

## TRANSFORMING ESL/BILINGUAL TEACHERS THROUGH ACTION RESEARCH AND TEAMWORK

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### ABSTRACT

In many professional development efforts, the experts are the outsiders who are called in to share research findings produced far away from the school or district involved. Charged with developing a grant-funded program to provide support to English as a second language and bilingual teachers in Wisconsin, we wanted to offer teachers an opportunity to build on and share their expertise to meet the educational needs of increasing numbers of English Language Learners throughout our state. Working first as individuals and later in professional teams, participating teachers developed action research projects, which served both as entry points for the program mentor into the teachers' classrooms and as tools for understanding how to more effectively support teachers' growth as professionals. Through active mentoring and professional teamwork, the participants realized the potential for action research projects and professional teamwork to enhance their understanding and critique of their own practice.

### **Transforming ESL/Bilingual Teachers Through Action Research and Teamwork**

In many professional development efforts, the experts are the outsiders who are called in to share research findings produced far away from the school or district involved. What began as a one-year federally funded professional development grant to improve teacher quality of English as a second language/bilingual teachers grew into a four-year series of grants that focused on collaborative action research among teachers who were committed to making changes in the education of their linguistically diverse students. The four-year program, located at the University of Wisconsin–Whitewater, evolved from supporting individual teachers to supporting teams of ESL/bilingual teachers and their colleagues with the goal of enhancing the academic achievement of English Language Learners in five area school districts. Recent research (Carroll & Foster, 2009; Carroll, Fulton & Doerr, 2010) has shown professional teamwork to be instrumental in boosting school performance and student achievement. Growing out of individual and collaborative efforts, action research (AR) became central to the program as each participating teacher designed a project in response to an identified need related to improving the education of English Language Learners (ELLs). While we hoped that AR would enhance teachers' abilities and strengths, we didn't anticipate that it would also shape the direction of the grant program itself.

The federally funded grant programs<sup>1</sup> began as a professional development program with three parts: a graduate seminar, with an action research project as the primary academic assignment; a mentoring component, with a half-time mentor who supported the teacher participants; and an electronic network that also served as a supplement to the graduate course. As the mentor began to work with the teachers that first year, the action research projects shifted to the center of our program, serving as entry points into the teachers' classrooms and as tools for understanding how to more effectively support their professional growth. With the teachers' experiences guiding us, we began to see the power of AR to guide the teachers' developing understanding and critique of their own practice. AR provided them with a systematic framework for investigating and improving their educational practices and disseminating their newly acquired knowledge with others at the school, district, and university levels.

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In order to place our work within recognized AR traditions, we briefly define and describe four types of AR: collaborative, critical, classroom, and participatory. These four types are summarized below, in slightly adapted form, from Hendricks (2006, p. 10):

**Collaborative Action Research:**

A system of AR in which researchers from school and university settings work together to study and try to solve educational problems. Collaboration may occur among teachers and administrators as well as among school personnel and university researchers. A major goal of this type of AR is to build and sustain collaboration among the different educational stakeholders in order to understand and, whenever possible, to solve educational problems.

**Critical Action Research:**

A type of AR found in educational settings that encourages wide collaboration among university researchers, school administrators, teachers, and others in the community. The goal of this type of AR is to evaluate social issues so that results can be used for social change. Critical AR often focuses on educational inequities due to gender, ethnicity, and social class. For more information, see the work of Carr and Kemmis (1986).

**Classroom Action Research:**

A form of AR that is carried out by teachers in their classrooms with the purpose of improving practice. It encourages and values the interpretations that teachers make from data collected with their students. Although classroom AR is frequently conducted by a single teacher, collaboration with others may also occur.

**Participatory Action Research:**

A type of AR that is social, interactive, and transformational in nature. Participatory AR investigates the reality of a particular setting with the goal of making it better. For the action researcher, this type of AR is viewed as emancipatory (exploring practices within the limits of social structures), critical (aiming to challenge alienation, unproductive ways of working, and power struggles), and transformational (changing both theory and practice). For an in-depth discussion of participatory AR, see Kemmis and McTaggart (2000).

At first glance, these AR models appear to overlap on one or more features, e.g., collaboration and the study of educational problems. One way to distinguish between the different models is to focus on their goals or outcomes: building and sustaining collaborations and partnerships (collaborative), effecting positive social change (critical), examining and improving classroom practice (classroom), and transforming self and professional practice in relation to others within a particular setting (participatory). In practice, however, it is sometimes difficult to differentiate between the types of AR, especially when collaboration and teamwork are an integral part. The AR projects described later in this article exhibit features of at least three models: collaborative, critical, and classroom AR.

