1992, p. 942) notes, "Research has yet to produce a unified and efficient empirically based theory of how and why school organization changes." What, then, are the prospects of this research process becoming an integral part of educational practice, and what is the likelihood that schools as organizations might over time become

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[8] My thanks to Kenneth Zeichner for helping me to understand this point.

centers of action research and site-based inquiry? Given that this has not happened despite years of advocacy, there is the highly practical problem of knowing how, exactly, to proceed.

In a study of school-based collaborative action research, King and Stewart (1993) point to four conditions that supported teams of teachers in this work. The first was the presence of a pre-existing group or team of three or more teachers familiar with each other on a personal level and, at least to some extent, used to talking among themselves on a professional level. The second supportive condition involved an issue or question that fired the group up and committed them to continuing action. In the words of a teacher, "[The question] has to be central to what you're doing every day. Pick something that will really make a difference." The third condition was support for the action research process itself, e.g., having someone to set and perhaps facilitate meetings, create deadlines, provide information about research methods, and review drafts. The fourth condition that supported the collaborative action research process was the presence of meaningful incentives, e.g., time or recognition that kept teachers personally committed to moving the process forward. One teacher put it this way: "You have to have something that motivates you to work on it [the action research study] because you're being pulled in a million directions, and there needs to be something that is strong enough to make you think, 'I need to spend some time doing this right now.'" Those interviewed were clear that action research must be a voluntary activity and could not be successfully mandated.

If these are conditions that support the collaborative action research process, what is the likelihood that they can be developed in schools? The isolation of teachers, both physically behind classroom doors and psychologically behind norms of independent practice, is well documented. Recent change efforts, however, promoting teaming and collective reflection may allow teachers to come together and develop the skills and attitudes supporting action research. In many cases this would mean overcoming a traditional

resistance to seeing themselves as researchers. Restructuring activities, however, could establish the first supportive condition, groups of teachers who might engage in research studies of their practice. There is little doubt that the second condition--a topic that is meaningful to teachers--will be theoretically present in any school, but whether or not teachers feel free to take on a given topic will vary from school to school. For collaborative action research to succeed, teams must feel free to pick topics that energize them, and, to the extent that certain questions are off limits, the process may be stunted.

Support for the action research process, the third supportive condition, may be more difficult to generate. Although meeting times and places can be set, the immediacy of a school day's events can easily overwhelm an action research process, and good intentions may not finally lead to productive collaboration. In addition, teachers need knowledge about how to structure research questions and about potent actions that could work in their situation, familiarity with both quantitative and qualitative research methods, and confidence that what they are doing is appropriate. The increasing inclusion of action research and reflective practice in the curriculum of teacher education programs provides important bases on which practitioners can build. Over time, they may gain confidence in their research ability (King & Stewart, 1993), but early in the process, such support appears crucial. Peer coaching, mentoring, and other structures that enable experienced teachers to engage in professional dialogue with newer colleagues may provide mechanisms for integrating this support into ongoing staff development efforts, but only to the degree that the experienced teachers feel confident in their knowledge of the research process. A potential supporting role for facilitators, whether school-, district- and university-based, is evident here.

While some have argued that the concept of teaching should be framed as continuing inquiry and that part of our professional responsibility is to engage in a research process, this alone has not resulted in the widespread use of action research. The fourth supportive condition, incentives, therefore may be key to initiating and sustaining action research in

schools. What incentives might work? Recognition and special privileges (e.g., attending conferences, visiting other schools) could help reward the work of action researchers, although teachers tell us that the risk of being labelled overly enthusiastic or elitist is very real. The prime incentive, however, is time during the workday to engage in research activities. Virtually every educator with whom we have discussed the prospects of action research immediately pointed to the limiting factor of time--for professional discussion, for the framing of problems, for data collection, for reflection, and so on. Without time, teachers may be justifiably reluctant to agree to action research projects, and the notion of taking action research from the hide of already harried professionals is not a best case scenario.

