

Translating methodology into action

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In this paper I will introduce to the SFLEX team and its roles and tasks and go on to talk a bit about our initial challenges both practically and conceptually and how we are using action research to develop and implement innovative solutions .to those challenges

But first I want to add a little to the comprehensive overview of Action research Gai has already provided.

What is Action Research and why use it?

Action learning and action research are a part of family of methodologies with a long history in community work and organisational psychology because it is simple and flexible. A key feature of the all action research is what is referred to as the Action Research cycle Action Learning/Action Research is characterised by connecting strands of continuing learning and development.

Action research can be used in almost any environment, and provides a planning and evaluation cycle for ongoing work. As such it is a tool for learning about and improving project work within community settings Using action research principles and the action research cycle in evaluation is not new however in the first edition of our regular Bulletin Tania Lienert coined the term “Action Research Evaluation” for the evaluation processes that stronger families fund projects are developing with the assistance of the learning exchange and the training and development team. Its flexibility and simplicity makes it an ideal tool for working in very varied and complex environments. It also allows each of the 21 active projects we are working with to design their own ongoing evaluation processes

What is SLEX?

The SFLEX team an abbreviation of Stronger Families Learning Exchange has been forming over the last year beginning with two part time researchers in January 2002 until now where we have a team of 8 and 39 projects we are working with around the country many of which are in extremely remote locations.

Overall the aim of the Learning Exchange is to contribute to the formation of an evidence base to inform policy, practice and research in strengthening families and communities

The training and support team are trying to achieve that aim in the following ways:

A) To look more broadly within the variety of projects for learnings that can assist in policy development for families and communities.

B) To undertake an action research evaluation on our own work. To answer the question how useful is an action research approach and our particular interpretation is in assisting projects?

C) To provide a framework for projects to network and learn from each other

D) To work individually with each project to use action research to add value to the project and as an evaluation process

Because our own work is still in relatively early stages I plan to talk most about the networking framework and the conceptual challenges the team is facing in our own action research processes.

Framework for networking and learning

Two Bulletins have been produced. These have been well received by projects and by the broader community and AR fields. Thousands of copies have been distributed. They act as a way of developing and sharing information and ideas around action research and showcasing the development of the projects and their use of action research as part of that development. We expect that each of the three papers in this symposium will be published in the next one due out in March or April

SFF discuss is an email discussion list for projects, facs and aifs. It is moderated by aifs and includes a weekly update on things that may be of interest to projects including conferences, library and web material.

The first *workshop* involving all the projects will be held in Melbourne from 1-4 April this year. This will be a great opportunity for projects and facs project workers to get together and learn from one another and to consult with the sflex team on a range of issues.

The Stronger Families Learning exchange has its own website within the aifs website. Each project now has their own page where their work can be shared with other projects and with facs. This is proving to be a very rich qualitative data base when projects can display their work in what ever form they wish. Models of practice, stories, pictures and links are made to contributions projects have made to the bulletin and other publications.

This symposium is another model of gaining some insights from a partnership approach. It has been an interactive process and we have enjoyed working with each other and have learnt from the experience. One project worker has recently asked her SFLEX worker to collaborate on a conference

paper so the model is continuing may develop as a collaborative way to develop and express project learning that may influence policy development

So much for process and achievements I would now like concentrate on two interesting conceptual challenges of the work to date before finishing on a very positive note with some learnings that projects have shared with us.

Parallel processes for community projects and aifs project

As a relatively new team of workers ourselves we have been having many of the same developmental issues and growing pains as the projects we support. My psychological background makes me name this parallel processes Some examples include:

- The Stronger Families Learning exchange – is in effect a funded project of facs. We work within similar constraints to any other project. For example we have performance indicators to meet some of which seem fine in theory- more difficult in practice and have required renegotiation with Facs.
- Action Research and action learning are relatively new to aifs as a methodology. Aifs is more used to large scale quantitative surveys as research methodology. The Institute did have exceptional clearinghouse facilities in place and has experience in the early childhood intervention field.
- Sflex research staff – like project staff are generally new to the organisation and have to learn the organizations ways of working Likewise project staff are new and need to learn how to develop a new project within whatever auspice agency they work for whether it be a Large local Government or a church based welfare agency.

