Accreditation Routines in a Demoralized School: Repairing, Expanding, and Striving For Improvement

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore how accreditation processes aided a school principal in making reform happen. Using routinized action theory (Feldman, 2000), we examined how the routines in school accreditation were used to transform what had been a demoralized, low performing middle school. This theoretical lens is important as it demonstrates that routinized actions can offer more than stabilizing elements in a school organization but also help administrators seeking to make change. We begin by describing the setting of Ironwood Middle School, presenting the research inquiry methods, and examining how accreditation processes enabled the school to move forward in the face of uncertainty and instability.

Keywords: organizational theory, educational routines, school change, accreditation, leadership, administration, management

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Rutinas de Acreditación en una Escuela Desmoralizada: Soluciones, Desarrollo y Ganas de Mejorar

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Resumen

Este artículo investiga cómo los procesos de acreditación ayudaron a un director de escuela a llevar a cabo una reforma. Mediante la teoría de la acción rutinaria (Feldman, 2000), se examina cómo se utilizaron las rutinas de acreditación en la escuela para transformar una escuela secundaria desmoralizada y de bajo rendimiento. Este punto de vista teórico es importante, ya que demuestra que las rutinas no sólo pueden ofrecer elementos estabilizadores en la organización de una escuela, sino que también pueden ayudar a los administradores que pretenden realizar un cambio. Se describe el contexto de la *Ironwood Middle School*, se presentan los métodos de la investigación y se examina cómo los procesos de acreditación permitieron avanzar a la escuela en medio de la incertidumbre e inestabilidad.

Palabras clave: teoría de la organización, rutinas educacionales, cambio en la escuela, acreditación, liderazgo, administración, dirección

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Transforming a demoralized, low performing school can be challenging for any administrator (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu & Easton, 2010; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Mintrop, 2004). While poverty rates in the United States continue to rise, there are fewer social supports for children and fewer resources available to them in schools, according to Darling-Hammond (2010).   The once detailed requirements specified by the U.S. Elementary-Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965 for ensuring comparable funding, staff, services and salaries between Title I (low income) and non-Title I, have been dismantled beginning in the 1980s under President Reagan. The lack of these safeguards has meant unequal funding, exacerbating racial and social status disparities evident in student outcomes. Further, qualified teachers are most inequitably distributed among schools, with wealthier districts offering teachers higher salaries, better working conditions, and professional development.

Yet school leaders are seen as the "key levers for school-based change" (Bryk et al., 2010, p. 61). In crafting a framework for what is essential for school reform, Bryk et al. write that:

> *School leadership* functions as the driver, directing attention to strengthening the *ties among school professionals, parents, and the local community* and to expanding the *professional capacity* of the school's faculty to advance student learning. All adults within the school community share responsibility for fostering a *student-centered learning climate* that promotes pupils' engagement with more challenging academic work in the classroom, with these studies being scaffolded by a coherent schoolwide *instructional guidance system* (p. 79). [Italics in the original text]

In this study, we explored how the principal of a western U.S. middle school was able to draw upon accreditation routines in order to develop such a learning community and provide an appropriate instructional system. We conducted interviews with key informants at the school (i.e., administrators and teachers), reviewed documents prepared for accreditation, and analyzed the findings based upon routinized action theory. Using this theoretical framework, we considered how the leadership could promote ongoing and systematic reform, leveraging accreditation to transform the school.

To begin the article, we describe the focus and development of routinized action theory. Next, we present the goals of school accreditation as a means to validate and certify the integrity of a school. Having laid out this theoretical and conceptual framework, we present the methods and findings in this case study. We posit that the routinized action of school accreditation processes can offer more than stabilizing elements in a school organization as has been the traditional view of organizational theorists.

