DEPARTMENT OF
FAMILY AND
COMMUNITY
SERVICES

Reconnect Action Research Kit

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with the support of the Reconnect Action Research Committee
and Reconnect services

For the
Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services,
Youth and Students Branch

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Reconnect
Opportunities, Choices & Support
For Young People and their Families

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For information contact the Department of Family and Community Services on 1300 653 227. People with a hearing or speech impairment can contact the Department on its telephone typewriter (TTY) on 1800 260 402.

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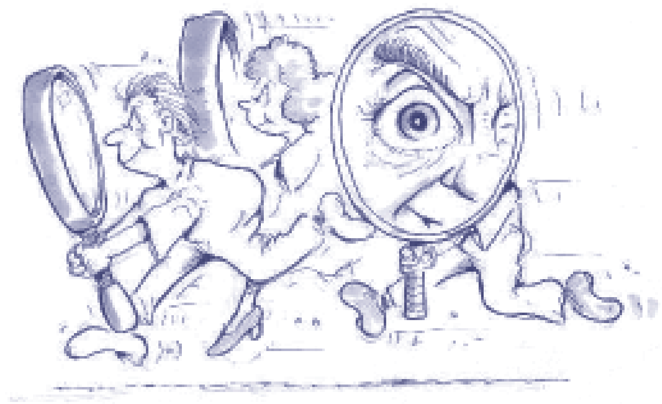
ABOUT ACTION RESEARCH



Why an Action Research kit?

This kit is to help Reconnect services build the capacities of their communities to deliver early intervention programs at the local level. It is not intended that services follow this kit rigidly rather, the kit is designed to act as a guide.

It includes information about how Action Research can contribute to positive outcomes for young people, their families, Reconnect services and other community agencies.

The kit's content was influenced by the findings of the Action Research undertaken by services as part of the Youth Homelessness Pilot Programme.

When the Reconnect Action Research Committee developed ideas for this kit, a number of important questions came up, including:

'What can we learn from the Youth Homelessness Pilot Programme's Action Research?'

'What are the characteristics of Action Research and how can these be tailored to suit Reconnect?'

'What information and support do services need so they can carry out their own Action Research?'

'How can services make the most of Action Research's benefits for their clients, as well as their communities?'

'How do we tell Reconnect services about Action Research?'

'How can Action Research findings contribute to the Reconnect Program, as a whole?'

'How can the Reconnect Action Research Committee use Action Research as part of its own work?'

'How does Action Research link with other parts of the Reconnect Program, such as evaluation?'

This kit provides some of the answers to these questions.

Action Research builds on what many services and practitioners are already doing. This includes responding to the local needs and circumstances of the people that they aim to assist. To improve the assistance they provide, services also routinely 'network' with each other and with other community organisations.

As well, many services have mechanisms and strategies for client feedback, review and change. This can include involving clients in the ongoing development of the services.

Action Research provides the conceptual and practical tools for making improvements to services. Putting the results of Action Research into practice can be challenging. For instance, it could involve introducing new strategies and skills that change the way services are delivered.

People who use Action Research usually find that, over time, it becomes part of everyday practice, rather than something separate or extra.

Developing the kit

The kit was developed jointly by the authors, the Reconnect Action Research Committee and a range of Reconnect services. This involved including ideas from the Committee. It also included looking at the effectiveness of the Youth Homelessness Pilot and the material used in their Action Research and evaluation reports. Practical examples of successful Reconnect services were identified and feedback on a draft Reconnect Action Research kit, via a special web site, was used.

Aims of the kit

This kit is designed to explain Action Research and how it 'fits' into the Reconnect Program. It provides practical examples and tools for applying Action Research. It also offers information to services about other resources that can help them to incorporate Action Research as part of their work practices.

Although many practitioners already have the skills needed for Action Research, this kit will help them with ideas and ways to build links and better communicate with other Reconnect

services and stakeholders. It also includes practical Action Research examples and feedback from other services.

Using the kit

This kit can be used to train new staff and to brief existing staff, managers and committees or boards. It can also be used to explain Action Research to others, like the people and clients that are involved with Reconnect services. The idea is to provide a common 'backdrop' for working together and an ongoing reference point.

The kit does not provide comprehensive advice on everything to do with Action Research. Nor does it describe all the possible strategies. However, it does give a 'taste' of what you can try.

The most important thing is to get a 'feel' for what Action Research is about, and then try to develop a local approach, using strategies and tools drawn from any helpful source, including this one.

Background to Reconnect Action Research

In 1996, the Prime Minister's Youth Homeless Taskforce was established. The Taskforce developed a framework for early intervention into youth homelessness.

The Youth Homelessness Pilot Programme involved 26 pilot services that provided information and evaluation data to the Taskforce. Based on this, the Taskforce advised the Prime Minister on youth homelessness and early intervention in particular. The Taskforce's final report and supplementary report were both called *Putting Families in the Picture*.

A major element of the Taskforce's terms of reference was the use of Action Research to identify best practice. This was used to develop sound advice on effective early intervention services.

A study by Crane and Brannock (1996) found that early intervention services needed to adapt their practices to local conditions and the circumstances of their target group. They needed to be respectful and responsive to young people, families and to the other people involved.

The study also found that services using early intervention often had to challenge and alter existing traditional views and practices. In short, a fixed and rigid approach did not work, and this meant services had to take a more complex approach to early intervention.

Youth Homelessness Pilot Programme evaluation findings

While there were variations in how services implemented their Action Research, the independent evaluation of the Youth Homelessness Pilot Programme (ARTD 1998) and the Taskforce concluded that Action Research was absolutely critical to the Pilot Programme's success.

> *The value of Action Research in this type of program is its capacity to see practice as dynamic and changing, where insights can be generated by a process of posing questions, seeking answers through practice, and improving practice on the basis of insights generated. More traditional evaluation processes cannot achieve such insights* (Evaluation Committee, Prime Ministerial Youth Homeless Taskforce, 1998, p. 19).

The Youth Homeless Pilot Programme's evaluation found that Action Research contributed to:

Better client outcomes—Services used Action Research to experiment with more flexible and responsive approaches, tailored to suit local circumstances.

Improved coordination and collaboration—Action Research led to improved coordination between local projects and services. This meant services could respond more effectively to the needs of target groups.

Action Research was used to encourage more involvement, ownership and participation by the community, other agencies, and clients. For instance, young people and their parents had a greater say in how services were run. As well, Action Research helped resolve 'territorial' issues such as conflicts between different agencies. It also led to more ideas about how they could work together, collaboratively.

> *As a tool for collaboration, the participatory nature of AR has been a fundamental part of the strong links (we have) been able to establish with other services* (A Youth Homelessness Pilot service in Quixley, 1998, p. 16).

Improved service delivery—Some pilot services changed their original project strategies because of Action Research findings. This included improving client access and referrals and promoting their services. Many pilots broadened or modified the types of services offered, including their intervention approaches, or changed where their services were located.

A high emphasis was placed on contributing to the regional capacity to respond to the needs of young people and families. Through playing an active and participatory role alongside other community-minded members, workers were able to assist in the development of programmes, but not own them (A Youth Homelessness Pilot service).

The evaluation also found that Action Research:

Was adopted by most Youth Homelessness Pilot services—Viewed as an important part of developing and delivering early intervention services, Action Research was found to be well suited to pilot programs and in-depth program reviews. It also suggested that modified approaches were appropriate for other ongoing early intervention programs.

Helped establish a dynamic, change oriented culture in organisations—Action Research promoted positive attitudes to change and, through regular reviews of practices, improved internal operations and clarified people's roles.

Made a positive contribution to the evaluation of the Youth Homelessness Pilot Programme—Action Research provided useful insights about the effectiveness of particular strategies.

Made an important contribution to policy development—In its recommendations to the Government, the Prime Ministerial Youth Homeless Taskforce recognised the value and contribution of Action Research.

Snapshot—the values of Action Research

Action Research:

- enhances client outcomes;
- improves coordination and collaboration;
- contributes to improved service delivery;
- is critical to local early intervention development and delivery;
- establishes a dynamic, change-oriented culture in organisations;
- assists in evaluation;
- encourages good practice, and identifies service delivery barriers and gaps; and
- contributes to policy development by governments and agencies.

How Action Research relates to early intervention

Reconnect early intervention services have two inter-connected roles that relate to the character of early intervention and the complex issues that are involved. One role is to deliver early intervention services to young people and their families. The other role is to help develop better early intervention capacities within communities.

Young people and their families can seek support or be referred to any one of a number of support services (Crane and Brannock, 1996, 1998). Many community services have the potential to support young people and their families where youth homelessness is a recent reality or becomes a possibility.

In early intervention jargon, initial contact is called 'first to know'. At this stage, it may not be important where the support comes from, or how people find out about it, as long as it is there.

Because of the range of support services available, Reconnect services have a role in developing the **overall** early intervention capacity in their communities, as well as providing direct support to young people and families. This role involves supporting other services, by encouraging them to talk to each other, negotiate roles, and find ways to get better outcomes for their clients.

While there are broad good practice principles that can apply to different contexts, there is no specific strategy that will 'fit' everywhere. Each area and community has a character of its own, and the existing service mix, their location, the community's demographics, location and cultural norms will point to the types of services needed.

At its most basic, Action Research provides a framework and the tools for developing responsive and relevant early intervention strategies. In short, the character of Action Research and the character of early intervention into youth homelessness suit each other!

Snapshot—the relevance of Action Research to early intervention

Action Research is particularly relevant to early intervention because:

- the range of factors that underpin and lead to youth homelessness are very varied, complex and often interrelated;
- to be successful, early intervention relies on young people, their families and the other people involved finding support from a number of 'pathways' and first to know agents, in the times immediately before or after homelessness;
- a range of agencies and community resources can all contribute to effective early intervention strategies, but the types of strategies will differ between communities;
- developing early intervention capacity over time requires proactive efforts to find the best ways to structure and improve early intervention in particular communities; and
- the relevance of early intervention strategies depends on the active involvement of people with insights into its outcomes. It also depends on the particular community's capacity to provide the range of support needed. This can only be achieved if local agencies and stakeholders—including the young people at risk of homelessness and their families—work together cooperatively.

What is Action Research?

In the context of Reconnect, Action Research is used to answer two broad questions:

'What would it take to improve the outcomes for those we aim to assist?'

'Given the aims of Reconnect, what would it take to improve our practice?'

Action Research builds on the everyday skills people use to make sense of their lives and improve their situation. The old cliché 'it's not rocket science' is true for Action Research. Here is what one Action Researcher said:

> *This sort of research is not a trained expertise, we can do it every day of our lives. We use our innate abilities to make choices, to make some sense out of our lives. We do it when we go shopping, when we think about the TV ads we have seen, the feedback from a friend about a movie or an event about which we are curious. We notice, describe, listen, we make an explanation—we make our decision.*
>
> *Expanding this way of doing things into the context of research (participatory Action Research) involves a singular person or small group of people noticing that something in their lives needs changing. A difference is noticed, an ideal is not met, a loss of quality, a foreshadowed change of direction, or perhaps the need for innovation* (Goff et. al, 1998, p. 65).

Action Research cycles

The main aim of Action Research is quite simple—to improve practice. At its core, Action Research moves between action and reflection, so that one informs the other.

> *Action Research is a process by which change and understanding can be pursued at the one time. It is usually described as cyclic, with action and critical reflection taking place in turn. The reflection is used to review the previous action and plan the next one. It is commonly done by a group of people* (Dick, 1997, p. 2).

Action Research can improve practice by helping people to gain a better understanding, and applying this to a process of change. In the Reconnect context, this means improving early intervention practice and, in turn, improving the outcomes for the program's clients.

Action Research in Reconnect = Getting a better understanding of things which affect practice + Using this understanding to change some aspects of practice

Action Research achieves this by using a 'cyclic research process'. The research is active and ongoing. Changes that occur because of Action Research processes can stimulate new or changed Action Research directions and, in many cases, result in new strategies.

Participatory Action Research involves:

> *'A spiral of cycles of planning, action (implementing plans), observing (systematically), reflecting…and then re-planning, further implementation, observing and reflecting'* (McTaggart in Goff, 1998).

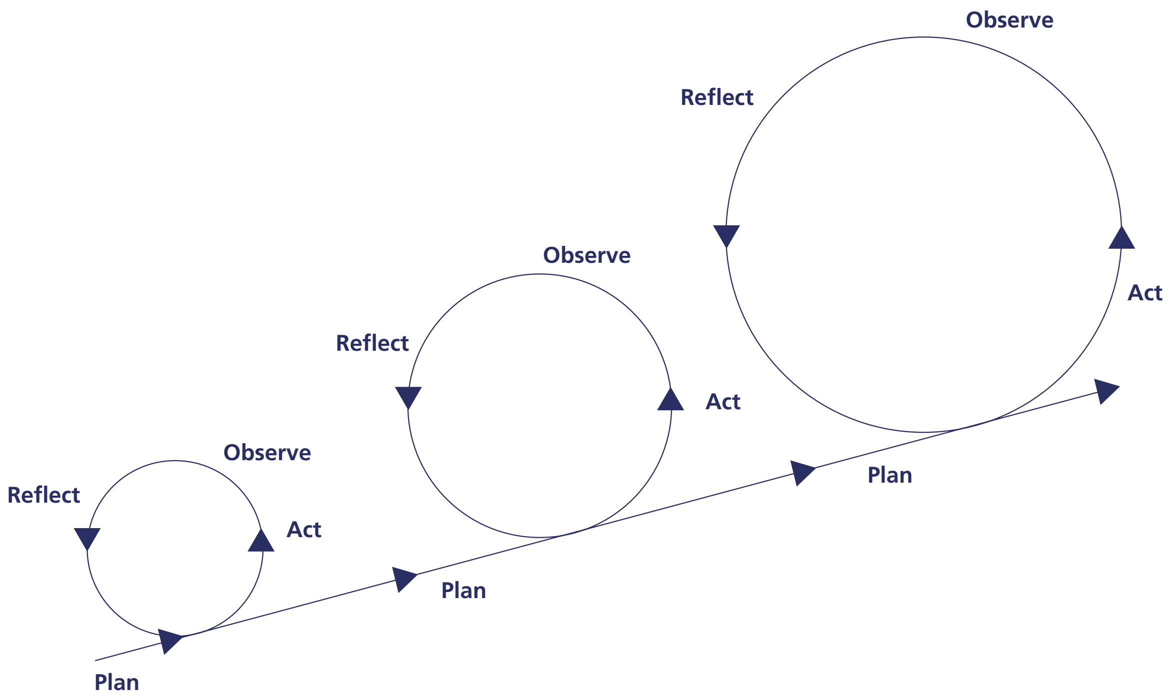
Cycles provide a useful way of thinking about and describing an Action Research process. Each cycle is made up of four phases—planning, action, observation and reflection.

This captures the idea that Action Research moves developmentally—that strategies be developed, implemented, observed in action and then reflected on. This reflection can lead to plans for further action, and so on.

Researching a particular question usually involves going through a number of cycles. This allows practices and understandings to be refined or changed over time. It may mean also that the question itself needs refinement or change.

It is important to keep in mind how the phases happen and what the Action Research process looks like. Both these depend on the local service's context and what questions are being asked.

Action Research cycles



The diagram on page 1.8 shows the way Action Research evolves through cycles of planning, action, observation and reflection. The rising base line represents the goal of continuous improvement. Successive cycles become larger and represent the way that the process may change over time.

> *Participatory Action Research starts with small cycles of planning, acting, observing and reflecting which can help to define issues, ideas and assumptions more clearly so that those involved can define more powerful questions for themselves as their work progresses* (McTaggart in Goff, 1998).

It may be that as the cycles are repeated, participation by stakeholders increases. This can stimulate a better understanding of what is needed. Or it may be that the research begins with a small question like 'what would it take to get referrals from the nearest high school?' This can lead to a larger, more powerful question such as 'what would it take to develop an agreement with schools in our catchment about links with Reconnect?'

Cycle characteristics

Flexibility—Cycles may not occur in consecutive 'steps'. They can overlap, or be repeated or extended as new understanding emerges. A cycle of Action Research may begin at any phase, although planning is probably the most common starting point.

> *One good way to begin a participatory Action Research project is to collect some initial data in an area of general interest, then to reflect and then to make a plan for changed action, another way to begin is to make an exploratory change, collect data about what happens and then build more refined plans for action* (McTaggart in Goff, 1998).

Systematic—While flexibility is essential, it is also really important that people can name what phases they are undertaking at a particular time. However, an Action Research project cannot be too flexible as it loses direction and clarity.

Being systematic and deliberate means people can see and reflect on what is going on.

> *One of the most significant strengths of Action Research was that it required a systematic framework in which to operate (eg establishing reference groups, identifying stakeholders, collecting data, setting objectives, evaluating outcomes). In so doing it ensured that we were going in the right direction and doing what we had set out to do.*
>
> *Also a systematic framework encouraged decisions and actions to be based on well-informed ideas and data. At the same time, Action Research allowed flexibility in an important way. Revisions, modifications could be made when ineffective strategies or questions were being pursued* (A Youth Homelessness Pilot service).

Developmental—Action Research develops over time. For those who have not used an Action Research framework before, it is important to see it as something that develops, and not something that just happens instantly.

There are different ways of carrying out Action Research. It can take quite a long time to develop a clearly developed approach and to put it into practice.

In Action Research, people are often keen to start with a big and meaningful question. To develop confidence in the research, though, it is sometimes better to start with quite small, concrete and localised questions, so that several cycles can be tried quickly. (*For more information about starting Action Research, see Section 3*).

It is very difficult to talk about 'outcomes' in Action Research at the **end** of the process. Action Research is about continuous improvement, rather than rigid 'solutions'. (*For more information about this see Section 2 which discusses Action Research's four elements—plan-act-observe-reflect*).

Values and Action Research

The approach to Action Research in Reconnect is called 'participatory Action Research'. Knowing about the values that underpin Action Research is just as important as having the right implementation skills.

Values underpinning participatory Action Research
(based on Quixley, 1997)

A culture of inquiry, learning and change is essential to achieving best practice Action Research.

Every stakeholder is valued and has ideas that contribute to service development. For instance, Reconnect clients have special expertise that can influence a service's focus, priorities and design. How much influence different stakeholders have should be measured against what the outcomes are for them.

People affected by research outcomes should be involved throughout the whole process. For research to be effective, it must be a key element of service development.

All the stakeholders must generate the problems and questions related to Action Research. This collaborative approach is essential to achieving the best long-term outcomes.

It is important for both the workers and managers that are involved in early intervention to understand the values that underpin Action Research. They also need to work in line with these values, even if other parts of their organisation work from a different basis.

Organisations that are committed to Action Research also need to make sure that enough resources are available to put it into practice.

Action Research presumes a completely different power base and decision-making from the norm in service provision. This could be a potential barrier if Management Committees do not understand their role in Action Research. [Our service's] experience was that the workers gave a presentation on Action Research at the Management Committee and that management was happy to let go of creative control (A Youth Homelessness Pilot service).

