

## **PART 3**

# **Flexible Instructional Strategies**





**An Action Research Study:**

**CHAPTER 6**

***After School Tutoring Program***

**Jason Reynolds**

**5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher**

**Indian Peaks**



*To be quite honest, I fought tooth and nail against the entire process until I thought about the goal. Action research is not about finding a definitive answer to a research question using hard data and controls; it is about making a difference through action. I was not a researcher first, I was a teacher, and my responsibilities were to my students, not the research community. I was dealing with ten and eleven-year-old human subjects with varied life experiences, feelings, and needs, both educational and emotional. When I put all of that into perspective, I realized that action was the most important aspect of action research, not the data.*

## **Background**

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Indian Peaks Elementary is a bilingual center school for the St. Vrain Valley School District, and is located in the southern end of Longmont, CO. The bilingual instruction at Indian Peaks uses a Spanish/English late-exit transitional model. Indian Peaks receives Spanish-speaking students from several neighboring schools if their families desire bilingual instruction. There are about 400 students that attend Indian Peaks, in 20 classrooms, grades K-5, with both Spanish and English speakers represented. Forty eight percent of the students at Indian Peaks receive free and reduced lunch; 53% of the students are Hispanic. Indian Peaks has a large number of highly mobile students. During the 2002-2003 school year, we recorded 97 new enrollments and 103 disenrollments. Through March of the 2003-2004 school year, we enrolled 62 new students and disenrolled 86 students.

During this study, I was in my third year of teaching at Indian Peaks. My teaching assignment at Indian Peaks included teaching literacy to students that received all of their literacy instruction in Spanish until fourth grade, at which point they slowly began to transition to English. During the 2003-2004 school year, my fifth grade class saw four students leave and we gained four new students. Additionally, eight of my 19 literacy students were absent from school for extended periods, on trips to Mexico.

When I entered the classroom for the first time as a fully certified teacher, I felt well prepared. I had a Bachelor's degree in Biology and a Master's degree in Education. I had spent countless hours as a practicum student in several different

schools in the Denver-Boulder area, and I had a very successful student teaching experience. However, I soon realized that one area in which I was not prepared for was student mobility. As students moved in and out of my classroom during my first two years, I was upset and concerned. I became flustered and stressed each time I learned that I was receiving a new student, usually on the morning that he or she arrived. I would run around like mad to secure the necessary equipment: desk, nametag, chair, books, planner, and all of the necessary forms. Then I would pull my hair out trying to plan for a student that would have no idea what we were currently studying. Even worse, as students moved away, I would worry about their educational futures, especially those students from families that were highly mobile, for I had noticed that they seemed to have less background knowledge coming in. I could only assume that this lack of knowledge was due to an unstable educational experience. I wondered if they would enroll immediately in a new school when they moved. I wondered whether they would continue their progress or if they would end up relearning what we had just studied. I hoped that they would feel safe and comfortable wherever they ended up.

At the end of my second year of teaching, the opportunity arose to participate in the Colorado Participatory Action Research (COPAR) project on homeless and highly mobile students. I thought about the students that had moved in and out of my classroom during my first two years of teaching, and I jumped at the chance to do something to help other kids like them and to learn more about their situations. The first meeting of COPAR really opened my eyes and my mind. I gained an incredible amount of information about the homeless population in Colorado and the Federal McKinney-Vento homeless Act (2002) that guarantees certain services to students that qualify as homeless. I also met other educators from around the state with similar concerns about how mobility affects students. At that meeting, another teacher and I discussed certain concerns about the stresses brought on by new students arriving in our classes mid year. I realized that even though I did not yet know what my research would entail, I could do certain things to prepare for new students in advance in order to lessen that stress. Thus, without a true research question in mind, I began my first cycle of action.

## **The First Cycle: Preparing for Mid Year Enrollments**

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Through my conversations with the aforementioned teacher, I came up with the idea of creating a welcome strategy for new students. This strategy involved three parts: having extra desks with nametags ready, creating a new student folder that contained all of the materials that a new student would need on his/her first day, and developing a buddy system for introducing new students to the school and the classroom. To begin, I collected three more desks than students I had in my class. Doing so was not a problem because our enrollment was down and there were several extra desks for the taking. Next, I began to assemble my new student folders. These folders included all of the materials that I was going to give my students during the first few days of school, including a letter of introduction from me, a school handbook, a class list and word search of classmates' names, pre-assessments in math and reading and all of the forms required by the office (Milenkiewicz, 2002). I also included several other necessities that were specific to my classroom. Finally, I began to develop a buddy program for welcoming new students into my classroom and the school. Several articles (Berliner and McCormick, 2001; Milenkiewicz, 2002) that I received in the first COPAR meeting stated that a buddy program was a great way to ensure that new students would have a friend and mentor immediately upon arriving and would feel more comfortable and welcomed into their new school.

### **Reflection**

Each of these three steps was surprisingly easy to accomplish and took very little time. Because I assembled the new student folders at the beginning of the year, all of the materials were at hand. All I had to do was find the actual folders and make sure that each one received all of the materials that I had collected. Once I had collected the extra desks and assembled the folders, I immediately felt better. I had always felt stress upon learning that I was receiving a new student. Now I was prepared.