Routinized Action Theory

Routinized action theory focuses on how repeated patterns of behavior within an organization might influence what occurs on a daily basis. March and Simon (1958) defined routines as a "highly complex and organized set of responses" (p. 141) evoked by a stimulus such as a gong in a fire station that initiates a sequence of responses. Other definitions of routines include performance strategies, standard operating procedures, and performance programs (Starbuck, 1983). Traditionally, researchers considered that routinized actions might be determined by the rules and customs of the organization or group (Feldman, 1988, 2000), the involvement of multiple actors within the organization (Cohen & Bacdayan, 1994; Feldman & Rafaeli, 2002), and group members taking habitual and repetitive actions in a given situation (Gersick & Hackman, 1990). Threading together different definitions, Feldman and Rafaeli (2002) considered routines as "recurring patterns of behavior of multiple organizational members involved in performing organizational tasks" (p. 311).

While this theory has tended to focus on routines being stable, persistent, and unchanging, thus a source of organizational inertia, several researchers have advocated that routinized actions might contribute to change within an organization (Feldman, 2000; 2004; Feldman & Rafaeli, 2002; Gersick & Hackman, 1990; Pentland & Feldman, 2005). Individual members in an organization can make changes by reinterpreting what is intended and thus, will revise how routines are operationalized. To advance this notion, Feldman (2000) developed a typology depicting how and when participants changed routines while enacting them. One type of change can occur when problems necessitate a *repair* of a routine. A second type of change occurs when actions produce new possibilities not anticipated, thus *expanding* a routine in different directions or aspects. Finally, change can occur when

intended outcomes are achieved but participants *strive* for more improvements. For these three types, Feldman (2000) stated that "Change occurs as a result of participants' reflections on and reactions to various outcomes of previous iterations of the routine" (p. 611).

Holding the view that individuals reinterpret and revise routines, it is possible that routines in organizations can and do enable continuous change even as they offer constancy and stability. On one hand, routines by definition will reinforce expected and habitual behavior that can propel an organization forward during periods of unrest or unexpected circumstances. On the other hand, there is sufficient evidence by Feldman (2000) and others that routines provide avenues for change as individual members within an organization reflect and respond differently. That is, members can interpret what they are doing and demonstrate change, rather than merely repeating a given action.

Howard-Grenville (2005) argued that routines could be seen as capable of changing organizations. Based upon a case study of a private sector manufacturing company, she identified factors contributing to the flexibility of routines as well as their persistence over time. While individual agency was found to affect how routines were performed, the organizational context also set constraints on how routines were adapted. Further, the relative power of certain individuals created interplay between individual agency and organizational context. Members brought to performances of routines their own distinctive orientations toward the situation at hand, and their own intentions. Howard-Grenville suggested that this might explain why the actions of certain individuals might cause changes in routines, while others did not.

Routines in school organizations warrant examination for several reasons. First, educational leaders who are able to examine, analyze, and initiate changes in routines may help their schools adapt to critical changes in the environment. For example, Spillane, Parise, and Sherer (2011) identified how school administration dealt with a changing, more regulatory environment by employing organizational routines as a "coupling" mechanism. They illustrated how school leaders worked to change the formal structure of schools by designing organizational routines that enabled "coupling among government regulation, administrative practice, and classroom practice" (p. 588).

Second, administrators may use routinized actions to leverage fundamental change in an organization (Covrig, 2000). They could anticipate receiving more feedback from attempts to change daily routines (e.g., a school schedule) than from revising formal organizational goals. In this context, studying routines could offer a means to better understand change because routines formalize initial ideas and values, thus transforming them into organizational activities. In a longitudinal study of a high school, Conley and Enomoto (2009) considered an implementation of a student attendance routine by examining qualities of the routine that contributed to change as well as stability in the organization (Feldman, 1988). Leaders were found to create opportunities for change by allocating resources, altering roles, and striving toward new goals in their habitual ways of acting.

