

Action research and better outcomes for community projects



COLLEEN TURNER looks at how an action research approach might improve the process of attaining goals and achieving effective outcomes for Stronger Families Fund community projects.

As part of the Commonwealth's Stronger Families and Communities Strategy, a number of Stronger Families Fund projects have been developed and funded in disadvantaged communities across Australia.

The Stronger Families Fund projects take an early intervention approach to community development, in order to ensure the best possible health and wellbeing outcomes for children by supporting children and their families within the context of their local community. Operating in areas classified as being of "high need", the projects have developed a range of models and strategies to build on community and family strengths, and to focus on the prevention of social problems.

The projects have been designed with a specific focus on community involvement, with a view to both

tapping and enhancing local community knowledge in developing resources to assist in supporting "stronger families" (however they are defined).

This article examines how an action research approach might improve the process of attaining goals and achieving effective outcomes for Stronger Families Fund projects. It is argued that an action research approach provides a valuable means of assessing or evaluating how such projects develop, and the outcomes that may result, thus improving the quality of the projects at a number of levels.

What is action research?

Action research may take a variety of forms. At one end of a continuum, it is barely distinguishable from good planning practice (Wortley 1996). Who could argue against the logic of adopting a planning cycle where

one plans, assesses and then makes appropriate changes to activities on the basis of those observations and assessments?

At the other end of the continuum, action research, and more specifically, *participatory action research*, is more controversial in terms of the world view that underpins it and informs the practice (Winter 2001; Winter and Munn-Giddings 2001). Participatory action research has the aim of being participatory and collaborative in both its processes and its outcomes. Ultimately, it can be a move towards social justice, facilitating participation and empowerment of individuals and groups who are traditionally less powerful. Participatory action research may therefore aim to transform society.

Action research differs from traditional forms of research and evaluation in that it is as much concerned



with the *process* of developing a successful project as with project outcomes, and in that it does not necessarily have an outcome of its own in the form of an evaluation report. However, as Liz Branigan argues elsewhere in this *Bulletin*, it contains its own measures of rigour when used to assess or evaluate projects.

Why use an action research approach in community-based projects?

Action research provides a flexible and creative framework for planning and evaluation. Projects are able to use action research in the form that most comfortably fits their own frameworks and philosophy at any point on the continuum outlined above.

Possible benefits for the projects and their activities can be understood at an individual and family level and at a broader community level.

First, parents, children and families benefit from participating in the activities generated by the projects. The community benefits because more services, and/or more appropriately targeted services, may be identified and developed for families, parents or children who need assistance or support. These supports improve the overall quality of life of community members.

Within each of these three levels (individual, family or community), projects can use action research tools to improve activities and services to individuals and families and to add value to the experience for program participants. For example, the use of participatory qualitative methods – such as “listening circles” to evaluate educational programs – can provide a great deal of rich information for a project with regard to what aspects of the program were valuable and what future improvements might be worthwhile. At the same time, participants may benefit from a structured opportunity to reflect on the content and processes of the activity.

Second, action research can generate a large body of valuable information for projects. Under an action research approach, a greater variety of information can be collected, when compared with more traditional research approaches. Information ranging from conversations, artwork, discussions in meetings, the results of surveys, interviews and more formal assessments, is all seen as making a valuable contribution to understanding, and as a means of better informing project development and the outcomes that may result. How this body of information and analysis is used will vary among projects, but it is hoped that it will be included on the Stronger Families Learning Exchange database and provide valuable information for other projects and a broader audience. (However, it should be noted that measuring any impact the individual projects may have in terms of the *prevention* of particular social problems within a community is a very difficult task.)

Third, action research is a participatory process. Community participation

is an important and explicit value within the partnership approach envisaged for Stronger Families Fund projects. A participatory action research approach invites community members to become involved in planning, developing and maintaining improved services for their community.

An action research process within this participatory model aims to use local knowledge in an effective and participatory way to decide what are realistic, achievable goals and outcomes of projects, and what are the best ways to achieve those goals. Therefore, participation assists in making services more closely aligned to community needs and, in this way, the effectiveness of the project is improved.

Finally, action research provides the base for a continuous improvement approach. Action research is based around participation in cycles of planning, acting, observing, reflecting and re-planning. This process enables a review or assessment of progress towards the goals and planned outcomes of projects within the life of the project.

Overall, the use of an action research approach provides a clear advantage for projects, funding bodies and communities in that the goals and tasks of the projects can be modified and improved in the light of experience and reflection, improving the chances that a project will produce “successful” outcomes.

References

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