



Action Research Reflections:

THE WANGANUI ADULT LITERACY
AND EMPLOYMENT PROJECT

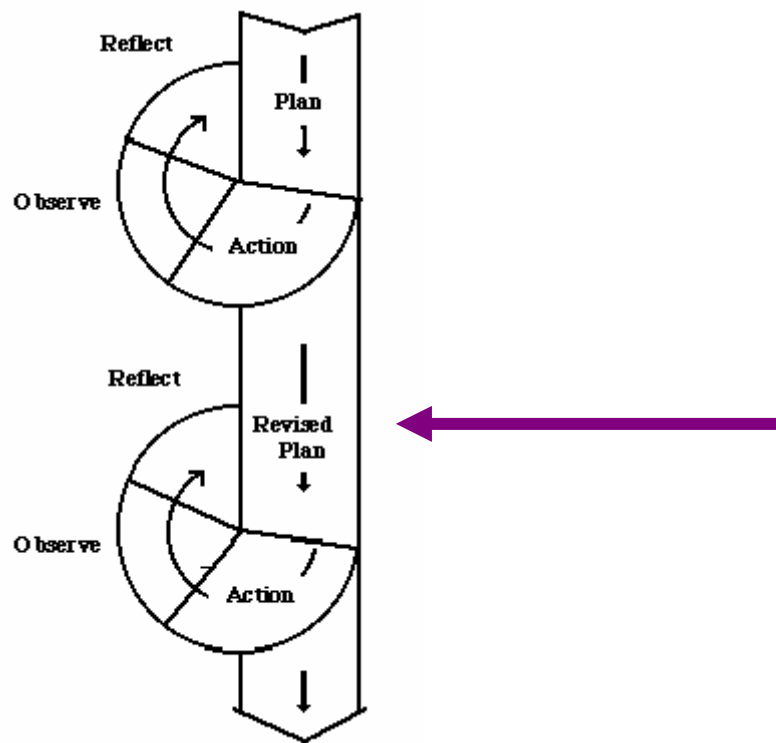
Franco Vaccarino • Margie Comrie •
Niki Murray • Frank Sligo



Massey University

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Introduction

When individuals decide to carry out action research, they generally want to find ways of understanding their circumstances and contexts better, and find out what changes can be made to improve and enrich both their own situations and that of others. McNiff (2002, p. 26) points out that, “action researchers are real people in real situations” who ask the question *how can I improve or change what I am doing?* This implies the investigation looks at what the researcher or practitioner is currently doing in order to make changes or improve what is being done, thus allowing the researcher to understand the situation more fully. This, in turn, assists researchers to evaluate their own work and make relevant changes, if necessary. In other words, individuals reflect on their own work. This self-reflection is a key element within action research and allows researchers to plan what changes can be made, implement these changes, and then reflect once again. Action researchers not only enquire into others’ lives, but also simultaneously address their own function as researchers and practitioners.

The action research projects within the Literacy and Employment Project feature a mix of types of action research, arising from collaborations with Wanganui community members that have identified areas in need of research. The projects represent areas in which community members would like to see change or development. In our projects, we employ the term *process consultation* where, as researchers, we manage the process by which information is gained, and work alongside participants to set goals, develop and implement plans, and interpret resulting information.

We started these action research projects in 2005 and the initial findings were reported in our 2006 report (Vaccarino, Comrie, Culligan, & Sligo). This report provides information on the next stage of the action research cycle.

The action research projects discussed in this report include:

1. *Stepping Through the Looking Glass: Action Research at Training For You*

This is the second stage of an action research programme based at Training For You, an adult literacy training provider in Wanganui. The action research was conceived and designed by Training For You’s Learning Centre Supervisor in consultation with the Adult Literacy and Employment team, and management and tutors at Training For You. The purpose of this action research project is to enhance self-reflective practices among students as to their learning, and concurrently, among tutors as to their tutoring, to improve the learning and teaching experience.

2. *Family Learning at Castlecliff School in Wanganui*

The home is a child's first school and the parent or caregiver the child's first and most important teacher. The concept of family learning builds on this natural learning bond. Family learning comprises the different ways parents, children, and extended family members use literacy during their day-to-day tasks and activities at home and in their communities. In Year 1, parents or caregivers play a crucial role in assisting their children consolidate emerging literacy skills that ease their subsequent acquisition of language, literacy, and cognitive skills, which form the basis for success in the learning context. This action research project involves Year 1 children and their parents at Castlecliff School. The intention is for the School to implement an ongoing family learning project for all Year 1 children entering the school. The primary research intention is to ascertain how well a family learning intervention assists and addresses learning goals within a school context.

Review of our approach to action research

In this section we will provide a brief overview of our approach to action research in two research projects in the larger Wanganui Literacy and Employment project, namely Training For You, a vocationally oriented training centre, and a family learning project at Castlecliff School. For a full review of the literature on action research, please refer to our previous publication on action research (Vaccarino, Comrie, Culligan & Sligo, 2006).

Action research was born when social scientists and practitioners, “concerned not only with the generation of scientific knowledge but also with its usefulness in solving practical problems, worked to bridge the gap between theory and practice” (Selener, 1997, p. 58). Kurt Lewin’s work is generally taken as the starting point, when he wanted to use “research in a ‘natural’ setting to change the way that the researcher interacts with that setting” (Ferrance, 2000, p. 7). Lewin recognised the important role of participation in planned change processes, and constructed an action research theory, describing action research as “proceeding in a spiral of steps, each of which is composed of planning, action and the evaluation of the result of action” (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988, p. 8).

This spiral or cyclical process involved a “non-linear pattern of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting on the changes in the social situations” (Noffke & Stevenson, 1995, p. 2). Lewin argued that to “understand and change certain social practices, social scientists have to include practitioners from the real social world in all phases of inquiry” (McKernan, 1991, p. 10). Lewin’s (1946) model, amalgamating research and action to enhance understanding and generate change, highlights that the introduction of action into the scientific model “by no means implies that the research needed is in any respect less scientific or ‘lower’ than would be required for pure science” (Lewin, 1946, p. 35). As action research is open-ended research in which techniques are examined systematically and scientifically, it starts with a concept, perception, or idea that has been developed, rather than starting with a fixed hypothesis. Central to this is the developmental process of following through the perception or idea, seeing how it is progressing, and constantly checking its development. Seen in this way, action research is a form of self-evaluation.

It is important to view action research as an individual, or a group of individuals, working together collaboratively to explore given areas of concern, acknowledge what they know, and then generate new knowledge. Action research is often referred to as practitioner-based research as it involves practitioners, and is also known as self-reflective practice as it involves individuals or practitioners reflecting on their own work. This self-reflection is a key element within action research. Action researchers do not enquire solely into others’ lives, but also simultaneously address

their own functioning as researchers. McNiff (2002, p. 6) captures this aptly in her statement that “action research is an enquiry conducted by the self into the self”.

The basic principle underpinning action research is that this research involves “identifying a problematic area, imagining a possible solution, trying it out, evaluating it (did it work?), and changing practice in the light of the evaluation” (McNiff, 2002, p. 7). This is a basic problem-solving process. However, to turn it into an action research process, researchers need to state why they want to examine or explore a particular issue and collect information or data to show the process. Such information or data act as evidence in terms of whether the researchers believed they were moving in the direction they were anticipating reaching in the first place. Essentially, the methodology of action research is that researchers need to evaluate what they are researching, and continually ensure that what they are researching is actually working and reaching the desired objective/s. Action research cannot be conducted on a once-off basis, but is rather a continuous process – hence its cyclical or spiral nature. Instead of a linear model, action research advances through cycles, ‘starting’ with reflection on action, and proceeding round to new action which is then further researched.

The protocol for action research is iterative and cyclical in nature. Its intention is to cultivate a deeper understanding of a particular situation, starting with the conceptualization of a problem or issue and progressing through several interventions and evaluations. Kemmis (in Hopkins, 1985) provides a diagrammatic representation of an action research protocol (Figure 1), with each cycle comprising four steps: plan, action, observe, and reflect. This is the protocol used in the action research projects within our Literacy and Employment project.

