

The Action Research Project: Taking SEN provision to the next level

Welcome to Module 20 of your SEN toolkit!

In this module, you will learn how to conceive and implement an action research project that will create a positive, impactful, and measurable change in your teaching and learning context.

Aims

By the end of this module, I will be able to:

- conceive an action research project to explore SEN provision in my context in greater detail
- implement and measure an action research project to explore SEN provision in my context in greater detail
- understand that the SEN Toolkit is merely a key to opening a door to furthering more inclusive SEN teaching practices, and that building a community of practice is fundamental to its success



Imagining Futures

What a journey it's been! The SEN Toolkit has taken you through some complex and (hopefully) interesting places, but this doesn't mean that you've reached the end of the road. It's more like reaching the top of a mountain, from where you can see new horizons.

With the knowledge that you now have, you have the opportunity to catalyse real change!

a) After completing the modules you have completed, which areas of your own context do you believe need change?

b) Can you narrow these down to no more than three important areas?

c) Of these important areas, what is your intuition about which one will be the easiest to change? Why is this the easiest?

d) Without thinking about it too much, what are the biggest obstacles you think there are to changing it?

e) Can you think of three important and positive outcomes from affecting change in this area?

Now you're nearing the end of the modular aspect of the SEN Toolkit, can you reflect on any knowledge and attitude changes you have undergone over the course of the modules? Have you answered the six questions (above) differently from how you would have answered them before embarking on the SEN Toolkit?

Imagining Change

Think change is always hard to manage? It really isn't. With motivation, and the right networks, goals, and planning, you can make a positive impact on the lives of all your SEN students!

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2. Read this story from Austhorpe Primary School, in Leeds, England. <https://www.austhorpeprimary.org/page.php?id=7307>

2.1. Now read this case study from: "Autism Case Studies" from the Autism Education Trust. <http://www.dyslexiabytes.org/asd-case-study>

3. Now you have read these case studies, reflect upon them and answer the following questions:

3.1. Can you identify any key things that these case studies share?

3.2. Why are they key?

3.3. What specific issues did these schools attempt to tackle?

3.4. What specific benefits can you think of that these schools now have, that they wouldn't have had previously?

3.5. Can you note down five important steps you believe these schools would have had to take in order to achieve the change they have achieved?

3.6. Do these case studies have relevance to your context?

You can take some time here, if you like, to search the internet for other instances of schools that have affected positive change.

Deciding upon your Action Research Plan

Change is good! – Especially where it benefits the most vulnerable in our schools. But to make change happen, it’s a good idea to simplify the process for ourselves. This section will look at ways of making change as structured and achievable as possible.

Action Research, in its simplest form, is:

“a disciplined process of inquiry conducted by and for those taking the action. The primary reason for engaging in action research is to assist the “actor” in improving and/or refining his or her actions” - Richard Sagor, 2021 <http://www.ascd.org/publications/books/100047/chapters/What-Is-Action-Research%C2%A2.aspx>

Action Research is a great way of planning and executing change. But planning to develop structures, environments or practices can sometimes be quite daunting. It can help if we go into the process focused on some of the benefits that can come from it.