In the next five sections, we describe in greater detail 1) the components of the program, 2) the AR project, 3) the role of the mentor, 4) examples of three AR projects, and 5) the benefits of AR as a tool for professional growth. Following each example of AR (section four), three ESL/bilingual teachers share their perspectives on the project, and in the final section, they reflect on the benefits of AR as a tool for professional growth.

### **Components of the Program**

During the four-year span of grants (2004–2008), the program evolved from supporting individual ESL/bilingual teachers to supporting teams of teachers in completing their AR projects in order to boost the academic achievement of ELLs. These teachers came from five local school districts near the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater. These districts, all smaller-sized, shared two additional characteristics: all had experienced rapid growth in numbers of ELLs and were in need of program support for existing and newly arriving immigrant families. In the first three years of the grant programs, participants from each school district consisted of ESL/bilingual teachers from elementary and secondary schools. As the program developed, the need for a team approach emerged and team membership shifted to include a mix of content teachers and administrators with a team leader who was an ESL or bilingual teacher who had previously participated in the program. The shift to teams occurred at the suggestion of participating teachers in order to expand the positive effects of collaboration and AR projects to multiple classrooms at the same grade level, and in some districts, to build in the potential for school- or district-wide changes. At the same time, it also expanded the leadership capabilities of ESL/bilingual teachers in the teams—and concomitantly in their schools and school districts—since they could share their expertise in both ESL/bilingual education and action research with new team members. Throughout the four-year grant period, three components of the program remained constant: a graduate Professional Development course, a mentoring component, and an online support network. A fourth component, the inclusion of team leaders, was added in the final year.

The graduate course consisted of seven monthly seminars scheduled over the academic year, beginning with a seminar that introduced AR to participating team members. Completing an AR project was the central assignment of the course. The seminar on AR was followed by six other seminars on topics related to the successful academic achievement of ELLs, such as language acquisition, differentiation of instruction, teaching academic language in the content areas, and literacy development. Seminars were taught by university faculty, including the

project director, or by in-service ESL/bilingual teachers who were themselves former program participants. A portion of each of the six remaining seminars was reserved for ongoing instruction and discussion among team members on their action research projects.

The mentoring component of the grant was included in order to support teachers individually and in teams as they worked to develop, implement, and report on their AR projects, both in the graduate seminar and in their home school districts. The program mentor served as a bridge between the university and the participating public schools in the five school districts. Both individuals who served as mentors to participating teachers were experienced ESL teachers with previous K-12 teaching in the U.S. and abroad. Like the composition of the participating teams, the nature of mentoring evolved over the life of the grant program. In the first three years, the program mentor worked closely with teachers in their classrooms to gain first-hand knowledge of their contexts of teaching, with the goal of supporting individual teachers as they designed and implemented their AR projects. The mentor's duties also included assisting the project director in establishing the teams, providing online support to team members, participating in the university-based seminars, and with the project director, evaluating the AR projects. After accepting a new position abroad, the first mentor could no longer continue in that capacity, and the position of a part-time mentor consultant was created in 2007-08. The second mentor, who was then teaching ESL full-time at a local high school, continued the mentoring work, but on a more limited basis. She worked with the project director to consult with the ESL/bilingual team leaders, monitor team leaders' discussions on the online network, participate in the graduate seminar, attend school/district presentations of AR findings, and evaluate the AR projects.

The third ongoing component of the grant, the online support network, provided a forum for team members to share ideas and also served as a supplement to the graduate course. Team members were expected to participate weekly on this network, and discussion topics were both guided and open-ended. Guided topics included those related to seminar topics (e.g., action research, second language acquisition, family involvement, the language of math and science), and open-ended questions related to working with ELLs in their schools and school districts as well as other informal topics that arose. Due dates were assigned for the guided responses, and participants were asked to hand in copies of the guided responses at each seminar for evaluation as part of the graduate course. Participants could also use the online network for informal exchanges with each other. The following excerpt from

an online discussion between two teachers illustrates the informal exchange of information and expertise that regularly took place.

Example of an online discussion:

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Teacher 1: If you are interested in using United Streaming...I have many video PowerPoints that I have developed using video segments...I would be happy to share them with you...

Teacher 2: Do you have school on January 25th? I thought maybe I could observe your classroom, because we have the day off.

Teacher 1: We have school that day....I am really excited that you want to come. I would love to show you what my students are up to. If there is anything I can help you with, let me know.

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The fourth component, the addition of team leaders, took place in the last year of the grant, largely in response to the developing expertise of ESL/bilingual teachers who were past participants in the program and to the changing duties of the mentor. In that final year, each of the five teams was guided by an ESL/bilingual teacher who worked with other team members to decide on a team goal, meet regularly with the team, and generally assist their teams as they participated on the online network and developed their individual AR projects. Team leaders also served as presenters at some seminar meetings and as seasoned advisors on the AR project, both in face-to-face meetings and online discussions. Additionally, they took responsibility to organize a school or district-wide presentation of their team's AR findings in the spring of 2008. In short, because of their previous experience as teachers and with AR, team leaders were positioned to successfully take on some of the responsibilities of the initial program mentor, with the added bonus of developing their leadership skills in their home schools and districts.

