

Positive Parenting Pupil Participation Project

An Action Research Perspective

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Starting Point

Project Objectives:

- The project will deliver in the school setting formal and informal education and training for parents of primary school students. The training program is designed to re-engage parents (particularly younger parents) whose own education has been interrupted and whose life opportunities has, as a consequence, been limited.

Research

- Action Research was selected to be the research methodology in this project, because of its suitability for “testing assumptions and informing action/practise which in turn refines and informs theory which in turn shapes further action. It was RMIT University’s role to undertake the research component of the project.

What is Action Research?

AR is best described as a family of research methodologies which pursue action (or change) and research (or understanding) at the same time.

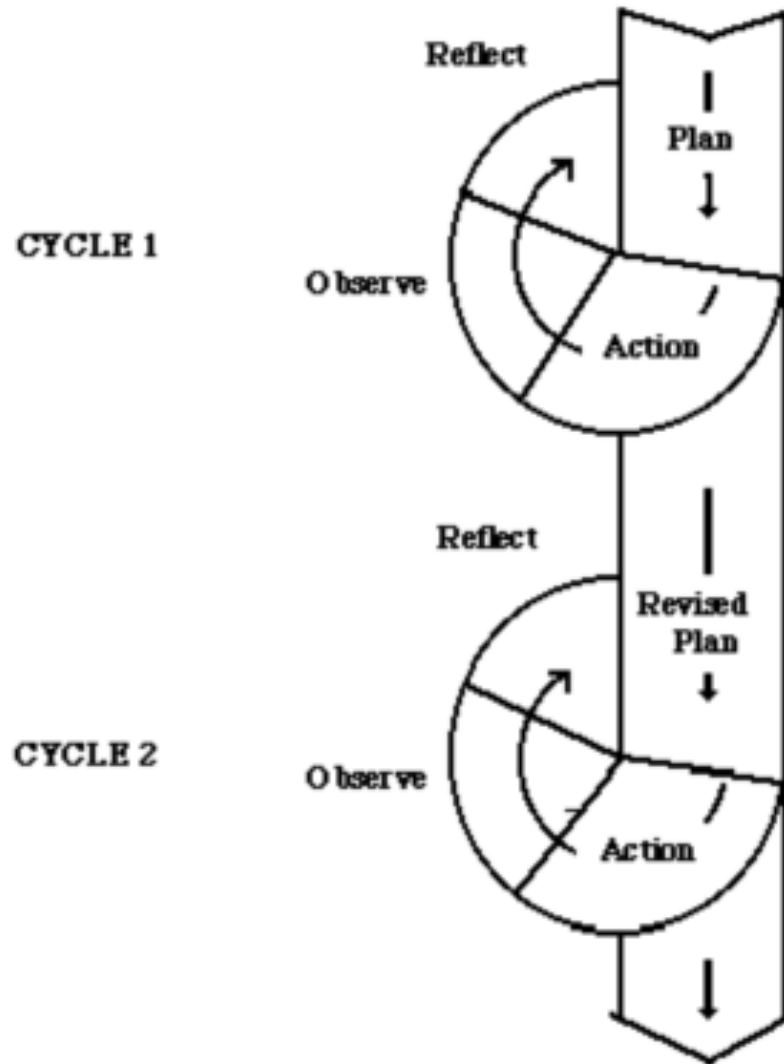
In most of its forms it does this by using a cyclic or spiral process which alternates between action and critical reflection.

- It is an **emergent** process which takes shape as understanding increases.
- It is an **iterative** process which converges towards a better understanding of what happens.

It is also participative (*change is usually easier to achieve when those affected by the change are involved*) and qualitative.

N.B. Action Research is NOT Change Management

Change management is a structured approach to shifting/transitioning individuals, teams and organizations from a current state to a desired future state (Hiatt, 2010).



The Action Research Process (MacIsaac, 1995)

Each cycle has four steps: plan, act, observe, reflect.

There are several cycles in an iterative process of continuous improvement.

