CHAPTER FIVE

ACTION RESEARCH

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The term *action research* was coined by the social psychologist Kurt Lewin in the 1940s to describe a particular kind of research that united the experimental approach of social science with programs of social action to address social problems. Lewin's research aimed to promote social action through democratic decision-making and active participation of practitioners in the research process (Kember & Kelly, 1994, p. 2).

Kemmis and McTaggart (1998) defined action research as:

> a form of collective self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices, as well as their understanding of these practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out … In education, action research has been employed in school based curriculum development, professional development, school improvements programs and systems planning and policy development. (p. 5)

Dick (1999) described action research as a family of research methodologies which pursue action (or change) and research (or understanding) at the same time. In most of its forms it does this by using a cyclic or spiral process. Thus, action research is an emergent process, which takes shape as understanding increases; it is an iterative process, which converges towards a better understanding of what happens.

Gay (1987) believed the purpose of action research to be concerned with a local problem and conducted in a local setting. He stated that it is not concerned with whether the results are generalised to any other setting, with the teacher very much a part of the process.

The action research model enables teachers to work directly in their classroom with other teachers and their students – in the natural setting. As Ira Shor described, "it [research] happens everywhere else except every day in the classroom, where it is needed" (as cited in Regelski, 1994/1995, p. 65). Action research also provides the opportunity to work collaboratively with other music teachers. Often music teachers work in isolation in their school – isolation from general teachers and also other music teachers. Kemmis and DiChiro felt that collaboration *defines* action research (as cited in Miller, 1996) and Kemmis and McTaggart (1998) stated that the approach is only action research when it is collaborative.

According to Kuzmich (1987) there is a gap between research studies and their practical application in music education. Action researchers try to close this gap between research and practice by creating a situation in which practitioners define research problems and conduct research in such a way that the outcomes are directly useful to classroom or other educational situations (Kember & Kelly, 1994). Grundy and Kemmis (1982) described action research as:

> research into practice by practitioners, for practitioners … In action research, all actors involved in the research process are equal participants, and must be involved in every stage of the research … Action research of any developed kind requires that the practitioners themselves control all the aspects of the research process … The kind of involvement required is collaborative involvement. It requires a special kind of communication … which has been described as 'symmetrical communication' … which allows all participants to be partners of communication on equal terms … Collaborative participation in theoretical, practical and political discourse is thus a hallmark of action research and the action research process. (p. 87)

Action research has been used in many settings including business, industry and education. Carr and Kemmis (1986) defined educational action research as a term used to describe a family of activities in curriculum development, professional development, school improvement programs and systems planning and policy development. These activities have in common the identification of strategies of planned action, which are implemented and then systematically submitted to observation, reflection and change. Participants in the action being considered are integrally involved in all of these activities, which makes this a collaborative process. Practitioners of action research link the practical and the analysis of practice into a productive and continuing developing sequence in collaboration with others.

Action Research in Music Education

Is action research then a valuable methodology to be used in music education research? Regelski (1994–1995) identified the central problem of research application and educational change in music as arising from a basic failure to take into consideration the situatedness of the teacher's unique world of experience. He believed that music education is carried on as a craft, having no basis for practice other than the tacit theorising of teachers who are apprenticed to teach as they were taught. While a craft merely involves a repertoire of skills, a profession demands an understanding of the concepts of that field of practice, the theory that underlies it. Regelski stated that if music teachers are to be professionalised, teaching praxis must be predicated on valid and reliable educational theory and in light of a generally accepted knowledge base concerning music, teaching and education.

Regelski believed that action research is concerned with asking questions or stating problems in terms that the actors involved recognise as problems and can relate to by critiquing their own praxis, as well as apply to improving future praxis. He also believed that a turning toward action research in music education will promote a democratic form of public discussion allowing for an uncoerced flow of ideas and arguments.