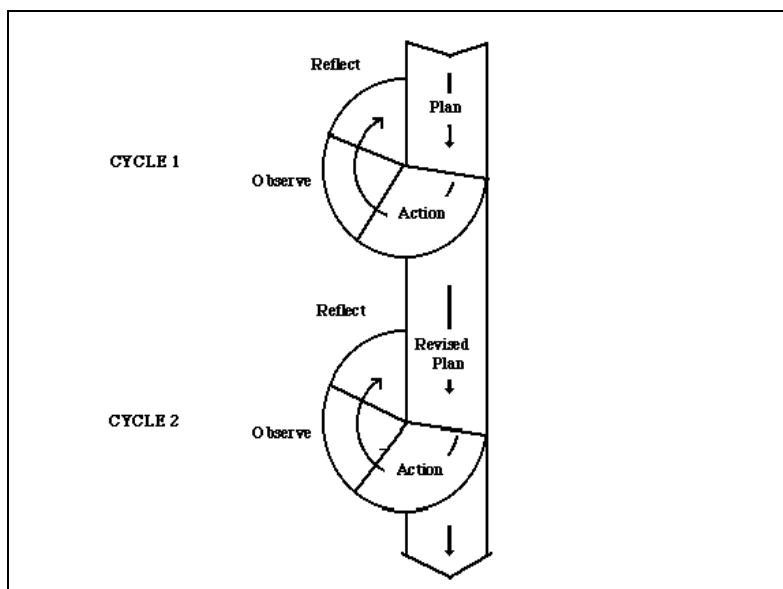


Figure 1. Kemmis' action research protocol (cited in Hopkins, 1985).

Types of action research

O'Brien (2001) explains that by the mid-1970s four main types of action research had emerged: traditional; contextural (action learning); radical; and educational action research.

1. *Traditional Action Research*

Traditional action research originated from Lewin's work and incorporates the concepts and practices of field theory, group dynamics, T-groups, and the clinical model. This traditional approach leans towards the conservative, and typically preserves the *status quo* regarding organisational power structures.

2. *Contextural Action Research (Action Learning)*

Contextural action research, also known as action learning, involves reconstituting the structural relations among individuals in a social environment; is domain-based, in that it attempts to engage all affected parties and stakeholders; is holographic, as each participant comprehends the working of the whole; and emphasizes that participant's act as project designers and co-researchers.

3. *Radical Action Research*

The radical stream, with its roots in Marxian dialectical materialism and the praxis orientations of Antonio Gramsci, focuses on emancipation and addressing power imbalances. Gramsci advocated the "renovation" and the "making critical" of the workers' common sense (Selener, 1997, p. 13). Participatory Action Research, often found in liberationist movements and international development circles, and Feminist Action Research, both aspire to social transformation through an advocacy course of action to strengthen peripheral groups in society.

4. *Educational Action Research*

Educational action research has its beginnings in the writings of John Dewey, the American educational philosopher of the 1920s and 30s, who believed all professional educators should become involved in community problem-solving. Its practitioners operate largely out of educational institutions, and concentrate on developing curricula, professional development, and applying learning within a social context.

The role of reflection

Possibly the major factor involved in action research is the concept of praxis. Schön (1983) describes using reflection to create models from a body of previous

knowledge. These models are used to reframe a problem or issue; then interventions are carried out which lead to outcomes which are analyzed further. This reflection-in-action model concedes there is very little or no separation of research from practice, and little or no separation of knowing and doing. Schön's model enhances the iterative and investigative nature of action research. McNiff (2002, p. 6) points out that in traditional forms of research "researchers do research on other people". However, with action research, researchers do research on themselves, and enquire into their own lives. This involves researchers asking themselves why they do the things they do, and why they are the way that they are. An action research report demonstrates how researchers have carried out a systematic investigation into their own behaviours and the reasons for those behaviours.

Roberts (n.d.) points out that with action research in organisations, "the researcher(s) tries to directly improve the participating organisation(s) and, at the same time, to generate scientific knowledge". He goes on to say that "this means that genuine action research projects should search for organisational improvements "during the research, rather than after the research". Although the term 'scientific' is not always clearly definable, Roberts states that research projects without "systematic reflection and learning" cannot be considered genuine action research projects. Reflection is therefore a critical component of action research.

According to action research theory, "change does not come about as a result of spontaneous acts, but through reflection on and understanding of specific problems within their social, political, and historical contexts" (Selener, 1997, p. 105). There is, therefore, interplay between understanding and change: understanding is motivated by interest in change. In addition, change leads to a clearer understanding of a particular situation (Usher & Bryant, 1989).

Reflection is a tool for promoting actions, and as Selener (1997, p. 105) points out, "action research is intended to lead to actions which promote improved educational practices". Ideally, action research as conceived by Lewin is an ongoing process of reflection and action. Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) reiterate that action research involves a self-reflective spiral of activities: planning; action; observation; reflection; re-planning; and action.

Sankar, Bailey and Williams (2005, p. 4) point out that "critical reflection is a form of analysis that not only explores how and why things happened but identifies the assumptions underpinning the analysis". They add that an action research approach "places much greater demands on those responsible for 'action' in the 'research' to be involved in the 'critical reflection' processes, than is common with many research approaches, where the responsibilities for action and research are separated". As a result of this, action research approaches are generally very collaborative.

Reflection in participatory action research is that moment where the research participants examine and construct, then evaluate and reconstruct their concerns (Grundy, 1986, p. 28). Reflection includes the pre-emptive discussion of participants where they identify a shared concern or problem.

Participatory action research

Although there does not always seem to be a clear distinction between *action research* and *participatory action research* (PAR), and in fact it is at times used interchangeably, we have felt it necessary to differentiate between the two. Reason (2001) talks about action research, participatory research, action learning, action science, action enquiry and co-operative enquiry, which in fact are “all contemporary forms of action oriented research which place emphasis on a full integration of action and reflection, so that the knowledge developed in the inquiry process is directly relevant to the issues being studied”.

Huizer (1997, p. 2) points out that

... in grassroots work in Third World countries a form of action research has emerged which tried to utilize the research itself as well as knowledge acquired through it, to enhance the grip of the local people, the participants on their own communities. From research objects they became research subjects ...

defined as participatory action research. Seymour-Rolls and Hughes (1995) state that participatory action research is “a method of research where creating a positive social change is the predominant driving force”. Greenwood, Whyte, and Harkavy (1993, p. 177) capture the essence of participatory action research by stating that it “is a form of action research in which professional social researchers operate as full collaborators with members of organizations in studying and transforming those organizations”. It is a research approach that highlights ongoing co-learning, participation and transformation.

Greenwood et al., (ibid) continue by reasoning that participatory action research “enhances problem formulation, hypothesis formulation, data acquisition, data analysis, synthesis, and application”. Thus, conducting participatory action research is a very collaborative process between researchers and members of a group or organization. Participatory action research has as its main aim the finding of solutions to tangible and concrete problems and disagreements. The results of such research, though, if performed systematically and consistently, also contribute to a greater knowledge of conflict-solving methods as such, which can be applied to a range of concrete situations. This is essential for the replication elsewhere of general theoretical knowledge in this area, from which grassroots groups in different circumstances can benefit (Huizer, 1997).

Elder and Chisholm (1993, p. 123) state that

... participation in the sense of co-researcher status for participation is ... one of the main characteristics of the emerging forms of action research ... Participants are truly co-researchers whose insider 'local knowledge' is as necessary for valid scientific sense-making as the outsider researchers' technical expertise and abstract general knowledge.

This is what distinguishes participatory action research from more traditional approaches, and as Bartunek (1993, p. 1222) points out, this "implies that participants contribute to the scholarly, as well as practical, outcomes of interventions". Participatory research combines three key activities: research, education, and action. Selener (1997, p. 17) adds that "it is a research method in which people are actively involved in conducting a systematic assessment of a social phenomenon by identifying a specific problem for the purpose of solving it".

The distinctive features of participatory research are, first, the group or community's participation in the whole research activity which, second, is a process in which research is directly related to transformative actions (Selener, 1997). Dick (2003, p. 2) states that "participation, by building shared understanding and shared commitment, increases the motivation for collective and collaborative action". Wadsworth (1998) stresses that such research "is not participation followed by research and then hopefully action. Instead there are countless tiny cycles of participatory reflection on action, learning about action and then new informed action which is in turn the subject of further reflection".