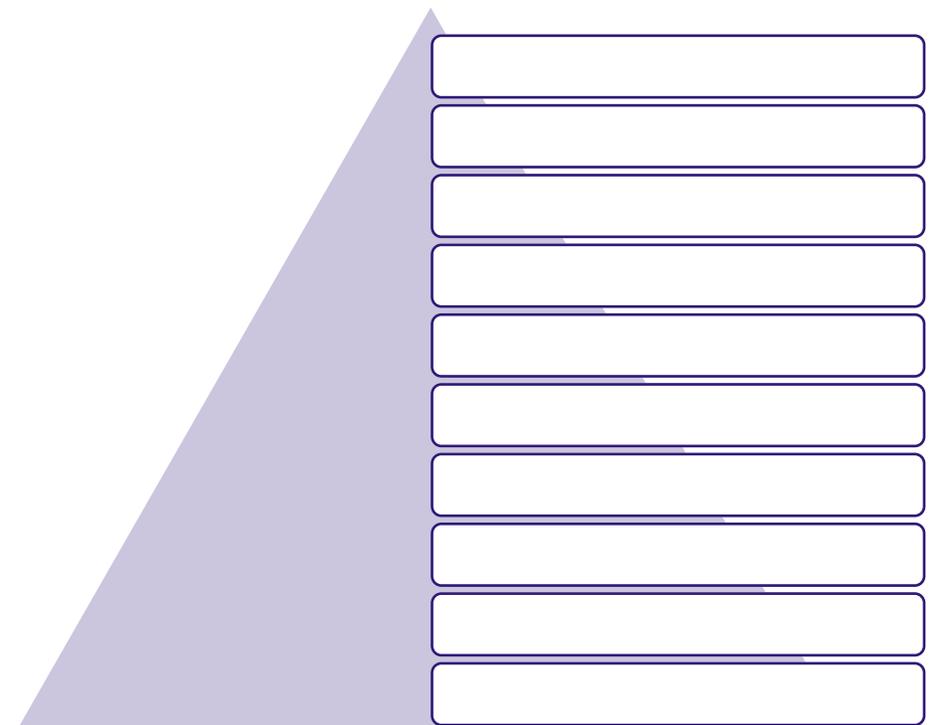
Part 1

4. Put the following eight cards – “Stages of Action Research” – in the order in which you think they should go.

a) Observe the results	b) Form a plan
c) Reflect on the results	d) Act on the plan

e) Identify a need	f) Fact-finding
g) Act again, mindful of what effect my adjustments have had	h) Adjust the plan

5. Look at the Pyramid you have been provided with. This pyramid represents a hierarchy of benefits to embarking on a process of change. Place the “reasons” in order, from the least important (at the bottom of the pyramid) to the most important (at the top of the pyramid). There is one “reason” we have left blank for you to fill in with your own idea.



1. Teacher development (CPD)
2. Ease of planning
3. Reflective practice
4. High level of practical relevance in our research
5. Can be used with quantitative as well as qualitative data
6. Possibility to gain in-depth knowledge about the problem
7. A real opportunity to help students
8. A great opportunity to “spread the word”
9. A chance to make our jobs as teachers easier
10. [Other – please specify]

Part 2

To create the best learning environment for SEN students in your own context, think back to the beginning of this module. What change did you decide was most important, and most achievable?

Using the “Stages of Action Research” cards from “exercise 4”, take the first card – “Identify a need”.

6. Write this need down on a blank piece of paper. You are going to “explode” it! The first stage of “exploding a need” is to turn it into an Action Research Question. So let’s imagine that the need you’ve identified is:

There’s too much sensory stimulation in our school, and we need to reduce this stimulation to create the best learning environment for our SEN students.

You can turn this into a question by formulating it as something like:

How do we reduce the sensory stimulation in our school to improve the learning environment for our SEN students?

So try to reformulate the need you have identified into a question, like you see in the example.

Now we need to “explode” this question. This is a way of making our quest more specific, and so a lot easier. “Exploding” a question is a simple process similar to mind-mapping.

If you look at the question we’ve presented to you, you’ll notice that there are some terms that are quite general. Research and experience have shown that tackling general questions can be harder than tackling specific questions, so the job is to make the terms in our question more specific.

Let’s look at the first of the general terms in our question.

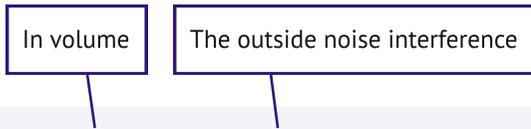
How do we **reduce** the sensory stimulation in our school to improve the learning environment for our SEN students?

This term “reduce” is quite general. Do we mean “reduce in number”, “reduce in severity”, “reduce in impact”, or something else? If we don’t specify what we mean at this early stage, the danger is that we might get lost in an attempt to do too much, with no focus on what is really important.

It might help if we can identify the type of sensory stimulation we’re addressing. This will help understand what we mean by “reduce”.