All of these things take time. Sometimes weeks or even months and require negotiation and analysis

In addition because we are as a team all too human we are finding it relatively easy to make overall judgements of our projects and too easily fall into the habit of doing so because we have a role in assessment So we are still wondering how much of our own observations and understandings do we/should we specifically include in the process of synthesising learning

We have learnt that it is quite difficult, challenging and confronting to reflect on our own work – and that as a group we will go to some lengths to avoid doing so. Therefore we better understand and can work out strategies for encouraging those few projects who also find it difficult to be reflective.

Developing social capital through participatory processes

Our project is exploring a connection between active community participation in projects such as these and the enhancement of social capital within the community. Action research theory emphasizes the emancipatory possibilities of participation. One of the foundation principles of action research is active participation from all stakeholders within any activity- or project.

The Stronger Families learning exchange also incorporates a philosophy of participation from all involved at all levels of our work. On this basis each of the SFF projects has been encouraged by its Action Research worker to develop participatory bodies and processes that include community members. As a result there have been a wide range of models of community participation developed and adopted which essentially reflect characteristics of the community in which they are based and the design of the projects.

The learning exchange is also trying to model what we teach to projects. SFLEX works with both projects and with Facs – it is a partnership with three players each with different as well as common issues. Projects are generally concerned with the practical day to day processes of deciding what to do that might make a real difference to the communities, working out HOW those activities can be carried out and incorporating an evaluation component.

The partnership between aifs, Facs and projects has multiple participants. They include all the Sflex team and library staff, Facs National Office, Facs state and territory officers working with projects and of course projects, their workers, auspice bodies, management committees and community members. This adds up to an impressive number of participants and potentially a very influential alliance many of whom will come together at our workshop in April.

A strong focus of the SFLEX team in working with projects has been to develop this theme of participatory action research with their case load of projects. Projects are strongly encouraged to develop models of community participation and representation, often in the form of representative reference groups.

We have found important differences between being a community representative and representing an organization or a community group. It is many ways a simpler task to be a representative of a service provision organization or community group such as the local government or the Country Women's Association because there are often clear cut policies and also a defined group of people from whom to seek guidance.

There are difficulties inherent in being a representative of the community in general. For example - it is not practically possible to gain guidance from all parts of the community. There are often a few committed people who are part

of a number of forums but run the risk of being seen as self interested and therefore not representative of the community. In any case there are usually a variety of strongly held opinions within any community. Several projects have overcome these difficulties by having more than one participatory group which can have overlapping membership

Examples of the participatory processes

Enfield project in South Australia has a participatory group made up primarily of mothers of young children who nevertheless meet very regularly and contribute in very practical ways to the project. One has taken the role of chief photographer for the project. Each member contributes to a reflective journal about the project and how it is developing

Goodwood Connect in Hobart using reflective exercises in their management reference group to encourage increased participation in decision making

Cairns Family income management project has structured its Action Research evaluation to enable and encourage participants to be involved in continually improving how the project works.

Some preliminary learnings from projects

I would like to finish by outlining some of the learnings projects themselves are expressing at this point in their development. These learnings have been gained by simply asking the projects about lesson they have learned or insights they have gained at this point of their work:

- *A safe and comfortable space is important for participants.
- *Workers should be empathetic and non- judgemental
- *It is vital to find ways of engaging with the community(s)
- *Working with a range of committees and community groups takes time, energy and skill.
- *It takes time to develop a mutual trusting relationship with your community.

Thanks for our attention and I will hand over to Leah to look at how action research has been used in one Stronger Families Project.