Selener (1997) provides participatory action research approaches which have been developed and applied in four broad areas:

1. *Participatory research in community development* has its roots in Latin America where it developed into its present form and where its main ideology evolved in the early 1960s. Liberation theology and the sociology of liberation were two participatory research approaches that showed the commitment of Latin American social scientists to become active participants in the liberation of the poor and oppressed. Participatory research has been inspired by Paulo Freire, critical consciousness, conscientization, and empowerment. Freire introduced the concept of conscientization, meaning "the identification and critical analysis of social, political, and economic contradictions, leading to organized action to solve immediate problems and to counter the oppressive aspects of society" (Selener, 1997, p. 14). Empowerment in participatory action research allows individuals to construct and use their own knowledge. Furthermore, Reason (2001, p. 1) points out that Freire emphasized "the importance of helping disadvantaged people develop critical thinking so that they could understand the ways in which they were disadvantaged by the

political and economic conditions of their lives and could develop their own organized action in order to address these issues”.

Thus the traditional role of the researcher has changed from an ‘objective’ external role to a ‘committed’ co-investigating one. This approach is mainly applied in community-based rural and urban developments in Latin American, African and Asian countries, and is generally applied by educators, community organizers, and facilitators. Members of an oppressed or exploited community or group collaborate actively in identifying problems, collecting data, and analyzing their own situation in order to improve it. “A major goal of participatory research is to solve practical problems at the community level” (Selener, 1997, p. 12). This area of participatory research will be explored further after the description of the four broad areas.

2. *Action research in organizations* “is an enquiry process intended to solve practical problems and generate new knowledge through collaborative efforts by researcher(s) and client(s)” (Selener, 1997, p. 8). Kurt Lewin recommended learning about social systems by seeking to change them through action research.
3. *Action research in schools* has been carried out by teachers, principals, supervisors and administrators.
4. *Farmer participatory research* was developed mainly by agricultural researchers and other rural development workers, and emphasizes the participation of farmers in the “generation, testing, and evaluation of technology to increase or promote sustainable agricultural production” (Selener, 1997, p. 10).

In participatory research there needs to be a balance between the knowledge, skills and experience provided by the researcher and that provided by the group or community. Maguire (1987, p. 37) argues that

... participatory researchers caution against either dichotomy: “They know, I don’t know” or “They don’t know, I know”. Instead participatory research offers a partnership: “We both know some things; neither of us knows everything. Working together we will know more, and we will both learn more about how to know”. Participatory research requires that both the researcher and the members of a group be open to personal transformation and conscientization. Participatory research assumes that both parties have knowledge and experience to contribute.

Greenwood, Whyte, and Harkavy (1993, p. 177, footnote) clarify the need to add the term *participatory* to *action research*:

It is interesting to note that many of our Scandinavian colleagues are surprised by the American insistence on adding the term “participatory” to “action research”. From their perspective, action research is impossible without participation. However, there are enough examples of non-participatory action research in the United States to make the distinction meaningful to us.

Our projects

Our projects feature a mix of types, arising from collaboration with Wanganui community members which has identified areas needing research. These are not necessarily problems *per se*, but represent areas in which community members would like to see change or development. Community members in concert with university personnel identify problem areas, collect the data then analyse the situation in order to suggest desirable forms of change. Our Wanganui projects are certainly enquiry-based in that researchers and community members are actively involved in researching various specified areas. An important intention is to generate new knowledge to be disseminated throughout the community, then to be used by other organisations or groups who are in similar fields. We see this as participatory action research (Greenwood, Whyte, & Harkavy, 1993) in that we are professional social researchers in collaboration with members of Wanganui training institutions, organizations or schools. Although our research projects do not engage the oppressed in the same sense as might happen in Latin America, for example, they are nonetheless community-based.

As Selener (1997, p. 111) points out, action research is methodologically eclectic and innovative and “does not follow any specific research methodology. The nature of problems to be solved, the conditions in which they exist, and the action researcher’s preferences and criteria will determine the appropriateness of the method to be used”. That is, each project or study is unique and needs to be treated independently, not forced into a particular framework. Our projects can be categorized under the action research umbrella, but each is unique, with its own context, aims, characteristics, unique problems and solutions. Thus we seek to apply eclectic and creative methodologies within each project. We agree with Dick (2003, p. 2) that “the actual research methodology can also be adjusted and improved as understanding grows”.

Dick (2002) comments on participation, saying it is not an “all-or-none” affair. Instead it comprises a continuum, ranging from much contact to a situation where the community organizations do the research themselves with little or no assistance. Dick (2002) states that some individuals would argue that it is not possible to have action research with low levels of participation; however, opinions vary. Dick (2002, p. 4) describes this continuum by distinguishing among non-involvement, representation, and participation. In non-involvement the researcher does it all; representation uses a small group of individuals who may speak on behalf of a bigger group; and participation implies that all the stakeholders in a particular project are involved.

In our projects, we employ the term *process consultation*, which as Dick (2002, p. 5) points out, “describes an approach which offers greater involvement to participants”. As researchers, we manage the process by which the information is gained, work alongside the participants to set the goals, develop and implement the plans, and interpret the resulting information. We agree with Uhlmann’s (1995, ¶. 1) comment that: for “real change to occur, participation by the people actually in the situation under research or affected by the outcomes (stakeholders) also has to occur”. She emphasizes that participation by the stakeholders is essential because:

- they are familiar with the situation under research so they are able to identify the initial issues very clearly
- they know the history and can tell the researchers what has been tried, and what might be culturally acceptable
- they are able to act themselves and to evaluate solutions intimately as to their suitability for their particular environment, and
- they will be there after our involvement in the research is complete and will be able to progress the actions because they will have learnt about the issues along the way.

Because the action research projects undertaken in this Literacy and Employment project do not follow an identical model, the rationale and method used in each will be explained separately.

Stepping through the looking glass: Training For You



When you have a student ... you want to give them a voice in their world ... and also to be able to read that world. So it's being able to see that world fully and to have a voice about that world. You have to be able to ask the right question to help them to read their world and voice what makes them unique. (Margot Syder)

Introduction

This section of the report provides a brief overview of the pilot study (in Kemmis' terminology, Cycle 1) conducted in 2005 and the next stage (Cycle 2) conducted in 2006 of an action research programme based at Training For You. The action research was conceived and designed by Margot Syder, the Learning Centre Supervisor at Training For You, in consultation with the Adult Literacy and Employment team, along with management and tutors at Training For You. The role of the project team was largely facilitation, helping Margot develop her ideas in a series of discussions. We also produced and printed the materials required and conducted an analysis of the results for feedback and further reflection. The aim was for the action research project to spring essentially from the needs and interests of the training provider and to be conducted, interpreted, redesigned, and owned by Margot and Training For You.

Margot has been teaching in the adult literacy field for ten years, and like most teachers, she had a number of ideas for changing and developing teaching methods, several of which sprang from a concern to give students at Training For You the skills to take them on to further education if they wished. In particular, she had become interested in how students perceived their own literacy, how they were assessed, and whether an accurate understanding of their skills and learning might be related to continued improvement of their skills. Margot described her initial concern as:



looking at how students perceive their literacy, how we assess students and whether students reflect upon the progress they make, what reflections they do make and how we can help them reflect upon their learning so that they can be more effective communicators.

This research interest came from observing that beginning students often had little idea of their own skills in relation to the literacy skills required to obtain the jobs or further training they aspired to. Pre-assessment, planning and goal setting along with training appeared to encourage self-reflection on students' knowing and learning.

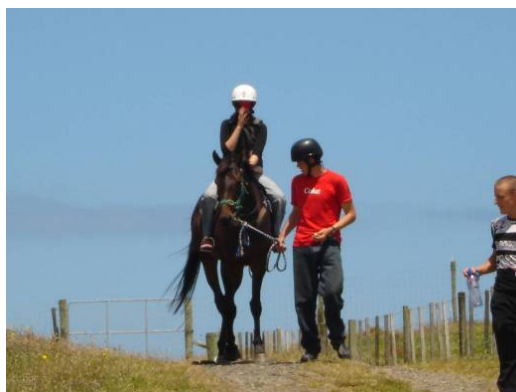
Margot describes herself as a practical person, adding that action research attracted her as a way of combining theory and practice:

Sometimes as a literacy tutor I feel like I've got a can opener and I'm trying to peer inside their head and work out how their brain thinks, in order to actually help them. You have to get down to really understanding how they learn and how they think and what they think about literacy before you can actually help them. I do think that in that sense it's imperative to understand the whole area of cognition and metacognition.