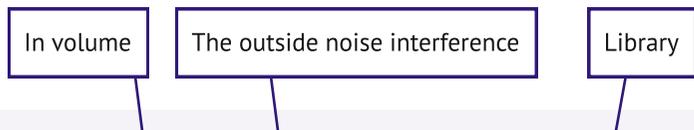
How do we **reduce** the **sensory stimulation** in our school to improve the learning environment for our SEN students?

Let's look at what this might mean:



How do we **reduce** the **sensory stimulation** in our school to improve the learning environment for our SEN students?

So now we have a more specific question about what it is we're trying to do, we need to explode some other terms in order to identify where we need to do it. "School" is a little too general.

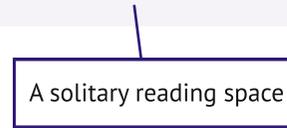


How do we **reduce** the **sensory stimulation** in our **school** to improve the learning environment for our SEN students?

So now we need to explode some further terms for the purpose of focus. What do we mean by "improve", and what do we mean, in this context, by the "learning environment"? Let's take a look.



How do we **reduce** the **sensory stimulation** in our **school** to **improve** the **learning environment** for our SEN students?



And finally, once we have got a better idea of the kind of improvements we'd like to make to a more specific environment, we should make one final "explosion":



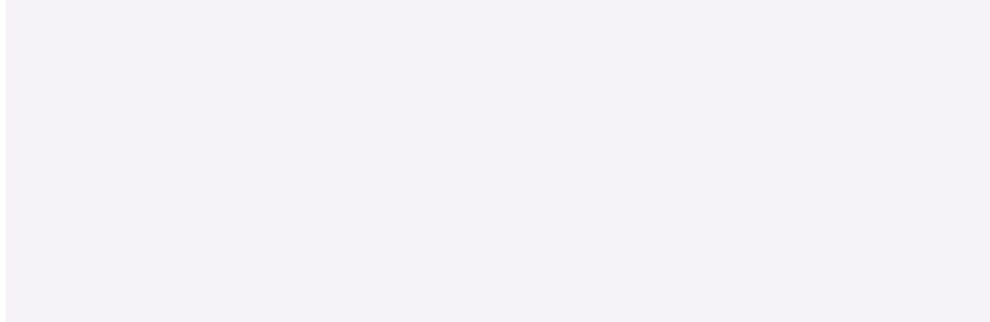
How do we **reduce** the **sensory stimulation** in our **school** to **improve** the **learning environment** for our **SEN** students?



Suddenly, from a rather general question, which could have caused us a lot of problems narrowing down our project, and risked making it open-ended and too unfocused, we have something far more specific:

How do we reduce the volume of outside noise interference in our library to create a more calming solitary reading space for our ASD students?

6.1. Now take the need you have identified, and the initial question you formulated from it, and “explode” your question to create something as focused as you possibly can. Do it in a similar way to how we just did it (above), so you can get a good visualisation of the changes you want to make.



Part 3

Now you have identified the importance of coming up with change, and you’ve identified a focused question to tackle, it’s time to tackle the “fact finding” part of the Action Research project.

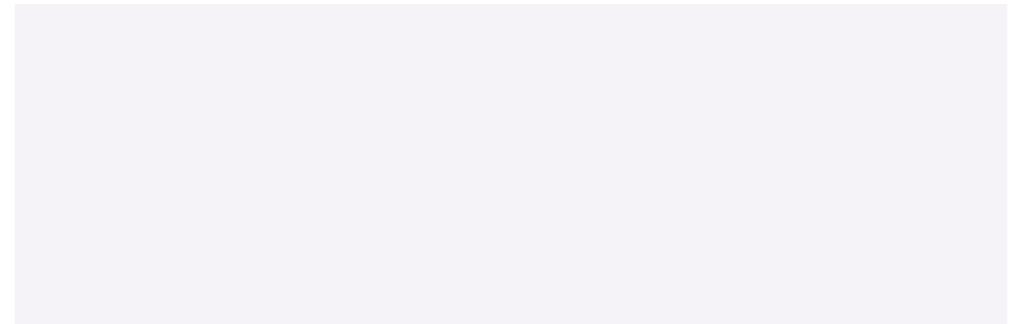
7. Make a list of data collection techniques you can use to find out the information you need. For instance, in the question you’ve been given as an example (above), you could identify the volume of the outside noise interference by:

- Handing out questionnaires to library users
- Asking your students to identify noises and “volume sensitive points” in the library
- Asking your students to set up measuring devices in the library
- Setting up student-drawn “noise barometers” at various places in the library – effectively large cut-out pictures of barometers – and asking library users to mark on the barometers what levels of noise there are at different times of the day, etc.

7.1. Now imagine you have a set of SMART goals (if you have taken Module 19, you should remember SMART goals from there) to align your data collection to. Are the data you want to collect:

- Specific? (you know precisely what the data are)
- Measurable? (you can answer clearly “yes” or “no” the question of whether you have collected it, you can measure the amount of data you have collected and whether it is enough, or you can measure precisely how much data you have collected)
- Achievable? (you know that it is possible and reasonable to collect these data)
- Relevant? (the data you wish to collect are perfectly aligned with the information you wish to find out)
- Time-dependent? (you have a clear timetable for when you need the data, and therefore a point at which you know that you have – or have not – collected the right / right amount of data)

7.2. Now you have made a list of data collection techniques, make a “hit list” of people you want to ask to help you collect these data. It’s useful to make sure these people are also invested in the project, so, if your question is similar to the example question we looked at (above), it would be a good idea to include some ASD students and other library users in your data collection phase.



Part 4

Now look back again at the document: “Autism Case Studies”. This contained six case studies of schools that had implemented change to develop their inclusive practices regarding ASD students.

8. Choose one of the case studies. Read it, but this time looking specifically for the kind of data the school in that case study would have needed to collect, and the types of analysis they would need to have done once they had collected it.

Note your observations down.

8.1. If you were in a similar position, would you have wanted to collect any different data?

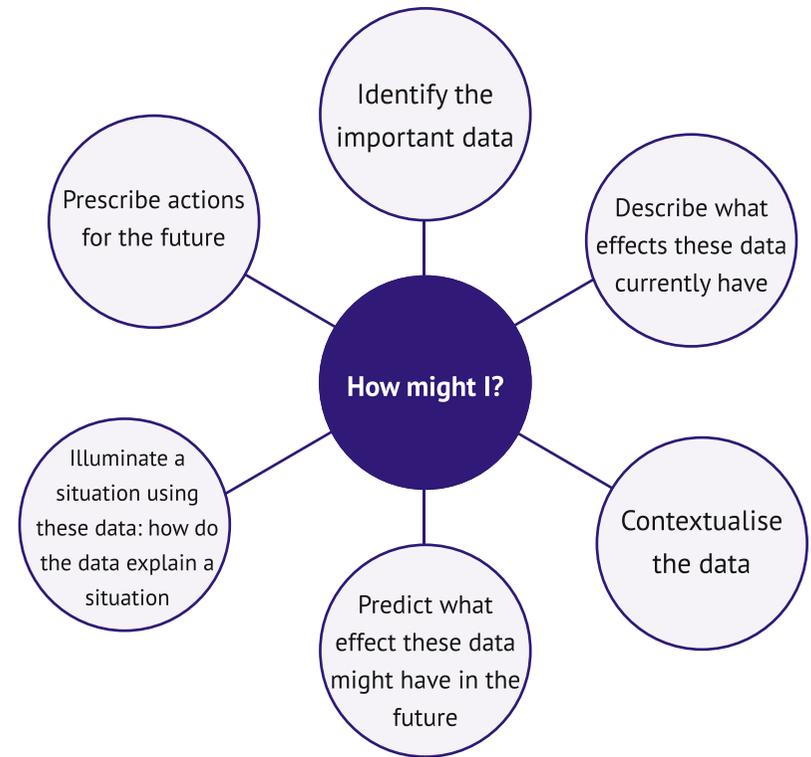
8.1.1. If so, what?