### **The Action Research Project**

The AR projects provided a central focus for participants during the year-long graduate course. Preparation for AR began with the initial graduate seminar meeting on AR and the reading of an action research text for educators (Hendricks, 2006). A starting point was an accessible definition of action research:

Action research is an inquiry-based approach to professional growth and school improvement in which teachers use research methods to identify questions about their practice, develop and implement appropriate changes, assess the impact of those changes, and share what they have learned with the profession as a whole (Wideman, Delong, Morgan & Hallett, 2003, p. 3).

As important as the discussions of the readings on AR were, however, it was the mentor's and in the last year, the team leaders' efforts to work with individual teachers and teams that inspired teachers to reflect on and problematize their teaching contexts in order to identify a team goal. Individual AR topics arose out of these team goals, which evolved into questions that guided the individual AR projects. The mentor's role in supporting the team members' planning, implementation, and reflection on AR are described in greater detail in the next section.

The starting point for planning was a list of reflection questions for teachers based on Chiseri-Strater (2006) and Hendricks (2006). (See the Appendix for a list of the questions.) These questions asked teachers to reflect on their current teaching situation and responsibilities and then identify a particular area in need of improvement. For example, to formulate the primary research question, teachers asked themselves, What is my classroom situation? What do I want to do in my classroom that I'm not now doing? After identifying a topic and formulating a research question, AR followed a four-step cycle: 1) developing an intervention plan, 2) collecting the data, 3) analyzing the data, and 4) reflecting on the findings and their application to current practice, at which point the cycle could optionally start over. Self-monitoring questions were provided at each step. (See Figure 1 for the Action Research Cycle.) The four-step cycle described here is similar to the four phases for doing AR reported by other researchers, for example, Sagor's (2005) four stages (clarifying vision, articulating a theory, implementing action and collecting data, and reflecting and planning informed action) and Burns' (2010) four steps (planning, action, observation, reflection), based on Kemmis and McTaggart (1988). Common to the different visions for carrying out AR is the practice of reflection, which is both the initial and final step in the recursive process of action research.

It is worth noting that the idea of reflection among educators has sometimes been overused and misunderstood, even though reflection is considered a cornerstone of both AR and many teacher education programs. Bullough and Gitlin (2001) underscore this concern when they point out that the crusade for teachers to reflect on their practice has too often resulted in "...only empty slogans [that] boil down to nothing more than a plea to 'think hard' about what they are doing and why they are doing it" (cited in Hendricks, 2006, p. 23). As Hendricks notes, the act of reflection goes beyond simply thinking hard about a problem; it also involves thought directed towards resolving the problem. Historically, this perspective on the act of reflection can be found in John Dewey's *How we think* (1933). According to Dewey, thinking about a problem is merely the first step; reflection also involves rational problem-solving. Action research thus ties together the related notions of *reflection* and *action*.

But what is the distinction between reflective practice and action research? Burns (2010) addresses this question in her recent book on action research for English language teachers. To help distinguish between the two, Burns refers to Schön's (1983) related notions of *reflection-in-action* and *reflection-on-action*. Reflection-in-action refers to "the kind of reflection we do 'on our feet' in the classroom as we evaluate our own and our students' reactions to the moment-to-moment activities and interactions that are taking place" (Burns, 2010, p. 14). It is reflection on-line that occurs during teaching. In contrast, reflection-on-action occurs after a teaching event. As Burns explains, "it's a kind of 'meta-thinking' about what happened—reflecting on the decisions we made, on our students' and our own responses, and on our thoughts and feelings about the lesson, and working out our reactions to it all" (p. 14). AR certainly involves both kinds of reflection, but it takes reflective teaching beyond the arena of one teacher's practice into the domain of academic research. In other words, AR allows teachers to link their teaching and emerging research questions to 'public' academic theories (Burns, p. 17). Researching the literature related to their action research topics made the teachers in our study aware of the academic discourse in those areas and the fact that they, too, were part of a larger research community. In this grant project, action research also required teachers to write up the results of their AR projects citing relevant research and to share their findings in at least two contexts: with their school community and with other students in the graduate course. For these reasons, it can be argued that our teachers were fully engaged in AR and not only in reflective teaching.