I received four new students during the year, and I smiled every time, thankful that I had taken the time early in the year to prepare for them. I never had to run around the school looking for desks as I had in years past, for I had replaced them as I had given them to new students. All I had to do was to write the student's name on a nametag and add the desk to a desk group. I also had materials to give them upon their arrival and activities for them to work on while I decided how to get them up to speed on our current unit of study. The students seemed to like receiving a folder of things that were theirs to keep and having a desk waiting with their name on it.

The buddy program didn't take any time at all to develop. All it really took was a decision to provide new students with a buddy that would be a good friend and mentor. I decided that I would provide same-sex buddies in order to make new students feel more comfortable and I would only choose kids to be buddies that were good, responsible students. I also decided that I did not need to train specific students to be buddies. Instead, I explained the role of a buddy mentor to the whole class and I asked if any of them would rather not perform this job. I made a mental note of the few that raised their hands.

I found that not having pre-selected buddy mentors allowed me to be more thoughtful about each individual case. I could then choose a buddy that I thought would get along with my new student and I even was able to choose students to be buddies that I thought would benefit from meeting a new friend. In fact, I chose a different buddy for each of the four students I received.

The buddy's job was to take the new student on a tour of the classroom to show him/her where materials were kept and explain which areas and cabinets were or weren't accessible to students. Then, the buddy would take the new student on a tour of the school, pointing out all of the important areas: bathrooms, gym, library, art and music rooms, cafeteria, office, etc. The buddy was also in charge of answering any questions that the new student had and taking the new student to lunch that day. I found that both the new students and the buddies enjoyed the experience and it saved me quite a bit of time and effort.

## The Second Cycle: Brainstorming a Research Question

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I felt great about my work preparing my class and myself for new students, but I still had not developed a research question to study. My concerns about the education of my highly mobile students and their continued educational growth remained, but I had come to realize that, as a teacher, I did not have the ability to track my mobile students from state to state and school to school. I decided that the biggest impact that I could have on these students was to connect with them, teach them as much as I could during the time that they were with me, and really try to get them to love school. As James Comer (cited in Payne, 1998) says, “No significant learning occurs without a significant relationship.” If I could create a strong relationship with my highly mobile students, I figured they would have a better chance of succeeding academically and they would have more of a desire to continue their education when they left my class.

My quandary came when I realized that this goal was the same goal that I had for all of my students: I wanted to connect with every one of them, give them the knowledge and skills to succeed in school and in life, and convince them that school and learning were fun. How could I justify spending more time and effort on a small group of students just because I knew that they moved around a lot and missed a lot of school? I decided that I could not, not if in doing so I was neglecting the needs of other students. I began to think of other ways in which I could give my highly mobile students the extra attention that I thought they needed without doing so at the expense of my other students. I discussed my challenge with my principal and we came up with the idea of starting an after-school tutoring group with my mobile students. I was very excited. I could give up an hour or two a week after school to help my mobile students to make a more personal connection to school and help them to catch up on some of the skills that they had missed due to their various moves.

## **My Concern**

When I learned that one of my new students was highly mobile, I immediately thought about my tutoring group idea and I was excited to work with him. However, when I was informed of his recent experiences, I went from feeling saddened and concerned to appalled. My principal and the school counselor explained that Jose (not his real name) had been in and out of school, and had moved four times in the past two years between the United States and Mexico. He had very low language ability in Spanish, and spoke no English. This issue was confounded by the fact that he was hearing impaired and had little to no recognition of high frequency sounds, mainly 's' and 'z' sounds. During his prior stints in the US, the Title 1 reading program, speech and hearing specialists, and Special Education teachers had served him. However, this time was different. During the previous summer in Mexico, Jose had witnessed his father commit suicide. He had been the only one home when his father took his own life with a bullet to the head. Juan heard the shot and discovered his father's body. I learned that he was angry and withdrawn and would be a challenge academically and emotionally.

## **My Question**

I really felt that Jose would benefit from some extra help after school, but the question that I kept struggling with was this: When a student has so many challenges in addition to academic ones, how should after-school tutoring proceed? Should I focus on his academic problems solely, and if so, in which areas? Juan was very low in math, reading, writing, and English. On the other hand, should my focus be on his emotional well-being and his feelings about school? I decided that the best course of action to begin with was to focus on making our time after school fun (Berliner and McCormick, 2001). I felt that if studying after school was not an enjoyable experience for Jose, he would not want to come, and any other goal that I had would be moot. I also hoped that if Jose really enjoyed our tutoring sessions, I would be able to establish a stronger bond with him, which would in turn improve his perception of school and facilitate his academic progress. As Dr. Ruby Payne (1998)

states, "...the most important part of learning seems to be related to relationship." Thus, my goal was set, make the after-school tutoring sessions fun and put more effort into building relationships than on academics.