Youth Homelessness Pilot services using Action Research results

We're constantly changing, and staff exhibited a sense of excitement about emerging issues for exploration. Workers wanted to talk about what they were learning, and how they were modifying services to improve outcomes for clients, services and networks. Whilst drawing on models and ideas from elsewhere as a resource, they developed their own, locally-owned, locally-appropriate responses to emerging insights and needs.

Those projects which valued and engaged stakeholders, worked alongside (rather than over) others, that approached stakeholders from a position of openness, suspended disbelief, or even naivety; appeared to have greatest success in generating new learning and improved practices.

Clear characteristics of these best practice services were evident. The underlying theme across these projects was their commitment to enabling the participation of others in a sophisticated way. This included genuinely sharing the power to influence project development with stakeholders, and a willingness to involve a wide range of (sometimes opposing) stakeholders throughout their process. Often the richest developments emerged out of constructive conflict, where minority views were actively valued and explored (Quixley, 1998, p. 32).

Because Action Research is developed and implemented over time, services learn more about it along the way. This means Action Research can start small. For example, there may only be a couple of people involved in a particular Action Research project at first. But, over time, the number of people increases and the scope of the questions they ask gets wider.

Culture and Action Research

Recognising and taking account of the 'cultural' context in which Action Research is being applied is critical. Culture is a powerful influence, whether it comes from a particular community, or an organisation or a 'sector'.

For participatory Action Research, respecting these cultural contexts often involves 'cross-cultural' work, or 'shaping'. There are no hard and fast rules. Participatory Action Research has the flexibility to adjust in culturally appropriate ways to a particular location, community, organisation or target group.

> *Engaging indigenous young people and families was a priority for the project given the cultural diversity of the population base. Strategies included:*
>
> - *working with local Aboriginal organisations, communities and individuals to develop the service appropriately,*
> - *having a broad definition of homelessness and families,*
> - *a flexible model of input and involvement that aimed to be culturally appropriate, recognising that gaining credibility can take time.*
>
> (A Youth Homelessness Pilot service)

A very useful Action Research question is *'what would we need to do to undertake Action Research in a culturally appropriate way in our context?'*

> *The processes and techniques used must be culturally suited to the particular stakeholders involved in each situation. They are designed to accommodate participants' comfort zone/norms, rather than those of whoever is conducting the process. Planned approaches should be abandoned, adapted or modified readily, in line with the feedback of participants. Approaches are designed to enable stakeholders to contribute both to the content and the process of Action Research* (Quixley, 1997, p. 9).

What's in it for Stakeholders?

For front-line early intervention practitioners

Action Research encourages front-line workers to develop local partnerships and collaborative arrangements. Action Research allows both clients and workers to better understand the role of different early intervention services.

Action Research also helps front-line practitioners clarify and improve relationships between workers and services, so they can work together more easily and effectively. It also identifies barriers to and gaps in good early intervention outcomes. This can lead to local responses that add to the evidence base used by advocates to support individual clients and improve policies and systems.

Action Research helps to answer the *big questions* that are often missed by busy service providers

It challenges workers and services to a look at the meaning and context of their work. Every day, Action Research routinely poses the question '*Why are we here?*' It helps people to be clearer about their personal and organisational values. It encourages people to ask and answer the questions that most help to make their work relevant to them, their clients and other stakeholders.

Action Research gives a focus to the things people would be doing anyway

It has the potential to include everything that Reconnect services do into a single system. It does not mean a whole range of new things to do. Rather, it provides a framework for what people are doing already. It draws together all areas of an agency's operations—that is, providing services, monitoring/evaluation/review, planning, needs' analysis, publicity/promotion, coordination/management, documentation/reporting and administration/accountability.

Action Research is a useful way to increase organisational and individual efficiency.

It provides benchmarks for setting priorities and a clear rationale for saying '*no*', if you need to. At the same time, this happens in a context of constantly assessing what is the most important thing to focus on. In other words, it helps people decide what they can and can't do with the resources available.

Action Research helps to improve practice.

Action Research strongly encourages people to take time and think about what they actually do and to test the alternatives. It offers both individuals and agencies the chance to constantly learn and grow. This means people think about and explore new ways of doing things. And in the end, of course, it is the clients who ultimately reap the benefits.

Action Research makes evaluation easier—and more enjoyable!

While some people enjoy 'number-crunching' and report writing, most human services workers would prefer to be dealing with people and thinking creatively about their jobs. However, information from Action Research can add colour, character and a new culture to the evaluation process. It can provide data and case studies to back up evaluation findings. It encourages groups of people to offer up ideas, rather than trying to think them through by themselves.

Action Research values 'hunches' and helps people to explore them in a relevant and useful way.

How many great ideas have people had at work, which they have never investigated? How often have they thought '*if only we could do [such and such]... parents would respond so differently*,' or, *'if only the local high school offered [such and such] ... young people would think twice about leaving home?'*

Action Research promotes new ideas and can help people justify changes to provide a better service. These efforts may even end up as part of Commonwealth policies, strategies and/or programs! (Quixley, 1997, pp. 6–7).

For young people and their families

Action Research provides young people and their families with opportunities to contribute to better service development. It can also give young people and parents a say in what the issues are and an opportunity to talk about their own experiences of early intervention.

Action research can also promote a greater understanding and insight into the services and the systems in particular communities. As well, it creates opportunities to develop skills in areas like communication, time management, organisation and problem solving.

For management

Action Research can provide management with well-founded evidence that points to the need for change and improvement. This can be particularly useful when looking for financial support for services from, for instance, governments or management boards or committees.

Action Research can also improve a service's transparency and accountability. As well, it can clarify an agency's direction by contributing to strategic planning and review.

To increase a sense of purpose among staff, Action Research can put a more focused, 'heads together' way of thinking. It values people's inputs, takes advantage of existing skills and resources, and stimulates innovation.

Action Research helps establish relationships with other agencies. Over time, these links lead to services getting a clearer picture of what is happening with other providers at the local level.

Using Action Research cycles can improve efficiency by refining issues and answering questions about what can and cannot be done. The cycles can also help develop and adapt cultures of 'continuous improvement'.

For other Agencies

Action Research can establish and enhance relationships with Reconnect services and allows for more opportunity for collaborative strategies within the community. Action Research also provides other agencies with the opportunity to contribute to the exploration of local solutions to local problems.

For government

Action Research can contribute to government policy-making and improve outcomes for young Australians and their families.

As part of the purchaser-provider relationship with government, services can provide Action Research data to support policy development and advice and influence the design of innovative and responsive new programs.

It can also help government and non-government agencies to identify and fill gaps and prevent overlaps in services. This can mean more efficient services, whether they are provided through local, state/territory or federal governments.

As well, Action Research assists government agencies to improve their own practices and contribute to better early intervention outcomes.

For the community

Action Research can provide communities with a way to develop responses to the issues that lead to youth homelessness. It also allows communities to understand more about the problems some young people face.

Action Research also ensures that the approach taken suits local circumstances and ensures community 'ownership' and involvement in developing early intervention strategies.

Snapshot—the essentials of participatory Action Research

Participatory Action Research involves:

- a commitment to including clients in the processes surrounding service improvement. Clients have first-hand knowledge about what makes a service responsive and effective. So, as a minimum, clients' views should be taken into account when planning improvements;
- a commitment to including other local services and community members who could play a role in developing local early intervention capacity; and
- the use of cyclic phases made up of planning, action, observation and reflection.

Action Research should also be used as a tool for improving practice with clients and in local contexts, rather than as just a research tool per se.

As well, service agreement and management arrangements that support Action Research principles do not necessarily have to be consistent with other parts of a service delivery system.

Participatory Action Research is not about getting a consultant to do all the research or delegating Action Research to one person. It is about using the experiences of clients and other stakeholders and it is different to traditional research.

SECTION TWO

ACTION RESEARCH PROCESSES

Aspects of participatory Action Research

A good way to understand participatory Action Research is to look at the concepts in its title.

It is action oriented

It is research

It involves those participating in the process

The 'action' aspect

Informed by understanding, the action provides change. Out of the attempt to produce change, a greater understanding emerges (Dick, 1999, p. 5).

Practitioners are confronted with a range of possibilities about how service delivery can be organised. Sometimes the way a service is delivered relates to the particular history of a sector or a particular community. Sometimes the approaches to service delivery reflect what skills and knowledge the practitioners have. And sometimes they reflect interpretations of what the funding agreement requires.

At its heart, Action Research is not simply about understanding something better. It is also about doing things differently.

The 'action' in Action Research means people should take the agreed action and observe carefully what happens. They should think about what happens during and after the action. 'Action' also means being responsive to issues that emerge along the way. It might be necessary to change the action because something occurs that was not expected. People should not get bogged down in talking and thinking. Instead, after careful reflection and planning, they should try out something and learn from it.

'We learnt that persistence pays off. If strategies trialed are not effective, do not give up, try different strategies' (Youth Homelessness Pilot service).

Snapshot—characteristics of the 'action' in participatory Action Research

- it is deliberately undertaken;
- the nature of the action taken is recorded;
- the action is not slavishly pursued regardless of consequence;
- it is flexible and suits the local context; and
- the action is ethical.

The 'research' aspect

"...JUST CARRY ON AS USUAL DEAR, SHE'S OUR CASE WORKER...SHE'S MOVED IN FOR THE NEXT SIX WEEKS TO EXPERIENCE FIRST HAND ALL THE JOYS OF LIVING WITH YOU...

`Research' simply means to find out. The word comes from the Old French for 'to search closely'. This sums up what Action Research is all about.

Basically, the 'research' in Action Research answers questions and ensures that any actions or changes to services are based on well-founded evidence. It does not mean setting up experimental conditions with client control groups or studying samples of practitioners. It does not involve controlled conditions or generalised findings. That is what traditional scientific research does by isolating cause and effect.

Participatory Action Research is more than just `thinking about practice': Action Research is a continuous process. In practice, it involves the 'no-holds-barred' reality of service delivery, people's lives and the communities they live in.

Action Research interprets what is happening on the ground at different times. Any changes and modifications can be made as new insights and new questions arise. And stakeholders can share their experiences of what is happening, as it unfolds.

To some degree, though, Action Research does involve methodical processes and structures and commitments of time, attention and discipline.

To be credible, changes to service delivery practices must be based on solid evidence. With Action Research, the kinds of 'evidence' can vary quite widely and it does not just depend on numbers and statistics. Changes to service delivery can also depend on the experiences of people actually affected by early intervention.

> Participatory Action Research is open-minded about what counts as evidence (or data)—it involves not only keeping records which describe what is happening as accurately as possible (given the particular questions being investigated and the real-life circumstances of collecting the data) but also collecting and analysing your own judgements, reactions and impressions about what is going on (McTaggart in Goff, 1998).

Snapshot—characteristics of the `research' in participatory Action Research

- it involves asking and answering questions;
- it is systematic, as well as creative and respectful;
- it relies on keeping records in ways that everyone can understand;
- it values people's hunches and ideas, rather than just confirming what people think they already know;
- it is participatory because it brings together stakeholders' views, experiences and knowledge;
- it uses many sources of information to validate its findings; and
- it is transparent and open to challenge because it is made public.

The 'participatory' aspect

Action Research is about researching **alongside** participants rather than doing research **on** them (Quixley, 1997).

It brings diverse groups together, acknowledges views and experiences and incorporates these into the process of improving practice.

A stakeholder is anyone who is affected by the practices or situation that are part of the research. This can include workers, management, other agencies, and community members. Most importantly, it includes the young people, their families and the other people that are involved in early intervention practices.

At the moment, stakeholders are not treated as equals in research processes. For instance, clients are often not asked to play a part in helping to improve services and sometimes it is wrongly assumed that these people are accustomed to dealing with formal processes and bureaucracies.

The degree of interest and capacity to contribute to Action Research will vary between individual stakeholders and good Action Research accommodates these differences.

Why stakeholders' participation is essential to Action Research

Clients, themselves are the ones who are going to be most affected by the changes and new strategies. Because they usually understand the issues and the history they can often suggest acceptable answers and ways to implement them.

In line with the 'two heads are better than one' saying, a diversity of stakeholders can often come up with a better solution together, than any one would have separately (Uhlman, 1995).

There is a long history of tokenist participation in service development because groups like marginalised young people, or their families, are assumed to be not interested or capable of participating in service development processes. However, Action Research creates meaningful opportunities for the widest range of stakeholders to participate in the inquiry process.

Participation is most effective when people feel they have contributed significantly and that they have real influence. It also helps people to learn to act for themselves or be part of a group.

Developing a sense of ownership among stakeholders is a very effective way to encourage people to invest their time and energy in working for change.

> *By including people in decisions about the programs and services that serve them, practitioners extend their knowledge base considerably and mobilise the resources of the community. Including more people in the process may seem to increase the possibilities for complexity and conflict, but it also enables practitioners to broaden their focus from one that seeks the immediate resolution of specific problems to more encompassing perspectives that have the potential to alleviate many inter-connected problems* (Stringer, 1999, p. 37).

Importantly in Action Research, 'participation' is not slavishly pursued. Ethical and practical issues also need to be considered. *(For more information, see Section 3).*

Snapshot—characteristics of the 'participation' in participatory Action Research

- it is meaningful to participants and it is fundamental they have real, and not tokenistic involvement in the whole Action Research project;
- it is purposeful because it encourages participation to genuinely include participants' experiences, views and ideas, even if they seem contradictory and reaching agreement on them is difficult;
- it supports diversity and seeks a broad range of views;
- it is developmental, which means that participation grows over time;
- it is creative because it suits local contexts and group needs by asking the right questions;
- it respects people's comfort levels and boundaries, although it may take time to find the best ways to involve different stakeholders; and
- it is ongoing and built into the Action Research cycles at all stages and levels. It is not just a way of gathering ideas and providing feedback. Rather, it genuinely involves stakeholders in planning and implementing change.

Plan-Act-Observe-Reflect

Plan

Action Research planning involves deciding how to respond to a question, issue or 'hunch' and what to try out. Plans outline details of 'doing'—that is, what, who, when, where, and how. It involves designing a framework to guide action. It may require a series of planning processes with different stakeholders.

Planning stages—Planning involves three main stages. These are clarifying the questions being asked, identifying the actions to be tried out, and developing an action plan.

Planning to get started—Getting the research process going may involve sitting down together and talking about local issues and the concerns that people have about areas of practice.

Example—getting people involved

We actually needed to plan how to get people involved, because people tended to do things in fairly fragmented ways in our area—the school did their thing with young people, Centrelink did their thing, we did ours.

So to get started we had to plan the strategies for getting into contact with others. This involved deciding which workers would approach which agencies; deciding how best to approach the different groups; having a time frame; and planning how we would document and keep track of the `action' as we put our strategies into place.

We had a meeting and brain stormed ideas. Our plan was written up on the computer and everyone given a copy. When we put our plan into action, we learnt a lot from the strategies that didn't work. This helped us develop the next plan (now with more input and information) for another round of action strategies (Youth Homelessness Pilot service).

Planning to take new action—Having gone through the whole Action Research cycle, people may already have enough information and understanding to plan a specific action, intervention or change.

Planning to go in a different direction—It may be, however that a new insight emerges mid-cycle and this leads to a new or different direction from the one originally planned. This could start another cycle that is based on new information which could also affect other Action Research under way.

Example—planning ways to understand

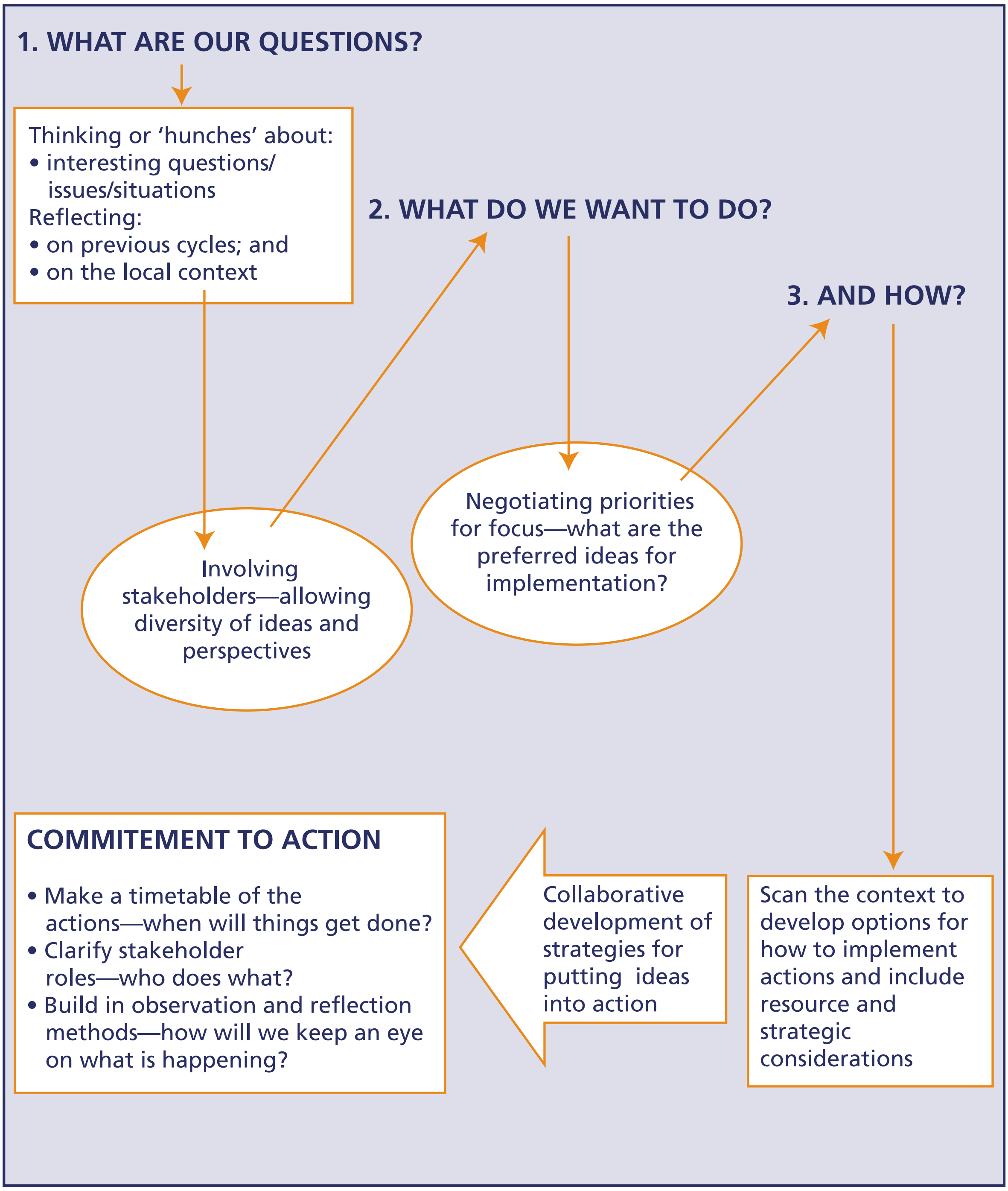
We tried to engage people (young people and parents) in focus groups about what they thought about homelessness, but found it didn't work and not many people got involved. It emerged that the term `homelessness' was culturally inappropriate and was scaring people off. So we then had to plan ways of understanding the meaning of homelessness in that particular cultural context, and how else it could be framed so we could better understand what was going on (Youth Homelessness Pilot service).