Have there been many action research projects conducted in music classrooms? Four examples are cited in this chapter. The first such published paper included an action research project conducted by Beth-Anne Miller (1996, p. 100–115), a music specialist: *Integrating Elementary Music Instruction with a Whole Language First-Grade Classroom.* She chose to use action research because she wanted this study to inform her teaching. The collaborative and cyclical nature of the action research model seemed to best describe her life as an elementary general music teacher and best serve her in her role as teacher-researcher. She believed that the collaborative nature of action research might be particularly appealing to specialists, such as music teachers, who traditionally have found themselves set apart from the mainstream of general classroom teachers. An unexpected positive result of the study was a marked increase in collegiality between classroom teachers and her. In the action research project, she explored ways to integrate her music instruction with the core curriculum without sacrificing the integrity of the musical agenda and was curious whether integration would enhance learning and student motivation. She collaborated with a first grade classroom teacher in

planning and implementing integrated units based on the whole language approach that were still focused on the basic music concepts of rhythm, melody, harmony, articulation, dynamics and timbre. The study changed Miller's view of integration from one entity to varied manifestations with different purposes, contexts, and educational functions. This informed her teaching and clarified rationales and functions for curricular activities. It also helped her move from a relatively authoritarian teaching role to a more facilitative one. The study informed her teaching in both context and style, as well as changing the whole context of her teaching.

Another music action research study is reported in *The New Handbook of Research on Music Teaching and Learning* (2002), edited by Colwell and Richardson. P. O'Toole, in 1994 conducted a study of power dynamics in the choral rehearsal class and addressed the question of why anyone would be willing to participate in the typical performance ensemble, in which the individual's opinions, thoughts and feelings are subordinated in favour of the director's opinions, thoughts and feelings. The research questions focused on replacing the traditional power relations of the choral music classroom with a series of three 8-week projects that implemented feminist pedagogy in three choral ensemble settings. Working in collaboration with two high school choral directors and her own choir, O'Toole used their classroom concerns to design projects that would allow greater input from students with respect to both individual responses and musical decision-making. O'Toole attempted to involve the students' feelings, needs and reactions in the rehearsal setting through activities ranging from large group discussion of the poetic text, journal entries about the rehearsals and student interviews about their experiences. The data included field notes, teacher interviews, student interviews, student-conducted interviews and researcher journals. The narrative is juxtaposed with tales from classroom events and with critical commentary, verbal snapshots of interesting moments from the classroom projects and montages (a series of images that play with the points of view established in the snapshots).

The action research methodology was also used in a study conducted by Costley (1993). This project involved a group of secondary music teachers, schools and the local professional development centre, and focused on the development and monitoring of anti-sexist classroom strategies and teaching materials. This action research used a spiraling process whereby, after close monitoring of a classroom situation, teachers accumulated evidence about a specific issue, which subsequently led to the planning of action steps and then positive practical action for change in the

school situation. The spiral process was repeated as many times as it was felt of value for the purposes of refining and focusing the specific issue. A number of strategies arising from the project were proposed to suggest possible practical ways for change including:

- teach 'music' rather than composers;
- gender issues, which only entreat a better deal for boys in music education, should be carefully considered;
- adopt girl- and women-centred ways of thinking;
- create our own music in the new context so that a different voice can now be heard.

Music in the Year 8 Classroom is the fourth study and was conducted by Hartwig in 2009. Hartwig wanted to generate public discussion regarding the teaching of year 8 music (the curriculum content and its delivery), develop collegiality between music teachers and collect stories of classroom events as well as students' comments. In order for the published report to obtain credibility amongst practising music teachers, she believed the research had to be practical and involve the researcher (herself) not only as an observer, but also an equal, active participant in the study. By being involved and engaged in the classroom she would more likely, to a certain extent, become an accepted part of the class. It should be noted that it is not normal to have a second teacher in the classroom on a regular basis. One aim was to be both teacher and researcher, at the same time, in the classroom. As Paton (1987) explained:

> Experiencing an environment as an insider is what necessitates the participant part of participant observation. At the same time, however, there is clearly an observer side to the process. The challenge is to combine participation and observation so as to become capable of understanding the experience as an insider while describing the experience for outsiders. (p. 75)

Paton, however, then stated "the ideal is to negotiate and adopt that degree of participation which will yield the most meaningful data given the characteristics of the participants."