### **The Third Cycle: Identifying Other Students to Participate in my Study Group**

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#### **Planning and Action**

I decided that my first step was to identify other students, in addition to Jose, that would benefit from an after-school group. I would have loved to work with Juan one on one, but I thought that it would be more fun for him if he had some friends to join him after school. I also figured that my work would be more worthwhile if I was able to help more students that had missed schooling due to their various moves. I began to seek out more students to work with, but I decided to limit the group to just three or four students, for research has shown that students achieve at the highest rates in groups of 3-4 (Marzano et. al., 2001, p. 88). I also decided that as Jose was my primary focus, I would look for students that fit my guidelines of being highly mobile, but only select those that had similar needs as him and got along with and worked well with him.

I developed a simple survey that asked students about their school history, including how many schools they had attended in the past two years. I gave the survey to all of the Spanish-speaking students in fifth grade. I only included the Spanish-speaking students because I knew that one of Jose's biggest needs was to learn English. I went through the surveys and selected students that I thought qualified for my group and then went about personally interviewing them. Once I concluded my personal interviews, I had identified two other students, Lena and Tomas (not their real names), which fit my guidelines. I talked to the two of them and Jose about starting an after-school study group. I assured them that the group would be fun and told them that we could study anything that they wanted. They all agreed to participate, so I set out to contact their parents to get permission for them to stay with me after school. I created a permission slip for them to participate, as

well as one giving me permission to drive them home after we met, if necessary. When I received all of their permission slips, we set a day to begin our sessions.

## **Reflection**

When I thought about this cycle of my research, I thought it would be relatively short, and we would be able to get started with our meetings promptly. However, it took a lot longer than I had expected. I had to create the surveys and the permission slips in Spanish, which is difficult for me as a second-language learner, and I had to get all of them proofread and edited by our school's district-approved translator. Another obstacle was that Lena left on an extended trip to Mexico so we waited for her to return before beginning. Because I was working with highly mobile children, I had anticipated difficulties such as students leaving in the middle of my study. Therefore, a child leaving for Mexico for a couple of extra weeks at Christmas time was not unusual. I was happy that she would be returning.

The delay that I had not anticipated was my own sluggishness at getting started. I was not looking forward to beginning the sessions as much as I thought I would. In fact, I was beginning to feel overwhelmed with all of my teaching related duties and my research project became a source of stress instead of an exciting opportunity to help kids. I began to procrastinate getting started, giving the students and myself various excuses as to why we should wait "one more week". Finally, the students got me back in gear. The idea of the group excited them and they began asking me about it constantly, so I could not put it off any longer.

## **The Fourth Cycle: Beginning our After-School Meetings**

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### **Planning and Action: Data Collection**

Even though my primary goal was for the students to enjoy themselves and for us to build a strong relationship, I wanted to measure my effectiveness with them academically as well. To measure their academic growth, I decided to give them pre

and post assessments in English language ability and mathematics computation skills.

We spent our first session doing an oral language assessment from the Carousel of IDEAS English language acquisition curriculum. I had used this curriculum in the past and really liked it because the students enjoyed the lessons and learned a lot. In addition, the assessments are extremely unthreatening and very game-like. In fact, I introduced the assessment to the students as a game and they were excited to play. The assessment involves the students taking turns rolling a colored die and the teacher asking them the questions or giving them the commands that correspond to the color that the student rolled. The students then receive a score and are placed into levels based on their ability to respond to the commands and answer the questions in English.

During our second session, I had the students take a mathematics assessment in which I assessed their abilities to add, subtract, multiply and divide.

### **Reflection**

The students enjoyed the English language assessment very much. In fact, they often asked me during our meetings if they could play “that game with the dice” again. I assured them that we would play again after they had learned some more English. The math assessment was not as popular. I did not hear any complaints, but I did not have any requests for a repeat either.

### **Group Meetings**

In keeping with my promise to the students, each week I asked them what they would like to study. Though they had initially expressed interest in practicing their math skills, each week they said that they wanted to learn English. We had fun playing vocabulary-building games, making picture dictionaries, and just chatting. I tried to use as little Spanish as possible to push them toward English.

After several sessions, I told them that I wanted to work on our math skills. We practiced multiplication and division strategies, as they were the areas that I had

noticed were the weakest on their pretests. After that session, we studied English again for three more sessions before I again opted to spend time on our math strategies. It was horrible. The students were off task and unproductive. “Mr. Reynolds,” they said, “We want to study English.”

## **Reflection**

After the second session we spent learning math strategies, I was upset that we had such a poor meeting. I went back to my reflective journal, read my notes, and smiled to myself. I had set out to create an environment in which my students could have fun at school and enjoy learning, and I had promised them that they could choose to study anything that they wanted. Then, I proceeded to impose my will on them and force them to work on their math computation skills. In retrospect, I realized that I did so only because I had given them a math pretest and I wanted to have some hard data to measure my success with them. Looking back at my original goal, I saw that nowhere had I written that I wanted them to increase their math skill level. I was upset at myself for losing sight of my original goal and changing the focus of our meetings to meet what I thought were the needs of my research.