One way to create time for action research is by providing teacher release time. However, many report finding this increasingly difficult. Not only do teachers have the additional burden of preparing for a substitute, they sometimes have no guarantee that their students will be productive, and, upon their return, they may have to handle a bad situation--or a stack of papers--their absence has created. Teachers also report being questioned by concerned parents about their classroom absences, and, in fact, for a year one Minnesota school board went so far as to forbid teachers from engaging in professional development activities during the school day.

Can collaborative action research become part of the culture of American schools? Can teams of teachers come together around issues of importance to them in a supportive process with sufficient incentives to sustain the effort over time? The question of how action research may help educators in the United States to become autonomous, yet collaborative professionals, acting on their own values and beliefs to improve educational practice collectively, has yet to be fully answered. To date there are few examples of schools that have sustained a culture of inquiry using long-term action research, although efforts begun in the last several years (e.g., within members of the League of Professional

Schools and schools using the North Central Association's Outcomes Accreditation process) warrant longitudinal study. Is action research an innovation worth institutionalizing? Available evidence suggests that it may well be, although the outcomes--either good or bad--and even the possibility of its institutionalization are not yet clear.

Available evidence notwithstanding, those involved in collaborative action research often report professionalizing and rejuvenating effects. The words of teachers bring collaborative action research to life. Action research is "a process that helps you to understand how to go about making a change. . ." It is "doing research in the middle of practice, watching yourself work." As one teacher recently put it,

> We don't have to get the calculators out and prove something statistically. We can look at what we want to know, and we can break it down into how are we going to figure out the answer to this, and then work on it.

And in the words of another: "Rather than just complaining or living through the problems, action research helped us to look at ways to resolve things we were working on" (King & Stewart, 1993). If nothing else, current interest in action research suggests the importance of continued attention--both practical and theoretical--to the process. For those who seek to build on the arguments supporting collaborative action research--its theoretical rationale, its growing base of research support, and its support in the school change literature--the task is clear: Collaborative action research should be expanded within both pre- and in-service teacher development programs in order to capitalize on its strengths.

However, those who now question whether we should institutionalize a practitioner-centered research process may well continue to raise questions. Faced with such challenges, action research advocates have historically provided critics two responses. One response is to argue (e.g., Corey, 1949) that solving site specific problems is more important than applying the canons of traditional social science, i.e., that it is better to answer a meaningful question however poorly than to design a tight study to answer a less

significant question. By focusing on specific problems within specific contexts, practitioners can ignore the challenge of nay-sayers and work directly to improve educational practice. After all, improved practice may help students, regardless of what any outside critics of the action research process think.

A second response to the "should not" critics is the rejection of traditional notions of validity, leading to a notion of "practical theory" that emerges directly from practice and makes sense to other practitioners (e.g., Stenhouse, 1988; House et al., 1989). This approach requires that we demonstrate the value of action research and the practical theory it generates for improving practice. During "first generation" action research in the 1950's (McTaggart & Singh, 1986), this possibility lacked epistemological and political grounding, and the eventual dominance of the well-funded RD&D model was virtually a foregone conclusion.[9] Several decades later, the notion of practical theory is no longer rejected out of hand, and the development of philosophical and methodological support for such theory is growing (e.g., Hartsock, 1983; Harding, 1991), creating exciting prospects for the future of collaborative action research.

For those who fear the hazards of institutionalization or who question the viability of collaborative action research in schools, we need only point to the thriving number of positive examples that speak to its potential--e.g., the growing number of teacher researchers in schools across the country, the increasing volume of action research studies now available to other teachers, the numerous opportunities for teachers to collaborate on research efforts, and the use of action research principles in teacher education. Work over the course of the next decade will help us see if action research can truly make a difference for schools.

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9 Although, as has been noted, the practice of action research nevertheless continued.