Atkin's view (1989, p. 204) was that "not much progress in education is likely to take place unless teachers become agents in the improvement of their own practice." Hartwig believed she needed to reflect on her own practice in order to set an example to other music teachers. She hoped to learn about her own practice and instead of playing the role of expert or interventionist, "to model the process of engaging in dialogue about the

'concrete particularities' of our own practice" (Crites, as cited in Clandinin & Connolly, 1991, p. 268). Hartwig was not only an observer but also an equal participant in the project in an attempt to capture the essence of action research. McNiff, Lomax, and Whitehead (1996) stated that:

> Action researchers are intent on describing, interpreting and explaining events (enquiry) while they seek to change them (action) for the better (purpose). (p. 13)
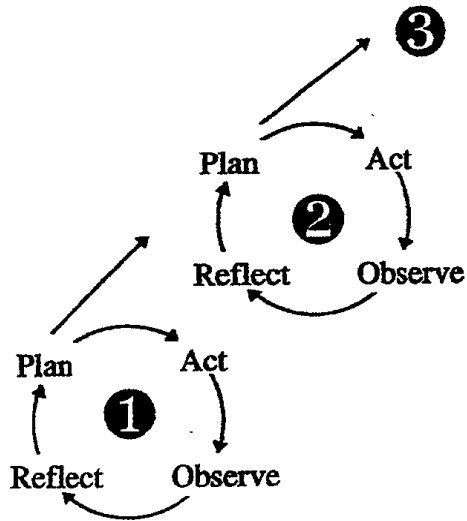
Action Research Design

There are many action research design models. Future researchers are encouraged to consult some of these designs before selecting their preferred model (for example, Cherry, 1999; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000; McNiff & Whitehead, 2006; McNiff, Lomax, & Whitehead, 1996; Mertler, 2006).

The model described in this chapter was devised by Zuber-Skerritt (1995, p. 13), as shown in Figure 1. Zuber-Skerritt described action research as "collaborative, critical and self-critical enquiry by reflective practitioners who are accountable and make the results of their enquiry public." Action research is a cyclical process of planning, acting, observing and reflecting. Planning includes problem analysis and strategic planning and involves constructing a plan that is flexible so that it may cope with unforseen issues. Acting means implementing the strategic plan in an action that is deliberate and controlled. This practice means putting the ideas into action. Observing includes monitoring and evaluating the action and its impact on the participants and the stakeholders with the effects of the intended and unintended action being documented. Reflecting on the evaluation results means drawing practical and theoretical conclusions and planning the next cycle of improvement or change in the action research spiral, in light of the findings. These four phases are static steps yet "dynamic moments in the action research spiral" (Cresswell, 2012, p.112) that are flexible and allow the data to guide the research findings.

