On PAR

Using Participatory Action Research to Improve Early Intervention

Improving the lives of Australians
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Acronyms

AASW  Australian Association of Social Workers
AR  Action Research
ARC  Action Research Committee (for Reconnect)
CaLD  Culturally and Linguistically Diverse
FaHCSIA  Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs
GLBTI  Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex
HOME Advice  Household Organisational Management Expenses Advice
NAYSS  Newly Arrived Youth Support Service
NHMRC  National Health and Medical Research Council
PAR  Participatory Action Research
Reconnect–NAYS  Reconnect–Newly Arrived Youth Specialist
YHPP  Youth Homelessness Pilot Program
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Introduction

This manual is designed to assist human service practitioners and agencies, and the communities they work with, to enhance their skills in undertaking Participatory Action Research, and, in so doing improve the situations of people who are vulnerable. It utilises insights derived from a number of Australian Government funded programs, most notably Reconnect, NAYSS (the newly Arrived Youth Support Service known as Reconnect–Newly Arrived Youth Specialists from 1/7/09), and Household Organisational Management Expenses (HOME) Advice. The experience of these early intervention programs demonstrates the benefits of using PAR to achieve improvements in human services.

The 2008 Australian Government White Paper on homelessness, The Road Home, signals that Action Research is a legitimate source of insight for evidence based policy and program design (Australian Government 2008, p.20). We have long known that those most affected by, and closest to, experiences such as homelessness, have an important role to play in the development of relevant and responsive services. To better respond there is also a need to develop services and policies that are more 'joined up' and which respond more holistically to the complexity of needs people may experience. Participatory Action Research (PAR) provides a process which can assist in achieving these goals.

Participatory Action Research has its origins in attempts to develop new forms of inquiry that could assist service and institutional development in times of substantial social change, diversity and complexity (Wadsworth 2005). Various fields of human services have utilised Participatory Action Research in recent years including health services such as nursing and health promotion, education, community crime prevention, disability services, family support services and homelessness services, just to mention a few.

Reconnect, an early intervention into youth homelessness program funded by the Australian Government, was the first social program in Australia to make the undertaking of Participatory Action Research a requirement for services accepting funding. Two whole of program evaluations (ARTD 1998, RPR 2003) found PAR to be a key ingredient of effective early intervention into youth homelessness.

The evidence drawn on to write this manual includes thirteen years of documented Participatory Action Research undertaken within the Reconnect program and its predecessor the Youth Homelessness Pilot Program. Reconnect services across Australia, of which there are currently 107, write annual reports summarising their Action Research processes including case studies. These are then analysed in order to generate observations and reflections across services regarding how they are undertaking their Action Research. This meta-analysis has been undertaken by external consultants annually since 2001 (Parker, Porter Orchard, ARTD), and allows the Action Research Committee to reflect on and support PAR across the program.

This manual also builds on previous Action Research resources, including Working From Your Strengths ... The Action Research Resource Kit (Quixley 1997), the Reconnect Action Research Kit (Crane and Richardson 2000), and the Action Research Induction Kit - A Guide for Reconnect and NAYSS Workers (Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs 2008), and is designed for workers and agencies who want more detail and complexity than covered in the Induction Kit. Indeed, the two can be used in a complementary way.

Since 1999 the development of Participatory Action Research in Reconnect has been facilitated by an Action Research Committee, comprised of Reconnect service providers, an academic with expertise in Action Research, and officers from the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (and its predecessors).

This manual outlines how PAR can be implemented as a tool to improve the situations of the young people, families and communities we seek to assist. It provides practical examples, tools and links to complementary resources. Be warned there is no recipe book for PAR ... no step 1, step 2 and so on. Rather, this manual outlines processes, considerations, questions, ideas, options and suggestions. There are also case examples from practice, hypothetical examples and links to further reading. We hope you find this useful.
Using this manual

We have tried to make this manual easy to read and use. It is primarily intended for use by workers and those they engage with in their practice. This includes, but is not limited to, you, your co-workers, managers, committees or boards, other agencies, and importantly your clients – the individuals, groups and communities that are the target of your service delivery activity.

A resource such as this often sits on a shelf above your desk or in a pile on the floor. It gets dug out when you are looking for ideas on how to get started, need a tool for reflection or want to locate an example that you remember was relevant.

The manual is divided into six sections:

Section One: About Participatory Action Research outlines the characteristics of PAR and its potential benefits.

Section Two: A Walk Through the Research Process examines in detail various aspects of the PAR process from ‘woe to go’.

Section Three: Key Considerations in Doing PAR provides guidance for embedding PAR into everyday practice, being ethical, and developing trustworthy insights.

Section Four: Practical Strategies and Tools contains practical tools for analysing your context, commencing a PAR process, ‘finding out’, analysing and recording.

Section Five: Case Examples provides a range of real and hypothetical case examples that assist in making the links between PAR ideas and practice.

Section Six: Action Research Resources contains a range of references and resources relevant to PAR.

Throughout this manual the term ‘Participatory Action Research’ is simplified to PAR, and the term ‘Action Research’ to AR.

One challenge in a resource such as this is to balance clarity and brevity with complexity and comprehensiveness. There is no simple solution to this. We have tried to not be repetitious, however there are recurring themes that are revisited as different aspects of PAR are explained.

The inevitable but important disclaimer:

Remember this manual does not provide comprehensive advice on everything (or even anything!) to do with PAR. Nor does it describe all the possible strategies you should consider or employ in a particular situation. Before using any particular strategy mentioned here you should pause and reflect, consider your own context and the ethical and practical dimensions of your work. Discuss these with the appropriate people: your colleagues, others you are doing your Action Research with, your manager/supervisor; and apply established principles for good practice.
SECTION ONE

About Participatory Action Research

It should be reassuring for you to know that Participatory Action Research (PAR) largely involves what you already do. Lots of writers and practitioners have commented that the foundation processes of Action Research (AR), of learning by doing, make intuitive sense. This is particularly true when we give value to reflection on practice, when we want to work with people rather than over them, when we enjoy some structure, and when we are open to change.

This section provides an overview of the character of PAR and the benefits of using it to improve early intervention outcomes.

1.1 What is Participatory Action Research (PAR)?

1.1.1 What is Action Research?

The best way to learn is to do, and the best way to do is to learn. In AR the learning and the doing inform each other. So research is not separate from practice but woven into it.

There are many definitions of AR. Here are a couple to consider:

*Action Research is a systematic approach to investigation that enables people to find effective solutions to problems they confront in their everyday lives.* (Stringer 2007, p.1)

*Action Research combines getting a better understanding of issues and using this understanding to change some aspects of practice.* (Action Research Induction Kit 2008, p.1)

Various ‘types’ of AR have been suggested by different writers. Each type has a different understanding of who asks the research question, and who is in the role of ‘Action Researcher’. However they all utilise a systematic process of observation, reflection, planning and action. This process is usually represented as a cycle (see Figure 1 below).

**Figure 1: The basic Action Research cycle**

A good place to start

Observe → Reflect → ‘Share’

Act → Plan

Imagine a rolling ball - multiple cycles over time

This cycle of inquiry is repeated until the conclusion of the Action Research.
The model of Action Research preferred in the Reconnect program is Participatory Action Research (referred to as PAR throughout this manual), though some of the program resources and reports referred to in this manual shorten this to ‘Action Research’.

### 1.1.2 Why Participatory Action Research?

The unique feature of PAR is the **participation** of **those affected by the issue** and the potential for them to be involved in both asking and answering an AR question.

> It is a way of working together to make things better.

This definition comes from the ... **pearls of wisdom** report (Frazer, Gehan, Mills & Smart 2003), which reflected on the Reconnect experiences of undertaking PAR in Indigenous contexts. Rather than involve research ‘on’ people, PAR involves research ‘with’ people. It generates knowledge through **“the lived experience of participants”** (Lennie 2006, p.28).

Yoland Wadsworth says:

> Essentially Participatory Action Research is research which involves all relevant parties in actively examining together current action (which they may experience as problematic) in order to change and improve it (1998, p.13)

and involves a shift from:

> “I ask ... You answer” to “We explore” (2001, p.78).

As Gonzales (2007, p.78) reflects:

> PAR is not primarily about a subject observing an object, but a community of subjects reflecting on themselves and their experiences.

The important question is:

**Who should be involved to make it participatory?**

Essentially PAR is about changing or improving a social situation and involving those most affected in the process of doing this (Alston and Bowles 1998, p.164). So if you undertake service delivery to assist particular people, these are the people ‘most affected’, and they should be involved in order for it to be called ‘participatory’.

The Miimali Report: **Yarning about cultural appropriateness** is instructive about making sure we explore with the people we seek to assist.

> We wanted to ask Aboriginal people what they thought. We believe it is important to hear their ideas, voices and stories on these issues and then to compile these in a way that will be useful for this project and others (locally as well as nationally). Not only will this provide useful data, it will actually allow Indigenous families to become involved in “improving the participation of Indigenous communities in early intervention”. It gives them a platform to express preferences but also to shape provisions and programs for themselves and their communities.  
(Naden, Trikilis, Bonser and Boothye 2004, p.4)

Those most affected by a particular practice strategy often include other agencies and practitioners. For example, it may be that to provide better outcomes for young people who are being threatened with eviction from home, you need better relationships and referral processes between family support services and community respite options for young people. In this case those to involve initially in a PAR process to improve inter-service cooperation will be the relevant service providers. The service user's participation would also be relevant but may not be the central component in this instance.

The key is that the ‘who with’ depends on the topic being explored, the question being asked and the people most affected by any action.

The strength of PAR is that it can be implemented in complex contexts, with service users and stakeholder groups, while maintaining a critical focus on improving local capacity to improve the situations of people. The
If in your practice:
- stakeholders are reflecting on and seeking to improve their own work and/or situation:
  - by tightly interlinking their observations, reflections, plans and actions; and
  - making their learning public through a process of sharing, so others can make use of it

And your practice increasingly.....
- involves stakeholders who are most affected by what you are seeking to improve or change;
- enables stakeholders to participate in identifying questions, answering them and making decisions about action;
- involves stakeholders in gathering data about their own questions;
- works in a collaborative, less hierarchical way, that shares power with all stakeholders;
- encourages stakeholders to take responsibility for their own critical analysis, evaluation and management;
- supports stakeholders to learn progressively and publicly by testing action ideas (and possibly making mistakes along the way); and
- progressively enables stakeholders to ask and answer the bigger questions,

Then.... Participatory Action Research is happening!

This is a re-development of the definition which emerged at the National Symposium on Action Research, held in Brisbane in 1989, and cited in Altrichter, H. et. al. (1990) Defining, confining or refining Action Research? In Zuber-Skerritt, O. (ed.) Action Research for Change and Development, Centre for the Advancement of Learning and Teaching, Griffith University, Brisbane.

Stakeholder participation is the key distinguishing element between PAR and other forms of Action Research, briefly outlined below.

**Emancipatory or critical Action Research** has the goal of “liberation through knowledge gathering” (Mills 2003, p.6). This form of Action Research has its roots in critical theory of the social sciences and the work of Paolo Freire (Freire 1972), a Brazilian educationalist who wanted to alter the way education was formulated, away from expert and academic driven and towards the lay person and “building a community of grounded or indigenous experts” (Gonzales et al 2007, p.79).

**Practical Action Research** takes a ‘how to’ approach and assumes that groups or teams involved in a practice context will choose their own Action Research topics and processes (Mills 2003, p.6).

**Technical Action Research** involves the co-option of practitioners by facilitators to work on externally developed questions. This can include some university located Action Research studies, and some organisational or management determined processes.

**PAR** contains elements of the different types of Action Research set out above.

PAR is emancipatory to the extent that it includes as active participants those who are most affected by the issues under investigation, especially the least powerful. In human services this is typically the clients and target groups of service delivery. Social programs should benefit those vulnerable individuals, groups and communities who experience the issue being targeted by the intervention. PAR conceptualises the participation of service users and other target groups of intervention as important for philosophical reasons (respect, voice, rights), to ensure the most responsive strategies are developed and to achieve the best possible outcomes.
PAR, in a human service context, is practical. There are typically a variety of factors which contribute to a particular social problem (such as youth homelessness). Responding in a way that improves the situation of service users often requires support or change from a variety of agencies. Many of you will be familiar with the phrase ‘joined up problems require joined up solutions’. The involvement of a diversity of stakeholders, who may have a wide range of values, institutional locations, and organisational interests, means that PAR in human services will need to have a practical as well as inclusive character.

PAR undertaken as part of government funded social programs could be argued as containing an element of technical Action Research. Those funding the program (usually governments) will have broad goals and legitimate interests in understanding how to improve policy and practice. Whilst the specific questions pursued by a PAR process are left to the funded services and their co-researchers, the institutional context does have an interest in what it takes to achieve the programs goals and objectives. For the Reconnect program these are expressed as Action Research ‘Questions of National Significance’ (see Section 6.1).

1.1.3 What is the relationship between PAR and other forms of social inquiry?

Various forms of inquiry and sources of knowledge can make different but complementary contributions to social policy and programs, and our understandings of what constitutes good practice (Petr, 2009). Rather than getting caught up in the paradigm wars that litter the literature on research methods, the focus should be on the contribution particular types of inquiry make in answering particular types of questions in particular types of contexts. How might different forms of inquiry complement and enhance knowledge and understanding? It is in this spirit that PAR has been systematically adopted and implemented in a number of early intervention programs as a form of inquiry that is ‘close to the ground’ which invites and values the contribution of those who experience the social difficulties services seek to assist with.

Figure 2 depicts four broad approaches to inquiry relevant to social policy and programs, distinguished according to who is at the centre of the inquiry process. At the apex of the pyramid is the core logic for a social program, namely the improvement of people's situations in one or more respects. The broad goals of programs and services are statements about what constitutes an improved situation. Social programs derive their legitimacy from the claim that they will in some way be of community or civic benefit thus justifying the support of governments, citizens through the ballot box, and other institutions.

**Figure 2: Complimentary approaches to inquiry**
Who is central to the inquiry process? Who decides what the research question is and what was found out?
‘Traditional’ research puts academics and academic-scientific thinking at the centre of the research process, though it varies enormously in underlying assumptions, style, and methods used. The researcher is at the centre of question posing and data interpretation. Knowledge is legitimated through peer review by academics or academic institutions to establish credibility (e.g. via refereed journals, research papers, theses, etc.).

Reflective/reflexive practice puts practitioners and the development of practice knowledge at the centre of the research process. The practitioner is at the centre of the question posing and the interpretation of the practice context. This involves practitioners thinking deeply about their practice situations, their role, the way their own values and assumptions influence their perspectives on clients and their needs, how they understand the intervention options, their professional development and the strategies they can employ to cope with practice challenges that arise. In some human services such reflective inquiry is undertaken with a ‘supervisor’, in team meetings, with a manager, or informally with a peer or colleague. Whilst some professional groups encourage it, there is no requirement to share or ‘publish’ the insights gained.

Agency inquiry processes put those with institutional power (eg. management, funding bodies, etc.) at the centre of the inquiry process. Relevant inquiry strategies can include formal evaluations, data collections, quality assurance processes, strategic planning, and applied research projects. Such inquiries may be required by an external body, be undertaken in-house, or be contracted to consultants. In these processes the topics and questions pursued are moderated by management, or their agents, and the results may or may not be made available more broadly.

Emancipatory Action Research positions the people most affected by a situation and with the least power, at the centre of the inquiry process. It is their questions which drive the process of producing knowledge and they decide what has been found out. In terms of social problems such as homelessness, those ‘most affected’ commonly have relatively little power being variously described as vulnerable, disadvantaged, marginalised or excluded. Emancipatory Action Research may be supported or initiated by others in a community (such as practitioners) but is different to consultation and participation which ‘contributes’.

The approaches to inquiry depicted previously in Figure 2 can be complementary in helping us understand how to improve the situations of the people our programs and services aim to assist. For example, good PAR may usefully draw on relevant academic studies, service data, program data, other statistics, relevant evaluations done on similar practice contexts, and consumer/client feedback. All are viewed as potentially providing contributions to better understandings, better practices, and better outcomes for those people that programs and services are attempting to assist. Considering what other sources of information might assist your PAR process to have the best chance of being well conceived is part of good PAR practice. PAR contributes something that others alone cannot: it enables well-founded change arising from the collaborative effort of those closest to the ground.

PAR uses reflective practice as a foundation. Reflective practice can be used by individual practitioners, across a team of practitioners, and across a whole service. A good starting point for building up your capacity to undertake PAR is to consider your own capacity to undertake reflective practice and build from there.

### 1.2 Why use Participatory Action Research in Early Intervention?

#### 1.2.1 About early intervention

This manual is broadly oriented to those involved in developing the early intervention capacity of services and communities. Early intervention involves assisting those individuals and groups who are experiencing the early manifestations of a particular difficulty and can be distinguished from broader systemic prevention (see Mallett 2009, Crane and Brannock 1996). Continuing debate exists about how to best define early intervention in relation to different social issues and target groups, and it is beyond the scope of this manual to canvass the details of this. Despite any differences that may exist, to be effective early intervention will need to deal with a number of challenges including:

- Most issues, such as homelessness, are manifestations of a potentially wide range of contributing factors that are often inter-related and multi-layered
- The ‘earlier’ the intervention, the more it may look like early intervention into one of several potential issues eg homelessness, early school leaving, family breakdown, mental health crisis, drug dependency, etc.
The focus of early intervention effort is often on the **building of greater connection** between people and the key sources of support and opportunity in their lives.

**Each community has a character of its own.** The existing service mix, their relationship to each other, the community’s demographics, location and cultural norms will indicate the types of services and relationships needed.

Particular principles have emerged which are considered necessary for good early intervention practice. Developed out of a substantial AR process in the late 1990’s, the Reconnect good practice principles are indicative of these (see Section 1.5).

Early intervention services often employ a mix of two inter-related strategies. The first is **direct service provision** to the particular target group. The second involves supporting and **building a community’s capacity** to respond to the target issue. This community capacity building role involves supporting other services, encouraging services to talk to each other, negotiating and clarifying roles and finding ways to achieve better outcomes for the particular target group. Undertaking direct practice and community capacity building roles simultaneously has many benefits but is often experienced as a ‘delicate balance’ (Evans and Shaver 2001, p.59).

Figure 3 below depicts early intervention with young people as located in the intersections between young people, family, the realm of learning/earning (which for most under 18 year olds means school and/or vocational training), and community (including access to safe and sustainable accommodation/housing for young people). This model builds on one developed by Community Connections (2009). Depending on the young person’s situation, early intervention may need to engage with, and intervene into, a number of these inter-relationships if a particular destination problem is to be avoided, or moderated.

**Figure 3: Early intervention and youth homelessness: Building connections**
The model depicted in Figure 3 has relevance to various early intervention areas. This includes early intervention into youth homelessness, aspects of youth mental health, juvenile crime and early school leaving. In respect of youth homelessness, early intervention involves addressing a myriad of factors that affect the young person’s relationship with the key institutions and supports necessary for them to sustain a stable living situation. **Situational factors** which may trigger early intervention into youth homelessness are often various and inter-related, and can include the loss of ‘home’ or sense of belonging as a result of family conflict, difficulties experienced by themselves, or those they rely on, such as mental health or drug and alcohol related difficulties, a deteriorating relationship with schooling, and/or disconnection from community support and involvement. A **holistic view** of early intervention recognises that any or all of the inter-relationships in Figure 3 may be a legitimate focus in a particular instance.

While there are broad good practice principles that can apply to different contexts, there is no specific strategy that will ‘fit’ everywhere. PAR provides a **framework** and the **tools** for developing responsive and contextually relevant early intervention strategies. The character of PAR and the character of early intervention suit each other.

**Figure 4: A simplified model of PAR: Improving the situations of people through improved practice**

1.2.2 **PAR as a tool for enhancing early intervention capacity and outcomes**

In early intervention into youth homelessness PAR has been found to contribute to:
- better client outcomes;
- improved coordination and collaboration;
- improved service delivery;
- enhanced community capacity for early intervention, and
- a more responsive, improvement oriented culture in human service organisations and programs.

The case examples of PAR included in Section 5 of this manual each illustrate one or more of these. The following summary, from an early intervention service in the Northern Territory, illustrates the contribution of PAR to improved collaboration and service delivery and, as a result, better outcomes for young clients.
Our specific Action Research question was: What would it take to improve support to young people at the local school?

No school counsellor, small school, small community with many issues, violence, alcohol, suicide. We started working with a couple of young people as individual clients, got some outcomes, and started discussions with the teachers. The teachers invited us to a camp at the school with the students to run some self esteem and safety workshops and make a fun film. Following this, regular meetings were held with the special needs teacher to identify students requiring support. Connect trialled a morning a week at the school when young people could come and chat. As part of this we asked the students what they thought was needed.

The school asked Connect to run some more workshops for the health & wellbeing program on keeping your head healthy. Feedback was positive from the teachers and students involved. Tuesday became the day for running workshops and catching up with anyone who wanted to have a chat. Through the workshops the workers became known to the students, who were more likely to approach the service with difficulties they were facing.

The Action Research question was regularly discussed with the teaching staff and students who were involved, and over time the decisions about students were able to be based on a deeper understanding of their needs and perspectives.

Manager, Connect - East Arnhem

Better client outcomes

Services can use PAR to experiment with more flexible and responsive approaches, tailored to suit local circumstances.

Practice is constantly changing and under review as a result of the Action Research process. Client access to the program has improved. In addition, other community minded people now have a greater voice in their community and are more actively involved with the Reconnect. We believe AR to be valuable in relation to good practice and improved outcomes for our clients. It motivates us to target specific issues and focus some of our time and energy to examine an issue that we have wanted to concentrate on.

A Reconnect service

Improved coordination and collaboration

PAR can lead to improved coordination between local projects and services. This enables services to respond more effectively to the needs of target groups.

PAR encourages more involvement, ownership and participation by the community, other agencies, and clients. For instance, young people and their parents can have a greater say in how services are run. PAR can also help resolve issues between different agencies. It can create opportunities to come together, develop relationships, and generate more ideas about how to work collaboratively.

... while proving to be very challenging, (PAR) has brought together services to specifically address referral processes and difficulties as a group for the first time in the local area. Communication between the services from observations gained through Action Research indicate some services are now much more aware of what is available in the community and how to go about tapping in to other services in the most appropriate manner.

Porter Orchard Report 1: 2004: pg. 19
Improved service delivery

Services can change their approaches to service delivery as a result of PAR findings. This includes improving client access, referral systems and service promotion. Services can broaden or modify the types of services offered, including their intervention approaches, or change where their services are located. See Section 5.7 for a good example of this. An analysis of the AR reports of Reconnect services from 2002-2007 concluded that AR:

- encourages a reflective, responsive and often creative approach to service delivery, such that insights are able to be acted upon to improve the quality of service offered to service users
- provides opportunities for continuous evaluation and review of all aspects of the service
- strengthens the relationships with stakeholders including the young people and families that it services both past and present
- enabled the development of many new initiatives and projects by providing the legitimacy through evidence for why they might be necessary and why they ought to be developed in a particular way.

Porter Orchard & Associates 2009: p.19

Enhanced community capacity for early intervention

Services undertaking early intervention often have a dual focus of working to build the capacity of other parts of the community to provide timely support as well as providing direct service delivery to clients.

PAR is an excellent tool for building community capacity as it engages other services in a collaborative process of inquiry where clarifying the contributions each service can make is one outcome of the process. Whether we call it ‘joined up service delivery’ or ‘client-centred’ practice or ‘wrap around’ support, PAR provides a tool for approaching the provision of timely assistance in a more holistic way. A 2001 study by the Social Policy Research Centre investigated the development of early intervention community capacity by Reconnect services (Evans and Shaver 2001, p.59) and commented:

Opinions towards Action Research were very positive and staff considered it as an invaluable aspect of their work for young people and families in the area. They clearly saw a link between the on-going process of Action Research and developing the communities’ capacity for addressing issues for youth at risk.

A more responsive improvement oriented culture in human service organisations

PAR helps in the establishment of a dynamic, change oriented culture in organisations (ARTD 1998). It has been found to promote positive attitudes to change and by regularly reviewing practices, improves internal operations and clarifies people’s roles. PAR makes a positive contribution to program evaluation by providing insights about the effectiveness of particular strategies, and can make an important contribution to policy development (ARTD 1998).

An independent assessment of Reconnect services in 2003 found that effective Action Research:

- was integrated into practice, often with regular scheduling of Action Research sessions
- was used to explore pressing issues and/or questions of national significance
- went beyond the comfort zone of internal staff meetings to risk involving a range of relevant stakeholders (including other services) in each question, using structured discussions or other participatory processes
- drew on client data, quality assurance and client feedback systems
- used the results of Action Research to refine service delivery and develop strategies, reflected in work plans
- documented their processes and results (in work plans and self evaluation reports) to provide a meaningful record for stakeholders (including new managers and staff) and to demonstrate accountability for service changes; and
- ultimately demonstrated a culture of self-reflection and evidence based practice.

ARTD (2003)
1.2.3 Potential benefits for different stakeholders

For young people and their families
PAR values the insights and experiences of the young people and family members whom services are intended to assist. It provides opportunities for young people and parents to influence what issues are seen as important to explore, and what strategies are experienced as helpful or otherwise.