Finally, the degree to which organizational routines are actually changed in reform initiatives and/or leverage change in the organization may be an indicator of school transformation. That is, a seemingly fundamental change that leaves daily routines unaffected may not result in major school reform (Conley & Enomoto, 2005). In Feldman's (2003) study of a university housing organization, the housing directors sought to change a routine so as to increase its consistency with a new organizational vision (i.e., encouraging the organization members to be more team-oriented). However, because of the persistence of other routines that were contradictory to that vision, changes in the performance of the new routine did not occur. In earlier papers (Conley & Enomoto, 2005, 2009; Enomoto & Conley, 2007; 2008), we have argued that routines in school organizations offer more than constancy and stability. Acknowledging that routines by definition reinforce expected and habitual ways of doing things, there seems to be sufficient evidence that routines provide avenues for change as individual members within an organization will reflect and respond differently. That is, members can interpret what they are doing and demonstrate responsiveness, rather than merely repeat a given action. In this way, changes are evident in everyday actions. Further, as Feldman and Rafaeli (2002) proposed, routines make for important connections linking members within the organization. People are able to understand what is needed as well as what the organization needs to accomplish. Both of these shared understandings relate to the importance of connections and how routines might serve as mechanisms for adapting to changing circumstances.

The role of management and leadership in any particular routine is worth examining. According to Feldman (1988), leadership can bring about organizational change by altering the rules that constrain behavior. Leaders can also direct available resources to individuals and groups and/or influence "role perceptions in ways that alter what is appropriate for an organizational member to do when a given stimulus occurs" (Feldman, 1988, as cited in Conley & Enomoto, 2005, p. 12).

School Accreditation

In validating and certifying the integrity of a school's academic program, accreditation agencies encourage and promote school improvement, thus fostering excellence in the education of young people. One regional accreditation agency specified its mission and objectives as follows:

> the goal of any school should be to provide for successful student learning [with] programs [that] foster human growth and development, and enable students to become responsible, productive members of the school community and our democratic society. . . . For ongoing program improvement, each school should engage in objective and subjective internal and external evaluations to assess progress in achieving its purpose (WASC Words 2010, p. 2).

To achieve that mission and those objectives, the association has in recent years attempted to emphasize the need for schools to look more closely at numerous aspects including a school's vision/mission, stakeholder collaboration, curricular programs, assessments of student learners, student support activities, and parent/community involvement. Beyond the academic program and student achievement, the accrediting process assesses how individuals are working collaboratively and how stakeholders within the school and communities are involved. In the words of the school accreditation director, "The accreditation process is more than a stamp of approval or quality assurance. It is a collaborative results-oriented school improvement process that serves as the underpinning of an effective school" (WASC Words 2010, p. 8). Accordingly, Fisch (2010) characterized accreditation as a "method that engages the entire school community in a continuous process of improvement, reflection and self-evaluation" (p. 456).

Most states and/or school districts require that at least secondary schools complete an accreditation process. As a consequence, schools undergoing accreditation follow the protocols of their respective accreditation association depending on their location in the country. For example, WASC is one of six regional accrediting agencies and it provides assistance to schools located in California, Hawaii, East Asia, and the Pacific Islands. Its accrediting procedure calls for three phases of full accreditation for an institution: a) school self-assessment reporting, b) on-site visit by external evaluators, and c) the commissioners' decision of school's terms (WASC Accrediting Commission for Schools, n.d.). Likewise, Fertig (2007) indicates similar guidelines are followed in the European Council of International Schools' (ECIS) accreditation process (pp. 336-337).

Research on school accreditation identifies several advantages to the accreditation process, including increasing the capacity of schools to engage in self-evaluation and set goals and objectives, as well as to become a catalyst for communication (Conley & Enomoto, 2012; Littrell & Bailey, 1976). Standards for accreditation make for public accountability as noted in school inspection mechanisms established in regional as well as national systems (Fertig, 2007). According to Fairman, Peirce, and Harris (2009),

> schools seek accreditation as a process that provides a visible credential validating school quality" that "signal(s) to parents, community members, students, colleges and universities that the school has met certain standards related to curriculum, teaching practices, learning opportunities, and physical resources for learning (p. 1).