Originally Zuber-Skerritt had the arrows pointing downwards and then sideways. She then changed the arrows to pointing upwards. This upward spiral indicates continuous improvement of practice and extension of knowledge – personal knowledge and knowledge in the field. The four sections of planning, acting, observing and reflecting are not static steps but as Zuber-Skerritt (1992, p. 112) described, "dynamic moments in the action research spiral."
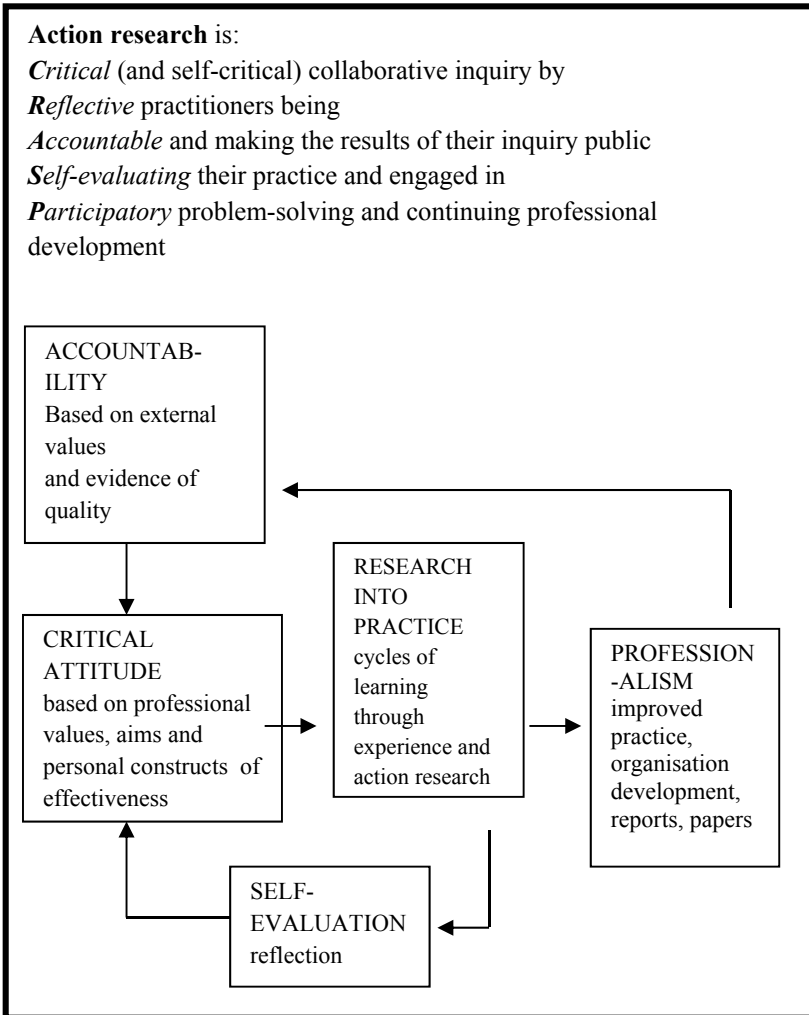
Figure 1. Action research spiral (Zuber-Skerritt, 1995)

Zuber-Skerritt (1992) developed the CRASP model (see Figure 2) as a way of describing the use of action research for professional development in higher education. Although it was developed for the university level, the model can be used in schools as it has at its heart that action research might lead to a better understanding and improvement of learning, teaching and staff development. This model defines the research model that guided the Hartwig (2009) study.

Chan's (1993) paraphrased version of the model (as cited in Zuber-Skerritt, 1995) can be used as a guide when using the action research methodology. Each of the headings from the model has been used and put into the music education and music teacher context. The headings in the model have been related to music education.

Figure 2. CRASP model (Zuber-Skerritt, 1992)

Action research is:
Critical (and self-critical) collaborative inquiry by
Reflective practitioners being
Accountable and making the results of their inquiry public
Self-evaluating their practice and engaged in
Participatory problem-solving and continuing professional
development

ACCOUNTAB-
ILITY
Based on external
values
and evidence of
quality

CRITICAL
ATTITUDE
based on professional
values, aims and
personal constructs of
effectiveness

RESEARCH
INTO
PRACTICE
cycles of
learning
through
experience and
action research

PROFESSION
-ALISM
improved
practice,
organisation
development,
reports, papers

SELF-
EVALUATION
reflection

Issues of the CRASP Model

Accountability.
As music teachers we need to become accountable for what is happening in our music classrooms. Action research helps to ensure continuous quality improvement. As teachers in the classroom carry out the research this model is likely to bring about more accountability to students and teachers. The published reports of the projects could form part of the on-going responsibility for music teachers to provide accountability for the effectiveness of their teaching programs in music. Music in some schools has been considered a non-essential part of the curriculum or a 'frill' subject. If music teachers want to be seen as professional, and music a valued part of students' education, we must become accountable for our subject and make public this accountability.

Critical attitude.
Action research helps encourage the development of critical attitudes towards personal contacts, attributes, values and aims as well as a probable relationship with students in learning. Action research projects endeavour to encourage the development of critical attitude in music teachers. This attitude encourages music teachers to become reflective practitioners and then act on that reflection as well as working in collaboration with other music teachers. It allows students to become a critical and vital part of the learning.