### **The Role of the Mentor<sup>2</sup>**

As described earlier, mentoring began at the start of the school year when the mentor asked participating teachers questions about their teaching assignment, classroom realities, concerns, and expectations. (See the Appendix for a list of these questions.) Together the mentor worked with the teacher to develop appropriate goals for the year and an action research question to accomplish these goals. In the first stage, planning the intervention, the mentor assisted the teacher in developing an intervention plan for the year and a timeline. Part of the planning process consisted of reviewing professional literature related to the AR projects.

The following example illustrates how the mentor helped one teacher attain her AR goal: to overcome her reluctance to use technology so that she could update the social studies curriculum and make it more appealing to students. This goal exemplifies a classroom model of AR. Using the four stages of AR as a framework, the teacher

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<sup>2</sup> The mentor relationship described in this section focuses on the role of the mentor in first three years of the grants.



sought to integrate short video clips into the curriculum as part of the first stage, *planning*. The mentor suggested professional articles and teacher resource books to the teacher that included ways of implementing this goal. As the teacher grew in her expertise with video streaming in the classroom, she felt confident enough to ask the mentor to observe and provide feedback on her use of the technology. After being observed and receiving constructive feedback, the teacher, buoyed by her success, continued to make progress in her AR. She collected student evaluations on her use of video streaming, which became part of the second stage, *data collection*. In the third stage, *analysis*, the teacher examined the student evaluation data she had collected, and with the support and encouragement of the mentor, began to draw conclusions about the effect of AR on her teaching practices. Finally, in the last stage, *reflection*, the teacher looked back on what she had learned about incorporating new technology into the curriculum and how it could be applied to her classroom. Thus, the mentor not only scaffolded the teacher's learning but also provided, in the words of Auger and Wideman (2000), a high degree of "collegial support for professional growth by setting up a venue for shared investigation of concerns and a heightened sense of collegial communication."

Borrowing from Auger and Wideman, another way to characterize the mentor's dual role is that of an active listener and critical colleague. As an active listener, the mentor helped teachers clarify their understanding of their teaching contexts in the early stages of AR by posing questions and carefully listening to teachers' responses (see Appendix). As a critical colleague, she challenged participants to examine their assumptions about teaching and their findings from AR at a deeper level. A teacher focusing on instructional planning in her AR captured the importance of these interactions in her appraisal of the mentoring process: "The mentor pulled from me ideas that I had in my head. She posed questions that I ask myself now when I put a unit together."

The concept of "evidence-based mentoring," introduced by Yusko and Feiman-Nemser (2008), provides another framework for understanding the contribution of mentoring to the self-awareness and improved practice of teachers. The researchers report on the practices of mentors with novice teachers in two established mentoring programs in urban areas.<sup>3</sup> In "evidence-based mentoring," mentors take artifacts from observations of teaching into account during professional conversations with teachers. These artifacts include, for example, observed behaviors during teaching, environmental print in classrooms, and samples of student work. The authors argue that this

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<sup>3</sup> The Peer Assistance and Evaluation Program in Cincinnati, Ohio (USA) and the New Teacher Project in Santa Cruz, California (USA).

approach to mentoring, which aptly described the work of our mentor, “moved mentoring conversations beyond self report and personal opinion to a new level of analysis and objectivity” (p. 946).

By guiding teachers to think critically about their practice and ways of challenging and improving it through the mentoring process, we have seen many positive results from AR. In the following section, we highlight three examples of AR research projects, each on a different theme, by teachers from different backgrounds: an experienced first-grade teacher, a first-year ESL teacher at an elementary school, and an experienced ESL teacher/ESL coordinator.

### **Action Research Projects: Three Teachers’ Voices**

#### *Developing Leadership and Advocacy Skills*

Joyce West, a bilingual teacher in a rural community, noticed that her first-grade ELLs had been performing poorly on reading progress tests. After some initial investigating, she found that only one reading teacher provided services to all the bilingual students, while the English proficient students had many options, including several parent and community involvement programs. Similar home-school connections between the parents of bilingual students and the school were lacking. According to Wynne (2001), “scholars suggest that one of the largest failures in the quest to raise the academic achievement of children of color in urban and rural schools has been the schools’ inability to listen to the voices of parents and students in these communities” (p. 4). Although the silencing of parents and students has historically taken place in schools with large numbers of African-American students (Delpit, 1995; Lipman, 1999), the lack of voice applies equally to more recent immigrant parents and their children.

#### *Joyce West, Participating Teacher 2005-06*

I taught bilingual first grade in a rural community in Southeast Wisconsin where our population of students was nearly twenty percent Hispanic. I was faced with many parent challenges while working in this district. The main concern teachers consistently discussed was that our bilingual parents were not involved with their children’s literacy development. This led me to question how and why parents were not involved and to develop more means of parent communication and literacy opportunities for our bilingual parents.