Figure 1 Simple Action Research Model (from MacIsaac, 1995)

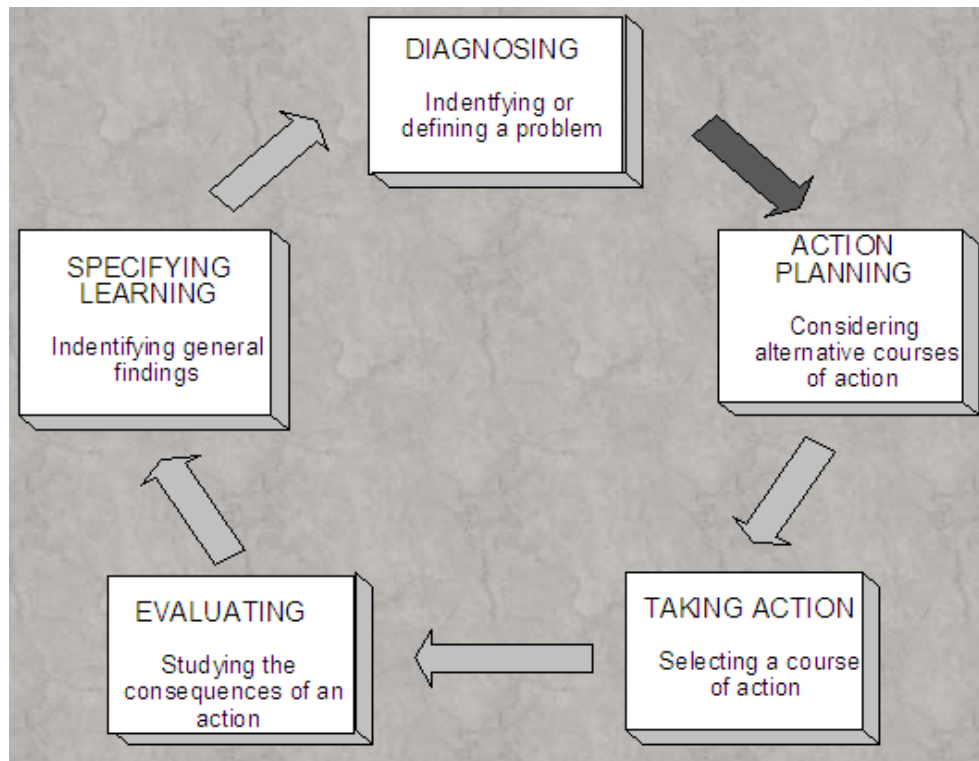


Figure 2 Detailed Action Research Model
(adapted from Susman 1983)

In a typical Action Research model each research cycle occurs in five sequential phases.

Initially, a problem is identified and data are collected for a more detailed diagnosis. This is followed by a collective postulation of several possible solutions, from which a single plan of action (an intervention) emerges.

Data on the results of the intervention are collected and analyzed to determine how successful the action has been.

The problem is re-assessed and the process begins another cycle. This process continues until the problem is resolved.

Principles of Action Research (Winter, 1989)

What gives action research its unique flavour is the set of six principles that guide the research. These are:

- (1) Reflexive critique
- (2) Dialectical critique
- (3) Collaborative Resource
- (4) Risk
- (5) Plural Structure
- (6) Theory, Practice, Transformation

Winter, R. (1989). *Learning From Experience: Principles and Practice in Action-Research*. Philadelphia: The Falmer Press, 43-67.



(1) Reflexive critique

An account of a situation, such as notes, transcripts or official documents, will make implicit claims to be authoritative, i.e., it implies that it is factual and true. Truth in a social setting, however, is relative to the teller.

The principle of reflective critique ensures that people reflect on issues and processes and make explicit the interpretations, biases, **assumptions** and concerns upon which judgments are made.

Assumptions

- That parents were indeed disengaged
- About SES and parents' education level
- That “engaging” parents would lead to desired outcomes vis-à-vis children's education



... review the school engagement policy through surveying and evaluating to examine changes in the school (with a particular emphasis on **quantifiable outcomes for young children**) as a result of the PPPP.

Context and Rationale

...because **the school** had significant problems which were perceived as barriers to positive student learning outcomes.

..to develop a strategy which could lead to better outcomes for pupils attending the George Street Primary School ...