How a plan might develop—Developing plans can mean bringing together stakeholders' knowledge, concerns, thoughts and observations. The people involved might develop one or more strategies that respond to the question *'what is it we want to do and how we will do it?'*

If necessary, the plan can be negotiated and modified. In the end, the idea is to get everyone to commit themselves to implementing an agreed plan together.

When we find the allies or stakeholders who share these concerns, we collectively plan ways of asking the right questions to find new ways of understanding and acting on the issue. Our allies may not think in the same way we do about the problem, but they share concern about its significance and they commit to changing their actions about it with us in some way (Goff et. al, 1998, p. 66).

What a plan might look like



Snapshot—refining the planning process

- planning often means clarifying and refining a plan as new and changed understandings emerge;
- it need not be difficult. Planning with stakeholders may already be part of what a service does;
- it involves clients. Existing ways of involving clients in services can be used or adapted;
- cycles can start with relatively small questions; and
- cycles are repeated and as the process becomes more familiar and comfortable, more people are likely to become involved.

Act

> *Action happens when the plan is put into place and the hoped for improvement to the social situation occurs. This action will be deliberate and strategic. It is here that participatory Action Research differs from other research methods in that the action or change is happening in reality and not as an experiment 'just to see if it works'* (Seymour-Rolls & Hughes, 1995, p. 2).

Action stages—The first stage of 'action' is to systematically and creatively implement plans—that is doing what you said you were going to do. The second stage is communicating with others and involving them in the process. The third stage is keeping track of what happens. The final stage involves a possible 'with their feet' vote by stakeholders on any actions and changes.

Action to get started—Action Research cycles can start with a change, seeing what happens and following through with observation, reflection, and further planning. Sometimes starting Action Research is a good excuse to do something that has support but has not previously had the time and attention it needs.

Example—establishing a place to start

> *We had lots of comments from parents who said they didn't know where to turn and felt isolated. So we decided to establish a support group, and in the back of our mind we wanted also to develop some information-type groups around issues of parenting, conflict and stress. So this was a starting place to try something out* (Youth Homelessness Pilot service).

Action usually comes after the development of a plan. The action might need to change and result in another action 'cycle' of its own.

Example—encouraging awareness and links

We wanted to increase awareness of our service with schools. However our strategies to establish links didn't seem to be working. So we changed tack and decided to approach specific people within the schools, in order to engage with these 'key staff' more intensely around issues of creating better linkages and awareness. This of course raised new questions to consider' (Youth Homelessness Pilot service).

Snapshot—taking action

- actions reflect the plan, although the plan can be changed or abandoned;
- actions are deliberate because they are based on planning ;
- actions are not separate from research as the aim is to test questions in practice;
- documenting action as it happens makes describing what happened much easier;
- action does not have a particular end point. If it isn't working, it can be reviewed and re-planned at any time; and
- it does not have to be complex, technical or flashy. It may involve a small change at first like testing ideas and coming up with an initial strategy. People may have to try a number of things before they feel they are on to something, and they will learn something from everything that happens.

Observe

Good observation requires looking at what is happening and describing it accurately. Its purpose is to provide a sound base for reflection by producing a widely accepted understanding of what actually happened (Quixley, 1997).

It involves preserving observations in ways that allow them to be used later for reflection or as evidence. Observing well can be difficult, particularly if you tend to move straight into interpreting and making judgements, but observation is critical if we are able to say something is 'research' and not just our opinion.

Observation stages—The three stages of observation are to look at what is happening, describe what has happened and record what has happened.

Observing to start an Action Research process—An Action Research cycle can begin by taking a look at something that is happening or not happening; using available information; finding out new information; involving a range of people to describe what they think is occurring; and so on.

Example—observing the full picture

Observing what happened when we received referrals gave us insight into the necessity of speedy responses to young people. For example, Centrelink referred a young person to us, who had stated that she wanted to leave home. We decided the situation wasn't urgent, made an appointment for four days time and never saw the young person again. Observation is therefore an active process of describing what is happening—of getting a picture, so you can start to see what action might be needed (Youth Homelessness Pilot service).

Observing during 'action'—Observation and action can occur at the same time. Implementing an action plan and putting strategies in place also involve observing what is happening. If there are a number of participants, observations are likely to vary. These contribute to collecting what is called 'rich' or 'well-rounded' data.

Observing as an ongoing activity—Action Research involves ongoing observation—that is, making mental notes and recording observations. This recognises that the best ideas that help to answer questions often happen when they are least expected. It is important to bring multiple observations together, over time. This builds a coherent picture of what happened, or what is happening. This can mean combining various sorts of observation—including direct observations by workers, clients and other stakeholders, and information about services and from other sources.

Example—seeing what is going on

Getting a foot in the door at this particular [agency] was proving really difficult. I kept a journal of how things were going, and what I saw was going on. In the midst of it all, when I was really frustrated, I found the journal was a way of keeping track of the 'bigger picture' and I saw that actually, things were slowly—slowly—improving, even though at any given point in time it felt like things were 'stuck' (Youth Homelessness Pilot service).

Observation tools—There is a range of ways to observe what it is that is going on. This can involve existing 'proformas' (see Section 5), or you can be entirely innovative. The key is being clear about what sorts of observation tool best suits a particular Action Research question or project.

Examples of observation tools include

- questionnaires;
- minutes of forums and meetings;
- informal interviews and discussions and keeping a journal in the agency to track insights, observations, anecdotes and questions raised;

- group brainstorming;
- client information, referral sheets, work log books and other agency paperwork;
- e-mail and web sites where people can leave comments and ask questions;
- wall charts/graffiti boards; and
- information systems like computer files, coloured folders for different questions, suggestion boxes, and so on.

The levels of routine and detail in keeping track of observations will vary. Having some sort of system will definitely help, and can make it easier for new workers to adapt to Action Research processes.

In Action Research, different stakeholders are sure to observe and remember events differently. In participatory Action Research, this diversity contributes to a richer, more detailed perspective on what is happening.

Asking the right observation questions

Observing in Action Research involves asking some questions. These are:

'How will we find out what happens?'

'How can we get different perspectives on this?'

'Are our ways of observing and recording what happens capturing essential, exciting or unusual features?'

'How can we get the observations of the people most affected by the particular situation being looked at?'

Reflect

Reflection is about building a shared understanding of the meaning of what happened. Essentially it is a process of interpretation, in which a variety of information and perspectives is likely to produce different understandings. Reflection informs improvements to practice and affirms or challenges particular ways of doing things.

Observations and interpretations, are shared to establish the ways in which they do, or do not, ring true for everyone (Everitt et. al, 1992, p. 105).

Reflection stages—Reflection includes a number of stages such as standing back and looking at what happened (the observations). It also involves developing ideas or 'theories' about what happened and sharing these with others so that a range of interpretations and 'meanings' can be considered.

This building of shared meanings helps stakeholders to be actively involved in and develop 'ownership' of any changes. Another stage of reflection is people thinking about their own values and experiences and how these influence the importance they attach to various 'meanings'.

Snapshot—reflecting in different ways

- have a look at what has been done, and the information gathered about it, and let it sit for a while;
- talk to people;
- have some quiet time to work out what you think and encourage others to do the same;
- share ideas, and be honest about them;
- be open about what is going on;
- respect different understandings and cultures;
- be aware of people's values;
- think about things in their context; and
- give ideas/theories time to develop.

Asking the right reflection questions

Reflecting on Action Research involves asking some questions. These are:

'Why did this happen? Do we need to probe further to really understand it?'

'How do different groups understand what happened?'

''What assumptions are we working with? What ideas are being supported or challenged?'

'Who agrees or disagrees and what does this reveal?'

'Who got to have a say and who didn't—and what does that mean?

'Have we developed a shared understanding of the meaning of what happened?

'What implications do our findings have for further change or current practice?'

Reflection: An overview

1. WHAT HAPPENED?

Stakeholders should examine the collected data. They facilitate different perspectives and observations on what has happened.

2. WHY BRAINSTORM?

Brainstorming helps to gain different interpretations of why it happened.

Brainstorm by:

- talking it over;
- sharing insights; and
- piecing things together or 'jigsawing'.

3. NEGOTIATING MEANING

It is important in negotiating meaning to:

- understand that making theory = making informed guesses based on the information (evidence) available;
- compare and account for competing evidence/interpretations; and
- understand that alternative explanations may reveal an unexpected dimension which needs further exploration (this is a good thing).

THEN… people will have a clearer understanding of what happened and why it happened to inform where to go next and what this means for current and future practice.

BUT MAYBE… further clarification about different explanations and viewpoints and more data collection is needed.

SO THAT… short cycles can be used to confirm or otherwise the diverse ideas that emerge in relation to necessary change.

Participants can focus on the strategies and plans needed for implementing the change action.

SECTION THREE

IMPLEMENTATION

How and where to start

Before implementing Action Research, it is worth learning about two suggested sets of activities to help you get started. The first is to consider the context in which Action Research will be implemented. This involves doing a 'scan' of the internal (organisational) and external (community) environments. These scans will help you to decide where to start in developing your Action Research capacity.

The second thing you can do prior to starting is to look at the existing skills and capacities you have already. This is called a 'competencies audit'. Many services already have practices that are consistent with or can contribute to meeting Action Research objectives. The processes for achieving client responsiveness, a culture of service improvement and stakeholder involvement in your strategy's development and review are central. Action Research is also useful for achieving the practices specified in client-centred approaches to case management, quality assurance and community capacity building.

It is important that the 'jargon' of Action Research does not create the false impression that what is happening already needs to be replaced. Action Research will build on the competencies you already have. And these can be adapted over time, as you get into the swing of Action Research.

Doing a scan of internal and external environments

'How does your organisational context affect the implementation of Action Research?'

'How does your community context affect the implementation of Action Research?'

Thinking about these questions can help you start to understand the opportunities for, and challenges of, building early intervention capacity in your organisation and community through Action Research.

(See Section 5 for a proforma for undertaking a 'scan' of your organisational and community contexts).

Competencies audit—building on your strengths

Using Action Research is not about 'overhauling' your service or starting from scratch with a whole new set of skills/practices. It is about drawing from the wide pool of existing resources and strengths that can be found in:

- your Reconnect team;
- your organisation;
- other organisations that are important for the achievement of positive early intervention outcomes;
- the wider community and community groups;
- government systems and bodies; and
- the young people and their families that you are working with.

It is important for you to identify and validate the strengths and skills you have already, as well as the areas that may need some development. Many of the 'key competencies' for undertaking Action Research are things that are already well developed within your service, or simply require 'refocussing'.

> *In many ways it [Action Research] is not different to practices that many agencies have already developed in the community sector of ongoing reflection and improvement* (A Reconnect service).

Areas of competency, directly relevant to Action Research include:

- interpersonal communication and counselling;
- group work;
- community work;
- organisational processes and management; and
- research.

It is also important not to assume that existing skills and competencies mean there is nothing new to learn or develop.

(See Section 5 for an Action Research competencies checklist to help you judge the existing capacities and competencies in your Reconnect context and how gaps can be filled).

Selecting topics to focus on

There are different aspects of practice that Action Research can help you with. For Reconnect, Action Research is essentially service-driven, that is, it is individual services and their stakeholders that choose what they will focus on.

However, under their funding agreements each Reconnect service is required to contribute to a **national** 'pool' of research. Arising from the extensive work of the Youth Homelessness Pilot Programme evaluation and Action Research, a number of 'questions of national significance' were identified. Reconnect services will be expected to nominate one or more similar questions for their Action Research, as well as a number of local questions that they develop themselves.

Action Research is used to understand and promote change. So what local topics might services look at? The list of examples below draws mostly on the Action Research reports of Youth Homelessness Pilot services and gives an idea of the variety of topics that services can apply Action Research to.

Topics for Action Research

Service elements

'What is the most suitable type of intervention, for example, co-mediation?'

'In working with other services, for example, what would it take to have referral processes that are seen as supportive and effective?'

'Should types of intervention change, for example, case management?'

'Should the times intervention services are open be extended or changed, for example, to operate a mix of day-time and after-hours' services?'

'Where should the intervention occur, for example, in the office, home or in an informal setting?'

'What are the workers' roles, for example, whether they have a specific role or multi-focus role?'

'Where should the office be?'

'Should the service model relate to people's needs in a particular geographic area?'

Gaps in services/supports

'What are the barriers to and gaps in providing support for parents/young people who are in a particular situation, for example, where there is drug abuse or violence?'

Good practice attributes

'What attributes do effective peer helpers have?'

'What does a service need to be like to make young people from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds feel comfortable about using it?'

Effective responses to a client's particular situation

'What is the best way to respond effectively to particular clients/families (for example, young people who are gay/lesbian and their families)?'

'Who do young people in the local area turn to in times of crisis and how should practices be structured in light of this?'

'How should early intervention support be provided to young people and their families in a conservative rural district?'

'How do services respond effectively to Indigenous young people, families and communities?'

> *Action Research has shown that parents, particularly fathers, were difficult to engage in the counselling process, but were very responsive to information based interventions* (Youth Homelessness Pilot service).

Ways to best achieve a particular outcome

'What approach makes parents feel they are getting adequate support?'

'What would keep young people out of the refuge scene?'

'How do you support situations where young people feel safe by staying with friends or extended family?'

Assumptions on which the early intervention models are based

'How early should intervention begin?'

'What terminology is best used to describe a particular service. For example, do terms like 'homelessness' and 'early intervention' encourage clients to seek out early intervention support?'

The most effective way to undertake Action Research in a particular setting

'Given the organisational context, community context, character of client contact, resource constraints, and so on, how can Action Research be most effective in a particular setting?'

The key is to select a varied but limited number of topics—topics that you don't already know the answer to but could relate to really important aspects of practice.

A very good way of choosing topics is to focus on asking 'good' questions. It is best to start by inviting stakeholders to share their insights and hunches and to talk about the things they see standing between them and better outcomes. In the case of Reconnect, this particularly applies to young people who are recently homeless or who may soon become homeless unless something happens to help them soon.

Posing Action Research questions

At its core, Action Research aims to improve practice. In the Youth Homelessness Pilot Programme some services had difficulty posing the questions that ultimately led to improvements. Action Research consultant, Suzi Quixley, suggested the questions be phrased starting by simply starting with:

'What would it take to?'

Using this approach made it easier for services to work out questions that focused on improving practice.

Starting small but thinking broad

> *Action Research starts small, by working through changes which even a single person can try, and works towards more extensive changes—even critiques of ideas of institutions that in turn might lead to more general reforms…of system wide policies and practices* (A Youth Homelessness Pilot service).

Where you start depends on where you are at the moment—When local or community of interest early intervention strategies are first established, it can be useful to focus on issues like developing connections and working relationships between first to know agencies. For instance, this could be establishing initial referral and communication links between a Reconnect service, Centrelink, local schools, local youth and family support services, and so on.

Another starting point could be to work out how accessible a Reconnect service is to at-risk young people and their families (for example, opening hours, office location and staff profile). Or you could explore some specific questions about service delivery methods (for example, about case management, material support and counselling).

For well-established services, beginning new research or continuing with current Action Research can offer the chance to reflect on existing outcomes and what it would take to improve services for young people and their families. The key to this is to start with small and concrete questions.

> *It is useful to target identified areas and issues rather than attempt to research broad sweeping topics* (A Reconnect service).

One good question can lead to another—Exploring small, quite concrete questions will often lead to broader, more 'powerful' issues and other questions, as well. For example, while opening hours may be a good topic to start with, broader questions will inevitably emerge.

'Micro' and 'macro' questions —You may find that you end up with an Action Research focus that includes a number of interrelated questions of different sizes. The questions move from small, concrete micro questions that usually contribute to a broader, more macro question.

Examples of micro questions:

'What would it take to improve access to the service for young people and their families? Would doing a particular form of outreach help? Or would developing a joint intake process with first to know agencies help?'

'What would it take to improve the referral numbers from Centrelink?'

Examples of macro questions:

'What would it take to improve the effectiveness of this Reconnect strategy?'

'What would it take to improve the early intervention capacity of this community?'

'What would it take for Indigenous young people in detention to keep in close contact with their families and communities, so that homelessness does not become an unintended consequence of separation?'

In asking macro questions, a number of smaller questions that have local practical relevance would need to be explored.

> *In working with schools in their area, one project identified that the way welfare in schools is funded leads to fragmented approaches to service delivery. …The project worked with the school and a social work student on placement to develop a research proposal. They started by looking at policies and procedures on everything from confidentiality to the provision of tissues in the counselling rooms. The focus was on developing a culture of evaluation and review in the school* (RPR, 1998, p.36).

Example—Asking macro and micro questions

Macro question

'What would it take to increase the options for young people facing homelessness, and those who have recently become homeless?'

Micro questions

'What would it take to improve the capacity of the local Supported Accommodation Assistance Program inter-agency?'

'What would it take for [this service] to re-orient its emphasis onto family reconciliation and case management?'

'What would it take to get [this service] recognised and used as an accommodation service broker?' (A Youth Homelessness Pilot service).

Identifying and addressing barriers and gaps—Achieving positive outcomes for young people and their families through early intervention is not always easy. Factors underpinning people's problems are often multiple and interrelated. The Prime Minister's Youth Homeless Taskforce found barriers and gaps can exist that work against good early intervention outcomes.

By themselves or by interacting with each other, particular policies, structures and practices can affect young people's relationships with their families, and their education, work and community involvement.

By exploring questions about improving practice and the outcomes for young people and families, Action Research can contribute to understanding at the local level of how to address these policies, structures and practices. It can also provide important insights into what changes are necessary to achieve improved outcomes.

> *Working with other agencies has enabled projects to ensure that individuals and families gain better access to the range of services and receive more coordinated support. It has also fostered the development of alliances to address gaps in services and develop strategies to better lobby for changes around systemic issues* (RPR 1998, p. 66).

How to come up with your initial questions—Youth Homelessness Pilot services usually started new Action Research cycles with 'fuzzy' questions. This included reflecting on what happened in earlier cycles and clarifying and refining the actual research process. This led to more focused and detailed questions and plans for the next cycles.

Examples of questions used in practice

Following are samples of questions drawn from the Youth Homelessness Pilot Programme's Action Research reports.

Identifying existing service gaps

Case managers at a particular service were frequently having trouble finding appropriate accommodation (family/home-based) for young people, particularly non-statutory clients aged under 15. The issue was frustrating for service providers and young people alike.

The research question that arose from this was *'What would it take to increase the numbers of family accommodation placements for homeless young people?'* This type of question is broad and exploratory—the initial Action Research cycles are most likely to make the key issues a bit clearer, and raise further questions, rather than provide substantial 'answers' first go.

Investigating a macro question like this will probably reveal many related influences—community attitudes, policy considerations, funding issues—which may trigger their own Action Research cycles.