But studies have also documented the problematic aspects of accreditation that may limit and constrain what can be done. For example, Fertig (2007) examined accreditation in an international school context and proposed that there was a central tension between the school's internal review and the external evaluation. In needing to maintain a focus on external evaluation, Fertig suggested that the reflection and "empowering" (p. 345) resulting from a self study may be scaled down. In a similar vein, Mullen, Stover, and Corley's (2001) collaborative action research study of one rural U.S. middle school placed teachers in an active role of reflecting on their experience of accreditation. The study revealed a "complex set of tensions that . . . [strained the] democratic ideals [of accreditation]" (p. 103).

For example, protocols that specified action plan formats appeared to reduce the authenticity of the self study. "Acting as a manager of protocol, rather than an inquiry partner, the accrediting agency put strain on the purpose and value of self study" (p. 111).

Other researchers, by contrast, have demonstrated how accreditation might serve as a catalyst for change. Fisch's (2010) study of a large public middle school found that the accreditation process "serve[d] as a cultural symbol" (p. 484) beyond fulfilling the requirements of the accrediting association. When including a school portfolio in the accreditation process, narration and storytelling gave meaning and distinctiveness to the school improvement process. Storytelling in the school portfolio "provided an organizational experience for quality school improvement and offered a shared vision for stakeholders of an educational organization" (p. 484). Staiger (2004) documented the influence of the accreditation process to prompt a revision to a bell schedule in a magnet program for gifted students in an urban California high school. The school bell schedule had previously separated magnet students and regular instruction peers in different passing periods and breaks. Mullen et al. (2001) found that a middle school undergoing accreditation made "numerous gains from the accreditation process, particularly in staff performance and community stakeholder involvement" (p. 107). More than an external inspection process (Fertig, 2007), accreditation could offer a mechanism for a school to engage collectively in reform and renewal efforts (Fisch, 2010; WASC Accrediting Commission for Schools, n.d.).

In this study, we explored how accreditation routines, which are recurring and conducted at specific intervals (Feldman & Rafaeli, 2002), may generate school change and reform if harnessed by the leadership. In a process of validating and certifying the integrity of a school's academic program, accreditation agencies encourage and promote school improvement (Fertig, 2007; Staiger, 2004). Through a case study approach, we examined how the middle school principal was able to leverage the accreditation process to improve his school for the better.

Methods and Data Sources

This case study is part of a larger investigation of accreditation and school reform (Enomoto & Conley, 2012). We selected the research design because

our empirical study pertained to processes of change in routines embedded within the context of the organization. As Yin (2009) suggested, the case study strategy is appropriate for studies that ask "how" and "why" events occur and that concern people who are still accessible and able to recall those events relatively accurately (Crossan & Berdrow, 2003). Case studies are useful, according to Stake (1995, 2010), for exploring a "bounded system" delimited by time and place, thus offering a snapshot of what occurred in an organization at a given point in time. This section of the article provides a description of the study methods and a brief background of the school.

To learn more about the school and its accreditation history, we reviewed documents related to the school's accreditation such as its self study, visiting committee reports, and midterm progress report. For the principal's experiences, we were able to draw from a leadership award application and letters of support from various people. In addition, we reviewed the school's strategic action plan, school website, and other publicly available information sources.

During the spring of 2011, we interviewed the school's principal and the curriculum coordinator. The principal was then asked to recommend teachers for interviews who had worked most closely with the school's most recent accreditation, which was in 2008. In the interviews, we asked broad questions about the school, the accreditation routine in place in the school, perceived changes in the school as a result of accreditation, and perceived strengths and weaknesses of the accreditation process. The interview lasted about two hours after which we toured the campus and met with teachers in their classrooms. We spoke with eight teachers who taught different subject areas like science, math, English, social studies, special education, and vocational education. Also comments and support letters were used to validate how the school leadership was perceived by different constituencies like the counselors, department head, Parent Teacher Association (PTA) president, and former principal colleagues.