For front-line early intervention practitioners
PAR provides front-line practitioners with a tool to pursue better outcomes for their clients. It encourages the development of local partnerships and collaborative arrangements, and allows workers the opportunity to move from networking to actual collaboration with other agencies.

PAR also helps front-line practitioners clarify and improve relationships between workers and services so they can work together more easily and effectively. It can be a useful tool to identify barriers to and gaps in early intervention. This can add to the evidence base used by workers and other advocates to support individual clients and improve policies and systems.

For management
PAR provides management with well-founded evidence on which to base change and improvement. This can be particularly useful when looking for financial support for services from governments, philanthropic sources, business, other interested stakeholders, and boards of management/committees.

PAR can also improve a service's transparency and accountability. It can provide important contributions to strategic planning, review, quality assurance and evaluation.

PAR involves a focused, ‘heads together’ way of thinking. It values people's inputs, takes advantage of existing skills and resources, and stimulates innovation.

Regular training of new staff in PAR always gets an energy happening that encourages the ‘new’ ideas and different ways of doing things. As a manager it’s great to see everyone get excited about the possibilities for clients, the community and the service as a whole.

Manager of a youth service

PAR helps establish relationships with other agencies and create links which can lead to achieving a clearer picture of the most useful interface with other service providers.

Using PAR can improve efficiency by refining issues and answering questions about what can and cannot be done. Properly supported PAR can be a key strategy in developing a culture of ‘continuous improvement’.

According to one manager of a state-wide multi-service agency:

Participatory Action Research can be more than a methodology. As a set of norms and beliefs it has a capacity to drive organisational culture and development. What's more in an environment driven by regulation, standardisation, risk management and total quality control adopting and embedding Participatory Action Research as an organisational framework allows concepts such as inclusion, integrity, and innovation, to get equal air time.

For government
PAR can contribute to government policy-making and improve outcomes for young people and their families. As part of the purchaser-provider relationship with government, services can feed insights from PAR into policy development and advice and so contribute evidence for use in developing innovative and responsive new programs or strategies.

Through PAR, services were able to confirm the broad definition of family reconciliation used in the Program. That it wasn’t always appropriate to get recently homeless young people living back at home. In some cases it was dangerous, so the focus on family reconciliation had to be a broad one, maximising their connection to their families and support networks, and getting their living situation stabilised. That meant returning home where appropriate.

Manager of a Reconnect service
Where the character of services is difficult to ascertain due to the complexity of need and/or the diversity of implementation contexts, PAR provides governments with a useful process accountability mechanism (Crane 2006). Where a particular model of service cannot be specified in advance, funding bodies can require services to diligently explore and establish interventions that fit the local context using PAR.

PAR can also help government and non-government organisations to identify and fill gaps, prevent overlaps in services, and engage with each other around complexity. This can mean more efficient and effective services.

For the community

PAR allows communities the opportunity to understand more about the problems early intervention seeks to address. It enables community participation and increases the likelihood that the approach taken will better suit local circumstances, and build real community ‘ownership’ and involvement.

1.3 The PAR cycle of inquiry

The cycle of PAR is typically depicted as including 4 elements: observe, reflect, plan and act. The experience of PAR in the Reconnect program has led us to include a 5th element, ‘share’. The model of PAR presented in this manual emphasises the importance of sharing observations, lessons, practice developments with stakeholders – throughout the cycle – and with stakeholders and broader public at the conclusion of the research. The model presented here also emphasises the importance of commencing each cycle with observation as a way of making sure you pause and look at the context you are in before starting to make plans.

Remember one PAR project should generally have multiple cycles. In 2007-2008 Reconnect and NAYSS providers reported that continuing the cycle of research for two or more cycles and trying refined or new methods based on the insights generated was particularly effective (ARTD Report to FaHCSIA 2009).

Figure 5 below represents the basic PAR cycle. The term ‘Share’ refers to the informal sharing of new actions and new understandings with all your stakeholders. It is also refers to the formal sharing of your documented research process with its questions, actions, findings, conclusions and recommendations for new action. Sharing can also involve the publication of your PAR report.

The following explanation of observe, reflect, plan and act is extracted from the Action Research Induction Kit (2008, p.8-11).
Observe
Some stages of observation are:

1. Look at what is happening
2. Describe what has happened
3. Record what has happened

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).

The observe stage can be a good place to start an Action Research cycle by:

- considering 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

Reflect
Stages of Reflection include:

1. Standing back even more and reflecting on what happened.

Take time:

- involve and listen to stakeholders for their different perspectives and interpretations

2. Developing ideas or ‘theories’ about what happened.

Brainstorm by:

- talking it over
- sharing insights
- piecing things together or ‘jigsawing’

3. Sharing ideas with others so that a range of interpretations and ‘meanings’ can be considered.

Float ideas by:

- making informed guesses based on the information gathered
- comparing what you have observed with competing evidence
- looking at alternative explanations

This is the stage in the cycle where you need to spend time thinking about the findings of the observations, negotiating meaning with stakeholders and building a shared understanding.

Plan
Planning includes:

1. Clarifying the questions being asked
2. Identifying the actions to be tried out
3. Developing an action plan

All stages should be participatory and collaborative and the planning stage is no different. At this point, stakeholders should come together to talk about what they will do and how they will do it. It is important at this point to directly involve those affected by the research question. Each member of the group undertaking the Action Research itself should make active contributions to the plan and work collaboratively with one another.
You will find that a well thought out, flexible and coordinated action plan will prove effective, particularly in serving a wide range of stakeholders. For example, if workers across five community organisations are involved in trialing a new approach under a particular AR project, it is critical that they have a clear, agreed action plan that all are committed to implementing.

**Act**

Action includes:

1. **Do what you said you were going to do - systematically and creatively implement plans**
2. **Communicate with others and involve them in the process**
3. **Keep track of what happens**

Having tried out the strategy (action), observed what happened, and reflected on what this means, you will be able to draw up your tentative answers to the question you posed.

In addition it is important to:

**Share**

Sharing includes:

1. putting your tentative answers to your question/s, and conclusions into a form that can be shared, within your PAR group and where possible beyond your PAR group;
2. inviting others to reflect on what you have found and suggest areas they confirm and dispute. The timing and the publicness of this will depend on your context;
3. refine the scope of your conclusions and consider the implications for your subsequent plan (the start of a new PAR cycle).

As explained later in this manual the process of sharing is an important step in enhancing the trustworthiness of what you find out and of the usefulness of the strategies you develop.

### 1.4 Summarising the key characteristics of PAR

PAR is:

- cyclical
- participatory
- systematic
- dynamic
- developmental
- critical.

#### 1.4.1 PAR is cyclical

The basic cycle of PAR is depicted in Figure 1 (page 1). This sequence has been extended in light of experiences in undertaking PAR in the Reconnect program. The sequence on the next page is extended and is particularly useful as a way of thinking about how to start a PAR process.
An extended cycle

- **Observe** (what is happening in your practice context)
- **Reflect** (develop an understanding of the context and one or more questions to begin with)
- **Plan** (a strategy that you think provides the answer, or part of it)
- **Act** (the strategy)
- **Observe** (describe what happened)
- **Reflect** (analyse and develop your ‘theory'/insights about what this means. Check out by sharing and seeking feedback)

  then **Plan** (using your insights outline changes to your strategy, your question, your stakeholders)

  and **Act** (try it again)

  and so on improving your understandings, your practices, and the outcomes for those you are trying to assist.

The final step is to **share publicly** (allowing the broader public to hear and engage with your story).

Figure 6: An extended PAR cycle

In this sequence *observe* and *reflect* are undertaken twice, once to investigate your context and come up with an initial question, and then again to evaluate the strategy you tried out.

The idea is that you and your ‘co-inquirers’ keep going through this cycle until you decide you have sufficiently answered your question. Repeating the cycle allows you to check your conclusions and build a stronger evidence base.
Keep in mind that PAR is not a tidy linear process - you will jump around between different elements in the cycle and sometimes even be doing them all at once. Something might have changed in your context and you need to adjust what you are doing and away you go again but this time with a lot more understanding and relationships to build on.

**A word on cycles within cycles.** Participants in PAR have often commented that as they follow a cycle through, other (micro) questions and issues may emerge that need to be explored in order to answer their larger (more macro) question. They have also said that as well as their question related to early intervention (the content), they need to explore how they do their PAR (the process).

For those of you who appreciate a circus metaphor it’s a bit like juggling different objects in the air simultaneously. Except just when you think you are getting it another object is tossed in for you to juggle!

There will always be a number of ‘balls in the air’, and from time to time you will drop one. But you are not supposed to be doing PAR alone. Doing and learning together - with people - is the critical ingredient. Remember complexity can be moderated by sharing roles, by documenting each question and cycle separately, and by keeping it all as simple and small as possible. You do not have to solve all the problems of the world. So keep an eye on what is your group's main focus, and stay relaxed.

**1.4.2 PAR is participatory**

The focus of PAR is on ‘people changing their own practices and behaviours, not those of others’ (Stringer 2004, p.5). Those who are affected by the practice should be engaged and involved in the process of understanding and change. This makes PAR a tool that can be used to enhance social inclusion and social justice.

Various metaphors have been used to describe what you might do to build this participatory character, including being a 'go-between', and a dinner party convenor (Wadsworth 2001, p.48). Certainly you will be looking for ways to invite people's potential contributions, communicating a lot, explaining, reframing, seeking common ground and language, facilitating and encouraging, even marketing and ‘selling’, all the time trying to respect those you engage with, and do what you can to set up an environment for ‘good conversation’. One service in a particular cultural community discovered the value of engaging ‘cultural brokers’ to enhance the participation.

> Through our Action Research we found we needed to use key people in the particular cultural community to act as ‘cultural brokers’. We found that participation in forums and events hosted by us improved dramatically when we involved key people to get the invitation out. They know who to ask, and the right time, and are able to do whatever it takes to get everyone there. Instead of just a few turning up now we get lots of people and huge discussion.

A NAYSS provider

**1.4.3 PAR is systematic**

While flexibility is essential, it is also really important that your PAR process is sufficiently systematic to produce the understandings and improvements you seek.

The framework of PAR provides a structure for exploring practice. You will need to establish or use a number of mechanisms to get stakeholders’ views, facilitate collaboration, gather information, analyse and share. Being systematic allows you to work through a PAR process in a way that others involved can understand and engage with, and which addresses the key challenges in undertaking an inquiry process.

You should also try to be logical in your PAR. By this we mean you should ‘join the dots’ as you move from one part of the PAR process to another. For example make sure that the question you are trying to answer doesn’t get forgotten and that you keep asking what you have learnt about it so far. If the question needs changing, change it! If it doesn’t, try to answer it in a deliberate way. Some people have found it useful to post their question up large on the wall in front of their desk or in the foyer of the service.

Make sure your PAR group explicitly discusses and documents the links between each element of the PAR cycle. In particular, make sure you have paused to observe before you start making interpretations about the meaning of what happened.

Systematically recording your PAR allows it to be adequately described, analysed and shared. This is critical if you are to produce trustworthy insights and conclusions. This is covered in more detail in Sections 3 and 4.
It is not only your PAR that should be systematic. To be sustainable in human service programs, PAR needs to be located within a broader AR system. An AR system links cycles of inquiry at the service level with cycles of inquiry between services, and between services and both program management and policy development. Mechanisms are needed for sharing PAR across services so they can benefit from and reflect on the insights of others, for contributing to, and hearing about, program and policy level deliberations, and for the training and support of those undertaking PAR.

See Section 3.6 of this manual for more on the components of an AR system.

1.4.4 PAR is dynamic

PAR needs to have an 'elastic quality' which means it can be adapted, changed and redesigned as the process goes along (Grant 2008, p.266). This is why you should not adopt an unchangeable formula for doing PAR but rather start simply and develop your confidence in thinking about what process best fits your context.

What might you need to change along the way? Well, just about anything. There are some wonderful accounts by Reconnect services of starting out in a particular direction only to end up changing dramatically along the way. What is important is to learn through this process. Each challenge is a potential source of insight and each twist and turn brings you closer to understanding what will be a more useful approach.

It was not until I was able to more fully comprehend the value of reflection that I began to appreciate the contributions each detour in my research journey made, both to the research and my own development. I was learning through 'being' and 'doing' (Grant 2008, p.268).

1.4.5 PAR is developmental

PAR is not operated by an on-off switch. It is strengths oriented, starts where people are at, and should try to maximise participation and scope over time.

It can take quite a long time to develop your confidence in PAR and to develop a clear PAR project.

In PAR, 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 PAR see Section 2.3.

1.4.6 PAR is ‘critical’

This doesn’t mean being negative. Rather it means PAR is questioning or 'self-skeptical' (Wadsworth 1997, p.31). Being critical also means we recognise that people’s situations are not only a result of their own actions and relationships, but arise from the social and economic structures around them. It means that PAR appreciates that some people get less say in things than others and that the people who are most affected should have a voice and a role in the process of working out what to do. In this sense PAR is underpinned by values of relationship, inclusion and justice. Critical reflection includes examining our own assumptions and norms, appreciating the nature of your own agency's interests and acknowledging the broader systemic factors that maintain vulnerability and undermine the wellbeing of particular individuals and groups.

Whilst PAR is inherently optimistic it also appreciates there are limits to what local practitioners and agencies can do to bring about change. In respect of homelessness, there are structural and systemic contributing factors that early intervention is not capable of addressing. A range of responses are required if the prevention of homelessness is to be realised, one of which is effective early intervention (Australian Government The Road Home 2008). PAR is a tool for continuous service improvement which can identify systemic and structural barriers to improving the situations of people. PAR can help build the evidence base needed for systems advocacy and broader change.
1.5 PAR is good human services practice

A great strength of PAR is that it is entirely consistent with what is now considered good social work and human services practice. This includes but is not limited to:

- recognising and building on the strengths and expertise of individuals, families and communities
- appreciating the importance of relationships and connection in people’s wellbeing
- understanding the importance of the specific practice context if a service or strategy is to be effective.

In an Indigenous context, key elements and processes of Action Research have parallels with processes that have been shown to work and are cemented in culture. They work because they involve people. They work because they use people’s strengths. They work because they are based on practice.

... pearls of wisdom, Frazer et al. 2003, p.4

Good practice within the Reconnect program is summarised within the Reconnect Good Practice Principles (available at www.fahcsia.gov.au). These Principles are:

- accessibility of service
- client-driven service delivery
- holistic approaches to service delivery
- working collaboratively
- culturally and contextually appropriate service delivery
- ongoing review and evaluation
- building sustainability.

These principles were originally developed through an AR process. PAR is a key mechanism in the Reconnect program for ‘ongoing review and evaluation’. It has been used to examine and deepen understandings of what constitutes good practice. The following summarises what one service learnt from their PAR processes over a number of years. They wanted to investigate what it would take for generalist services to work in a culturally appropriate way.

The service’s research investigations involved numerous discussions with their team and key Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CaLD) agencies, web-based searches on the barriers faced by young people from CaLD communities, analysis of the findings or outcomes from previous project work they had done in this area and reflections on what was learnt in recent CaLD forums and in cultural awareness training. Some of the key insights made from their investigations in this area included that:

A. A generalist service should not presume to know what the needs of a CaLD community is and must seek to engage with the community and its representatives in order to firstly establish what their needs are. From this engagement a service will begin to know the CaLD community and are then able to provide community-building activities that are inclusive, accessible and equitable;

B. As a service, knowledge, skills and experience in working cross-culturally are required and culturally sensitive, responsive, appropriate, relevant and safe work practices are also needed. These may include using interpreters and being mindful of religious and cultural practices in planning and the delivery of programs; and

C. For a generalist service it is important to go into partnership with expert stakeholders, sharing knowledge, skills, experience and resources for running groups before embarking on other community initiatives.

From Porter Orchard Report 2: 2008 pg 21
Overall PAR is viewed very positively by services, particularly once they have had the opportunity to develop a familiarity with it. In surveys of Reconnect services from 2003-2008 more than half regarded AR as ‘very useful’ and between 79% and 90% of services, depending on the year, rated AR as either ‘useful’ or ‘very useful’ (Porter Orchard Report 5 2006/2007, p.19).

1.6 Summary and reflections

This section has:

- introduced you to Participatory Action Research and compared it to other forms of Action Research and social inquiry
- highlighted the value of PAR in developing and improving strategies for early intervention, and
- outlined the cyclical nature of PAR and its key characteristics.

Some questions to consider

- How do you currently reflect on your practice?
- What would it take for you to better understand PAR?
- How might PAR contribute to better outcomes for the people you work with?
- What aspects of PAR are the same as/ similar to ‘good’ practice in your field?
- What would it take to incorporate, or better incorporate, PAR into aspects of your practice?

Section Two walks you through the PAR process, identifying the contextual and practical dimensions of commencing, implementing and concluding a PAR project in your community.
SECTION TWO

A Walk Through the PAR Process

This section walks you through a simplified PAR process. It sets the scene and looks at what you could usefully do before getting started. It then tracks through the practical steps and potential issues in the planning, management, facilitation and conclusion of a PAR process when facilitated through a community based organisation. The engagement and participation of stakeholders, the scope of action and the importance of documenting your process of evaluating and sharing your learning are explored.

2.1 Setting the scene

Your agency has its own unique context, has particular objectives, and is located in a specific locality or is working with a particular community of interest. This context will influence how you undertake intervention and how you might use PAR. PAR enables your agency, together with your community of stakeholders, to notice what is happening, ask questions and seek to improve the outcomes for those you seek to assist. The specific challenges and complexities facing you – the worker – will depend on the character of your agency and its community and institutional contexts. These include the expectations and mix of funding sources, the agency’s existing connections, the core values that underpin the agency, the models of service employed by your agency and others relevant to the target issue, the approach to management, your agency’s size and resources, the skills of staff and others you involve in a PAR process, and so on.

A PAR process should assist you to better understand:

- your agency’s strengths and resources
- your stakeholders’ strengths and resources
- the complexities of the issues at hand
- the opportunities for action, change and improvement.

PAR enables you and your stakeholders to ask in relation to a particular context: What works? What doesn’t? What should we do differently?

2.1.1 Agency managers are key enablers in PAR

The understanding and support of agency managers is critical to the development of an inclusive PAR process. Some funding programs, such as Reconnect, require PAR be used as a tool for service improvement. In other programs it may be recommended by the funding body. In many other instances it would be desirable but is not explicitly endorsed by the funding body. Understanding which of these applies to your service is important.

If you are a manager there are a number of things you can do to assist the development of PAR in your service. Getting a basic appreciation of PAR yourself will assist you to create an environment in which it can develop and contribute to service improvement. Ensuring you give organisational endorsement, space, practical support and staff development opportunities will be important.

Implementing PAR requires being open to change and to working with service users and other organisations and community groups. This asks something of your service and other stakeholder services. Can you work together and trust that in seeking this change you will not create havoc but assist in meeting the goals of your service?

There are a number of factors in the broader institutional human service environment that can limit the capacity of services to explore new ways of doing things. Contract management which specifies inputs and throughputs, risk-averse cultures, and insufficient recognition of staff development needs are some of these.

Management may be concerned that service funding will be at risk if they significantly change their service delivery approach or if the strategies tried are not successful. Certainly PAR does involve trying strategies which though thoughtfully developed, may not work, or may need revising. Using a systematic PAR process, however, brings you closer to understanding what will work better. A culture of inquiry means encouraging the exploration of what good practice means in your context and accepting that this may include going up a few dead ends in the short term.
2.1.2 Agency planning for PAR

Agency endorsement of roles in PAR coordination, training, facilitation of a specific project and ethics makes these a clear part of duties. Even if these tasks are shared, it is important to articulate clearly who is doing what and when. Ideally the key tasks related to the agency undertaking PAR should be clearly articulated in worker job descriptions and reflected in operational management and planning. Some agencies have found that it is useful for one person to have the overall responsibility for facilitating a specific PAR ‘project’. Agency planning processes (strategic and operational) can be used to identify priority projects suitable for PAR. Questions that can assist your agency develop a capacity for undertaking PAR include:

- do we support a culture of inquiry within the agency? How?
- who in the service is responsible for facilitating the development of PAR in the agency? Who else is involved?
- how - and who - provides supervision and support to workers involved in PAR?
- how can we support existing and new staff develop skills in PAR?

Addressing these questions can assist your agency to provide staff with a clear endorsement to be involved in PAR and provide a foundation for developing the agency’s capacity over time.

2.1.3 Making time for PAR

Time is a precious and limited resource. Inevitably you will face tensions over the balance of time spent on direct service delivery and PAR. If you are a small service this can be a particular problem. Single worker services can find their credibility is undermined if they have to choose between ‘being open or closed’.

In early intervention services there is normally a strong emphasis on building your community’s capacity for ‘intervening early’. Early intervention is rarely understood simply as only direct service delivery. So given that PAR builds the very relationships and collaborative linkages that are needed for greater community capacity in early intervention you have a good case for dedicating time to your PAR.

Over time you will gradually be able to incorporate elements of PAR into your everyday service delivery.

As one worker writes:

*For me PAR IS direct service delivery. As a Community Development Worker I am constantly looking for ways to support communities to self-determine and develop. PAR is a simple framework that keeps me in ‘check’ to ensure ethical processes and outcomes.*

Worker Colony 47

2.1.4 Strategies for managing PAR

Crisis and administrative priorities can push developmental processes such as PAR to the bottom or off agendas. If PAR discussions are only located within general meeting processes they may be swamped by more immediate demands, tasks and crises. Your PAR will need some space of its own for observation, reflection, planning, engagement of stakeholders and so on. In addition, a regular spot on a staff meeting agenda may be an important strategy for your agency to discuss the role of the PAR, note its progress, gather more resources and report on observations, reflections, plans and activity. Table 1 outlines some of the common approaches services use for managing their PAR. Most services use a number of these in conjunction.
Table 1: Approaches used to manage PAR

- A set agenda item at weekly or fortnightly team meetings*
- Regular AR meetings (Weekly/Fortnightly/Monthly) *
- A set agenda item at an AR Advisory or AR Reference Group meeting*
- Each worker develops their own question in consultation with the team and then takes responsibility for it
- Project management approach, using an AR framework, and regular review
- Professional development/training in AR where specific AR investigations are developed
- Network of Reconnect services work on a broad question as a group
- Discuss AR at wider organisational meetings
- Identify links to AR at everyday case meetings & case review meetings
- Specific time allocated for AR activities
- Staff supervision & work plans where specific AR explorations are regularly discussed
- Utilisation of an external evaluation consultant to assist with AR
- AR focused review sessions on a regular basis

*Most commonly used by Reconnect Services in recent years

An analysis of Reconnect Action Research reports over 6 years concluded:

For many services a combination of these approaches is used, such that AR activities are not forgotten and AR is more easily integrated into everyday practice. Those services that hold separate, regular AR focused meetings tended not to include AR in staff meetings or in supervision. Some services have delegated specific AR explorations and their development to specific workers to ensure ownership and responsibility. This approach appears useful if individuals are then supported by other members of the team with ideas and energy in the development and implementation of the AR exploration.

AR has been incorporated by services into planning and evaluation sessions that may be held six monthly or yearly. This is imperative if the findings of AR explorations are to have any impact on service delivery.

Porter Orchard 2009 Report 5, p.22

2.1.5 Support, supervision and sounding boards for PAR

Agency processes that promote worker support, practice reflection, planning and review can also promote and support PAR. Supervision, team meetings, board meetings are all forums that can offer real support, feedback and recognition to workers. They can also provide the space to reflect on observations, ask the hard questions and propose ways of engaging stakeholders in solution focussed action. Other less formal support mechanisms and sounding boards may also be important for you. The pearls of wisdom Report talks of:

Finding someone or a number of people to rebound off after a meeting, forum or whatever will add critical checks and balances in the process and keep you on track as opposed to leading no one anywhere.

Frazer et al. 2003, p6

2.2 Appreciating the contexts in which your PAR will take place

PAR enables you to draw on the wide pool of strengths and resources in your team, your management, your clients and your network of related agencies and statutory services. Your task is to work with your stakeholders to identify and harness these capacities and resources and to decide where best to start your PAR. For PAR to be easily integrated into day to day practice it needs to draw on what it is you do well, what you would like to get better at, what you understand to be the resources available, and what you understand to be the realistic
constraints. PAR should harness the strengths and resources of your organisation, your interagency community and your service users.

The strengths perspective (Saleebey 1997) was designed to focus on people's strengths and resources rather than their problems, and was seen as a major shift in how to think about working with people in comparison with problem oriented approaches

O'Connor, Wilson, Setterlund and Hughes 2008, p. 65

Understanding these strengths and resources, as well as the constraints and realities of day to day workloads and other pressures, is a starting point for working together to seek improvement. To properly understand the resources and capacities of your agency and your external stakeholders you can undertake a scan of the internal and external environment and an audit of existing skills and capacities.

2.2.1 Scan for strengths and resources: internal and external

A scan of the internal environment will assist you to consider how your agency might contribute to, and affect the implementation of a PAR process. A scan of the external environment enables you to consider how the local community and service system environment might contribute to, and affect, the implementation of a PAR process. Both these provide a mechanism to identify strengths, resources, opportunities, critical factors for success, and challenges for undertaking a PAR process.