Reviewing existing arrangements

On learning about the pilot project and a service's plan to conduct Action Research, a stakeholder raised some difficulties with the existing contact arrangements that involved young people within the local schools. The stakeholder suggested that, as part of the Action Research, the service reviews these arrangements and the research question posed was: *'How would the rotation of workers improve the integration of [the service] into schools?'*

This question proposes that an action is undertaken and any changes that flow from that action are then reflected upon. The action and the changes are then evaluated for their effectiveness in improving service delivery.

Raising awareness

One service brought a large group of parents together to let them know about the Action Research it was undertaking. It soon became clear that one of the most fundamental issues was the lack of knowledge about what the service did.

The question that emerged was—*'How can we best inform the identified target group about our service?'*

'Our other source of inspiration for Action Research cycles were interventions that didn't work well'

One particular pilot project decided early on that one of their first Action Research questions would have a macro focus—*'What would it take to keep young people out of the refuge scene?'*

They found that in most cases when they were unable to respond to young people straight away (that is, asking young people to re-contact the service), the young people would never show up again, and ended up 'in the refuge scene'.

Discussions with the young people showed that they were reluctant to go back to the service, once they had been turned away. As well, they said the crisis seemed to lose the momentum that had propelled them to seek help in the first place. With this in mind, the project raised a micro question to begin with—*'What would it take to increase the immediate response capacity of the service?'*

Research questions are valuable only when they are meaningful to the people that answer them. The examples show that an important feature of Action Research is flexibility. There is no need to endlessly pursue dead-ends just because you are pointed that way. In fact, Action Research will probably help you see when you are 'running into walls'!

Implementation issues

Participation

Rigour

Documentation

Action Research and ethics

Participation

Historically, participation in research was either tokenism, forced or only partially successful. This is particularly true in respect of young people and families who have few resources or who are marginalised.

In the past, it was assumed or argued that 'client groups' are not interested or capable of participating in service development processes. However, participatory Action Research creates genuine and meaningful opportunities for a wide range of stakeholders, especially for clients, to participate voluntarily in the inquiry process in ways that are respectful to them.

Collaboration and partnerships are now more common in 'service-land'. Traditionally, policies and service systems segmented or fragmented issues that were complex and interrelated. So there are substantial challenges in Action Research for creating more effective links and relationships between these issues.

The participatory side of Action Research provides a framework for acknowledging and meeting these challenges.

Issues like finding the appropriate level of client and other stakeholder involvement and reducing the tensions in participatory processes are not unique to Action Research. Similar issues can arise, for example, within work teams and organisations; within communities; between organisations; and within different levels of government.

> *[The service] worked to ensure that all the stakeholders in the project had a clear understanding of what Action Research means; that it is actually a process to ensure that projects work with communities to enable them to work effectively together to address the needs of those communities* (A Youth Homelessness Pilot service).

These issues do not make participation daunting or unmanageable—they are simply some things to keep in mind when participating in Action Research processes. The danger is to think of participation only in terms of its ideals of collaboration; sharing; creative generation of ideas; mutual support; and negotiation, without thinking about some of the challenges it represents. Many human service organisations will already be very aware of these and have developed skills and strategies for managing them.

There is no formula for 'good participation'. It will depend on the local context, the questions being asked, as well as a range of individual, organisational and cultural factors.

> *It's preferable to come at it from the angle of meeting the community, to find out what they need. Consultation—they need to be in on the ground level, to develop and increase perceptions of ownership and involvement. It won't work otherwise, we just waste time and resources, and repeat the mistakes of every other service which has come in and done the same thing*
> (An Indigenous stakeholder, cited in ARTD 1998, p. 4).

Levels of participation will vary according to how willing and prepared the participants are to be involved and consulted.

Building participation is about building trust that encourages people to be involved because they can see the value in it.

Building trust is about demystifying Action Research and showing people that not only can they participate (and that their contributions are important, even essential), but that it is 'worth it'. In other words, they will see results from their involvement.

> *It is counter-productive to do research involving other players where there is no organisational intention to act upon the findings. Members of the public quickly take a cynical view of people and organisations that do that* (A Youth Homelessness Pilot service).
>
> *Participants' previous experiences with tokenism consultation processes, required that I ensured that I followed through on the suggestions. Participants*

commented on their feelings of being instrumental in service development/ownership and changes that would address a service gap. This was particularly with regard to young people designing a program at the school level (A Youth Homelessness Pilot service).

The idea is not to 'rush' into complex Action Research questions straight away. Rather, first test out what it means to use Action Research on smaller, more manageable cycles. The initial stages of implementing Action Research can assist a range of 'players' to become familiar with, and engage in, the research processes.

At the same time, insights into the best way to undertake Action Research in your local context may emerge and allow your service and other stakeholders, including clients, to become confident about what Action Research means for them.

Specific issues related to local service contexts—Thinking about what culturally appropriate means of participation are appropriate to your specific service, and different community and cultural groups is an important part of participatory Action Research.

Factors such as the number of workers and resources available to manage a range of participatory mechanisms also need to be considered. For instance, *'are there existing focus groups, forums, committees that can play a role?'*

Sometimes, collecting information informally can better suit your target group and community. At other times, early intervention strategy development might involve a large, structured gathering of local interests. Some Reconnect services have set up community-wide or targeted reference groups to support Action Research, while others tap into existing community consultation arrangements.

Keeping in mind that Action Research is flexible—that is, it can be tailored to suit local needs, rather than requiring services and groups to 'fit' into them—specific issues faced by your agency can require some reflection. This means that participatory processes can also be tailored to suit the diverse needs of stakeholders.

Across the three targeted communities (Vietnamese, Hispanic and Samoan) some of the issues of the young people will be similar and some will be different. We have to look at different ways of working with different communities (A Youth Homelessness Pilot service).

The issues and questions being explored—This may be about asking:

'What range of stakeholders should be involved in this stage of Action Research development, or particular question? How will we ensure we can access a diversity of views on this question? Is consultation or more active participation suitable to this question or aspect of the process?'

'Do we need to 'get something' happening quickly, before we really get serious about collaborating with others?'

'Are we 'stuck' and need to take the time to generate ideas and hear the viewpoints of others in order to get fresh direction?'

'Is the question macro or micro? Will some stakeholders be involved in some parts and others in different parts?'

'What is the most useful way of 'unpacking' this question? Can we break it down into smaller elements?'

Given the variety of service contexts, there is no ideal model of participation. Stakeholders can participate just as informants or they can actually be co-researchers, alongside agency workers. Combining the experiences, skills and resources of all the stakeholders is more likely to lead to a detailed understanding of the solutions to particular problems or situations.

Participatory Action Research is both developmental in its process (ways of doing things) and contextual (responsive to local circumstances). It is about weaving participation into an Action Research approach and building a strategy that makes it more participatory over time.

Participation and service users

> *Bringing different experiences of an issue to light in a public setting and negotiating collective understanding of its significance involves a methodical collaborating. It requires a carefully managed working space amongst people who may not have had contact with each other before, or who may have mixed feelings about each other or the organisation they represent. The issue being addressed may be very painful, complex or just 'too hard', requiring a lot of effort for people to give it time and the degree of thought that it may need in order to be understood* (Goff, 1998, p. 66).

Initially, clients experiencing difficulties and crisis may not want to participate, particularly if they cannot see how it is relevant to their own situation. However, many Youth Homelessness Pilot services involved clients who were at crisis points. The clients found this experience positive and empowering because it meant that services wanted to make real changes based on the clients' personal contributions.

Most people like to 'have their say'. Negotiating ways to best achieve this without having adverse effects on service delivery, is an important area for staff discussion and reflection. *(For more information about this, see 'Ethics and Action Research' below)*.

Achieving client participation tends to become easier. Over time, as people become more confident about 'reflecting' on the services they access and Action Research, itself, becomes an every day process within the service.

> *[Participation involves] conveying to the clients the message that they are respected as individuals and their opinions and suggestions are important to the project and the community. This is especially important when clients are at their most vulnerable* (A Youth Homelessness Pilot service).
>
> *When issues arise about service gaps, Action Research encourages workers and service users to work together to look at possible options and enables those options to be further developed. Action Research takes away the `expert' interpreting `need gaps'. Via the process of consultation, Action Research empowers the service user, and provides the mechanisms to put ideas into practice* (A Youth Homelessness Pilot service).

Inter-agency participation—Participatory processes allowed some Youth Homelessness Pilot services to achieve higher levels of inter-agency collaboration. This included making more links and networks than they had ever previously achieved, with genuinely beneficial outcomes.

Achieving this can take time and creativity. It can involve overcoming a number of possible barriers such as suspicion *('what will we get out of this, and why does this need to happen now?')* It can also lead to apathy (we don't have the time/resources/inclination to be involved), and issues of power (we already know how to do this best and we can't learn anything from this process).

As time goes on, however many local community services come to appreciate the increased coordination and sharing that result from Action Research.

> *We can't underestimate the importance of bringing people together who haven't sat down in the same room before. Especially here in Darwin, that has been an issue, and I think one of the real outcomes of the project is that now people are aware of and talking to each other…and that wouldn't have happened without the project* (A Youth Homelessness Pilot service).

Action Research projects commonly includes a range of participatory strategies—some involve clients, some are inter-agency and some include both. To answer Action Research questions, it is better to have a mix of strategies that allows maximum participation.

Asking the right participation questions

Who are treated as participants?

'Who has a 'stake' in the issue in question? Who is deciding this?'

'Will all stakeholders participate in all aspects?'

How much do they participate?

'Are there natural or enforced 'limitations' on the participation of certain groups?'

'What factors enhance/obstruct greater participation?'

'Are more limited forms of participation acceptable/required sometimes?'

'How is participation managed at the various stages?'

In what ways do they participate?

'Do they participate in a consultation role as informants or as collaborative developers of research questions?'

'Or, are they co-researchers managing their own aspects of the research in either or both informal and formal structures?'

'How is power genuinely shared?'

Can participation be enhanced as the Action Research progresses?

'As agency workers get a better 'grasp' on what Action Research is and how it is done, does this help increase the levels of participation of others?'

Are the desired participants willing and/or able to participate in the ways imagined?

'What are some of the factors that relate to participants being willing and able to be involved? What are some strategies for addressing these issues?

'What supports need to be put into place?'

'Do we have options for participation that don't just involve lots of meetings?'

Suggested participation strategies

Informants

Reference Groups

Focus Groups

Co-researchers

Peer researchers

Informants—When we ask someone their opinion or view, they become 'informants'. In Action Research, all stakeholders should have this role.

> *Making Action Research integral to our practice has meant that any, or every contact in the daily interactions of providing a service have provided opportunities to involve stakeholders in the evaluation of the service* (A Youth Homelessness Pilot service).

Potentially, anyone who has some sort of knowledge of the issue at hand could be considered an informant. Action Research gives people a chance to have their say in a variety of ways, usually without a lot of 'structured effort' by the informant.

Having an informal conversation is one of the best ways to get people's opinions and ideas. Stakeholders who are not used to 'being involved' or do not see the process of inquiry as 'their issue', may be willing informants or interested in an **active** kind of role.

Informants can provide valuable insights at all stages of the Action Research process. For example, a question like *'do you think we should provide a free-call crisis number at the service?'* may be asked during the planning phase. Or, a lead in question to this could be *'I noticed you've been using the after hours service—how has that been?'*

Reference groups—Reference groups are set up to seek people's views and feedback in structured ways. They are good at getting a broad range of views because they include people from a number of 'sectors'. This could be people such as representatives from other agencies and community groups. Reconnect workers may not necessarily be regular members of reference groups.

A reference group may be established because of a particular question, for instance, opening hours. Or they may look at a number of questions about a broader theme like good practice with gay and lesbian young people and their families.

A reference group could be a client group, for example a representative group of young people from local schools. They could discuss and negotiate potential Action Research questions; provide input on action that suits the needs of particular groups; and give feedback about how it feels to play a role in strategic change.

A reference group can also involve people that traditionally don't access the service—for example, fathers and male caregivers. The aim would be to find out how to encourage them to make more use of the service.

Representatives of local service providers could also form a group. They would meet regularly to discuss Action Research questions related to service coordination, barriers and recurrent problems, and share 'good practice' insights.

An initial step was developing a reference group. This group consisted of 22 individuals, representing agencies in the provision of services to young people in the central Sydney area. Reference group members generated several potential Action Research questions (Youth Homelessness Pilot service).

Focus Groups—Focus groups tend to provide specific feedback on particular issues or topics. Unlike reference groups that tend to be ongoing, focus groups usually involve one or maybe two discussion sessions. Focus groups are good at capturing the views of a particular group or sub-population, such as a focus group of young people living in alternative care.

Focus groups encourage the exploration of people's feelings, reservations, hunches and instincts around particular topics. They can be organised in ways that are culturally appropriate and accessible to those involved.

To keep the group's 'focus' on the issue at hand, someone usually facilitates the discussions. Generally small in size, one-off and topic-specific, they may be less demanding and more comfortable for particular people or groups. An example may be a focus group that looks at what beliefs/ideas Vietnamese mothers hold about counselling and mediation. The closed focus of these groups offers a measure of 'safety' for those involved to share their views and concerns.

Focus groups may be a good way to hold a work-team discussion about a particular aspect of Action Research such as *'what do we each think participation means?'*

Co-Researchers—These are groups that work 'beside' service researchers in developing Action Research processes, implementing strategies, interpreting data and evaluating change.

Co-research groups undertake part or all of the Action Research for one or more questions. Co-researcher groups can have significant control in Action Research projects—for instance by coming up with the best ways to explore particular questions and practice issues. Often, the role of Reconnect workers is to maintain a high level of active co-researcher participation by facilitating and supporting the groups.

Example—young co-researchers help service planning

A co-research group of young people was set up to explore the question 'what would it take for young people to feel safe about accessing [the service] for support?' As part of a planning process, the young people coordinated their classmates' answers to questionnaires and interviews, and completed the observation and reflection phases.

The understandings about the issues of access and confidentiality and the service's profile provided rich and in-depth data that was used as the basis for further planning. The co-research group also produced a video for local schools that covered some of the issues raised in their inquiry processes (A Youth Homelessness Pilot service).

Peer research by young people—Peer research is also known as 'peer interviewing'. 'Peer interviewers' can be loosely defined as individuals with a connection to a specific target group, and who are selected and trained to undertake data collection' (Williams & Roche, 1999, p. 220).

Drawing on the work of Williams and Roche, in the context of Reconnect, peer interviewing may mean choosing and training young people who are a part of a particular and perhaps difficult to access target group, to carry out aspects of the Action Research.

These young people are able to link into their peer group those who may not otherwise have the opportunity (or the inclination) to participate in Action Research or other consultative strategies. The peer interviewers know how to approach and involve their peers and are more likely than other researchers to get information from them.

Although similar, peer research is different from using a co-research group Peer research is about gaining information about specific issues from 'hidden populations'—that is, from sub-populations of young people that are difficult to access via more formal research methods. On the other hand, co-research groups tend to gather information from a broader group (such as young people in schools) where a diversity of views is explored.

Peer researchers might be young people that you already have contact with who are from hidden populations and who agree to act as a link between their own peer group and the Action Research.

The nature of peer interviewing

The 'sample' of people chosen by peer interviewers will largely depend on factors like the relationships they have with the group members and whether particular people agree to participate. This might relate to if existing friendships influence whether the young person chooses to take part. So while the sample can be rich in depth because of existing relationships and connections, it may lack in breadth in terms of representation.

The relationship between the peer researcher and their peer group may mean certain subjects are avoided or group members may not want to talk about them. But the nature of the relationships can also lead to information that might not otherwise be shared and this often provides good insights for Action Research.

Generally, peer interviewers are 'fluent' in the culture and language of their peer group. This can play an important role in interpreting data. In essence, peer interviewing means that peer researchers convince young people to participate who might not otherwise be 'heard'.

Importantly, young people who undertake peer interviews should feel they are playing a key role in the Action Research. For Reconnect services, using peer interviewing involves planning and a fair bit of work in selecting, training and supporting the young people involved. It may also mean paying them a fee.

Williams and Roche (1999) provide an overview of a research project that used young people as peer interviewers, including how they were chosen and trained and how they helped to develop the research tools.

Snapshot—the role of participants in Action Research

The role participants have in decision-making in Action Research is a key issue for implementation. An important question to ask is 'are they just participants or informants that we consult or is their role more central to the planning, acting, observing and reflecting processes?' The Reconnect Action Research approach to this is not prescriptive but involves two principles. These are:

- the role which participants have in the Action Research should be seen by all those involved as meaningful and respected; and
- the level of stakeholders' involvement should become greater over time. This sees participation as something that actively increases, rather than as a static expectation.

Examples of commonly-used participation strategies

Who are the stakeholders?

<table>
<tr><th>How much are stakeholders involved?</th><th>Other service providers/community groups</th><th>Internal stakeholders</th><th>Clients</th></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="5">For the whole Action Research process</td><td colspan="2">Reference group—representative of all local youth services</td><td>Reference group of particular client group such as gay and lesbian young people</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">Stakeholder forums to explain Action Research and discuss/raise issues</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="3"></td><td>Dedicate time to discussing Action Research in general at staff/ team/ management meetingsæthat is work-team focus group</td><td>Co-Research group of young people doing Action Research in their school</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Ongoing informal consultations</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">A reference group for a particular questions, for example, opening hours</td></tr>
</table>

For aspects of the Action Research process	*A reference group* for a particular question, for example improving case management Work team *focus group* to discuss particular issues within the service itself raised through Action Research process *Focus groups* to discuss issues/questions raised through Action Research process, for example local service coordination *Regular meetings* with specific service providers, for example local schools Reconnect practitioners informally weave particular questions into client interactions	*Feedback forms* about service *Focus groups* to discuss issues raised through Action Research process, for example attitudes to counselling *Contracted and paid young people* to work within aspects of project *Comments boards/boxes* in service for clients to have their say about changes.

The field of community development has a long history of engaging people in participatory processes. This includes some basic principles that underpin a community developmental model of consultation, which can also be applied to participatory Action Research.

A summary of community development consultation principles

A community development approach involves effective consultation that aims to ensure authenticity and relevance to the lives and work of those being consulted. It should enable participants to express their views in their own terms/language and engage participants in ways that promote awareness of less obvious alternatives.

The approach also provides multiple avenues for input and use of existing community networks. It should ensure immediate as well as longer-term positive outcomes for participants and their communities.

As part of community development, those consulted—including decision makers and community members—should be recognised and empowered.

Established structures for ongoing involvement in development are important, as well as feedback mechanisms that ensure any recommendations genuinely reflect community perceptions (McArdle, 1999, p. 66).

Rigour

Rigour refers to qualities of Action Research that establish its validity and credibility—that is, qualities that ensure the outcomes and findings are seen to be, and are, well founded. Paying attention to the characteristics and values of participatory Action Research will increase the 'rigour' of your findings.

