

9 Guiding Your Own Research That Leads to Action

To prompt learning, you've got to begin with the process of going from inside out. The first influence on new learning is not what teachers do pedagogically but the learning that's already inside the learner.

—Lee Shulman (1999, p. 10)

GETTING STARTED

We invite you to take one last opportunity to listen to the voices of fellow educators. The unique thing about the educators in the following paragraph is that each is committed to educational improvement to support English learning students. They are ready to examine their own practice and context to see what needs to be done to more effectively meet the needs of English learning students. Pay attention to what each colleague believes should be the focus for change:

- Educator A—We believe that English learning students struggle to learn exists due to how entire school systems have operated for years. We have not been able to make systemic change or don't know how to change at that level.
- Educator B—Even though we want to change many aspects of our schools in serving English learning students and their families,

we've noticed that not much has changed over the past decades. We don't know how to get our teachers and other educators to make necessary changes.

- Educator C—Even when the opportunity has been provided to us to allow our English learning students to take responsibility for their own learning, we don't know how to go about it. Nobody notices the attempts we make to address student achievement. So everything ends up as failures without a celebratory event at the end of the school year.

Take a moment and focus on each of the above statements. Which statement resonates with your beliefs as a teacher, counselor, administrator, or other role as educator where changes need to be made that benefit English learning students? Describe the reasons why the selected statement supports your thinking? What are examples from educational practice that support your beliefs? Use the space below to record your thinking and, then, share with a learning partner or dialogue group.

ACTION RESEARCH: A MODEL FOR IMPROVEMENT OF PRACTICE FOR YOU, YOUR SCHOOL, AND THE COMMUNITY SERVED BY YOUR SCHOOL

The purpose of this chapter is to describe and offer the benefits of Action Research combined with the Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency as a tool for you in making changes in your own practice and with your colleagues in making changes in your school or district. We also propose an Action Research Inquiry “getting started” protocol for you and your colleagues to use as a way to engage you with your own learning, curiosities, and possibilities.

Action Research as a credible approach for designing and implementing desired change in practice has a well-reasoned rationale:

- The need for educators to have the skills for conducting research in their own classrooms, schools, communities as a way to improve instruction and enhance the academic achievement of students,

with particular emphasis on English learning students, has been extensively described and discussed in educational literature (Levin & Rock 2003; Lieberman, 1995; Quezada, Lattimer, & Spencer, 2010).

- Support for the use of Action Research by practitioners as part of professional learning has been well documented (Esposito & Smith, 2006; Johnson & Button, 2000; Sax & Fisher, 2001).
- Action Research transcends the narrow confines of traditional research methods to support personal, professional, and organizational learning as authentic professional development by providing educators an opportunity to become researchers in order to think and create knowledge in new ways, both in their own schools and classrooms (Anderson, 2002).
- Action Research is defined as research conducted in a “field” setting and involving those actually “native” to the field, usually along with an “outsider,” embraces the notion of participant researcher and brings educator and community into ever-closer mutually beneficial relationships (Noffke & Zeichner, 1987).
- Systematic inquiry conducted by researchers, teachers, principals, school counselors, or other stakeholders in the teaching/learning environment is for the purpose of gathering information about how their particular schools operate, how they teach, and how well their students learn (Henning, Stone, & Kelly, 2009; Mills, 2000; Quezada, Lattimer, & Spencer, 2010).

Using Action Research supports the purposes of improving the academic achievement of English learning students and narrowing and closing persistent and prevalent achievement gaps. The three educators’ comments at the opening of this chapter represent distinct but complementary approaches to Action Research. The focus of study ranges from examining the total school system, to studying the local school, to studying one’s individual practice. Take a moment to look back to the three colleagues comments that we used to open this chapter. The three comments are examples of three models of Action Research we have adapted from Grundy (1982):

- *Emancipatory*—Educator A’s comment reflects a desire and intent for changing school systems in service of diverse communities. The purpose of Emancipatory Action Research is to change institutional structures, and individual or group beliefs that impinge upon educational practice through critical intent. “It is the interaction between ‘theory’ with ‘personal judgment by the process of reflection” (Grundy, 1982, p. 29). *Emancipatory* research leads to improving social action.