Section 4.1.1 contains a template for undertaking the internal and external scans.

2.2.2 Having a good look at the skills you have available

A PAR skills ‘audit’ is about identifying your existing skills and capacities and those involved in your PAR project. Keep in mind implementing PAR requires a set of skills and capacities that are common across human service work. Undertaking an audit allows you to consider not only where the strengths and capacities lie in your group, but what additional support and training may be useful to seek.

Many services already have practices that are consistent with or can contribute to the PAR process, including those for good communication, client responsiveness, strengths-based intervention, quality assurance, and inter-agency partnerships. PAR can dovetail with and build on these.

Within your agency or network of services there will be people who have particularly relevant skills and understandings. This said it is important to keep in mind that PAR is about 'ordinary people becoming researchers in their own right, generating relevant knowledge in order to address issues that are of primary concern to them' (Tsey, Patterson, Whiteside, Baird, Baird and Tsey 2004, p. 65). If a PAR process explores how services are delivered, your clients should have opportunities to be key informants, active participants, peer facilitators or peer interviewers. Their views, ideas and feedback will be critical. The young people, parents and adults, who your agency is targeting, are experts in their own lives and 'should be actively involved in decision making, planning, and then implementing and reviewing change' (Tsey et.al. 2004, p.70). They will have first
hand knowledge because they are most affected by the situation everyone is seeking to change or improve.

Section 4.1.2 contains a template for undertaking a PAR Skills Audit.

2.2.3 Identifying ethical considerations

Even at the earliest stages of undertaking a PAR process there could be ethical issues to consider. These could include how you undertake a scan or audit of skills, how you negotiate what you do within your agency, and what information you record and share. There may be others. Section 3.3 outlines a range of things to consider in ‘being ethical’.

2.3 Getting started

Section 4.2 of this manual contains a checklist for starting PAR. This prompts you to work through the tasks identified so far in this section, to identify the strengths, opportunities and challenges in your context, and to consider what might be useful to do before you fully embark on a project.

Let’s assume that you are no longer just you by yourself but you and one or more others involved in looking at doing a PAR project. This process starts with your awareness that something needs to be changed or improved or developed. Document what you became aware of and what you are observing. Share this with colleagues, clients and other stakeholders. Keep it simple and keep a record.

2.3.1 Documenting the critical issues for your agency and your community

For your PAR to be useful, the area for investigation should address something you and your stakeholders are trying to change or improve. So what theme or issue that relates to your core business is currently challenging or frustrating your attempts to improve service delivery or community capacity building? What are you noticing needs attention or a different approach to get better outcomes for your target group? At this stage it is best to be tentative and have an attitude of exploration; to wonder if this is something to look at more closely.

A good way to start is to talk with others and write down the thoughts and ideas that are mentioned. You could take these initial thoughts to your team meetings or supervision. It is important to note all the ideas. When you have the support of your service you can begin to more formally involve all the stakeholders.

2.3.2 Keeping records

From the beginning you should have a place to file and collate your notes and other key documents such as relevant meeting minutes. Even at an early stage you could start to use a documentation template. Section 4.6 contains a number of templates for documentation.

At the start it is useful if someone is given the task of ensuring the process is recorded and that those records are accessible and coherent so they can assist in the process and form the foundation of a final reflection, analysis and written report.

There are many ways to record your PAR and most services use a mix of strategies. Different methods suit different situations and audiences. Ensure the system you use is:

- relatively simple
- suitable for your PAR process and each particular aspect of the process
- well understood by those involved.

Every Monday morning is set aside for a staff meeting and Action Research. A standard format is used for recording the Action Research cycles. At most Reference Group meetings one Action Research topic is featured.

A Reconnect service
There are many ways to document PAR and with developments in technology the options are increasing. Most agencies utilise a range of strategies for recording what happens, and what interpretations are made. A combination of written and audio/visual/experiential strategies is most likely to engage and interest a diversity of participants in the process.

**Table 2: Common approaches for recording PAR**

- PAR ‘project’ folders
- Computer files
- Visual and fun ways to record events: photos, video/DVD, graffiti boards, drawings etc.
- Stories and narratives
- Poetry, dance, song, works of art
- Meeting minutes, notes from focus groups, notes from supervision, notes from discussions with clients
- Copies of completed questionnaires and surveys
- PAR sheets (butchers paper, coloured sheets) on walls for clients, stakeholders and/or staff to use
- PAR diaries or journals (Individual or team) usually for recording informal conversations with staff, clients and stakeholders and ideas
- PAR templates or proformas for recording PAR cycles and questions (see Section 4 of this manual)
- Service databases developed to collate evaluation data/reviewing statistics that relate to an AR question
- Divided book/folder used for documentation of relevant information from; newspaper clippings, journals/books, web searches etc.

*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 ‘scrap’s of information, to compile and analyse them at a later date.*

**2.3.3 Involving other stakeholders**

Involving others as soon as possible means people are more likely to feel they are part of determining the focus of a PAR project. Look for informal and formal opportunities to meet, brainstorm, swap ideas, and find common ground.

**Your contacts and networks** provide a great place to start. These may not necessarily be the particular representatives other agencies would nominate onto a formal committee but may be those best placed to help you navigate through the challenges of engaging all the stakeholders into a PAR process. A NAYSS worker writes:

*I always attend sector meetings where possible. It’s incredibly important that a sector works together. With dispersed funding and focus, authentic collaboration and partnership are essential for optimum community outcomes.*

*I’m currently in the ‘observe’ stage of a project. It’s been months … a bit of an ‘off the side of the desk’ project. The question I have framed is “What would it take to broaden the opportunities for newly arrived young people with disrupted education and low levels of English?”* In the *observe* stage, the insights, experiences and participation of all stakeholders needs to be included for a holistic picture of the issues and of the possibilities. The key insights come from the key stakeholders. In this example, newly arrived young people.

Colony 47
Another agency uses emailing as a strategy for developing a ‘culture of invitation’:

*We put out emails regularly to our network asking what's working?, what's not working? & what could we be doing better? This invites services to be open about processes that aren’t working ok. These standard questions have helped us to improve our services, including our feedback processes to the reference group.*

Connect - Darwin

2.3.4 Making space for people to come together

You need space for ‘yarnin up’. PAR needs spaces – large and small – for people to come together – formally and informally – in mutually acceptable ways for the benefit of all participants. You may need to establish new ways for people to connect to discuss and reflect upon critical observations and PAR questions. Existing agency meeting structures, interagency meetings and your current ways of engaging your clients will all be starting points for talking with people about PAR. Convening, facilitating, supporting and listening to the participation of everyone will create the ground on which your AR and learning can emerge. It is critical that these spaces and processes are safe, respectful, and culturally responsive and open to the contributions of all involved.

The research of Janet Kelly and Kim O’Donnell (2007) sought to understand how they could improve opportunities for people to come together for AR utilising Aboriginal ways of knowing and doing. Their larger goal was to harness Aboriginal knowledge and practice in addressing the health and well being issues of their community. Together with their community colleagues, Kelly and O’Donnell wanted to create a rich and productive learning environment that pooled the knowledge, skills, abilities and networks of their community. They took time and created space for ‘yarnin up’. They talked with people about ‘the challenges of ethical research and practices between blackfullas and whitefullas’. They created space for people to ‘come, hear each other, share our knowledge, celebrate what has worked, discuss what has not and be invigorated to go out there and try again’. It sounds simple but it requires thoughtful action and a determination to provide space and a place in the process for everyone affected by the action (O’Donnell and Kelly 2007 p. 13).

Section 4.3 outlines a range of participation strategies to consider.

Reference groups can offer an effective structured and ongoing mechanism to ensure clarification of the critical issues. They can facilitate the:

- articulation of different positions, power and meanings for all stakeholders
- acknowledgement of shared understandings, different understandings and role differences
- establishment of reflection and decision making processes for the research question and action inquiry
- coordination of the action and the documentation of findings and sharing of the learning.

Specific meetings provide an opportunity to outline your agency’s core work, its responsibility to undertake PAR and your observations and concerns. You may seek the assistance of a worker who is internal or external to your agency to facilitate initial meetings with larger institutional stakeholders – like a school or groups of schools, Centrelink or large housing providers – or a large group of diverse stakeholders. These meetings can seek the feedback of your stakeholders and formally invite their participation. At this type of meeting it will be important to create an atmosphere of interest in, and openness to, the stakeholder’s views. The aim is to understand their issues, challenges and ideas.
2.3.5 Doing an initial investigation

The canvassing of ideas and interests from other stakeholders is part of the initial ‘observation’ phase of PAR.

Table 3: Observation questions for developing a PAR topic

- What have we noticed?
- What are the current outcomes of practice?
- Do different stakeholders observe different things?
- What are our stakeholders’ observations?
- Is there anything different or new happening?
- What is going on for our clients? What is going on for our stakeholders’ clients?
- What are our clients observing?
- Can we enrich our understanding of the situation by seeking the feedback of our clients and other stakeholders about our service delivery or the issues we are identifying?

A common characteristic of good PAR is the seeking of other sources of information relevant to the particular topic or theme. This information can be used to provide some background or inspiration. Specific information can also be incorporated into the development of a plan or initiative. Services can seek out information in a number of ways. They can include:

- internet searches on specific topics
- looking for relevant reports and journal articles
- interrogating their own service data
- talking to other similar services about relevant information they know about
- getting local demographic and service information from ABS or local councils, and
- talking to specialist services and peak bodies (including Reconnect specialists) that service specific groups such as Indigenous, CaLD, GLBTI and newly arrived (Porter Orchard Report 1 2006/2007 p. 10).

Drawing on other sources of information in the early development stages of a PAR project can:

- save time and energy by utilising the insights and wisdom of others
- build on a body of knowledge rather than reinventing the wheel, and
- enable you to avoid the hurdles or pitfalls that have already been experienced by others (Porter Orchard Report 1 2006/2007 p.10).

Table 4: Questions for reflecting on what you find during an initial investigation

- What knowledge about our topic did we uncover?
- Are there different approaches to our topic that have been tried?
- What application does this knowledge and experience have for our context?
- What key ideas and assumptions will we start with?
- Who agrees/disagrees with particular interpretations? What does this reveal?
- Have we considered the target group/client/other stakeholder observations/views?
- What possibilities and opportunities seem useful to explore/trial in our context?

Section 4.5 contains a more detailed outline of strategies for reflecting.
2.3.6 Coming up with questions

Most inquiry is question driven. That means you come up with something you want to look at, decide on how you could phrase that as a question, then come up with a process to ‘answer’ the question. This sounds like a step by step process but most of the time it is not. Don’t be surprised if you change the way you express your question as you find things out. But like everything in PAR, it is important to start somewhere and use this as a platform.

The early part of your process may well start with you starting with a hunch – this is fine particularly if you try to make sure that this is a meaningful, and relevant or useful hunch (Wadsworth 1997, p.78).

Macro questions are broad questions that are clearly linked to the goals of your service delivery. In Reconnect services these are expressed in the program goals and relate to early intervention into youth homelessness.

It is important that your macro question links to getting better outcomes for the people you are trying to assist – not to things associated simply with the service delivery process or the popularity of your services.

In your agency a number of big questions may be being thrashed around. You may be wondering what you could be doing to improve a specific aspect of young people’s lives or the situations of their families. You may want to achieve improved communication and collaboration with key institutions and groups which are ‘first to know’ a young person or family is experiencing difficulty or instability (Crane and Brannock 1996), such as schools, TAFE, Centrelink, housing and accommodation providers.

Early interventions into youth homelessness must address a range of complex risk factors and questions affecting the lives of young people. These risk factors can include family violence or family breakdown, exclusion from school, underdeveloped literacy and numeracy skills, poor employment skills and prospects, mental health concerns, challenging behaviours, criminal activity, incarceration and so on. In early intervention into youth homelessness PAR should aim to improve the living stability for vulnerable young people, maximise their engagement and access to key supports, and minimise the risk of further disconnection and homelessness.

Table 5: Characteristics of a good macro question

- Clearly links to outcomes for the client individuals, groups or communities
- Relates to something your practice can make a positive contribution to
- Is clear to everyone involved
- Is action oriented
- Is open ended, in that there are likely to be a range of actions required.

A useful way to express macro questions is in the form of:

What would it take to...?

Micro questions are smaller more focussed questions that contribute to being able to answer the macro question. There will usually be a number of these in a PAR process. Smaller questions will start to emerge as you tackle a big question and break it down into identifiable factors and manageable parts.
If one of your PAR questions is about a small, specific, localised issue you may be able to express this simply in terms of the macro and micro questions you are asking (a small ‘tree’). Other questions which involve complex/inter-related or systemic components will need longer and more careful processes with a larger number of inquiry branches (a big ‘tree’). Keep in mind how ‘big’ you and your co-inquirers are able to cope with. Generally it is better to start small and grow the scope of your PAR over time.

Table 6: Characteristics of good micro questions

- Link clearly to the macro question
- Are understood playing a contributory role in achieving outcomes for client individuals, groups or communities
- Are practical
- Are action oriented
- Relate to actions that your PAR collaborative group can itself undertake
- Are open ended

Useful ways to express micro questions include:
- **What can we do to...?**
- **What practices would be most effective to...?**

Below are a range of macro and micro questions that Reconnect services have asked over the years.
Table 7: Examples of macro and micro questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Macro questions</th>
<th>More micro questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What would it take to break social isolation and improve community connectedness with young women from the Horn of Africa living in Hume?</td>
<td>What could we do to make our social/recreational activities culturally relevant and sustainable for young newly arrived refugees from Africa?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What would it take to improve early intervention capacity in this community?</td>
<td>What would it take to develop interagency relationships in our area that facilitate immediacy of response?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What would it take to improve the accommodation stability of living situation for the young people we work with?</td>
<td>What could we do to maximise the engagement of young people who are ‘couch surfing’ with their families?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Don’t get too bothered about categorising questions as macro and micro. In reality there is a continuum from very macro to very micro. The micro questions you ask should be specific enough to provide a focus for collaborative planning.

2.4 Planning for action: What will you try?

2.4.1 Engaging stakeholders in planning

Levels of stakeholder participation in planning will vary according to how willing and prepared the participants are to be involved and consulted. Enabling real participation is about creating access and building trust. Suzi Quixley cautions that ‘this is the phase where stakeholders can vote with their feet...often providing a clearer indication of their interests than they might verbally’ (Quixley 1997, p. 17). People will want to be involved if they understand the process has both value and the potential to improve their situation and the situation of those they care about. People will generally need to have some degree of confidence that it will be safe, their contribution will be valued and they will see some result that is meaningful for them in their context.

2.4.2 Developing a plan for action

There is no formula for ‘good planning’. It will depend on your local context, the question/s being asked and the individual, organisational and cultural factors operating in your environment. The plan should be flexible, coherent, and coordinated in a way that enables the participation of everyone affected by the action. The plan should be the outcome of work with stakeholders to understand what is being observed, what that means and what could be tried. This should result in a plan for new action that can sit easily alongside the current work of your agency and can actively involve your stakeholders.

So what are you going to try? Or in other words ‘What strategy are you going to use to explore your question/s?’

Table 8: Some questions to ask when you plan

- What is our question/s?
- What change/action will we try?
- What information-analysis made us decide to make this change/action or to examine this particular aspect of the problem/issue?
- Who will be affected?
- Who needs to be involved?
- What are the key tasks or steps?
- What other sources of information or research will we seek out?
- Who will do what, when?
- What improvement do we hope to see?
- What knowledge or understanding do we hope to generate?
- How will we ensure that the observations, ongoing reflections, plans, actions, further observations and outcomes are recorded?
Suzi Quixley (1997, p.16) provides a set of step-by-step questions to use when generating a PAR plan with a group of stakeholders (reproduced below - original emphasis).

1. **What are all the possible actions that could arise from your thinking at a theoretical level?**
   *Test your answers with as many stakeholders in this question as you can, to ensure that as many ideas as possible are included.*

2. **What is the most widely preferred order of priority of the ideas? Which would stakeholders most like to see implemented?**
   *Seek feedback from as many stakeholders in this question as possible, to ensure that you’ve taken account of the full range of preferences.*

3. **What would be the resource implications (eg money, time) of pursuing, for example, the top 3 ideas? Could they be undertaken in addition to existing tasks – or would they need to replace something?**
   *Engage stakeholders in this question throughout this exploration process, so they can extend your thinking in this area, and make an informed choice when revising priorities.*

4. **So … given the resource implications, do the priorities need to be reviewed?**
   *Again, fully involve stakeholders in this question at this stage.*

5. **What would it take to be able to implement the preferred action ideas? What strategies need to be explored/ put in place?**
   *Many people enjoy this stage of the planning process most!*

6. **Timetable the changes!**

### 2.5 Into action

#### 2.5.1 What range of actions can you try?

Depending on your earlier analysis and planning, your PAR might do anything from launch a comprehensive in-depth investigation, to engage other agencies in a community capacity building effort, to run a specific activity or group that you think has potential to better meet client needs. Keep in mind that if you undertake further investigation you should later turn this into an action to be trialled. Below is the range of strategies Reconnect and NAYSS services used in their AR projects over the 3 years from 2005-2007.

**Table 9: Types of strategies PAR has been applied to**

- Engagement of key agencies or communities
- Building capacity
- Engaging specific client groups (e.g. rural and remote communities)
- Responding to specific issues (e.g. violence or mental health issues)
- Activities for service users
- Group work with a specific focus
- Model of service development or reform
- Information provision (e.g. using new media)
- Working with young people and families (e.g. engaging fathers)

**Engagement of key agencies or communities:** This involves building relationships with other services or sections of the local community and sometimes across a region or state. Engagement strategies (involving conversations, meetings and forums with key people) are often used in the initial phases of the PAR cycle when services are trying to better understand a specific issue/s or group, or are building participation in the PAR process.

**Capacity building:** This involves strategies to increase the range of people, organisations, and even communities able to address particular problems or issues contributing to homelessness and amenable to early intervention. Stakeholders are enabled to develop and sustain practices that assist in effective early intervention, including strategies which enable services or communities to respond in a more ‘joined up’ way.

**Activities for service users:** Some PAR projects involve trialling a particular activity that is potentially useful in achieving outcomes. In Reconnect the most commonly tried activities with young people involve cultural development, sports (broadly defined), and adventure/camping experiences.

**Group work with a specific focus:** This involves the development of group programs for the target group, usually oriented to a specific area of clients’ lives that is understood as contributing to the larger problem. In the Reconnect program specific group work has been undertaken around school difficulties, anger and violence, and family conflict.

**Model of service development or reform:** This involves focusing on a particular aspect of, or approach to, service delivery that is critical to achieving effective outcomes. For example, intake processes, referral and inter-agency protocol arrangements, approaches to family support, more inclusive schooling strategies for vulnerable students, models for building better relationships between young people and their parent/s, and the articulation of case work and group work have all been the focus of PAR strategies.

**Information provision:** This involves the development of initiatives or materials that provide information about a particular topic or about the service and its projects. The audience can be young people and/or families, and/or the wider community more generally. These strategies have included both written (printed information packages), DVDs and verbal (meetings/forums) formats and are often not ongoing initiatives.

**In the action phase you are actually testing possible ‘answers’ to the question/s you are exploring through action.** This is where you implement the plan and stay flexible, where you attempt to do something different and then observe and reflect upon its affects. Your action should be deliberate and purposeful, a careful and thoughtful variation of practice which is critically informed (Quixley 1997).

**There will be ups and downs, diversions and adjustments.** These are unavoidable in a PAR process. Expect and embrace them! Don't be tricked into thinking that a straightforward plan will smoothly unfold, deliver clear outcomes, and be easily captured in the documentation. Life is too complex and changeable for it to be that straightforward. As you commence your planned actions with your participants, there will be stops and starts, ‘failures to appear’, meetings that go well, others that don’t. Participants may want new issues to be tackled, or be reluctant/unable to deliver on something they previously committed to. A key person from another agency may change role or leave. Getting the balance right between staying on track and accommodating new information and concerns will be an inevitable part of the journey.

2.5.2 **Watch what happens and record the journey**

It is one thing to plan – another to carry it out. Remember to carefully watch what happens while implementing your plan! And record your observations, reflections, plans, actions and the affects of your actions. Make sure your PAR story - or project narrative - is captured by the project’s records. The road blocks or diversions also need to be noted and attempted to be understood in the context of your research question and the bigger questions for your agency and your stakeholders.
How one PAR project captured their ‘action’

Workers on a PAR project aimed at improving rural Aboriginal men’s health developed a strategy, in conjunction with their workplace supervisor, to ensure ongoing reflection and evaluation of their operational plan. This strategy was a three-tier system for capturing their action, the ‘yarning’ and their learning. It worked as follows:

1. The Workers kept diaries and noted:
   - What was working well (the positive effects of their men’s group in the community)
   - The challenges (implementing the men’s group)
   - The strategies they tried to overcome the challenges.

2. Feedback from the participants:
   They created ‘feedback boxes’ with the same headings as above – ‘what works’, ‘the challenges’ and ‘strategies to address challenges’. At regular weekly meetings men were encouraged to give written or oral feedback to slot into the relevant box.

3. The project workers ‘collated and presented data from their diaries and feedback boxes at monthly planning and evaluation session for reflection, strategy refinement and action’.  
   Tsey et.al. 2004

Another excellent recording strategy to utilise with young people is video. With cheap cameras available, and everyone a potential Academy Award winner, video footage is a practical and engaging way to record what happens. Video can also be used to record participant feedback and gather input for the PAR process itself. Remember to get permission to film and depict participants and make sure that the production process recognises and respects participants’ input in any resource development that follows (e.g. the project ‘show-reel’).

Table 10: Some questions to ask when you get into action

- Who is doing what?
- What is happening?
- Does this differ from the plan and if so how?
- What do various stakeholders think is happening?
- How are we recording this?
- What strategies/supports can we use to ensure recording occurs and is sustained throughout the process?
- When will we take time to reflect on our actions and note what we are observing?

2.6 Evaluating what happens

[Make] clear what has been learnt from the process, and what should be retained, and might be done differently to strengthen this approach in the future.


It is important that you make observations and reflections at the end of each cycle and link any conclusions back to the issue(s) or question you posed. You can then consider whether you:

- undertake another cycle so as to deepen your understandings and further develop your strategies
- refine or develop a new question (a new branch to your question tree)
- conclude this PAR project partially or fully.
If your action was quite ‘small’ this part of the process may be very swift, involving no more than a discussion amongst your PAR group, but it may be large. You may be at the end of the final cycle in a long complex process and therefore your analysis, conclusions and writing up will require a lot of attention. Regardless of how large or small, the process of analysis involves a number of elements. A model for this is depicted in Figure 8.

**Figure 8: The process of analysis in PAR**

- **Identify observations bring the data together**
  - Describe what happened
  - What did you and others observe?
  - What data do you have?

- **Check out and refine your conclusions confirmation**
  - Share insights/story and seek critical feedback
  - Refine your conclusions

- **Observe and reflect where to next?**
  - Use your conclusions and insights to commence a new cycle or finalise your PAR project

- **Reflect across the data synthesis**
  - Identify themes, patterns, and relationships

- **Identify all possible interpretations & propose which fit best interpretation**
  - Link possibilities to evidence
  - Draw tentative conclusions
  - Construct the ‘story’

The process of reflecting on a strategy, whether small or large, involves ‘analysis’ and requires that you undertake some form of ‘evaluation’. In PAR this process is not externalised but is an embedded component of the inquiry cycle. There is a substantial literature on evaluation. Yoland Wadsworth’s *Everyday Evaluation on the Run* is particularly useful for using in a PAR process. Section 6.2 contains full details of this and other references and resources that may be useful.

Reflecting on the ‘success’ or otherwise of a particular action or set of actions is important. Participants in the process should have input into the determination of findings and outcomes. You will need to consider what additional insight into your question/s you now have. Do you use these insights to refine your action and test this through another cycle? Make sure your PAR does not end abruptly and leave people wondering whether anything was learnt or changed as a result.

> … these observations and reflections could be considered the most important aspect of the AR cycle [for] without these there is no evidence to suggest that any one strategy is better than another. Without the documentation of these observations and reflections, what has been learnt may be lost.


It takes time and space to properly observe and reflect on what happened. The following questions may assist your reflection and writing up. As you can see, they require you to identify evidence for the conclusions you make, and for the strategies you consider to be ‘improvements’. This is where your recording of your processes with your stakeholders becomes the basis for drawing well-founded conclusions.
### Table 11: Questions to ask before concluding your PAR

- What did the project achieve? Evidence?
- Did we answer the question? If so, how? If not, why not?
- What worked? Why do we think it worked? Evidence?
- What didn’t work so well? Why not? Evidence?
- What do we understand better or differently? Evidence?
- How were specific stakeholders, such as young people or their parents, affected by the process? Evidence?
- How well did the process enable real participation? Particularly of the least empowered stakeholders? Evidence?
- Do we have their feedback and ideas?
- What was particularly difficult to achieve or to understand?
- Does our written story (documentation) properly account for all parts of the process and the lessons we learnt?
- What do we want to incorporate into our ongoing practice?
- What do we want do differently? Evidence?
- What do we want to try now?
- What new questions have been raised by the findings of this inquiry? Evidence?
- Should we explore any of these ‘new’ questions?
- How will we share (distribute/publish) our story?