Validity is about the extent that the findings/outcomes are based on 'truth'. In traditional scientific research, the truth may be thought of as a more 'objective' truth, existing 'out there' not coloured by bias, and able to be repeated under the same conditions. In Action Research, the truth can seem to be the opposite to this—that is, it is 'embedded' in local contexts, coloured by people's experiences and values, and it is distinctive to a specific cultural or regional location.

This doesn't mean that what you find out by using Action Research is not valid or is not 'research'. It **does** mean that you need to make sure your conclusions are well founded and not based on untested assumptions, preconceptions or hunches. The 'truths' may change over time, but Action Research is the ideal way to keep track of developments in the 'real world'.

Action Research involves asking questions in a particular context and validity is about the extent the answers you come up with are accurate in that context.

Increasing rigour in your Action Research processes doesn't actually involve any more work. It is simply what you are going to be doing anyway in 'good' Action Research.

Achieving rigour involves:

Participation

Multiple flexible methods

Having an evidence base

Transparency

Developing detailed answers to questions

Seeking disagreement

Multiple cycles of Action Research

Participation—There is an essential link between participation and rigour. Participation increases commitment. The more participants are involved, the greater their likely commitment to whatever action is planned. Deeper involvement and commitment of participants can also increase the diversity of data generated and improve the quality and richness of the understandings (Dick, 1999).

Participation contributes to open and transparent Action Research processes. Participation by people most likely to be affected by the research findings provides an important 'reality check' for any changes or actions. By bringing together a range of viewpoints you are building a more accurate picture of what is happening.

Multiple, flexible methods—Using multiple methodologies (ways of doing things), multiple sources of information, multiple processes for gathering and analysing information, and comparing data and interpretations to things that have gone before (that is, previous practice methods and outcomes, as well as literature) enhances rigour.

Collecting a variety of data gives a more diverse and complex picture. It gives a clearer picture of 'the way things really are'.

> *If you only use questionnaires to seek the opinion of clients about a practice issue, you are probably limiting and distorting the type of feedback you'll receive, because questionnaires will suit some sorts of people and some sorts of questions, but not others* (A Youth Homelessness Pilot service).

Seeking out a number of voices and in a range of different ways that suit various groups assists in making well-founded 'rigorous' conclusions. Looking at an issue from a range of perspectives is a bit like colouring in a picture. You might start out with a sketchy, black and white outline of what something 'looks like'. Then, as people provide their own views and input, the issue comes into clearer focus and the picture becomes more complex and three-dimensional with subtle shadings and colour.

The flexibility of Action Research can add to its rigour. There is no single experimental design to capture data. It uses a range of methods that are locally and culturally appropriate.

Having an evidence base—Action Research needs to result in insights that are supported by evidence. Evidence can be found in a variety of places and include the observations recorded of what happened when you tried something. It also includes the feedback you have from those involved or affected by an action. This could be client feedback via standard processes used in an agency or via specially developed strategies to fit a particular part of your inquiry. Remember that getting more feedback a little down the track can help provide the evidence that shows outcomes are sustainable.

Evidence also comes from client and service level data. This 'quantitative' data can often show particular trends or outcomes. It can be very useful to draw on data from the agencies you are collaborating with—agencies that have 'part of the picture'.

Sometimes it is useful to do some more 'traditional' research to feed into your Action Research process. Doing some semi-structured interviews with a sample of clients can explore in-depth a particular question. In general, however, Action Research is not meant to depend on more formalised research.

You can also collect evidence from other local research that is relevant to your Action Research. As well, evidence from things like letters, minutes of meetings, and other documents that show support for a particular strategy can often provide evidence of what has happened and the level of support you have.

Keep in mind there are ethical issues associated with gathering, recording and distributing information. *(For more information, see 'Ethics and Action Research below).*

Transparency—In Action Research, the continual process of reviewing understandings, interpretations and findings provides a system of 'checks and balances'.

At the end of the day, interpretation is about what something means to those who have experienced it. Transparency means people keeping an eye on what is going on and asking—*'what is the evidence for developing certain interpretations, how were interpretations translated into strategies for change, and do they actually address the issues which have emerged from reflection?'*

Action Research processes are constantly open to scrutiny—that is, letting a range of people observe, reflect, question, and interpret what is happening as it goes along. This means that sometimes participants can claim their input was misinterpreted and say 'no that's not what we meant' **before** a strategy is developed and implemented. So, an open process also allows for monitoring of who is involved and consulted, and what their input actually means.

> *One project devoted an office wall in a public area to AR, and mapped their emerging AR questions, processes and outcomes on a day-to-day basis* (Quixley, 1998, p. 33).

Seeking disagreement—Life would be a lot easier if everyone could agree on everything, on what things mean, and on what and how things should be done. Usually, the more open you are and the more willing you are to involve people, the more conflict and disagreement will surface! It is easy to ask a question and then go and look for the information that provides the answer that you want to hear. What's not so easy is to actively look for information that contradicts or challenges what you think is true, to come up with a range of alternate explanations—in fact, to seek to **disprove** your understanding.

The benefits of seeking 'disagreement'

Seeking 'disagreement' (or `disconfirming' evidence) is an important part of achieving validity and rigour in your Action Research. This is because 'disconfirming' evidence tells you something about the issue you are looking at that you may never have considered. It also tells you something about the issue from another perspective.

In turn, this disagreement can put the pressure on you to make sure that the explanation or meaning you think is most correct, is grounded in `good evidence' and more robust than other, alternate explanations and meanings. It also challenges you to come up with really good reasons for what you believe to be true and to take into account other 'evidence' like the views and experiences of a range of stakeholders, in literature, and so on, which you may not have previously considered.

You may find that other evidence genuinely **does not** confirm what you thought was the truth and that holding onto that belief was what was 'holding you back'. Or you may find that alternate explanations are not as robust, and the one you have reached is justified.

Seeking disagreement—an essential part of achieving rigour

Seeing disagreement builds meaning by taking you through a process of weighing up a variety of possibilities that, ideally, leads to a deeper understanding of the issues and a sturdier basis for believing what you believe.

The transparency of the process and involvement of stakeholders adds legitimacy to your conclusions—after all, you're not trying to 'pull a swifty'. You are genuinely interested to find out what is going on, why, and what that means for change. Therefore, while disagreement can be difficult to face, it is actually helping you to achieve rigour, and to understand and account for the complexity of the issues your agency is addressing.

Developing detailed answers to questions but not over-generalising

Providing detailed responses to your Action Research questions also achieves rigour. This means explaining what is meant and in what contexts it applies; qualifying statements; being tentative when this is warranted; and avoiding categorisations and overstatements.

If one of your Action Research questions is about a small, specific, localised issue you may not need long, complex processes of data collection, reflection, documentation, and so on. To get an answer, each Action Research question will require different levels of complexity. Some Action Research questions and issues don't require too much 'unpicking' before you get to their essence. Others (maybe those which are about complex/systemic issues) will need longer and more careful processes (cycles) of inquiry, analysis and documentation.

With macro questions—that is, questions of national significance that may apply across the field of early intervention—you may want to make generalisations from your findings. But the only valid generalisations are drawn from a firm knowledge base, including accurate documentation of your Action Research cycles. In any case, generalisations should be qualified so that you are not overstating the scope of your answers. In this sense, your Action Research would be a 'case study' and could contribute to a larger research process.

Ensuring rigour through documentation

Rigour essentially asks *'do the findings and understandings gained from this Action Research process stand up?'* and *'are the intended changes supported/warranted?'*

When dealing with short, small, specific questions or issues in your locality (such as the impact of opening hours), rigour comes when the answers are meaningful and credible at that local level. This may mean you don't need wads of `documentation' as much as you need collaborative processes, which are recognisable and meaningful to stakeholders.

If you want to make broader generalisations beyond the local context, then the way you have reached your conclusions needs to be observable (seen). This is because much of the intended audiences (for example, other early intervention agencies, government officials and community groups) were not necessarily present throughout your Action Research process. They cannot always see how you did and understood things. This reinforces the strong need to record accurately your Action Research processes.

It is essential that findings and conclusions be actually considered credible by stakeholders. In fact, if the answers that you come up with are not seen as credible, valid or meaningful, then you cannot say you have achieved rigour.

Start to think about rigour by asking yourself who the audience of your findings will be and what that audience will need to satisfy them that your conclusions are well founded—even if the question is small, concrete and localised.

Achieving rigour without documenting every small thing

Achieving rigour is particularly cumbersome in the context of short, specific cycles. The essence is the 'observability' of your process and how you can be sure that others—intended audiences—can see how you reached understandings drew conclusions and supported change. The level of documentation required for this can vary and you can adapt your recording systems to suit the contexts and purposes of your own Action Research questions.

Multiple cycles of Action Research—Maintaining focus on a question/area over time, refining the questions and refining understandings, and developing a stronger basis for conclusions also enhances rigour. With time, it will become clearer what dominant themes emerge from your collective experience. It is quite likely your answers will develop greater complexity and detail, as well. These qualities protect you against accusations that you just thought up the response 'on the hop'.

Bob Dick has written several articles on rigour in Action Research. *(For information about these, visit his web site at: www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arhome.html)*

> *Involving participants allows the assumptions of the researchers to be challenged. Above all, Action Research is emergent. As understanding grows, so action becomes better informed, and so does the methodology which is being used* (Dick, 1999, p. 6).

Documenting Action Research insights and processes

Documentation is about capturing what is being done, how and why it is being done and who is involved in doing it.

The best documentation methods are the ones that let you keep a handle on Action Research questions and insights and they are the ones that you should use!

> *A consistent yet flexible approach to Action Research must be developed with, and by, stakeholders. Informative, meaningful, relevant and engaging reporting formats need to be used* (A Youth Homelessness Pilot service).

Documentation is a very important part of Action Research because it 'captures' your information and insights. It is also crucial to achieving the openness needed and the ability to share with others what is being observed and learnt. Documentation helps you keep track of changes and patterns and it makes evaluation and reporting much easier.

"WE'RE SHORT OF SPACE SO CULL THEM DOWN TO ONE SHELF PLEASE ...AND DON'T THROW OUT ANYTHING THAT'S VALUABLE..."

Documentation does not just involve formal reports, or 'set' activities such as meetings, nor is it intended to involve hours of note-writing and lengthy reports. Again, there is no formula for how much or what type of documentation equals 'good' documentation.

> *Through the process of supervision, I have observed that there is a wealth of AR information, both macro and micro, surfacing during supervision, debriefing, case conferencing, team problem solving, network meetings etc. A kit that includes a model for recording AR information during these service delivery activities, in an accessible format, would be very useful* (A Reconnect service).

(For more information about documenting Action Research, see Section 5).

Suggested documentation methods

You can take notes after talking informally with clients and other stakeholders and recording your observations/thoughts/feelings in a journal. You can also document progress on running sheets, charts, maps, and tables.

Another way to document projects is to develop a colour-coded folder system to keep track of different kinds of information. You can also use existing client data sheets.

Brainstorming in groups or teams using butcher's paper is also effective. And you can collate and sort information into manageable chunks from, say, comment boards or suggestion boxes.

Other good ideas include developing or using simple proformas for writing things down each day and having 'summary' sheets which you can add to each week or month.

We found it helpful to develop the practice of jotting down and recording thoughts, events, client comments and anything related to the question, filing these 'scraps' of information, to compile and analyse them at a later date (A Reconnect service).

Snapshot—the importance of documenting Action Research

- documentation 'beds down' your research process—that is, you are not just 'doing'—you are systematically capturing the planning, acting, observing and reflecting processes in ways that suit your agency, your target groups and your questions;
- documentation occurs at all stages of Action Research and it assists with working through each phase. The documentation of 'actions' forms a large part of 'observing'. Having clearly recorded and well-organised information about what is happening, how it is happening and why also helps to bring the processes together. Then you can interpret and understand (reflect)—and plan again; and
- a range of stakeholders can take part in and contribute to documentation. It is a way of making research processes and interpretation more accessible to a range of people so they can offer comment and responses.

To make the most of what you can 'get out of' your ongoing documenting, you may need to work out how to integrate this into daily/weekly service processes, so that it is not haphazard or too time-consuming.

The Action Research questions were kept in mind through daily interactions, with pertinent issues being documented. In this way, material could then be reflected upon within the service, and offered to key stakeholders for further reflection. These learnings continued to inform the service delivery and caused components of our model to steadily evolve (A Youth Homelessness Pilot service).

(See Section 5 for tools and case examples that offer some practical ideas for including Action Research documentation in your day-to-day service delivery systems).

Publicising/publishing Action Research

Action Research insights should be available to others, so that they can be shared and affirmed or challenged. In traditional research this is achieved by publishing. In Action Research, this can include, for instance, a simple poster up on the wall; sharing a research 'write up' with other services and community contacts involved in Reconnect; creating a web site for your Action Research; and/or publicising your findings and feedback mechanisms.

You can also use a peer review strategy, such as a good practice forum, or an e-mail group or Action Research web site to share your 'case study' and ask for feedback.

In sharing your Action Research with others you need to indicate how sure you are of what you have found out. Maybe it is something quite tentative that you are keen to investigate further or something you would like others to comment on. The importance of sharing a **written** account should not be underestimated. This can help a to clear up what you think the insights are and what the evidence is for them.

> *Projects talked about the need for further work to publicise the good practice they have developed. This would have the important function of further dissemination of the models to other service providers and could also be used to argue for other avenues of funding. This would mean developing strategies to provide other agencies with 'evidence' to support good practice. To be effective the information needs to be presented in different formats for different audiences* (RPR, 1998, p.63).

Ethics and Action Research

In all types of human service work, there is a wide range of ethical issues to consider.

Legal and ethical considerations apply to workers' and agencies' everyday practices, including their organisational policies and the broader legislative and policy contexts in which they work. These considerations apply to Action Research.

If possible, workers and services involved in research should seek advice from people experienced in ethics, and also get their own organisations to approve their research approach.

There are ethical issues associated with gathering, recording and distributing information from people (including clients) and agencies.

Participants' involvement should always be on the basis of informed consent—that is it should be voluntary. Reconnect clients and others should always have privacy and confidentiality about their situations, experiences and views guaranteed. This means that when information is recorded and distributed it should be done in a way that protects privacy and confidentiality, unless prior and informed consent has been given.

Seeking people's views and feedback can sometimes raise unexpected issues. You should let people know if this happens, support them if they feel concerned about any issues that relate to their participation and tell them how to raise these and any grievances they might have.

You should consider the question of ethics in the planning stage of your Action Research process and regularly revisit the ethics of what you are doing. If any ethical issues come up you should deal with them quickly in line with professional and organisational standards. You should also ensure that the way you 'store' data does not compromise the interests of clients and any other people that are involved.

SECTION FOUR

CHALLENGES AND TROUBLESHOOTING

In implementing Action Research, it is quite possible that you will come up against some significant barriers.

This section draws on some existing resources. Many of the barriers were encountered by the Youth Homelessness Pilot services. Also, Quixley (1997, pp. 41-47; 1998, pp. 23-31) provides some insights into the barriers and suggests some strategies to overcome them. In particular, her *Learnings and Future Applications* (1998), more often referred to as The Action Research Commentary, identifies a number of them.

Making assumptions about Commonwealth expectations

Service concerns that their Commonwealth funding would be at risk if they significantly changed their service-delivery approach—Being concerned about this is understandable given services are bound by service funding agreements. These agreements involve considerable detail about the way a service will operate to reach program outcomes. However, this does not mean that the service-delivery approach cannot be changed. In fact for Reconnect, the funding agreements include Action Research as a way of bringing about better understandings and improved practices.

While the Reconnect Program operates within a framework underpinned by good practice principles, there is flexibility for Reconnect services and their co-researchers to feel free to explore what good practice means in their context. Action Research is a core part of the Reconnect Program, and well-founded change is not only okay but also central to the program's implementation.

Building Action Research

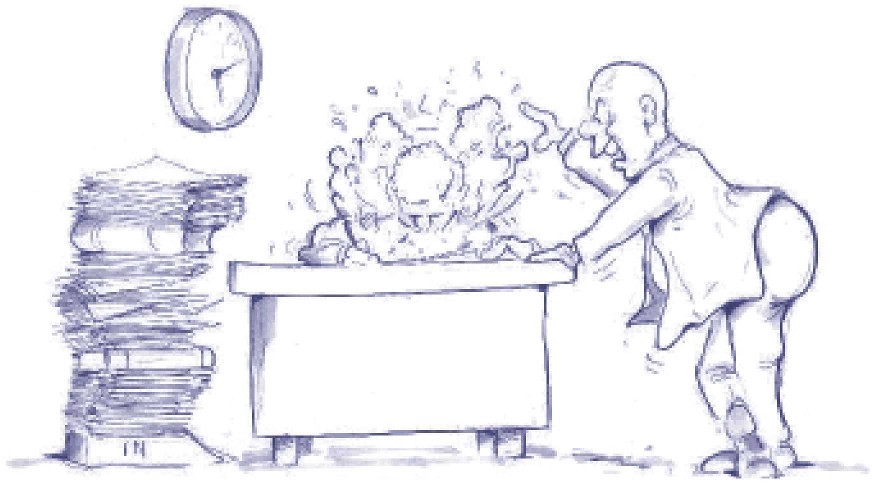
Finding Action Research daunting because there seems to be so much extra work involved—The full implications of using participatory Action Research can be daunting because developing an Action Research approach may require substantial shifts in how we think and operate individually and as organisations. Importantly, you will need to allow a reasonable time for a coherent, local approach to develop.

Strategies to help deal with the larger implications of Action Research include combining different methods to gain information. For instance, the Reconnect Program provides written resources as well as training and mentoring and an interactive web site where people can ask other service providers for information, ideas or strategies.

You could also start with a small number of fairly specific questions and gather data by making minimal changes to existing processes. And you can start with just a small group of stakeholders and build on from there.

Setting priorities and timing

Insufficient time or pressures to prioritise service delivery over Action Research



"YOU WOULDN'T BE DISTRACTED IF WE COUNTED DOWN TO THE DEADLINE TOGETHER, NOW WOULD YOU?..."

Time is a precious and limited resource. Inevitably you will face tensions over the time spent on both direct service delivery and on Action Research.

In the Youth Homelessness Pilot services, single-worker projects found this a particular problem. They often felt they risked credibility if they had to make a choice between 'being open or closed'.

Quality Action Research takes time. Within the context of Reconnect, taking time to implement Action Research is quite legitimate. At first, you will have to spend time working out how Action Research will become a part of your service. You will also need to take the time to educate and engage the stakeholders, develop systems and just get used to how Action Research 'feels'.

You will gradually be able to incorporate elements of the Action Research cycles into service delivery, so that there is less tension between these two parts of your practice.

So, it is worth setting aside enough time to develop your Action Research processes.

It is important that clearly negotiated and legitimised organisational space is allowed for service development, including Action Research, to occur. This has been identified as part of good practice. This should be actively supported by both staff and management. You will probably need to establish new ways for people to come together, you'll invariably find you keep not quite having the time to discuss service development issues in a deliberate, critical way, within existing meeting structures.

