

- Preventive education and training – parenting skills; budgeting courses; literacy programs; computing; first aid; awareness raising/information provision; health promotion; relationship skills; violence prevention; and awareness raising about other community services.
- Community building – play groups; peer support groups; projects that strengthen support networks; community gardens; and drop-in centres.

See pages 18 to 28 for the latest project news.

SFLEX Training and Support Team

The Training and Support Team is now working with 46 Stronger Families Fund projects. Work was also undertaken towards developing and running the SFLEX National Workshop (Melbourne, 1–3 April 2003), which was a very successful event. Information on the conference will be included in the next Bulletin.

The Team's action research support role was also highlighted in the 8th Australian Institute of Family Studies Conference, held in Melbourne from 12–14 February 2003, with the theme *Steps Forward for Families: Research, Practice and Policy*. The Team (with the involvement of the Wagga Wagga project and Gai Stern from the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services), ran both a symposium and action research methods workshop (see page 11 for further details).

A number of staff changes have also occurred since the last SFLEX Bulletin. In late 2002, Dr Kelley Johnson took over the role of Team Leader of the SFLEX Training and Support Team. Kelley is now responsible for all day-to-day operations of the Team; Adam Tomison remains involved as Manager.

The Team would also like to welcome two new members: Lisa Natoli and Katrina Bredhauer (they introduce themselves on pages 31–32). Finally, it should also be noted that Dr Sandra Billard, who made a valuable contribution to SFLEX as a contracted consultant for the SFLEX Team through much of 2002, has now completed her assignment. We would all like to thank Sandra for her great contribution and wish her well with her future endeavours.

Judy Adams is Manager of the Clearing-house arm of the Stronger Families Learning Exchange (SFLEX) at the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

The Elephant *and*



Action Research

Kelley Johnson

When I think about action research I often think of a poem which I read at school. A group of blind men from Hindustan encountered their first elephant. One touched its trunk and thought the animal was a hose, another touched its tail and thought it was a mop and another touched its side and thought it was a wall. Bring any group of action researchers together and like the blind men they start to talk about their very different perceptions of what they do.

All of these may be right but may only partly describe the animal. Among the different ways action research has been used are: as a tool for making research relevant to social change (Lewin 1948); as a radical means of empowering people to take political action against oppression (Freire 1972); and as a means for managers to reflect on their practice (Greenwood & Lewin 1998).

The metaphor of the elephant and action research seems particularly relevant when considering the Stronger Families Fund projects and our work as members of the Training and Support Team in working with them. Each of the projects and each member of the team knows something of the total picture, and each of us brings different skills and experience to the work.

The Training and Support Team has knowledge and expertise in action research and in working with projects somewhat similar to the Stronger Families Fund projects. Project participants and workers know their community and needs and may have skills in working in action research and/or community development. Each person works in a different environment with different people, and uses a range of different strategies to achieve the project goals. Further, each project has developed using action research in different ways. ▶

Consequently, we all have a partial view of the complex 'animal' that is the Stronger Families Fund initiative in its entirety, and action research as an integral part of it. The 'animal' is even more complex because, as individual projects develop, the project workers gain different insights, and their ideas, practices and roles change. As we have worked with projects to support them, our roles with them have also changed. And yet, if our learning from these projects is to be useful to others, we need to find ways to develop a more holistic view of the whole project. In other words, we need to come to understand the elephant.

Researching Action

In the past, really good strategies, ideas and practices have been developed by individual groups or communities but are not then made available to others. Part of our role in the SFLEX team is to draw out understandings and learnings from the projects and to make these available to other projects within the Stronger Families Fund. This will also enable the knowledge and learning outcomes of the projects to be available to inform future projects and government policy.

This raises the difficult dilemma of how to do this and stay within an action research framework. Over the past few months the Training and Support Team have been thinking seriously about the tension between working to support individual projects and then undertaking what has been called a 'meta analysis' of the work of all the projects. We recognise that just as individual projects are using action research, so our work as a team is also an action research project, and the development of learnings from projects should reflect this.

Previous articles in the SFLEX Bulletin have looked at how projects and the SFLEX team might work together using action research (Branigan 2002; Lienert 2002(a); Lienert 2002(b); Turner 2002). This article proposes a means by which we can work together to document the learning that is emerging from the different projects in an action research framework.