8.2. If you were in a similar position, how would you have analysed the data?

8.3. Now think in terms of how you might be able to use the data you want to collect in your own context. We suggest six key questions to ask:

How might I...?

- Identify
- Describe
- Contextualise
- Predict
- Illuminate
- Prescribe



Think of the data you wish to collect in order to answer your research goal, and go through each of these questions, one by one, in order to provide yourself with both a focused context into which you can put your data, and useful analytical perspectives.



Planning your Action Research Project

Now you know what your focused question is, you know what sort of data you need to collect in order to help answer it, and you know how you are going to analyse your data once you have it, it's time to start planning your Action Research Project! This is an important step, because you can take all the knowledge and insights you have gained from The SEN Toolkit, and start to generate important changes in your context!

Look at the “Action Research Project Template” we have provided. Read through it carefully, and fill in as much as you can. This template will become a helpful “companion” to you as you create your Action Research Project.

Action Research Project Template

- Abstract
- Introduction
- What I've Learned from Distant Colleagues (also referred to as the Literature Review or the Theoretical Framework)
- Clarifying My Action Research Project
- The Road Map of My Action Research Project
- The Story of My Action Research Project
- Further Reflection and Continuing Questions about My Action Research Journey
- References
- Appendices

Adapted from: *Becoming a Teacher Through Action Research*, Second Edition © 2010
Routledge / Taylor & Francis Group, LLC.

Abstract

The abstract consists of a single, concise paragraph describing the purpose, procedure and intended results of your study. Use no more than 200 words. You might choose not to write the abstract until you are nearly finished writing the whole Action Research Project template, and then draft and redraft until it reads as clearly as possible.





Introduction

The goal of this section is to tell the story behind the project in a smooth narrative that engages the reader, and contextualises your project; the critical question that you have “exploded” and worked on is also introduced here. The reader should have a good idea what the paper is about before finishing the first page. In the introduction, think about the following:

- Context. It is important to communicate to the reader a clear picture of the overall context of your project. The way you write the beginning of your paper lays the foundation (weak or strong) for the credibility and trustworthiness of your results and conclusions.
- Use storytelling. Instead of simply describing your setting, illustrate it for the reader using stories and anecdotes taken from the lives and experiences of the students you teach, reflections, and data. Introduce major players and stakeholders in your analysis and results.
- Include active and layered description. Use multiple data sources to illustrate the setting and story behind the research. It must be clear to the reader that you are thoroughly immersed and engaged in your setting, and are therefore qualified to make credible analyses and interpretations. By referring to some data here you signal to the reader prior to the rest of the document what type of research this is and how data were generally collected.
- Your story. It is also important to communicate to the reader a clear picture of yourself as the researcher, and how your own biases, experiences, and assumptions not only influence the study but also provided substance for your critical question. This may be woven into your illustration of context

by including your own thoughts and memories. Make it clear how you arrived at your critical question, because this is important.

- Your critical question. Bring your narrative to a climax in which you lay out your critical question in detail. Explain briefly what your conclusions look like (don't try to keep the reader in suspense).





What I've Learned from "Distant Colleagues"

The goal of this section is to introduce the reader to the major issues and / or themes learned from any literature or stories ("distant colleagues") surrounding your critical question. By broadening your readers' understanding of the major issues surrounding your research, you further solidify the credibility and trustworthiness of your work. This section is generally about three to five pages long.

Choose a format that will allow your readers to make the connection between the reasons you began your AR Project and the purposes you have for the project. This should be persuasive.

Clarifying My Action Research Project

This is a brief, concise section focusing on the essential elements of your AR project. Think about:

- who is involved in the project;
- what the critical question is and what will be analysed;
- where the project will take place (description of setting);
- when the data collection will occur;
- how data collection will be completed;
- why you wish to conduct the study;
- limitations of the study.

This section may seem redundant given that you have already revealed your critical question (CQ) and action(s) earlier. The intent here is to clearly focus both your reader and your own thoughts.