- *Techné or Making Technical*—Educator B’s comment reflects a need and purpose for improving the school to deliver effective services to students. *Techné, Making Technical, Action Research*, when implemented correctly creates more effective and efficient practices in order for teachers and other educators to utilize their own classrooms as labs in which to conduct research and make “action” through product-centered approaches.
- *Practical*—Educator C’s comment reflects a need for improving one’s practice as a teacher, counselor, administrator, or other educator for the purpose of improving family, school, and community partnerships. Practical Action Research is for the purpose of improving instruction with the intent of increasing student academic achievement by “doing” action (*praxis*) through a process-centered approach. This approach seeks to improve practice through the application of the personal wisdom of the participants where “research seeks to improve practice through the skill of the participant. Practical Action Research seeks to improve practice through the application of the personal wisdom of the participants” (Grundy, 1982, p. 27). “*Praxis* is not just random action. It is action with regard to human goods” (p. 26).

The common denominator in these three approaches for Action Research is the need for improvement of practice. Lee Shulman’s quote in the epigraph for this chapter foreshadows the intentional nature of disturbing systems that may be impeding equitable education of all students. As past president of the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education, Shulman is, most certainly, in a position to view what works and what does not in our schools. Therefore, we propose that Shulman’s healthy vein of inquiry and disturbance into educational practice combined with the Tools of Cultural Proficiency and Grundy’s (1982) three types of Action Research can create and sustain the actions needed to change the learning environment for English learning students.

EDUCATORS AS PRACTITIONER RESEARCHERS IN SUPPORT OF ENGLISH LEARNING STUDENTS

Expanding our roles as culturally proficient teachers, counselors, administrators and other educators means being a champion or advocate for the needs and causes for English learning students and their families. Becoming

a culturally proficient practitioner researcher entails asking our schools and ourselves questions such as the following:

- In what ways might the school/district support you and other educators in becoming a culturally proficient practitioner researcher in support of English learning students?
- In what ways and how are educators involved as culturally proficient practitioner researchers in their classrooms, in their own schools, as well as in the community where their English learning students live?
- What obstacles and opportunities do you and other educators as culturally proficient practitioner researchers encounter in your own communities, schools, and classrooms?

Please use the space below to record your thinking as you mull over these questions. Or, maybe, to record new questions about your practice or school that are surfacing for you.

ACTION RESEARCH THROUGH A CULTURALLY PROFICIENT PRACTITIONER RESEARCHER LENS

Culturally Proficient Action Research engages educators as practitioners in identifying questions related to equity to investigate, developing an action plan, implementing the plan, collecting data, and reflecting on the results. This equity-focused research is a process that engages educators in a cycle of questioning, planning, reflecting, acting, observing, reflecting, replanning, and often questioning further (Levin & Rock, 2003; McTaggart, 1988).

Action Research is a tool to be used by individual educators and teams of educators in collaboration. Members of a school district team, or an individual school team, or any one educator can engage in Action Research to improve their practice. A superintendent, principal, instructional coach, lead teacher, mentor teacher, or classroom teacher can guide their own research based on district or school needs through focused

readings, discussions, and by providing examples of model practitioner research projects. The focus of the inquiry is the most important of the process. We suggest the development of key questions for such equity-focused inquiry may be begun with a review the Cultural Proficiency rubric presented in Chapter 3.

The Cultural Proficiency rubric can guide your formulation of key questions. Take a moment and, once again, return to the rubric in Chapter 3. Note that the first column defines the Essential Elements as standards for individual and institutional practice in service of English learning students. The Essential Elements are an appropriate framework for guiding research. Once you have reviewed the Essential Elements in the first column, turn your attention to the column titled Cultural Competence. Note the term “at standard.” This signifies that the behaviors, policies, and practices described in this column represent use of the Essential Elements to guide practice. Now slowly read the entries for Assessing Cultural Knowledge beginning with Cultural Destructiveness to Cultural Proficiency. Do any of the entries sound more familiar to you than do others? For our purpose, this examination of the rubric might inform you and your colleagues as you think of areas for inquiry.

We urge your research questions arise from your experiences in the school district, the community, or classrooms and schools. Such inquiries must address real academic and social needs of our English learning students. After a research question has been agreed upon, a plan for research and action is developed (the first in a series of iterations). The plan must be supported by the educational literature and accepted educational theories that support best practices when working with linguistically and culturally diverse students and their families. Second, researchers engage in a thorough review of the relevant literature that helps align the proposed action with what is already known about English language learning, the social context of schools, and instructional practice. From this rigorous literature review, additional focused questions are developed. Those questions then lead to sound methodologies designed and implemented to lead to more meaningful and valid results (Quezada, Lattimer, & Spencer, 2010). The initial findings provide information for the team of researchers to explore prior to taking action.

