

The West Partnership

COLLABORATIVE ACTION RESEARCH HANDBOOK

Equity, Excellence & Empowerment



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Introduction

THE WEST PARTNERSHIP'S (WP) VISION IS:

“...to embed the values of equity, excellence and empowerment in everything we do, building a culture of collaborative working across the eight partners to improve learning experiences and increase attainment continually for every learner across the region.”

Collaborative Action Research (CAR) is one tool used across the WP to support this vision. CAR is an enquiry process used in a range of the programmes that are offered across the eight local authorities. It is highly flexible and adaptable and works in any sector and context to support improvement. The CAR process can be used as part of ongoing school improvement processes and can be easily planned to articulate with existing self-evaluation activity.

This handbook contains the rationale for using CAR, an overview of the approach and a workbook that can be used by those undertaking CAR in their establishment.

CAR Overview



WHAT IS 'CAR'?

CAR reflects the knowledge and work many educators and leaders already do within their establishment. The can focus on:

- ➔ planning learning differently to address an observed issue
- ➔ applying learning from research to change practice
- ➔ adapting / trying a new approach that others have used successfully
- ➔ exploring ways to improve attainment and achievement; and
- ➔ a hunch about how something could be improved.

CAR is a flexible approach that is built on a process of planning, evidence-based implementation, and evaluation. There are usually three elements in setting up a new project: open discussion, sharing data, and creating a shared plan. Once the planned changes / activity have taken place, progress is evaluated and next steps identified. This can be done either within your school / centre or with colleagues in other establishments.

The aim of CAR is to make small changes, based on observations and data, that could have a big impact in a range of different ways, including practice, learner outcomes, as well as wider impacts (e.g. family).



WHY USE CAR?

Internationally, there is evidence that where education establishments work together to share expertise, practice, and resources, and have ownership of these activities, there are:

- ➔ more opportunities for building leadership
- ➔ improving pedagogy; and
- ➔ improving outcomes for all children and young people.

Practitioner enquiry is an area of professional learning that was highlighted in Teaching Scotland's Future (Donaldson, 2011) as a way to support educators to become more engaged with research, to support their own learning and, ultimately, improve learners' experiences.

CAR, as a form of practitioner enquiry, will support those involved to:

- ➔ critically interrogate their own practice
- ➔ develop a deeper understanding of the wider social context of the school / centre and beyond
- ➔ share expertise and work together on a shared goal; and
- ➔ evaluate how different actions and changes impact on a range of processes and outcomes.

In Scotland there is evidence that using CAR specifically can lead to positive outcomes for young people by:

- ➔ improving teaching and learning experiences
- ➔ improving the quality of professional learning
- ➔ building confidence in analysing data
- ➔ enacting evidence-based change
- ➔ strengthening school leadership opportunities; and
- ➔ creating opportunities for knowledge exchange between establishments.

Of course, collaboration takes many different forms and it is very likely that schools and centres are already engaging with others to support improvement. CAR offers the opportunity to engage in a more structured form of collaboration that is absolutely focused on improving outcomes for children and young people and specifically tailored to the local context.

CAR Overview



WHAT MAKES CAR SUCCESSFUL?

Previous evidence has shown that there is a set of key features that are more likely to lead to impactful CAR. Where there are a number of projects running in an area, like a local authority, it works best when these are supported strategically.

At establishment level, CAR succeeds more often when it:

- ➔ is driven by and owned by the school / centre
- ➔ is evidence based and outcome focused
- ➔ involves collaborative planning and teaching
- ➔ uses a range of data sources including quantitative, qualitative and observational data to plan and evaluate the work
- ➔ is built into improvement planning activities; and
- ➔ is supported by the local authority by, for example, providing access to networks, resources and sharing findings widely.

WHAT HELP IS AVAILABLE TO SUPPORT CAR IN THE WP?

This handbook is accompanied by a series of narrated PowerPoint slides, all of which can be found on the [West Partnership website](#). These provide responses to the questions most commonly asked by those undertaking a CAR project for the first time. The slides can be used alongside this handbook to support CAR in any sector or context.

The WP works in partnership with the Robert Owen Centre for Educational Change (ROC) at the University of Glasgow. The ROC researchers are directly involved in some WP programmes to support schools / centres to use CAR.

