

Strand B – Action Research

The fluid nature of action research

Action research is a fluid, unfolding process of research. It involves cycles of questioning, gathering data, critical reflection and deciding on a course of action (Stringer, 2008). Through action research, educators research their own practice in their own setting. They learn from their experiences as the action research cycles progress, and apply new learning to practice.

In action research, educators begin by developing a research question about something of key interest and concern. In a whole-setting approach to action research, it is common for educators to identify a broad theme for inquiry and to develop several research questions that are investigated by different members of the team. MacNaughton and Hughes (2008) suggest that research questions should be:

- Knowledge-generating
- Change-oriented
- Ethical
- Manageable (not too broad, narrow or vague).

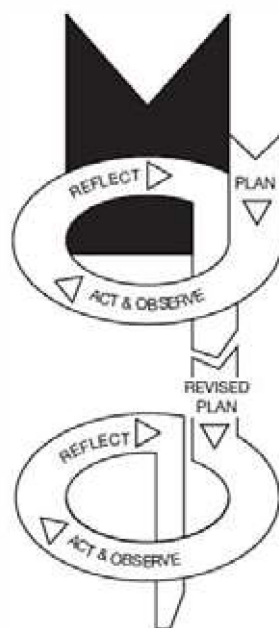
A well-designed research question will lead to logical starting points for action. For example, a group of educators investigating the question, 'What is the value of pretend gunplay in children's experiences at our centre?' You can begin the action research process by:

- Watching the gunplay over time and documenting children's experiences
- Gathering the perspectives of children, parents, educators and critical friends
- Reading literature about pretend play and gunplay specifically
- Accessing theories that allow different ways of viewing and understanding gunplay
- Using a reflective journal to document educators' responses to gunplay scenarios.

Over time, data can be collected using familiar tools such as observations, photographs, audio recordings, parent surveys, reflective journals, interviews, concept maps, videos and drawings. Throughout the research process, data is analysed to identify key themes, (both convergent and divergent) that guide new directions for practice. Analysis of data should occur systematically and involve all researchers to ensure multiple perspectives are heard and documented.

Documentation of the action research process is a robust representation of what occurs over time. It is not possible to capture all of the intricacies of the action research cycles, but documentation should illustrate the systematic enactment of cycles of questioning, gathering data, critical reflection and deciding on a course of action. This contributes to rigour in the research process, alongside the use of different methods for collecting data and ensuring data is analysed collaboratively. Documentation collected over the course of an action research project is highly valuable for assessment and rating purposes. It demonstrates an embedded research culture, high level reflective practice, and commitment to improvement and change.

As a form of professional development, action research represents a shift from a traditional content-model to a research-model for professional learning. It constitutes a medium for learning that can be crafted for, and with educators, in response to their own interests and professional needs. Ownership over the direction of one's own professional learning supports transfer of learning to practice, because the



An Action Research Cycle

impetus for change occurs through internally-driven, contextualised inquiry. Immersing oneself in research on a topic of interest also supports deep level inquiry that is often lacking in more traditional content-models of professional development.

A key benefit of action research is its accessibility to all members of staff regardless of role and tenure. As action research is collaborative in nature, all staff can demonstrate leadership in the research process. For example, float staff are positioned well to identify connections across research activities occurring in different classrooms and to lead discussion with others.

Action research projects can benefit from the involvement of facilitators or critical friends who support the research process by:

- Building a shared language of research
- Enabling educators to see themselves as researchers by relating the research process to everyday practices
- Developing skill sets around critical reflection and applying literature and theory to interpret data from different perspectives or lenses.

As a regular facilitator of action research projects, I engage in four key processes: active listening, resourcing, mentoring and interposing. In a mentoring role, I position myself alongside educators, encouraging and supporting them as co-researchers. When interposing, I position myself deliberately between an educator's existing beliefs and practices and different ways of thinking and working. Interposing carries the intent to disrupt thinking and practices that have become common sense or commonplace. This occurs through interposing questions, remarks, literature, theories and resources that provoke educators to conceptualise their work in new and different ways.

Action research is an influential tool for ongoing improvement and change in early year's settings. Ideally, action research never concludes. Each cycle generates new questions and avenues for investigation, with educators applying learned skills to maintain research momentum and a culture of active inquiry.



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References:

MacNaughton, G., & Hughes, P. (2008). Doing action research in early childhood studies: A step-by-step guide. Berkshire, UK: Open University Press.

Stringer, E. (2008). Action research in education. Columbus, OH: Pearson Prentice Hall.

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