She added that it was crucial for students to work out what strategies work for them. While as a tutor Margot teaches students specific literacy skills that work, she believes that if students are to take these skills and use them in other contexts they need to become aware of which strategies work best for them. Her belief from observation was that giving students a chance to analyse their learning will simultaneously give them the opportunity to become more autonomous learners.

The research site

Since 1995 Training For You Ltd has been providing vocational training course for Equine, Childcare and Teacher Aide programmes. Equine courses are offered in Taranaki and Manawatu, while Childcare and Teacher Aide programmes are only sited in Wanganui. It also offers equine and childcare courses for all secondary schools in the Wanganui region through Gateway and STAR (Strategic Tertiary Alignment Resource) courses.



The organisation is NZQA-approved to deliver:

- The National Certificate in Equine Level 2
- The National Certificate in Early Childhood Education and Care Level 3. It also includes National Certificate in Employment skills Level 1.
- The Certificate in Teacher Aiding (Level 4), developed by Training For You.

When students begin these year-long courses in late January they receive an initial assessment of their skills and learning, involving self-assessment where students assess themselves against vocational, literacy, and numeracy expectations; formal assessments in vocational literacy in reading, writing, and numeracy.



Tutors also assess oral and listening skills during the interview process. As a result, students' individual goals are 'scored' on a matrix. These results are then aligned to The Learning Progressions. The matrices form the basis of one-on-one literacy and

pathway planning sessions where students and tutors discuss learning strategies and set individual goals for the course, learning, and literacy. These pathway plans are revised each term. At the end of the course, in an individual exit assessment, students' plans and goals are reviewed and their achievements discussed.

The action research design built on these practices which were already in place, adding a further process to encourage greater and more frequent reflection in students.

Cycle one – the pilot

The planning process took place over a three month period. Margot met with the research team in March 2005 and narrowed down her central research question to:

Does incorporating metacognitive skills into a training programme aid literacy achievement?

Her challenge then became how to incorporate such skills into the teaching programme. The research team discussed with Margot ways in which students could be encouraged to reflect on their learning processes more regularly during the course of their training. It was eventually decided that this could be accomplished by adding an initial questionnaire, using regular diaries or logbook questionnaires and adding a final questionnaire to the exit interview. The processes would be incorporated into

the already established process of initial assessment, regular appointments with literacy tutors, and exit interviews.

Margot and the team designed the logbook questions, and after several revisions, refined logbooks were prepared. The logbooks would be filled in by students on a regular basis. Tutors would also fill in logbooks regularly.

Eleven students and five tutors from the teacher aide and early childhood programmes participated in the pilot project conducted during Term 4, 2005. The project team analysed the results in January 2006. For details of the pilot project results, please refer to the *Action Research Initiatives* report (Vaccarino, Comrie, Culligan, & Sligo, 2006).

Reflecting on the pilot study

The full results from the pilot study were discussed by Training For You tutors in February 2006, and their responses fed back to the Massey team to plan the next cycle. While tutors had found the process valuable, they also made clear their concerns about the large amount of time the process was taking. A number of changes and refinements to questions for students and tutors were discussed with the Massey team and it was also suggested that questions in the logbooks should be reduced. It was further decided that logbooks would be filled in less frequently and this should be done at times connected to key parts of the course.

It became clear that the research project was also having an effect on the tutors and their teaching. Two aspects became obvious. First, the pilot study helped the organisation assess whether logbook processes and other forms of reflection were 'working' for students and tutors and how to incorporate these processes more effectively. Second, the action research process helped tutors assess the effectiveness of the initial assessment and pathway process and reflect on parts of their literacy teaching.

Reflecting on the success of the pilot study, Margot Syder commented that tutors regularly discussed their logbook responses with her and during these sessions ideas were produced and any necessary help was arranged. Most important, tutors began to question their assumptions about students' literacy learning. This was important because literacy learning in class is blended seamlessly with the knowledge needed for students' specialty. For



example, the concept of volume is taught as part of mixing baby feeding formulae, and so on. Margot said that the pilot process, combined with her discussion with tutor, had helped them identify literacy learning opportunities:

In fact, as a result from those sorts of comments, we've now decided that in each unit and each module that we do, we're going to start with some particular integrated literacy component that we will concentrate on and we will collect some form of formative assessment evidence – not necessarily formal

Margot also pointed out that it was good to have a pilot project, as the tutors and students were very focused and keen on providing feedback regularly, and that started the ball rolling. She believes they received very good feedback from the students in the pilot and they learnt that some questions were not appropriate or worded correctly. The pilot also gave students and tutors an opportunity to learn about the whole reflective process.

For the next cycle of the action research project, some of the logbooks and questionnaires for students and tutors were modified or partly redesigned and the new versions were presented to the Massey University Human Ethics Committee for approval in March 2006.

Cycle two

Overview

The second cycle of action research at Training For You was undertaken between May and December 2006, with students and tutors from all three major certificate courses in the Wanganui campus (Equine Skills, Early Childhood Education and Teacher Aiding) taking part.

Participation was voluntary, and twenty five students (more than three-quarters of the student body) participated in the second cycle of this research project:

- 10 from the teacher aide programme,
- 6 from the equine study programme, and
- 9 from the early childhood programme.

All nine tutors participated in the second cycle of this research project: 3 from each of the programmes offered at Training For You.

The data collected in the second cycle is presented below. We concentrate first on students, reporting on their reflections on the initial pathway planning process. Then we cover their open-ended responses in their student log books. We move on to the end-of-course feedback. The next section focuses on tutors, reporting on their re-

sponses in the log books. Finally, we compare student and tutor responses to closed-ended questions which were asked of both students and tutors.

Students

Pathway plan/literacy review feedback forms

Twenty-one students completed *pathway plan/literacy review feedback forms* at the beginning of the 2006 academic year.

The results showed that this initial process is very beneficial in building understanding of skills and self-reflection. All the students said their literacy skills had been assessed in a way they understood; and they had understood the goal-setting process. All the students reported finding the literacy assessment process helpful in assisting them in planning their goals; and all, except one, said they were now better able to reflect on their skills and those required to meet their goals. One student commented that

Before starting the course I knew what my goals were and had a fair idea of what I was capable of. The literacy and numeracy assessment allowed me to pin point what I need to work on.

Student Log Book

Between 22 May and 4 December 2006, students completed *Student Log Books* over a period of 12 sessions, providing a total of eighty one entries. These log books consisted of:

- eight questions with a Likert scale in which students ticked a block which reflected their learning process (to be discussed in a later section on page 22);
- five open-ended questions looking at issues such as their approach to learning, which literacy skills they identified as being most helpful towards achieving their course objectives, ways in which the literacy programme was useful to them, and any suggested changes to the literacy programme.
- Students were also provided with a list of 23 possible methods of literacy instruction (also discussed later on page 23), where they had to tick the ones they felt reflected the best way they had learnt since completing the previous log book.



When asked which literacy skills were the most helpful for meeting their course objectives, students identified writing, maths, and reading. Students commented on the

way the literacy programme was useful to them, and the comments below indicate their range of responses:

*By writing a journal every week on what we did, and ways we can improve
To help understand things I do, write diaries/record details and think about how that
affects me or the kids I'm looking after
Because they give us techniques that can help us learn.
Very helpful in improving my written work to a level that I am happy with.
It was useful because it taught me the things I was struggling with
Because it enhances my understanding
Has cleared up a lot of numeracy problems particularly around division – concepts are
explained in a variety of ways to make sure I understand*

The last question asked students to provide any suggestions for changes to the literacy programme. There were twelve suggestions, mainly focused on three areas: more time, more one on one literacy sessions, and more visual aids in the literacy workshops.

Course evaluation and exit process feedback form

In December 2006, seventeen students completed the *course evaluation and exit process feedback* forms. These forms are designed to help students reflect on their overall learning experience and the organisation regards it as useful information about the course focus and its applicability. Responses were uniformly positive. The Likert scale answers showed that students felt they had achieved their personal goals/literacy goals identified at the beginning of the course. Students indicated they believed they had achieved the goals which they had reviewed throughout the year; and the goal-setting process had influenced the way they approached their learning.