### 2.7 Sharing your PAR

Ideally sharing beyond the core group involved in your PAR should occur throughout the process. This in-house sharing is an important mechanism for getting feedback from across your stakeholders, for growing the awareness of what you are finding out, and for broadening participation in the process.

Sharing can be relatively informal or quite formal. It may be quite appropriate during the PAR process to share your progress verbally through conversations and meetings, or in written form through blogs, email groups, updates, newsletters or notices.

Sharing is also about letting people know what you have found out: the story and lessons of your PAR journey. Sometimes referred to as **‘publishing’**, this is a critical part of the PAR process. Sharing in this sense means more than celebrating or showcasing. It means genuinely inviting others to look at what you have done and provide them with a meaningful opportunity to agree and disagree with your conclusions and strategies. ‘Inviting disagreement’ is one way PAR is able to establish its trustworthiness (see Section 3.4 for more on this). In traditional research external review is often done via ‘seminars’ as well as through external review by people knowledgeable in the particular topic. In PAR the emphasis is on making sure your interpretations reflect and fit the experiences of those involved. There are a wide range of strategies you can use to share and review your PAR including:

- Writing a summary of your report and seeking feedback on conclusions or ‘the stories’ from your community before distributing it. This was done for the ... *pearls of wisdom* Report (Frazer et al. 2003). See Hill (2003) for more information on using storytelling in your PAR.
- Creating a DVD or video and showing drafts to your community before finalising and distributing. It is also possible to use drama, song, poetry, dance role plays and works of art to share what has been found. Depending on the context this may need some accompanying interpretation so that the audience ‘get it’.
- Holding one or more meetings at which you invite a broader group from your organisations and communities to hear about your PAR project via summaries or diagrams that are open to clarification and improvement.
• Posting draft material on your website for comment.

Accounts should provide sufficient material to enable intended audiences to understand the experience and perspectives of key people in the primary stakeholding group.


The process of writing or producing accounts of your PAR for public distribution should actively involve your stakeholders, including service users. Strategies used to facilitate this, identified by Waldman (2005: p.977-978) are:

• Early in the process invite participation in the writing process
• Run workshops or build into reference group discussions about what strategy to use to share ideas for writing and develop roles/topics
• Generate options and action plans about who will write something individually or as part of a group (co-author)
• Provide follow-up support to complete writing tasks
• Provide editing and feedback on drafts and discussion of ideas for further collaboration.

Writing has a lot to do with confidence. It is very useful to have someone available who has prior writing experience who can advise and support others in a way that builds their confidence and ownership.

Having checked out your understandings and strategies with a broader audience you can put your PAR on the public record. Sharing publicly might be done using your website, a report or DVD able to be distributed, a photo board etc.

Remember to:

• make sure you have informed written consent from participants and authors before you ‘publish’ any material
• respect privacy and adhere to ethics around confidentiality and not doing harm
• properly acknowledge people’s contributions
• give (if possible) a copy to everyone who contributed
• use the opportunity of ‘publishing’ to further the recognition of the work your participants do, the importance of early intervention and your insights into how to best support people in your community.

2.8 Closure

The process of ending a PAR project raises many of the same considerations as with ending any other process. Endings are important and celebration can be an important form of validation and recognition. In PAR it is often the case that professional relationships will not completely come to an end, though they may alter. Pay particular attention to the needs and vulnerabilities of those who have associated closely with the project or for whom involvement has meant a great deal. Social work literature on closure is useful here.

2.9 … pearls of wisdom

The following extract is from the report … pearls of wisdom (Frazer et al. 2003). The information in the report was collated from anecdotes and records of Reconnect services in Darwin and Palmerston, and from the many people involved in the Action Research training held in Brisbane 2002, as well as from Action Research training held in Broome 2003.

The authors seek to engage stakeholders in critical and continual review of this document, which too demonstrates Action Research processes (p.4).
The report includes the following tips for people who are working together to make things better.

- Participate at a practical level
- Explain situations and issues using real and practical examples
- Always be aware of your influence and impact on other people and processes
- Rushing things will lose people and their support
- Listen well, hard and long
- Set out to build confidence and trust
- Out with all jargon
- Find ways to identify small wins
- Wrestle with the hard questions - but be realistic
- Invent ways and have fun collecting information and data
- Strength based approaches will engage people
- Don’t miss an opportunity to celebrate
- Offer opportunities for story telling
- Make time to think and reflect

... pearls of wisdom report (2003) prepared by Dean Frazer in collaboration with Kay Gehan, Ann Mills and Christine Smart

2.10 Summary and reflections

This section has taken you through the central processes involved in initiating, implementing and concluding a PAR process. This has included:

- the importance of management endorsement, support and supervision
- understanding how PAR would work in your agency
- ensuring that time and space is made for PAR
- the importance of identifying stakeholders and the practicalities of creating opportunities for people to come together
- how to ask questions and distinguish between the ‘big’ questions (macros) and the ‘smaller’ (micro) contributing questions
- how to plan for action
- the process of documenting and sharing your PAR
- considerations for telling the story of your PAR process and insights
- closing your PAR process.

Being creative whilst employing a sufficiently structured process, and utilising all the strengths and resources within you, your agency and your stakeholder community, will enable a richer more exciting inquiry process.
Some questions to consider

What barriers to your client group getting good outcomes have you noticed?

What questions would you like to explore with your workgroup?

When and how could you appropriately discuss questions about improving service outcomes and delivery processes?

Who are the key stakeholders in your practice? Where do service users fit?

How would you begin talking to these stakeholders about what it would take to improve outcomes?

What formal and informal strategies could you use to bring people together and encourage discussion about how to improve the situations for the people your service aims to assist?

If you chose to convene a reference group to initiate a PAR process, who could be involved?

How could you begin to record your PAR?

How would you build in time for observation and reflection? (That is regular times to stop and notice what is happening and thinking about and discussing what that means.)

Section 3 of this manual digs deeper into some of the complexities of implementing PAR in social programs and community agency contexts.
SECTION THREE

Key Considerations in Doing PAR

The previous section of the manual is designed to give you a simplified overview of the PAR process and how you can get started. If only life was so simple! Our experience in the Reconnect program tells us that it takes time to develop a working familiarity with PAR – often one to two years. There are many reasons for this. In this section of the manual we will touch on some of the challenges and complexities that you will most probably experience. Our goal is to provide an introductory discussion of the issues that have emerged during the implementation of PAR in early intervention services for homeless young people over the past 12 years. This discussion is organised under the following headings:

- Working with complexity
- The relationship of PAR to your daily practice – additional or embedded?
- Being ethical
- Developing trustworthy insights and actions
- Resistance and barriers, and
- Developing and maintaining an Action Research 'system'.

3.1 Working with complexity

*The development of services which make a positive difference to people’s lives is located in an ocean of complexity. The human condition is expressed in social, economic and political life - formal and informal, cultural and inter-cultural; it is embedded in history partly told and even less understood; lived out through space and place; in journeys individual and collective; kept going by hope and trust; across a sea of power relations.*

Phil Crane 2009, unpublished manuscript

The Australian Community Sector Survey 2008 Report (ACOSS 2008, p.3) which canvassed 725 non-profit community agencies, concluded that complexity of client needs is the real problem with 64% of agencies indicating that their clients had more complex needs.

Engaging with complexity is what human services must do. Collaboration with other services is central in responding to complex needs in a more holistic way. But how do we develop service systems that allow for improved collaboration at the worker, organisation, inter-agency and policy levels? (Beadle 2009). And how do we do this across geographically and culturally diverse contexts where what is an effective intervention in one may not be appropriate or workable in another?

PAR provides a tool that is suited to this challenge of engaging with complexity so we not only identify what might work for people at the front-line, but what barriers exist to effective service delivery in particular contexts.

It is important not to underestimate the challenges inherent in applying participatory approaches to social programs, particularly in those where the target groups include people who are economically and/or socially marginalised.

*... the more disempowered you are, the less hope you may have about either the value of participating or even the chances of something good coming out of it.*

Wadsworth 1998 p.11

So we need to proceed with a self-critical eye and a deep regard for the complexities, histories, diversities and cultures of the environments we engage with, appreciating that relationship, wellbeing and justice cannot be assumed.
3.2 The relationship of PAR to your daily practice: additional or embedded?

For many of you undertaking PAR for the first time it may feel like an ‘add on’ to practice, quite separate, involving additional strategies and time. Specific PAR strategies and processes are often helpful when you first are exploring what PAR is and means in your context. The experience of many workers has been that this lessens over time as it becomes embedded into their practice. The way you understand and undertake PAR will be affected by where you are on this “PAR is additional” … “PAR is embedded continuum”.

There are a range of strategies for embedding PAR more into your everyday practice. For example some PAR processes have used the strategy of front line workers asking clients each month a particular question as part of their routine case work: *We are trying to understand how to better …. Do you have any thoughts on this?*

Some services have found it useful to think of their AR as an extension of practice rather than as ‘research’.

*The consideration of Action Research as a formalised and documented process of reflecting on the work we do and the outcomes, or lack of, that we achieve, has been useful. It has removed the fear factor from the necessity of viewing ‘research’ as part of our core role, which traditionally practitioners have perhaps avoided. Action Research has instead become a way of taking further the reflections we may have as we consider a visit with a family, an interaction with an outside agency or perhaps noticing patterns emerging in referrals.*

A Reconnect service

When the Youth Homelessness Pilot services commenced in 1996, it was indicated that services and workers new to PAR should put aside specific time for their AR. In this admittedly new program environment one day a week, or 20% of a practitioner's time, was allowed for this. Whilst the amount of time may seem high, it is clear that the benefits and improvements from PAR require time is set aside for induction and further training, agency level discussion and development and the engaging of stakeholders in conversation, planning, reflection and sharing. There is a strong argument that quality human services and greater community capacity to respond do not develop without some clear dedication of time.

One way to work out how to embed PAR in your service is to make this a goal of a PAR process. You could ask: “What would it take for our PAR to become as integrated as possible into our everyday practice?” or “What could we do to embed PAR into our everyday practice?”

You may well wonder at times how ‘tight’ and structured to be during the PAR process, and how strongly to drive through to clear outcomes. One way to think about the management of PAR is striking a ‘soft-hard’ balance. ‘Soft’ in that you value and respect the multi-stakeholder and collaborative character of PAR, that you accept you will refine and change your strategy along the way, and appreciate that many complexities may not be clarified or resolved. This means you don’t force outcomes and resolutions when these are not possible and remain alert to any tendency you have to become overly task oriented. The ‘hard’ side of management is that all processes require forms of leadership, facilitation, structure, role clarity, boundary setting and monitoring. If you or your agency is to ‘lead’ a PAR process there is a need to consider the responsibilities that go with its establishment and with your ongoing participation. Be careful not to be so ‘strengths’ oriented that anything will do.

3.3 Being ethical

The need to be ethical comes from a number of places. In human services we are involved in work that is fundamentally moral in nature (rather than technical or scientific). In saying this we are not suggesting we necessarily do good, rather that the provision of support and care to those who are in difficulty or marginalised is fundamentally a moral concern. As employed professionals we are in positions of trust and routinely have more power in the practice context than the users of our services.

3.3.1 Dealing with the ethical dimensions is not optional

Every PAR project will involve ethical dimensions which should be considered as part of the initial planning and as an ongoing exercise (see the Checklist for Starting PAR in Section 4.2). In undertaking your PAR there are a number of ethical perspectives that are important for you to draw on. These will assist in the identification of the ethical dimensions to your PAR process and will help you to put in place appropriate strategies.
Keep in mind that ‘research’ is generally seen in more traditional terms where there is a clear distinction between ‘researchers’ and ‘the researched on’. In PAR the collaborative and participatory character of the process can mean there is a blurring of researcher and participant roles. There may be times when you assess a situation and need to intervene with one of these hats on - either practitioner or researcher. In PAR the two hats challenge will also exist when service users or people in the target group take on co-researcher roles. For example, one strategy sometimes used in PAR involves young people being peer researchers. These young people are not just traditional ‘participants’ but have become researchers in their own right and therefore will have responsibilities in relation to how they interact with their peers as part of the research process. These responsibilities will be associated with issues such as privacy and confidentiality. In a situation such as this it will be important there is appropriate support and training for the young people to be able to take on this responsibility and achieve a sense of accomplishment from their contribution. The literature on managing ‘dual relationships’ in human service practice and peer research is useful here.

3.3.2 Professional Codes of Ethics

Codes of Ethics provide practitioners in particular fields with principles, guidance and boundaries. In human services in Australia the most developed of these is the AASW Code of Ethics (2nd Edition 2002) published by the Australian Association of Social Workers. In addition to the five basic values of human dignity and worth, social justice, service to humanity, integrity and competence, Section 4.5.2 of the AASW Code outlines specific responsibilities when engaged in research.


So you need to make sure you are using your power as a practitioner appropriately. For example, ask yourself if it is appropriate to use information you have acquired through your practice in a report that is distributed more widely, if you did not get permission to use that information for that purpose.

3.3.3 National guidelines for the ethical conduct of research

“We’re working with people because they need support. This implies levels of vulnerability. Most processes are common sense and if I’m unsure, I refer to the Australian National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research.”

Practitioner Colony 47

The current relevant guidelines for the ethical conduct of research in Australia are the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (NHMRC 2007). This states (p.3) that ‘ethical conduct’ is more than simply doing the right thing. It involves acting in the right spirit, out of an abiding respect and concern for one’s fellow creatures. The values underpinning this statement are:

- Respect for human beings
- Research merit and integrity
- Justice, and
- Beneficence.

The National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research states that two themes must always be considered in human research, these being the risks and benefits of the research, and participants consent (NHMRC 2007, p.15).

A risk is a potential harm, discomfort or inconvenience (p.15).

Potential harms in research include (edited from original text p.16):

- Physical harms: including injury, illness, pain;
- Psychological harms: including feelings of worthlessness, distress, guilt, anger, or fear related, for example, to disclosure of sensitive or embarrassing information;
- Devaluation of personal worth: including being humiliated, manipulated or in other ways being treated disrespectfully or unjustly;
- Social harms: including damage to social networks or relationships with others; discrimination in access to benefits, services, employment or insurance; social stigmatisation;
Economic harms: including the imposition of direct or indirect costs on participants;
Legal harms: including discovery and prosecution of criminal conduct.

Discomfort is less serious than harm, and includes anxiety. Inconvenience is less serious again. Examples of inconvenience would include being asked to complete forms, to participate in a survey, or to give up time to participate in research (p.16).

‘Low risk research’ is where the only foreseeable risk is discomfort. ‘Negligible risk research’ is where there is no foreseeable risk more than inconvenience (p.16).

The NHMRC Statement indicates that assessments of research that has low and negligible risks should use Chapter 2.1 of the NHMRC Statement to inform the identification of the level of risk (p.17). The National Statement is available on-line at http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/PUBLICATIONS/synopses/e72syn.htm.

Also relevant is the Values and Ethics: Guidelines for Ethical Conduct in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research (NHMRC 2003) which identifies six Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander values that should lie at the heart of research. These are:

- Spirit and Integrity
- Reciprocity
- Respect
- Equality
- Survival and Protection, and
- Responsibility.

Understanding and putting these principles into practice is the main thrust of these Guidelines. The Guidelines are available online at www.nhmrc.gov.au/publications/synopses/e52syn.htm.

In Indigenous contexts, and other contexts where a more collective view of social relationships is held, it may be that informed voluntary consent has both group and individual aspects. For example it may be appropriate to seek permission from elders or community leaders while remaining sensitive to the possibility that particular individuals may have a different view.

3.3.4 Other sources of guidance

The funding program guidelines, your service agreement, quality assurance provisions, community service standards, or your agency may have policies and provisions which are relevant to understand and consider when undertaking activities which have a research character.

3.3.5 Appreciating the ethical dimensions of your PAR

There is no one answer to the question of how to understand the ethical requirements of a particular PAR process. There are however a number of key considerations.

The first is that certain forms of inquiry are an expected part of everyday service delivery and professional practice. In an early intervention service this includes appreciating and distinguishing between individual and group views, need, preference and experience of service delivery. In relation to inquiry and professional practice Stringer (2007, p.55) writes:

In these cases, the systematic processes of inquiry are part of the legal framework of the duty of professional care, and no formal procedures are required to legitimate them.

This places the onus on us as practitioners to understand the standards of care that go with our professional roles. The AASW Code of Ethics outlines this for social workers, and together with other service delivery standards that relate to our particular fields, gives us some clear guidance as to what we should and should not do in practice, including the practice of PAR.

The flip side is we also need to appreciate and assess the various ways a particular PAR process may go beyond the scope of everyday practice and into the realm of ‘research’.
All research (including PAR) requires:

- a broad risk assessment
- respect for participants’ rights to safety
- respect for participants’ rights to informed voluntary consent
- a strategy for personal information to be stored and disposed of.

Those who form the inner core of participants in a PAR process give their consent largely by way of the process being voluntary, open and transparent - at least within that group:

*Because of the participatory nature of Action Research, ethical considerations work in a special way. The same provisions for duty of care apply, and all stakeholders have the same rights to safety and informed consent that apply in other forms of research. In addition in Action Research, however, there is a particular imperative to ensure that all participants know what is going on, that the processes are inherently transparent to all. Because participants in an Action Research process have much more control than is normally accorded participants in a study, they are in effect engaging in a mutual agreement about the conduct of a study. Nevertheless, the need for informed written consent is still required for situations where people are at risk because of the sensitive nature of issues involved in the study.*

Stringer 2007, p.55; our emphasis

The level of risk that a particular PAR process might pose must be assessed in the planning stage and reassessed every time the circumstances change, for example when a new strategy for ‘finding out’ or ‘publishing’ is considered. In PAR the whole process of inquiry is not generally known in advance so it is important for people to:

- understand and collaboratively negotiate the way the PAR process will work in their context,
- think, in the early planning phase, about any risks and ethical issues that are likely to crop up in their project,
- seek external advice when the PAR process goes beyond the parameters of everyday professional practice,
- develop mechanisms for informed voluntary consent appropriate to the project,
- ensure the ethical dimensions of the PAR process are ‘discussable’ and re-visited regularly and systematically along the way.

‘Publishing’ your PAR will often involve going beyond the core group of PAR participants. You should always have the permission of the people involved before doing this. The identity of a particular person should be not revealed (in word or image) unless they have given specific written consent and there may be situations where this is not appropriate (for example if this posed a risk to them or others). You may also need to be careful that in reporting your PAR you do not reveal details that ‘give away’ someone’s identity. In formal types of publishing (journal articles etc) questions of intellectual property and proper acknowledgement of authorship will need to be addressed.

In summary there are some bottom lines you need to adhere to:

- Participants’ involvement should always be on the basis of informed voluntary consent, written when possible and appropriate – there should always be an explicit invitation to withdraw at any time.
- Participants should always have the contact details of someone they can talk to if they have any concerns, and know who to contact if they wish to make a complaint. This applies to the process as a whole or to a specific event such as a focus group.
- Where broader publication of the process and/or its findings is a possibility participants should be informed of this possibility prior to their involvement.
- Clients and others involved should always have privacy and confidentiality about their situations, experiences, data and views guaranteed. In collaborative and localised contexts there may also need to be group level discussions and agreements.
When information is recorded and distributed it should be done in a way that protects privacy and confidentiality, unless prior and informed voluntary consent has been given.

Seeking people's views and feedback can sometimes raise unexpected issues. You should let people know what to do if this happens for them, support them if they feel concerned or experience distress about any issues that relate to their participation; and inform and support them to raise any grievance they may have.

If any ethical issues come up you should deal with them quickly in line with professional and organisational standards.

Ensure that the way you ‘store’ and ‘publish’ information gathered does not compromise the interests of clients and any other people that are involved. Make sure you comply with any privacy provisions that exist in law, and in a particular program and agency context.

Much of what is required for ethical conduct of PAR can be achieved by way of applying good professional practice principles, clear communication and transparency in ways which respect the safety, confidentiality and voluntariness of those involved. However you should be aware that PAR can involve processes that warrant the application of research ethics standards.

**Thinking about the ethical dimensions of your PAR is not something you should do by yourself.** You should get support by:

- checking out the ethical dimensions of your PAR through appropriate supervision,
- discussing your PAR process with people who have expertise in undertaking research in community service settings (you may have such people inside your organisation or find them externally), and
- openly discussing and debating ethical dimensions with your co-researchers.

### 3.4 Developing ‘trustworthy’ insights and actions

In traditional scientific research, ‘the truth’ may be thought of as ‘objective’, existing ‘out there’ not coloured by bias, and able to be repeated under the same conditions. To claim that the knowledge generated is valid and able to be generalised, scientific research must be ‘rigorous’.

In PAR, ‘truth’ is not seen as objective and able to be generalised, but is embedded in a particular local and community context, involving jointly developed understandings amongst a group of participants, generated by trying particular strategies and watching what happens. In PAR rather than pursue rigour in the scientific sense, you need to maximise how well founded, or ‘trustworthy’ your insights and actions are. Understandings that are well-founded in a particular context may change over time as the context itself changes. PAR involves asking questions in a particular context and trustworthiness is about the extent the answers you come up fit that context.

**Table 12: How trustworthiness (or ‘rigour’) is achieved in PAR**

- Participation of those most affected by, and closest to, the situation being investigated in ways that develop mutual trust and open communication
- Multiple sources and methods of ‘finding out’
- Having an evidence base developed from systematic processes of ‘finding out’, documenting, and analysing
- Transparency in the process
- Ongoing critical reflection which includes actively seeking review and disagreement
- Multiple cycles to fine tune and ‘confirm’ insights and actions
- Developing ‘rich’ contextualised answers to questions
3.4.1 Participation

There is an essential link between participation and rigour in PAR. Participation increases commitment. Involving a range of participants who represent the diversity of relevant stakeholders provides the foundation for developing well grounded insights and strategies. Deeper involvement and commitment of participants can increase the diversity of data generated and improve the quality and richness of the understandings (Dick, 1999).

Participation contributes to open and transparent PAR processes. Participation by people most affected and closest to the topic of your PAR 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.

However it would be naïve to believe there are not complex barriers to achieving diverse representative participation. There are a range of issues that may need to be addressed and the reality may be that participation builds rather than happens, or comes and goes according to the part of the PAR process being undertaken, or as a result of issues such as staff turnover, changes to client circumstances, or inter-agency tension.

3.4.2 Multiple sources and 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 experiences 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

YHPP 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.

A variety of data gathering strategies can be used, including conversations with young people and their families, brainstorming, examining client data, interviews, focus groups, surveys, forums and researching published reports (ARTD 2009, p.iii).

The trustworthiness of what you find through a PAR process is boosted when you use a variety of methods that are locally and culturally appropriate to flexibly explore multiple aspects of an issue.

3.4.3 Having an evidence base

The conclusions you draw need to be supported by evidence. Evidence can be found in a variety of places and include the observations recorded of what happened when you tried something. Evidence also includes the feedback you get from those involved or affected by an action, whether this is client feedback via standard processes used in an agency, or via specially developed strategies to fit a particular part of your inquiry. Getting feedback on several occasions over time can help provide the evidence that shows outcomes are sustainable.

Whilst PAR most obviously involves qualitative information, it can be very useful to seek and use quantitative data in your PAR. For example, client and service level data can show particular trends or outcomes. It can also be very useful to draw on data from the agencies you are collaborating with - agencies that have ‘part of the picture’. Other useful statistics may exist to help you map or better understand an issue including local government, regional, state or national statistics.

Other sources of evidence include a wide variety of reports and studies, as well as letters, minutes of meetings, newsletters, and web postings. In using any information as evidence you need to consider what it is evidence of, and whether it is sufficiently trustworthy to use in your PAR.
Systematically recording your PAR process preserves information, experiences and insights so these can be treated as evidence during the reflection phase. Without this you are relying on memory and only those records which can be located at a later date. To have good quality evidence you need to record the process in a way that is faithful to the participants, that captures the complexity and detail, and can provide a basis for analysing and summarising each phase of the PAR cycle. Section 4.6 contains a number of templates for recording and summarising PAR.

Keep in mind there are ethical issues associated with gathering, recording and distributing information. See Section 3.4 ‘Being Ethical’.

3.4.4 Transparency

In PAR the 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?’

PAR processes should be 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. 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

3.4.5 Ongoing critical reflection including seeking disagreement

Critical reflection is like looking down at something from high – getting a bird’s eye view. You can better see how something relates to its context. From this vantage point you can ask broader questions such as ‘How are we doing this?’, ‘What does this mean in the broader scheme of things?’, ‘If we look at this from another perspective what would that tell us?’ and ‘Have we sought out contradictory views or are we just confirming what we want to find?’

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 perspectives 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 contradict your interpretations.

Seeking ‘disagreement’ (or ‘disconfirming’ evidence) is an important part of achieving rigour in your PAR. 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 trustworthy 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, the published literature and reports, and so on, which you may not have previously considered.