With the support of the mentor, West researched resources on parental involvement and provided opportunities for ELL parents to share their ideas on how to increase their children’s reading achievement and improve their attitudes towards reading. As West learned more about this topic, she started to advocate for the parents of her ELLs in concrete ways, first by listening to the voices of parents and students and second by

consulting other teachers in her school. Additional outcomes of her AR included a literacy night for parents, a parent handbook on early literacy, and increased literacy levels in her students.

Joyce West continues:

In my project, I included my students' parents in my action research. Rather than making assumptions about what resources parents might need or want, I went straight to the parents and asked them what they would like. I did this because the research I found indicated that a common barrier to getting bilingual parents involved is when teachers make assumptions about the needs of the parents. After reviewing the survey, I sought out culturally appropriate materials that the parents were familiar with and I provided the parents with the types of involvement opportunities that they asked for. As a result, parental involvement improved, literacy scores went up, and the voices of parents were heard in the school district. Other teachers in my district were also so impressed with the results of this project that they, too, began to improve their parental involvement practices and strove to have their parents' voices heard.

West's advocacy on behalf of Latino parents, whose involvement in schools is often viewed as limited (Olivos, 2009; Tinkler, 2002; Turney & Gao, 2009), places her AR project in the domain of critical AR. West's efforts to encourage the school involvement of bilingual parents in the community and the later participation of other teachers in the district in that effort resulted in positive social change, one mark of critical AR.

#### *Developing Literacy in Young Bilingual Readers*

In her first year of elementary school teaching, Kari Johnson worked with native Spanish-speaking students who were beginning English learners. Her young charges were struggling to learn how to read. Although she was a novice teacher at the time, she was asked by her building administrator to create an effective literacy program for her students that would be in step with the district's balanced literacy program. The search for effective literacy programs became the focus of her AR. She reviewed literature on approaches to teaching literacy and noted whether or not they were successful with ELLs. In monthly meetings, Johnson and the mentor contemplated strategies to create meaningful balanced literacy lesson plans for her students. In the same manner, they discussed promising approaches to include in an appropriate action plan. While implementing her newly developed literacy program with her students, Johnson collected data that when later analyzed, would demonstrate student growth in the area of reading. She outlines her experience below.

#### *Kari Johnson, Participating Teacher 2006-2008*

As a first year teacher, I was given the task of re-creating the elementary ELL program for my school district. In the past, my district experienced problems with finding the best practice for educating ELLs in the areas of reading and writing while simultaneously teaching English. I chose to address this problem in my action research through my focus on improving reading instruction for beginning ELLs. I needed to review literature on similar studies to help get my action research started. In the process, I found valuable resources that have helped me discover fresh ideas to use in my classroom. The literature helped me to stay up-to-date on current trends and methods in education. Without going through the action

research process, I would not have bothered to read literature related to my topic of improved instruction. I was able to discover what methods were successful or not successful to other educators looking to improve reading instruction with their ELL students. I saved myself lots of time by doing the research and only implementing the methods that were successful, rather than trying out a technique that had failed for others.

I also needed to collect data to show that changing my classroom instruction from phonics-only instruction to balanced literacy was the right move to make. Action research provided the structure I needed to gather systematic data from a variety of sources. To track the progress of my students' reading abilities, I used emergent reader checklists, student surveys, a guided reading notebook, anecdotal records, running records, and informal observations. The multiple sources of data collection could be used to show the effects of my improved instruction. At the end of the school year I had proof to show that our district was making forward progress and taking the right steps to improve instruction with ELL students.

Because Johnson's AR project was rooted in her work as a classroom teacher, it is most closely associated with a classroom model of AR. Additionally, her emphasis on improving classroom practice, by monitoring her students' learning and modifying her teaching, supports a classroom model.

#### *Promoting School-Wide Collaboration*

As schools throughout Wisconsin and other states serve increasing numbers of culturally and linguistically diverse families, the need for collaboration among qualified ESL and bilingual teachers and mainstream teachers has become more pronounced. Because research shows that many ELLs spend most of their school days in mainstream classrooms, it is essential that all teachers and administrators who work in linguistically diverse schools are knowledgeable about promising instructional models for ensuring the academic success of ELLs (de Jong & Harper, 2005; Menken & Holmes, 2000; Rance-Roney, 2009). In our program, action research has served to both reinforce the need for collaboration and pave the way for community building and improved instructional practice by participating teachers. Several of the teachers' AR projects have supported research findings that indicate that collaboration is essential for the improvement of school climate and instruction for ELLs. We report on one by Amy Calkins, who served as the ESL program coordinator in a small rural school district.