Research into practice.
Action research provides a platform for music teachers to take ownership and control of their teaching practice. Action research conducted by music teachers can be more appropriate and meaningful than educational research carried out by theorists. As well as being applicable to practitioners action research can help build a body of knowledge that contains the voices of the music teachers and their students.

Self-evaluation.
Action research encourages self-evaluation of teaching performance, of individual courses and of whole programs by music teachers. This self-evaluation can be done individually and collaboratively, with the process bringing about improvement in teaching practice. Teaching and research activities also need not be isolated as action research is an ideal way of linking theory and practice together in music education. It can help make music education relevant to students in the classroom today.

Professionalism.
Regelski (1994–1995) suggested that music teachers need to be "professionalised." Action research can contribute to this professionalism by encouraging music teachers to critically look at their own practice and aim for improvement and then document this discovery. Music teachers, by their own professional actions, can improve the attitudes towards music education at their own school level, community level and then as a combined group to state and national levels.

Triangulation for Action Research

Triangulation is the process of cross-checking the integrity of the information accumulated by the researcher. It involves using multiple data gathering techniques, strategies and sources to verify information about an item of interest. Triangulation is "the process of comparing and justifying data from one source against that from another … the message is simple – use more than one observation technique in order to see whether your results are consistent" (Kember & Kelly, 1994, p. 18). Multiple methods and multiple sources of data collection should be used in any action research project to authenticate the data. In relation to the Hartwig (2009) research, the methods included: personal journals from the researcher and the music teacher, observation notes, meeting notes, recorded interviews of class music teachers and students, videotapes of classes and student performances, student questionnaires and photographs. The method of checking the validity of the observations and inferences was confirmed by giving these to the music teacher for her reflective consideration; a technique referred to as "respondent validation" (Zuber-Skerritt, 1992, p. 138).

Cohen and Manion (as cited in Zuber-Skerritt, 1992) offered another definition:

> Triangulation may be defined as the use of two or more methods of data collection in the study of some human behaviour … triangulation techniques in the social sciences attempt to map out, or explain more fully, the richness and complexity of human behaviour by studying it from more than one standpoint and, in so doing, by making use of both quantitative and qualitative data. (p. 139)

Zuber-Skerritt recommended the use of this multiple method triangulation as appropriate for a more holistic view of educational outcomes. Some examples that meet the criteria of multiple method triangulation include:

the methods of data collection already mentioned; obtaining data from various sources including one's own reflections; the music teacher's reflections; data obtained from the students; and data input from other music teachers. The use of these multiple methods and sources reflects an attempt to secure an in-depth understanding and adds richness to the inquiry.

> In educational research, there is also justification for the use of at least three different viewpoints in analysis. Each point of the triangle stands in a unique position with respect to access to relevant data about a teaching situation. (Burns, 1998, p. 323)

Through reflection, music teachers are able to access their own intentions and the aims of their action. Students are able to explain how the actions of the teachers and the curriculum presented influenced the way they respond.

An Action Research Plan

The following plan is an example of an action research project that was conducted by Hartwig (2009). This action research project was conducted over one term (ten weeks) at the school. There were four cycles that were planned collaboratively with content and activities as the driving force. At the end of each cycle, students were expected to complete a task – sometimes individually and sometimes within a group – prior to the plan being implemented. Monitoring and evaluating the action then took place during the cycle, after which a reflection on the results was carried out where practical and theoretical conclusions were drawn, before planning for the next cycle commenced. (Note: the content titles of the cycles were predetermined, however the planning for implementation was only able to be completed when the data from the previous cycle were analysed in line with the action research design). The action research cycles are presented in Figure 3.