In response to open-ended questions about skills they intended using in the future, most students mentioned maths, and writing. Two students mentioned skills to help understanding. Additional skills included reflective skills, road code, study skills, time management, and research skills.

Throughout the year students attend pathway plans and literacy review meetings. When asked in what way these meetings assisted them in reaching their goals, ten students said that they showed them what they needed to do: it gave a focus on what they need to know, it helped them set goals and work towards a plan, it helped them achieve their goals and decide what they're going to do in the future, and as one student said "It identified and reiterated what it is I want to do, and that I can do it!"

Overall, students were satisfied with the literacy programme and there were very few suggestions for changes. One student wanted more maths whilst an-



other wanted more one-on-one sessions. One student suggested “Don’t change the tutor!”

Students were asked whether it had been helpful to reflect on their literacy learning throughout the year. All students said that it had been helpful to them, and typical comments included:

Because it made me realize what the skills are used for
Being able to remember things and go back later to do them later in the year.
Because I could see what I had achieved
Helped me remember what I have learnt
I was able to see what I need to work on

Tutors

Tutor log book and staff feedback and appraisal results form

Between 29 May and 27 November 2006, tutors completed *tutor log book and staff feedback and appraisal results forms* over a period of 12 sessions, providing a total of forty one entries. Tutors were asked to reflect on what worked well in the classroom and what did not work so well in the classroom. Tutors provided a range of detailed and comprehensive responses which demonstrates their reflective skills. Tutors also provided a list of skills which were asked for by the students to help them progress into higher education. Because the courses are so different, there was a wide range of responses. Comments below represent common threads:

Verbal skills around behaviour management while on practicum
Being reflective on their own practice
Comprehension and numeracy skills
Editing written work
Writing and reflective thinking
Memory techniques and study skills
Brainstorming techniques to get them started with writing descriptive paragraphs
Planning strategies

Tutors were then requested to reflect on how student progress was measured. Answers showed that tutors are developing their own ongoing assessment processes, such as practice exercise, assessing student diary entries, observation and questioning students, and reviewing essay plans.

Next, tutors were asked to mention the methods of evaluation they used to assess the outcome of the literacy programme. Some of these methods included:

A completed learning story by each of the students
Asked students what worked or didn’t work at the end of each session
Observations and peer support

Each student was asked whether they felt that what they had been taught and how they had been taught was conducive to their style of learning
Discussing the results recorded in the graphic organisers
Reflection on progress and how well they were progressing against goals set
Discussion with students about their progress and further needs

Tutors were then required to mention any changes they were intending to make when they teach literacy, and some of their comments included:

Encourage more self-evaluation
I would like to look at using more "problem solving" scenarios to stretch their thinking and transference strategies
More questioning to help students to recollect important and relevant information
More modeling of the work so the students can visually see what is required
More one on one for more frequent but shorter periods of time
More mind maps and study techniques
I would like to use more real life practical skills

In the last question, tutors were asked to make suggestions for any changes to the literacy programme. Themes from these responses are increased smaller group work, professional development to help with literacy teaching, team building, more time of student assessment and support.

Student and tutor responses

Two sections appeared in both the student and tutor forms, and the results have been included here so that comparisons can be made.

In the first section, eight questions were asked in which students looked at their different learning processes, and how often they used these processes. A Likert scale was provided. Tutors were asked the same questions about their students' learning processes, and how often their students used these processes.

Because responses to this block of questions were quite complex and time consuming to complete, both students and tutors provided responses which could not be quantified. Subsequently, this section has been redesigned for future usage. Therefore, the following analysis is largely indicative.

Students reported they "often" try to relate new material to things they have previously learnt, whereas tutors felt that students only do this "sometimes". When asked if they learn by memorising, both students and tutors pointed out that only "sometimes" do students memorise material so that they can recite it. However, in an apparent contradiction, students report they "often" try to memorise everything they might need to learn, whereas tutors believe this only happens "sometimes". When

asked whether they force themselves to check to see if they remember what they have learnt, both students and tutors feel that this happens “sometimes”.

Students and tutors agree that students “often” make sure that they understand the key points for an assessment. Students and tutors also agreed that students “often” try to figure out which concepts they haven’t understood. Both tutors and students reported that “sometimes” when students do not understand something, they look for additional sources of information to clarify it. Also, both students and tutors agree that students “often” try to figure out how the information or skills they are learning might be useful in real life situations they might face.

While we were not able to quantify the results as we had hoped, we were able to determine that there is high congruency between the students’ perceptions of how they learn, and the tutors’ perceptions of their students’ learning processes.

In the second section, students and tutors were asked about the literacy methods used in the literacy programmes at Training For You. A list of 23 methods was provided to both students and tutors. Students were asked to select the best ways they learnt since completing their previous log book. Tutors were asked to select what methods they had used to teach literacy since completing their previous log book. The results have been provided in the table below, presented in order of preference (numbers represent frequency of responses over the twelve sessions of log book completion).

STUDENTS		TUTORS	
Best way they learnt		Methods used to teach literacy	
One on One	51	Real life or practical experiences	34
Real life or practical experiences	48	Prior knowledge	33
Group discussion & brainstorming	40	Games, puzzles or hands-on experiences	33
Games, puzzles or hands-on experiences	39	One on One	30
Handouts, worksheets & notes	38	Group discussion & brainstorming	30
Evaluation & feedback	34	Structured to learning style	29
Researching	33	Modelling & demonstrations	27
Prior knowledge	30	Handouts, worksheets & notes	26
Quizzes – oral or written	24	Questioning strategies	22
Goal setting & planning strategies	22	Transference strategies	18
Questioning strategies	20	Evaluation & feedback	16
Journals & portfolios	20	Journals & portfolios	15
Repetition, practice & application of rules	19	Repetition, practice & application of rules	15
Memory techniques	18	Goal setting & planning strategies	14

Recovery & trial & error strategies	17	Critical thinking & analysis	13
Checklists & prompts	17	Quizzes – oral or written	13
Role plays & scenarios	16	Graphic organizers & mind maps	11
Modelling & demonstrations	15	Researching	10
Structured to learning style	14	Role plays & scenarios	9
Self monitoring & tracking strategies	14	Memory techniques	9
Graphic organizers & mind maps	9	Self monitoring & tracking strategies	7
Transference strategies	9	Recovery & trial & error strategies	5
Critical thinking & analysis	11	Checklists & prompts	4

Although in different order, the top five methods selected by students are similar to the ones selected by the tutors. These include one on one; real life or practical experiences; group discussion and brainstorming; and games, puzzles or hands-on experiences. This does suggest congruency and the tutors obviously have an acute understanding of their students' needs. It is worth noting that tutors placed prior knowledge in 2nd position, whilst students placed this in 8th position.

Reflecting on cycle two

After the completion of the second cycle of this project, two meetings were held. Margot and tutors from Training For You discussed the second cycle of the project, and future directions with one of the university researchers. This section summarises the main gist of these meetings.

Tutors

Tutors reported that asking students to reflect on their learning through log books and resulting discussions, helped them think about what they are doing, what they are learning, and how they are learning. They said that through this process, students are able to transfer what they learn in the classroom to a real life situation in their practicums. For example, when a Teacher Aide tutor was observing one of her students on a practicum, she noticed that when her student was teaching fractions, she gave the example of using a quarter of a cup of sugar in a recipe. The tutor went on to say:

I listened to a student today teaching fractions ... and she was talking to him about how in everyday life you come up with fractions because you might be doing a recipe and it might be a quarter of a cup of sugar. That's a fraction. It was just lovely the way she did it.

Teacher Aide Tutor

That was a real reflection because afterwards, she said to me the reason she did it was because of her own difficulty in the past of looking at maths and seeing how it all fits around her all the time. I thought, she is reflecting on her own

learning and she's transferring that to the children and took it really to the very basic activity.