The Roadmap of My Action Research Project

The goal of this section is to inform your reader about the following:

- the interventions, analysis, or strategies you intend to implement;
- the data collection strategies and sources you intend to use;
- the data sets you wish to collect;
- the methods and perspectives you will use to analyse the data;

The Roadmap section is a technical piece of work in which the reader gets an inside view of your research process. The idea is that someone else could do the same research in their classroom by following your detailed descriptions of methodology.

The Story of My Action Research Project

The goal of this section is to illustrate what you learn and have learned, related to your critical question, as you go through your ARP. It is a working document and can also be used in part as a diary of your progress. Use data to tell the story of your research and support your conclusions and emerging theories. Be specific about your evaluations and reflections of your project as you go along. This section is the heart and soul of your action research paper. This is where you tell your story. The section is rich in voice, style, and data. Remember the writing advice: show, don't tell as you write. Interweave important data into your narrative. Include tables, charts, and quotes from interviews and your observations and reflections. Use your data to illustrate your ideas, and to provide the reader the freedom to draw his/her own conclusions as well. Explain how you interpret your data. Include multiple voices and perspectives, including those of critical stakeholders, especially SEN students.





Further Reflection and Continuing Questions about My Action Research Journey

In this section, you bring themes together as you plan your project. Consider the following questions as writing prompts for this final reflection of your action research journey:

- What are some of the most important lessons you will take into your teaching career?
- What will you do differently in the future?
- What additional questions does this research project pose for you?

How to Write a Memorable Conclusion

An effective way to write a concluding paragraph is to use a quote, either from someone famous, your students, or other stakeholders. Another possibility is to end with a short story that illustrates the central focus of the study. Sometimes, a combination works well.

A conclusion should summarise the main lesson that come from the Action Research Project.





References

Depending on the type of Action Research Project you wish to create, references may be optional. However, they can be very useful for others following in your footsteps, or for further ARPs you wish to undertake in the future!

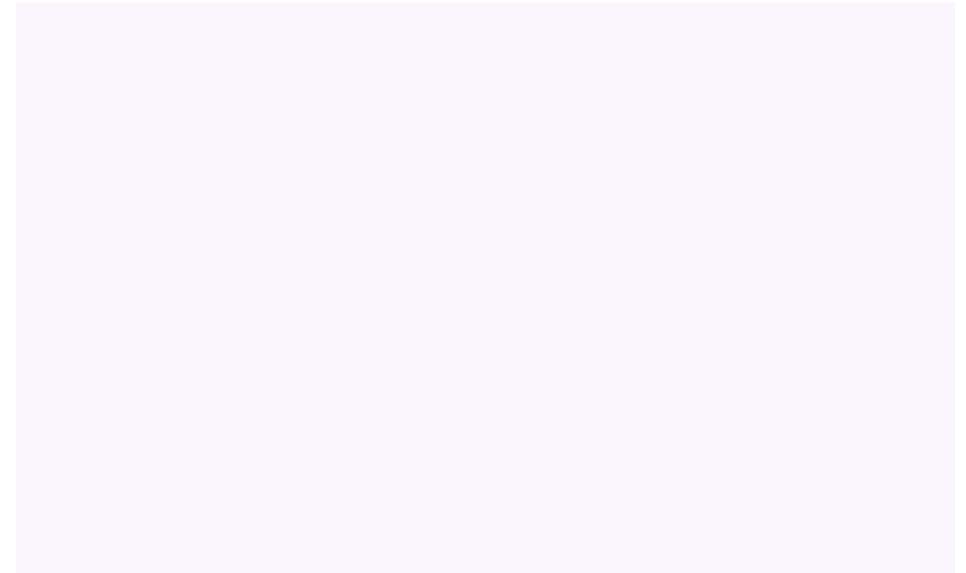


Appendices

A writer places in the appendices additional information that supports or illustrates points in the paper. Items in the appendices allow the reader to go deeper or gain a clearer view of what is being said in the main text. Appendices are important but they are not a “dumping ground.” For example, not all data goes in the appendices; however, a log of data sets may be appropriate. Not all student work would be placed in the appendices, but a sample that clarifies an assignment would be appropriate.

