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Appreciative Inquiry (AI): Taking a Strengths-Based Approach to School Change

Megan Tschannen-Moran

College of William and Mary

The accountability movement has taken a toll on educators and students alike. Everywhere I travel, teachers and school leaders complain that school just is not fun anymore, either for themselves or for their students. I doubt that policymakers and politicians meant to make schools such dreary places where mindless repetition of tested materials supersedes engagement, creativity, and fun, but they have. AI gives us a way to reduce the fear, rampant in many schools, that is sapping the energy and imagination of those who inhabit our schools. It is a powerful tool that can help us to shift the conversations and to imagine new ways forward.

AI is a strengths-based approach to motivating change that focuses on exploring and amplifying organizational strengths. The thesis of AI is simple: Building on existing strengths will lead to more robust and lasting change than focusing on areas of weakness. AI contrasts with traditional models of change that focus on conducting strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analyses and that seek the root causes of problems, gaps, or discrepancies. It can feel that the air has been sucked out of the room as the focus inevitably turns to weaknesses and threats. Although it may seem counterintuitive to focus on strengths when things are going poorly, a growing body of research has demonstrated that this approach is far more effective than ferreting out examples of the things you don't want and designing strategies to eliminate them (Watkins, Mohr, & Kelly, 2011; Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010). A strengths-based approach replaces SWOT with SOAR, examining strengths,

opportunities, aspirations, and resources (Watkins et al., 2011).

AI has been used around the globe for over three decades in corporations, international aid organizations, the United Nations, and the U.S. Military. Originally developed as a methodology for conducting organizational research, the process of inquiring into and studying the positive aspects of a system proved to be transformational (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2008). AI therefore has come to be seen as a method for stimulating social innovation and organizational change. There is a solid research base to testify to its effectiveness across a variety of contexts (Cooperrider et al., 2008; Watkins et al., 2011; Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010). AI only recently has begun to be adopted in schools, but I believe it is a process that has great promise for assisting schools to creatively adapt to the rapidly changing world in which we live.

Appreciative Principles

AI is both a philosophy and a process for fostering whole-system change by focusing on strengths and what's working well. AI works because of how its five, interconnected principles get people ready for and excited about change (Cooperrider et al., 2008; Watkins et al., 2011).

- The *positive principle* holds that the energy and emotion associated with identifying, celebrating, and building on strengths enables people to transform systems and to get them moving in new directions. This positive approach broadens thinking, expands awareness, increases capabilities, builds resilience, bolsters initiative, offsets negatives, and generates new possibilities for learning and growth.
- The *constructionist principle* asserts that people do not just interpret and understand the world through their conversations with others, but that through these interactions they actually construct the reality in which they live. Because the stories people tell become self-fulfilling prophecies, AI encourages people to invent positive, energizing stories.

- The *simultaneity principle* holds that conversations and interactions become positive the instant we ask a positive question. This simple shift—from asking, “What’s wrong and how do we fix it?” to “What’s right and how can we build on that?”—is at the heart of AI.
- The *anticipatory principle* asserts that our questions and reflections flow from the outlook we hold. In the absence of hope, it’s hard to seek out, much less to celebrate, the positive. An underperforming school that can catch hold of a vision of itself as vibrant learning community can cultivate a sense of hope and an increased sense of collective efficacy in moving forward toward that vision (Daly & Chrispeels, 2005).
- The *poetic principle* recognizes that people come to anticipate a positive future when they attend to those things that add richness, texture, depth, beauty, significance, and energy to life. The work of a poet is to draw our attention to simple, ordinary things in ways that imbue them with a sense of meaning and purpose. In doing so, we find the energy and creativity to live into a positive future.

Appreciative Practices

Over the past three decades, a set of practices for the implementation of AI has been developed and honed (Watkins et al., 2011). One four-step process for capturing, expressing, and working with those practices utilizes four Is: initiate, inquire, imagine, and innovate.

1. Initiate: Focusing on Strengths

The *initiate* phase involves the choice to take a strengths-based approach to change, as well as the selection of the focus of inquiry. AI recognizes that the first question is fateful. It sets the tone and moves the conversation in a particular direction.

