ImpactingEducation
JOURNAL ON TRANSFORMING PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

Becoming an Education Activist Through the Action Research Dissertation:

From Ideas to Action

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ABSTRACT

Watching Columbine unfold as a first-year teacher, I realized student mental health was more important than my English lessons. In subsequent years, I became increasingly worried about student anxiety exhibited in tears, outbursts, self-harm, suicidal ideation, and sadly, suicide. When I watched the murder of George Floyd occur blocks from where my most marginalized students lived, I finally knew I had to act. Completing my action research dissertation in the Education Doctorate program at the University of South Carolina-Columbia gave me frameworks to define problems, opportunities to research interventions, skills to both enact research protocols and pivot when needed, and insight to evaluate solutions. This process replaced my paralyzing worry with confidence to act. Now, when faced with problems, I can effectively investigate the issues, explore interventions, enact realistic solutions, assess outcomes, and make improvements. When educators use and refine research-based practices students are more likely to survive and thrive.

KEYWORDS

action research, secondary students, anxiety, DBT

Educators today can understandably feel plagued by problems on all sides. On one hand, educators are working to correct antiquated, racist disciplinary procedures, and on the other, lawmakers are threatening Class 3 felonies if teachers' content is too "woke" (Crenshaw, 2024). Educators must make diverse curriculum choices to reach all students while avoiding texts from the ever-expanding list of banned books. In some schools, educators are required to use students' preferred names, pronouns, and genders, and in others, educators must strictly adhere to the names and pronouns students' families have listed on registration documents. According to a RAND study in 2023, 25% of teachers were instructed by their school or district to limit discussion of political and social issues (Doan et al., 2023). Balancing this political and ideological tightrope, especially after the 2024 presidential elections and inauguration of Donald Trump, requires so much skill and concentration that providing meaningful learning experiences can take a backseat. Because a teacher's well-being directly impacts their ability to provide a healthy learning environment for their students (Kush et al., 2022), educators must push back on external societal demands, exercising their own voice and choice to acknowledge and sustain the unique identities of their students. Through action research, educators can reclaim their own voices not only to investigate the problems they face in their practice, but to dream, discover, implement, and evaluate solutions (Alpert et al., 2023). Armed with their own research, educators can represent their students' needs and concerns with integrity and become part of larger conversations taking place across the country.

During my nearly 25 years in education as a high school and middle school teacher, middle school lead, and now an academic advisor at a university, I have sat with students experiencing anxiety in various locations, including my classroom, school assemblies, field trips, college counselors' offices, and hospital emergency rooms. In all these situations, I felt inadequately equipped to help my students who struggled to cope with their anxiety and pain. I wished I could do more to affect positive change. After I lost a high school student to suicide in 2019 and witnessed first-hand the effects of George Floyd's murder in 2020 in the very neighborhood where my tenth grade, historically marginalized students in the federally funded TRIO Upward Bound program (TRIO) lived and attended school, I knew I had to act. Thus, when I read about the action research dissertation component of the Education Doctorate program at the University of South Carolina, I applied immediately. After I was accepted, the dissertation process became my catalyst for action.

Writing my dissertation gave me the opportunity to investigate the problems surrounding youth anxiety, especially for LGBTQ and Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) students in the schools and programs where I worked, and frame them with critical race theory (CRT), Queer theory and pedagogy (QTP), and culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP). The program gave me the space, skills, and model to dream up and discover solutions, plan research procedures, and enact my research protocol to test and assess those solutions. The dissertation process also gave me the guidance and tools I needed to pivot when my teaching schedule changed mid-intervention and when my students faced the unexpected community trauma of our beloved school closing. The action research dissertation process has replaced my worry, concern, and hesitation to act with confidence in my ability to thoroughly investigate problems, research, plan, and enact solutions, and change course if circumstances change or attempted solutions are less than successful. Learning the action research process gave me

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This journal is published by Pitt Open Library Publishing.

This journal is supported by the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate: A Knowledge Forum on the EdD (CPED) cpedinitiative.org

impactinged.pitt.edu
Vol.10 No.4 (2025)
ISSN 2472-5889 (online)
DOI 10.5195/ie.2025.579

knowledge and strategies to affect change through workable, real-world action that positively impacted my middle school English students and continues to positively affect the university students I teach and advise today.