Some steps have already been taken to do this. The SFLEX Bulletin regularly

provides reports from projects of their work and progress. We have a website where projects can record information, talk with each other and share ideas and practices.

In thinking about this aspect of our work we have found Rapoport's definition of action research very helpful:

Action research aims to contribute to the practical concerns of people in an immediate problematic situation and to the goals of social science by joint collaboration within a mutually acceptable ethical framework. (Rapoport 1970: 499)

While this is fairly conservative view of action research, it is useful because it stresses three things:

- that action research should always be grounded in the concerns of stakeholders and should be collaborative in nature;
- that it involves research as well as action; and
- that it should contribute to our knowledge as well as work on particular issues.

Using this definition as a starting point, we identified key principles we wanted to work with in developing a way of recording and disseminating learning from the projects. The key principles are:

- learning from the projects should reflect their diversity and difference as well as common learning;
- the method of developing learnings should be collaborative and participatory;
- projects should own the learning outcomes of their work and should be part of the process of making it available to others;
- the process of understanding what Stronger Families Fund projects have done and its impact should be developmental. We should try to understand the learnings as they emerge at different times from different projects;
- we should recognise the context within which particular projects are working;
- the information should be grounded and useful and should ensure that many voices are heard from diverse projects; and

- the process should involve learning as we go and should be open to reflection and change.

Making Action Research Learning Known

Our proposal involves the development of a series of resources over the next twelve months. Each of these will reflect themes which are emerging from the Stronger Families Fund projects. As a team we are conscious that particular themes arise for different projects at different times. Projects may identify important learnings or we may consult with a group of projects about a theme which seems to be arising for them.

There will be three different kinds of themes: content themes which deal with the impact of the project on the community in which it works; process themes which look at how the project has undertaken its work; and conceptual themes which look at overarching contributions made by the Stronger Families Fund project to strengthening families.

Content themes

These will be concerned with what projects are doing and the impact of these on the community. Such themes might include: providing parent education; including men in family life; improving the links between service providers; improving the financial situation of families. They may also include learning which arises from a project's location. For example, the positive and negative factors involved in working in so-called 'remote', rural, urban or inner-urban areas.

Process themes

These themes, which emerge from how projects do their work, have particular relevance for action research. They will include themes of participation and collaboration; engaging the community; evaluation and how this was undertaken; developing reference groups; and ethical approaches to the work.

Conceptual themes

These will emerge as strong themes as we begin to develop process and content resources, and may include concepts like 'social capital' and sustainability.



We will have a range of resources which highlight both common issues and the differences between the work of the projects. We also believe that these resources will be of use to other projects in different fields, and to future policy makers.

The resources developed around each theme will include an overview of the theme and why it was important; accounts by projects about their diverse ways of working; a reflection by a SFLEX team member; and a jointly written short commentary on key learnings emerging from our work. The learnings of Department of Family and Community Services workers may also be included. Process theme resources may also include workshops and ideas for action which can be used in the future by other groups.

Participation and Collaboration

Participation and collaboration between project stakeholders, the Training and Support Team and Department of Family and Community Services (FaCS) staff are essential in developing these resources. This can happen in a number of ways.

Identifying themes

Individual projects or groups of projects may identify key themes that are important. Further, the SFLEX team will reflect on their experiences during project visits to identify emerging

themes. FaCS staff may also wish to identify particular issues and themes.

Developing resources

Resources will be jointly produced and no project will be required to contribute if they do not wish to do so. They will be written plainly and will include photographs, drawings and other materials arising from the work of the Stronger Families Fund projects. We envisage small working groups comprising project and SFLEX team members and FaCS workers to develop each resource.

Conclusion

All of us involved with Stronger Families Fund projects currently know one part of the elephant. Individual projects know their own communities and have their own view of how they are going about their work. FaCS has its own perspective to the projects and the work. The SFLEX team knows its work and as a team we know something about all the projects. If the projects, the SFLEX team and FaCS work together and document our practice, our understanding of the nature of the elephant will be

deepened and we will be better able to share it with others. The SFLEX team's reflections on its work have led to a view about how this might be done. We believe that at the end of the contract period, we will have a range of resources which highlight both common issues and the differences between the work of the projects. We also believe that these resources will be of use to other projects in different fields, and to future policy makers.

References

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