The WP team will also be able to share examples of previous CAR projects that may be useful as examples of what others have done (see [page 10](#) for examples).

[👉 VISIT WEST PARTNERSHIP WEB PAGE](#)

The CAR cycle

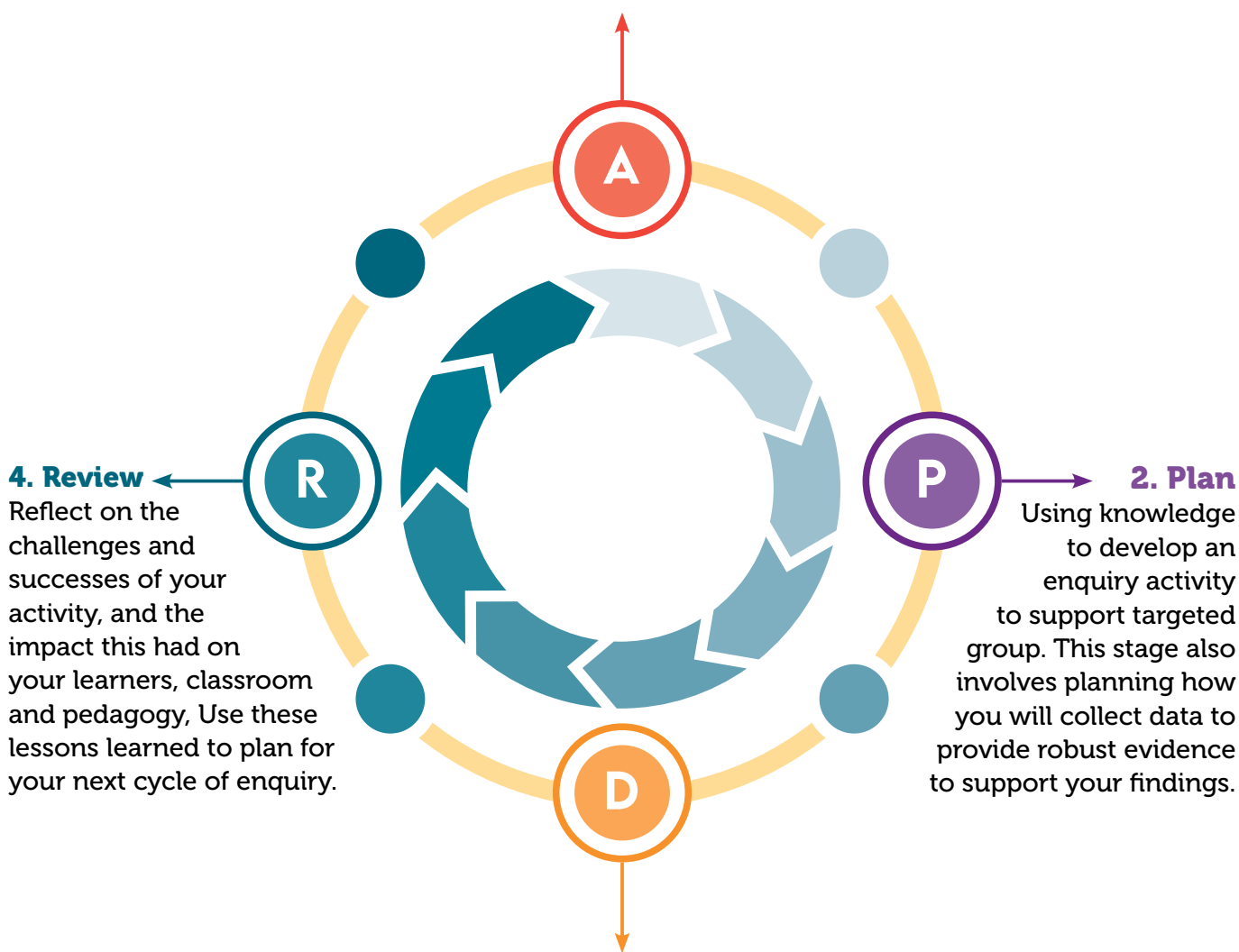


The examples and resources included in the remainder of this handbook should be used flexibly to suit the context and focus of the school / centre.