The most significant aspect of the Action Research is reflecting on initial findings and designing a new action/set of actions based upon individual reflection and/or group discussion. The Cultural Proficiency rubric might be a tool to inform structured reflection regarding key questions and the literature that has been reviewed. After subsequent cycles of research and action, participants are guided to analyze and discuss their findings and to describe transformations that have occurred in their practice. In a

classroom setting, Action Research can be a way for teachers to ask questions that matter to them and their English learning students and to demonstrate evidence of students' more authentic learning than what is used in standardized assessments. For administrators, counselors, and others who support classroom teachers, Action Research can support their learning about "best practices" for highest quality instruction, curriculum, and professional development in support of English learning students. These cyclical stages of inquire, collect data, analyze data, study findings, take action, study action are important steps to becoming a culturally proficient practitioner researcher focused on the educational needs of English learning students.

A culturally proficient approach to Action Research provides teachers, counselors, and administrators with tools to meet the many individual and institutional challenges they face when working with linguistically and culturally diverse students. "It (Action Research) provides stakeholders with a means for asking authentic and important educational questions, systematically investigating and acting upon those questions, and a process for reflecting upon those actions with the intent of improvement. These are the skills that practitioner researchers will always find useful in their classrooms" (Quezada, Lattimer, & Spencer, 2010, p. 187). Action Research provides the opportunity for educators to push back against mandates set by external authorities. By encouraging systematic investigation, critical analysis of classroom teaching and learning, and evidence-based decision-making, Action Research offers teachers the data and the language to advocate in support of their linguistically and culturally diverse students' learning. Cadeiro-Kaplan (2008) summarized it well: "Without opportunities to reflect and critically analyze state mandated materials and their own beliefs and teaching practices, teachers are caught up in an endless loop continually uncritically reacting to curricula shifts and material, methods, or practices" (p. 119).

ACTION RESEARCH CYCLE RUBRIC FOR CULTURALLY PROFICIENT PRACTITIONER RESEARCHERS

Action Research is a powerful tool for planning culturally proficient professional learning through reflective practice and continuous instructional improvement. Table 9.1 represents the Action Research Protocol for guiding and conducting *Emancipatory, Technical, or Practical* Action Research focused on supporting linguistically and culturally diverse students' learning.

Table 9.1 Cultural Proficiency Action Research Protocol

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| <p>STATEMENT OF PROBLEM, UNDERSTANDING OF CONTEXT AND RESEARCH QUESTION</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Question is researchable and could potentially resolve a clearly identified problem or issue related to linguistically and culturally diverse students' learning. • Question is relevant, timely, <i>and</i> grounded in practice and supported by thoroughly conducted needs assessment conducted in the school and community context. • Equity-based needs assessment was conducted in collaboration with other professionals in the school and community. |
| <p>LITERATURE REVIEW (GUIDING THEORIES AND RESEARCH)</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Literature review cites comprehensive research and theoretical knowledge of the field of English learning students and "best practices" for linguistically and culturally diverse groups of students relevant to their contextual needs. • Literature review is synthesized purposefully and appropriate connections are made to the research question(s). • Literature is organized around and guides action and assessment plan. • All literature is reviewed in the context of the researchers' district, school, department, grade level, or classroom. |
| <p>ACTION AND ASSESSMENT PLAN—FIRST ITERATION</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data collection demonstrates responsiveness to English learning students' context and issues. • Link action and assessment plans to guiding theories and research of "best practices" for English learning students that are insightful and reflective. • Data collection plans are exceptional and provide in-depth examination of the research question(s) related to linguistically and culturally diverse students' learning. • Action and assessment plans are developed through collaborating with other professionals focused on improving outcomes for English learning students. |
| <p>EVOLUTION OF RESEARCH QUESTION, IDENTIFICATION OF PROBLEM, RATIONALE, SIGNIFICANCE</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Second phase research question is researchable and could potentially resolve a clearly identified problem or issue related to linguistically and culturally diverse students' learning. • Second phase research question evolves from first study and connections made with relevant literature and emerging "best practices." • Changes are clearly related to substantial professional growth and self-transformation of the researchers. • The researcher relates evolution of research question to social and collaborative dimensions of the research process. • Second phase research question is even more relevant, timely, and grounded in educational practices for improving outcomes for English learning students. |