As the theoretical framework for the study was routinized action theory, we analyzed the data based upon Feldman's (2000) typology to distinguish among three change responses (i.e., repair, expand and strive) that were occurring as evidenced in the interviews, accreditation documentation, and other data sources. The typology was helpful in assessing why school

leadership and members might be making changes (i.e., to repair what had been unsuccessful; to expand an activity; and to strive toward improvement).

A second data analysis was related to how and whether routines were altered. For example, how did the leadership or school members enact organizational change? These included: (a) considering how the leader or leadership team might have initiated change in response to the environment; (b) identifying how the accreditation routine might have been a lever for change; (c) examining evidence of changes or alterations made in daily practice; and (d) determining how members were enacting change in the school.

Our focus in this paper was on the change responses primarily and we attempted to determine how leadership was employing the routinized action of accreditation to reform the school.

School Context

To set the context, we describe the setting and demographic characteristics of Ironwood Middle School. Pseudonyms were given to the school and its personnel for confidentiality purposes.

Located near a military installation, Ironwood Middle served a diverse socioeconomic and multi-ethnic student body of almost 600 students in 7th and 8th grades. Forty-two percent of the students received free or reduced cost lunches; 12.2% were identified for special education services, and 6.5% were of limited English language proficiency and required supplemental support. There were 41.5% Asian-American, 14.8% Native American, and 13.7% identified as other minority, totaling 70% non-white. There were 37 teachers and 4 administrators (a principal, assistant principal, curriculum coordinator and registrar).

Constructed in 1963, Ironwood Middle was designed to serve the students residing in the neighborhood. With rapid growth and urban development, the suburban community was experiencing numerous socio-economic challenges, which included having low-income housing, over-crowding, income disparities between rich and poor, racial-ethnic tensions, and family stress. These challenges affected the school's attempts to provide a quality education for its adolescent students.

When Mr. Oliver Montez took over as principal of Ironwood Middle School, it was underperforming academically with few prospects for change.

The majority of the students came from a low-income housing project. There was high turnover among the faculty and the staff morale was low. He described Ironwood in this way:

> Our students did not believe in themselves, the teachers did not believe in the students, and the parents and community members did not believe in the school. While never openly expressed, the feeling in the community was that students attending [Ironwood Middle] were more at risk for academic failure, for juvenile alcohol/tobacco/drug use, and for gang or criminal activity than students attending other schools. Parents who had the means sent their children to private schools or found alternative public schools through the education process. This was not an option for the [public housing] kids whose parents lacked the means and resources to consider these choices.

The persistence of the problem created a mindset that low levels of student performance reflected the larger socio-economic context. With over 45% of the students qualifying for free/reduced lunch subsidies, and nearly 50% living in low income, public housing, the conditions were grim. Faculty and staff believed that Ironwood Middle students were doomed from the start and that the school was "powerless to affect change because it could not control the external factors that influenced the educational success" (School report, p. 7). Given the problem of a demoralized school, how might a routinized action like accreditation work to turn it around? That was what we explored in this case study.

Findings: Repairing, Expanding, Striving

Feldman's (2000) typology of change responses were repairing, expanding, and striving for change which were used to categorize the case study data. We illustrate the three change responses as examples of how the accreditation process aided the school principal in enabling the school to move forward despite its low performance and history.

Repairing a Problem

If actions do not produce the intended results or there are unintended consequences from the routines, then *repairing* is the strategy invoked by organization leadership and members. Because of the demoralizing situation of the school, the principal took action to repair the problem.