Project Aim

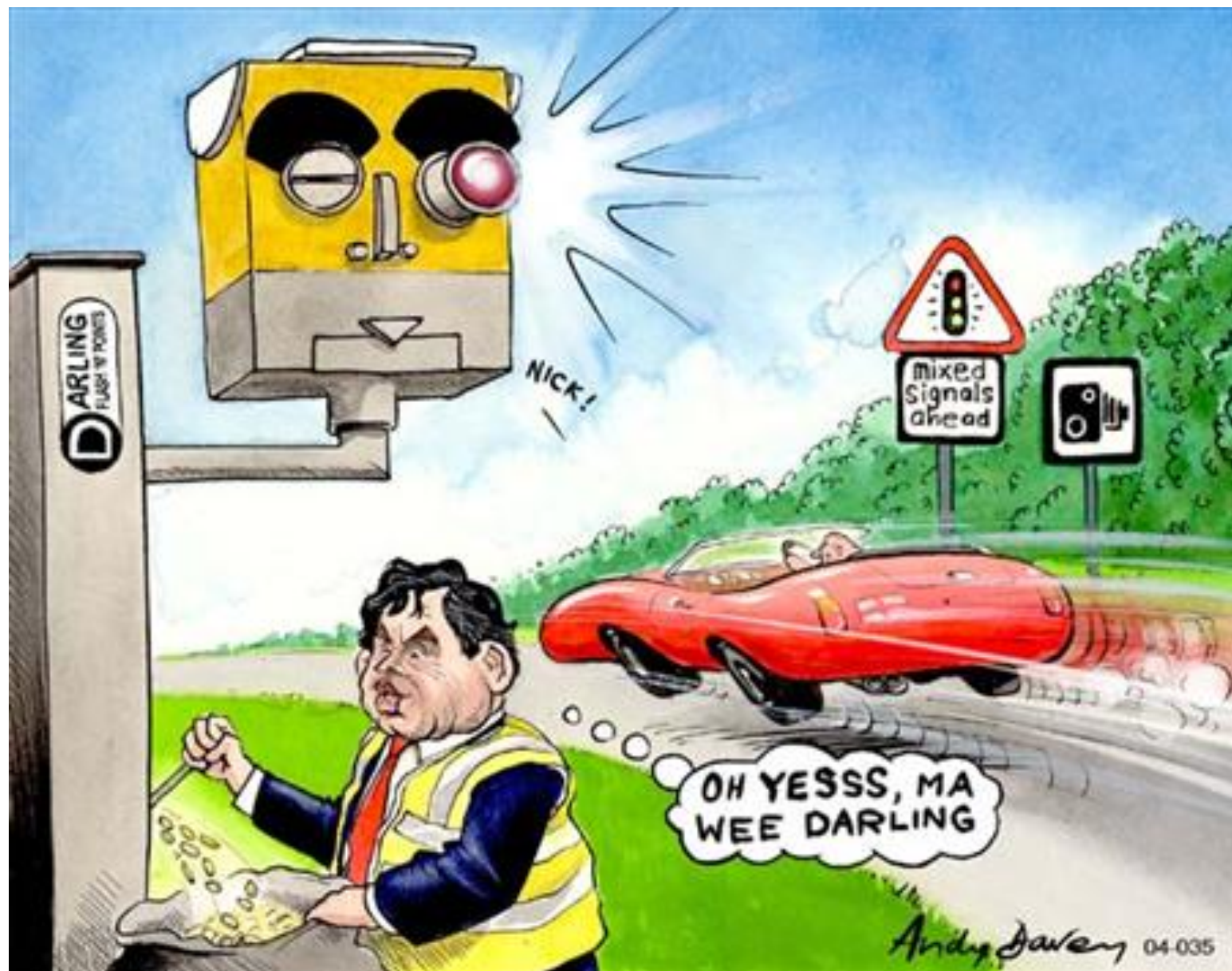
The aim of the project was to develop a sustainable engagement program for parents into the long term.

... to establish a “whole of community” approach to increase parents’ engagement with learning so that they would become confident members of the school community and proactive supporters of their **children’s schooling**.

The Positive Parenting Pupil Participation (PPPP) project was undertaken in order to address the problems of poor educational achievement and falling enrolments **in a Victorian primary state school**, through increasing and improving parental involvement with the school because it was believed that the poor performance of the school was exacerbated by low levels of parental involvement.

Project Objectives

The project will deliver, in the school setting, formal and informal education and **training for parents of primary school students**. The training program is designed to re-engage parents (particularly younger parents) whose own education has been interrupted and whose life opportunities has as a consequence, been limited.



(2) Dialectical critique

Reality, particularly social reality, is consensually validated, which is to say it is shared through language.

The dialectical method is dialogue between two or more people holding different points of view about a subject, who wish to establish the truth of the matter by dialogue, with reasoned arguments. Dialectics is different from debate, wherein the debaters are committed to their points of view, and mean to win the debate, either by persuading the opponent, proving their argument correct, or proving the opponent's argument incorrect.

The key elements to focus attention on are those constituent elements that are unstable, or in opposition to one another. These are the ones that are most likely to create changes.