Margot commented that tutors were spending more time ensuring they got feedback from their students on how they were learning, and how they were thinking. For instance, a tutor mentioned that one of her students had a problem with a particular aspect of the module. The tutor's involvement with this project had alerted her to a new way of approaching the problem. Instead of explaining the issue and providing a solution, she asked the student to talk about her own thinking process on the issue, and the student was able to resolve the problem through this reflective process. Yet another tutor provided an example of how on practicums students are teaching their pupils to reflect on their learning. The tutor said "it was just so awesome, encouraging them to talk about that process because that then encourages the pupils to think about their own processes". Another tutor commented that in order to teach reflection, it is important to model the reflective process. She said she told her students, "I'm not going to stand up in front of the blackboard and give you this knowledge. I want to know what you think".

There was a range of views about the efficacy of the log books. One tutor said she found the reflection process difficult: "When it was time to complete the log book I used to think 'Oh no. Do I have to do this?'" Other tutors commented that reflection was something they did innately rather than formally. They said that they habitually thought back on what they had taught and they "knew" whether it had been a good lesson or whether it needed some changes. Two other tutors said that they found it challenging to complete the log books and write comments, and another described it as a burden. A major concern with all the tutors was shortage of time to sit down and reflect on a lesson, a unit or a module and transfer these reflections onto paper.

However, Margot maintained that the only real resistance completing the reflective log books from the tutors was the resistance that you would expect from most educators, and that was shortage of time.

Margot reported that in the second cycle, tutors had taken a more active role in looking at what they could do in the teaching and learning of literacy, in addition to their roles as vocational tutors. They had used the process as a means of enhancing their own reflective strategies. Tutors' reflections of their teaching were also more systematic and more focussed on key modules and units in order to assess how they might alter learning outcomes, or teaching practice:

We've discovered different ways of reflecting, and some of the different strategies that you can use to encourage reflection both of the students and of the tutors

When they've looked at some of the literacy [training] they've delivered, they've made notes on what has worked and what hasn't worked. This is re-

corded so that in the following year, when tutors teach the same module or units, they can see what worked and what didn't work, what was effective, what was integrated, and what extra help students needed. This is particularly useful when a new tutor teaches the programme.

Students

Margot pointed out that some of the Training For You students came from backgrounds where they hadn't had the opportunity to experience role modelling of thoughtful reflection. She said that these students do not reflect on things naturally, and for them to go through the process of evaluation, reflection and then to try something out and then reflect on it again, is an important learning cycle. For example, students complete journals when they go out to do their practicums. Margot mentioned that the students find these journals very useful and see the value of reflecting on their learning process.

Margot said: "the big thing for our students is being able to really know what they know, and to know that they know that concept or piece of information". This meant that it was important for the students to be able to pinpoint at what stage they "lost track" of their knowledge. She said some students have engaged in learning experiences, in the past, which have not enhanced their learning. The reflective process however, has helped them to add meaning to their learning, which remains with them after the tuition has finished. The reflection process helps students with other things too, like tapping into their prior knowledge. Margot summed it up by saying that internalising their learning had been very powerful for students.

When you are reflecting, you're taking charge of your own learning so you're being totally responsible for yourself
Margot Syder

The organisation

With this reflective project, the organisation now has three sets of records. First, the notes that Margot took at regular meetings with the tutors where they discuss what they're doing with the students. Second, the reflections from the tutors about what they are teaching. Third, the reflections from students about their literacy learning in particular lessons, modules or units. This means that more thorough and in-depth reflections are taking place in order to fine tune the learning and teaching process.

If you build up that culture of reflection then I don't think it becomes something extra, it just becomes part of everything you do
Margot Syder

Future of the project

As a result of this project, reflection and metacognition activities will be established in the culture of teaching and learning at Training For You. The questionnaires and

forms will be used regularly. The organisation is looking at a method of collating information across the teaching curricula so that feedback on what works and what does not in relation to particular training modules and units will be easily accessible, and will impact on planning for the following year. In the future, tutors will write their reflections (a sentence or two) on the success of the lesson at the bottom of their lesson plans. This will help whoever teaches the course the following year.

After an interesting and lively discussion tutors agreed on how the questionnaires should be filled in the future. It was agreed that at each weekly team meeting, tutors and students will spend a short time on literacy and numeracy reflections. Tutors will ask their students to reflect orally on their literacy and numeracy learning. Then once a month, students will complete their reflection questionnaires. Tutors will discuss these at the monthly meeting of tutors from each teaching programme.

As has been mentioned earlier, Training For You and the tutors are committed to continue with this project of including reflection and metacognition into their learning and teaching process. This means that tutors will continue reflecting on their teaching by completing their reflection sheets and adding comments at the end of their lesson plans; and students will continue completing their reflection sheets so they have the opportunity to think about their learning, as well as provide ongoing feedback to their tutors and the organisation. In summary, Margot said she hopes that in this way the quality of learning and teaching can be reviewed on an ongoing basis to ensure the students get an excellent learning experience.

Family learning at Castlecliff School in Wanganui



Introduction

An action research project involving parents or caregivers and their Year 1 children at Castlecliff School in Wanganui was started in early 2006. The primary research aim was to ascertain how well a family learning intervention helps address learning goals within a school context. The overall objective of this project was to establish family learning time to promote the development of literacy, numeracy, and communication skills in Year 1 children at Castlecliff School.

This report provides an overview of the process undertaken in establishing a family learning project, including setting up the initial workshop with parents, the development of a booklet providing tips for parents on how to share books with their children, and the on-going evaluations of the process.

In establishing the context for the action research intervention, namely setting up this Castlecliff School family learning project, it was important for the School principal and the university researchers to identify the key issues or needs for the School around family learning. Very often parents, particularly of children with emerging literacy skills, do not realise the important role they play in helping their children learn and acquire literacy. Learning is not confined to formal schooling, but, to a great extent, also takes place outside the school. By regularly sharing books with children, parents become involved in their children's learning and, as a result, children can feel their parents are interested in their achievements. Children and parents often develop a special bond when they spend quality time together sharing books and literacy activities.

Castlecliff School



Castlecliff Primary School is a Years 1 to 6 co-ed Decile 1 school, situated in Polson Street, Castlecliff, Wanganui. The school has been part of the Castlecliff community for more than 125 years.



The following extracts from the October 2006 Education Review Office (ERO) evaluation (Education Review Office, 2006) give a picture of the school, its major challenges and approaches¹:

Castlecliff School provides for a diverse range of learners from new entrants to Year 6. The school has many outstanding features, the most significant being ahuatanga – enveloping the child by providing for learners' emotional and physical wellbeing. The principal and trustees are strengthening links with whānau to support students' learning. Students work and play in a well-resourced and maintained environment that includes up-to-date Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and library facilities.

Since the previous ERO review, progress is evident in the teaching of reading and use of associated student data. Students in the bilingual classes receive consistently well-planned programmes, particularly in reading and te reo Māori. This report indicates that continued development is needed to further involve teachers, students and trustees in the use of assessment.

Many appropriate programmes, responses and interventions are in place to support students who experience learning and behavioural difficulties. Teachers focus on lifting reading achievement. At the beginning of 2006, data identified that many students had low reading levels. Comparative information mid year indicates a significant improvement, with a decline in the number of students in the lower levels.

Although some improvements in students' reading levels were evident at the end of 2005, the gains were not considered by the principal and the board to be sufficient. Learning support for students and further teacher development in reading continue to be the main focus in 2006.

Students work in a positive environment that is culturally inclusive and conducive to learning... High expectations are set for learning and behaviour within classrooms. Teachers use a range of strategies that encourage the development of a variety of skills. Student success is acknowledged and celebrated. Students experience a range of learning opportunities and many are engaged.

Board, principal and staff initiatives to involve parents in their children's education, successfully foster positive relationships between school and

¹ A full copy of the ERO report is available at [http://www.ero.govt.nz/ero/reppub.nsf/0/FC2988FCD829184DCC2572180074866E/\\$File/2346.htm?Open](http://www.ero.govt.nz/ero/reppub.nsf/0/FC2988FCD829184DCC2572180074866E/$File/2346.htm?Open)

community. Trustees and the principal are strongly committed to strengthening links with the community. Involving families is a deliberate strategy in raising student achievement.