An early emphasis on putting systems in place is likely to pay off in the long-term. Two types of systems would be useful:

1. Processes that reduce the pressures that distract attention from Action Research:

Examples

Systems to ensure that you have negotiated realistic workloads based on sound time analysis can reduce the pressures on developmental work enormously—in the short and long term.

Systems which establish opportunities to educate and involve people in service development can pre-empt possible barriers down the track.

2. Processes that establish the central role of Action Research in the service:

Examples

Allocating key facilitation and documentation roles (particularly amongst staff) makes this a clear part of their duties. (These can be included in job descriptions.) Even if these tasks are shared, it is important to articulate clearly who is doing what? When?

Establishment of explicit time and space to pursue service development (including Action Research) activities is an important way of acknowledging the place of these activities as core functions of your Pilot.

Formal organisational recognition of processes established can also be a useful means of engaging Management (Committees) with the culture of learning and change (Quixley 1997, p. 41-42).

Developing Action Research skills and processes

Action Research is new to some or all of the people in our service—it may feel like a lot of extra effort, rather than a core part of normal service delivery—It took around 18 months for Action Research ideas and processes to really become part of the Youth Homelessness Pilot Programme's organisational and individual practices. In the meantime, many people found the approach separate from normal practice, and often tedious.

Part of the solution to this was to make that situation itself a subject of Action Research: *'What would it take for our Action Research to become as integrated as possible into everyday practice? What processes do we need to use to get there?'* Another part of the solution is to give yourself time to get used to Action Research, for example, by identifying the resources you need, interacting with others in the same position and practising with small local questions.

Committing to Action Research

We like it, but others find it less responsive—Some workers found that while they became enthusiastic about Action Research, others did not—Action Research requires the involvement and commitment of a range of people. On occasions, some Youth Homelessness Pilot services found that *'stakeholders with the power to direct or significantly influence the development of the service actively resisted attempts to function in a flexible, creative manner which valued the expertise of all stakeholders (including parents and/or young people)'* (Quixley 1998, p. 23–24).

Removing barriers to responsiveness

Why do some people find it hard to respond to Action Research's more flexible approach? You might find it valuable to use an Action Research process to explore some questions about this.

'Do the key players have the knowledge and skills required to work in this particular cultural way?'

'Are they committed to this approach?'

'What is their degree of choice about you using this approach?'

'Is this approach compatible with their preferences? Habits? Values?'

'Have they had an opportunity to think through the impact of using this approach?'

'How much is this approach going to affect their work?'

'To what extent can they have power over the manner in which the approach is implemented?'

Treating people's fears seriously and addressing their discomfort with doing things differently can help remove barriers to Action Research.

If you are really stuck, with a lot of resistance to change, as a first step try a dramatic change of physical environment. Even changing desks so you see the world from a different angle might help. Close the service for a day or two, so you can actively reflect on the Reconnect service, rather than slipping into a downward spiral (Quixley, 1997, p. 46).

A similar problem can occur if an organisation does not have a *'pre-existing culture of learning'* (Quixley, 1997, p. 43). Action Research fits far better into an organisation that is comfortable with workers communicating easily with other people than in an organisation that likes to insist it 'has the answers'.

Improving practice is in part an 'empowering process'. It allows staff, clients and others involved with the service to talk openly about what is done, how it is done, and what is necessary to do it better.

Making Action Research a core part of practice creates opportunities to develop an organisational 'culture of learning', endorsed and accepted by workers and management.

To achieve this, it will probably be necessary to keep management well informed of program requirements. As well, you will need to demonstrate positive outcomes and involve management in Action Research as partners. A medium-to-long-term view is often needed if significant issues of organisational culture are involved.

It can be especially important to make sure management understands Action Research is a required part of the service agreement—that it involves a significant amount of workers' time and attention, particularly when the necessary skills and systems are being established.

> *It is important to recognise that if these approaches are completely new to your organisation, time will be needed to:*
>
> - *educate key organisational players about an Action Research approach to service development;*
> - *examine the relationship between organisational and Action Research values, and decide how to deal with any tensions;*
> - *identify existing evaluation/service development tools that work well and build on these in the way you approach Action Research; and*
> - *develop an Action Research system.*
>
> *It is critical that, whilst you actively pursue this type of development process, you don't move so fast that key organisational players have insufficient ownership of the outcomes. In a situation like this, it might be useful to employ an external facilitator/consultant to work through these processes with you* (Quixley, 1997, p. 43).

It can also be useful to make Action Research an extension of other processes you already use, such as quality assurance processes and client feedback systems to work out how they can be adjusted to contribute to Action Research. In this way, Action Research may be seen as a tool for improving the service's development, rather than as a completely new set of demands.

Dealing with resistance to change

"EUREKA, LOOK I'VE DISCOVERED A NEW WAY..."

Carrying out Action Research may help to break down some obvious long-standing areas of resistance, or 'blocks', particularly in the reflection stages. 'Blocks' may come from individuals or they can be based in service models, in whole communities, in institutions or in policies. That these 'blocks' are recognised is a good thing, because it gives you a better chance to understand them and find out what is behind the resistance.

Resistance to change can come from a number of sources:

Suspicion/fear—other groups who have had less involvement may not fully understand the issues and the need for change—It is not always possible to identify all stakeholders, especially in the first stages of inquiry. This is an issue of involvement and ownership—people/groups who feel left out may try to prevent strategic change until they have a better idea of what is going on. The key here is to underpin Reconnect strategies with a culture that values openness and inclusion. Reassuring people that you genuinely want their input and involvement is an important feature of reducing people's suspicions and the fear that you are `going behind their backs'.

We know better, or, it's the way things have always been done—within various communities there are cultural and/or psychological constraints on change

This is where having a good evidence base really makes a difference. To use a cliché, it can be hard for some people to 'think outside the square'. They may have a history or tradition of operating in a certain way and they don't want to 'let it go'.

The systematic nature of Action Research inquiry may help you to demonstrate that strategic change would in fact be better than leaving things the way they are, and that this is not just based on a hunch, but on good evidence. This may also require involving and educating key people about your Action Research project. The idea is to get them to use their influence in areas where there is strong resistance to change.

Concern about practicality—lack of resources to comprehensively develop newly discovered strategic options—Sometimes, exploring a particular Action Research question will point to answers or strategies that will potentially call on time and resources that you simply don't have. This could be because you have uncovered some significant service issues that go beyond the scope of your Reconnect strategy, like drastically changing your systems.

However, there are ways to achieve change that can be less resource intensive or make innovative use of existing resources. Being creative with what you have and arguing for new systems are not mutually exclusive. They often go hand in hand.

Concern about who is responsible for what is found—some groups/players not liking what Action Research finds and what this means for them personally, their organisation and the community—This is also linked to the issues of practicality and resources. When big issues emerge, it can be difficult to find someone who wants to take responsibility! And it can be a bit confronting when Action Research reveals a significant amount of change is needed, especially when not everyone accepts this.

Often, it is easier to put the emphasis elsewhere, even if this is not the whole picture. It is essential not to see systemic change as the only answer to complexity. In any case, this can be beyond your capacity, or outside the scope of your Reconnect strategy. Using multiple cycles can help to make things clearer because you can break up complex issues into a number of more focused questions.

You may also not be ready to tackle difficult issues head on, especially if the other key players are not happy about the role they have to play in promoting change. Again, this is about taking the time to build relationships and to keep emphasising to other stakeholders what key values and goals you share—that is, promoting the well being of young people and their families and building an early intervention capacity in your community.

Working together with other people at a variety of levels to achieve your Action Research goals means responsibility for change is shared across groups and not 'dumped' on one sector or system.

Lack of confidence in the research—a mistrust of research itself or a lack of credibility given to Action Research/qualitative methods—Action Research is still a mystery for many people. They may not readily accept your Action Research findings because they are not based on 'traditional research'. There are no easy answers here.

But Action Research is rigorous and it does provide well-founded evidence. It forms a very legitimate base for inquiring into and exploring a range of issues in your practice and in your community. The key is communicating this to others who are sceptical.

Paying attention to and demonstrating rigour will give you a strong basis for arguing that your findings are credible and valid. There is a range of resources which help explain Action Research to people, especially people who have misgivings about anything with 'research' in the title. *(For more information about the resources, see Section Six).*

As well, involving people in Action Research processes can help them to understand more about it. This can often increase their confidence in the capacity of this kind of research to explore and respond to issues that confront them, their organisations, communities and other systems.

Dealing with resistance to change is about taking things slowly. It takes time to develop trust and build relationships. It also takes time to find and demonstrate evidence that says change is needed. In Quixley (1998), there is a useful discussion about change and the nature of resistance. Because of the 'culture' of the Reconnect Program, it is likely that services and their communities will be more willing to share insights and strategies as part of their Action Research processes, especially in relation to resistance to change.

> *I think Action Research has the potential to reduce (resistance to change) substantially by using small, perhaps incremental steps as trial actions. Often the results speak for themselves and the resistance collapses* (A Youth Homelessness Pilot service).

Dealing with resistance to participation

In developing a local approach to Action Research, participation is crucial and, if possible, it should increase as the research processes develop. However, it is one thing to want participation, but quite another to achieve it.

There are powerful practical and ethical constraints on clients participating in Action Research. Not surprisingly, they are usually focused on their own problems and difficulties.

When working with other services there can also be constraints to do with what they do, the people they deal with, and how they operate.

In some cases, for instance, it just may not be appropriate or possible for all the stakeholders to be involved in every Action Research process. However, it is important for you to keep giving people opportunities to participate. This helps to shift some of the constraints, over time.

Actions rather than words—the key to participation

People's willingness to participate is more likely to be changed by demonstrations of success rather than theoretical arguments—that is, by action rather than words.

Participation can often be built into everyday practice, as well as highlighted in events and processes. For instance, if you suggest seeing someone in their own 'territory' they might be more prepared to be part of a meeting. Or they may be happy to talk over the phone for half an hour, rather than meet in person.

As well, people need to know that their contribution is valued. There is more chance they will participate in future if you keep them up to date on issues and progress. And if you adopt another idea, rather than theirs, you need to explain why.

Some suggestions for encouraging participation in your Action Research include

Always do what you say, and when you say you'll do it. Follow up every key interaction, formally or informally. Actively acknowledge all contributions. You can even do things like send out updates with your work Christmas cards.

As well, understand that stakeholders can be highly committed people, but they don't always share your priorities and concerns. So, focus on people's specific interests. Don't expect them to sit around for a three-hour meeting that spends five minutes on their pet topic. In fact, several short and focused meetings with small groups are usually more efficient than long meetings with large groups (Quixley, 1997, p. 46).

Separating conventional research from Action Research

Although Action Research practices are not entirely different to the more traditional research methods, there is a danger that some staff and managers and other people involved in Reconnect services may have skills in traditional research and feel this should dictate the 'style' for Action Research.

Certainly, traditional research strategies can be very useful in answering certain kinds of questions. But as Action Research aims to improve practice, traditional research can only feed into and should not dictate Action Research processes.

If you use consultants or advisers to help you with your Action Research, be aware that they may not see Action Research as a stakeholder-driven process. The Youth Homelessness Pilot Programme evaluation found that some external consultants tended to develop Action Research questions which were analytical, rather than action-oriented (Quixley 1998, p. 24).

Managing information and data

"...NOW WHAT DO WE DO?..."

Action Research generates a lot of information and keeping track of it can become a major preoccupation that distracts you from the main purpose of your research. The key is to have a simple and effective system that is accessible to all the people involved.

Creating systems that work

Before you start, have a clear view about what you need to do to properly document your information and data. This includes working out how it will be presented, in what form and how long it will be (for example, a typical 'case study' is 100 to 200 words).

Create a workable system that several people can use. This could involve a simple filing cabinet that becomes a central place for all the data from whatever sites are involved. And to encourage spontaneous and new ideas, perhaps you could set up a special suggestion box or a notice board.

Whatever you decide to do, make sure your approach makes it easy to access the information you need to keep people up to date on what is happening—for instance, at a fortnightly Action Research meeting or at your staff meetings.

Sometimes projects end up with huge quantities of irrelevant data because they are exploring too many questions at once. It is usually best to focus on about two macro questions and two micro questions at a time.

Another way of keeping data management simple, is to make a commitment not to change research questions for a full cycle—to only review how useful questions are at each planning phase, when they can be made either more general or more specific (Quixley, 1998).

Remember to keep your data in an appropriate place and to be aware that if it includes any sensitive material that it should be stored securely.

To keep the paperwork down, it is worth destroying data from time to time. And after any interpretations are concluded, presented and confirmed, only keep the summaries and the outcome reports.

(For more information, see Section Five, which has tools and proformas that may help you to develop effective information management systems).

SECTION FIVE

CASE EXAMPLES AND TOOLS

As you develop strategies for your Action Research you can add them to this Section. You can also use the information in this Section to train new staff or co-action researchers about how Action Research is done day-to-day in your Reconnect service.

Three useful case examples

These three case examples are drawn from the Action Research experiences of particular Youth Homelessness Pilot Programme and Reconnect services. They are not intended as models to be copied exactly, but as examples of how Action Research was used in practice.

Case example one—applying the cycles for a particular question

(Contributed by Connect, Darwin)

Connect in Darwin used a broad range of processes, including focus groups, one-on-one discussions, group work, questionnaires, and action-oriented 'gatherings'. Action Research questions were initiated at all points in the cycle, often at the 'action' point when clients and/or other organisations identified a need for change.

This example shows briefly what Connect did in each phase of one particular Action Research cycle.

The initial question	**What would it take to provide an effective service to young people and families in rural areas?**
Observation—Describing 'what happened' by gathering perspectives and 'data' from all stakeholders.	This involved gathering information and people's stories (clients, potential clients and service providers) so we can identify referral sources, issues, gaps and needs. Sources of data were: ● minutes from relevant meetings (for example, local support workers forum); ● service and client data; ● records of feedback/ interviews with individual workers and clients;

	● client case files; ● stakeholder focus groups (for example, rural school counsellor, local politician, aboriginal liaison officer, and so on); ● input from 'experts' (people living and working in rural communities); and ● our own observation of client accesses to service.
Reflection—'Developing theories', through analysis, and interpretation. This should be undertaken collaboratively with key stakeholders.	Sharing this information through discussion and idea generation using: ● focus groups with young people and clients; ● discussions at our community reference group; and ● sharing client feedback with other service providers and other clients and getting their views (for example, 19 other people have said they would like us to have an office base in a rural area ... what do you think?').
Planning—Translating broad generalisations and analysis into practice	Forward plan using: ● focus groups with clients or other stakeholder groups; and ● one-on-one discussions with clients and potential clients (for example, 'most people we asked said they wanted us to have an office here in Humpty Doo, how should we do that with existing resources?').
Action—Based on three previous stages. It should be deliberate and critically informed and will lead to new cycles with a refined question.	Trying things out, based on previous phases, such as: ● establishing a one afternoon a week office base in Humpty Doo, and one in Palmerston; ● gathering feedback about this (a new cycle of 'observation'); and ● this then leads to a new specific question for each of the two new sites. Refined questions: What would it take to set up effective early intervention support services for parents in these two locations?

Case example two—from question posing to evidence-based findings

(Contributed by Resourcing Adolescent and Family Team (RAFT) Wollongong)

This case example demonstrates:

- how a general issue or concern can be refined over time to a more specific targeted question;
- how various sorts of data can be used to develop an evidence base for practice changes. Information was used from a combination of existing and specifically-developed strategies. In this example, substantial use is made of client and service level statistics complemented by records kept from practice which are anecdotal (people's comments and views). To help make it manageable, a sample of cases for a particular period was used to help answer the question; and
- the findings and the evidence to support them have been documented in detail. This can be useful when a strong evidence base is required for findings, but it is not suggested you necessarily go into this amount of detail.

This case study does not actually illustrate the Action Research cycles involved in the processes. However, it does show how this service made clear links between refining questions, gathering evidence, and then changing their practice to reflect what they found out.

The initial question: Gender issues?

Revised question: In what ways does variation of gender impact on services provided by RAFT?

Re-revised question: What impact does the flexibility of location and hours have in ensuring more men (as fathers/guardians/significant others) participate in the program?

Process description—Although Australian society has changed with more women entering the workforce, the experience of the Wollongong Youth Accommodation and Support Association Inc. seems to indicate women are still the primary carers of children.

Our experience has also shown that, in general, it is the female caregivers who seek support and counselling when difficulties occur in the family, and male caregivers are less available to make appointments during the ordinary working day.

It was decided to examine if counselling and support were available after ordinary working hours in places that would better suit men. If so, would male caregivers (for example, fathers and guardians) take up the opportunity to be involved.

The initial Action Research question was devised to look at the rate that males in the family accessed the service. It was then further revised to investigate whether the after hours component and flexibility of location did indeed encourage males, such as fathers, stepfathers and guardians to access the service.

Once the question was established, quantitative and qualitative data was collected over the period I July 1997 to 31 October 1997 in the form of questionnaires, interviews with males and responses included in exit forms.

Key findings and changes

Percentage of families with a significant male involved

Between 1 July 1997 and 31 October 1997, 58 clients were seen. Of these, 26 had males, such as fathers, spouses, or grandfathers living with the family. Of those families with male caregivers, 84.6 per cent (22 families) participated in some or all of the services provided by RAFT.

This sample indicates that, in families with male caregivers, a high majority of them were involved with the pilot.

Who made referrals? (If made by parent/guardian)

Of the six referrals made by a parent/guardian from I July 1997 to 31 October 1997, five were made by a female, and one by a male. None of these referrals were made after 5pm. This indicated that females are the main referral source in the family. It also shows that females still use the traditional hours, before 5pm, to initially access the service.

Times of appointments when males were involved

For families involved with the pilot the appointment, times differed where:

- fourteen had only after-hours' appointments;
- five had no after-hours' appointments;
- four had the father not involved at all; and
- three had some after-hours' appointments.

Some of the reasons behind males not accessing the after-hours' component were that the male, being a shift worker, was available at times during the day; the male being unemployed; or the parents or the male were not being involved.

The reasons that male caregivers were not involved in all cases were that the young person did not want their father involved. In cases like this, RAFT dealt with the female caregiver only and that no immediate family members were involved.

The choice of appointment times indicated that after traditional work hours (after 5pm) was the preferred choice by males when making appointments for sessions with the service. Of the remaining 30 families that did not have a male, seven (23 per cent) used the service for some after-hours' appointments, while six (20 per cent) only accessed the service after-hours. So, to be readily accessible to males and encourage their participation, workers needed to maintain a flexible attitude and approach to working hours.

Changes to the way we delivered our service—service locations

The hours after 5pm were maintained by the pilot for working parents whenever possible. Home visits were offered to families when dealing with the service.

There were 17 males who were involved in the service during the sample period, either exclusively after-hours, or sometimes after-hours. The location of these visits was, 17 in the clients' homes; one was at a crisis youth refuge; and one was at a grandparent's home.

Both the Crisis Youth Refuge and the grandparent's home were used in conjunction with home visits.

This indicates that the preferred location by males for contact with the service was at home. Our perceived rationale behind this is that most males have worked during the day and thus a service visiting the home would be more time effective for them. It would also cause less disruption to their leisure time (and less stress) and allowed all of the family to be involved if appropriate.