DEFINING THE PROBLEM: CHOOSING WISELY

The first step in the action research process is to identify the problems present in one's particular setting (Efron & Ravid, 2020). As Ladson Billings challenged educators at the 2024 American Education Research Association (AERA) conference in Philadelphia, "Stop studying the little things. Study the big things!" While most educators can identify multiple problematic issues in any given setting, discerning which issues most impact the health, well-being, and learning of students and teachers is vital. Next, to be effective, educators must determine which of those problems they are most likely to be able to change in a meaningful way, given their own positionality in relation to their students, faculty, staff, and setting.

Problems have a way of presenting themselves, and there are moments in the lives of every teacher that forever define their experiences and change their lives. My first such moment was the Columbine shooting, which occurred during the spring of my first year teaching. Other moments include staying overnight in the emergency room with a suicidal student until their family arrived; attending an initial counseling intake appointments with college students seeking help for depression and anxiety; listening to my Minneapolis students express fear in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder as they were trapped in their homes with no groceries while fires and crowds raged outside; hearing those same students worry that they too would be pulled over and subjected to violence after they got their drivers' licenses; being an empathetic listener as my students disclosed their sexual orientation, gender identities, and abuse in conservative, religious settings; and attending the funeral of one of my students who died by suicide. Although these situations increased my empathy and understanding for my students, the action research process gave me confidence to attempt and evaluate interventions that I hope will make positive changes.

TOWARD A FOCUSED DISSERTATION: DEFINING THE PROBLEM ACCURATELY

Intuitive educators often have a general sense of the problems plaguing their students, but developing appropriately specific solutions requires educators to act as researchers and accurately define the problems they wish to address. However, in the current social landscape, even definitions are becoming polarized and politicized (Crenshaw, 2024). Educators may need to rely on inner courage to challenge definitions and assumptions of the status quo. Educators also need to have enough confidence in their observations, research, and analysis to propose new definitions when necessary.

As I observed my students while planning my dissertation study, I noticed many who showed signs of anxiety but did not necessarily have a genetic disposition toward anxiety or seem to have a high number of risk factors on the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) measures of personal and family trauma (Hawley Cronin, 2023). When I was teaching high school in a private, conservative, affluent, primarily White school, I saw Black, Hispanic, and LGBTQ students from supportive families who suffered significant anxiety at school, but, to my knowledge, had very few ACEs markers. When George Floyd was killed, I was teaching 10th grade composition to TRIO Upward Bound students who lived and attended school just a couple of miles away from the site of his murder. Many of my students were taking driver education classes, and several Black male students had a conversation with me one day about being afraid to get their driver's licenses for fear of being pulled over by police and subjected to violence. Studies show that after George Floyd was killed, anxiety rates for Black people rose to significantly higher rates than those for White people (Fowers & Wan, 2020). However, when I tried to research anxiety rates for Black students before COVID and George Floyd, there was very little data. I also discovered that ACEs measures do not account for community or environmental trauma but are limited to personal and family trauma (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023). I could not find data reflecting what I thought of as *identity-based anxiety*, or the anxiety felt by students with Black bodies in primarily White spaces. Identity-based anxiety also applies to LGBTQ students in conservative, heteronormative spaces, with a more ample research base (The Trevor Project, 2023). I used the term identity-based anxiety several times in my dissertation, and in a recent presentation, I defined it as:

> anxiety experienced as a result of having different defining aspects of one's core identity than those in the dominant culture within a particular setting one must inhabit, such as school, work, or community; as distinct from genetic, situational, or trauma-based anxiety. (Hawley Cronin, 2024)

I wrote this definition to combat educators' tendencies to attribute student anxiety to outside factors such as genetic disposition and personal or family trauma, instead of looking for contributing factors within school systems. While identity-based anxiety may occur concurrently with other anxieties, acknowledging the role of identity-based anxiety allows educators to move away from deficit thinking and instead focus on solutions for their students.

RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY: PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR THE DISSERTATION

Action research also requires researchers to be mindful of their positionality within the context of the research setting. This means they must be mindful of power dynamics, hidden biases, as well as intended and unintended outcomes of researching in or near the setting where they work. When researchers are open about how their own humanity both informs and affects the research process, it lends validity to their results and encourages more open, robust dialogue (Herr & Anderson, 2015). As a White, middle-class, female educator, I reflect the vast majority of public school teachers in the United States (Schaeffer, 2021). To collect accurate data, I needed to examine my positionality in relation to my research participants, who were my students. I needed to be open with my students about the way our different positions and life experiences made authentic research more difficult. My professors, in classes about the action research process, taught me that I needed to take responsibility to study and learn more about my students' lived experiences as distinct from my own, and that I also needed to be humble with my students by acknowledging that, in keeping with the Rumsfeld matrix (McGregor, 2004), I did not know what I did not know.

Ultimately, allowing students to point out when I made mistakes or misinterpreted data was the most powerful result of acknowledging my positionality. In a TRIO 10th grade composition

class that I taught the week after the January 6th Capitol riots, I told my students there were lots of education researchers trying to work to make the realm of education less racist. One of my female students countered, “Well, we don’t see it. We see you trying, but we don’t see that.” Her words kept circling in my mind as I read my students’ journals that week and realized the Capitol riots had retriggered the feelings of anxiety and hopelessness my students felt after George Floyd was killed. This experience with TRIO students made me decide that, if I wanted the most accurate assessment of my dissertation research protocol, I needed to use student-led Socratic seminars to evaluate both my intended intervention outcomes and to evaluate my students’ perceptions of the efficacy of my research design and process.

As my dissertation outlines, I hoped my middle school students would effectively use skills I taught them to decrease their own anxiety, and that they would gain increased confidence through our class discussions and assignments in the culturally sustaining course content I developed (Hawley Cronin, 2023). In the final Socratic seminars in my study, students talked about the ways they applied their new skills to their daily lives and the new mindsets they learned, as well as aspects of the research protocol that did not work well and strategies and skills they did not find helpful or actually disliked. While some of the intervention strategies were more popular with students, such as calming by coloring while listening to music, others, such as yoga, students embraced or hated depending on their individual preferences. More importantly, I learned that some of the behaviors I categorized as bullying were accepted as normal teasing or simply overlooked, especially in the younger classes.

FROM THEORY TO ACTION: FRAMING THE ACTION RESEARCH DISSERTATION

As education activists, action researchers must bravely uphold theories that embrace their students’ individuality, despite threats of being reprimanded, fined, fired, or charged with felonies. When 80% of public school teachers in the United States are White and 75% are White women, but over 50% of public school students are BIPOC, and over 20% are LGBTQ (Schaeffer, 2021; The Trevor Project, 2023), theories such as CRT (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001), Muslim critique (Ali, 2022) and QTP (Pennell, 2020) provide essential frameworks for understanding students’ experiences. Justifiable problem-solving action must be grounded in theoretical expertise, whether or not that expertise is socially popular. It is not enough for education researchers to simply hypothesize or follow a hunch. The most impactful research moves effectively from theory to action. When researchers use theoretical frameworks to inform their perspectives of contextual problems, possible solutions, and intervention results, they will be more mindful of marginalized populations and better able to propose and enact meaningful change (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Originally, I had hoped to conduct similar interventions in both my TRIO Upward Bound classes and my classes at the predominantly White, relatively conservative, religious school where I was teaching. In both settings, I noticed anxiety seemed higher among my historically marginalized students than my White students. This observation led me to ground my research in CRT, QTP, and culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) (Paris & Alim, 2017). While I had hoped to evaluate the effects of using the same interventions in two different populations, partway through my doctoral program, I was promoted to middle school lead teacher and did not have time to renew my TRIO commitment. Since CRT and QTP also highlighted the experiences of my marginalized students at the middle school, I chose to continue using them as frameworks. I also chose to use CSP as the basis of the curriculum portion of my intervention.

Because action research begins with identifying problems in a system, it inherently runs the risk of challenging the status quo. Herr and Anderson (2015) pointed out that:

> Practitioners will have to make their peace with how much of a challenger of the status quo they wish to be. . . if action research is not done with a critical spirit, it runs the risk of simply legitimating what may be. . . unacceptable arrangements within schools and society. (p. 28)

When I talked to teachers and administrators about working to decrease student anxiety, they often responded that I was overstepping my bounds or asked, “Isn’t that the job of the school counselor or the student’s family?” I first had to establish that the shortage of counselors in U.S. schools is widespread (Cratty, 2019). My private middle school was no exception, as we had an outside counselor who only came in for half the day once a week. We always needed to triage her appointments, reserving them for students with the most pressing needs, but leaving many students without access to counseling services at school. When I taught at a public middle school, students routinely had to wait 3 days before they could see the sixth-grade counselor, and when her position was cut, the sixth-grade students were divided between the seventh- and eighth-grade counselors.

