Optimizing Human Development Using Exemplarian Action Research

WCFR's approach to advancing the adoption and high-quality implementation of individualized career plans (ICPs) is grounded in the methodology of **Exemplarian Action Research**, a framework derived from **Structuration Theory** (Giddens, 1986, 1993) and articulated in educational contexts by **Coenen (1994, 1998)** and **Solberg (2003)**. This approach recognizes that **sustainable systems change does not occur through technical solutions alone, but through transforming the everyday practices, beliefs, and relational dynamics**—the "rules and resources"—**that shape how educators and students experience schooling.** Rather than positioning ICPs as external mandates or technical tools to be adopted, WCFR intentionally works with states, districts, and schools to cultivate **mutual understanding** among stakeholders about the challenges students face and the role that career development can play in addressing those challenges. This collaborative process reflects Giddens' emphasis on co-constructed meaning and shared agency within social systems and Coenen's insistence that researchers and practitioners function as equal partners in the change process.

Exemplarian Action Research in Action

In practice, WCFR operationalizes this framework by beginning with listening, dialogue, and local needs assessment—referred to as the **Thematic Phase** of Exemplarian Action Research. Through facilitated conversations, data reflection, and collaborative inquiry, educators, leaders, and youth come to jointly define the purpose of ICPs not as compliance artifacts, but as developmental practices that promote agency, identity development, belonging, and postsecondary readiness. This shared framing is essential for adoption: when stakeholders see ICPs as a response to *their* articulated challenges—such as disengagement, inequitable access to opportunity, or weak transitions—they develop genuine ownership over the work rather than passive compliance.

As implementation unfolds, WCFR facilitates the **Crystallization and Exemplarian phases** of Exemplarian Action Research by translating shared understanding into changes in everyday practice. WCFR focuses deliberately on shifting both the underlying beliefs that shape educator behavior (e.g., "career planning is paperwork" toward "career development is a core developmental practice") and the organizational conditions that support implementation (e.g., professional learning structures, shared ownership across roles, aligned curriculum, leadership routines, and data use practices). This reflects Coenen's (1994) assertion that meaningful change requires reconfiguring both the social norms and the material supports that sustain existing systems. In this way, **WCFR supports local adaptation while protecting the core developmental components of high-quality ICP practice—such as reflection, goal setting, identity exploration, and relational support—ensuring fidelity to the evidence base without imposing rigid uniformity**.

Evaluation for Efficacy

Evaluation within WCFR's approach is also consistent with Exemplarian Action Research in that it is designed not merely for accountability, but for **collective learning and reinforcement of shared meaning**. WCFR emphasizes that research findings must be communicated in accessible language so that practitioners can interpret, internalize, and use the results to refine their practice. WCFR similarly emphasizes practical indicators, improvement trends, youth voice, and implementation quality in ways that strengthen belief in efficacy and deepen commitment to the work. Over time, this process builds the relational trust, shared language, and internal capacity necessary for ICPs to become embedded within systems rather than dependent on external support.

Taken together, WCFR's use of Exemplarian Action Research explains why individualized career plans have scaled nationally not as superficial compliance structures, but as a **paradigm shift in how schools conceptualize student development**. By treating adoption and implementation as a social, relational, and developmental process—rather than a technical rollout—WCFR advances career development as essential educational infrastructure and supports systems in creating lasting, equity-driven change.