All projects follow an **Assess > Plan > Do > Review (A-P-D-R)** cycle.

1. Assess

Using professional knowledge and data to understand the wider context of your classroom/school/community to identify a target group for the enquiry activity.



2. Plan

Using knowledge to develop an enquiry activity to support targeted group. This stage also involves planning how you will collect data to provide robust evidence to support your findings.

3. Do

Conduct enquiry activity and any associated data collection.

4. Review

Reflect on the challenges and successes of your activity, and the impact this had on your learners, classroom and pedagogy, Use these lessons learned to plan for your next cycle of enquiry.

The CAR cycle



ASSESS

In order to develop effective improvement strategies, the first stage of the process is to understand the wider context of the classroom / play room, establishment, and community. At this stage, consider the hunches or questions you may have about children and young people who need support, and what evidence exists to support these ideas. Questions to consider include:

- ➔ What types of data do we already have and what do they tell us about the children and young people who need support?
- ➔ Do we need help to make sense of existing data? What might this look like?
- ➔ What new data do we need? How might we collect / access this?
- ➔ What is our focus based on a review of the data?

By the end of the Assess part of the cycle the target group of children / young people should have been identified along with the research question (see appendix for examples).

PLAN

The next stage is to develop the plan outlining what needs to happen. Working with others, critically reflect on what changes could be made, and what difference this would make. The planning stage also asks you to consider how you can collect robust evidence to support your findings. Questions to consider include:

- ➔ What changes will be put in place to support the target group? How will this be decided?
- ➔ How will the change improve outcomes for the target group?
- ➔ What will success look like for the target group?
- ➔ How will impact be evidenced?
- ➔ What data will be gathered to evidence impact?
- ➔ How will learning and impact be shared throughout the process? (e.g. classroom visits, lesson study)

This should be built into the improvement plan for the establishment and other planning tools, such as the working time agreement, as required. The final piece of advice in this section is to keep your CAR focus small. One of the most common issues with developing the CAR focus, particularly for those who are new to it, is to plan a focus that is too big. The advice is always to start small. Over time, CAR can be repeated and expanded to support multiple areas of improvement and changes that are successful can be scaled up.

The CAR cycle



DO

As you would expect, this stage of the process focuses on putting the plan into action, carefully monitoring progress, and using robust measurement tools to capture change. There are several activities that happen at this stage, including:

- ➔ Pre-project data collection / baseline
- ➔ Actioning changes outlined in plan
- ➔ Collection and review of ongoing impact data as per plan
- ➔ Sharing learning and impact with each other via collaborative professional learning opportunities
- ➔ Post-project data collection
- ➔ Analysis of data and feedback

REVIEW

The last stage of the process is critical. Collectively reviewing and reflecting on lessons learned from the changes that have been introduced enables a robust evaluation of impact. Through doing this, next steps are identified. This may be a different focus area, or growing the existing project to include more learners. Questions to consider include:

- ➔ Who has been impacted by this change?
- ➔ How have they been impacted? Were any of these unintended impacts?
- ➔ Could this work for a bigger group, or a different group?
- ➔ Can the same methods/approaches be applied to different areas of improvement?
- ➔ What are the implications for the next improvement plan?

The *Review* phase should be built into ongoing self-evaluation activity.