You may find that other evidence allows you to identify a more productive line of inquiry. Or you may find that alternate explanations are not as robust, and the one you have reached is even further supported. Often seeking disagreement results in new detail and perspectives becoming apparent that were not previously covered, making the improved analysis more robust than it was previously.
3.4.6 Multiple cycles

Maintaining focus on a question or question ‘tree’ (outlined in Section 2.2) over time and refining the action you try out is critical to undertaking good quality PAR. This means you are really learning through doing, and so developing a stronger basis for the conclusions you draw. With multiple cycles it will become clearer what dominant themes emerge from your collective experience. Your understandings have the chance to develop greater complexity and detail, as well. These qualities protect you against accusations that you just thought up the response ‘on the hop’.

Conversely single cycle PAR, where you try something once then move onto something else, has less lived experience to base your conclusions on.

3.4.7 Developing ‘rich’ contextualised answers to questions

Believability in PAR is enhanced when you tell the story well. That means telling a rich story that captures the essence of what you have looked at and found out. A ‘thick’ detailed description provides evidence about what took place and gives the context of the experience (Denzin 1994, p.505, Hill 2002). In telling the story of a PAR project it is not your job to tell others what your story means for them – that is, it is not your job to generalise from your context to other people’s. If you tell your story well, others will be able to judge whether there are insights and strategies that might apply or be worth trying in their context.

So when you tell others about your PAR remember that it is often the detail that conveys the embedded ‘truthfulness’. If you are concerned about including identifying material edit it. You might consider negotiating ‘representative’ stories which capture the essence of what is being experienced and communicated. A wonderful example of using representative stories to communicate understanding can be found in the report from the Miimali Aboriginal Community Association (Naden et.al. 2004) Yarning About Cultural Appropriateness.

In writing up your PAR feel free to be tentative (“it seems like …”), to make qualifying statements (“this strategy worked well in supporting parents but mostly involved mothers and female care-givers”); and to avoid categorisations and overstatements that go beyond the scope or contexts of your focus.


3.5 Resistance and barriers

On occasions you may have found that some 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).

Resistance to change can come from a number of sources and from a number of levels. Drawing on Crane and Richardson (2000) there may be:

- Concerns about relevance - other stakeholders who have had less involvement may not fully understand or support the need for change
- Concern about agency interests - some agencies may feel it is not in their best interests to be involved in a process which has the level of collaboration and transparency of PAR
- Concern about practicalities including the resources to undertake a PAR process or implement changes
- Concern about who is responsible for what is found, including implications for workers, organisations, communities or governments
- Concern about ‘opening up a can of worms’
- A lack of confidence in the contribution PAR can make
- Concerns about the involvement of clients or client groups seen as vulnerable.
Strategies you might utilise if you experience resistance to PAR include:

**Invest in people who have the energy and enthusiasm for the process.** Not everyone or every organisation will want to engage in the PAR process. Be aware of the time, energy and resources spent to entice, force or convince people/organisations to participate. Ask the question *for what benefit?* Work with those who are committed and use your resources to foster positive and collaborative allies. When it is strategically important to engage a reluctant party, identify what the barrier might be to their participation and deliberately design in opportunities, resources and supports that will make participation worthwhile. Accept that some people just aren’t into it and that’s OK.

**Actions rather than words.** 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 heightened through events and processes. For instance, if you suggest seeing someone in the own ‘territory’ they might be more prepared to be part of a meeting. Or they might be happy to talk over the phone for half an hour, rather than meet in person.

**People need to know 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.

**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.

**Design meetings and agendas to be responsive to people’s needs and priorities.** 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).

**Be alert to any undercurrent of agendas and politics.** Be aware that there are many reasons, not always what you might think of as the right reasons, for participation. Some of the less noble reasons might be that someone may want to be seen as being important in the community; or they come because they think they might be missing out on something; or because they want to control the agenda; or are distrustful of another organisation. Some may come because their management told them to. These agendas tend to be hidden and guarded yet do add to the politics of engagement. As a consequence we don’t always know what we are dealing with or what impact the unspoken politics will have on the process. The key is to remain aware and alert to the possibilities but not immobilised by any fear. Keep the process transparent and the communication open so that dealing with emerging issues remains a collective responsibility. Focus energy on maximising the strengths and the positive contributions to be made, and appreciate that good quality engagement may make future participation more likely.

### 3.6 Developing and maintaining an Action Research ‘system’

There are a range of considerations which relate to the support and sustainability of PAR. The notion of an AR system is useful to help map the flow of communication and support necessary for a program to use PAR sustainably and effectively as a tool for continuous improvement (Crane 2006). Well founded insights generated from front line experience are important for understanding what constitutes good practice and effective policy.

Cycles of PAR can occur at a number of levels from the individual practitioner, to the program level (across individually funded services), to the policy level. These different levels of action-reflection can be linked so as to inform and converse with each other. Figure 9 provides a simple model for different levels of practice in an AR system, together with key tasks. Each of these tasks requires practical mechanisms be developed that suit the context. The core tasks of an AR system are to endorse and allow space for the undertaking of PAR; foster communication and sharing across services and stakeholders; provide training to those new to and experienced in PAR, and support those undertaking PAR to deal with various challenges they confront.

Depending on your location you may be able to identify, participate in or develop some of these.
Figure 9: Elements of an Action Research system

- **Strategies within and between various levels of effort**
- **Which enable ...**
  - Forums for discussing good practice and broader implications, e.g., conferences/seminars
  - Ways of sharing PAR projects and insights, e.g., publishing reports, distribution of summaries, communities of practice/AR websites
  - Training in PAR, e.g., written and online resources, manuals, training events, mentoring, induction processes
  - Undertake PAR cycles of inquiry, e.g., endorsement at each level plus mechanisms to collaborate & undertake PAR
  - Strategies for discussing and exploring challenges, e.g., mentoring mechanisms, supervision, team meetings, AR hotline

- **Across programs and sectors**
- **Program level**
- **Inter-agency level**
- **Agency level**
- **PAR practitioner level**
Since inception, the Reconnect program has had a program wide Action Research Committee (ARC) to advise FaHCSIA on the use of PAR. Consisting of service providers, Departmental officers located at national and state levels, and an academic with expertise in PAR, this Committee provides a collaborative point for considering a wide variety of issues regarding the ongoing use of PAR. These include:

- Insights generated by services about their use of PAR
- Reflecting on the way AR is being undertaken in services and providing this feedback to services
- Advising on training needs
- Advising on resource development e.g. induction manual on PAR for new workers

Various evaluations and studies into Reconnect have indicated the value of the enabling elements in Figure 9. Developing and sustaining as many of these elements as possible in your practice context is challenging but worthwhile.

### 3.7 Summary and reflections

This section has considered some of the complexities and challenges which come with undertaking PAR. It has underlined the importance of participation by all affected stakeholders and acknowledged that multiple motivations and agendas may be operating in any one process – some less explicitly than others. It has reflected on key ethical considerations and provided strategies to assist you understand, respect and account for these in all phases of the research process. You are encouraged to remain alert to power differentials between stakeholders – ensuring the least powerful have a voice – and that you embrace disagreement. Multiple sources of information and multiple perspectives will enable you to better understand the contexts in which you practice, as well as recognise the variety of ideas, assumptions and possibilities at play. PAR is complex but you can still aspire to keep it simple, open and honest. PAR is simply seeking to answer pressing and relevant questions, via multiple strategies, collaboratively with others in a way that builds well-founded interventions and insights.

#### Some questions to consider

- Do you have a copy of the relevant professional codes of ethics? Do you have an agency based code of conduct for practice? Are there practice standards that apply to your program/ field of practice?
- How can these assist your thinking and planning about PAR in your workplace?
- What ethical issues might you need to consider in undertaking PAR in your context?
- How can you build trust and safety so a diversity of people can participate in a PAR process?
- What barriers or resistance are you likely to encounter as you endeavour to initiate and implement a PAR process? What could you do to minimise these barriers?
- What aspects of PAR present the greatest challenge to you?
- In your PAR process how could you maximise the trustworthiness of your reflections and conclusions?
- What strategies could you use to engage with others around PAR? What elements of an AR system do you have access to, could you adapt existing mechanisms for, and could you develop? How might you link with these?

Section 4 of this manual provides you with a range of practical strategies and tools for undertaking a PAR process.
SECTION FOUR
Practical Strategies and Tools

In this section you will find practical tools and strategies for undertaking PAR processes. These include:

- Strengths and resources scans
- PAR skills audit
- Checklist for starting PAR
- Participatory strategies for ‘finding out’
- Other strategies for ‘finding out’
- Strategies for enabling participation
- Templates for recording your PAR
- Processes for analysing and reflecting on what you have found.

These tools are not intended to be prescriptive. Rather you are invited to try them out, modify them or develop others better suited to your context.

4.1 Strengths and Resources

PAR cannot be imposed. To be successfully incorporated as an element of practice, PAR requires the support and contribution of a variety of stakeholders and it needs to be tailored to your particular context. It might even be useful to ‘Action Research’ how you develop your PAR capacity. Don’t assume it will just happen.

Understanding the potential strengths and resources that can be mobilised for a PAR process is fundamental. A strengths perspective enables you to focus on the capacities and potentialities of your agency, your service users and your community of other stakeholders. ‘Listening to’ or ‘listening for’ the strengths in your community can motivate people to participate. It enables you to positively engage with your stakeholders and the unique contribution they can make to planning and action. Collaborative work will also need to acknowledge the constraints that are operating in any given context so you can work within these, or develop strategies in response to them. For further reading on this topic see Karen Healy’s essay entitled: Asset-based Community Development: Recognising and Building on Community Strengths in O’Hara, A and Weber, Z. (2006). See also Karen Healy’s chapter on ‘The Strengths Perspective’, in Social Work Theories in Context: Creating Frameworks for Practice (2005) and Dennis Saleebey’s The Strengths Perspective in Social Work Practice (2006).

4.1.1 Strengths and resources scans

An environmental scan enables you to identify the range of strengths and resources in your agency/service, in the network of services, and in your local community. It is these inherent strengths and resources of your context that need to be identified, engaged and developed. The following tool provides questions for you to consider when scanning for the strengths and resources of your agency (internal) and your community of stakeholders (external).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The strengths and resources of our agency/service</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What is the <strong>structure of our agency</strong>?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are our <strong>strengths</strong>?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What <strong>resources</strong> can we dedicate to initiating a PAR process?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>What <strong>parts of the agency</strong> need to be, or would benefit from being, <strong>involved in the PAR process</strong>?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>What <strong>PAR values</strong> are present in our agency, or the relevant part of the agency? (see Section 1)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Are there already <strong>processes</strong> within our agency that reflect PAR values or processes? (See Section 3.6 on an Action Research system)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How open or closed is our agency to <strong>include others</strong>, for example, clients and other agencies in service development planning and reflection? Should this include some groups more than others?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What <strong>concerns or challenges</strong> exist in implementing PAR values and processes?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who is/should be responsible for ensuring PAR has <strong>endorsement, time and resources</strong>?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What agency <strong>constraints</strong> will need to be acknowledged and managed?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are there any <strong>other relevant questions</strong> we as an agency need to address in order to undertake PAR?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The strengths and resources of our community</td>
<td>Responses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do the <strong>history, character and culture</strong> of our <strong>community/locality</strong> affect how we encourage involvement in a local early intervention strategy with a PAR component?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What/who are the <strong>key ‘first to know’ agencies</strong> in our community?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What <strong>relationships</strong> currently exist with these?</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>What <strong>networking/collaborative mechanisms</strong> already exist that may be involved in a PAR initiative?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Who</strong> is ‘on board’ already? <strong>Who isn’t?</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What <strong>other relationships</strong> with <strong>key stakeholders</strong> will be important to acknowledge and develop?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What <strong>community strengths and resources</strong> could we mobilise?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How will we build an <strong>inventory of community strengths</strong>?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who from other services and the community has or could quickly develop some <strong>understanding of PAR</strong> and its role in early intervention?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What <strong>communication strategy</strong> could we develop to facilitate greater understanding of and engagement with a PAR process?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What <strong>other relevant questions</strong> need to be addressed regarding the involvement of other services and the community?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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On PAR: Using Participatory Action Research to Improve Early Intervention
4.1.2 PAR skills audit

To undertake PAR you will need to assess what relevant skills you and those you are working in collaboration with already have, and what additional skills you will collectively need to undertake a PAR process. The Table on page 55 lists the key skills in human services delivery relevant to PAR. These include relationship building, communication, group work, community work, organisational coordination, research and so on. The audit tool is designed to assist you to acknowledge the skills you and others involved have, and note the gaps or areas that need development, specialist input or training. You can do this individually or as a group exercise, and it can also be used as a resource for identifying training needs.

Remember PAR is not about starting from scratch with a whole new set of values, skills and knowledge. Most services are used to translating their terms of reference, funding guidelines, theoretical frameworks and policies and procedures into ‘real world’ human service practice. It is your human service understandings, questions and competencies that will drive AR initiatives. In the 2007 – 2008 summary report Reconnect and NAYSS services identified that their ‘own knowledge and training were a barrier to successfully designing and running Action Research projects’. Training opportunities about the language and methods of PAR will improve your confidence and your capacity to plan, deliver and report on effective research (ARTD 2009, p.iii).

The following tool is designed to assist you to identify the skills needed for PAR, the current skills of those in your PAR project, any areas needing development or training, and those areas where additional assistance would be useful. Remember service users are also experts in their own lives and in the life of their community.
### Participatory Action Research Skills Audit

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interpersonal and counselling skills</th>
<th>Related PAR skills</th>
<th>Our strengths - gaps – need to develop – need to seek specialist input – need for training - and so on</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relationship building</td>
<td>Ability to form trusting, credible and respectful relationships with your clients, the community and its organisations.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Communication skills</td>
<td>Ability to engage with people and to invite people to express their thoughts, ideas and views.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ability to actively listen.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ability to create safe space and use plain language when communicating about your work and PAR.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ability to clearly explain PAR and how it could work in your context with your stakeholders.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ability to communicate a genuine wish to enable people's access to a local PAR process and to give value to their contribution.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem solving</td>
<td>Ability to identify and communicate that you value hearing and understanding what is working well and what is not working well.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ability to hear and give value to people's concerns, ideas and hunches.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ability to cooperate and collaborate with people from diverse backgrounds and/or roles in order to develop Participatory Action Research questions.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ability to identify and mobilise resources – what is available and how to gain access to them.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ability to set goals within your agency and with your stakeholders and continually review your progress.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ability to manage emotional issues in crisis situations.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Empathy | Ability to listen to and attend to people's concerns in a way that promotes safety and people's capacity to participate.  
Ability to genuinely respect diverse perspectives, values and cultures.  
Ability to look at things from the client's or stakeholder's frame of reference. |
|---|---|
| Seeking understanding | Ability to step back and reflect on your assumptions and values.  
Ability to remain somewhat sceptical about what will 'work'.  
Ability to value making time for non-chaotic reflection.  
Able to cope with an open and transparent process and a shared reporting of insights. |
| Observation | Ability to observe and describe what happened without jumping to interpretation. |
| Flexibility | Ability to take on new information, change direction and modify questions, plans and strategies along the way.  
Ability to juggle a number of projects/research questions at a time. |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group work skills</th>
<th>Related PAR skills</th>
<th>Our strengths - gaps – need to develop – need to seek specialist input – need for training - and so on</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Facilitation</td>
<td>Ability to support people to have their say in focus groups or meetings. Ability to manage the ‘high talkers’ to ensure everyone has an opportunity to speak and be heard. Ability to ensure a clear mechanism for facilitation is established with a reference group or other collaborative mechanisms. Ability to deal constructively with group disagreements and conflicts. Ability to debrief and support those who are ‘new’ to participation. Ability to ensure that transparency and a clear and agreed upon documentation/reporting method is accepted by members of group processes.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group development</td>
<td>Ability to provide support, resources and opportunities for groups to be established and sustained. For example, a parents’ group.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>Ability to assist groups to negotiate, understand and name outcomes (intended and unintended).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creativity</td>
<td>Ability to be open to having fun and being comfortable with different ways of doing things.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowerment</td>
<td>Ability to take steps to allow the least powerful to be heard and have influence.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community work skills</td>
<td>Related PAR skills</td>
<td>Our strengths - gaps – need to develop – need to seek specialist input – need for training - and so on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negotiation skills</td>
<td>Ability to communicate, problem solve and seek agreement when working with diverse groups, for example, protocols and referral policies.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Networking                             | Ability to actively work ‘with’ other people/groups/services, rather than ‘flying solo’ and trying to solve all the problems on your own.  
   Ability to facilitate connection between people and groups in your community.  
   Ability to initiate activities and convene meetings to create opportunities for people to come together to work on achieving specific goals. |                                                                                                  |
| Small ‘p’ political skills             | Ability to use language and processes that make it easy to be involved.  
   Ability to negotiate access to resources and systems.  
   Ability to respect and understand protocols and customs, for example, cultural norms.  
   Ability to identify key people - the ‘movers and shakers’ - and make the most of what they have to offer.  
   Ability to support and reassure people who feel threatened by change. |                                                                                                  |
| Resource auditing                      | Ability to identify community strengths and resources.  
   Ability to identify the key community issues.  
   Ability to identify the challenges and constraints. |                                                                                                  |
| Community development and education    | Ability to assist people from diverse backgrounds to become involved in building a community’s capacity for early intervention through PAR. |                                                                                                  |
| Facilitation skills                    | Ability to work with diverse groups of people.  
   Ability to assist people to generate their own ideas/solutions/meanings.                         |                                                                                                  |
Cross cultural competencies

- Ability to listen to and work with people in ways that respect and incorporate their ‘cultures’.
- Ability to negotiate guidelines and facilitate communication between groups who may not use the same language and/or have different understandings of things.
- Ability to pay attention to what it will take for different communities to ‘own’ certain strategies/actions.

Motivating

- Ability to engage with and educate those involved.
- Ability to inspire enthusiasm and highlight ‘what’s in it’ for various stakeholders.
- Ability to recognise and celebrate the achievements and skills of all those involved.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisational Skills</th>
<th>Related PAR skills</th>
<th>Our strengths - gaps – need to develop – need to seek specialist input – need for training - and so on</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Planning</td>
<td>Ability to work through how things will be done in fairly systematic ways.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information sharing</td>
<td>Ability to communicate and share information – to all stakeholders across the community – for example by developing a clear workable communication strategy.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy development</td>
<td>Ability to use PAR insights to inform policy and service directions.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ability to document key findings in a way that promotes engagement with policy makers regarding key learning, program insights, service improvements etc.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ability to break down broad policy questions into manageable research questions.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ability to keep focused on big picture program goals while coordinating micro levels of inquiry.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skill</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time management</td>
<td>Ability to employ strategies to make effective use of time. For example allocating specific time for activity related to your PAR initiative.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Conflict resolution           | Ability to assess for and diffuse tensions across a broad range of groups. There may be times when you assess that a specialist facilitator is required to assist a working group or individuals who are unable to proceed due to conflict.  
   Ability to creatively use conflict for learning. |
| Team management               | Ability to motivate and support the work of teams.  
   Ability to ensure workloads/roles/tasks are realistic and appropriate for particular people or work groups. |
| Monitoring                    | Ability to maintain the ‘quality’ of the PAR processes.  
   Ability to assess the thoroughness/validity of what is happening. |
<p>| Marketing                     | Ability to communicate about the good practice and positive early intervention outcomes of community-based collaborations. For example, in succinct summary reports of a local strategy and its achievements. |
| Report writing                | Ability to report clearly in writing using plain language and providing an open and honest account of work undertaken, agency data, proposed projects etc. |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Skills</th>
<th>Related PAR skill</th>
<th>Our strengths - gaps – need to develop – need to seek specialist input – need for training - and so on</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preparation for PAR (Traditional research often commences with a literature review)</td>
<td>Ability to undertake preliminary research to scope what has previously been done and learnt in relation to your issue or question. Do your homework - understand, critique and consider previous insights.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing research questions</td>
<td>Ability to turn local issues/concerns/hunches into Action Research questions. Ability to engage stakeholders in conversation about observations, issues and critical questions.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deciding how to go about the research (often called the methodology)</td>
<td>Ability to work out the best way to gather and make sense of the information you need. Ability to cooperate with other stakeholders in relation to who, how, what, where, when and why research activity will occur.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical practice</td>
<td>Ability to understand and ensure the rights of all participants are respected throughout the process. Ability to interpret the relevant ethical codes and guidelines and apply these to the PAR project. Ability to ensure a transparent research process that respects all participants and seeks their consent if documentation material intends to name or include information and other inputs from participants.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documenting</td>
<td>Ability to set up a simple and efficient system for documenting the details of the process and the evidence you depend on.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data management</td>
<td>Ability to manage information and data effectively. This will involve working out the best time and physical or computer-based methods of managing your PAR information.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theory building</td>
<td>Ability to work out why things happened in partnership with others.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Publicising/ publishing</td>
<td>Ability to share insights and findings publicly and in a way that allows for their evaluation. Ability to package the PAR story into a resource that can be shared (report, video, performance, newsletter etc.).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### 4.2 Checklist for starting PAR

This checklist is designed for you to use very early in the PAR process. If you use it later you should include rows for things such as ‘Who are the stakeholders?’ etc.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key consideration</th>
<th>Existing strengths and opportunities</th>
<th>What else might be useful to do?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agency-Management support for PAR</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency-Management understanding of PAR</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Specific endorsement to undertake PAR</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Making time for PAR</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Mechanisms for managing PAR</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Internal agency scan</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Community scan</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>PAR skills audit</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support, supervision and sounding boards</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General ethical considerations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anything else?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.3 Participatory strategies for ‘finding out’

PAR requires genuine participation and collaboration – allowing others to ask questions, to gather and interpret data, and for mistakes – or poor outcomes – to be seen as sources of learning rather than as risks to be avoided. Unfortunately funding arrangements can position some agencies as competitors rather than potential collaborators. PAR provides a means to work against the forces that undermine cooperation. The participation of key stakeholders is critical in PAR. Participation enables a comprehensive consideration of the big questions through smaller more targeted inquiries. Participation promotes understanding of different roles and responsibilities, the overlaps and gaps in service delivery and the different ways of making meaning and responding to issues and concerns. Participation promotes real collaboration, resource and information sharing, community links and networks and a greater capacity to respond holistically to critical social problems in vulnerable families and communities.

Key Stakeholders: Who could potentially be involved?

- Front-line early intervention workers
- Client individuals, groups and communities eg young people and their families
- Agency management
- Other service providers
- Larger local institutions - local schools, TAFE, universities
- Local government, and local offices of other levels of government
- Local community groups
- Local businesses

All stakeholders will be informants in your PAR process. Their views and opinions will influence the focus and course of the research activity. They can be engaged to participate in the variety of ways outlined below.

The challenge of meaningfully involving those most affected by a situation can be substantial. When the goal of early intervention relates to experiences such as homelessness or mental health, the individuals, groups and communities who are the users of services are usually and understandably more interested in timely and relevant responses rather than involvement in committees and bureaucratic processes. A challenge in running a PAR process is to invite and engage those ‘most affected’ to provide direction in what is explored and what interpretations are made. You will need to be quite creative in developing a mix of processes that are meaningful and inclusive for the diversity of stakeholders you have.

*The discussion of how to achieve these conditions of mutual involvement, participation and collaboration are very similar to the discussions about how to achieve ‘community development’. For example, the more disempowered you are, the less hope you may have about either the value of participating or even the chances of something good coming out of it.*

Wadsworth 1998, p.11

Informal conversations are one of the best ways to get people’s opinions and ideas. For example:

- *What could we do to ...?*
- *Do you have any thoughts on ...?*
- *What have you found useful for ...?*
Brainstorming is a much used group technique to generate a range of ideas and views through free association, though it can be a challenge to maintain the agreement that all suggestions are welcomed without critical comment (Wadsworth 1997, p.81). To boost the number of people who feel confident to contribute it can be useful to firstly brainstorm in smaller groups and bring back the ideas to the larger group.

“When used to try to generate creative and imaginative new solutions, the results of brainstorming could be listed for further thought and discussion rather than expected or relied on to come up with the best solutions immediately. Sometimes it is helpful for people to go away and chew over all the possibilities, once they have been ‘put on the table’ by a group, and come back later.”

Wadsworth 1997, p.81

A reference group can be established for a particular question or for your PAR more generally. Reference groups seek people's views and feedback in a clearly invited and structured way. They enable the gathering of a broad range of views if composed of people from number of sectors/parts of the community. In one service, a reference group was composed of young people, parents, school personnel, the agency, police and other local community stakeholders who could provide valuable feedback, broad views and problem solving in relation to defining the PAR question and guiding the action plan.

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.

Service provider

See Rice (2002) for tips on ‘reference groups that really work’.

Focus groups can provide feedback on particular issues or topics. They are good at capturing the views of a particular group or sub-population (such as a focus group of young people excluded from school), and for ‘drilling down’ into a particular topic (such as how a local service system might work more effectively). Focus groups encourage the exploration and sharing of people's feelings, ideas, aspirations, reservations, and hunches. They can be organised in ways and take place in spaces that are culturally responsive and accessible for those involved.

Focus groups generally require strong sensitive facilitation and an atmosphere of respect and safety to enable participants to trust and engage with the process. See Dick (2003) for a very useful outline of how to facilitate a focus group that is structured but where the information provided is driven by the participants.