2. Inquire: Sharing Uplifting Stories

Once the focus of inquiry is clear, AI looks to discover nascent examples of those desired outcomes from the past and in the present. The next step is to design an interview protocol that will map the positive core, discovering instances of strength and success in

the area of inquiry (Watkins et al., 2011). AI assumes that in every situation at least some examples of desired states can be found. They may be hidden under a patina of problems and discontent, but life-giving examples, images, and stories that support the learning focus always can be discovered.

One of the things that I value most about AI is that it is a deeply participatory process. Rather than taking a group of leaders off site to develop a strategic plan that must then be “sold” down the organizational chart, AI taps into the wisdom and experience of a broad representation of the organizational participants. AI is grounded in paired interviews that include as many organizational stakeholders as possible to share positive stories in the area of inquiry and explore how they express their core values through the organization. A clever strategy for unearthing problems and issues in a productive fashion is to invite participants to offer wishes that would enhance the organizational effectiveness. After the interviews are complete, the interviewers share the stories and wishes they heard in small groups. The small groups then identify common themes and report back to the large group. This process lays the foundation for all that follows.

3. Imagine: What If ?

Once people have appreciated the best of what is, they are primed to envision the best of what might be. The third I then, *imagine*, involves developing vivid images of what the school would look and feel like if it embodied fully the themes selected. Participants use the discoveries of the last phase to create a dream that is anchored in their history even as it expands their potential. They share those images, not by coming up with a set of bullet points, but by developing creative presentations of what the school might then look like. They convey those images through drawings, collages, music, or skits before articulating a bold claim describing a desired future state.

4. Innovate: Taking Action

Once participants have crafted a compelling vision for their school, the task shifts to generating the strategies for making it so. In the *innovate* phase of the AI process, small groups convene to design and plan action steps for moving the school closer to the beautiful, vivid

images that participants developed in the imagine phase. It starts with brainstorming to keep the process playful and encourage out-of-the-box thinking. It then invites people to get specific about the brainstormed ideas that most interest and energize them. Participants specify who will take action by making offers of themselves and requests of others, with time-specific horizons.

When the spirit of AI is fully realized in a school, educators become more willing and able to celebrate and build on their strengths. By orienting people around the positive, AI enables organizations to generate positive actions and outcomes that become self-reinforcing (Watkins et al., 2011). With the sense of ownership for the plan shared by a broad group of stakeholders, resistance is reduced and implementation enhanced.

AI in Schools

AI has been used for a variety of purposes in schools including district-level initiatives, building-level school improvement, and classroom-level projects aimed at increasing student engagement. The impact of AI on schools has been documented in a number of case studies reflecting these various purposes. At the district level, one of my students documented how shifting to a focus on strengths in strategic planning for his district's special education department transformed what can sometimes be a contentious and adversarial aspect of schooling into a very inclusive and positive process (Ruhlman, 2014). In my own work, we saw significant improvements in the climate and performance of an underperforming district through the use of AI, some up to a standard deviation in just 2 years (M. Tschannen-Moran & Tschannen-Moran, 2011). At the building level, another of my students used AI in a Title I school to plan ways to keep parent involvement high once supplemental funds they had relied upon for this purpose were expended.

Even with the absence of these funds, the attendance at the parent meeting following the initiation of AI was the second highest attendance in 6 years (McDowell, 2013). My own experiences have demonstrated the powerful effects this orientation can have in bolstering morale, rebuilding broken trust, and fostering the professional growth of teachers and school leaders (B. Tschannen-Moran & Tschannen-Moran, 2010; M. Tschannen-Moran & Tschannen-Moran, 2011, 2014). Some of the most powerful

documented uses of AI in schools have included the voices of students. For example, an extensive AI process in the Toronto District School Board resulted in over 2,400 appreciative interviews, including over 1,600 interviews with students (Watkins et al., 2011). And a delightful collection of stories of the use of AI in schools around the globe was recently published as an open source book (Dole, Godwin, & Moehle, 2014).

We all long for vibrant schools—schools that are upbeat and positive; that display collective good humor and a determination to succeed; that abound with constructive relationships, curiosity, and creativity—schools where the extraordinary becomes possible. AI is a process that can help those dreams become reality.