Possible inclusions in the appendices include:

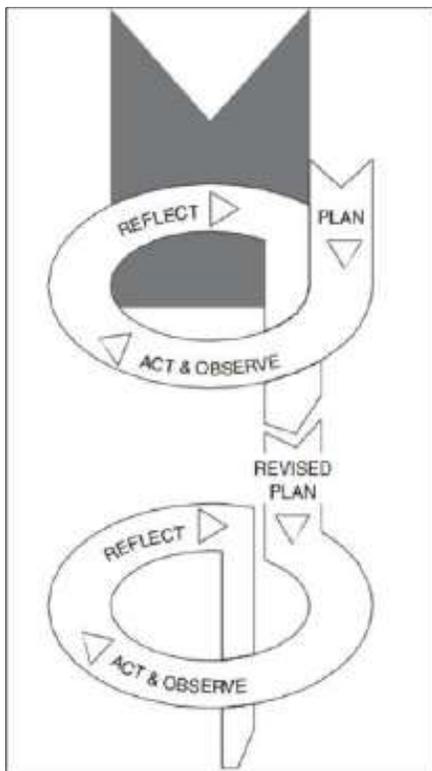
- a log of data sets or specific items from a data set;
- assessments;
- surveys, questionnaires, and interview questions;
- letters home (including how you gained permissions);
- lesson plans;
- artifacts.





Finally

Always remember that an Action Research Project forms a beautiful “virtuous spiral”. You can achieve a lot with a project, but the project, in one sense, has no end – it forms the basis for future research and future change. And as you go deeper into your projects, you can draw more people – teachers, parents, students, and others – into your project cycle.



Taken from <https://research-methodology.net/research-methods/action-research/>



The Stages of an Action Research Project

An Action Research Project consists in several stages. These include:

- 1 Identifying a need
- 2 Fact-finding
- 3 Forming a Plan
- 4 Acting on the plan
- 5 Observing the results
- 6 Reflecting on the results
- 7 Adjusting the plan
- 8 Acting again

Within the earlier stages of your Action Research Project, which of the following have you already done?

- Observed an area that can be developed / changed
- Identified a need
- Come up with a question
- “Exploded” the question
- Decided on what kind of data you need to look for
- Decided on methods of collecting the data
- Decided on methods of analysing the data
- Decided on others who can assist you in your Action Research Project
- Decided on a timescale within which you can implement your project

Check your understanding

Take a short quiz to check you've understood the main points of the module.

Tick the one that you think is correct

1. An Action Research Project:

- a) Is an ongoing project
- b) Is a never-ending project
- c) Is an open-ended project

2. An Action Research Project:

- a) Is rigorous and academic
- b) Is rigorous but not academic
- c) Is academic but not rigorous
- d) Is neither academic nor rigorous

3. An Action Research Project:

- a) Is a way of making problems more specific
- b) Is a method of systematic enquiry into problems and their solutions
- c) Is a method of finding problems that could never otherwise be found

4. Action Research involves:

- a) Observing, identifying, acting, adjusting, identifying
- b) Observing, acting, adjusting, evaluating, observing
- c) Identifying, planning, acting, observing, adjusting, acting
- d) Identifying, acting, adjusting, planning, identifying, evaluating
- e) Evaluating, acting, planning, acting

5. Data analysis perspectives include:

- a) Identify, contextualise, illuminate, dismiss
- b) Predict, prescribe, instruct, illuminate
- c) Illuminate, generalise, specify, describe
- d) Identify, describe, contextualise, predict

Answers

1.a, 2.b, 3.b, 4.c, 5.d

Reflect on the module

In this final section, think about what you've learned this module and how you can use this in your day-to-day working life.

1. What is your biggest concern now you have looked at an Action Research Project?

2. Who can you turn to, to discuss this concern / these concerns?

3. Can you recollect why such a project is important?

4. What do you think you can do to put your concerns into context and take them seriously, yet not allow them to stop you embarking on your ARP?