The location of visits to clients where there was no male in the family were more varied, often with a number of locations being recorded for each client. This was possibly due to the fact that there was more flexibility in choice of locations during the day. This was particularly so when the worker was dealing with an individual client, rather than the whole family, which logistically was harder to coordinate and had more limited options.

Main meeting locations and subsequent number of client visits

Home	23
Crisis Youth Refuge	9
School	5
Friends	5
RAFT	5
Other for example, McDonalds, beach, relatives	6

Outcomes

A positive outcome is for RAFT to perceive that the client was somewhat re-engaged in one or more of activities like education, training, employment and community participation. A neutral outcome is for the service to perceive that nothing had changed for the client, either positive or negative. The table below shows the differences in outcomes with and without male caregivers.

	Positive outcome	Negative outcome	Neutral outcome
Families with a male	61.54% (16)	15.38% (4)	23.08% (6)
Families without a male	46.88% (15)	25.00% (8)	28.12% (9)

Results appear to indicate that single-parent families (predominantly female) have a lower level of positive outcomes, reinforcing the need for additional supports to be provided to a single parent when dealing with young people at risk of homelessness.

Changes to the way we delivered our service—for single parents and working families

Additional supports and/or referral to other services were accessed more frequently when dealing with single parent families. RAFT endeavoured to promote the after-hours' component when dealing with working families.

Changes to the type of service we delivered—for males

Workers encouraged males to participate, where appropriate.

Key learning about the process—In most cases, the service used the family approach, not an individual one. Because of the high level of access by males, the pilot workers need to increase their awareness of the needs of male parents, especially if they are single parents.

The after-hours' component should be used predominantly for families who work between 9am and 5pm. Staff hours needed to be flexible to accommodate the varying numbers of clients that need an after-hours' service.

It may be difficult, but not impossible, to engage males in a counselling or support model. When they are engaged, it appears to be effective, and this produces a more positive outcome.

Many working families are surprised to know that the pilot can operate after hours, and often appear to feel that they are imposing on a worker's private time. The worker must ensure that the family understands that this is their work hours.

Anecdotes, quotes and insights—One father stated 'that it was good that you could sit in your own chair with your slippers on when you spoke to a worker. I feel more comfortable discussing my family's problems in my own home'.

One mother said that she wished that her husband had been more involved, as the problems in the family were due to the fights with her daughter and her husband. She stated that each said it was the other's problem, and each were waiting for the other to change first, rather than working on it together. Unfortunately as a result, nothing really changed in the family.

More positive outcomes have occurred when male and female caregivers are involved. This may be because they have more supports than a single-parent family.

Many families that the service deals with have issues with stepfathers and their relationship with the young person. Therefore, it is essential that the stepfather is present when working through these issues so that a long-term positive result can be obtained.

The regular absence of a particular parent or guardian in the session can say a lot about the functioning of the family's dynamics.

A father stated that he was only involved because it was after hours and in his own home. He stated that he was not going to come home, change and go out again just to hear his son 'dump on him'.

Case example three—a 'day in the life' of a Reconnect worker using Action Research

(Contributed by Connect, Darwin)

Being a Reconnect worker means that on any given day you can work across a huge spectrum of areas, using a number of interventions and with goals ranging from individual client change to long-term systemic change.

The use of Action Research in everyday work is imperative to the continued development of the Connect service in Darwin. With such a large emphasis put on the Action Research process in the pilot, Connect now has ingrained the use of Action Research questions and ways to develop/change how the program is run in response to client/community feedback, into every aspect of its service provision.

This is a typical (if you could call it that) day in a Connect workers' life…

8.30am–9.15am

Begin work, receive a message on the answering machine from Rita (Joanne's Mum who I provide case support to) requesting an immediate response. A phone call is made back to her after speaking with the other Connect worker, who supports the young person. Rita is asked for her preferred way of receiving support. The result was that the other Connect worker finds out if Joanne would be OK about a meeting between them all.

Action Research Component

An ongoing Action Research question is 'whether it is more viable for the young person and their parents to have separate workers'. It was found in the pilot that this was often the case, but with the recognition that every client is different, this is a question that is asked of clients and ourselves every time we engage with a family.

10.00am–12.00pm

Meeting with a youth detention centre social worker and other key stakeholders regarding the development of a 'Community of Origin Visitors Scheme'. This meeting is to discuss the draft Background Paper created by a Connect worker and the creation of a time-line that allows for the optimum amount of consultation and contribution by relevant community members.

Action Research Component

Within the pilot, it was identified through client feedback and service assessment processes that there was a need for Aboriginal young people in detention to receive visits from other members of their communities with language, family or just community ties. This would be seen as a way to ease the feeling of dislocation and isolation from their communities and families, who are sometimes 2,000 km away. In response to this need and in partnership with the detention centre, Connect has drawn together a few key stakeholders in an effort to secure funding and put the beginnings of a model together, before further consultation is undertaken with members of the sector and the community.

1.00pm–2.30pm

Meeting with a young woman who is 14 years old. Went to shopping centre food court and discussed current issues. These included school truancy, self-harming behaviour and violent behaviour towards other people. On returning from meeting, a few observations regarding our meeting are placed in the 12 to15 file.

Action Research Component

The key to making Action Research successful in terms of client work has been the ability to make it accessible on a daily basis. An example of this is creating a file titled *'what works with 12 to15 year olds?'* This came about as a result of observations by workers and in dialogue with local agencies. This age groups' support needs seemed to be different. The aim of this file is that when a worker has dealings with someone in this age group, they jot down what was effective, whether it be 'meeting for shorter times' or 'driving the whole time', and drop this in the file. This was a time-effective way of collecting information that was later collated. Then it was used at the service level and fed into an inter-agency process for improving access of under 15's. This helped to support services and improve their capacities to respond effectively.

2.45pm–3.00pm

Return from client visit and receive a message (amongst others) from the school counsellor at a local high school. Return her call to accept a referral for a 15 year old male requiring assistance with a mix of issues including extreme conflict with parents and the need to look at income support needs. Time made to meet with him and the school counsellor tomorrow.

Action Research Component

The school counsellors and Connect workers have jointly agreed to use Action Research to look at the best ways the service and school can work together to have the optimum result for the young person. This is at an early stage and tomorrow's meeting will be a good opportunity for observation and reflection on how collaborative early intervention case work can happen. At a practical level, we are asking *'what would it take for the young person and their family to have more options for referral, advocacy and support?'.*

3.00pm–4.30pm

Pick another client up from school and take her to Centrelink in relation to a breach that has been imposed. Exceptional circumstances have come to light in our work with her. During this interview, it strikes me that Connect staff have been regularly providing additional information to Centrelink at the time of a breach and that a collaborative look at communication processes between the agencies might improve the information base for decision making. I make a note to follow this up with Centrelink.

Action Research Component

Anecdotal evidence indicated it was worth looking at this area. This insight led to communication with Centrelink and it was later decided we would look collaboratively at how the service and Centrelink could improve communication, particularly at the time of breaches. A page in the back of the service daybook (a book used between workers to communicate information during the day) was created to record client experiences and worker communications with Centrelink. This information was then able to go to the regular collaborative meeting we have with Centrelink staff as a basis for improving practice between the agencies and identifying any emerging issues. From the meetings, collective decisions could be made.

4.30pm–5.00pm

Message in daybook from other Connect worker saying that Joanne says that she will meet with her Mum tomorrow night. Contacted Rita and told her that a meeting time has been made for tomorrow night after work at the office with her daughter. I help her prepare for the meeting and clarify with her the main issues she wishes to raise and discuss with her the potential impact on her daughter of speaking about these issues. The conversation ended with Rita being asked how she found phone contact as a way of getting support and indicating that face-to-face was always an option. Rita said she was happy with phone support as the main way of communicating, as it was very convenient for her.

Action Research Component

Another Action Research question constantly being explored by Connect is *'What is the most effective way to support families?'* One strategy for exploring this is for phone support to be actively offered to parents, as well as face-to-face meetings. There was some anecdotal evidence that parents often find phone contact a more viable and practical means of support. The worker records Rita's' feedback on the Action Research observation sheet which has been set up to look at phone support, (a one month focus). So far this is showing that phone support is a viable form of client work and not 'just a phone call'.

Practical tools to help with Action Research processes

In this section, you will find practical examples and tools that you can use in your Action Research processes. They are not intended to be prescriptive and you are invited to modify these or to develop other tools that better suit your context.

Tools provide some structure for thinking about Action Research and recording information in a form that is relatively succinct. The scanning and competencies' audit tools are designed to help you start Action Research at an agency. They can also be very useful for regularly reviewing and informing Action Research practice.

As well, there are some tools that are designed to assist in recording of Action Research processes and insights. They are simple and practical. In particular, they are intended to assist in building lots of information into key points that you want to keep.

The tools included here are not the only ones that can help in developing key points. Various computer programs can be used to record information and help sort it into themes—for example, for working out the themes of comments from a feedback box.

Tools and documentation are not an end in themselves. Reconnect's objective is not about developing impressive piles of paper about what is happening. The real objective of Reconnect is to improve the level of engagement of homeless young people or those at risk of homelessness with family, work, education, training and the community. The Action Research tools in this kit are to help you and your community achieve this objective.

Undertaking scans of internal and external environments

Action Research cannot be simply imposed on a particular locality or on a 'community of interest'. To be successfully incorporated as an element of practice requires the support and contribution of a variety of stakeholders and tailoring to a particular context.

Indeed, you should 'Action Research' how you develop your Action Research capacity, rather than assume it will just happen! As a first step, you can involve an initial group of people to look at (observe and reflect on) their own organisation/s and the community context in which they are located. As organisations and communities change over time, this will be relevant to their later stages of Action Research implementation, as well.

Some questions to ask	Responses
Organisational context **How does your organisational context affect the implementation of Action Research?** *‘What is the structure of the organisation and what parts of the organisation need to be, or would benefit from involvement in the Action Research process?’* *‘What Action Research values, identified in Section One of this kit, are present in the organisation (or the relevant parts of the organisation)?’* *‘Are there already processes within the organisation that reflect Action Research values or processes?’* *‘How open or closed is the organisation to include others, for example clients and other agencies in service development planning and reflection Should this include some groups more than others?’* *‘What concerns may emerge about implementing Action Research values and processes?’* *‘Are there any other relevant questions?’*	

Community Context

How does your community context affect the implementation of Action Research?

'How might the history and character of your community/locality and how you fit within that, affect how you go about encouraging involvement in a local early intervention strategy and the Action Research aspect of this?'

'What/who are the key first to know agencies/contacts in your community?'

'What relationships currently exist with these?'

'What networking/collaborative mechanisms already exist that may be involved in the Action Research effort? Who is 'on board' already? Who isn't?'

'What are the other relationships that may be important to recognise or develop'

'How will you start to build an understanding of Action Research and its role in early intervention with those currently and potentially involved in your Reconnect strategy? What communication strategy could you develop to facilitate this?'

'Are there any other relevant questions?'

Undertaking a competencies' audit

The Action Research competencies' tables below are designed to demonstrate that Action Research is not about starting from scratch. Most services are used to taking formal terms of reference, funding guidelines, policies and theories and turning them into 'real world' practice. In Action Research, you will need to work out what capacities and competencies you already have and what other skills are needed to undertake the research. Then, you can look at how to use existing competencies and how gaps can be addressed. This is called a 'strengths-based' approach.

The left column of the table below lists key competencies of human services delivery relevant to Action Research. These include interpersonal communication, group work, community work, organisational coordination and research.

The middle column translates these into Action Research competencies. In the right column you can indicate areas of strength, together with any notes on areas where there are gaps or where it may be useful to seek other people's involvement or training.

Action Research competencies

Interpersonal and counselling competencies	Related Action Research competencies	Your strengths, gaps, areas to keep an eye on, areas to seek others involvement, training needs, and so on
Communication skills	Being able to engage with people, invite people to express their thoughts, actively listen. Making Action Research accessible by explaining it in ways that it can be understood. Communicating to people the value of their contributions (a 'strengths' perspective).	
Problem solving	Communicating that you value hearing about what's not working as well as what is working. Hearing people's concerns and hunches. Working alongside people to come up with Action Research questions. Mobilising resources. What can be used and how to get access to them. Setting goals and continually reviewing your progress. Ability to handle crisis situations and emotional issues.	

Empathy	Paying attention to people's concerns so that they feel comfortable with contributing or participating. Ability to respect diverse perspectives, values and cultures. Being able to look at things from the client's or stakeholder's frame of reference.	
Seeking understanding	The ability to step back and check your assumptions and values. Staying a bit sceptical about what will 'work'. Valuing and making time for non-chaotic reflection. Being able to cope with an open process and reporting of insights.	
Observation	Being able to describe what happened and postpone interpretation.	
Flexibility	Ability to change direction and modify questions, plans and strategies along the way. Being able to juggle a number of projects/research questions at a time.	

Group work competencies	Related Action Research competencies	Your strengths, gaps, areas to keep an eye on, areas to seek others involvement, training needs, and so on
Facilitation	Supporting people to have their say in focus groups or meetings. Facilitating and participating in reference groups and other collaborative mechanisms. Dealing constructively with group disagreements and conflicts. Debriefing and support to those who are `new' to participation.	
Group development	Providing support, resources and opportunities for groups to be established and sustained—for example, a parents' group.	
Evaluation	Assisting groups to negotiate, understand and name outcomes—intended and unintended.	
Creativity	Having fun and being comfortable with different ways of doing things.	
Empowerment	Taking steps to allow those least powerful to be heard and have influence.	

Community work competencies	Related Action Research competencies	Your strengths, gaps, areas to keep an eye on, areas to seek others involvement, training needs, and so on
Negotiation skills	Talking to and reaching agreements amongst diverse groups—for example, protocols and referral policies.	
Networking	Actively working with other people/groups/services, rather than ‘flying solo’ and trying to solve all the problems on your own.	
Small ‘p’ political skills	Choosing language that makes being involved easy. Negotiating access to resources and systems. Understanding protocols and customs—for example, cultural norms. Identifying key people—the ‘movers and shakers’—and making the most of what they have to offer. Helping to reassure people who feel threatened by changes.	
Resource auditing	Ability to identify the main community issues. Ability to identify community strengths and resources.	

Community development and education	Assisting a diversity of people to become involved in building community early intervention and using Action Research as a tool for this.	
Facilitation skills	Working with diverse groups of people. Helping people generate their own ideas/solutions/meanings.	
Cross cultural competencies	Listening to and working with people in ways that respect and incorporate their 'cultures'. Negotiating guidelines and facilitating communication between groups who may not use the same language and/or have different understandings of things. Paying attention to what it will take for different communities to 'own' certain strategies/actions.	
Motivating	Engaging and educating those involved. Creating enthusiasm about 'what's in it' for various stakeholders. Recognising and celebrating. Making the achievements and skills of all those involved.	

Organisational Competencies	Related Action Research competencies	Your strengths, gaps, areas to keep an eye on, areas to seek others involvement, training needs, and so on
Planning	Able to work through how things will be done in fairly systematic ways.	
Information sharing	Communicating up, down, out and between—for example, developing a communication strategy.	
Policy development	Using Action Research insights to inform policy and service directions. Breaking down broad policy questions into manageable research questions. Keeping focused on big picture program goals, and change actions, and coordinating micro/macro levels of inquiry.	
Time management	Structures for making effective use of time—fitting Action Research in between morning tea and lunch.	
Conflict resolution	Diffusing tensions across a broad range of groups. Creative use of conflict for learning.	

Team management	Motivating and supporting work teams. Making workloads/roles/tasks suitable to particular people/groups.	
Monitoring	Maintaining the 'quality' of the Action Research processes. Checking thoroughness/validity of what is happening.	
Marketing	Being able to communicate good practice and positive early intervention outcomes arising from community-based collaborations—for example, summary reports of local strategy and its achievements.	

Research competencies	**Related Action Research competencies**	**Your strengths, gaps, areas to keep an eye on, areas to seek others involvement, training needs, and so on**
Pre-research preparation (in traditional research this is often done by a literature review)	Checking out what has been found out and done already in relation to your issue or question. 'Do your homework'. Where possible, understand, critique and use previous insights.	

Developing research questions	Turning local issues/concerns/hunches into Action Research questions.	
Deciding how to go about the research (often called the methodology)	Working out the best way to gather and make sense of the information you need.	
Documenting	Being able to set up a simple and efficient system for documenting details of the process and the evidence you depend on.	
Data management	Managing information and data effectively—a rusting filing cabinet out the back or a pile of papers under the left had side of the desk? Working out the best physical or computer-based methods of managing your Action Research information.	
Theory building	Working out why things happened in partnership with others.	
Publicising/publishing	Sharing your insights and findings publicly and in a way that allows for their evaluation.	

Six examples of documenting Action Research processes

There is no single way to document and record your Action Research activities. You will need to develop and adapt the way you record information to suit your individual situations and preferences. Some of your recording tools may be flexible and informal. Others may be more structured.

Different recording tools may be used in a number of ways. In some cases, the tools are used to record primary data. In others, they act as 'prompter sheets' to help you plan each phase of the Action Research cycle. They may also act as 'summary sheets' to document your main research activities and work as cross-references to where your primary data is stored.

Feel free to mix and match those aspects that seem to meet your particular needs. Or make up something that suits you better.

Recording example one—to prompt discussion and record activities

(Contributed by Kangan Batman TAFE, which delivered Action Research training to Reconnect services)

The questions under each cycle are taken largely from Section Two of this kit. This tool can be used as a 'prompter' for discussion about your Action Research activities. You can also use it to write your responses to the questions on this form and to record your activities. Using the questions to guide you through each phase of the Action Research cycle will help ensure you take a rigorous approach to the research.

Planning

'What are our questions?'

'What do we want to do?'

'How will we do it?'

'When will it be completed by?'

'Who will do what?'

'How will we know if we're on track?'

Action

'What actions are completed?'

'Which actions were planned but abandoned?'

'Which actions were modified or were not in the initial plan?'

Observation

'In what ways have we tried to find out what happened?'

'Who thinks it happened differently?'

'How did things happen?'

'What supporting documentation do we have?'

'Are our ways of observing what is happening actually capturing the essential/exciting/unusual features?'

'Are we including 'voices' that may not usually get heard?'

Reflection

'Why did this happen? Do we need to probe further to really understand this?'

'How do different groups understand what happened?'

'What assumptions am I working with? What ideas are being supported/challenged?'

'Who agrees/disagrees and what does this reveal?'

'Who got to have a say and who did not—and what does this mean?'

'Have we got a shared understanding of the meaning of what happened?'

'What does the interpretation mean for planning change?'

Recording example two—to track your main research activities

(Contributed by Kangan Batman TAFE)

This tool can be used to tracking your main research activities. You could summarise the key activities for each cycle on this form, with cross-referencing to the records that contain primary research data. (These may include case notes, minutes of meetings, client feedback data sheets, and so on) You might fill out each column as you finish each phase of the cycle to help you manage the recording of the process. To help maintain an overview of each research cycle, present the follow-through for each aspect of your plan on the one page.