E.g., differing perceptions of parental involvement and engagement and their relationship to engagement in children's education

“ ... the survey of the existing literature did not find evidence that parents' participation in adult education per se results in a greater commitment to engagement in their child's education. **Nevertheless, engaging parents, whose own educational levels are low, in opportunities to improve their education and therefore their prospects, is still deemed a worthwhile objective of the project”.**



(3) Collaborative Resource

Participants in an action research project are co-researchers. The principle of collaborative resource presupposes that each person's ideas are equally significant as potential resources for creating interpretive categories of analysis, negotiated among the participants. It strives to avoid the skewing of credibility stemming from the prior status of an idea-holder. It especially makes possible the insights gleaned from noting the contradictions both between many viewpoints and within a single viewpoint.

Early on, the message we received from partners was to be 'low key' about the word Research – because the involvement of a university in a lower Socio economic group, the school etc, would alarm people, make them uncomfortable and potentially frighten them off.



(4) Risk

The change process potentially threatens all previously established ways of doing things, thus creating psychic fears among the practitioners. One of the more prominent fears comes from the risk to ego stemming from open discussion of one's interpretations, ideas, and judgments. Initiators of action research will use this principle to allay others' fears and invite participation by pointing out that they, too, will be subject to the same process, and that whatever the outcome, learning will take place.

One of the areas of risk clearly identified in the reports was “Have we adequately and correctly assessed the needs of parents, especially, those identified as “hard-to-reach” from their perspective?”

and

“If any learning program is not developed from the perspective of the client (parent) then that may be a critical factor (risk) that would lead to either the success or failure of the project in terms of participation rates”.



(5) *Plural Structure*

The nature of the research embodies a multiplicity of views, commentaries and critiques, leading to multiple possible actions and interpretations. This plural structure of inquiry requires a plural text for reporting. This means that there will be many accounts made explicit, with commentaries on their contradictions, and a range of options for action presented.

E.g. today's talk provides differing perspectives.

Perspective from SGAE and perspective from RMIT in terms of the Research Component.

Also could have the school's perspective and within that there would be several competing views (parents, teachers, school council).

E.g. comment that some decisions "... impacted on the progress of what was essentially a change management project."

Reports, particularly partner reports should act as a support for ongoing discussion among collaborators, rather than a final conclusion of fact.



(5) Plural Structure: Learnings from our perspective

We learned a lot about partnerships

We wanted an holistic approach, but in the end, the institutional barriers were almost insurmountable – for example, internal directions changed:

- School focus on teaching and less on engagement
- SGAE – now with contestable funding has a stronger business focus
- Trust is very fragile when working between sectors

(6) *Theory, Practice, Transformation*

For action researchers, theory informs practice, practice refines theory, in a continuous transformation. The two are intertwined aspects of a single change process. It is up to the researchers to make explicit the theoretical justifications for the actions, and to question the bases of those justifications. The ensuing practical applications that follow are subjected to further analysis, in a transformative cycle that continuously alternates emphasis between theory and practice.

A key initial assumption was that the 'poor' performance of the school was exacerbated by low levels of parental involvement

As a result, the PPPP project was based on the premise that increasing parents' engagement with learning, would encourage them to become:

- 1) More involved with the school community
- 2) Proactive in their children's learning

But the initial Literature Review concluded that:

Although parents' education and SES have an indirect effect on children's academic achievement, there is no evidence in the literature to support the contention that parents' participation in adult education results in a greater commitment to their children's education.



Additional thoughts/learnings

Not working in a ‘research culture’ – Not using the ‘R’ word had a number of significant impacts:

- The research element was not highly visible,
- Led to lack of clarity about what constitutes research
 - If it is not visible, is it happening?
- What is applied research?

Danger of becoming locked in to a “change management” rather than an Action Research exercise.

- E.g., By half way through the project, it was clear that there were a whole lot of reasons why parents didn’t engage, not related to their low SES status (e.g., had jobs, other commitments) – and in fact on the basis of response to surveys etc - they were probably not far from ‘average’.
- In an AR paradigm, the issue of “whole of school commitment” is part of the context rather than something that needs to be “fixed” *before* the project can begin.

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Final Comment

The project was originally intended to develop a sustainable program for the school into the long term.

Obtained funding for only 12 months

- This is problematic for real culture change.
- Problematic for Action Research in an environment such as this.

- So do you do nothing, or try to do something?
 - Utopianism or Meliorism?
 - The utopian seeks perfection – the meliorist seeks improvement.
- So, even if this specific project is not going to continue, we have learned a lot and we can refine and develop those learnings and apply them elsewhere. So, onward and upward to the next phase.