Ironwood Middle had received a three-year accreditation term in 1999. While noting that he had never been at a school with such a low rating, Montez could understand why things were not working. In writing Ironwood's 2002 self study report, school members were "brutally honest." They stated that "[data collection] validated what some of us had suspected, embarrassed others, and angered a few who questioned the findings. But in the end, [we] all agreed that everyone was responsible for school improvement" (School Self Study, p. 8). Ironwood Middle School's history of failed attempts, low academic performance, frustrated teachers, and lack of parent involvement, made for a nearly overwhelming task. Concurring with that assessment, a staff member commented that at the time, "the facilities were run-down, students were roaming the halls during class time, and quality teaching was the exception rather than the norm."

The principal took initial steps to improve the appearance of the environment, citing that changes to equipment and facilities could be done quickly. The classrooms had mix-matched desks and chairs; there was graffiti on the walls and no grass, only dirt in the courtyard. Mr. Montez painted the school walls and bought new furniture so all the classrooms had the same desks and chairs. He directed the custodial staff to plant grass, shrubs, and trees to improve the grounds. "There was more control over how we looked than how we performed [academically]." But, he said, these changes to the physical appearance were a start.

Believing that a change in attitudes was needed, the principal told his faculty that "the people who will change this school are right here in this room" meaning that they were responsible for making change happen. They should not think of him as "the white knight coming in to save the school." He emphasized that "failure was not an option" for this school. Yet the reality was that 40-50% of the kids did fail, so now what? "Let's focus on success. When kids know that they can't fail, then they aren't afraid to risk more. And teachers began to believe it too."

The accreditation process provided that lever for fundamental change. For example, the process required stakeholder groups to be involved in school improvement. Through this requirement, the principal could

encourage faculty and staff to take the dominant role in the process, holding honest and open discussions about what needed to be changed. They shifted from complaining about the past history and present economic and social conditions of families to directing efforts toward the knowledge and skills necessary for students to be successful.

> Staff members candidly reported that:
> [Accreditation] was not an easy process and [it] was viewed in many different ways, ranging from a troublesome process that created havoc and more work, to a process that offered exciting possibilities for extending authentic learning opportunities for students. Not all of us were prepared for the tremendous amount of time, anxiety and confusion that can sometimes arise when people must deal with change. The [accreditation] process forced us to look at our school from different points of view and honestly reflect where we stood as a school. . . . In the end [it] compelled us to move away from finger pointing and fault finding to taking responsibility for school improvement (Accreditation report, p. iii).

Examples of change at the school included aligning their curriculum with content standards, assessing teaching and learning, creating systems for supplemental student support, engaging in remedial reading across the board in all classes, and implementing more hands-on and project based learning. The aim was to have students exposed to rigorous learning experiences and expected to meet high standards. According to Principal Montez,

> The faculty and staff have created and fostered a culture at this school that believes their accountability to ensure learning lies not to the principal but to the students they teach. Through their commitment and caring, teachers have become significant adults for our students whose influence and impact extend far beyond the years students spend at this school (Interview with the principal, p. 11).

Accreditation visitations in subsequent years 2002 and 2008 resulted in six-year accreditation terms. According to Mr. Montez, "These six-year terms are especially important to our staff since they represent an assessment by an external objective body of experts whose analysis is based on the research-based criteria of successful schools" (p. 13). Similarly, staff members commented that "Ironwood Middle School has made it a practice

to earn a full six-year accreditation based on sound curriculum and practices."

Expanding a Routine

Having attained a suitable term of accreditation, the school could turn its efforts toward expansion and striving. As the two types of change are similar, we differentiate by noting that *expanding a routine* proposes doing things differently. This could be illustrated by how the principal expanded school leadership. By rotating those serving in leadership positions like department chair every two years, Mr. Montez was expanding or building the capacity for leadership among teachers and staff, thereby sustaining the efforts of reform and excellence. A school counselor commented that Mr. Montez believed "leadership should be fostered within the faculty and encourages us to take the role of department head and program coordinator at any time. He provides the vision and guidance with the expectation that we will emerge as school leaders to carry on" (Counselors' correspondence, p. 2).