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| <p>ACTION AND ASSESSMENT PLAN—SECOND ITERATION</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data collection demonstrates responsiveness to new emerging issues. • The new design phases are thoroughly substantiated by data. • Problem-solving conducted in an innovative way through collaboration, reflection, and dialogue. |
| <p>DATA ANALYSIS, REFLECTION, AND PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data analysis includes quantitative and qualitative techniques: patterns and themes, changes in demographics, changes in student achievement data, interview data, narrative inquiry data, etc. • Interpretation of data shows synthesis of literature review with previous and current research in the current context. • Trends or patterns are clearly identified in the data. • The data analysis is deeply reflective in terms of the context and relates to professional and personal development in collaboration with other professionals focused on linguistically and culturally diverse students' learning. • Relationships among data are presented graphically. • The presentation of findings includes analytical interpretation. |
| <p>DISCUSSION</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Description of findings and the implications of those findings push knowledge and understanding of the research in relation to linguistically and culturally diverse students' learning. • Discussion includes a thorough description of the relationship between the findings and the context of the researchers' district, school, department, grade level, or classroom. |
| <p>OVERALL REFLECTION AND CONCLUSION</p> | <p>Reflection on the study connects the research to a body of knowledge and adds new potential to the field.</p> <p>Reflection on action research includes the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How the action researcher was transformed to be a wiser and more effective practitioner through the research experience; • How the action researcher could initiate leadership in the field; • How critical reflection of the transformative experience at personal, social, and cultural levels; and • How the culturally proficient action researcher benefited from collaborating with other professionals in the field and intends to continue the collaboration in her/his professional life. |

Source: Adapted from University of San Diego. (2010). *Department of learning and teaching research handbook*. San Diego: School of Leadership and Education Sciences.

A team of peers working collaboratively can provide feedback and support to analyze and interpret findings in a culturally proficient context that focuses on the best interest of educating English learning students. “It is this work that involves building relationships and trust, negotiating roles and boundaries, learning from colleagues, that strives to contribute to the education field” (Cooper, 2006, p. 115). While educator learning is critical to student learning, schools must be places where both teachers and students learn (Bonner, 2006). Classroom conditions that allow practitioner researchers to flourish will foster opportunities for collaboration, autonomy, and choice in teachers’ work, reflective practice, professional development within the workday, and will provide a culture of inquiry (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Lieberman, 1995; U.S Department of Education, 2000; Zeichner, 2003). Action Research as a model of practitioner research provides educators with the following:

- *Empowerment to choose* a systematic research study that can effect change.
- *Empowerment in design* with data collection as a part of the daily routine based on recording data through observations, journaling, and field notes, not on intuition.
- *Empowerment of sharing* the process and results with stakeholders, peers at school, community and in professional settings (i.e., conferences or symposiums).
- *Empowerment of results* as the results impact the practitioner researchers practice as well as solving the problem being researched (Esposito & Smith, 2006).

ACTION RESEARCH GETTING STARTED PROTOCOL

Now, we invite you to begin your Action Research Plan with a “Getting Started” protocol. As we noted several times in this chapter, the first step of the Action Research process is to be clear about your inquiry. The frame that we use for a Culturally Proficient Action Plan is the Tool of the Five Essential Elements. To build your *Getting Started Protocol*, return to Chapters 4 through 8 and review the reflective questions and your responses from the *inside-out* sections. These may become your inquiries for your Action Research. Or, these questions may serve as examples for questions you may design for your inquiry. The questions must be relevant and meaningful for your context and your student population and your school community. What’s important for you to study about your own community, school, or classroom?

Tables 9.2 through 9.6 provide the *Getting Started Protocols* for your Action Research Plan. The Protocols have spaces for you to construct questions for

the three forms of Action Research presented in this chapter: *Emancipatory*, *Technical*, and *Practical*. You will construct your research question(s) based on the needs of the community and students you serve. The Protocols (Tables 9.2–9.6) use the Five Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency to guide you in determining a specific area for your equity-based inquiry.

Once you have developed a question for your research, you are ready to begin your review of the literature to determine information or theories that inform and support your area of focus. Table 9.7 provides you a series of questions, once again using the Five Essential Elements, to guide your literature review.