Research question ______________________________

Plans *'What do we intend to do?'*	**Actions** *'What did we do?'*	**Observations** *'What happened? How do we know what happened?'*	**Reflections** *'What does this mean for changed practice?'*

Supporting documentation:

Recording example three—a research 'journal'

(Contributed by Kangan Batman TAFE)

This tool works more like a research journal, where minimum formatting allows you to jot down anything from a record of activities, to comments and observations, to plans for what to do next. This is a kind of 'catch-all' tool where any relevant thoughts or activities are recorded indiscriminately for summarising and analysing later. You may like to transfer this format into an exercise book, allowing one page for each phase of the cycle.

Research Question:

'What would it take to…?'____

Planning

Research Question:

'What would it take to…?'____

Action

Research Question:

'What would it take to…?' ______________________________

____

Observation

Research Question:

'What would it take to…?' ______________________________

____

Reflection

Recording example four—recording data an interpretative material

(Contributed by Kangan Batman TAFE)

This tool is slightly more structured than example three. On the one hand, it allows you to record hard evidence. On the other hand it also allows you to record your own thoughts and interpretations. This allows the tool to record both primary data and interpretative material. It allows you to record your thoughts about your Action Research, even on days when you actually do nothing on it.

Research Question:

'What would it take to…?' ____

Planning	Date	Comments

Action	Date	Comments

Observation	Date	Comments

Reflection	Date	Comments

Recording example five—documenting the plan-act-reflect observe cycle

(Contributed by Colony 47, Reconnect, Tasmania)

Here is another example of how you can document information on each phase of the plan-act-reflect-observe cycle.

Macro Question: ______________________________

____

Micro Question: ______________________________

____

PLAN—What do we want to try?

(Describe the background of the issue (other research and so on)

Strategy	Methods of review	Time frame

Stakeholders:

ACT—What are we actually doing?

(Breakdown the process of implementation)

(Breakdown the process of obtaining feedback)

Barriers/Issues	Strategies

OBSERVE—What is happening? What do people think of it?

(Any information attached—for example, questionnaire?)

(Measurable outcomes?)

(Other feedback?)

(Other observations?)

REFLECT—What is working? What does that mean?

(Our thinking on what we found)

(Others' thinking on what we found)

(Where to now—other possible questions/directions?)

Recording example six—a two-step planning proforma

(Contributed by RAFT Wollongong)

Step one—general plan

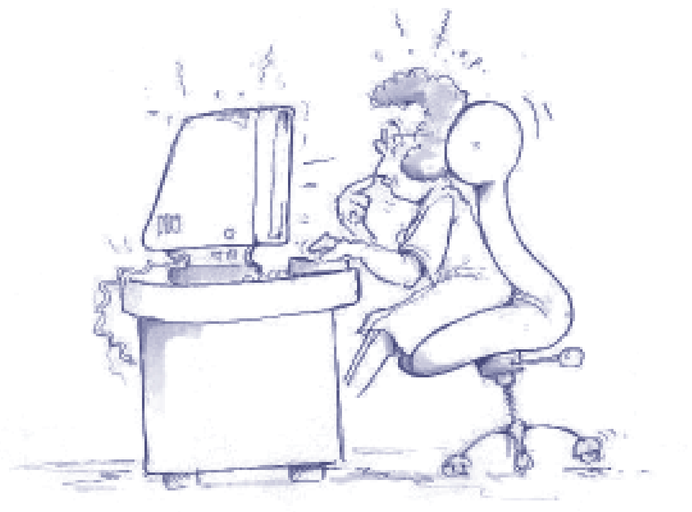
What is our question?	What do we want to do?	Who is involved?	What strategies could we try?	Preferred strategies	Who needs to do what?	Time Line	Insights
Macro or micro level? For example, 'What would it take to improve our responsiveness to young people after hours?'	What are you seeking to change or explore? For example, 'We want to ensure we are able to engage with young people who need assistance after hours'.	Seek stakeholders/ participants and list them here.	What are the ideas brainstormed by participants?	Negotiate and 'prioritise' strategies, taking into account strategic and resource considerations.	Delegate tasks to the relevant people. How are they involved in participating to carry out the plan?	Put the actions in a timetable.	List any insights, issues or questions that have arisen throughout this process which may lead to new cycles.

Step two—specific/strategic plan

Strategy	Who is involved?	Who is doing what?	Timeline	What else have we learned during planning? What other questions have emerged?
The specific strategy you wish to try out in response to your Action Research question—for example, 'develop an after hours intake system'.	List the various people who are involved with carrying out and monitoring the strategy.	Map out and delegate tasks.	When are things to be done by?	Is a new plan needed? Does this raise a new question?

SECTION SIX

ACTION RESEARCH RESOURCES



References/Further Reading

The Reconnect Action Research web site: 'Reconnectar'

There is a special web site to support Reconnect services that are carrying out Action Research.

The School of Human Services at the Queensland University of Technology is contracted to provide the Department of Family and Community Services with a number of services related to the web site, including an On-Line Teaching system for Reconnect Action Research. The information on the site is interactive so that services can have some 'ownership' and confidence in its capacity to assist them.

This kit is also available on the web site, as well as copies of useful publications about Action Research. *(For more information about publications, see below)*.

Visit the web site at: http://www.olt.qut.edu.au/udf/reconnectar/

Action Research and the Youth Homelessness Pilot Programme

Below are details of the publications referred to in this Action Research kit.

Most of these are available on-line through the 'Reconnectar' web site at:

http://www.olt.qut.edu.au/udf/reconnectar/

The list will be updated regularly on the web site to include information and input from the practitioners and services that are involved in Action Research.

ARTD (1998), 'Evaluation of the Youth Homeless Pilot Programme' in Evaluation Committee, Prime Ministerial Youth Homeless Taskforce, *Putting Families in the Picture: Supplementary Report*, Department of Family and Community Services, Canberra.

This provides program evaluation of the 26 Youth Homelessness Pilot Programme projects. It also includes the findings of the Programme, identifying good practice insights, critical success factors and barriers and gaps.

Crane, P. and Brannock, J. (1996), *Homelessness among young people in Australia: Early intervention and prevention*, A report to the National Youth Affairs Research Scheme, National Clearinghouse for Youth Studies, Hobart, Tasmania.

This study contributed to the development of the Youth Homelessness Pilot Programme framework, with reference to concepts like as 'soft entry' points, 'immediacy of responses' and 'first to know' agencies. In the report, Crane and Brannock state that, '*[T]he purpose of the study was to determine models of best practice in the prevention of, and early intervention into, youth homelessness'*.

Crane, P. (1998), 'Incorporation of Action Research into Government Social Programs', Conference paper, *Action learning*, Action Research and Process Management (ALARPM) National Conference, Brisbane, July.

Evaluation Committee, Prime Ministerial Youth Homeless Taskforce (1998), *Putting Families in the Picture: Supplementary Report*, Department of Family and Community Services, Canberra.

This report summarises the main findings and statistics from the evaluation of the Youth Homelessness Pilot Programme. It contains a section on the best practice principles that came out of the evaluation. The Evaluation Committee said that, *'[T]he primary purpose of this report is to present, contextualise, and briefly critique the body of evidence generated by the evaluation strategy.'*

Prime Ministerial Youth Homeless Taskforce (1996), *First Report of the Prime Ministerial Youth Homeless Taskforce: Framework for the Youth Homelessness Pilot Programme*, AGPS, Canberra.

This first report outlines the framework for the Youth Homelessness Pilot Programme and discusses its context and underlying principles.

Prime Ministerial Youth Homeless Taskforce (1998), *Youth Homelessness Pilot Programme: Interim Report*, AGPS, Canberra.

This reference provides information about the implementation of the pilot programme, details of the pilot projects and some of the emerging themes.

Prime Ministerial Youth Homeless Taskforce (1998), *Putting Families in the Picture: Early Intervention into Youth Homelessness*, Department of Family and Community Services, Canberra.

The author says that, *'[T]his final report summarises the outcomes of the pilot programme and presents the Taskforce's recommendations in response to its terms of reference'*.

Quixley, S. (1997), *The Action Research Resource Kit*, Commonwealth Department of Health and Family Services, Canberra.

This Action Research kit was developed for the Youth Homelessness Pilot Programme to assist with implementation of Action Research in the pilots. Its programme-specific focus and step-by-step framework makes it recommended reading.

Quixley, S. (1998), 'A Commentary on the Process of Implementing Action Research in the Youth Homelessness Pilot Programme' in Evaluation Committee, Prime Ministerial Youth Homeless Taskforce, *Putting Families in the Picture: Supplementary Report*, Department of Family and Community Services, Canberra.

This commentary takes a detailed look at how Action Research was implemented in the Youth Homelessness Pilot Programme. It has valuable insights about the methods used; the implications for practice; the advantages and challenges of the participatory Action Research framework; and characteristics of effective Action Research. It contains information about improving future application of Action Research to the Reconnect Program.

RPR Consulting (1998), *Report of youth homelessness pilot projects good practice forums*, Department of Family and Community Services, Canberra.

This report includes the material collated from the four Good Practice Forums held in May 1998 that was attended by Youth Homelessness Pilot services. The report also contains good practice early intervention principles that were proposed at the forums for working with young people and their families. The report discusses the main intervention strategies used by projects, and the relationship between these and the good practice principles. It also covers gaps and barriers to effective intervention, including a discussion about systemic issues.

References to Action Research and related processes

Cancian, F. & Armstead, C. (1993), 'Subject Biography: Participatory Research' in *Collaborative Inquiry*, No.9.

Quixley (1997) writes that this text, *'…is a useful starting point if you want to take a look at Action Research in depth. The listing includes material on theory and practice, internationally and looks at the application of participatory approaches in addressing a range of 1st and 3rd world problems'*.

Carr, W. & Kemmis, S. (1986), *Becoming Critical: Education, Knowledge and Action Research*, Deakin University, Geelong.

Coover, V., Deacon, E., Esser, C. and Moore, C. (1985), *Resource manual for a Living Revolution: A Handbook of Skills and Tools for social Change Activists*, New Society Publishers, Philadelphia.

Quixley (1997) writes, *'[F]or those with a group/team work bent, this is a really practical resource...it is not directly addressing Action Research but explores processes and techniques suited to a range of participatory endeavours. I have found it a really useful stimulus to process design'*.

Dick, B. (1999), 'Sources of rigour in Action Research: addressing the issues of trustworthiness and credibility', A paper presented at the Association for Qualitative Research Conference, Issues of rigour in qualitative research, Melbourne 6-10 July.

This explains the concept of rigour and how it is achieved in Action Research by capitalising on the inherent features of the Action Research process.

Everitt, A., Hariker, P., Littlewood, J. and Mullender, A. (1992), *Applied research for better practice*, The Macmillan Press, London.

In this book, there are chapters on being a 'research-minded practitioner' with an emphasis on the participatory framework, and what this looks like in practice. It contains a particularly good chapter called 'Developing a Methodology'.

Goff, S and Associates (1998), *Restraint of love: participatory Action Research into the meaning of family violence to young people*, Southern Cross University Press, Lismore.

The publisher of *Restraint of Love* refers to it as, *'…a description of participatory Action Research (PAR) in practice…The project used PAR to explore the meaning of family violence to young people. The purpose of the project was to extend the assumptions underpinning youth work and domestic violence intervention about this issue, in order to stimulate more effective intervention strategies.'* This book gives an excellent account of how service researchers and participants work together in the Action Research process from a 'both sides' perspective.

Grundy, S. (1982), 'Three modes of Action Research', *Curriculum Perspectives*, Vol.2 (3), pp. 23-24.

Hart, E. and Bond, M. (1995), *Action Research for health and social care: a guide to practice*, Open University Press, Philadelphia.

This guide provides a cohesive discussion about how Action Research can bridge the gap between theory, research and practice. While mainly focused on the application of Action Research in health settings, it does make comparisons and links them to practitioners in social/welfare work.

The guide also discusses:

- Action Research concepts in context and practice and issues such as the impact of existing organisational cultures, resistance to change and time constraints;
- Action Research methodologies clearly and plainly, with ways of keeping the focus on `process' and the use of diaries and work journals; and
- useful case studies that tease out 'real life' applications. They cover areas like the rewards and difficulties of Action Research in practice; involving management; negotiating 'understanding' between different groups; and ideas about data collection.

Kemmis, S. & McTaggert, R. (Eds.) (1988), *The Action Research reader*, Third Edition, Deakin University, Geelong.

With a range of contributions about Action Research values and processes, this is a good place to start reading.

McArdle, J. (1999), *Community development in the market economy*, Vista Publications, Melbourne.

While primarily a book about community development and community action (particularly within an economic rationalist environment), many of the concepts and strategies in this book may help you with your Action Research, such as:

- sections on empowerment and participation in community action;
- principles and strategies for consultation; and
- practical strategies such as discussion groups, community conferences, focus groups and community resources auditing.

Seymour-Rolls, K and Hughes, I. (1995), *Participatory Action Research: Getting the job done*, University of Sydney.

This publication discusses the three concepts of participatory Action Research and outlines the 'moments' in the Action Research cycle.

Stringer, Ernie, (1999), *Action Research: A handbook for practitioners*, Second Edition, Sage, Thousand Oaks.

Bob Dick, on his Action Research web site at: www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arhome.html comments on this text. He says that, *'[E]mphasising community applications of Action Research, this clearly written book explains how to conduct Action Research in very practical terms, yet is consistent with the theoretical literature'* It provides a good discussion about participation, communication and inclusion with many practical examples of Action Research processes. It also remodels the four phases in this Action Research kit as 'look, think, act'.

Uhlmann, V. (1995), *Action Research and participation*, [On-line], available at: http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/partic.html

Wadsworth, Y. (1984), *Do It Yourself Social Research*, Victorian Council of Social Service and Melbourne Family Care Organisation, Melbourne.

This resource deals with practical issues such as time management and different forms of documentation. It has an extensive section on Action Research techniques/methodologies and is particularly useful for comparing traditional/positivist research methods with Action Research, as well as outlining the benefits of Action Research in particular settings such as human service contexts.

Wadsworth, Y. (1991), *Everyday Evaluation on the Run*, Action Research Issues Association Incorporated, Melbourne.

This article discusses evaluation from an Action Research perspective. It takes you through research and evaluation processes in a practical way with a good section on using critical reference groups.

Wadsworth, Y. (1993), *What is participatory Action Research?—work in progress*, Action Research Issues Association Incorporated, Melbourne.

On-line resources

Action Research web site maintained by Bob Dick

www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arhome.html ©1997

This site is definitely worth a good look. The web site's content is accessible and 'reader friendly'. It contains an extensive range of resources from basic information and discussion pages, introductory overviews to Action Research concepts, through to more specific papers on rigour, methodology, and critical issues in Action Research processes. It includes:

- an extensive annotated bibliography of source material;
- a list of links to other sites (Australian and international) and discussion groups;
- contributions by other authors on Action Research and associated topics; and
- a public course with weekly sessions about Action Research. (The resource papers from this are available on-line.)

Action Research on Web

http://www.cchs.usyd.edu.au/arow

Ian Hughes who is based at the University of Sydney maintains this site. There are a number of on line articles and reference that are updated regularly. Keep on checking the 'electronic reader' section, as there are a number of contributions on Action Research processes from different authors and sources, including in discussion papers, articles, links and other resources.

Action Learning, Action Research and Process Management Association Incorporated (ALARPM)

Each year the Brisbane branch of this Association sponsors a two-day conference with workshop-oriented sessions about Action Research from academics and practitioners in the field.

For details of their 2000 World Congress, visit the web site at:
http://www.alarpm.org.au/wc5&9/

Glossary

Action learning

Action learning can be defined as a process in which a group of people come together more or less regularly to help each other to learn from their experience (Dick, 1997).

Action Research

Action Research is a process by which change and understanding can be pursued at the one time. It is usually described as cyclic, with action and critical reflection taking place in turn. The reflection is used to review the previous action and plan the next one (Dick, 1997).

Experiential learning

This is a process for drawing learning from experience. The experience can be something which is taking place, or more often is set up for the occasion by a trainer or facilitator. Both Action Research and Action Learning are about learning from experience. The experience is usually drawn from some task assumed by a person or team. Experiential learning is the basis for the learning component of both Action Learning and Action Research (Dick, 1997).

Early intervention

Involves the development and implementation of policies, practices and strategies which address situational factors affecting specific young people. These: a) respond to a perceived difficulty or crisis which may be a precursor to a specific instance of homelessness; or b) respond after homelessness has occurred, but before such time as the shift to chronic homelessness has taken place (Crane & Brannock, 1996, p. 15).

Any activity that would assist in re-engaging young people who had recently left home or saw themselves at risk of homelessness when they, or their family members, sought help from friends, schools, community or government agencies (Final Report of the Prime Minister's Youth Homeless Taskforce, 1998, p. 12).

Early home leaving

Early home leaving occurs when a young person and the family of origin (parent, parents, long-term care giver) separate, for whatever reason, at a stage when there is general community consensus that the young person and family of origin should live together, and where a degree of parental guidance and dependence is appropriate. This definition of early home leaving takes into account a wide range of circumstances, including protective intervention by the state, the abandonment of children and the expulsion of children from the family or foster home (Final Report of the Prime Minister's Youth Homeless Taskforce, 1998, p. 8).

First to know agencies

Those services most likely to be the first point of contact for young people or parents experiencing difficulties related to early home leaving (Crane & Brannock, 1996, p. viii). For example, schools are often an important 'first to know' agency.

Participatory Action Research

Participatory Action Research is a form of Action Research where the people involved in a practice or situation are participants, and where possible co-researchers in the inquiry and change processes.

Reconnect early intervention strategy

In keeping with the values and aims of the Commonwealth Reconnect Program, Reconnect services are an important element of the 'holistic' approach to building communities' early intervention capacities to help young people and their families around issues of homelessness. The term *'Reconnect early intervention strategy'* is seen as 'inclusive' because the program aims to improve the early intervention capacity of a particular community in which the Reconnect service is located.

Soft entry points

Providing parents, young people and other family members with a range of universally accessible, non-stigmatising support services. Such services should provide a 'soft entry' point of first contact where parents or young people, separately or together, can access support to more specialised services. (Crane & Brannock, 1996, p. viii). An example of this would be a service that is attached to a café where people are happy to go without feeling like they are accessing 'welfare' or asking for help.

Technical Action Research

It is a conventional research process, undertaken separately from practice. It may, or may not involve (selected) stakeholders. Stakeholders seen as informants rather than participants, in the research process. The researchers' determine the questions for research (Quixley, 1998, p. 9).

Youth Homelessness Pilot Programme

In May 1996, the Prime Minister announced the formation of a Taskforce to explore more effective responses to youth homelessness, with a particular focus on early intervention. The Taskforce's main responsibility was to oversee the Youth Homelessness Pilot Programme in which 26 services Australia-wide trialed a range of early intervention and family relations' approaches to youth homelessness. *(For more information about the Youth Homelessness Pilot Programme, see 'References/further reading' above).*