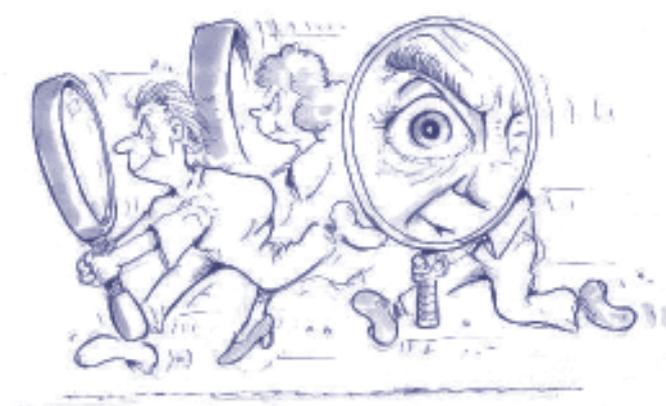




SECTION ONE

ABOUT ACTION RESEARCH



Why an Action Research kit?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This kit provides some of the answers to these questions.

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

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

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

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

Developing the kit

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

Aims of the kit

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

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





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

Using the kit

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

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

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

Background to Reconnect Action Research

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

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

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

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

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

Youth Homelessness Pilot Programme evaluation findings

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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





The evaluation also found that Action Research:

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

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

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

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

Snapshot—the values of Action Research

Action Research:

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

How Action Research relates to early intervention

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

Young people and their families can seek support or be referred to any one of a number of support services (Crane and Brannock, 1996, 1998). Many community services have

the potential to support young people and their families where youth homelessness is a recent reality or becomes a possibility.

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

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

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

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

Snapshot—the relevance of Action Research to early intervention

Action Research is particularly relevant to early intervention because:

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





What is Action Research?

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

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

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

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

This sort of research is not a trained expertise, we can do it every day of our lives. We use our innate abilities to make choices, to make some sense out of our lives. We do it when we go shopping, when we think about the TV ads we have seen, the feedback from a friend about a movie or an event about which we are curious. We notice, describe, listen, we make an explanation—we make our decision.

Expanding this way of doing things into the context of research (participatory Action Research) involves a singular person or small group of people noticing that something in their lives needs changing. A difference is noticed, an ideal is not met, a loss of quality, a foreshadowed change of direction, or perhaps the need for innovation (Goff et. al, 1998, p. 65).

Action Research cycles

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

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

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

**Action Research
in Reconnect**



Getting a better understanding of things which affect practice



Using this understanding to change some aspects of practice

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

Participatory Action Research involves:

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

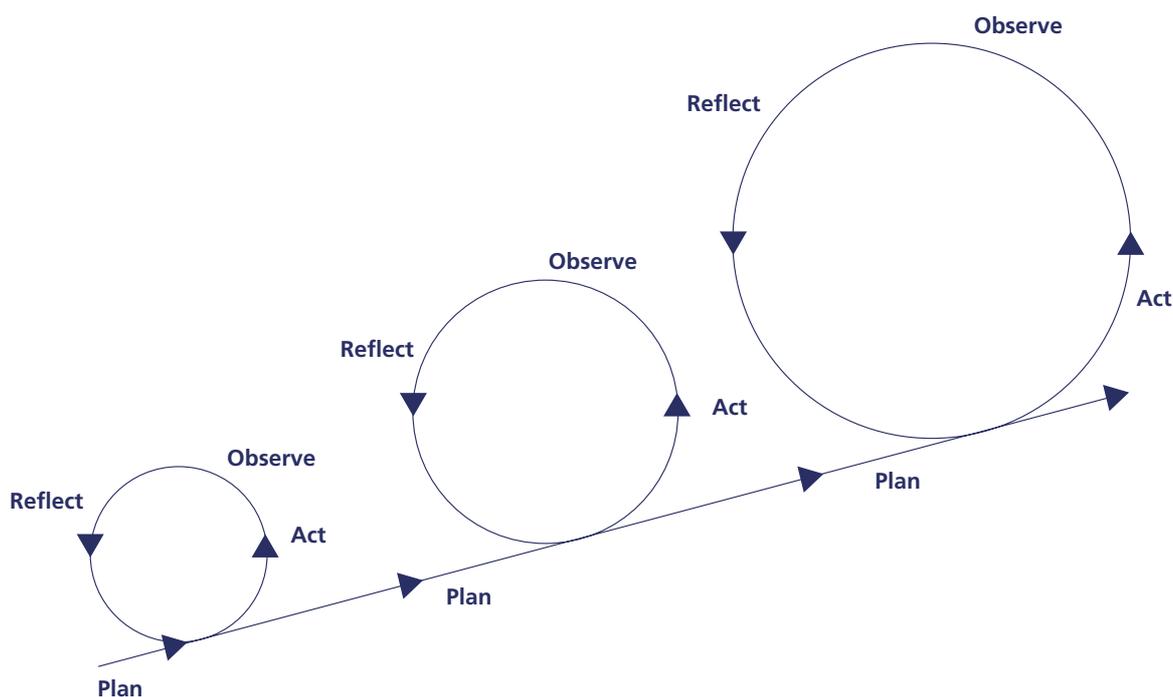
Cycles provide a useful way of thinking about and describing an Action Research process. Each cycle is made up of four phases—planning, action, observation and reflection.

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

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

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

Action Research cycles





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

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

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

Cycle characteristics

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

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

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

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

One of the most significant strengths of Action Research was that it required a systematic framework in which to operate (eg establishing reference groups, identifying stakeholders, collecting data, setting objectives, evaluating outcomes). In so doing it ensured that we were going in the right direction and doing what we had set out to do.

Also a systematic framework encouraged decisions and actions to be based on well-informed ideas and data. At the same time, Action Research allowed flexibility in an important way. Revisions, modifications could be made when ineffective strategies or questions were being pursued (A Youth Homelessness Pilot service).

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

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

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

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

Values and Action Research

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

Values underpinning participatory Action Research

(based on Quixley, 1997)

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

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

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

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

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





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

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

Youth Homelessness Pilot services using Action Research results

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

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

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

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

Culture and Action Research

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

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

Engaging indigenous young people and families was a priority for the project given the cultural diversity of the population base. Strategies included:

- *working with local Aboriginal organisations, communities and individuals to develop the service appropriately,*
- *having a broad definition of homelessness and families,*
- *a flexible model of input and involvement that aimed to be culturally appropriate, recognising that gaining credibility can take time.*

(A Youth Homelessness Pilot service)

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

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



What's in it for Stakeholders?



For front-line early intervention practitioners

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Action Research helps to improve practice.

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

Action Research makes evaluation easier—and more enjoyable!

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

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

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

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

For young people and their families

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





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

For management

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

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

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

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

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

For other Agencies

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

For government

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

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

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

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

For the community

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

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

Snapshot—the essentials of participatory Action Research

Participatory Action Research involves:

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

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

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

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

