SECTION THREE

IMPLEMENTATION

How and where to start

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

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

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

Doing a scan of internal and external environments

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

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

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

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

Competencies audit—building on your strengths

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

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

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

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

Areas of competency, directly relevant to Action Research include:

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

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

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

Selecting topics to focus on

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

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

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

Topics for Action Research

Service elements

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Where should the office be?'

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

Gaps in services/supports

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

Good practice attributes

'What attributes do effective peer helpers have?'

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

Effective responses to a client's particular situation

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

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

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

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

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

Ways to best achieve a particular outcome

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

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

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

Assumptions on which the early intervention models are based

'How early should intervention begin?'

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

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

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

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

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

Posing Action Research questions

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

'What would it take to?'

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

Starting small but thinking broad

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Examples of micro questions:

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

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

Examples of macro questions:

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

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

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

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

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

Example—Asking macro and micro questions

Macro question

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

Micro questions

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Examples of questions used in practice

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

Identifying existing service gaps

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

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

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

Reviewing existing arrangements

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

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

Raising awareness

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Implementation issues

Participation

Rigour

Documentation

Action Research and ethics

Participation

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Participation and service users

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

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

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

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

[Participation involves] conveying to the clients the message that they are respected as individuals and their opinions and suggestions are important to the project and the community. This is especially important when clients are at their most vulnerable (A Youth Homelessness Pilot service).

When issues arise about service gaps, Action Research encourages workers and service users to work together to look at possible options and enables those options to be further developed. Action Research takes away the `expert' interpreting `need gaps'. Via the process of consultation, Action Research empowers the service user, and provides the mechanisms to put ideas into practice (A Youth Homelessness Pilot service).

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

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

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

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

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

Asking the right participation questions

Who are treated as participants?

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

'Will all stakeholders participate in all aspects?'

How much do they participate?

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

'What factors enhance/obstruct greater participation?'

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

'How is participation managed at the various stages?'

In what ways do they participate?

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

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

'How is power genuinely shared?'

Can participation be enhanced as the Action Research progresses?

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

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

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

'What supports need to be put into place?'

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

Suggested participation strategies

Informants

Reference Groups

Focus Groups

Co-researchers

Peer researchers

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Example—young co-researchers help service planning

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The nature of peer interviewing

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

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

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

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

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

Snapshot—the role of participants in Action Research

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

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

Examples of commonly-used participation strategies

Who are the stakeholders?

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

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

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

A summary of community development consultation principles

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

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

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

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

Rigour

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

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

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

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

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

Achieving rigour involves:

Participation

Multiple flexible methods

Having an evidence base

Transparency

Developing detailed answers to questions

Seeking disagreement

Multiple cycles of Action Research

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The benefits of seeking 'disagreement'

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

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

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

Seeking disagreement—an essential part of achieving rigour

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

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

Developing detailed answers to questions but not over-generalising

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

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

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

Ensuring rigour through documentation

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

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

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

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

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

Achieving rigour without documenting every small thing

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

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

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

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

Documenting Action Research insights and processes

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Suggested documentation methods

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

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

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

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

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

Snapshot—the importance of documenting Action Research

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

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

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

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

Publicising/publishing Action Research

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

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

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

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

Ethics and Action Research

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

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

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

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

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

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

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