Nevertheless, as I looked at my original goal, I also smiled because I realized that I had met both of the goals I had set. I had wanted to build relationships with the students and I wanted them to enjoy staying after school and learning. I had indeed built relationships with the three of them. I had learned about their families and their likes and dislikes, and they told me things that I never would have learned had we not built the bond that we did during our after school meetings. I now know that Lena lives with another family and as such classifies as homeless. I learned that she lives in a verbally abusive home and that her dad drinks. She even told me about how her mother had suffered a stroke and was unable to care for her younger brother, so he was living in Mexico with their aunt. I learned that the reason Tomas had been moving so much was because his family was looking for better housing, and they had recently purchased their first house. I found out that he and Lena often helped each other out on their homework. I already knew quite a bit about Jose due to the information I had received from the school counselor. He shared some information

with me about his family, like how he lived with his sister and brother-in-law; however, we never discussed his father.

I know that these students, especially Lena, who was quiet and reserved, would not have opened up to me in this way had they not felt so comfortable with me. Our after school meetings had served one purpose: I had built a stronger relationship with my students.

Additionally, I had achieved my second goal; the kids were enjoying staying after school. I had assumed that they would not want to spend any extra time at school and would dread coming to our group. I found just the opposite to be true. They loved playing vocabulary-building games like “Simon Says” and “I Spy”, and on several occasions, they asked if we could stay longer. Several days a week, they would ask me if we were meeting that day. Somehow, they never got the meeting day straight, or maybe they just needed to know that I still wanted to meet with them.

After reflecting on my time with these three students, I felt more at ease. I realized that I really wanted some quantifiable data for my project and the only way I saw to get that data was to show academic growth, despite the fact that my original goal was not solely academics.

### **Evaluation: Students**

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#### **Academic Results**

The results of the *Carousel of IDEAS* English Language assessment showed that all of the students made growth. Out of ten points possible, the students scored as follows:

<b>Student</b>	<b>Pretest Score</b>	<b>Post-Test Score</b>	<b>Growth</b>
Jose	2.5	6	3.5 points
Tomas	8	9.5	1.5 points
Lena	9.5	10	.5 points

Because of my realization that math was not a priority to the students or my research, I never gave them a post assessment. Therefore, I have no results for mathematical growth.

## **Reflection**

Because Jose had the lowest language ability at the start of our group meetings, it is logical that he showed the most growth. In fact, the level at which I instructed the students was actually one level lower than was prescribed for Tomas and Lena. I decided to teach them at that level because I wanted all of them to learn together and help each other out, and once again, I focused on Jose's needs as a primary concern. I was worried that the level would be too low for Tomas and Lena, and they might get bored. I was especially worried about keeping Lena's interest since she was far more advanced than the boys were. I was pleasantly surprised to see shy, reserved Isabel relish the opportunity to be the "expert". She really came out of her shell in our group, and she picked up quite a bit of vocabulary that she had been missing.

## **Emotional Results**

When I began my research project, my focus was on Jose. Of course, I was concerned with his lack of formal education, but my main area of concern was his emotional well-being. I feared that this was a very pivotal year in Jose's life and if he did not make a positive connection with school, he might forever see education in a negative light. Though I certainly cannot take sole credit for his emotional growth, I am happy to report that Jose completely changed his attitude and outlook on school and life this year. Throughout the year, Jose worked with the school counselor, several other teachers, the school principal, and he grew to love school. When the year started, he was timid, angry and closed off. He rarely attempted to communicate with me or other students. Toward the end of the school year, Jose was smiling and laughing with his classmates. When he began the year, he lacked confidence and was uninterested in learning. However, as the year progressed, he

became engaged and his confidence boomed. During our group, I often laughed at how aggressively he shouted out the English vocabulary words we were working on and then raised both hands like a champion when he got them right.

Countless people came together this year to nurture Jose and give him the skills and knowledge he needs to succeed. He still has a long way to go academically, but I am confident that he will work hard in school and that he views school as a positive place. His confidence has grown immensely and he believes that he can succeed in whatever he wants to do if he works hard. Perhaps the most important piece of data that I collected throughout this project was when I asked Jose what he wanted to be when he grows up. “A teacher”, he said, “and then in about forty years... the President.”

When I started this project, I wanted to impact more than just one student, so I included Lena and Tomas. I really did not have too many expectations for them, as my focus was on Jose. Tomas enjoyed our sessions and never missed one, but I think he would have rather been at home playing a lot of the time. I think that besides the games we played, his favorite aspect of our group was that he got to ride in my car and wave to his friends on the way home.