THE HEART OF THE ACTION RESEARCH DISSERTATION: TESTING SOLUTIONS

To become education activists, educators must not only use the unconditional positive regard they have for their students (Rogers, 1957) to notice and accurately define the problems facing their students within the educational context while being mindful of their own positionality, but they must also seek solutions. Action research assumes the researcher will take an action meant to correct or lessen the problems they have identified and assess whether the action was successful (Herr & Anderson, 2015). The primary reason I sought a doctorate from the University of South Carolina was to learn how to effectively combat the anxiety I was seeing in my students. The emphasis on action research in the Educational Practice and Innovation doctoral program and the program’s affiliation with the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate, dedicated to social justice, gave me hope that I would learn how to actually do something about the problems I was seeing. My hope was carried out to fruition as I worked on and completed my dissertation.

Because teachers are often the first point of contact for students experiencing mental health needs, I chose to use Cavioni et al.’s (2020) framework of mental health promotion in schools as the framework for my intended solution. Cavioni et al. argued that schools are an appropriate setting to meet students’ mental health needs and proposed a three-part, wraparound model designed to prevent and treat mental health issues at school. They suggested that, to prevent and treat impacts of poor mental health, particularly for marginalized students who often face significant barriers to accessing helpful community mental health services, educators

should actively build resilience, provide social–emotional learning, and cooperate with family and community resources.

I used a combination of my past experiences, current empirical models, and imagination to create a two-part intervention that I hoped would decrease student anxiety in my classroom spanning Grades 5–8. At first, I thought I would replicate the system of check-ins and mini- activities meant to increase dopamine, serotonin, endorphin, and oxytocin that I had used in my online classes during the pandemic, but as I researched anxiety and thought about the connection between anxiety and suicidal ideation, intent, and attempts, I became convinced I needed a more robust intervention. I was thrilled to come across Mazza et al.'s (2016) *DBT Skills in Schools: Skills Training for Emotional Problem Solving for Adolescents (DBT STEPS-A)*. The book provides specific lessons, worksheets, and learning objectives designed for any caring adult, not necessarily a therapist, to use. Since I was teaching English and Social Studies and did not have a class dedicated to health or social–emotional learning, I chose to simplify the dialectical behavioral therapy (DBT) lessons and use them as my class opening activities. I provided students with small notebooks to record their notes and ideas, and we began our study and practice of the four pillars of DBT: beginning with mindfulness, then moving to emotion regulation, distress tolerance, and ending with part of the unit on communication.

I also revised my seventh- and eighth-grade curriculum to include discussions of gender roles in Shakespeare's (n.d.) *Midsummer Night's Dream* and the role of race and ethnicity in genocidal movements throughout the world in my 7th-8th Geography classes. We used Allport's (1954) ladder of prejudice and Thomas's (1972) sketches about gender roles in *Free to Be… You and Me* to expand our conversations of racism, sexism, and homophobia. I hoped openly acknowledging the challenges of historically marginalized students while presenting their cultures and lifestyles as normal and accepted would also increase awareness and acceptance among White, non-marginalized students, and decrease marginalized students' anxiety from having to constantly code-switch while having their collective histories, lifestyles, and tragedies ignored or glossed over.

DISSERTATION CHALLENGES: EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED

Simply getting to the point of beginning my intervention required considerable flexibility. First, the Institutional Review Board asked me to rewrite my survey questions more than once. They did not want me to ask fifth and sixth graders specific questions about their sexuality, even though the previous year I taught a sixth-grade student who openly identified as transgender and had difficulty finding a safe space at school to change for gym class. The families of my fifth- and sixth-grade students were also more conservative and less supportive of me teaching openly about gender identity, sexuality, and race. For this reason, I chose to teach the book *Wonder* by R. J. Palacio in Grades 5 and 6 to discuss inclusion of students with disabilities. I reasoned many of the themes and concepts around inclusion of students with disabilities would transfer to students of other marginalized communities.