As the only ESL teacher in her district,<sup>4</sup> Calkins worked with ELLs scattered in schools across the district. Her AR project was a self-study of her effectiveness in providing appropriate professional development and support to fellow teachers as they worked to improve their instruction of ELLs. She surveyed the literature on the improvement of school-wide instruction for ELLs, which focused on educating all teachers on ESL/Bilingual instructional strategies and techniques. The project mentor met with Calkins on a monthly basis to give suggestions,

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<sup>4</sup> Since the grant project ended, another ESL teacher has been hired in Calkins' school district.

offer feedback, and provide resources on her AR topic. In addition, the mentor presented a workshop to the staff on research-based educational practices for ELLs. Due partly to the ripple effect of this workshop, Calkins broadened the focus of her research to include a team of district educators working to improve the educational climate and instruction of ELLs.

*Amy Calkins, Participating Teacher 2005-07*

I work as a teacher for ELLs in grades K-12 in our district. As such, my job entails a great deal of consultation and coordination with teachers as well as my regular teaching duties. I chose to focus on how my efforts in the district were perceived by teachers. That is, I knew what I thought they needed to hear and do, but I wanted to find out how closely my perceptions meshed with theirs. I also wanted to collect evidence on whether my advice on differentiation and lesson/curriculum modification was being used in the classroom. Via surveys and interviews I gained an appreciation for the difference I was making in our small, rural district. In March 2006, I put together a district-wide team to take part in a team building conference to create an action plan on how the district might do a better job in responding to the needs of English Language Learners. The team consisted of seven members. Two were administrators (Director of Pupil Services and an Associate High School Principal). We also had one high school teacher, one middle school teacher, two elementary teachers as well as me, the ELL program coordinator. We focused on two goals: improving the use of differentiation techniques in classrooms throughout the district, and working to create a more welcoming environment in our schools for both ELLs and their families. The team decided that many teachers would be more responsive to the need for differentiation if they could experience the ELL perspective, so we brought in a guest speaker to conduct a mini-lesson in Estonian on Estonian geography.

To establish a baseline in order to determine whether our efforts were successful, we decided to survey the district [teachers] on their use of differentiation strategies before beginning our intervention efforts. A follow-up survey on the use of differentiation strategies, conducted in January 2007, showed that teachers reported greater familiarity with more strategies as well as the incorporation of at least twice as many strategies as in the previous survey. The middle school adopted differentiation as one of their building-wide goals, and teachers have been expected to provide examples of how they incorporate these strategies into their curriculum. The high school has recently decided to follow the middle school example of teachers documenting their use of such strategies.

Through her AR project and collaboration with teachers and administrators in the district, Calkins found that AR helped transform a working group of teachers and administrators into a professional learning community. Similarly, Calhoun (2002) summarizes the potential transformational effects of AR in school communities: “When used as an organization-wide process for school improvement, action research changes the context and provides a way of organizing collective work so that professional expertise is tended and extended, helping to build a strong professional learning community” (p. 23). The use of widespread collaboration between teachers across grade levels and district administrators and the team approach used to complete Calkins’ AR project identifies it as collaborative AR. Although the AR project was also participatory in the sense that Calkins’ practices were a focus of her research, the strong emphasis on collaboration points to a collaborative model of AR.

The three examples of AR described above illustrate different types of AR. It is interesting to note that although these teachers were introduced to AR through similar texts and similar research processes, their approaches

to AR nonetheless diverged. In the next section we hear again from the three teachers as they reflect on what they learned from AR.

### *Action Research and Professional Teams: Tools for Professional Growth*

As part of the graduate Professional Development seminar, participating teachers and administrators reflected on what they learned from doing AR over the course of an academic year. AR is an intensely personal and time-intensive endeavor that plays out in multiple ways and evokes varied reactions among its practitioners. While our participants' reactions to AR also varied widely, three common themes emerged from their reflections: the practical value and relevance of AR, the importance of collaboration with colleagues, and the centrality of reflective practice. First, because AR is situated in local teaching contexts, it holds immense practical value and relevance to team members (and others) who share that context. Second, collaboration on several levels—between team members, between teachers/administrators and the mentor, and between teachers and other school colleagues—contributes to the success of AR and often results in a product that is more than the sum of the parts. This idea is reinforced by Carroll, co-author of *Team Up for 21st Century Teaching & Learning*, “At the heart of every high performing school, we find a team of effective educators who join forces to increase student achievement beyond what even the best of them could accomplish alone” (National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future, 2010). Finally, AR affords teachers the space to thoughtfully reflect on their instructional practices from both a personal and professional perspective. This reflection is built into both the beginning and end of the action research cycle. The following comments from the three teachers exemplify these three themes.

#### *Kari Johnson, Participating Teacher 2006-08*

Action research offers many incentives for teachers to improve their instruction. A great benefit of action research is that it encourages teachers to focus on something practical and relevant. When I began the school year, I was already planning to implement a new reading program with ELL students. Action research helped me to focus my issue while finding evidence that uncovers the positives and negatives of the new reading program. At the end of the school year I was able to take the data collected from my action research and present it to my colleagues and administrators and show them how the changes in the reading program have helped our students' progress.