Background to the project

In 2005, the principal of Castlecliff School, Craig Sharp, expressed an interest to members of the Wanganui District Library to start a family learning project at the school involving parents and their children in Year 1. The Library contacted Massey researchers in the larger Adult Literacy and Employment programme. The researchers met with the principal of the school to discuss possible ways of implementing this project. The principal mentioned that he wanted parents, particularly of Year 1 children, to be more involved with their children's learning, and also to spend more time reading with their children. The researchers and the principal decided to design a workshop which would assist parents to share books with their children. Topics that would be covered in the workshop included the benefits of sharing books with children; how reading books with children helps them; ways of sharing books with children; and "reading" the pictures in story books. Parents would be encouraged to share their stories with other parents. After the workshop, the intention was to have follow-up family learning sessions at the school at agreed upon times.

Reflecting on cycle one

Once approval was obtained from the Massey University Human Ethics Committee, the principal and Year 1 teachers invited parents of all Year 1 children to take part in an information session in which the family learning project was discussed. Information sheets were distributed to the parents at this meeting. Later, consent forms were given to and signed by those who signalled they would be available to participate. The project was explained to the child by both the parent(s) and the teacher. The principal and the Year 1 teacher also received information sheets and signed consent forms.

The first workshop was attended by 11 parents/caregivers who were all responsive and positive about reading to their children. The presence of the principal and the enthusiastic class teacher was a great bonus. Their support was visible and appeared to encourage parents. Parents were very responsive and participative in this workshop. They asked many questions and were very keen to try new ways of sharing books with their children. After the introduction and the distribution of handouts, parents were asked what benefits they believed might come from sharing books with children. During these discussions parents offered ideas about how such reading might help their children. They were then asked to discuss with the group or with a partner how they share books with their child. The parents were then asked whether they felt there were any right or wrong ways to read books with children. It was em-

phasised that it is not just the act of reading a story to a child that is important, but particularly *the nature of interaction* between the adult and the child. The parents then looked at how to share books with their children. The importance of pictures in story books was also explored.

The parents completed an initial questionnaire on their family's reading habits. This revealed they all believed that reading with children was important. Some of their comments on why they thought reading together with their children was important included the following:

To help them with their learning
They learn a lot about different things
It is part of their learning
For the child to learn that reading is important for learning and skills
Good spending time learning together
Because you both can get some time together in reading.

Three family learning sessions were planned for Term 2 (2006). However, these were not successful. At the first session, only one parent arrived with her daughter. Some of the children did not go to school that day as they were sick. Another parent sent her apologies. For the second and third sessions, no one arrived.

After consultations with the principal and the Year 1 teacher, it was decided that a new strategy was needed to engage the parents.

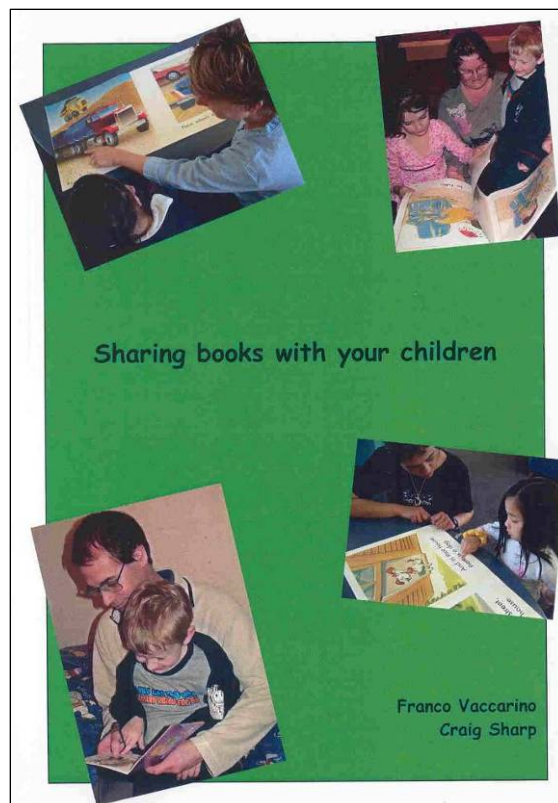
At the first workshop, the Year 1 teacher and the principal wondered whether the parents may have been intimidated by the formalities of the ethics process with information sheets and the completion of the consent forms. As the principal was very keen to make these family learning activities a compulsory component for all Year 1 children entering the school, the idea was to modify the workshop by possibly producing a booklet with lots of photographs and illustrations. The idea was that this booklet could be given to parents, and explained to them individually by the teacher. Parents could then take the booklet home with them, go through it and if there was anything they didn't understand, they could ask the teacher in the next session.

Another important consideration for enhancing parental engagement was one of timing: when would the ideal or most convenient time be to run family learning sessions at school? Some parents fetch their children from the school then go to another school to fetch other children; or they may have sports commitments and thus not be able to stay directly after school.

Revising our plans for cycle two

Whilst considering the best approach to continue this project, the principal met with a newly-appointed Family Liaison Co-ordinator for the Castlecliff area. Based at a kindergarten near Castlecliff School, her role was to encourage a closer relationship between the community and schools. Many of the children from this kindergarten go to Year 1 at Castlecliff School when they turn five. The principal and one of the researchers met with her and she was very keen to work with us on the family learning project.

The university researchers and the principal worked on producing a booklet which could be handed to parents who were part of the project. The overall aim of this booklet was to succinctly outline different ways in which parents or caregivers could share books with their children. This thirty-nine page booklet covered topics ranging from choosing a special time and place to read; letting children choose their own books; asking questions about the cover of a book; asking children to predict what may happen next; acting out certain parts of the story; and linking the story to children's lives. The pictures below show some excerpts from the booklet.





Ask your child why she chose that book

12



When you've finished reading, talk about the book.

- *Did you enjoy this book? Why?*
- *What did you like about it? Why?*
- *What did you not like about it? Why?*
- *How did the story make you feel?*

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Cycle two

At the beginning of Term 1 (2007) family learning sessions began at the School. Parents were informed that there would be family learning sessions where they could assist their children with their reading and other literacy and numeracy activities. In terms of when to have the family learning sessions at school, a suggestion from the Year 1 teacher was to use the last half hour of school, i.e. from 2.30 pm to 3 pm every Monday. Parents could come to the classroom any time between 2.30 pm and 3 pm, choose a book with their child, sit in an allotted area in the classroom, and share a book.

Parents were encouraged to attend these family learning sessions, and, instead of attending a workshop, they received a copy of the booklet. The teacher would guide them through the booklet whilst demonstrating how to share books with the children.

Copies of the booklet were also given to the Family Liaison Coordinator who gave it to parents whose children were approaching five years of age and getting ready to move to Year 1 at Castlecliff School. The Family Liaison Coordinator also encouraged these parents to attend the weekly reading sessions at Castlecliff School. This assisted with the transition period from kindergarten to school.

Twelve to 15 parents have been attending the family learning sessions, which have been monitored by the teachers and the principal..

Outcomes from cycle two

Throughout the project the teachers, the principal and the university researchers have been monitoring how things have been going with the Monday afternoon sessions. Here we will highlight some of the comments made by the parents and children, and by the principal and the teachers.

Parents and children

Comments that parents and children have made to the teachers and to the principal during Terms 1 and 2 (2007) have been recorded.

A lot of the parents were very shy about whether they had anything to contribute to the school, whereas now they have found that they have something to contribute. They can read with children other than their own and this is a great benefit. Some parents have asked the principal if they could have reading sessions every afternoon. A lot of the parents are now staying in the morning when they drop their children off and they'll stay through the first reading session. They sit in small groups reading with the children and reported they feel empowered to do that. They know the questions to ask, they're comfortable doing it as they've seen the teachers do it enough times to think they can also do it.

The principal said that "parents really do want the best for their children and they are concerned about their learning and want them to do as well as they can, but they just need the means to help them". Some of the parents aren't sure what their role is in the learning process and are concerned about whether they have the skills to be able to help their children. The principal continued to say that it has been good to be able to break things right down into really basic building blocks of reading, and saying "you can ask this question, or you could stop the story here and say 'what do you think will happen next', and ask 'what if we had a different ending', 'what if there was a sequel to this book?'" The parents lit up and said "you know, I can do that!", and they've all said "is that all you have to do?" The parents are a lot more confident now, and as one parent said "it has been a really good idea to know the teacher and other mums better for support and that".

All the parents who took part in the sessions enjoyed the booklet. One parent suggested having "a pullout checklist for the fridge with an overview on it" while another requested the book be translated into te reo Māori. The translation of the booklet is currently being undertaken.