The Review Board also only allowed me to ask the fifth- through eighth-grade students in my study to identify as male, female, or other, as opposed to including various transgender identifiers. Although I was frustrated by this limitation, the simple inclusion of "other" as a choice ended up being life-changing for one of my eighth-grade students. The student was assigned male at birth, and after completing the initial survey, they came up to me and told me how glad they were that they could choose "other" because they had a lot of questions. The next day, they came into my class early and excitedly told me they had gone home and told their mom they thought they might be transgender, and their mom said they would have to wait until they were 18 to change their name, but they could start experimenting with wearing different clothes. The student was noticeably calmer, and their mood was lighter for the rest of the year. I also had several conversations with their mother, who expressed thanks that her child was able to find support and acceptance at school.

Another aspect of my study that required me to be flexible was participant recruitment. Although participation was high among my students in Grades 5–7, because my research study was optional, several of the more popular eighth-grade students opted out. Initially, I was disappointed, as several of these students were class leaders whose participation I hoped would be instrumental in creating a more inclusive class climate. However, as the study continued, I saw some of my quieter eighth-grade boys open up during class discussions and the Socratic seminar. They shared some of their experiences of being bullied and exploring their sexuality that they may not have been comfortable sharing in the presence of the students who opted out of the study.

I also had to pivot partway through the study and readjust the method of my study design. After our physical education teacher left unexpectedly, my principal and our administrative team decided to shift from hour-long classes to block scheduling in order to alleviate scheduling issues. As the middle school lead teacher, I supported this change, yet it created a whole set of complications for my research. I ended up team-teaching an afternoon Health and Wellness class for Grades 7–8. Thanks to the support of my principal, I used that time once a week to teach DBT lessons for my intervention, instead of continuing to use the DBT lessons as warm-ups in my English and Geography classes. The new schedule benefitted the class because we were able to do more extended projects, such as creating emergency mental health "grounding" toolkits for students to keep in their backpacks. They filled their toolkits with objects such as mints, playdoh, and fidgets they made by filling a clean sock with rice and essential oils. The challenge with the new schedule was that I had to find a space and activities for the eighth-grade students who had opted out of the study. Thankfully, my principal was supportive and allowed those students to partner with our building and grounds team for mentorship and service projects around the school during my intervention days.

Another unexpected event became a confounding factor in my study. The school was supported and largely funded by an adjoining church that was struggling with membership after the pandemic. In the fall, church staff accidentally sent a notice that they were considering closing the school to an email list that included seventh- and eighth-grade students. My students received the notice in the middle of the school day, before the school board or parents had been notified. This shocked families and students as the church had assured everyone they were financially viable just a few months earlier. The potential school closing became a major source of anxiety for students, families, and staff for the next 6 months. In March, student and staff anxiety increased again after the church board voted to close the school, causing students and staff to focus

on finding new schools and positions for the next school year, instead of focusing on the end of the current academic year. The school closing clouded my ability to differentiate between community trauma and identity-based anxiety. This confounding variable led me to design-based improvement science (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020), as I explain further in my discussion of becoming a reflective practitioner.

Action research requires researchers to accurately record and report what happens in their interventions, paying special attention to their participants' own words (Herr & Anderson, 2015). Teaching and taking notes at the same time was difficult, so I relied heavily on my students' journal entries. I always begin journals on the first day of class, so students were very comfortable and proficient with this medium. I also received permission from my students and their families to videotape the final Socratic seminars. I used a transcription service to produce word-for-word scripts of each seminar. I was able to watch the videos several times and pick up nuances in students' communication that I would have missed had I only seen the seminar once as a live observer.

COMPLETING THE DISSERTATION: BECOMING A REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

Rereading journals and rewatching videos are essential aspects of the reflective process; and are some of the most beneficial and equally frustrating aspects of action research. In addition, changing circumstances, confounding variables, and unexpected outcomes are all opportunities for learning and development as competent practitioners. I found that I often did not know what I did not know until I observed and interacted with my classes through the lens of an action researcher.