Lena, on the other hand, thoroughly enjoyed coming to our group. She was the student that was most often asking if we could stay longer, even just fifteen minutes. The funny part was that she needed the content the least. She was the strongest English speaker and knew most of the vocabulary that we studied before I introduced it. For her, I believe that our group fulfilled something that she was not getting during the regular school day. She received focused attention and she was able to shine. In whole class situations, Lena was bashful and reluctant to take risks. However, in our group, she was the star and I saw her blossom. Often when we finished our sessions, we would spend ten minutes out on the playground. As the boys raced over to the tetherball courts, Lena and I would shoot baskets and talk about life. She confided in me about her family and her fears about going to middle school. We celebrated when her mom recovered from her stroke and her baby brother came home. Because we made such a connection, I also felt more comfortable challenging her in class. I had been afraid of really pushing her hard

because of how shy she was. I was scared that I might make her feel unsuccessful or turn her off to school. After we got to know each other on a more personal level and developed a strong trust, I knew that she would respond well if I expected more out of her. When I did so, it seemed as if she really started to grow.

### **Evaluation: Myself**

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When I began my action research, my goal was to help my highly mobile students find enjoyment in school and feel more comfortable in the school culture. I really had no goals for my own growth as an educator, yet the lessons that I learned because of doing my research were profound.

When I started to learn about action research, I felt put off by the “softness” of the research and the data to be collected. My personal background is in the sciences and I have always thought of research in a traditional scientific sense, with the researcher as an observer, collecting “hard” data that is easily measurable. In my mind, the researcher should not be directly involved in the experiment, so as not to affect the outcome. Action research was extremely difficult for me to wrap my head around. Throughout the project, my frustration continued because I did not have more numerical data. I did not understand how journal entries and personal reflections counted as data sources. They seemed far too ambiguous and unreliable. I also could not comprehend the idea of the researcher changing and adjusting the project as the research proceeded: surely, the data would not be reliable if the parameters changed throughout the course of the research. To be quite honest, I fought tooth and nail against the entire process until I thought about the goal. Action research is not about finding a definitive answer to a research question using hard data and controls; it is about making a difference through action. I was not a researcher first, I was a teacher, and my responsibilities were to my students, not the research community. I was dealing with ten and eleven-year-old human subjects with varied life experiences, feelings, and needs, both educational and emotional. When I put all of that into perspective, I realized that action was the most important aspect of action research, not the data.

It took a while for me to get to the action, because I could not figure out what exactly I was measuring. I decided to collect academic data so that I could “justify” my research project and I hated the fact that I was not going to have any hard data except for the pre and posttests. My resistance to the action research process was so great that I procrastinated terribly. Thankfully, the students got me to move into the action phase of action research. Had I continued to fret over the validity of my data and the success of my research, I would have never gotten to the most important thing: spending time with the kids. Once I did, I realized that no matter what my data said, I was making a difference in the lives of three children that needed me. I was spending time with these three students and showing them that I cared about them and their education. I was giving them extra: a tiny bit better of a chance to succeed in school. More importantly, I was giving them the attention and love that all children need to succeed in life, and after interviewing them during our last meeting, I know that they appreciated it. They each told me that they enjoyed coming to our groups and that they learned some English. Jose and Tomas also told me that they were better friends than they had been at the start of our group.

Another thing I learned through the course of my project was that no matter how busy teachers get, we could do that little bit extra to make a difference in our students’ lives. There were times that I was absolutely exhausted by the end of the day and the last thing I wanted to do was stay after school for an extra hour to meet with my group. I found that once we got started and I saw their enthusiasm and appreciation, I reenergized. With all of the expectations put on teachers from parents, the school district, and the state and federal governments, it is easy to forget why most of us became teachers in the first place. We did not do it for fame, money or status. We did it because we wanted to make a difference in the lives of children. I found that starting an after-school tutoring group gave me that feeling of making a difference that my daily work lacked. With my small group, I was able to build relationships that are impossible to build with every child in a classroom of 25-30 students. I was able to build these relationships with students that are easy to overlook in a whole class setting: quiet, second-language learners that move around a lot.

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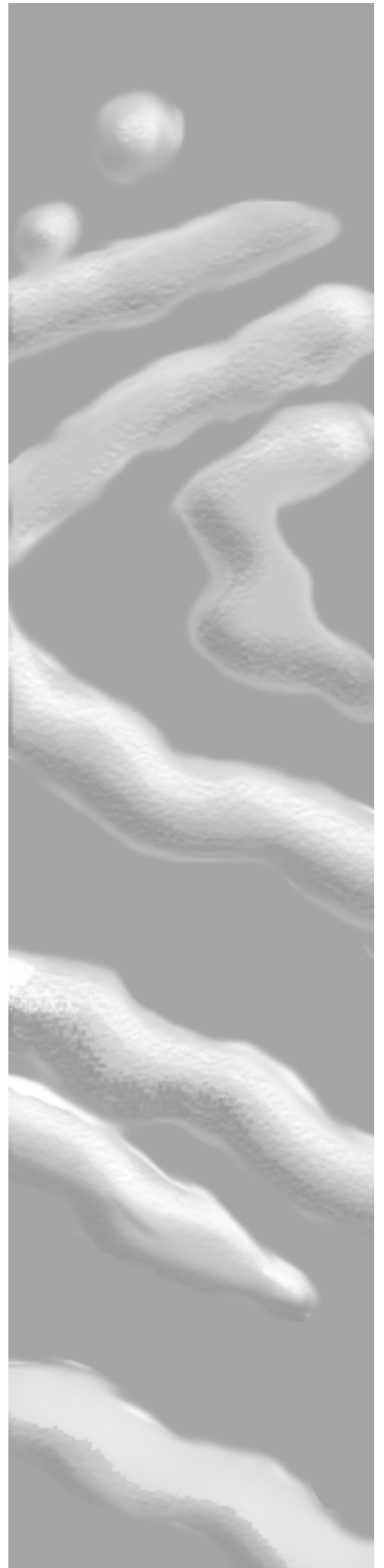