In addition, parents were asked to complete a short questionnaire. Seven parents returned the questionnaire, and the results are provided below:

When parents were asked what they thought of the project, they answered:

Good idea
It has been helpful and good to see other children not just yours
It has been excellent
Really good

All the parents felt that this project has helped them as a parent, and when asked how, their comments included:

He enjoys reading books with us now
I am more confident about how to question and prompt
Gives you guidelines to look through the book and be involved in the book
I ask better questions now when Seth reads
More interaction
I have been more involved in the school

The parents all agreed that this project has helped their children, and made the following remarks:

He is more interested in reading to me now
Improved his reading
He thinks more about what he is reading
Never used to be into books, but now he is
Asks more questions and looks at pictures for clues
She enjoys showing me what she has learnt when I come to school

All the parents said that their children enjoy books more now; and they would all like more reading time with their children at school. One parent said that “half an hour is not long enough”, while another parent said “it’s a great opportunity to spend time with children at school”.

For the children, sharing literacy activities with someone other than their teacher is a good change, especially if it’s a parent, an aunt, or a friend’s parent. If the principal makes a guest appearance to read to the children, it can also be very special for them.

The children are really enthusiastic about their reading. They show off to their parents what they’re capable of doing in terms of their reading, so when their parents come on a Monday afternoon, they’re very quick to grab the books they’ve read that week and say “these are the books I’ve read and can I read them to you or can you read them to me?”. The principal states that the children then also ask their parents to read with a group of their friends, to show their parents off!

What about the children whose parents aren’t involved? The principal pointed out that these parents come under an enormous amount of pressure from their children, as they constantly ask their parents when they will be coming to the school to read

with the children. Unfortunately, for some of the parents the ability to be involved during school time clashes with other commitments. However, the school continues to remind the parents that the family learning activities are on as the school would like the parents to be involved as much as they can, even if they can only come for one or two sessions. These one or two sessions would allow parents/caregivers to learn more about sharing literacy activities with their child that they could then carry on in their own time.

School

The principal was very positive about the project and said that it had met the needs and objectives of the school. He mentioned that the project has worked in a number of ways, firstly as a literacy programme, where parents have come in and engaged with their children and the teachers. The parents gained a better understanding of what the teachers do with their children in the classroom. The teachers have found it an enormous benefit just having the parents feel relaxed in their class. Secondly, the relationships between some of the parents and the school are far stronger than they used to be. Some didn't exist at all, and now these parents are quite involved in the school. These parents have also had the opportunity to build up relationships with other parents in the class.

These relationships have extended into other areas as well. For example, Castlecliff School is involved in the *Computers in Homes* project, where parents are clustered together. The ones who read together have said to each other "If you do it, I'll do it". They've come together as a group rather than as individuals, and this has been a positive step.

The principal pointed out that "the booklet has been fantastic, because even parents who aren't in those junior classrooms have heard about the booklet and they ask if they can have a booklet. Teachers from other schools have asked to borrow the booklet as well".

The principal concluded that "it's been really very positive for us. It's such a simple and easy add-on to our programme and yet it has given us enormous benefits. It is now part of life at the school and has been incorporated into the Year 1 programme. We'll definitely carry it on. To have parents turn up and be part of the process, either as readers or listeners, or just participants alongside their children, has added value for us. Some of them have asked to do this every afternoon! It is really positive".

Future of the project

Castlecliff School will continue with this family learning project, both as an intervention/community project and as a research project. The project will be offered to all Year 1 children and their parents, grandparents or caregivers. It will continue to be used as a teaching tool to hopefully align what happens at home with good practice

at school. The intention of the principal is to interview the parents regularly to see where they see value in the project and to encourage them to suggest any changes. The principal also believes that this project could be extended further into other classes as well. He mentioned that there could also be more opportunities for parents to read to children. The principal would like the parents to take ownership of this project and they should be suggesting ways in which they can assist their children's education.

Closing thoughts from the researchers

Linking the terms "action" and "research" highlights the essential features of the methodology we pursued in these two projects. We wanted both action and research outcomes. We have found ourselves in agreement with Hart and Bond (1995, p. 46) who state that an action research project is not necessarily fixed in any one approach: "during the life of an action research project it may shift from one type to another as it moves through the spiral of cycles". We also had first hand experience of the process described by Dick (2000, p. 5): "action research is a family of research processes whose flexibility allows learning and responsiveness. Vague beginnings can move towards better understanding and practical improvement through the critical analysis of the information, the interpretation of it, and the methods used". This is true of the two projects discussed in this report. The reflective project for example, did start as a vague concept centered around a metacognitive approach. It developed into a focussed project allowing tutors and students to develop a better understanding of how reflection can be used effectively in the learning and teaching process.

Wadsworth (1997, p. 78) provides a very apt overview of action research stating that it "is not merely research which it is hoped will be followed by action! It is action which is *intentionally* researched and modified, leading to the next stage of action which is then again *intentionally* examined for further change and so on *as part of the research itself*". This was the case with the family learning project where drastic changes were made after the initial stage was unsuccessful. Action research is not a problem-solving method *per se* in that it does not try to find out what is wrong, but as Ferrance (2000, p. 2) points out, it is "a quest for knowledge about how to improve".

It is important that community organisations and university researchers combine their collective expertise to create projects that satisfy criteria of both academic rigour and community relevance. This has been implicitly recognised by FRST which states that one of the factors it wishes to see addressed in future funding applications is: "meaningful engagement and collaborations with these groups [communities and NGOs] and [FRST also] wishes to encourage a 'bottom-up' approach for research ... " (FRST, 2007, p. 9). This approach also finds resonance in a number of government documents and policies which refer to developing community capacity. For us 'building capacity' has centred upon the strengths already existing within the com-

munity, helping community members identify, have confidence in, and build on, their strong foundation of knowledge and skills.

Part of our collaborative aim was to help build a platform among community members which allowed them to continuously improve their situations by tackling issues or areas of concern more comprehensively and effectively, and also to create new knowledge through action research and other projects. Collaborating with community members has involved learning from them, as much as acknowledging and building on their existing abilities. For us this has meant respecting and valuing our community colleagues; developing their trust and respect; being responsive to the context; avoiding pre-packaged ideas and strategies; and developing well-planned and integrated strategies that fit in with the community's existing plans.

The projects have enabled us to actively involve individuals in issues which affect not only their own lives, but the lives of others. It can thus be seen as a modest contributor to a community development process based on the sharing of skills, knowledge, and experience. The projects in this report seek to enable individuals and communities to grow and change according to their own needs and priorities and at their own pace.

However, we feel this ideal process has only just begun and that we are still at the start of what could become a true collaborative journey if time and funds were available. As Kumar (2002) notes, establishing community-based research with true collaboration between community and university partners is very time-consuming, yet with publicly funded projects, this lead-in time is often not taken into account. Research funding based on contracts with strict timelines for research outputs, often does not fit well with the process of developing meaningful collaborative partnerships. Further, funding organisations appear to be loathe to allow this time. For example, in a New Zealand based project Lerner and Mayow (2003) proposed a three-year timeline for a community-based collaborative research project, factoring in time for a partnership development period, only to receive funding for a two and a half year period.

Regrettably, just as we have started to see the creation of new knowledge and the impact generated by these action research projects, the university team has reached the end of the funding for this project and must withdraw. In an ideal world, this would in fact have been the beginning of a further project, where we would have looked at the next stage of the action research cycle. It is evident that there is a mismatch between the stated need for collaborative community-based research and current research funding structures. We strongly advocate research funding that values appropriate lead-in time for the development of strong collaborative relationships. We also strongly advocate long-term funding opportunities for the continuance of community-based programmes developed from these collaborative ventures.

It has been a privilege for us to have been involved in these two projects, and it has been a rich and valuable learning experience. We are indebted to all the community members and organisations in Wanganui who have worked with us in transforming a concept into a collaborative working reality, which has benefited both individuals in the community and university researchers.

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The Adult Literacy and Employment Project has initiated a number of action research projects. An initial overview of these projects was provided in the 2006 'Action Research Initiatives' report. This report provides details on the further action research stages of a project conducted within a Wanganui adult literacy training provider, and a family learning project conducted at Castlecliff School.

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