Table 9.2 Culturally Proficient Action Research Plan: Getting Started Protocol for *ASSESSING CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE*

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| <p>STATEMENT OF PROBLEM, UNDERSTANDING OF CONTEXT AND RESEARCH QUESTION</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Question is researchable and could potentially resolve a clearly identified problem or issue related to linguistically and culturally diverse students’ learning • Question is relevant, timely, and grounded in practice and supported by thoroughly conducted needs assessment conducted in the school and community context • Needs assessment was conducted in collaboration with other professionals in the school and community |
| <p>YOUR KEY LEARNINGS AND/OR QUESTIONS FROM CHAPTER 4: <i>ASSESSING CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE</i></p> | <p><i>Emancipatory</i> research question about your school district:</p> <p><i>Techne or Making Technical</i> research question about your school site:</p> <p><i>Practical</i> research question about your classroom, grade level, or department:</p> |

Table 9.3 Culturally Proficient Action Research Plan: Getting Started Protocol for *VALUING DIVERSITY*

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| <p>STATEMENT OF PROBLEM, UNDERSTANDING OF CONTEXT AND RESEARCH QUESTION</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Question is researchable and could potentially resolve a clearly identified problem or issue related to linguistically and culturally diverse students' learning • Question is relevant, timely, <i>and</i> grounded in practice and supported by thoroughly conducted needs assessment conducted in the school and community context • Needs assessment was conducted in collaboration with other professionals in the school and community |
| <p>YOUR KEY LEARNINGS AND/OR QUESTIONS FROM CHAPTER 5: <i>VALUING DIVERSITY</i></p> | <p><i>Emancipatory</i> research question about your school district:</p> <p><i>Techne or Making Technical</i> research question about your school site:</p> <p><i>Practical</i> research question about your classroom, grade level, or department:</p> |

Table 9.4 Culturally Proficient Action Research Plan: Getting Started Protocol for *MANAGING THE DYNAMICS OF DIFFERENCE*

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| <p>STATEMENT OF PROBLEM, UNDERSTANDING OF CONTEXT AND RESEARCH QUESTION</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Question is researchable and could potentially resolve a clearly identified problem or issue related to linguistically and culturally diverse students' learning • Question is relevant, timely, <i>and</i> grounded in practice and supported by thoroughly conducted needs assessment conducted in the school and community context • Needs assessment was conducted in collaboration with other professionals in the school and community |
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Table 9.7 Looking for Relevant Literature: *Connecting to Context and Question*

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| <p>LITERATURE REVIEW (GUIDING THEORIES AND RESEARCH)</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Literature review cites comprehensive research and theoretical knowledge of the field of English learning students and “best practices” for linguistically and culturally diverse groups relevant to their contextual needs • Literature review is synthesized purposefully and appropriate connections are made to the research question(s) • Literature is organized around and guides action and assessment plan • All literature is reviewed in the context of the researchers’ district, school, department, grade level, or classroom |
| <p>ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS GUIDE OUR LITERATURE SEARCH:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ASSESSING CULTURE • VALUING DIVERSITY • MANAGING THE DYNAMICS OF DIFFERENCE • ADAPTING TO DIVERSITY • INSTITUTIONALIZING CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE | <p>What has been studied about ways to assess cultural knowledge?</p> <p>In what ways has diversity as value-added been studied in schools as organizations?</p> <p>What methods have been used to study diversity as a win-win, or interest based, or adaptation approach in cross-cultural settings?</p> <p>What methods have been used to study students’ languages through an assets-based lens?</p> <p>What’s missing from the literature that is present in our context (community, district, schools, classrooms)?</p> |

CLOSING THOUGHTS

The goal of developing educators who are culturally proficient practitioner researchers in linguistically and culturally diverse schools is to nurture our students to become people of good character, capable of love and work, educated in good schools that are caring, civil, and challenging (Quezada & DeRoche, 2010). “These goals contribute to building a society that finds systemic solutions to its problems and promotes democratic ideals for each of its citizens” (Lickona, 1998, p. 78). We believe the skills and competencies presented in this book are needed for 21st century culturally proficient practitioner researchers. We believe one of the primary purposes of education is to improve the lives of all students through effective teaching and learning strategies; therefore, we pose these final questions for reflection to engage you as culturally proficient practitioner researchers who bridge theory into practice.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- What attitudes, circumstances, and/or conditions help or hinder your movement and the movement of your peers, your school and community, and the school district toward the development and implementation of Action Research strategies as a means for developing culturally proficient practitioner researchers?
- In what ways can you better support and address the needs of promoting practitioner research and Action Research? What additional information, resources, and support are critical to help you meet those needs in working with culturally and linguistically diverse students and their families?
- In thinking about culturally proficient practitioner research in support of the linguistically and culturally diverse student population in your class/school or school district, what curricular and teaching approaches would be most suitable to meet their needs? What support do you need to bring those approaches into your work?
- In assessing yourself, the school, and those of your peers' concerning Action Research (if already being implemented), what is working well and what areas need improvement?
- What recommendations do you have for implementing the ideas and suggestions in this chapter? What do you do with educators who demonstrate a lack of understanding by the work they do?

We look forward to communicating with you about any aspect of this book:

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