Implications for the Development of Collaborative Action Research in Schools

What might facilitate the expansion of action research? First, people must explicitly operationalize the innovation they name "action research" so that they know exactly what it is they are trying to initiate and working to implement. On the one hand, the numerous forms of action and teacher research currently extant create a challenge. Are we, for example, talking about classroom-centered instructional improvement or school-wide change? Are we conducting traditional or practitioner-centered action research? Are we seeking to use a pedagogical innovation effectively or to address issues of inequity in our practice and in our community? Are we studying and reforming ourselves, our schools, or our society? The notion of mutual adaptation (Berman & McLaughlin, 1974) is virtually implicit in the action research process, as it adjusts to fit any situation. But practitioners learning action research methods must understand exactly what they are trying to do and feel confident about the process.

On the other hand, the potential problem of over-specifying an action research process--developing an action research cookbook for research technicians--cannot be ignored. We must not create either "easy hobby games for little engineers" (Hodgkinson, 1957) or high-minded social critiques (McTaggart, 1991), the results of which may not lead to meaningful professional dialogue and improved practice. University-based researchers could potentially play an important role in guiding practitioners through a pre-specified research process. However, we cannot ignore the dangers of cooptation and the dilemma of facilitation--the tension between pushing an outsider's agenda, on the one hand, and having the process die for lack of outside support and knowledge, on the other (King, in press).

If we are serious about installing action research in schools, a second point concerns

problems of attitude, knowledge, and skills, both of educational change generally and of school-based research specifically. If action research is to succeed, we must acknowledge practitioners' sometimes negative attitudes toward educational innovation. The marvelous ability of schools to withstand change has led many practitioners to fold their arms, roll their eyes, and wait for "this year's innovation" (TYI) to pass, knowing fullwell that "next year's innovation" (NYI) is just around the corner (Guskey, 1992). In many schools, the total quality management cycle of Plan-Do-Study-Act is shortened to Plan-Do-Drop on an almost annual basis (Lyman, 1992). What would it take for action research to break this pattern? What would lead practitioners to adopt action research as a long-term innovation? The importance of pre-service teacher education to creating new generations of teacher researchers cannot be overstated.

In addition, our work with in-service teachers (e.g., Lonnquist et al., 1992) has suggested that a compelling notion for the acceptance of action research has been its use as personalized professional development or, as one staff developer noted, the "cheapest form of meaningful inservice work available." The fact that practitioners choose their own problems, then work to improve their practice in a collegial and data-based process, in our experience, is appealing. Also compelling, teachers report, is the idea that what would once have been labelled "failure" becomes instead a collective learning opportunity. As a teacher researcher once said, "[Action research is] freeing in a sense. You can't really fail at it. . ." (King & Stewart, 1993). For their part, school- or district-based facilitators and university faculty can help facilitate discussions and scan the innovation horizon for potentially useful additions to the ongoing dialogue.

Research attitudes, knowledge, and skills form another area of concern for the adoption and eventual implementation of action research. As noted earlier, until recently research methods have been uncommon content in the preparation of teachers and administrators, and many practitioners today do not see action research as central to their

professional role. It is, perhaps, an interesting adjunct for those who want to engage in studies, but not part and parcel of their daily work. Stenhouse (1975)--and John Dewey before him--would disagree, presenting an integrated notion of inquiry and instruction for everyone involved in schools: teachers, students, and (by extension) administrators alike. If practitioners are to initiate action research, they must see this connection and their potential role as researcher and learner, which for many would mark a dramatic change. They must also have sufficient research knowledge and skills to proceed. Teaching and modeling action research as an integral part of ongoing professional practice for teachers and administrators in both pre- and in-service coursework is an important role for university faculty. Practitioners, however, need not take a Ph.D. research methods sequence in order to engage in action research, and the question of how much knowledge of the research process is enough remains to be answered. One possible solution is a continuing and meaningful collaboration with university researchers that allows access to research expertise on a demand basis.