Co-researchers are those that work alongside you in the PAR process. They work ‘beside’ you developing processes, implementing strategies, interpreting data and evaluating change. Co-researcher groups can undertake part or all of the PAR for one or more questions. Co-research groups can also provide creative and innovative reporting via arts mediums such as video production, written stories and so on. Co-research groups
tend to have diverse stakeholder membership, including service providers, clients where appropriate, and other relevant stakeholders.

**Peer research** by young people can take a number of forms. ‘Peer interviewers’ can be loosely defined as individuals with a connection to a specific target group with whom they share language and culture. Peer interviewers enable young people’s voices to be heard when otherwise they may be inaccessible. Peer interviewers can play a key role in a PAR process and they should be recognised accordingly.

A 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.

Their views and suggestions were 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 Program service_

As part of a planning process peer interviewers can enable their peers to answer questionnaires and be interviewed for their views and opinions in both the observation and reflection phases and the action implementation phase. Peer interviewers can provide rich information about youth issues, barriers to access, support needs, trust and privacy, attitudes and fears to specific issues or institutions and so on. An adult inquiry may not achieve the depth of feedback, especially if there is any anger, distrust or alienation being experienced by young people.

Peer interviewers were used at a local youth forum to determine what people were getting out of the forum, what they thought the benefits were, what they knew at the end compared to what they knew in the beginning & what their favourite things were.

Because it was young people asking the questions, the responses were more frank than they might have been with workers. Peer interviewers had to attend training each week for 6 weeks before the forum. Everyone was committed to the process, however some people were a bit shy and did less than others did. Peer interviewers helped each other out if they were feeling shame. Having training was sooooo important to making it work & building up the confidence needed to get out there & ask everyone how it was.

_Manager, Anglicare Topend_

Peer involvement can also be in other roles than that of ‘interviewer’. For example, in 2007 the Colony 47 NAYSS partnered with Relationships Australia to run a forum for African families in Hobart. They employed a young person to enhance the participation and feedback of other young people. The forum was called Strengthening Families in a New Country.

Two hundred people attended the one day Forum which included presentations by the Commissioner for Children, Anti-Discrimination Commissioner, Police and other relevant service info and also break out groups for participants to talk through issues.

For the Forum, Colony 47 NAYSS worked with a group of young African Australians from a local college to present on their insights, perspectives and experiences of settlement called “UNITY UNITED”. The workshop sessions, presentation and individual interviews with the young participants were videoed and edited into a documentary, UNITY UNITED. We employed a young person from the client group, to co-coordinate this project with a NAYSS worker. The young person was responsible for:

- Encouraging interest and support from peers
- Ensuring material and resources were age and culturally responsive
- Ensuring all material and resources authentically reflected the views and experiences of peers.

This approach provided skills and experience for the young person and immeasurable benefits for the authenticity and relevance of the project for the client group.

_Colony 47_
Although sometimes similar to a co-research group, peer research is about those who are part of the target group playing a role in the PAR inquiry process. Peer research has particular utility in gaining information from ‘hidden populations’ but should not be limited to this.

**A community development approach** can support and empower people to take greater control of and responsibility for their situation. The role of a PAR facilitator is to focus people's attention on the questions, problems and issues that arise and harness their strengths and capacities to create solutions. A community development approach involves effective consultation with all key stakeholders to ensure authenticity, agreed understandings and relevance to everyone's unique lives, roles, perspectives and concerns. Effective consultation should enable participants to express their views in their own language. A thorough community development approach takes the time to build relationships, understand the different ideas and understandings about a particular question, and works to ensure there is some agreement about the direction of the inquiry. This requires careful work to ensure all those consulted – from decision makers, to clients, to community members – are recognised and empowered in the process. Creating structures (e.g. reference groups or regular project meetings) is important to ensure there is rich communication, acknowledgement, and a mechanism for flexible planning, implementation, feedback, discussion of findings, recommendations and the sharing of learning.

Most of the strategies mentioned above can include most stakeholders – e.g. informal conversation, reference group membership, being involved in a focus group. The following table lists a range of other participation strategies that can be utilised with different stakeholder groups.

**Table 13: Strategies for enabling participation of particular stakeholders**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who are the stakeholders?</th>
<th>Possible strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agency management</td>
<td>Board meeting, staff meetings, strategic planning events, service evaluations, PAR training, informal discussion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your supervisor/ team leader</td>
<td>Supervision sessions, PAR training, critical incident debriefing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your clients</td>
<td>PAR training, peer audits of your service, peer interviewing, being interviewed by a peer interviewer, peer facilitation of groups/events, ‘panels of experts’ session (where they act in a ‘Brains Trust’ role), videoing what happens and feedback, video editing, ‘graffiti’ walls, community cultural development processes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other community service providers</td>
<td>Inter-agency meetings, seminars and forums, training events, special meetings, community consultations, informal networks/working relationships.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local businesses</td>
<td>Attending a meeting of the local Chamber of Commerce/ business associations, phone calls, inviting to an agency event e.g. reference group meeting (if not a member), a Board meeting, AGM, a fundraiser, community consultations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Members of the broader community</td>
<td>Newsletter and newspaper invitations, open forums, service open days, community consultations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other like services in other localities</td>
<td>Across program network mechanisms, invitations to provide input, reports, training events, informal networks/working relationships, feedback.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.4 OTHER STRATEGIES FOR ‘FINDING OUT’

There are a wide range of other methods that can be used as ways of generating insights, preferences and rankings of ideas from individuals or groups. A number of these are briefly described in Stringer (2007) and Wadsworth (1997).

- Informal interviews (referred to by Stringer 2007, p.69) as ‘guided reflection’
- Drawing maps and plotting key features (individual or group based)
- A guided tour
- Surveys (more useful in the later stages of a PAR process to include input from a wider range of people)
- Open Space Technology (this has been used in Reconnect and NAYSS at Good Practice Forums)
- Quality Circles
- Search Conference techniques
- Narrative and story telling
- Concept mapping
- Fishbowls
- Force-field analysis

4.5 ANALYSING: STRATEGIES FOR REFLECTING ON WHAT YOU HAVE FOUND

Analysis is the process of distilling large quantities of information to uncover significant features and elements that are embedded ...

Stringer 2007, p.95

In a participatory context such as PAR the meaning you make of your data will be negotiated – in other words, it will be what you agree it to be. That does not mean you should not make every effort to make the interpretations trustworthy. To maximise this you should use strategies for interpreting and analysing that suspend your ‘judgement’ and try to identify the story your information tells.
Stringer (2007, p.98-106) talks of two main processes for ‘distilling’ the information you have gathered. These are:

- Categorizing and coding, and
- Analysing key experiences.

These are briefly summarised below.

### 4.5.1 Categorising and coding

Categorising is about identifying a clear representation of the information (data) you have collected, by looking for common themes. A code is the name you give a particular category and is used as a tool for sorting through and organising the information (data) you have collected. You have to ‘suspend’ your own interpretations whilst you do this (as much as is possible anyway). To help in this use the verbatim principle as much as you can. This means using the words and concepts of the participants. Stringer (2007) suggests the following:

- Keeping different stakeholders themes separate at least at the beginning. This means they can ‘check’ your interpretations when you ‘share’ these back to them (if you didn’t do it together).

**Procedures involve:**

- Reviewing the collected information within a stakeholder group or event
- Identifying the discrete ideas in the various contributions i.e. break it into its bits. For example, what ideas, activities, events, topics were raised in a particular focus group or information interview? This is called ‘unitizing the data’. You can use post-it notes or cards or other visual ways to code when doing this.
- Categorising and coding. Now you can cluster these single ideas into groups and give the cluster a name (called a code). Depending on the codes you use, you end up with lots of piles or only a few. Debates will rage about whether two piles are the same, related or different.
- Then you can look across stakeholders or across events and look for common themes. You might find different stakeholders have some different concerns or ways of seeing things, and that there are also some common themes or concerns across groups.
- You can then develop a way to describe what you have found.

### 4.5.2 Analysing key experiences

This type of analysis focuses on events that seem to have had (or you wonder if these have had) a significant impact on the experience of stakeholders. You can use this approach to explore what service users or stakeholders have experienced of a new strategy you want to evaluate.

*By ‘unpacking’ these events we can learn the features of that experience that make them so meaningful, and in the process we extend our understanding of the way the issues affect their lives.*

Stringer 2007, p.103

The steps suggested for this include:

- Identify key events/experiences
- Identify main features of each event/experience
- Identify the elements that compose the event/experience
- Identify themes.

This type of analysis can be used to help you analyse what people have said about key events, experiences or interventions in focus groups, workshops or interviews.
4.5.3 Displaying what you have found

You can do this via a range of strategies, including:

- Descriptive accounts
- Representative stories
- Themes
- Audio and/or visual presentations
- Statistics, and
- Tables and graphs.


4.6 Templates for recording your PAR

Recording your PAR (sometimes called ‘documenting’) is a key challenge and there is no single way to do this. You will need to develop and adapt the way you record information to suit your individual situations and preferences. Generally you will need to use more than one recording strategy. Some of your recording tools may be structured and others quite flexible.

Different recording tools may be useful for planning, recording what happens, and reflection. Some assist you to capture lots of information (butchers paper notes from a workshop) while others act as ‘summary sheets’. These summaries document your main research activities and indicate where more detailed information is stored e.g. in the Reference Group minutes.

The following tools have been developed to assist you to record what happens, the processes and the insights. They are simple and practical and intended to assist in sorting information or developing key points. Various computer programs can also be used to record and sort information - for example, to identify the key themes from comments lodged in a feedback box.

These tools and your records are not an end in themselves. The objective is not about developing impressive piles of paper about what is happening. The real objective is to improve the outcomes for those you are trying to assist and develop practices that can contribute to this. The PAR tools in this kit are to help you and your community achieve this objective.

Feel free to mix and adapt those that seem to meet your particular needs. Or make up something that suits you better.
**Recording example 2: A two-step planning proforma**
(adapted from a template originally contributed by RAFT Wollongong to The Reconnect Action Research Kit)

**TITLE OF OUR PAR PROJECT:**
Step one: Getting started

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions to ask</th>
<th>Prompts</th>
<th>Our PAR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What area or broad theme do we want to look at? What is known about this already?</td>
<td>Do our homework by seeing what others have done and what others (including stakeholders) say.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is our question/s?</td>
<td>Macro or micro level? For example, ‘What would it take...?’ or ‘What could we do...?’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How is this linked to better outcomes for the people affected?</td>
<td>What are we seeking to change or explore and how does this link to better outcomes for those we are seeking to assist?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who should we involve in our PAR?</td>
<td>Seek stakeholders/participants/those affected and list them here.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What range of strategies might we first try?</td>
<td>What are the ideas brainstormed by participants?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Of these what are our preferred strategies?</td>
<td>Negotiate and ‘prioritise’ strategies, taking into account ethical, strategic and resource considerations.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who needs to do what?</td>
<td>Indicate tasks, roles and issues to be considered by various people &amp; agencies.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is our time line?</td>
<td>Put the actions in a timetable.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What have we learnt so far?</td>
<td>List any observations, insights, issues or questions that have arisen throughout this planning process.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Step two – Specific plan for (name of specific strategy)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions to ask</th>
<th>Prompts</th>
<th>Our plan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What are we going to try?</td>
<td>Discuss the specific strategy you wish to try out in response to your PAR question</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who is involved?</td>
<td>List the various people who are involved with carrying out and recording the strategy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is to be done by whom?</td>
<td>Map out and delegate tasks</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What ethical considerations exist and how will these be dealt with?</td>
<td>Map out issues and indicate how these will be safeguarded</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What timelines?</td>
<td>When are things to be done by? When will we meet to discuss?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What will we record and how?</td>
<td>What methods will we use to record (observations), and who will do this?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Recording example 3: Recording by each phase of the cycle**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>PAR summary sheet 1</strong></th>
<th><strong>Summary</strong></th>
<th><strong>Implications for where to from here</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Theme or issue of interest</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Observe</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is known about this already?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What else might be useful to find out?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who else to ask?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How will we go about this?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reflect</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do we interpret the information we have gathered?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What could we change to produce better outcomes for our clients?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Macro research question</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Micro questions</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAR summary sheet 2</td>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>Observations, evidence, insights, new questions and issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Plan</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What, Who, When</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Act</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The story</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Observe</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What happened, For different participants/parties, What was recorded</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reflect</strong> (analyse)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Share</strong> (and review, publish)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who, What, When, Where, How</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
SECTION FIVE

Case Examples

This section contains a number of examples of PAR projects. You can use the information in this section to help orient new staff or your co-inquirers on how PAR might be undertaken. As you develop examples of your own PAR you can add them to your resources.

The first case example is a composite of a number of different PAR cases and experiences. It is intended to be a tool for you to read and see how a number of themes in establishing a PAR process play out. You may find it useful as a training exercise at your agency or with your PAR co-inquirers.

The other case examples (2 - 7) are drawn from the experiences of particular Reconnect and NAYSS services. They are not intended as models to be copied, but as examples of how PAR was used and written up in different contexts.

None of these examples are comprehensive. Most were written originally as summaries. However each is illustrative of one or more aspects of PAR. Each example is introduced with a short commentary by this manual’s authors.

5.1 A hypothetical case study

5.2 Engaging across services
   PAR with CaLD young people and Centrelink

5.3 Embedding PAR into everyday practice
   ‘A day in the life’ of Reconnect workers using Action Research

5.4 Using a visual template to summarise your PAR
   ‘Riding the Waves’

5.5 Engaging stakeholders across multiple cycles
   PAR in a Rural setting

5.6 Empowering service users to take a central role in service development
   Parents of teenage children with abusive behaviours

5.7 Developing a new strategy using PAR
   Engaging Indigenous young people in education

5.1 A hypothetical case study

This is a hypothetical example. The circumstances and strategies referred to are drawn from various AR experiences and reports. Reading this case example might assist you to see how various processes referred to in earlier sections can be put into practice in a particular context. This may assist you in developing your own PAR process.

Macro question: What would it take to improve young people’s engagement with family and education?

This is a big question. There are many complex and inter-related factors contributing to disconnection from school and family. These include individual family histories and values; specific cultural and community contexts; the unique situations, capacities and attitudes of a young person and groups of young people; the policies, procedures, values, capacities, resources, accessibility and organisational cultures of education and training institutions; the views and responses of the local community, police, local council. And so on. This question could take many years to properly answer in your community. Coming up with a smaller question that is still relevant yet more realistic is a process in itself (see Section 2.3.1 – 2.3.3).
On PAR   Using Participatory Action Research to Improve Early Intervention

The big question, and ideas for smaller questions, can be discussed with all of your stakeholders both informally and formally. Day to day work provides the opportunities for this talking. These discussions sow seeds for collaborative research work. A set of smaller, targeted and related micro questions can be explored (see Section 2.3.4).

In this hypothetical example it is understood that the quality of a young person’s connection to family and school is directly related to the general stability of their living situation. The workers are in contact with parents who are distressed by either their child’s suspension or expulsion from school or their refusal to attend. These parents are desperate to see them re-engaged in learning rather than bored and wandering the streets. In this agency both the youth worker and the family worker understand the critical link between school failure, family connection and pathways to homelessness. They are also aware that this risk will be even greater if parents are at their wits end and close to ‘washing their hands of their kids’. Inclusion in school and support to parents are two factors that the workers believe will lessen the likelihood of young people heading down the path towards homelessness. The workers are concerned about their underdeveloped links with the school and the absence of mutual understandings of each other’s (community agency and school) roles and capacities to support and hold these young people and families into school and the wider community.

Prior to initiating a PAR process with their community of stakeholders, the workers in this example undertake some internal agency reflection. They reflect on their observations of young people and families, on the reasons for young people’s disconnection – or risk of disconnection – from school and family, and the agency’s current work to support and assist these young people and their families. In staff meetings, case management reviews and with the agency board of management discussions are held to consider how, what, when and with whom they could initiate a PAR process. Big questions are tossed around in a process of critical reflection on the agency’s current practice and the areas they wish to better understand and strengthen. Focussed discussion and planning also occurs around:

- Who within the agency will take the lead in a PAR process?
- Who will support, supervise and encourage ongoing observation and reflection?
- Who are our stakeholders?
- How will workloads be shared and managed to enable PAR to be given a priority place in daily practice?
- How will recording and documentation be resourced to enable it to occur throughout all phases of the process? (see Section 2.1)

At this initial stage – as in daily practice – ethical concerns about peoples’ rights, and the agencies responsibilities and the commitment to do no harm, are affirmed as critical elements of any PAR process (see Section 3.3).

Engaging Stakeholders and Coming up with a Realistic Question (Part 2)

To get their observations and concerns into a larger community arena the agency decides to use their existing connections with those stakeholders affected by concerns around young people’s risk of disconnection from school and family. They take all opportunities to interact with the school executive and key support personnel. They make contact with a number of individual young people who have been recently suspended and/or expelled from school. They note the numbers of young people at risk and those already experiencing disconnection. They begin to document. They keep a diary of their activity – identifying forces affecting disconnection and re-connection as they go. They note what they do and with whom. They note the observations, perspectives and ideas of all the stakeholders with whom they have contact. These notes will be shared with these stakeholders in PAR processes along the way.

The workers have identified some openness for re-engagement with school amongst some young people. In a number of cases this appears to be borne out of a high degree of boredom and trouble with local police. The workers met some of these young people through their parents – mainly mothers – who are struggling to cope and want your assistance to get their kids back into school. They begin to think and chat about the big question with these young people and their parents whenever possible. They tell them about their research ideas and note their responses. They start posing some smaller related questions:

- What could we do to get the school to engage with us about this issue?
- What could we do to improve support to families struggling to hold their children into school?
What could we do to support parents struggling with the challenging behaviours of their sons and daughters?

What could we do to get support to vulnerable young people and minimise the risk of disconnection from school and family?

What could we do to improve the young people’s openness, readiness and capacity to return and settle into school?

What could we do to get some alternative learning program going?

All these questions have been generated out of the workers observations, and their listening and reflection on their day to day work. They are all relevant questions – some are bigger and more complex than others. Coming up with a realistic initial question will be a process that considers what is meaningful right now for their service, their clients and the other key stakeholders. The PAR question should reflect a current practical issue in the work that an action inquiry could both shed light on and strengthen the capacity for improved service responses (see Section 2.3.6: Table 6: Characteristics of Good Micro Questions).

In this example a practical starting point and manageable question would be to focus on improving the communication between the young people, the families and the school. Improved communication will be critical if all the stakeholders are to work together to address the complex issue of improving connections for vulnerable young people with family, school and community supports and opportunities.

Getting Started (Part 3)

Getting people together will be a key starting point. The workers in this example sought meetings with key school personnel – the guidance officer, the deputy principle, the school nurse and the student support unit. They provided information to the school, prior to this meeting, about their agency and their requirement to undertake PAR within the framework of early intervention services and youth homelessness. They prepared for this meeting by gathering together the key facts and observations that had led to their concern about the numbers of young people disconnected – or at risk of disconnection – from school and family. They managed to do a quick literature search around this issue and came up with some relevant material that they gave to all stakeholders, either at formal meetings or informally, as appropriate and as day to day service delivery brought them into contact. This included a very relevant report done by a service in another part of the country, and alarming statistics on the levels of suspension and exclusion in the region. These facts, readings and other preparatory notes were all copied and housed with other documentation relating to the PAR project in the central place they set up in their agency for PAR documentation (see Section 2.3: Table 2: Common Approaches for Recording PAR).

The research question and proposed plan of action continued to be refined as the workers invited and enabled the participation of all the identified stakeholders. In this example the stakeholders were a mix of the agencies delivering core services such as education, police, supported housing and income support services and the less empowered young people and parents who were often at odds with these services. The community agency initiating the PAR process was in a unique position. It had links and relationships with all the parties and could play a critical role in convening bigger facilitated consultations or smaller less formal conversations. In these forums different observations and views can be heard and reflected on, questions can be posed and issues and ideas aired before decisions and plans are made for a course of collaborative action.

In this example, the parents’ views tilted things in the direction of wanting activity that gets something happening for their kids. The school’s input leant towards questions about how the community agency could assist them to manage very vulnerable young people with challenging behaviours who are at risk of being suspended or expelled. For the agency itself a critical issue was their current workload, a range of competing demands and the need to set realistic priorities. All of these issues and constraints were discussed with all the stakeholders – to various degrees as appropriate. At the heart of things was a question about how everyone could improve how they shared and worked together to improve the situations of the most vulnerable.

After the first round of engagement, consultation, reflection, agreement and documentation the PAR question evolved into:

What could we do to build stronger communication and real collaboration between our agency, vulnerable young people and their families and the local high school/s?
This question was a step towards creating the ground to answer the bigger question. Without dialogue, trust and collaboration, the bigger questions cannot be addressed. The task now was to create an action plan that attempted to find a way to improve the communication, involve young people and families and achieve some real collaboration with the local school and other sources of opportunity and assistance in the community (see Section 2.4.1).

**Developing a PAR Plan (Part 4)**

Achieving real participation was a challenge in relation to this issue. The parents of excluded students wanted some hope that new options would emerge for their children. School personnel were initially seeking some practical solutions in return for their time with a community agency who is talking about ‘collaborative problem solving’. Young people needed some encouragement to be involved. They questioned whether their complaints and aspirations would really be heard and understood. The challenge was to facilitate a series of processes in which these potentially estranged stakeholders could participate and, in so doing, influence the whole process.

The discussions with stakeholders – both formal and informal – worked on clarifying the focus of the inquiry and working out how it could be overseen and implemented.

A reference group was established made up of the agency’s PAR worker, local school representatives, two parents, a local police representative and other community organisation representatives that the stakeholders agreed should have a place at the table. This group agreed on a plan that involved:

- Ongoing reference group meetings to review progress, synthesise feedback, analyse data being gathered and monitor and support overall activity and its documentation.
- The agency workers recruited, trained and supported a small group of young people to undertake peer interviews, in collaboration with the reference group. These young people had been engaged through the case work activities of the service and through the school. They were involved in discussions about the focus of the PAR project, and were key contributors, along with parents and the reference group, in determining the interview questions, language and style of the questionnaire to be used with their peers. The data collected from these interviews assisted the stakeholders to understand what was happening for young people, and what needed to be the focus of adult collaborations.
- Consultation with parents. The agency workers undertook the consultation with assistance from the parent/s on the reference group and school guidance officer/support unit.
- Analysis of the peer interviews and consultation. This was done by the agency worker and the school guidance officer and discussed with the young people, parents and reference group. A summary was developed and distributed to all participants in easily understood language.
- A facilitated session between key services and institutions with responsibilities for young people at risk of disconnection from school, family and community. This session focussed on understanding the different roles and responsibilities of participants, as well as discussion, reflection and brainstorming on ways to improve and sustain interagency communication, collaboration and responsiveness. Protocols for information sharing and collaborative activity began to be considered. This session occurred after the peer interviews and parent consultation had been completed and analysed.

The peer interviews and parent consultation revealed a number of issues and concerns held by young people and by parents that had not been fully aired in an interagency forum. While there was a tendency by participants to want to leap in and start trying to address these issues and concerns the interagency gatherings endeavoured to remain true to the initial PAR question.

The process itself started to deliver outcomes in the form of improved relationships and communication between the various participants in the process, and an enhanced understanding about what was driving disconnection (evident from the reference group minutes and worker journaling). The basis has been laid for developing specific strategies which can be trialled as possible ‘answers’ to the main question. See Section 2.4: Table 8: Some questions to ask when you plan.
Action and Learning (Part 5)

The outcome so far has been to undertake some initial investigation, and use this to bring together various stakeholders in different forums, some formal, some not, so that a collaborative plan could be developed. The decision is made to trial a set of protocols and strategies that focus on improving communication between the school, young people, parents and the early intervention service. The school agreed to contact where possible the early intervention service when a young person was at risk of being suspended or expelled. Information sheets on support available to parents were to be developed and distributed, and young people involved were invited to form the core of a peer support strategy within the school so that students experiencing distress had someone they could talk to and who could assist them to find support. The reference group discussed how each of these would be evaluated.

This question What could we do to build stronger communication and real collaboration between our agency, vulnerable young people and their families and the local high school/s? asks participants to think about how they could get better at working together. It asks the community agency to consider what they could do and insists that they get feedback from their stakeholders. It asks all participants to consider the input of the more vulnerable - young people at risk of unfinished schooling, unemployment and homelessness. It seeks to understand their position and the position of their parents and families. The question seeks to include the perspectives of all the stakeholders and together seriously explore how - through ‘having a go’ - everyone from the key institutions, support services, young people and parents could be respected as having something to contribute to finding better ways of doing things. No doubt there will be barriers to achieving this - not all strategies will work first time, some may need changing or refining, and others may simply be classified as ‘good in theory’. The process of inquiry can put people in a better position to identify constraints and engage in systems and policy advocacy to address these.

Some questions to consider:

- How is this scenario similar or different to your context?
- At what points in a PAR process would you seek assistance to convene and facilitate stakeholder meetings/gatherings?
- What do you imagine were the ideas generated in the facilitated sessions to improve communication and create real collaboration in the above example?
- What are the biggest challenges when trying to ensure the participation of clients?
- What do you think they tried?
- What would you do in your context?
- What do you think they learnt?
- What would you be looking for in the documentation of this example of a PAR process?
- What do you think the next PAR cycle could focus on?