**An Action Research Study:**

**CHAPTER 7**

*How can I improve reading achievement  
among my highly mobile and homeless  
fifth grade student population?*

**Tobey Cho Bassoff**  
**Fifth Grade Teacher**  
**Columbine Elementary School**



*I am better equipped to handle the academic achievement of a student population impacted by homelessness and high mobility. More over, I have sought out collegial collaboration on positively and effectively addressing those needs and issues through the process of action research. Finally, I gained personal knowledge that I have made, and will continue to make, a difference in the lives of the children.*

## **Background**

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I teach at Columbine Elementary School in Longmont, Colorado, which is located 37 miles northwest of Denver, Colorado near the foot of the Rocky Mountains. The population is approximately 76,000, including a large number of migrant workers and families. The major local employer is the Con Agra turkey plant.

Columbine Elementary School's ethnic breakdown is 54% Hispanic, 41% Caucasian, 3% African American, and 2% Asian. Free or reduced lunch applies to 89% of our students, and a large number are highly mobile and/or homeless.

In 1999, our school accountability team identified a need for systemic change to increase our historically low student achievement. By 2001, changes included an extra twenty days of instruction, a new school calendar that was more in keeping with family needs, class sizes that were 20:1 or lower, and all-day everyday kindergarten classes.

As a third year teacher at Columbine, I saw a need for greater attention for students from our highly mobile and homeless population. Many of the students in my class would leave for several weeks or months and return numerous times throughout the year, their academic progress often suffering. I recognized a need to better accommodate these mobile students, wondering how to make the students feel welcome when they arrived and how to adjust my teaching to better fit their needs. When the opportunity arose to collaborate with other educational professionals who were also concerned about the same issues, I took it.

## How did I get started?

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Although I had heard the term “action research,” I really did not know what it was and wanted to find out. I “googled” “action research” on the internet and read the journal articles and books suggested by my colleagues in the COPAR group. While there were many interpretations of “action research,” I understood it to mean a process where I would collaborate, conduct a research project, reflect and report on my findings. Once I thought I had a reasonable working definition of “action research,” I began working on a question that would serve as my goal. The goal would allow me to focus, avoid going off on tangents and distractions from competing ideas. While all this sounded good in theory, in practice narrowing my focus was hard. As a teacher, I was used to attending to all the issues that affected my students and thinking narrowly was out of my comfort zone. Therefore, collaboration with my group became essential.

When I presented my goal of helping highly mobile and homeless students become more academically competent to my colleagues, they found it to be too broad. They helped me narrow my focus challenging my assumptions about my students. For example, they asked why I thought the students were not already academically competent; in which areas I thought the students were not competent; if I had any data to support my assumptions; and if I thought they were incompetent just because they moved around a lot. This questioning process was enlightening albeit somewhat uncomfortable for a seasoned fifth grade teacher like me who trusted her instincts. As my scraped ego thought about each question, I began to realize for the first time that I did make some unfounded assumptions about my students. Rather than beat myself up for these mistakes, I focused on answering these tough questions.

## The first cycle

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I went back to my classroom and began to think seriously about what I was seeing. I began to realize that when students came to my class from Mexico, they

had solid computational math skills. However, on math tests given in their native language they performed poorly on any problem that required literacy. Furthermore, students who came from schools outside the state also excelled on computational exams, but failed on tests requiring literacy skills. Finally, even students within our own district, taught using a literacy-based math program, still struggled on assessments requiring reading comprehension skills. This led me to realize the impact that reading proficiency has on student achievement. I also looked at the reading data from our computerized reading assessment program, and it showed that many students who were new to the school started as below grade level readers. As I pieced together what I was learning, I honed in on the idea that my primary goal for the action research project would be: How can I positively impact the reading achievement of highly mobile and/or homeless students?

When I presented my primary goal to the COPAR group, they responded positively. They helped me create a plan of action in which I would discover the answer to my question. Hence, I set up a procedure for collecting data. I selected three ways to gather data that collectively would provide information for me to analyze. The three methods that I chose were student work samples and authentic notes from students or parents, reflections from my personal journal, and results from the computerized reading program. My CO PAR colleagues continued to challenge the new assumptions that I made about data collection.

For instance, Julie, one of the CO PAR members, asked me about the validity of the computerized testing program. In other words, she wanted to know if the test was measuring what I wanted it to measure. While the question annoyed me at first, I found it surprisingly useful. Of course, I should have considered the limitations of the reading test program. Because of my excitement about the project design, and how I was going to help my students, I was blind to the aspect of limitations. Even though Julie brought up a good point, I was tempted to see it as a reason to “submarine” my project. However, after reflecting on what she offered, I saw it as no more than food for thought. I decided to reframe the test from being the *only* indicator for reading success to being *one* of three indicators of reading success.