Without action research I would have been at a loss for where to begin my teaching career. ELL [ESL] is a field in education that is still very new and constantly undergoing changes. Without my district having a set curriculum I was overwhelmed by where to begin. Action research helped me to create my own goals for my classroom that coincided with the overall goals of the school district. Having an experienced mentor observe my classroom and offer feedback and suggestions helped me stay revitalized and in touch with the changes in my area of expertise. My action research has served as a common communication point between the mentor and me as well as between my colleagues and me.

Participating in action research has made my job as an educator easier. My project has given me direction and goals for my students. It helped me validate the importance of improving my instruction to

help my students with reading. Action research has motivated me to continually seek positive change for my students and has helped me improve my instruction dramatically. Action research has made me feel successful as a new teacher.

The relevance and practical value of AR to Johnson is evident in her comments. The fact that her AR project coincided with an identified need at her school, the restructuring of the literacy curriculum for young ELLs, motivated her efforts. Additionally, the structure for doing AR in the graduate course, the collaborative support for making it happen, and Johnson's organizational skills and perseverance contributed to her success. Although not all first-year teachers would willingly embrace the challenges of doing AR, it clearly helped anchor Johnson's practice in her first year of teaching.

*Amy Calkins, Participating Teacher 2005-07*

The single most compelling argument in favor of action research is that it allows the individual to focus on his or her own practice. It affords an opportunity to read and learn about subjects specific to a teacher's needs. Instead of being theoretical, it is intensely practical, and can be extremely rewarding. I worked with a mentor over the year who made visits, suggested alternatives, provided resources and in general, helped to guide me in developing and implementing my research.

Like West, Calkins, an experienced ESL teacher, also mentioned the practical aspect of doing AR and the benefits of collaboration with the mentor throughout the AR process.

*Joyce West, Participating Teacher 2005-2006*

I feel that action research is unique in that it truly allows teachers to become advocates for students and their families. Teachers are constantly bombarded with new programs, techniques, and methods to implement in their classrooms, without any consideration as to whether or not the new "idea" is the best one for their students. Action research allows a teacher to step back and analyze a problem that is occurring in his or her own classroom. It allows the teacher to think about what will help the students who are right there in his or her classroom at that very moment. In this respect, teachers can truly become the voice of meaning in their classroom and school.

In this excerpt West notes how reflection can anticipate informed action, which for her translated into becoming an advocate for immigrant students and their families.

These three teachers had participated earlier in the grant program as individual ESL/bilingual teachers. As the grant program progressed, they and other ESL/bilingual teachers recognized the need to work with their content area teacher colleagues and school administrators to maximize the positive effects of planned interventions on ELLs. They suggested a team approach to AR, with an ESL/bilingual teacher, content area teachers, and school administrators working together on common goals. In the final year of the grant, five former ESL/bilingual teacher participants, including Johnson and Calkins, became team leaders of their district teams. Serving as a team leader in

the AR process engendered opportunities for leadership, both on the district teams and in the participants' home schools and school districts.

These opportunities for leadership, however, did not come without challenges. With teams of content area teachers and administrators, finding time for common planning was often difficult, and adjustments in deadlines for completing the different steps of AR occasionally had to be made. The organizational structure of schools sometimes complicated the ability of team leaders who were less experienced teachers to urge or cajole their team members into action. Team members who were administrators were sometimes called away to address other pressing needs, and team leaders at times struggled to juggle their responsibilities as teachers while supporting the needs of the team as team leaders. For example, one team experienced difficulty when a team member who was a building administrator needed to take time away from her AR project in order to address a personnel issue in her school. The team leader, a teacher at the school, could do little more than encourage her to return after the problem was resolved. The flexibility and support of the project director was instrumental in allowing the administrator to complete her AR at a later date.

Similar challenges were experienced by the research groups participating in collaborative action research partnerships elsewhere (Goldstein, 2000; Johnsen & Normann, 2004; McLaughlin, 2007; Platteel et al. 2010). In another example, teams of secondary teachers, college instructors who facilitated the teams, and a university educational researcher in the Netherlands collaborated together to improve secondary Dutch L1 education (Platteel et al. 2010). Similar to our teams of teachers, the researchers also encountered difficulties with time commitments and the fluidity and overlapping nature of roles and responsibilities among the participants. They recommend "long-term sustained partnerships" to help overcome these challenges (p. 447). As participants in the grant program for at least two years, our team leaders were fortunate to have time to develop their expertise in AR and to strengthen collaborative relationships with other program participants as well as those in their home schools. Through online communication, informal exchanges, phone conversations, and planned meetings, team leaders also provided valuable feedback and suggestions to the project director, mentor, and mentor consultant about ways to improve implementation of the program.