The principal also ensured that smaller learning communities were established, thus transforming what had been a junior high school into a model middle school. In its latest accreditation cycle, the restructuring meant that core teams were organized to be interdisciplinary with social studies, English, math and science forming the academic groupings around a middle school philosophy and addressing the adolescent development of the youngsters at Ironwood. In terms of priorities and decision-making, Mr. Montez demonstrated being student-centered. Mrs. Clarissa Chung, the curriculum coordinator with him for eight years, commented that "when [the principal] reminds the staff that schools exist for the education of the students, not as a place for administration and other adults to go to every morning, many decisions become 'no brainers'." This student-centered focus enabled him to question what was best and who would benefit from the resources used.

Moreover, the leadership invested in professional development sessions designed for teachers to expand their repertoire of practices, learn new technologies, experience hands-on problem solving lessons from a student's perspective, and visit other sites to learn more. In addition to the Technology and Innovation Center (Tech Lab), there were interactive Promethean boards

in math classrooms, graphic arts technologies, media arts equipment, and staging for student performances and presentations.

Allison Alvarez, a retired principal who has known Montez for almost 20 years commented on his leadership.

> It is evident to a visitor on campus that Principal Montez has supported a professional culture that embraces collaboration, continuous learning and leadership at all levels. The pride that staff and students have in their school is clear in every conversation. The school functions as a system that continually renews itself on all levels, supported by many who share leadership and who will assure sustainability.

Striving for Improvement

Striving for improvement (Feldman, 2000) is reflected in Ironwood Middle's academic progress beyond the students' mastery of basic skills. Evidence can be found in school requirements that all students, not only the gifted and talented, participate in competitive academic pursuits like projects for History Day and the Science Fair, competition in the Spelling Bee, and enrichment opportunities for dramatic arts performances. Student talent was also featured at the school's annual Open House, Pride Night, student performance exhibitions, and family fun nights.

Asked about Ironwood's next challenge, Mr. Montez said "We need to prepare our kids for the 21st century but we teach as we have been taught. Maybe I'm impatient." Collectively, faculty members grappled with how best to prepare Ironwood students for what might be next. They identified possible interdisciplinary thematic projects made possible with Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) funding. "This initial funding was greeted with great enthusiasm since it enabled us to translate previously researched hopes and make them classroom realities" (Interview with the principal, p. 12).

To extend the possibilities into a workable project, a team of 7th grade teachers had devised a scale model of an aquaponics system (i.e., a system combining aquaculture, for raising aquatic animals, with hydroponics, for growing plants in water), which enables the students to raise fish and grow green onions. Partnerships with businesses, the nearby high school, and the state university have made it possible to consider developing a marketable

product as well as work with wind and solar energy resources. This endeavor went well beyond the scope of what a middle school might be doing to educate its students.

During this time, the language arts faculty became fearful of what would happen to them. The principal told them that they needed to make a case for their value and importance in the 21st century. He felt that they could help develop that "moral compass" but they would need to recognize their own value and importance. He spoke of the skill set necessary for their students – skills like problem solving, critical thinking, adaptability and flexibility.

Commenting on their accreditation as a process for school improvement, the principal said "It's already what we do." "What do you do when you're successful? That's [somewhat] spooky to try something new. You take a risk." He spoke of lacking the funding and resources but seeking to make a tremendous investment of $100,000 to get a 3D laser printer and other emerging technologies. He suggested that that would be next on the horizon for the school.

According to Mrs. Chung, the curriculum coordinator, Mr. Montez "models a constant need to change – to 'stay ahead of the game.' Complacency is a pitfall to avoid. As a true educator with a passion to provide balanced and meaningful learning opportunities for youngsters, he is never satisfied because there is still work to be done" (Interview with the curriculum coordinator, p. 1).