In addition, I realized there were portions of the study I could have planned or executed more effectively, which led me to explore design-based improvement to evaluate practical aspects of my study (Hawley Cronin, 2023). For example, I underestimated the amount of time middle school students would need to complete many of the intervention projects. I also underestimated the level of interest my students would have in learning practical DBT skills such as recognizing that people cannot read your mind or using mindfulness and distress tolerance strategies to improve a moment that is unlikely to get better on its own. Although students had mixed feelings about various portions of the intervention, Grades 5–7 voted to continue the intervention protocol even after I concluded data collection, because they wanted to finish the unit on healthy communication. Ideally, however, I would have planned the lessons more accurately so that we finished all of them within the intervention timeline.

Design-based improvement analysis also highlighted problems with my survey. In retrospect, I would have aligned the pre- and post-questions more clearly so the graphs of the results would have been more comparable. I also wish I had sent out a questionnaire revision asking students about their levels of anxiety regarding the potential, and then the reality, of the school closing as a way to disaggregate the data regarding students' anxiety due to school closing and students' identity-based anxiety (Hawley Cronin, 2024).

My action research results also led naturally to design-based policy analysis (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). Through my research, I realized many students did not experience the classroom as a safe place to be themselves, which contributed to their overall anxiety. I had difficulty changing my classroom atmosphere on my own because I was relatively new, and the school was so small that students were in basically the same groupings all day. Unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1956) is essential for students to thrive, but this needs to come from both their teachers and their peers. For this reason, my principal and I began working on revising the outdated bullying and harassment policy, but nothing came of our work since the school closed. However, this is the heart of action research. If we take our research and change reality positively for just one student, we have done something worthwhile, but how much better would it be to change reality for a class, a school, a district, or a community?

DEFENDING THE DISSERTATION: PRACTICE FOR THE REAL WORLD

Educators know all too well that new initiatives, programs, curriculum, and methods must earn the approval of committees, teams, administrators, and even school boards. Defending an action research dissertation is a high-stakes trial run at presenting a concise overview of a problem and proposed solution(s), supporting them with evidence, and fielding questions from a diverse audience. Preparing for the defense and defending the dissertation are both valuable experiences that educators can use to hone and refine their voices as they advocate for real-world solutions to the problems they encounter.

I spent the month before my defense giving my 20-minute dissertation overview to anyone who would listen and answering their questions. I heard responses from a wide variety of perspectives, from teenagers and their parents in school systems from Minnesota to South Carolina, to educators in public and private schools, and to my graduate school cohort. These listeners helped me to refine my presentation, whether they were timing me and tallying the number of times I said "umm," or asking deep, complicated questions about the role of teachers in combating rising anxiety in students across the nation. As a woman in education working under primarily male administrators, I have not always felt listened to or like my input was respected, even though I come from privilege and have a long tradition of education in my family. Practicing my defense ahead of time and then actually defending my dissertation against my committee gave me much more confidence to present ideas in high-stakes situations.

NEXT STEPS: POST-DISSERTATION IMPLICATIONS FOR ACTION

Becoming an education activist means that we take what we learn and use it to transform our own teaching and inform others. Although the primary goal of action research is to change a practitioners' own setting as opposed to providing a replicable experimental design for other researchers, Efron and Ravid (2020) argue that action research can be instrumental in helping practitioners enact social change. Similarly, Herr and Anderson (2015) argue that knowledge gained in action research is often transferable to other settings and contexts.

I have used not only the action research process, but my research content itself in my role as an academic advisor in the Center for Academic Success and Achievement at the university where I work. I presented a session at my state's College Professional Association conference to help instructors and staff in higher education explore the impact of identity-based anxiety within

secondary learning environments as it carries over into challenges faced by marginalized students as they enter college (Hawley Cronin, 2024). In addition, I often suggest DBT skills and strategies that I taught in my intervention protocol to distressed students who are meeting with me, or who have disclosed that they deal with some type of anxiety, while also making them aware of the services provided at the university counseling center.