Once my data collection process was in place, I went back to school ready to observe and collect data. I organized a loose-leaf binder into three sections. One section became my journal; another section held student work and other authentic samples; and the third section housed the data from the computerized reading test. Then, I observed and took notes.

Within several weeks, I noticed that my attention to my homeless and highly mobile student population increased. I identified which students in my class were homeless and/or highly mobile. Because my school had no formal identification system for notifying teachers, this was difficult. However, my frustration led me to discover that the school district had a liaison for the homeless. Simply stated, this was a person assigned by the district to track and follow our homeless and highly mobile population.

My most startling discovery was that one of my students rode a public bus to school because our school had officially eliminated school bus service. It turned out that he was not eating breakfast in the morning because the bus dropped him off at school just before the bell rang. Due to his conscientious effort to make it to school on time, he elected to miss breakfast. However, he would perform poorly in class as a result. I contacted the liaison for our homeless population and I learned that my student came in from a homeless shelter. This transportation was paid for by a grant from the Colorado Department of Education as part of the McKinney-Vento Act that stipulates that all children are entitled to remain in one school even though their housing situation changes.

### **The second cycle**

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Even though this student's situation had seemingly nothing to do with my goal of assessing reading achievement, I learned about it because I had a heightened awareness about children's circumstances that may be affecting their school performance. Therefore, my research entered a new cycle, and I focused on a new question: Since students cannot learn if their basic needs are unmet, how can I ensure that my students' basic needs are met? This question tied into reading achievement

because if students were hungry or having other basic needs unmet, then how could they focus on anything but that? My new plan of action involved asking my COPAR group what assumptions I was making about “basic needs.” They assisted me once again by asking me what I already knew about basic needs and suggested that I “google” once again. My reading led me to want to find out if the school had any system in place to meet students’ basic needs. Unfortunately, I found out that the answer was “no.” I made a list of what I considered the fundamental needs of students so that they could learn. My list included food, shelter, clothing, and supplies.

It did not take much time for me to see that new students to my class did not always have the clothing, food, or supplies that they needed to start the day. In fact, during the time that the study took place, five highly mobile/homeless students joined my class without the necessary supplies to do their work. Furthermore, their families did not have the money or means to purchase these things. Not surprisingly, not a single child admitted to not being able to buy the necessities, they merely stated that their parents just had not gotten around to it yet. Based on what I was learning, I set up a system so that every child would have supplies ready for them when they got to school. I coordinated my efforts with our Parent Room, which is a group of school volunteers that arranged for donations from area businesses and scoured yard sales for good deals. Together we made sure to stock the classroom with individual backpacks full of the necessary pencils, notebooks, and pens that the children needed to become active learners in school. We also arranged for extra sets of eyes to monitor the most impacted students during breakfast. It was not long before we ensured that all of my students ate breakfast. In addition, we arranged for extra clothing for two of my students whose families had only two pairs of pants and one shirt.

As I reflected in my journal, I had not attuned enough to my students’ basic needs. While this self-assessment seemed harsh, I needed to realize that because I was concentrating so hard on student achievement, I sometimes failed to pay adequate attention to their not-so-obvious impoverishments. At that point, I made the decision that if the students needed something essential, then I would find a way

to provide it. I further deduced that a welcoming environment would all but guarantee that I could find out early on if the child's basic needs were unmet. To create a welcoming environment, I needed to develop a rapport and create a safe place that would allow them to share with me what they needed.

### **My third cycle**

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Once again, in the course of my research, I found unexpected paths. This time I questioned whether the classroom felt welcoming. I reasoned that if students felt welcome then they could feel safe enough to share their personal experiences with me.

As I shared my discoveries with my colleagues, it dawned on me that they enriched my original question. I found much comfort in my colleagues. It was Amy, a woman from Saguache, Colorado, who said that if I did not take time to make a child feel welcome then nothing else I did all year would matter. As I sat around the table and listened to my COPAR teammates, I learned that they had discovered new places in the process of their research as well. Furthermore, our practices were improving based on what we were learning. Perhaps we were not improving in ways we anticipated, but we were improving in the best kind of unexpected ways.

Amy offered me the idea of creating a welcome folder for new students to my class. The folder would include a letter describing our city, school, and class, initial assessments, and a getting-to-know-you activity. In the activity that I chose to include, the new student described his interests and hobbies, which I then featured on a board that included descriptions of the other children in the class. In this way, the new student would feel special and part of the new classroom community. Creating the folder and seeing my classroom through the eyes of a new student was honestly stirring. I had the electrifying feeling that I would make the next student that came to my class feel truly welcome, and I did.

