Inclusive School Practices Toolkit

Appreciative Inquiry Tool 2: Application of Appreciative Inquiry to Support Organisational Change in Schools

This tool has been developed as part of the *Inclusive School Communities Project*, funded by the National Disability Insurance Agency. The project is led by JFA Purple Orange.

Introduction

This tool is the second in a series of three, written by Dr Katy Osborne who is a social scientist with a background in psychology and public health, currently working as a Research Fellow at the Southgate Institute for Health, Society and Equity.

Appreciative inquiry (AI) is a strengths-based, collaborative approach to organizational change which focuses on understanding the ‘positive core’ of an organization and how this can be strengthened. The process of AI typically begins with the following:

Tell me a story, if you will, of a time when this team/organisation/community has been at its best – when people were proud to be part of it. What happened? What made it possible for this highpoint to occur? What would the system look like if that example of excellence were the norm? (p. 1)[[1]](#footnote-1)

AI involves working through a process called the ‘4D’ or ‘5D’ cycle to build upon pre-existing strengths in an organisation in order to bring about change. These steps refer to Define (the most recent step), Discover, Dream, Design and Destiny. Read ‘Appreciative Inquiry Tool 1: An Introduction to Appreciative Inquiry for Schools’ for an introduction to the principles and cycle of AI.

AI has been applied in many different organisational settings and disciplines including in the education sector. The current tool presents examples of how AI has been applied to guide change in schools at different organisational levels.

Ideas

Below, examples are presented of how AI has been applied in school settings at the level of:

1. school districts
2. within individual schools to promote whole school change
3. with particular groups of teachers
4. with students within individual schools

*Application of AI in School Districts (North America)*

In North America, AI has been utilised as a process to guide change and planning across school districts; these are administrative groupings of public schools which are governed by school boards[[2]](#footnote-2).

At this level, AI has been used for improving planning processes and professional development. In Canada, AI was used in one school distinct to undertake team building with school staff, run an appreciative leadership course for teachers and administrators, and create individual school plans through a 4D cycle[[3]](#footnote-3).

In the USA when a school district used the 4D cycle process, the following changes and outcomes were identified:

* a greater appreciation of strengths
* a culture that was transformed from being defensive to one that welcomed collaboration, both internally and with external stakeholders
* the school district was able to form a clear plan for improved communication and partnerships with stakeholders
* participants were supported to take on leadership roles and become more outward looking[[4]](#footnote-4)

Other research has also shown that AI can assist schools to form partnerships with other institutions and build social capital[[5]](#footnote-5). As such, AI has been identified as a valuable tool for developing change in schools in a democratic way and strengthening partnerships between schools, local communities and external stakeholders[[6]](#footnote-6).

*Application of AI within Individual Schools (Australia)*

AI has been used within single schools to foster positive whole-school change. One case study in a South Australian school involved the application of AI in order to implement the school’s strategic goal of fostering student wellbeing[[7]](#footnote-7). This case study was undertaken at St Peters College, an independent K-12 boy’s school in Adelaide. In 2011 the school established a specific goal in their strategic plan to build a ‘wellbeing strategy’ for students. AI was chosen as the guiding approach to develop, implement and monitor the wellbeing strategy by the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) under the headmastership of Simon Murray, in consultation with the Council of Governors[[8]](#footnote-8). AI was chosen because it is consistent with positive education and positive psychology, and because it was:

* Collaborative and whole school
* Inquiry-based
* Empowering
* Appreciative and strengths-based[[9]](#footnote-9)

The school set up three processes to achieve its goal: development, implementation, and monitoring. AI was integral to each of the three phases. This process involved the school governing body, teachers and other school staff, and students[[10]](#footnote-10). The 4D cycle was used to generate ideas about how to achieve the goal, and was also used throughout the process, for example, in staff meetings. In this case study AI was successfully used to generate positive changes which enabled the school to act on their strategic goal of improving student wellbeing. Fifteen wellbeing initiatives were implemented at the school over a two- and half-year period. These included four ‘bottom up’ initiatives that were not suggested initially by the SLT, including:

* the formation of a positive psychology interest group
* provision of wellbeing activities for staff
* discussing the student’s wellbeing in parent-teacher meetings as well as a report card
* training for staff to support them to use an evidence-based approach[[11]](#footnote-11)