Developing The Research Question



Examples of how to develop a research question from a hunch

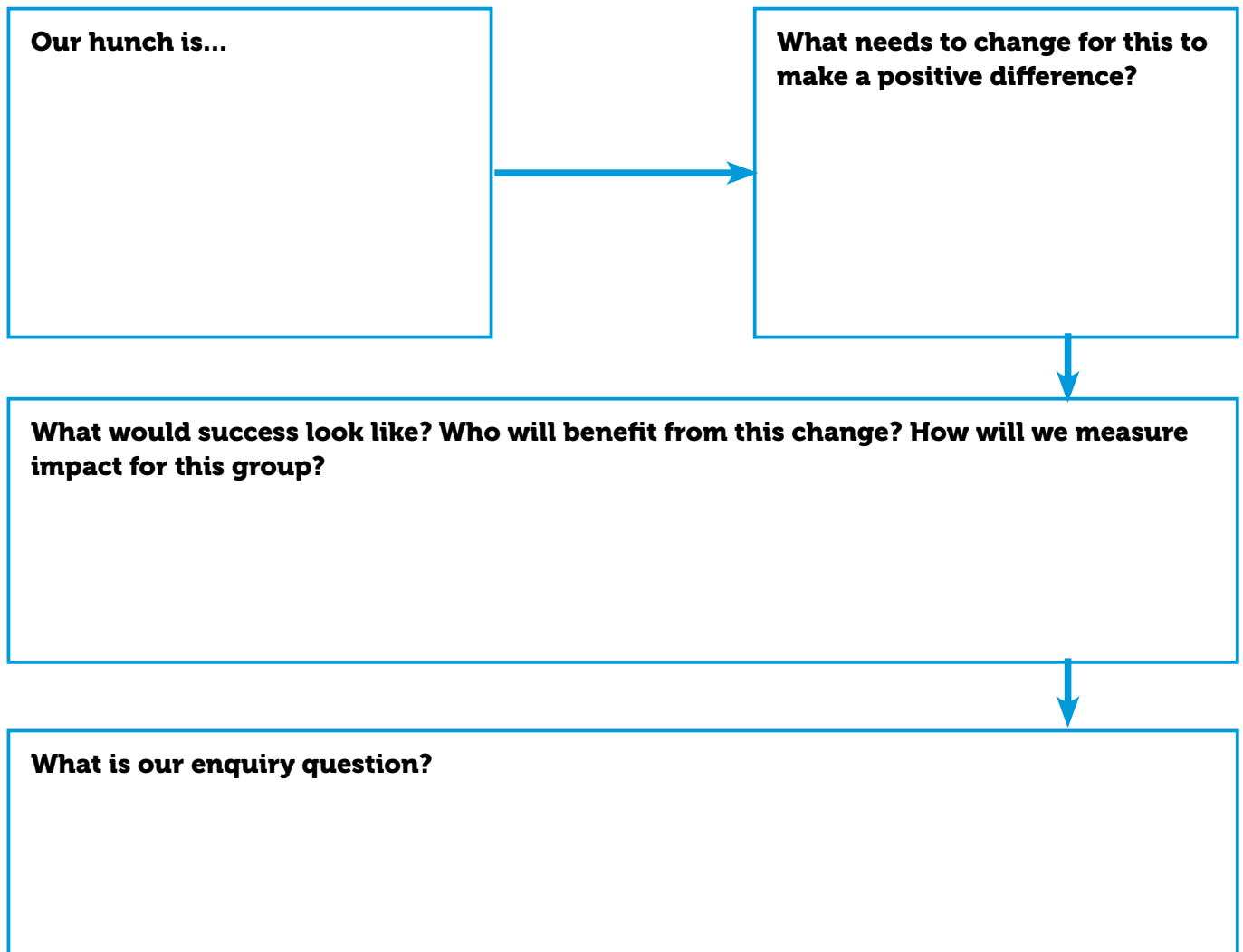
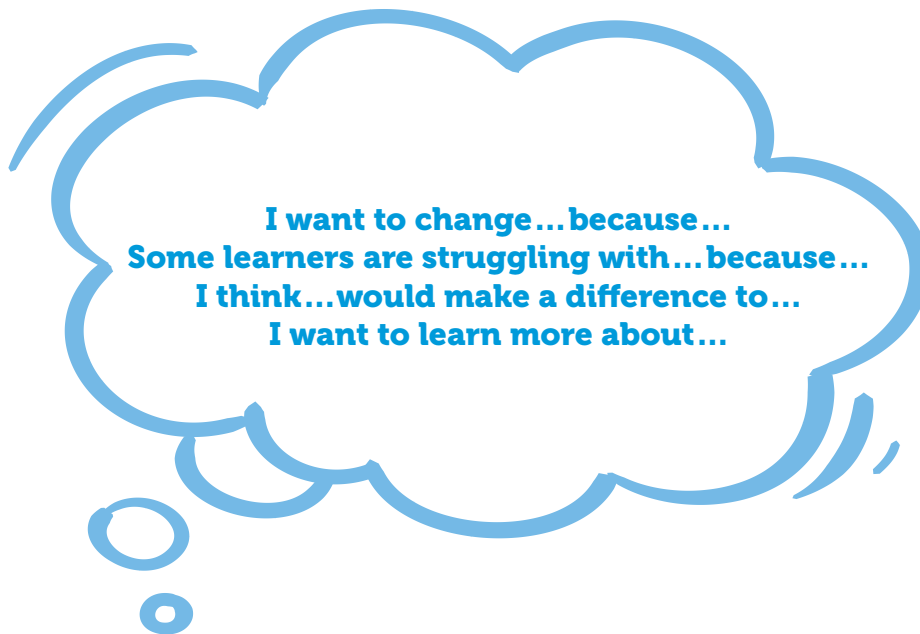
These examples are drawn from real CAR projects that have taken place in schools across the West Partnership area.