The expertise of our team leaders as seasoned AR practitioners, coupled with their commitment to the goals of the team and to improving the academic achievement of ELLs, contributed to their success in helping team members' complete their AR projects and communicate their findings with others.



Summarizing studies on teacher leadership, Wynne (2001) reported that “effective teacher leadership involves a move away from top-down, hierarchical modes of functioning and a move toward shared decision-making, teamwork, and community building” (p. 2). Reviewing teacher leadership programs across the country, Wynne found that teacher leaders

demonstrate expertise in their instruction and share that knowledge with other professionals, ...frequently reflect on their work to stay on the cutting edge of what's best for children, engage in continuous action research projects that examine their effectiveness; collaborate with their peers, parents, and communities...and become socially conscious and politically involved (p. 2).

Evidence of these leadership characteristics could be found in our participating teachers as well. As part of dissemination efforts built into the grant, all teams presented the results of their action research projects to at least two different audiences: the graduate seminar group and colleagues at a school or district meeting. One team, for instance, presented the results of their action research projects to their school board. In addition, the project director, the mentor, and several teachers presented their AR findings at both state and national conferences.<sup>5</sup> Together these activities embodied the multiple ways in which teachers can share what they learn from AR, both with peers and a wider professional audience.

## **Conclusion**

In an age of increasing pressures for the accountability of schools and teachers, policy makers too seldom listen to the expert voices of teachers as they fashion and implement educational policy. What is needed is a systematic framework for supporting and disseminating teachers' knowledge of best practices. To move from “highly qualified” to “highly effective” teachers, it is necessary to formalize a process by which committed teachers bring their knowledge to educational decision-making (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). AR can contribute to that process, and its benefits are both tangible and intangible. Speaking from the perspective of participating teachers, Burns (2010) notes, “Doing AR can invigorate our teaching, lead to positive change, raise our awareness of the complexities of our work, and show us what drives our personal approaches to teaching” (p. 7).

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<sup>5</sup> For instance in 2007-08, Project Director Anne Durst and three teachers presented at the annual Wisconsin TESOL Conference (September 2007), and Durst and four teachers presented at the New Teacher Center's annual Symposium on Teacher Induction in San Jose, California (February 2008).

In the grant program outlined here, we have provided opportunities for ESL and bilingual teachers to refine their expertise—their insider knowledge as teachers—through involvement in action research projects that they designed to improve their practice. Participating teachers, in turn, have shared their insider knowledge to restructure the grant programs and strengthen opportunities for collaboration, which, ultimately, have contributed to positive outcomes in their school districts. Outside experts are not the only sources of knowledge, nor should their voices be the only ones that educators listen to. The teachers in our program have disseminated the results of their research at program seminars, national conferences, and school and district workshops. By conducting action research and disseminating the results, teachers can systematically bring their experience and expertise to bear on matters of local and national importance in education.

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## Appendix

### Initial Questions for Action Research<sup>6</sup>

Research questions usually emerge from your everyday teaching life. Reflect on the following questions to start getting some ideas for a research focus ...

#### 1. Briefly explain your classroom situation and teaching responsibilities:

**There are a number of potential action research studies that could be conducted on your practice, and several broad topics are presented here:**

Student achievement  
Collaboration  
Motivation  
Technology  
Behavior/discipline

Inclusion  
Needs of at-risk students  
Extracurricular participation  
Professional development  
School climate  
Parental involvement

Think about which of these topics are issues in your work as an educator. Reflect on the two topics (either from this list or on other topics of your own choosing) that you are most interested in or about which you feel the most passionate. Reflect also on the outcomes you desire regarding these two topics and the actions you might take in pursuit of those outcomes.

#### 3. Respond to the following questions. It's not important now to elaborate on or "solve" your problems and desires; simply articulate them to yourself.

- What do you want to do in your classroom that you're not now doing?
- What's preventing you?
- What support would you need to be able to carry out a new strategy, curriculum, or project?

### Figure 1. The Action Research Cycle<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Adapted by Sarah Anderson for the Professional Development Program for Teachers of Linguistically Diverse Students, University of Wisconsin–Whitewater, from E. Chiseri-Strater and B. S. Sunstein, *What works? A practical guide for teacher research*, Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2006, and C. Hendricks, *Improving schools through action research: A comprehensive guide for educators*, Boston: Pearson Education, Inc., 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Adapted from E. Chiseri-Strater & B. S. Sunstein, B. S., *What works? A practical guide for teacher research*, Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2006, and C. Hendricks, C., *Improving schools through action research: A comprehensive guide for educators*, Boston: Pearson Education, Inc., 2006.

Figure 1. The Action Research Cycle<sup>5</sup>