Discussion and Implications

By examining routinized accreditation processes at Ironwood, we found that these aided Principal Montez in repairing problems, expanding possibilities, and striving toward improving upon an ideal while retaining stability in the organization. Findings highlighted how accreditation processes like involving stakeholders in school improvement could be used to lever fundamental change. Other changes involved aligning the curriculum with content standards, assessing teaching and learning, creating systems for student support, engaging in remedial reading for all, and implementing more hands-on and project based learning.

All of these aspects made for a coherent and comprehensive program, essential for school reform (Bryk et al., 2010). The principal was able to manage and direct needed resources toward the priorities established in the

school plan and accreditation process (Conley & Enomoto, 2005; Feldman, 1988). While his role was instrumental in bringing about organizational change, he could involve everyone because accreditation required that all stakeholders be part of the school self study, evaluation, and prioritization (Fertig, 2007; Littrell & Bailey, 1976). The theoretical lens of routinized action could be useful to educational administrators who seek to make change while preserving stability within their organizations.

Further, there was expansion of possibilities and striving toward improvements (Feldman, 2000). The principal worked to expand leadership by rotating faculty members in positions like department head and program coordinator. He also established smaller learning communities and invested in professional development sessions. These were designed for teachers to expand their repertoire of practices, learn new technologies, experience hands-on problem solving lessons from a student's perspective, and visit other sites to learn more. Striving for improvement meant that Ironwood was looking toward better preparing students for the 21st century in the school work that was expected, the projects they were taking on, and the attempt to "stay ahead of the game" by investing in emerging technologies as well as professional development.

Howard-Grenville (2005) suggested it would be helpful to differentiate between actors' intentions and their orientations toward a routine and this appeared relevant to our case. While intentions deal with the ends envisioned for the routine, an actor's orientation toward a routine means considering the past, present, or future. In her analysis of a road mapping routine in a private sector manufacturing company, Howard-Grenville found that the routine was used for multiple ends like goal setting, communication, enforcing performance standards, and other legitimate actions. The interviewees in the Ironwood case mentioned similar goals for the accreditation routine, with particular emphasis by Principal Montez on individuals and groups taking responsibility for school improvement. Actors' present orientation toward the routine was evident in choosing to expand current activities related to the situation-at-hand and available resources for projects made possible through STEM funding. A future orientation was evident in steps outlined as "next on the horizon" for the school, staying ahead of the game, and avoiding complacency.

These multiple orientations were consequential, according to Howard-Grenville, because they underscore that agents choose whether to use a

routine iteratively in an orientation to the past, use it deliberately in responding to present situations, or by projecting into the future. Supporting the idea that a routine is not simply fixed or stable but could be an "ongoing ... accomplishment" (Howard-Grenville, 2005, p. 635), the performative model utilized in this study directs attention to the multiple orientations of individuals and groups to the past, present, or future, and to the multiple intentions shaping particular performances of the routine.

Two caveats exist to our general finding that accreditation routines can be used by school leaders to leverage the change needed in underperforming schools. First, our findings indicate that accreditation was a catalyst to pull everyone together for school improvement. The question emerges whether a leader in another institution similarly attempting to leverage change would have been as successful. Could such school transformation be realized if the principal did not utilize other leadership dispositions (e.g., empowering staff, giving ownership to others, leading by vision) as demonstrated in this case? We examine this concern in a forthcoming paper as we contrast a high school where the leadership was in flux (Enomoto & Conley, 2012).

Second, school faculty and staff might have been primed for change. It was apparent from our case description that parents, community members, and students were willing participants in the changing the demoralized school and that general agreement existed that substantial change was both necessary and desirable. Recognition of this willingness to change may well have advanced accreditation-related reform in the school aside from the leader's direction and influence.

As U.S. schools struggle to be more accountable and standards-based, their organizations have been viewed as recalcitrant, enslaved to existing arrangements, and incapable of changing and reforming. This study suggests possible ways to think about routines like accreditation do indeed offer mechanisms for change while at the same time offering stability and constancy for organizational members. Our findings have implications for how school administrators might consider the leverage possible with accreditation processes.

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