5.2 Engaging across services: PAR with CaLD young people and Centrelink

This example was provided by the Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY), Victoria.

The following example demonstrates a clear articulation of the components of the PAR cycle (i.e. observation, reflection, planning and action), and the clear engagement and participation of key stakeholders (young people and Centrelink) in the process.

Macro question (A Reconnect Question of National Significance):

What would it take to improve early intervention outcomes through coordination of, and collaboration between, services delivered by government and the community sectors?
Micro question:

What would it take to provide alternative opportunities for young people to participate in providing feedback to and communicating with Centrelink?

Observe: Young People and Centrelink

- Reconnect had been trialling feedback mechanisms for young people in South East Victoria
- The worker observed that many young people were taking up the opportunity to write their comments on issues for young people and CaLD young people
- Centrelink were implementing their new Youth Strategy at the same time and were keen to get some direct feedback from young people

Reflect: How to facilitate feedback to Centrelink

- The Reconnect worker and Centrelink staff felt this was a great opportunity to work in collaboration to gather feedback from young people
- As this had already been happening at YouthLinks, a generalist drop in Youth Centre (the base for the Reconnect position in the South East), it seemed like a great opportunity
- Centrelink staff were also keen to respond to issues young people identified

Plan: Trial using graffiti to gather feedback

- Planned to trial the process of gathering feedback from young people at YouthLinks rather than at Centrelink sites as with previous attempts
- Planned to use graffiti style for feedback as young people were used to this form and a graffiti project was running at the same time in YouthLinks
- Met with Centrelink to plan questions and timeframes

Act: Ask questions & provide means to make a response (graffiti)

- Placed large sheets of paper up on the wall and asked three simple questions:
  - ‘How do you think Centrelink’s staff treat young people?’
  - ‘How could Centrelink work better with culturally diverse young people?’
  - ‘Have you noticed any changes in the last year?’
- The project was trialled over one month
- Pens were attached to the paper and the receptionist encouraged young people to make comments

Observe: Young people engaged

- Lots of young people wrote comments on the graffiti paper
- Many had the time to write while in the waiting room
- The young people didn’t need much encouragement to contribute

Reflect: Right environment, right medium

- It was the sort of environment where young people felt comfortable in expressing their opinions
- Graffiti seemed to be a familiar form to the young people who participated and the workers reflected on the fact that this has been a form that young people use to feed back to society about their feelings anyway
- The workers then identified a need to compile all the feedback for Centrelink and to prepare a document
- Some ideas for further development of the concept include: asking questions in different languages, encouraging young people to write in their first language or doing something visual
Plan: Digitalise young people's feedback, provide to Centrelink

- The workers decided to digitally scan each comment that young people made in order to maintain the authenticity of their comments.
- The workers then planned to submit the document to Centrelink for comment and to place Centrelink's response up on the wall for the young people to make further comments – engaging in more of a dialogue with Centrelink.

Summary

CMY learned key lessons about the use of creative techniques for gathering feedback from Refugee and CaLD young people. In particular, this cycle provided an opportunity to work with Centrelink on a key barrier for Refugee/CaLD young people: providing feedback. It also empowered the Centrelink staff involved to more effectively 'engage' with Refugee/CaLD young people in that they had the opportunity to provide feedback and seek further responses from the young people through the use of an Action Research approach.

Porter Orchard 2002 – 2003 Reconnect Action Research Reports: Summary and Analysis

5.3 Embedding PAR into everyday practice: ‘A day in the life’ of Reconnect workers using Action Research

This example was contributed by Connect, Northern Territory and is an updated version of an earlier version that was produced in the Reconnect Action Research Kit (2000).

This ‘day in the life’ illustrates through a worker’s eye how PAR plays out in their day to day practice. It shows how PAR can be woven into everyday practice in a variety of ways, and that a number of questions can be pursued simultaneously. It includes simple systems that allow for the recording and analysis of observations.

This narrative highlights how a worker might contribute to several AR processes in a single day, particularly if strategies have been set up at the agency to record ‘data’ from existing lines of inquiry. In this way over time AR becomes embedded into the daily practice of the worker and the service.

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 PAR in everyday work is imperative to the continued development of the Connect services in Darwin, Palmerston and East Arnhem. With such a large emphasis put on the process over the years, Connect has ingrained the use of AR 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 worker’s 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 has been found through AR 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.
Meeting with the local Headspace service. Now that the new service has been operational for a short while and other mental health services have commenced in the Top End, Headspace is again bringing together key stakeholders in the area to look at “What would it take to improve the mental health response for young people living in Palmerston?” The service has had involvement in discussions with service providers and young people in the area over the past five years. A part of this was improving co-case management practices when working with young people and their families.

**Action Research Component**

It is terrific to see another service utilising AR! One of the key things to come out of the meeting was that there are still many service providers who don’t know what each other do in relation to mental health responses. We’ve committed to doing further work to improve communications across the sectors and through this to improve outcomes for young people (...and loved the lunch).

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 the meeting, a few observations regarding our meeting are placed in the 12 to 15 file.

**Action Research Component**

The key to making AR 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 to 15 year olds?” This came about as a result of observations by workers and in dialogue with local agencies. This age group's 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.

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 agreed to use AR to look at the best ways the service and school can work together to have the optimum result for the young person. Though this practice has been in place for a long time, staff change regularly and it’s important to re-energise questions for new staff in Connect and with the school. Tomorrows 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?’

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**

The statements and experiences of young people (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 of, 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.
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 AR 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’.

**Next day: East Arnhem 8.30am**
Start work, young woman 17 comes into Connect office, hungover and hungry, wanting water and something to eat. She slept out last night and couldn’t get a lift back home as the night patrol had finished. Made a cup of tea with her and had a chat. She was a client of a pilot program that has recently finished. She says she’s drinking more since the program finished.

**Action Research Component**
With the end of a pilot Alcohol and Other Drugs (AOD) program which was developed through the Action Research question, “What would it take to support young people with alcohol and other drug issues?” we are gathering information about what's happening for young people who were engaged in the program now that it’s finished. I write a note about what she told me and pop it into the AOD file.

**9.30am -10.30am**
Mental health assessment with Debbie (a client), her mother, and the mental health worker in our office. Debbie has had thoughts of suicide and has agreed that she needs help from her family and from the mental health mob. She has requested that we all be present for her assessment, and the mental health workers have agreed to this.

**Action Research component**
“What would it take to support young Indigenous people to access mental health support?” One of the suggestions from this question has been that offices other than the clinical spaces be used, such as the Connect counselling space, or home visits. Debbie already had a relationship with our service and is comfortable there so it makes sense to have the assessment there.

**11.00am to 12.30pm**
Meeting in a community with the parents of young men boarding at a high school in Darwin. The young men are getting into trouble at the school, and parents are concerned they’ll get expelled if they don’t get more support and do something with their spare time.

**Action Research component**
During the meeting the question “What would it take to better support young people at boarding school?” emerged as something the parents wanted to look at. The parents’ idea is that they would like the young men to be participating in more cultural activities, e.g. hunting, spear making and fishing, so they are doing the things that keep them strong as cultural young men. I agree to contact the Connect service in Darwin to see how they can help this group of young men stay connected to their culture and families, and bring this information back.

**1.30pm to 3.00pm**
Responding to phone calls and messages from the morning. There’s a message from the midwives at the hospital asking if there is anything we can do for young mothers. There are seven young women pregnant at the moment whom won’t access mainstream child birth education nor attend appointments regularly. They’re hoping there’s something we can do together to help these young women.
Action Research component
In the first years of our service we conducted a young mothers’ program, using the question, “what would it take to support young mothers in East Arnhem?” We refer back to this information to discover that the strong women were trained to deliver child birth education. We’ll arrange a meeting with these women and the midwives to see if we can support them to get it happening again.

3.30pm to 5.30pm
Running of a girls’ group. This is a socio-educational group is based on health and wellbeing goals. Young women are engaged in the planning process and use Participatory Action Research processes to evaluate it.

Action Research component
The group was developed following hunches by workers that sexual health information out there was not being understood by many young people and a lot of misinformation was noted from discussions with young people during case work. “What would it take to improve young women’s access to sexual health information?” Sent workers on a search for a suitable program for the region and the information found was brought back and shared with the elders. With approval from elders, a program was implemented and continues to be evaluated.

5.4 Using a visual template to summarise your PAR
‘Riding the Waves’

The following example is contributed by St Luke’s Anglicare in Victoria.

This example uses a visual template to summarise each cycle, of which there are four in total. The development of the strategy to make a video is told in an engaging way. The inclusion about how people felt as the project developed adds to the sense of authenticity. A summary such as this can convey a lot of detail in a small space.
St Luke’s Riding the Waves

**Action Research Question:**
What would a tool look like that would assist young people and families to better understand one another and encourage better communication?

From the feedback it was decided that a paper tool would not meet the needs of families we work with.

**Phase 1**

- **Plan**
- **Observe**
- **Act**
- **Reflect**

**Issues raised by clients and staff**
- Would it engage young people and parent?
- What if the one party had low literacy levels?
- What would it look like?
- Not much enthusiasm generated

1. **Hunch:** To produce written material that is contemporary and relevant that expresses the views of young people and parents in a manner, which encourages understanding and promotes good communication.

To consult with young people and parents i.e. Home visits, phone contact and surveys
St Luke’s Riding the Waves

Action Research Question:
What would a tool look like that would assist young people and families to better understand one another and encourage better communication?

Reflect:
Written material would not engage both young people and parents
Hunch
We started to dream about the possibility of producing a video that was developed by young people and parents that put them in the shoes as ‘experts’. We discussed the idea of parents and young people developing questions that focus on key issues that build good communication.

Observe:
1. There appears to be extensive paperwork tools / resources for families. These tend to be ‘more’ focused on parents.
2. It was clear from our visits that Video material was aimed at parent’s not young people, and was more information based.

Plan:
What current material exists?
Plan:
1. To investigate current paper work tools.
2. To visit services in Melbourne i.e. Berry St and Anglicare to discuss current resources available

Act:
1. Explored paper work tools including Parenting S.A, Parent Zone, and Parent Tip Sheets.
2. Visited Berry St and Anglicare
St Luke’s Riding the Waves

**Action Research Question:**
What would a tool look like that would assist young people and families to better understand one another and encourage better communication?

Reflect:
Proceed with Video Idea

Observe:
Excitement and enthusiasm was expressed and a willingness to be involved

Plan:
To invite current and past clients (including parents) to a pizza night to discuss the idea of making a video.

Act:
Pizza night / information night was held with over 20 people attending, with a good cross section of young people and parents attending.
St Luke’s Riding the Waves

Summary of Process

Reflect
- Focusing on the process or ‘journey’ lead to a positive outcome / tool
- Sense of real achievement for both young people and parents
- Successful video that will be able to used i.e. Show families, group work etc
- Possible opportunities to market video for the benefit of future Reconnect projects

Plan
- Young people and parents to develop questions / concepts / ideas etc
- Participants (leaders) to plan excursions / filming locations
- Contact Schools ‘student interviews’
- Contact families in the community re: interview
- Organise Camera person
- Video footage reflection days
- Video Editing days
- Launch of Video / Celebration / Awards

Act
- Excursion / filming locations include: Torquay, Bendigo Trams, Life Adventure Park, Castlemaine Skate Park, Maryborough Secondary College, Castlemaine Secondary College
- A number of school, client and family interviews took place
- Editing sessions
- Launched at the Castlemaine Theatre Royal Nov. 2003

Observe
- Will focus on process not outcome
- Enthusiasm and willingness to be part of the project was highly evident
- Questions generally worked well (modifications needed)
- Fantastic wisdom and insights generated
- Friendships / supports networks developed
- Over 55 people interviewed
- Over 120 attend Launch at the Castlemaine Theatre Royal
5.5 Engaging stakeholders across multiple cycles

PAR in a Rural setting

This contribution is from Mercy Reconnect in Western Australia. It has been partially de-identified for publication in this manual.

This example demonstrates clear use of the phases of the PAR cycle, the engagement and participation of key stakeholders in the PAR process, and how changes and improvements to service delivery emerged from the PAR process.

This research first explored the Question of National Significance:

“What would it take to maximise involvement and collaboration with schools and what does/would it take to address these?”

They then developed the following micro question:

“What would it take for our rural team to provide relevant and effective services to the regional agricultural college?”

Cycle 1

Observation/Reflection/Plan

Background

Our Reconnect service provides a telephone support service to young people and families living in regional Australia. Within the service delivery region there are a number of residential agricultural schools. Since the commencement of a telephone support service the Reconnect case workers have experienced difficulty accessing students at regional schools and residential colleges. Based on reflections on previous experiences and Action Research we speculated that a more effective strategy to establish strong working relationships with agricultural schools in our region would involve the following:

- Establish a working relationship with staff at residential schools and meet (where possible) in person to discuss the service and the specific needs of each school.
- Gain trust and a ‘profile’ with students attending each residential college.
- Where possible Case Workers need to visit individual schools and explore with students what role they would like our service to play in their school and community.
- Work collaboratively with staff and students at each school to establish an individualised service incorporating Individual Case Management and Community Capacity Building within the school and for the wider community.

As a result of working collaboratively with the staff at the agricultural college and with our clients, it was arranged with the Principal that our case workers would meet at the school to explore the potential role of our Reconnect service. Information and promotional material was sent out to the school prior to the visit and an agenda for the visit was devised.

The agenda of the meetings was as follows:

- Meet with the Principal and support staff to explain the role of our service and discuss the issues facing teachers and students at the school.
- Explore the support networks in place at the college and within the local community for students.
- Meet with the college Student Council to discuss the potential role of our service at the school and to discuss current issues for the students.
- Have a tour of the school, dormitories and the farm with the students.
Primary Objectives:
- Establish a working relationship with staff and students at the college.
- Provide a support service to students at the college as identified by the students.
- Find out what the ‘issues’ are for young people living away from home in a residential college.
- Identify gaps in services for the college and the local community.
- Explore the success of formalising a working relationship with the college and determine how transferable that is for other agricultural colleges/schools in our service region.

Evaluation Measures
To monitor the support that is provided to the community via:
- Identified college and/or community projects
- Qualitative feedback from college staff and students
- Number of client referrals
- Feedback from Reconnect Case Workers

Action: engaging stakeholders
During June and July 2002, staff from our service had a number of meetings with staff and students at the college.

We met with:
- School Principal
- School Nurse
- Associated teaching and support staff at the college
- Student council (10 students with representatives from all year groups)
- Students attending the college

Feedback from Principal and staff:
- Principal reported that the College has very few support agencies available for their students.
- Principal explained that the school is a popular referral point for Department of Community Development agencies where young people are Wards of the State or unable to live in the family home.
- A large proportion of the students have therefore experienced a variety of family conflict issues and the Principal expressed concern for their psychological well-being.
- The school accesses the services of a non-government school psychologist once a term. The Principal explained that this is not enough for students to build the rapport and trust that is required for effective intervention. The Principal described his staff as very supportive and explained they often play “counsellor role” to the students.
- The Principal suggested that our Reconnect service could offer an alternative support option for young people at the school who require more than what is currently being offered by the staff there.

Feedback from the Student Council:
- Met with the student council at the College on two occasions and advised of our service and asked what they perceived the issues to be for young people living at the college and accessing the local community. Also enquired about their perceptions of the role of the Reconnect workers at the school and in the community.
- We were advised that having a Reconnect case worker attend the school for a day (on a regular basis) would be a good resource for young people to use as they could talk to someone who does not work at the school. Reconnect staff could also run ‘groups’ for specific groups of students as the need arose.
Additionally they detailed they would be interested in participating with our service on a Community Capacity project that addressed the boredom issues faced by young people in their free time and at weekends.

Outcomes of the meetings:

- The Principal advised that he sees a strong role for the staff at the college, utilising Reconnect, to provide support options for his students. The students also saw a role for the Reconnect service in the college.
- It was agreed that due to the college’s geographical location (being one hours drive from a capital city CBD) the Reconnect service would have a Case Worker attend the school once a fortnight on a set day for students to speak with. This was set up so that the young people could speak informally or engage as Reconnect clients with case workers. Once clients had engaged in person with a case worker they would then set up regular telephone counselling times.
- The school provided a room to meet with individual clients and an ‘introduction’ for the students of the services of Mercy Reconnect.
- Case workers supported students to identify a Community Capacity Project. Students identified the need for a BMX Bike track located at the school. Case workers negotiated with students and college staff and a team of students worked with the College property manager. They identified a suitable location on school grounds and were planning to commence construction in 2003 with support from our Reconnect service to secure funding for cost of gravel etc.
- Three Reconnect case workers ‘rotated’ so that each fortnight a different Case Worker attended the college. This was so that one case worker did not become the ‘face’ of the service with staff and students.
- It was agreed that this would be on a trial basis, given the other commitments of our Reconnect Case Workers. It would be re-evaluated in the second term of 2003.

Observation: strengths and difficulties

Over a three month period of ‘trialling’ the model of a case worker attending the college once a fortnight the following observations were made:

- Consulting with the young people a number of times through the student council proved to be highly effective for a number of reasons:
  - They consulted with other young people at the college and we received feedback from a number of students as to what they wanted the role of Reconnect to be in the school.
  - The ‘word spread’ about who we were and the supports that we could offer – this resulted in establishing trust with the young people and subsequent client referrals.
- Attending in person to make initial contact with the young people proved to be effective and further contact with the client was via the telephone. Some clients advised that they ‘preferred’ face to face contact and this caused some resistance to speaking over the telephone.
- Being ‘on site’ at the school allowed us to establish strong links with the staff and support staff at the school and get a real ‘feel’ for the heartbeat of the college.
- It was difficult to arrange times to speak with clients over the telephone for a number of reasons:
  - Lack of private space for young people to make telephone calls. Payphones were located in the dormitories (one per dorm) but due to the large number of people wanting to use the phones time was limited.
  - The college was experiencing difficulty with their telephone lines and there was no opportunity to make another phone line available (financial cost).
  - Student timetables were very structured and a majority of their time after classes were accounted for.
  - It was difficult to pass messages on to clients via the telephone as there was no ‘after hours’ number to call.

Throughout the time we attended the college a number of referrals were made to the service, both self referred and referred by teaching and school support staff for a variety of issues.
Reflection: positive developments and issues to address

- Consulting with the young people a number of times through the student council proved to be highly effective.
- Attending in person to make initial contact with the young people proved to be effective.
- It was difficult at times to provide effective support to the young people via the telephone.
- From our case management a number of patterns emerged for young people at the college including:
  - Conflict between students in the dorms – particularly the year 9 girls.
  - Anger issues – particularly males.
  - Boredom after school and during the weekends.
  - Isolation from parents.
  - Limited interaction with other schools (e.g. socials).
  - No counsellor attached to the school that they could go and talk to.
  - Sexuality issues – conflict with the rules of the college regarding personal relationships between students.
- By offering both counselling and community capacity projects the 'stigma' for the students of talking to a Reconnect case worker was significantly reduced. Students approached us about a variety of things: school issues, sticker competition, family problems, conflict with other students.
- Due to service commitments and time constraints with the service it was difficult for Case Workers to commit to attending in person each fortnight and as agreed this was to be reassessed in 2003.
- The guidelines we devised incorporated working practice, accessibility to telephones for students and responsibilities of the school.

Cycle 2

We implemented the changes at the commencement of Term 1. The following Guidelines were agreed to by the college Principal and Reconnect staff:

Guidelines for Work Practices between Reconnect and the Agricultural College

- Unless it is a duty of care issue, Reconnect will inform the Principal of Reconnect Case Worker involvement. This will be done via e-mail on case commencement and case closure.
- We would consider the list of Reconnect clients as confidential and in keeping with the ethos of anonymity, for example the list will not be distributed among college staff.
- We are prepared to work collaboratively with other agencies where appropriate with client consent.
- In the past Reconnect has offered an outreach service to the College on a fortnightly basis. Due to how well the telephone counselling service has worked with the clients the face to face contact will be reduced.
- Reconnect will maintain a presence in the school by supporting them to develop community projects and facilitating groups with students at the school.
- We anticipate the College will provide a safe and private space for young people to phone our service.
- We anticipate the College will support the young people to access our service by providing them with the opportunity to contact us.

Summarised from Porter Orchard 2002 – 2003 Reconnect Action Research Reports: Summary and Analysis
Empowering service users to take a central role in service development: Parents of teenage children with abusive behaviours

This example is contributed by Bridges Reconnect in Queensland. It has been edited by the authors of the manual from the service report Bridges Reconnect Action Research for Addressing Violence Against Parents 2004 – 2005.

About the target families and community

It was not uncommon for the adults in the families of this target population to have criminal behaviours and for their young people to be following suit. It was not uncommon for their young people to be involved in criminal activities which could include violence against others. This was seen to be OK – a bit of honour amongst thieves. However, when their son or daughter’s violence turned on their family it was experienced as a problem for parents – as ‘out of control’ behaviour. Working with this group of families was not easy.

Cycle 1

‘What will it take to support parents who are being abused or at risk of abuse by their young people?’

Plan: How to bring parents together

The first stage did not focus on how to address parent abuse. Its focus was on how to bring people together, in a safe environment, to discuss the problem. The workers – aware of the stigma attached to the problem – did not want to advertise the project. They chose to use a ‘word of mouth’ communication strategy.

Many meetings occurred. These were mainly debriefing sessions as parents shared stories. They were all struggling to find effective strategies to manage their teenage children’s behaviour. Parents wanted to be involved in finding answers. Male participants took it upon themselves to encourage other fathers and step-fathers into the group.

Tensions did emerge between male and female participants when the women felt that the men were taking over particularly when the abusive behaviour by young people was generally directed towards women. Fathers who were experiencing the aggression of their children were in the minority.

One resourceful mother decided to start a women’s group. The Reconnect service resourced this initiative with a desk, computer and phone access. This enabled the women to do web based research for the whole group. An unexpected crisis put this activity on hold. However the ‘Abuse Against Parents’ group continued to form and plan.

Act: Working with ambivalence and empowering parents

The families were outwardly distrustful of the key institutions that they had encountered to date. These included the statutory child protection system and the justice system. They were ambivalent towards the Reconnect worker – wanting the worker to both ‘fix the problem’ while hostile to ‘professional interference’ in their family. Working closely with the original sets of parents the Reconnect worker provided suggestions and ideas for them to share with the whole group.

The Reconnect worker was working to enable the parents to lead this process and often experienced being ‘tolerated at meetings’ because of the resources the worker provided for the parents to address the problem.
The parents identified these issues:

- The shame of admitting abuse by their young people
- The stigma of being viewed in the community as a poor parent
- The fear of the Department (statutory child protection) becoming involved in their family
- Their fears for the future of their young people
- The escalating violence and criminal behaviors of the young people
- The increase in young people’s power over parents because of parents’ inability to control them
- Mothers fearing for their lives
- Parents feeling they had ‘no rights’ and being ‘held to ransom’ by young people who were threatening to report them to the department
- Parents unable to trust helping services, who they experienced as having ‘a tendency to take over’, to be critical of them as parents and to use power over them.

Local police and community organisation personalities were invited in to provide information and/or support in dealing with aggressive young people. The group functioned well although attendance waxed and waned. It was observed that the more conflict parents were in with their young people, the more they attended. When things were quiet, parents tended to stay home.

**Observation: ‘The cycle of violence’**

Parents’ web based research provided information on a number of strategies and programs from around the world. This information was shared and discussed. A peer mentoring strategy was employed by parents for parents who were in crisis. Parents could phone each other for support.

The Reconnect worker observed that parents appeared to be ‘sucked in by their young people’. They observed that violent episodes were being followed by a period of remorse in which young people promised not to do it again. At a planned meeting the Reconnect worker gave a presentation on the cycle of violence. This was particularly challenging for some parents who did not want to believe their children should be classed as ‘perpetrators of violence’.

**Reflection: Parents in control at group meeting**

Throughout the group’s development the Reconnect worker continued outreach visits to the participating families. In these individual family focussed meetings the worker was treated with respect and ‘allowed’ to provide support. However at group meetings the interactions with the Reconnect worker were different. The general consensus was that the parents had control and they would provide the support and guidance for problem solving. The worker’s status at the parents meeting was that of a ‘non-voting visitor’.

On the basis of new information from web research some parents left the group to pursue ‘tough love’ style programs. The parents who remained were keen to find a ‘family approach’ to addressing the violence. A range of options were explored and discussed. These included parent run ‘Behaviour Camps’ and fund-raising to send young people to America for intensive residential programs. Ideas emerged, created excitement and fizzled when they failed to meet expectations. Parents were looking for concrete evidence of solutions that could ‘fix the problem’. They found programs that addressed violence but not violence against parents. These parents decided to develop their own program for their young people.

**Cycle 2**

**Reflection: Parents confronted by the literature.**

Parents were reflecting on:

- The affect of the group on parents and their families.
- The risks for young people as a result of their abusive behaviours.
- What others were saying at a state, national and international level
Parents were confronted by the frequent use of the term – ‘parent abuse’ – in the literature. Many had understood their children’s behaviour as ‘part of adolescent transition’. The group was divided in its acceptance of this concept yet were in agreement about their desire to develop a ‘family response’ to the issue – something they had not found in their research.