Last fall, when I taught a first-year seminar for incoming freshmen, I chose to focus on representations of mental health and mental illness in popular media. This idea stemmed from my dissertation research, where I discovered that White students are diagnosed with anxiety at twice the rate of Black students, but Black students are diagnosed with emotional and behavioral disturbance at twice the rate of White students (Alegria et al., 2010; Minnesota Department of Education, 2018). Teachers often think of anxiety in terms of a flight or freeze response, where students appear quiet, reticent, and isolated. However, teachers often attribute the fight response to anxiety to causes such as aggression, oppositional defiance, emotional disturbance, or personal or family trauma, instead of identity-based anxiety. Although personal or family trauma may be contributing factors some of the time, Black students are highly overrepresented in numbers of students with emotional behavior disturbance, especially considering the rising rates of anxiety, suicidal ideation, attempts, and death by suicide in BIPOC students overall (Sheftall et al., 2022). As I thought about where these ideas and stereotypes come from, I started to wonder about representations of mental illness in popular television shows, movies, and music, and whether these portrayals increase helpful awareness of mental health conditions or add to harmful stereotypes. I decided to have my first-year seminar students research a mental health condition of their choice, write a critical review of a television show, movie, or music album that features a character or artist with the same condition, and create a public service announcement increasing positive awareness of the condition that they can post on YouTube, TikTok, or Instagram, or portray through a zine or comic that they distribute on campus. The final projects were humorous, poignant, compelling, and insightful.

FROM HERE TO BEYOND: LIFE AFTER THE ACTION RESEARCH DISSERTATION

The process of writing an action research dissertation not only helps researchers identify, define, and frame problems, and hypothesize and test solutions; it also helps researchers become experts in the most current thinking and programming available to address aspects of their problem of practice. Reading other research and learning what has been done in other contexts is a vital piece of addressing problems of practice in researchers' individual contexts. Whether an educator adopts a program to try in their own setting, builds an intervention based on parts of several programs, or creates an entirely new model meant to address gaps in available solutions, basing interventions on current research gives educators more tools to place in their toolkit. This can help them respond more quickly and specifically to problems similar to the problem they investigated. This knowledge can also provide the type of current expertise school systems often require in order to try or adopt a new solution or initiative.

One of the initiatives I found promising in my research was the Coffee, Hip-Hop, and Mental Health (CHHMH) model (Pablo, 2020). Years ago, a coffee shop opened in Chicago dedicated to normalizing therapy, using profits to fund therapy for underserved clients, and using the space during off hours for therapists to lead discussions on hip-hop through mental health lenses as a more accessible means of delivering group therapy. This model would work in high school common areas and cafeterias, coffee shops on or near college campuses, and in underserved communities. Recently, a store owner in my community asked me to consider piloting two or three after-hours groups at a local bakery and to write a business plan for what a coffee shop similar to CHHMH might look like in the Twin Cities. I have wanted to visit CHHMH in Chicago for years and would love to make a connection there. Over the course of writing my dissertation, I have made many contacts in the Twin Cities who have the training and expertise to address anxiety and mental health needs for all community members, and specifically for BIPOC and LGBTQ populations. The possibility of replicating the CHHMH model is an exciting outgrowth of writing my action research dissertation that I hope bears fruit and positively impacts my community in the future.

CONTINUING THE WORK: A CALL TO ACTION

While I doubt many educators would be excited to write yet another dissertation, I think most would agree that our work is far from done. Writing and defending an action research dissertation not only can give educators confidence to apply the action research process in new situations and contexts but also can give educators hope that the field of education is neither static nor merely subject to forces beyond our control. Rather, we can use principles from action research to investigate, research, and frame problems, as well as create, execute, and assess a variety of possible solutions. This process feels familiar, as educators engage in a micro version of it almost daily, when we realize a lesson or interaction needs a modification or change if we want our students to achieve our intended outcomes.

At the 2024 AERA conference, Ladson-Billings charged educators not to become complacent, and instead of asking "Why me?" ask, "Why NOT me?" After all, we never know how far-reaching our actions may be. Tim Walz, the governor of my state, Minnesota, started as a social studies teacher and football coach, became the advisor for the Gay–Straight Alliance at his school, and ran for public office at his students' urging. As the governor, he signed laws guaranteeing free breakfast and lunch for all Minnesota public school students (Minnesota Department of Education, 2024), and free college tuition at state colleges for low-income families, and he was the Democratic nominee for vice-president (Karnowski & Hanna, 2024). Although Walz and Harris lost the election and the American education landscape is rapidly changing, we can take Walz's example to heart. Armed with confidence from well-executed action research, both within and beyond dissertations, we can, and must, use our voices as educators to advocate for our students and each other as we move toward workable solutions to even the most pressing real-world problems in education.

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