Figure 3 – Music project cycles
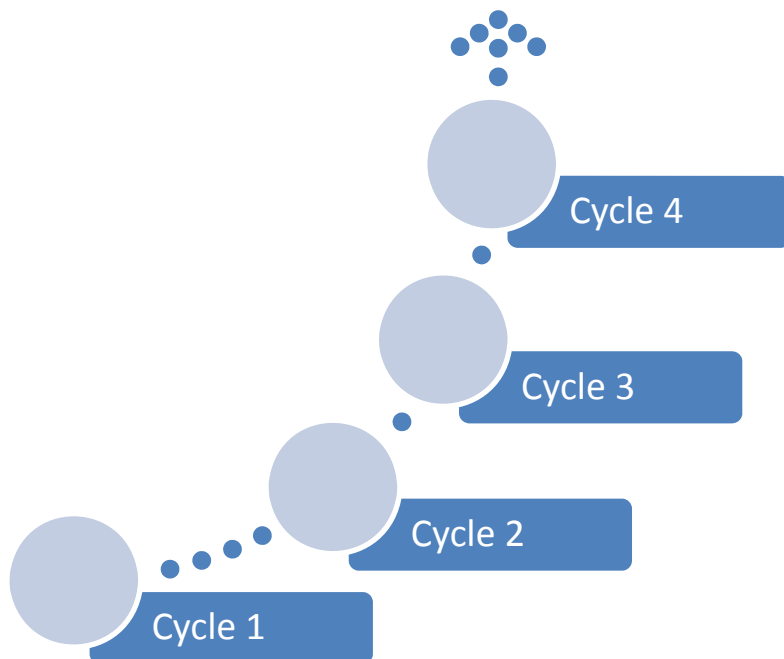
Cycle 1: Rhythm, raps, drum kit
Cycle 2: Staff notation, keyboards, singing
Cycle 3: Graphic scores, soundscapes, guitars
Cycle 4: Major compositions

The cycles involved different time frames depending on the thematic work to be covered. Cycle one was two weeks; cycle two three weeks; cycle three two weeks and cycle four became two weeks after a change in the school timetable, but originally three weeks had been allocated for this cycle. Various assessment tasks were set at the end of each cycle, with both individual and group assessments conducted. The task for cycle one was the composing and performing of a group composition in rap style.

Cycle two involved individual performance on the keyboard of pieces the students had been practising. Individual performance of chords on the guitar as well as group composition and performance of a soundscape was required in cycle three. For this soundscape, a graphic score had to be prepared and presented for the class to view. Cycle four was the culmination of the term, and a group composition using voice, keyboard, guitar and drum kit was required. Students once again had to prepare the score and perform their composition for the rest of the class.

According to Oja and Smulyan (1989, p. 16), successful collaborative action research depended on a project structure that allows the characteristics of collaboration, focus on practice and professional development to emerge. They believed that a project structure conducive to effective action research consists of at least four elements:

- frequent and open communication among participants;
- democratic project leadership;
- spiralling cycles of planning, acting, observing and reflecting; and
- positive relationships with the school context, within which the project occurs.

The action research project was designed with importance placed on the above elements.

The music teacher from the high school involved in the study is here given the name Glenda. Glenda and the researcher met frequently and had an effective line of communication. This involved a brief discussion after each lesson, a planned meeting after each cycle and regular contact through phone and email. The specific goals of the project were articulated and mutually understood and accepted by all the stakeholders at the initial meetings. The instigator of the action research project became the official leader of the project however, as Glenda was the only other person directly involved, the situation was effectively a two-person team with shared responsibility.

The project proceeded through four spiralling cycles of planning, acting, observing and reflecting. The spiralling cycles are fundamental to any action research project "to provide participants with the opportunity to work through several cycles in order to be effective … This allows practitioners to use their own reflections, understandings and developing

theories to inform both practice and research" (Oja & Smulyan, 1989, p. 20).

The administration at the project high school wholeheartedly supported the project being implemented. The deputy principal was invited to become a participant but she preferred a role of providing assistance and consultation when needed or requested and became a critical friend for the project. Whitehead and McNiff (2006) defined the role of a critical friend to be both of friend and critic. As a friend they are supportive and listen to the researcher's account of the research. As a critic, their work is to offer thoughtful responses to the account, raising points that perhaps have not been raised by others. To get a reasonably unprejudiced view it is vital to involve others who will act as critical friends to critique any interpretations (McNiff, Lomax, & Whitehead, 1996).