**Plan: How to address the issue.**

The parents were able to identify in their group the affects of their young people’s aggression on the family. They wanted the program to address these issues:

- Good memories of their young people being overtaken by bad memories related to their violence.
- Distrust of their young people’s positive behaviour because of fear they are being manipulated.
- Loss of respect – not a lack of love - for the aggressive child and a preference for their non-aggressive siblings.
- Allowing their young people to ‘couch surf’ as a means of passing the problem around to family and friends.
  Yet young people quickly wore out their welcomes and shelters or the streets became the final option.
- Fathers, who were unable to control their teenage children, lost the respect of their spouse. They were then more likely to ‘put their young people out’ to prevent the constant reminder of their failure as a Dad.
- Younger siblings showing signs of depression or a mimicking of aggressive behaviours in order to prove to older siblings that they were not ‘mummy’s boys’ or girls.
- Siblings being fearful that their older sibling would ‘kill parent or them’.

Parents wanted a program, run by an outsider, to address these issues with their young people. It would be an eight week program for young people and parents would attend a weekly parents meeting so that a team approach would add more weight to the strategy. The Reconnect worker, who was Scottish, referred to the young people as ‘wee scallywags’ not ‘violent young people’. This non-stigmatising reference stuck and the program became *The Scallywags Program*.

**Plan: How to engage young people and what to do with them?**

Parents discussed strategies to engage young people. Everything from ‘lock’em up and force them to attend’ to using blackmail and rewards was suggested. Although the more forceful options were popular with parents they were able to accept that this would not happen. There were a few smiles along the way which helped to lighten the discussion.

Brainstorming and diary entries provided the worker a very large list of complaints from parents about their young people’s behaviour. The list appeared to be endless and planning to address these issues became a nightmare. The initial plan was to work with young people on:

- Positive communication,
- Respect for parents and
- Taking responsibility for their actions.

Finding a model to achieve these outcomes became the next challenge. Reconnect workers poured over books and literature. The specific model was eventually chosen by the parents who, ‘not having a good history in the education system’, wanted something basic. They wanted it to be about ‘good and bad choices’ and not some psychological model which required a degree in psychology to understand.

**Act: The first Scallywags Program**

A pocket money program was selected to commence its first action cycle. A parents’ group commenced at the same time as the young peoples’ group. This provided the parents with feedback about the group’s progress and the Reconnect workers with feedback from parents about how their young people were responding.

The program was successful in relation to:

- Young people doing chores at home
- Reducing stress levels in parents
Parents feeling they were getting more respect
Using a family model combined with pocket money.

In the parent group the Reconnect workers were gathering information about the different behaviours that were getting young people into trouble. With this knowledge the workers tried to find and develop exercises to address these behaviours. However, monitoring the group and the individual young people ‘became a nightmare’. Workers had to manage each young person's case, keeps abreast of what the young people were doing and what they were up to at home and in school. They researched other programs for answers to a new question: **How do we monitor any improvements or regressions in young people and their behaviour?**

**Observe: Improvements and ongoing challenges.**
Parents appeared to be experiencing improved relationships. Young people appeared to be responding positively to new learning. On the whole chores were being done and pocket money paid. Where parents had not signed off on chores completed young people were engaged in discussion about what was happening and encouraged to try harder next week.

The ongoing challenge was that completed chores did not equate with changed attitudes at home. These changes were slow and minimal. The workers went back to the drawing board to find other solutions.

**Cycle 3: What works – what doesn't?**

**Reflect: Improving participation and evaluation**
Each new program brought a new set of parents. It was observed that parents’ interest in the program remained high when conflict was high at home and waned once young people showed some improvement.

The workers, with psychology students on placement, and the parents used butchers paper exercises to identify the strategies used to meet the desired outcomes. The butcher's paper lived on the agency walls for some weeks. Other parents, staff, visitors and community organisations added to the growing list of behaviours and strategies. The students were especially keen and used placement time to research useful ideas and information.

Reviewing past strategies indicated that those activities with artistic, symbolic or highly interactive elements showed evidence of good participation by young people. Changing negative behaviours at home continued to be difficult to evaluate, particularly as evidence relied on the feedback of parents. Reconnect workers wondered whether positive reports about program effectiveness were being provided by parents because they felt supported by the Reconnect workers and therefore felt compelled to give a favourable evaluation.

The key questions included:

- How can we use symbolism effectively to catch young people's attention and improve participation?
- How can we use incentives (rewards) effectively?
- What tool can we develop which clearly evaluates a positive change in young people's behaviour?
- How can we maintain parents involvement in the development processes, including fathers?

**Plan: The ‘What's What’ tool**
The team developed a tool to improve the programs capacity to evaluate change. The tool was a form to be completed by parents each week as they evaluated any changes to their participating young people's behaviour. It was a one page document covering four behavioural areas: respect, responsibility, accountability and leadership/maturity. The form asked parents to grade their young people's behaviours.

The team also developed a new incentive program and rewards for young people who reached the highest level of improvement each week.
Act: Trialling new processes, tools and incentives

The parents group formed into three parts:

- Information sharing – on young people’s behaviours during the week.
- Debriefing – an opportunity to give and receive peer support.
- Education on strategies for collaborative and positive relationship with their young people.

An interactive game show strategy developed as an activity for young people provided some very useful insights about their behaviour at home. Young people revealed that they resorted to violence at home because:

- People made them angry;
- They were frustrated;
- It made them feel powerful;
- They got their own way; and
- Because they could.

Workers were aware that young people’s attitudes to violence and abuse were not those of the general population. They now however had learnt that:

- Young people were aware their behaviour was abusive towards parents.
- Young people were very proud of their ability to hold power over, and to manipulate their parents.
- Young people saw a parent’s purpose in life as purely to provide a young person’s wants/needs. They found it difficult to comprehend a parent needing or wanting anything outside the realm of ‘bringing up children’.
- Young people fail to see past the here and now. Although they can perceive of long term consequences, they feel they have plenty time to undo abusive behaviours before they become adults.
- Young people think their parents worry too much about their behaviour and that their behaviour is accepted in society so parents just have to learn to accept it – “It’s no big deal”.

Young people were unaware of the harm they could cause to parents. The program rewarded their honesty and commenced looking at consequences of abusive action – including long term consequences – with the young people.

Scallywags’ workers, while maintaining individual confidentiality, were able to share the young people’s responses with the parent group. In the group the parents discussed what was needed to monitor and manage these behaviours before they were out of control or abusive.

Observe: Positive outcomes yet more questions

Observations of the parents’ group and the young people’s group were exciting. Parents were providing positive feedback in relation to behaviour change in their young people. Workers were interested in developing a tool to measure changes in parental behaviours.

In a group exercise young people were asked about the behaviours of parents that were detrimental to good relationships. The whiteboard was filled by their responses. With this material the workers developed a measurement tool for parental behaviour. This was taken to the Scallywags group for young people to score their parents’ performance. The workers’ expectation was that parents would not rate well. However this was not the case. This raised further questions:

- Is the young person rating their parents well out of loyalty or to protect them?
- Do the scores young people give them actually reflect their parents’ skills?

The workers decided it was too early to hypothesize and that they needed to gather evidence over another year and then look at it again.
Cycle 4: Questions within a question

In this cycle practice questions were being more refined. They were asking:

- How do we better identify problem behaviours in young people and track changes as a result of intervention?
- How do we personalise Scallywags to address the individual needs of each participant and their family?
- How do we make the Scallywags program more interactive and creative?
- How do we help young people understand the impact of their behaviour on others and on their life chances?

Plan: Refining tools, creating resources and adapting the parents’ group

The ‘What’s What’ tool was further developed. It was enlarged to capture parents’ feedback and enable Scallywags facilitators to:

- monitor young people’s behaviours on a week by week basis
- monitor parents’ stress levels and coping skills
- provide information on each young person’s progress
- reflect on the information and how it could influence the content and context of each Scallywags session

Planning also focused on developing new ideas and activities to make the sessions more interactive, creative and fun. For example, to teach young people about the need for rules in society a story was written and CD developed about the collapse of a society when young people rebelled.

For parents, fortnightly groups were proposed as an alternative to weekly. Parents were to be encouraged to continue completing the ‘What’s What’ tool and opportunities were created for easy delivery of the completed form to workers.

Act: Innovations and information exchange.

Young people responded well to new interactive activities.

Parents were completing the longer ‘What’s What’ forms.

Workers began playing with another new idea for activity with young people it was called the Bank of Emotions. It was trial and error at first. In time it developed into a useful tool to build young people’s understanding of how their behaviours and attitudes affect their parents.

Scallywags work was becoming known in other localities and many invitations were received to speak at community meetings, run workshops and engage in an information exchange with an interstate service experiencing some success in work with parents but less so with young people.

Observe: A parent family perspective worked best.

Referrals to the Scallywags program became ‘fast and furious’. Word of mouth by the parents of previous participants continued to be the key source of advertising for the program.

Understanding and respecting the individual parents and their family cultures was critical.

Using the word ‘WE’ brought down barriers between workers and families. The greatest levelers were the following acknowledgements:

‘No one is perfect - sometimes we can make a poor choice in our behaviour’.

‘Sometimes we as parents/individuals get it wrong’;

‘Sometimes we as parents have to make some changes in order to fix it’.

The introduction of a male worker to the team further reduced barriers and resulted in more men attending the parents’ group.
The parents’ group became more of a working group and the workers were not viewed as ‘the enemy’.

The success of peer mentoring for parents – both on and off site – has led to the establishment of a peer mentor group for the young people. Peer mentors are selected from the graduating Scallywags class. They are young people who have excelled and are now making positive choices regarding their behaviours and attitudes. This work will generate its own Action Research question in time.

Reflect: Managing demand
Reflecting on the evolution of the Scallywags program and what it means for the future has been thrashed out at individual meetings with stakeholders, meetings with other services and within agency team meetings. Contact with other services at a national and international level has been positive and encouraging, and sharing resources strengthened the work. Referrals for the program and requests to provide training opportunities have increased.

A concern for this Reconnect service is that the Scallywags program has the potential to take over the Reconnect service. Requests for more programs in different geographical areas are increasing. Funds continue to be inadequate.

Ongoing questions:
Is this an effective service because it is in demand and can offer an effective strategy for dealing with young people with aggressive behaviours?

Is this an ineffective service because we do not have the capacity to meet the community needs (waiting lists are too high)?

While the service acknowledges they can only do as much as the funding of 2.5 workers enables, it is not easily explained to stressed out families, nor is it acceptable for workers who have to turn away families in distress.

‘Scallywags will always be a program in development; each time we hold a Scallywags session we learn something new. The important lessons we learn is how to do it better. Both young people and their families are a wealth of knowledge and they in fact become our trainers (educating us)’.


5.7 Developing a new strategy using PAR
Engaging Indigenous young people in education

This example is contributed by Connections Cherbourg-Murgon Reconnect.

This is an example of how a significant new service approach was developed in collaboration with other services, including schools. This process, undertaken between 2003 and 2006, used a number of cycles to find out, try out, and confirm. Note that the State High School was situated in another town to where the young people lived.

Questions
Macro question: What would it take to improve young people’s involvement in education and training?

Micro question: What would it take to keep Indigenous Young People in Education?
**Cycle 1. Observation:**

By Reconnect: From the Reconnect service’s work with clients we became aware that there existed a very poor transition rate from primary school to high school. Anecdotal information suggested that a percentage of young Indigenous people were not making a successful transition from primary school in Year 7 to high school at Year 8.

**Plan:**
- A series of surveys was designed to investigate the concerns of Year 7 students with respect to transitioning to high school.
- Reconnect and the local high school staff organised Transition Days for Year 7 students transitioning to Year 8 at the local high school in the following year.

**Action:**
The surveys were prepared and distributed to young Indigenous people aged between 12 and 13 years, throughout the local district. Reconnect staff supervised the process of this activity and collated all the participant feedback.

**Outcome:**
In conducting this survey we attracted several young Indigenous people who participated in our survey and provided us with feedback about why they like going to school and why not. Survey results were collated and displayed.

**Reflection On Process:**
This process proved very successful in assisting us to collate information from young Indigenous people who were transitioning from Year 7 to Year 8. It also allowed Reconnect workers to become more aware of the program objectives.

Initially we considered including more specific youth participation in the planning and completion of the survey. In retrospect, results demonstrated that if we had chosen that particular option, further relevant results may have been achieved.

**Reflection On Outcome:**
Feedback from the young people indicated that the overall concept was well received and highlighted both positive and negative aspects of the transition.

**Restated question: What would it take to improve young people's involvement within the School?**

**Cycle 2. Observation**

Reconnect Workers observed the involvement at school of young Indigenous people. This demonstrated that some had poor attendance records at high school. In addition, the young people were not motivated to get out of bed in time to catch the school bus to school.

**Plan:**
We designed a program which would cater to the needs of these same young people. This program had the aim and intention to motivate students to eat a nutritious and healthy breakfast which would, in turn, assist students to concentrate throughout the day. The program also included children being picked up early from a nearby local community to attend the Reconnect Service for breakfast and then be able to get to the high school on time.

**Action:**
A School Transition Support Program was introduced and targeted at the young people who were either not attending school or coping with the transition from primary school to high school. Reconnect workers picked up the young people every morning at 7am and provided them with a nutritious breakfast three days a week. The young people also participated in organised activities.
Reflection On Process:
This process was very supportive toward the young people and proved to provide them with some motivation. It also ensured that young people were receiving a healthy breakfast several times a week which would work to improve their concentration.

Reflection On Outcome:
The program resulted in a long day for the young people who, by the end of the day were very tired. This resulted at times in some of the children being suspended or sent home.

Cycle 3. Observation:
The Reconnect Service and high school believe that the educational needs of all young people were not always being met and school did not always cater to the needs of young Indigenous children. In particular, these children demonstrated low social skills, literacy and numeracy skills. The children appear to learn more by practical methods rather than through theory.

Plan:
After making these observations the Reconnect Worker in conjunction with the high school, designed an Alternative Education Program to better meet the unmet needs of the children. The ensuing Program was therefore designed to increase their social skills, literacy and numeracy skills. It was designed to provide the young people with a more suitable learning environment while also decreasing the hours of participation in a day to lessen their frustration and tiredness.

Action:
Further action was taken to implement the Alternative Education Program which was scheduled to be conducted for three days each week. The program was located at the Reconnect service and operated between 9am and 1pm. During this time an allocated teacher from the high school accompanied the students to the Reconnect service and conducted a two hour teaching course on Literacy and Numeracy. The Reconnect Workers also supervised an activity with the young people to increase their social skills.

Reflection:
The program was perceived as successful as it increased the attendance of the children and improved their social skills. However, it is thought that these young people were still not able to make a successful transition to the high school environment.

Cycle 4. Observation:
Reconnect workers discovered that the children were not receiving enough education as became evident in the outcomes. However they were also not prepared to complete a full day of school. A need existed for increased learning in literacy and numeracy skills as well as spending an appropriate time within an educational institution environment.

Plan:
- Reconnect Staff Members discussed altering the Alternative Education Program in an attempt to cater more for the children's needs while also meeting the requirements of high school policy.
- Develop funding submissions for a partnership program between the Reconnect service and high school.
- Work with primary schools and high school to discuss Year 7 students transitioning to Year 8, their individual needs and the most suitable programs and support for them.

Action:
In 2006, we commenced the Transitions program which operates for four days a week, between 9am and 3pm with students enrolled for four subjects (Maths, English, Science and SOSE). The children attend only for the duration of the particular subject. At the conclusion of the subject the students are transported to the Reconnect service where they engage in a program focusing on social skill development.
Reflection:
The education component of the program has proven successful. Social skill development required more structure to develop skills within the students’ boundaries.

Cycle 5. Observation
Students would benefit from more structured social activities acknowledging small steps of success and recognised success.

Plan
In conjunction with the Department of Communities, the Reconnect service planned the commencement of Duke of Edinburgh Bridge Award for students in their non-educational time to develop their social skills.

Action:
- Bridge Award commenced with students participating in supported activities;
- Skill – Building and performing with a ‘Junk Orchestra;’
- Physical Activity – Bowling;
- Social Service – Cleaning at the old people’s home.

Reflection
This has proven to be a highly successful program with all participants likely to transition into mainstream schooling in 2007. Other groups of young people not engaged in school have been identified. This has included young people returning from detention and youth mothers.

Cycle 6. Observation
Young people returning from detention rarely make a successful transition back into education due to the lack of structure and routine in their lives and the large class sizes in comparison to the 1:2 support received in detention.

There are between 14 and 30 young mothers (under 17) in the local town, none of whom are engaged in education or training.

Plan
The program has been planned in conjunction with Education Queensland District Office, schools, Youth Justice and Queensland Health. Committees have been formed and applications submitted.
SECTION SIX
Action Research Resources

6.1 Reconnect Questions of National Significance

The following text is provided by FaHCSIA in consultation with the Action Research Committee.

The objective of Reconnect is to support young people ‘at risk of’ or experiencing homelessness, and improve their level of engagement with family, work, education, training and the community.

Reconnect’s central client is the young person. Keeping this in mind, Reconnect’s objectives are undertaken by understanding and working with the young person in the context of their family and/or other significant relationships they identify in their lives.

The Questions of National Significance have been devised from Reconnect’s Program Objectives and Good Practice Principles. These questions are relevant and core goals for all Reconnect services to reflect on, leading to improved service delivery. The Questions of National Significance are examples of macro questions; broad questions which overview a large area of focus. Action Research inquiries will usually address a micro question; a small concrete question which would form a part of the larger macro question.

**Example:**

**Macro Question:**

“What would it take to improve the stability of young people’s living situations?”

**Micro Questions:**

“What can we do to better engage with accommodation service providers?”

“What can we do to improve the service knowledge of young people?”

“What can we do to measure stability outcomes for our clients?”

**OUTCOMES**

1. What would it take to improve the stability of young people’s living situations?
2. What would it take to improve the capacity of the community to provide early intervention into youth homelessness?
3. What would it take to make inter-service linkages with other community and government agencies seamless, integrated and sustainable?
4. What would it take to improve young people’s engagement with family relationships?
5. What would it take to improve young people’s engagement with education and training?
6. What would it take to improve young people’s engagement with employment?
7. What would it take to improve young people’s engagement with their communities?

**GOOD PRACTICE PRINCIPLES**

8. What can we do to improve the accessibility of our service?
9. What can we do to ensure our service delivery is driven by our clients?
10. What can we do to ensure our service delivery has a holistic approach?
11. What can we do to improve our collaboration with other stakeholders?
12. What can we do to ensure our service delivery is culturally and contextually appropriate?
13. What can we do to embed review and evaluation within our service?
14. What can we do to build the sustainability of our service?
6.2 References and further reading

Below is a list of references used in this manual together with other publications which may be useful. Some have annotations below. For most, the content is self-evident from the title.


The Australian Community Sector Survey is an annual survey that covers the non-profit community services and welfare sector. The sector is a major provider of the community services that most of us rely on at some point in our lives, but which are particularly important to people on low incomes.


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.


ARTD conducted independent assessments of Reconnect services annually from 2001 to 2005 drawing on client data, service reports, and interviews and field visits around Australia, including Centrelink officers, schools, care and protection agencies and NGOs.

ARTD (2009) *Analysis of Action Research Reports from Reconnect and Newly Arrived Youth Support Services*, Unpublished draft report to Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, Canberra.


Also known as the ‘Homelessness White Paper’ this sets out the Australian Government's plan to tackle homelessness.


This study contributed to the development of the Youth Homelessness Pilot Programme and Reconnect framework, with concepts such as ‘soft entry’ points, ‘immediacy of response’ and ‘first to know’ agencies. Alongside other principles, this report suggested Action Research as being a ‘good practice’ for effective early intervention.

Funded by the Australian Government, this manual was written to support the undertaking of Action Research in the Reconnect program. It is the predecessor of the manual you are reading.


Available at www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/ri2003.html this article explains the concept of rigour and how it is achieved in Action Research by capitalising on the features inherent in the process.


Very useful for anyone running focus groups within their PAR process.


This report summarises the main findings and statistics from the evaluation of the Youth Homelessness Pilot Programme. It contains a section on the good practice principles that were generated through a PAR process with services and endorsed by the evaluation.


Undertaken for the Australian Government, Department of Family and Community Services, this study investigated 4 Reconnect services, the service networks they developed, and the contribution made to building early intervention community capacity.


This excellent report can be found on the Centre for Multicultural Youth web site at www.cmy.net.au/NAYSS/ActionResearch


Proposes a useful framework which distinguishes four ‘constituents’ of participatory practice: Governance, development, learning and activism.


This book gives an excellent account of how service researchers and participants work together in the *Action Research* process from a ‘both sides’ perspective.


This book takes a practical approach to action research underpinned by a critical yet inclusive approach to social problems. It contains a mix of general chapters on action research and chapters which explore new media applications.


Using stories as a vehicle for inquiry can provide rich ‘thick’ accounts which communicate central themes and meanings.


This guide is designed to provide NAYSS providers with an easy-to-use reference guide to enhance and support effective, innovative and culturally appropriate delivery of NAYSS services to newly arrived young people. The guide was developed by the Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues (CMYI) in conjunction with the Department of Families and Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA).


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


An in-depth analysis of how the incorporation of consumer and practitioner perspectives deepens our understandings of what constitutes best practice, and can compliment empirical research.

These reports provided analysis across the individual AR reports submitted by Reconnect and NAYSS services to FaHCSIA, and considered by the Action Research Committee of Reconnect. Depending on the presence of inappropriately identifying information service providers receive these reports or summaries of them to assist in their undertaking of AR.


A particular report which analysed across all the reports from Reconnect and NAYSS services submitted for the periods 2002-2003 to 2006-2007.

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

This report summarises the outcomes of the YHPP and recommendations from the Taskforce.


This Action Research Kit was developed for the Youth Homelessness Pilot Programme to assist with implementation of AR in the pilot services. A PAR approach was endorsed from the outset, though much of the program literature shortens this to AR. Its program-specific focus and step-by-step framework makes it recommended reading.


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.


This report outlines the conclusions of a two-year longitudinal study of Reconnect services’ role in building community capacity for early intervention into youth homelessness, which was undertaken as part of the Reconnect Program evaluation.


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.


Ernie Stringer is an Australian author who has written a number of books on Action Research. Contains useful detail on particular data collection and analysis strategies.


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.


This very accessible book 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.


This much cited article is available online and provides a comprehensive but quite accessible outline of the key characteristics of PAR.


Discusses the sociological and epistemological development of PAR. Excellent read for those who enjoy theory.


The above two articles are for those who want to dive into deep theory. They are described by Yoland as providing ‘a transdisciplinary “mental architecture” that illuminates how inquiry may usefully be seen as the dynamic process by which all living systems live, and by which the “living human organism” - at whatever scale, but simplified as individually-psychologically and collectively-sociologically - utilises its varying inquiry capabilities to ‘get round the cycles’ of life, using an epistemology of action-research. (Or does not get fully round the cycle, if these are in any ways impeded). This is a deep theory of the compelling rationale for ‘building in’ Action Research cycles of induction-abduction-deduction to the lives of all ‘human systemicities’, both individual and social, and at all scales of time/space activity.’


This is written for practitioners from workplace-based professional development programs and research training courses. It provides guidance on how to present findings so as to inform policy, how to demonstrate the quality of the AR undertaken, and how to write critically.
6.3 Networks and online resources

6.3.1 National Homelessness Information Clearinghouse
The Homelessness Information Clearinghouse is an online tool designed to help tackle homelessness in Australia. This site is available to share resources, ideas and information. It is intended to be a dynamic information website that contains current news and events, extensive information about good practice, research and data, and other opportunities for comment and discussion. Designed with the homelessness sector in mind, the site provides an easy to use method of finding and sharing information.


6.3.2 Action Learning, Action Research Association (ALARA)
The ALARA web site at http://www.alara.net.au/public/home describes ALARA as ...

a strategic network of people interested in using Action Research and action learning to generate collaborative learning, research and action to transform workplaces, schools, colleges, universities, communities, voluntary organisations, governments and businesses. ... ALARA is one of the longest-established associations of AL and AR practitioners, growing from an originating base in Queensland Australia where we are incorporated. We host the World Congresses, hold annual Australian National Conferences focusing on Action Research and action learning developments, publish a journal and a newsletter, and support local network events. Our membership is now drawn from 25 countries.

Membership of ALARA provides practitioners with access to a wide range of online resources as well as the opportunity to attend a range of seminars and events around Australia.

6.3.3 SPIRAL
www.spiral-victoria.net/
SPIRAL is a Victorian network made up of around 300 people interested in a wide variety of approaches to Action Research. SPIRAL stands for: Systemic- Participatory- Inquiry- Research- Action- Learning. SPIRAL produces an email newsletter and supports various events and seminars related to Action Research.

6.3.4 Action Research Resources website
www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arhome.html
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
- the e-journal Action Research International
- contributions by other authors on Action Research and associated topics
- a public course with weekly sessions about Action Research. (The resource papers from this are available online.)
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