If the research skills needed by practitioners are of concern, so, too, are the attitudes and skills of non-classroom collaborators, whether university-based researchers or other facilitators who might join action research efforts. The increasing number of articles on classroom-based action research suggests the commitment of many academics to collaborative work with colleagues in schools. However, for other researchers, the action orientation of such research, with its focus on useful data, is problematic. What attitudes are required for a commitment to action research? What does it take to develop them? And what are the interpersonal skills needed when working with a group of practitioner researchers?

The issue of time was discussed at length earlier, but demands repetition. Without time for professional reflection during the workday, action research may never fulfill the potential it appears to have. The problems with providing release time have been noted. In

the absence of school time, one fairly limited solution is to provide incentives for teachers (e.g., stipends and honoraria, course or thesis credit) to use existing time outside of the classroom for this purpose, but this may not provide sufficient incentive for long-term commitments. In the long run, the most viable solution to the time problem is a dramatic restructuring of the school day that would provide built-in time for professional work on a regular basis. If, for example, students are actively engaged in learning with one group of teachers, then other teachers in the building can be actively involved in action research activities, and no one suffers.

In supporting the practice of action research, then, we must be specific about what we are proposing; we must insure that those involved from schools and universities have the necessary attitudes, knowledge, and skills as well as access to those who know the process; and we must provide sufficient time for people to engage in the research. School-university collaborations might facilitate the adoption process by advocating action research and early on providing support and assistance to those involved. University faculty might also advance the work of action research by engaging in theoretical activities--another area requiring development--although this creates the negative potential of building on an existing hierarchy in the action research community in which academics develop theory based on the work of teacher researchers.

It is by now a platitude for university researchers to suggest the need for additional research in an implications section. But in the case of collaborative action research, such research seems imperative. If the rationale for the approach remains compelling after 50 years, perhaps now is the time to see once and for all if action research can be put effectively into practice and document the conditions under which that happens. Regardless of the approach taken, additional studies examining the process of action research and its effects on teachers, students, and school organizations would provide useful information either supporting or refuting the various components of its theoretical rationale. It would be

important to frame action research studies in the context of other changes, both curricular and organizational, to identify those situations that benefit most from this approach. The dilemmas of institutionalization and facilitation also require validation. Although progress has been made in the development of a research base for action research, clearly, much remains to be done.

As positive as the process appears for those who support it, two important questions remain: Why action research? And why now? It is no news that American schools at the close of the 20th century are under siege. One could win an easy bet that the opening paragraph of virtually any recent paper on the topic of school change contains some section of the litany of well-documented ills attending our public education system. Regardless of the unit of analysis--from the individual to the broadest level--few Americans can take comfort from this latest incarnation of the "one best system" Horace Mann sought to create over 150 years ago. However, one thing seems constant: the remarkable ability of schools to stay the same despite repeated assaults on their bastions.

At the same time that the school system is receiving such broad-based attack, however, people also acknowledge that now, more than ever, public education must play an increasingly important role in the next century. Demographic data point to daunting challenges that educators and the citizenry simply cannot ignore; statistics on violence, substance abuse, families in crisis, homelessness, illiteracy, and a host of other negative indicators suggest that things will get worse--if they ever get better. Another constant, then, is the urgent need for systemic change that will create schools to prepare our children for a world we can only begin to imagine.

These constants--the fact that our schools, despite continuing reform efforts, stay remarkably the same, even when we need them to change dramatically--point to the appeal of action research. If educational change is, in the words of Fullan (1982/1991, p. 66), a "learning experience for the adults involved (teachers, administrators, parents, etc.), as well

as for children," then action research, with its repeated cycle of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, qualifies as ongoing change. It is, at least potentially, a teacher-friendly process that can directly address educational practice in the classroom over time. It directly, actively, and collaboratively involves practitioners in creating and studying their own change--continuous improvement with ongoing support and less than continuous risk. As John Dewey suggested earlier this century (1929/1984), schools cannot remain the same if teachers, students, and other people who conduct their work continually engage in inquiry. In addition, action research may hold the potential to foster long-term, meaningful change. Those theorists who advocate emancipatory action research, for example, speak of radical change in schools and social transformation to create a better society through such research.

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