Hunch	What would success look like?	How could change be evidenced?	Research question
I think taking a play-based approach to writing might improve boys' engagement in writing.	Boys' engagement with writing activities will improve. They will access provision more often and for longer.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➔ Discussion with boys about what works and doesn't work for them ➔ Leuven scale of engagement ➔ Writing assessment, draw picture of self 	What is the impact of a play-based, child centred approach to writing, on a target group of boys?
Might health and wellbeing be a good vehicle to get parents more involved in our curriculum development.	Parents better understand and engage with the school's health and wellbeing curriculum so feel better equipped to support their children in this area.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➔ Questionnaire to parents about HWB curriculum in school ➔ Feedback from parental working group ➔ Discussion questions with learners at pastoral check-ins ➔ School-wide health and wellbeing tracker data 	Is a collaborative approach effective at promoting parents' engagement in our school's Health and Wellbeing curriculum development?
We think a bigger focus on outdoor learning might help with children's skills development.	Children can talk about the skills they are working on, why they are important and how to improve them.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➔ Analysis of skills passports ➔ Discussion with children about what the skills are ➔ Questionnaire for children about how skills are used at school and in life ➔ Observation during activities focusing on engagement and skills awareness 	How well does outdoor learning support pupils' skills development and build positive relationships?
Might accessing Forest Schools help school engagement for some of our children.	Children are more engaged in and feel part of the school, have higher levels of motivation and readiness to learn.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➔ Attendance of target group ➔ School Supportiveness questionnaire ➔ Floor book to record children's comments throughout 	Can engagement in Forest Schools Fundamentals sessions, improve the sense of school supportiveness of the target group (6 pupils from P5-7) from an average baseline of 2.8, on the Sense of School Community Scale, to at least an average of 3.5?

Developing The Research Question



A tool to help with developing the research question



Collecting Data

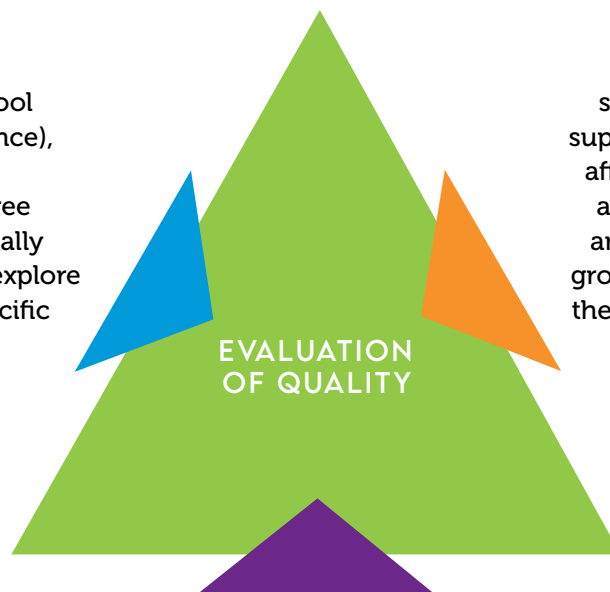


At the early stages, data is used to examine the context, and to find patterns that lead to the research question for the project. Data can be used to benchmark where target groups are, to document change, and to evaluate how well the project met its intended aims.

Data takes many forms, three are described in *How good is our school? (4th edition)*.

