

ABSTRACT

This dissertation questions if our traditions in public education are continuing to serve us well. It explores how asset based conversations made possible through a process of Appreciative Inquiry might help a community to examine its schools, determine what is of greatest value to continue doing, and generate possibilities for action and innovation in order to better prepare students for a future world. At the same time this dissertation explores how the thinking and daily work of two school district administrators is influenced by their experience as co-researchers engaged in a study of Appreciate Inquiry and systems change. It is based on evidence gathered from one school district located in the Province of British Columbia, Canada.

The methodology employed is one of action research with a blend of cooperative and collaborative inquiry. The study begins with a review of the history of a prior change initiative in the school district, through examination of documents and interviews with representative members of the stakeholder groups who were involved with the process at the time. A 4-D cycle of Appreciative Inquiry is then implemented with a total of 270 participants, including staff, students, parents and community members. Established protocols for generating data in an Appreciative Inquiry are followed. The researchers and participants collect and reflect on data continuously throughout each of the four stages. Action initiatives arising from the formal Appreciative Inquiry process and from improvisational applications of appreciative thinking and leading are reported. All were found to have potential for positive change, some incremental and some transformational.

Findings suggest that Appreciative Inquiry differs significantly from traditional approaches to change in educational organizations. It is generative rather than prescriptive and involves designing initiatives by people within the community rather than adopting initiatives prescribed by central office. In a public school system where we are in need of innovative practices designed by practitioners in collaboration with their colleagues and stakeholders, the researchers find Appreciative Inquiry to hold promise, both as a framework for change and a philosophy or way of being. The Appreciative Inquiry process has the capacity to create strong community, gain broad participation of staff and stakeholder groups, and initiate inspired actions on behalf of the system.