When “Delia” (not her real name), who happened to be homeless, arrived to my class, she received the welcome folder, the backpack full of supplies, a bag full of clothes for her and her family, and a teacher who was more aware of her as a whole child. In no time at all, I received a warm note from Delia’s mother stating how touched she was by the supplies that I had provided for her daughter. As this mother explained, the family had to move in the middle of the night leaving most of their belongings behind. She would not have been able to afford anything for quite some time. They moved around a lot, and they finally felt that this was a welcoming place.

Delia’s reaction to the folder was enthusiastic. She appreciated the letter and said it helped her understand that “specials” was what we called gym, music, and physical education. Delia’s story made me feel that my action research was opening my eyes to the students as more than receptors of knowledge. As I learned more about Delia, I gathered that her life was hard. Delia’s survival was fraught with abuse, neglect, and poverty. I believed that she slowly opened up to me because of my efforts to know her as a whole person, which allowed me to be a more effective teacher to her. While her reading was not quite on grade level, she did seem to show more aptitude in reading than in any other subject. Then, I asked myself how I could get Delia and my other students more involved in reading.

### **My fourth cycle**

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As I reflected on the interests of the class, it dawned on me that what my students needed was an opportunity to express what they had learned from their own experiences. Operating under my currently successful guided reading model of instruction, I began to look at ways in which I could make the model flexible. I wanted to tap into my students’ strengths as tellers of their own stories. This led me to look at the poetry component of my reading program. Each week students were required to memorize and learn about the meaning and structure of a poem. Many of the poems illustrated phonemic patterns, but some poems were selected because of their silliness or their thematic ties to our reading anthologies. I researched poems

with themes of poverty, neglect, and survival. Children’s poetry offered my students a beautiful way to nourish their imaginations while drawing on academic strands like “figurative language.” I started with an anthology of poetry written for children entitled *Knock on a Star*. I selected poems that had an obvious connection to many of the students’ experiences. Then I introduced them to poetry that was more sophisticated and encouraged them to probe their own experiences more deeply. They were able to share their interpretations of the poems without discussing their own personal experiences, and I felt they opened up to new self-understanding. The results of this flexible strategy were overwhelmingly positive. Students who had never experienced success with memorizing poems began pleading with me to recite their poems earlier than the due date. My shyest students started speaking up in class discussions, sharing their experiences about feeling like an outsider. My more creative students began drawing illustrations to go with poems and several students felt that they could best express their feelings through writing interpretations of poems. Not only did the changes in my teaching strategy help my students learn about poetry but engaged them in reading groups. As a result, they began to do better on in-class assessments. My mid-year student interviews indicated that the students’ favorite part of reading was the poems. I had several students memorizing the poems assigned to other reading groups and requesting to sit in on all poetry discussions. Parents wrote letters and remarked in conferences that they were pleased with their child’s development in reading and their recent interest in poetry.

### **What evidence did I have that action research was effective?**

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Even though my school year is only three-quarters complete, student achievement on the computerized reading assessment program in my class increased an average of 200 lexiles for my stable student population and over 300 lexiles for my homeless and highly mobile student population. The average student growth is 75-100 lexiles in one school year. Student work and parent communication suggest that students have grown considerably. Parents and administration report that they are happy with the growth that the children have made. My personal journal shows

strong evidence that through reflection I have grown in my capacity as an educator. I am better equipped to handle the academic achievement of a student population impacted by homelessness and high mobility. More over, I have sought out collegial collaboration on positively and effectively addressing those needs and issues through the process of action research. Finally, I gained personal knowledge that I have made, and will continue to make, a difference in the lives of the children.

### **How did I modify my practice?**

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Based on this research experience, I have made sure that there is an identification process for homeless and/or highly mobile children in the class. I have become more welcoming to my students by offering them a safe place to share their personal lives. My writing assessment and interview intake forms provide me with information regarding the students' basic needs and if they are being met. I have developed a rapport with the homeless liaison, and other school officials who provide services to my students. Through this network, my students have more people paying attention to their needs. Students participating in reading groups experience poems that are relevant to their personal lives and that tap into their funds of knowledge. I am currently seeking out books that also draw on their personal experiences while keeping in line with state standards. I have implemented a portfolio system that tracks student achievement on assessments, and I offer students a chance to discuss their progress with their parents, the administration, or me. I have increased my network of professional colleagues who will assist me on further action research endeavors. I introduced the idea of action research and my findings of this project to my school colleagues. They were impressed and wanted to know more.

## Significance of my research

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### **For me ~**

I believe that I achieved what I set out to do: I wanted to learn more about how public education affects our highly mobile and homeless student population. Specifically, I wanted to learn more about what I could do to improve student achievement in this group. I have reevaluated my earlier assumptions, some of which were unfounded, examined my classroom practice, collaborated with a network of professional educators, adjusted my practice to meet the needs of my students, and shared my findings with students, colleagues, and members of the community.

### **For my school ~**

Action research supports the belief that educators have the capacity to build their own evidence-based practices. Colleagues have expressed interest in wanting to learn from my work. As more educators honestly face the problems that beset the school system, change is inevitable. We can hope for solutions or at least partial solutions based on accurate observations of our own practices.