QUANTITATIVE DATA:

schools collect wide range of quantitative data in their school day (e.g. attainment, attendance), but also have data on wider context of their school (e.g. free school meals, SIMD). By critically examining our data, we can explore trends and identify when specific interventions are necessary.



QUALITATIVE DATA:

many individuals make up our school community (staff, pupils, support staff, parents/carers, other affiliated staff) and all have views about our schools. By collecting and analysing the views of these groups, we are able to understand the mechanisms behind decisions and behaviors.

DIRECT OBSERVATION:

One of the key activities teachers engage in day-to-day is observation, whether this be in your classroom, playground, canteen, or elsewhere. The ability to critically examine and reflect on what is happening, is another key method of data collection. By observing practice in a range of learning contexts, and providing feedback on agreed set of criteria, it will enable stronger self-evaluation.

How good is our school? (4th edition) page 11

The table below highlights some of the different types of data that can be used.

Quantitative	Qualitative	Direct observation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Summative assessments Formative assessments Attendance data Leuven scale Myself as a learner scale Scottish index of multiple deprivation Benchmark/insight data Surveys/questionnaires Scaling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Professional learning log Professional dialogue Focus groups Interviews Pastoral notes Surveys/questionnaire comments Exit passes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Peer observation Learning visit Lesson study Learning round Self-observation (video)

Collecting Data



As stated earlier, planning the data collection is an essential part of the CAR process. Often, more than one type of data is needed to gain a nuanced understanding of the context and success of a project. It is important to also consider how data is used to support the narrative of change. For example, a project may generate quantitative data that evidence change, but the addition of qualitative data gives a more nuanced understanding of the wider story underpinning these changes.

WHAT TYPES OF DATA WILL BE COLLECTED TO EVIDENCE CHANGE IN OUR CAR PROJECT?

Quantitative	Qualitative	Direct observation



PLANNING DATA COLLECTION – QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

WHAT

- ➔ What questions will you ask to gather evidence of impact?
- ➔ What form will these questions take (survey, focus groups)?
- ➔ What are you going to observe and how will this be recorded?
- ➔ What existing data sources can you access to evidence change?

WHO

- ➔ Who will you collect data from (e.g. learners, families, teachers, partners, wider community)?
- ➔ How many people will be involved?
- ➔ How will you select the target group based on the data available?

WHEN

- ➔ When in the school year is it best to conduct this project?
- ➔ Will the project activities be spread over a day/week/month?
- ➔ When will data collection take place (before, during, after)?

HOW

- ➔ How will you record, and share your data?
- ➔ How will you use your data to tell the full story of your change (e.g. graphs, narrative description)?

DATA TRIANGULATION

Triangulating the data (that is, using quantitative, qualitative and observational data) collected, strengthens the change narrative and articulation of the impact of a CAR project. The questions below can be used to help with this process.

- ➔ **Has it changed?**
Using facts and figures to benchmark and demonstrate trends (quantitative)
- ➔ **Why has it changed?**
Describe the process of why something has changed (qualitative)
- ➔ **What did the change look like?**
Document how this change was enacted from different perspectives (observation).

Car Workbook



SCHOOLS/CENTRES INVOLVED:

WHO IS INVOLVED:



ASSESS

Focus of your project (what do you want to change and why)

--

Who are your target group?

--

Why were they chosen?

--

What types of data have you used to inform this decision?

--

What is your enquiry question?

--



PLAN

What change could be undertaken to address the identified need/ issue/ challenge?

--

How will this be done? (Consider: where will this take place? when will it happen? who will deliver it?)

--

What would success look like?

--

What types of data/evidence will you collect for your project (e.g. pupil assessment data, qualitative observations, pupil feedback, teacher observations)?

--

How and when will you gather your data/evidence? (e.g. before, during, after)

--

How can you learn from others, and share ideas and findings from your project?

--



DO

What is your timeline for the project?

What happened during your project? Did everything go as planned, or did you have to change things? Please use this page to document any notes on experiences of delivering the project.



REVIEW

Who was impacted by the changes of this project (self, others in the establishment, learners, families, wider community)? Were any of these changes unintended? (Please provide evidence)

What, if anything, would you do differently if you ran the project again?

Could this work for a wider group, or a different target group?

How can you incorporate CAR into improvement planning?

How will you share your findings with others?

What will you do next?



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