Data Collection Tools for Action Research

Journals, observation and meeting notes.
Through the action research project the researcher and participants are encouraged to keep a journal in which the plans made and the actions that were taken are recorded. Impressions and personal opinions about the actions taken and any reactions to them can also be recorded. The result is a very personal record of what is done and what was thought that encompasses critical reflections on the project. Notes from the cycle meetings are also often included as well as observations notes from lessons. These journals offer a way of collecting data that helps create "thick description" (Guba & Lincoln, 1990) of the unique situational and transactional aspects of the experience.

There are a number of complementary documents that support the journals such as the plans for each week and cycle, syllabus and curriculum documents, school plans, student handouts, and student test results in literacy and numeracy.

Video.
Video recordings are often made of some of the lessons however, the presence of the video recorder sometimes influences the students' behaviour in a negative way. Instead of focussing on the task at hand the students can react to the presence of the camera. Use of video recordings needs to be carefully monitored, as they can be very useful in the recording of student presentations. Such recordings provide an accurate

and detailed account of what transpired. In addition, the students are often very keen to view themselves and others after their presentations.

Photographs.
Photographs can be taken of both the students engaging in the process and the work produced, such as graphic scores, compositions and presentations.

Recorded interviews.
The recording and transcribing of all interviews is advisable. Open-ended questions allow the interviewees an opportunity to raise points that are of interest to them. Transcripts need to be analysed by searching for responses and/or themes that commonly occur, as these can provide rich accounts of other teachers' reflections on the issues. Students can be identified as key informants (Woods 1986) since they provide rich description of their view of the classroom. Interviews can be conducted individually or in small focus groups.

Student questionnaires.
Questionnaires and surveys may contain both closed and open questions. These tools gather specific data from the targeted group and also give the students the opportunity to express their points of view in a confidential setting.

Analysis

"They [qualitative data] are a source of well-grounded, rich descriptions and explanations of processes in identifiable local contexts" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 1). The data collected provides a rich description of the project. An enormous amount of data can be collected throughout a project and the analysis of this data should begin at the outset of the study and be ongoing.

The analysis can, however, be described in five sections:
1. Analysis of the transcripts from interviews.
2. Analysis after each of the cycles of the project including the reflective phase.
3. Analysis of questionnaires/surveys.
4. Analysis of supporting documents/policies relevant to the project.
5. Merging of the data from all of the above sources.

Each step of the analysis will identify themes and issues that are both complementary and contrasting. Through deliberation on the data collected and by making authentic and professional interpretations themes can be identified. These themes should then be shared and discussed with all the stakeholders.

Conclusion

Action research is a qualitative study that has as its main aim, the improvement of practice. This chapter has defined the Action Research Methodology. It has presented examples of how this methodology has been used in music education. This methodology is a most appropriate method for use in music education in many settings including universities, schools and the wider community.

Some writers (for example, Cresswell 2012; McNiff et al., 1996) have identified the key characteristics of action research, of which this is a summary:
- Uses a process of inquiry, regardless of design.
- Teacher or educator becomes the researcher (practitioner based).
- As the researcher, the practitioner becomes self-reflective.
- Others are engaged collaboratively in the process.
- Embodies good professional practice (cycling back and forth between identifying a problem, trying a solution, reflection on information learner, applying new solutions).
- Information is shared with others.

McNiff et al. (1996, p. 14) have also summarised the commonalities and differences of action research and other research methods.

Action research shares the following characteristics with other research:
- it leads to knowledge;
- it provides evidence to support this knowledge;
- it makes explicit the process of inquiry through which knowledge emerges;
- it links new knowledge with existing knowledge.

Action research is different to other research because:
- it requires action as an integral part of the research process itself;

- it is focused by the researcher's professional values rather than methodological considerations;
- it is necessarily insider research, in the sense of practitioners researching their own professional actions.

What makes participatory action research 'research' is not the machinery of research techniques but an abiding concern with the relationships between social and educational theory and practice (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000, p. 600).

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http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arhome.html