Initiatives suggested by the SLT included:

* developing a formal wellbeing curriculum for students
* running parent information sessions and training on wellbeing
* measuring student wellbeing[[12]](#footnote-12)

Other research has identified some important factors that explain how AI enables positive reform within schools[[13]](#footnote-13). AI is viewed as a valuable process because it can counteract a focus on deficits which can be de-motivating for teachers and other school staff. Furthermore, it can reconnect teachers and school administrators with their passion for education and teaching. For students, AI can enhance school pride and enable a recognition of the bonds between students and teachers[[14]](#footnote-14).

*Using AI to Work with Teachers (USA)*

The Australian case study described above was an example of a whole-school application of AI. AI has also been used to work with specific groups of stakeholders within individual schools. One study in the U.S.A utilised AI to work with a group of eighth-grade teachers to engage them to think differently about their pedagogical practices in a school that was deemed to have ‘non-adequate yearly progress (non-AYP)’[[15]](#footnote-15). In the U.S.A, under the ‘No Child Left Behind’ Act, all students need to achieve a determined level of academic achievement on annual standardised tests. Schools failing to achieve this level of achievement receive non-AYP status[[16]](#footnote-16). This study indicated that AI is a valuable approach to encourage teachers to explore new pedagogical practices, particularly in contexts where they wish to change but feel trapped in a negative cycle of traditional behaviour patterns and an unhelpful organisational culture[[17]](#footnote-17). In this instance, through the AI process, the team of eighth- grade teachers were able to recognise and share their appreciation for one another and find new ways to collaborate in their teaching. Furthermore, the focus on what they could do to change (rather than a focus on deficits in the wider school) meant that they were able to undertake training in technology and other professional development activities, and they initiated a series of conversations with school and district administrators about how to bring about changes that they identified using the 4D cycle[[18]](#footnote-18).

***Using AI to Work with Students***

AI has also been used directly with school students. AI is a strengths-based, collaborative approach to bringing about transformation change, and as such, has been viewed as a highly effective way for engaging with students, both in supporting them to learn, and in enabling them to have a voice in creating and developing their own curriculum[[19]](#footnote-19). In a case study in the UK, Lewis examined whether AI could give three classes of primary school children voice in decisions that affected their learning[[20]](#footnote-20). The AI process was used to facilitate children’s creation of curriculum activities for writing, and children devised activities which were engaging and meaningful, and contributed to a positive culture of pupil participation[[21]](#footnote-21). This suggests that AI is a useful process in learning and teaching, and this is discussed in ‘Appreciative Inquiry Tool 3: Appreciative Inquiry as a Teaching Approach’.

Actions

AI is a flexible process that can be applied to guide change within and across schools in different ways, and with different stakeholders, according to the varying contexts and needs of the school. The examples discussed above in the ‘Ideas’ section demonstrate how AI has been successfully applied in school settings at the school district level and within individual schools. School leaders may use these examples to explore how AI can be applied to develop, implement and monitor positive whole school change towards an inclusive education framework.

This tool can be used by school staff and other school community members to expand knowledge and understanding of AI and its application in school settings.

More Information

Case study discussing the application of AI to support positive change and build wellbeing at St Peter’s College, an independent K-12 boy’s school in Adelaide <https://internationaljournalofwellbeing.org/index.php/ijow/article/viewFile/328/441>

Free ebook, ‘Six Questions that can Lift Your Leadership, Shape Your Strategy, and Transform Your Organization’, which explores the questions asked throughout an Appreciative Inquiry process https://cvdl.ben.edu/resources-tools/six-questions/

Information about AI and the 4D cycle by the co-founder of AI, David Cooperider https://www.davidcooperrider.com/ai-process/

Six video interviews with senior students discussing their experiences with wellbeing, the way it has impacted their school, and the programs impact on them as individuals <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL57E5EEE637A4807E>

St Peter’s College’s Wellbeing Strategy <https://www.stpeters.sa.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Wellbeing_Brochure.pdf>

5-minute video on AI in schools https://youtu.be/cUHtCDqjQkM

Acknowledgement

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