



Using Appreciative Inquiry to Foster Intergenerational Collaboration for Positive Change in a Struggling School System

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In its heyday, Crossroads, small city in the U.S. Rust Belt, had been a strong community with solid schools and a thriving economy. It was an attractive place for families to live and work. At one time more than 100 railroad trains stopped in and/or passed through Crossroads on a daily basis. By the start of the 21st century, however, Crossroads was no longer such a thriving hub. Instead, trains passed right on through the city without infusing any capital into the local economy. Combined with the erosion of its manufacturing base, this change made for a city in decline.

The Crossroads Community Schools (CCS) was no longer the well-regarded and well-supported school system it once had been. CCS had taken a hit in both performance and reputation. This decline distinguished Crossroads as a city having more than its fair-share of troubles rather than as a desirable place for families to reside. Such negative attention became all the more pronounced when the State's Local School Report Card process documented the underperformance of CCS. In the first round of reporting, CCS received the lowest possible rating: Academic Emergency.

Initially, CCS decided to solve its problems by addressing them head on through traditional approaches to strategic planning and organizational improvement. This approach did not, however, prove to be very effective. People became disheartened and discouraged after years of hard

effort and work had led to only minimal improvement in the schools' rankings. Things were looking bleak in Crossroads.

Fortunately, the Board of Education (BoE) learned about Appreciative Inquiry (AI) and decided to give it a try (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2008; Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010; Watkins & Mohr, 2011). The Board members first decided to experience AI for themselves at a BoE retreat. By working through the AI process on their own, the BoE saw how identifying and building upon what was right with their schools would enable them to move forward with greater confidence and enthusiasm. From this experience, the CCS leadership was able to better understand and imagine how such a process might take form in the district as a whole. Indeed, experiencing rather than just being told about AI was critical to the decision to move forward in this way.

In designing its AI process, CCS drew upon the railroad roots of its community and proclaimed "Get On Board the Celebration Express!" as the overarching theme for the process. This process helped people reclaim their pride in what the schools had been as well as their optimism in what they might yet become. The strength of the AI process in Crossroads was due, in part, to the breadth of involvement across many constituents and generations. Not only did the BoE include

district leaders and teachers, they designed the process to include business and community leaders as well as the students of Crossroads' five schools. AI enabled CCS to draw its student and adult constituencies into conversation with each other on new grounds both in focus and in method. Instead of talking about how to fix what was being done wrong, with its consequent discomfort and demobilization, sessions were held across generational lines to talk with each other as to how the things that were working well could be acknowledged, expanded, build upon, and developed. Such widespread participation in the AI process – from planning through execution, by all age brackets, of each and every constituency – made the experience all the more transformative. When everyone took on and became invested in the process, things really began to change.

To kick off things, a series of eleven Define-Stage sessions were held with a variety of constituent groups within CCS, as well as in the community at large, to acquaint people of all ages with the process of AI and to enlist their support in identifying the focus of the inquiry. These sessions included the BoE, district administrators, parents and teachers, community leaders, business leaders, and students in all five of the district schools. In the case of the K-1 building, adult volunteers – including teachers, administrators, and staff members – were paired with first graders to interview them about their best experiences and wishes for their school. At the other school buildings, teachers and administrators participated in paired interviews and small-group discussions right along with the students. The pairings were then organized into small, intergenerational groups, in order to share their stories and to identify common themes.

After these eleven Define-Stage sessions were held, a group of thirty volunteers met to plan the Summit. The volunteers were divided into small groups that were each given sets of cards on which were written the 141 themes that had emerged from the Define Stage. The small groups were then asked to sort them into larger, unifying themes that would guide the AI process in CCS. When the small groups reported back to the committee as a whole, a

consensus converged as to three over-arching themes that were to be explored and advanced:

- Trust and Respect
- Community Pride and Involvement
- Student Achievement and Success

A three-day Summit was planned to take place shortly after the end of the school year. The summit revolved around these themes and included the active participation of all CCS constituencies. Given the importance of maximizing diversity to AI, CCS strove to mix things up not only with the administrative, instructional, and support staff but also with the students, parents, and community leaders as well. The mayor participated and invited members of his staff to participate as part of their job responsibilities for the week. Likewise, the directors of the public libraries in town and other social service agencies participated as well. The whole community was involved with the process.

The Summit proved to be both fun and productive. Through paired interviews based upon an interview protocol structured around the three themes, as well as through small-group and large-group conversations, CCS was able to design a positive way forward. New stories and wishes were shared around the three Summit themes. Summit participants also had fun together when they played out their hopes and dreams on stage at the summit, in a variety of illustrative skits based on their positive images of the future. Provocative propositions were developed by small groups that described CCS at its very best. Creative presentations of those propositions utilizing songs, dances, and skits that served as powerful expressions to the gathered community as to how that might look. Inspiring plans for implementing these propositions were subsequently developed by six, self-organized innovation teams (two for each of the Summit themes). The teams shared their plans with the whole group. Offers and requests made by members of each innovation team to bring the plans into being were recorded on planning documents.

Some of the most engaging and productive parts of the process were the times when people were able to interact with each other across

institutional and generational lines. The AI process set both student and adult players in CCS in dialogue with each other to both imagine the future and to plan out ways for bringing that future to life. Doing so proved to be critical to the Summit's success. Dialogue became more welcome and real when no constituency, by process design, stood over-and-above the other. Dialogue also became more creative and productive. People were not used to hearing each other's ideas on these topics across generational lines, let alone hearing them on something of an equal footing with each other.

After the Summit, the innovation teams met over the summer to refine and to develop strategies for implementing their plans. A video presentation of the Summit was shared with the entire staff of the district during the opening convocation for the following school year, as were reports from each of the innovation teams. To support the outcomes of the Summit, CCS sought to infuse AI throughout the district. Administrators and teacher leaders were trained on appreciative approaches to supervision and conflict resolution. The innovation work continued through the following school year, resulting in measurable improvement in each of the areas of inquiry.

Building Upon Strengths in Crossroads

AI works, in part, because it identifies, aligns with, and amplifies organizational strengths. By getting people to discover, focus on, and explore organizational strengths, AI changes the tone and character of conversations. Instead of complaining about what's not working people start celebrating what is working well. By noticing and amplifying the good things that are going on, AI turns the tables on old conversational patterns. As the search for scapegoats subsides, the safety required for innovation, risk-taking, and learning grows. People become more open, forthcoming, and confident. This is what unfolded through CCS' AI process.

By getting people to have conversations with each other about their best experiences, core values, generative conditions, and heartfelt wishes, AI created a space where new possibilities could emerge. It assisted people to generate new positive images of and propositions for the future by reconnecting them with their reason for going into

education in the first place as well as with their continuing passion for working constructively with students in the here and now. Instead of attending to the wounds of what was going wrong, the process evoked new possibilities for constructive change by attending to the dimensions and nuances of what was going right. These positive, constructive conversations resulted in the planning and implementation of a number of new initiatives designed to enhance performance in the three areas of inquiry. In addition, the quality of interpersonal relationships improved in measureable ways.

Trust and Respect

Trust is foundational to learning across all stages and facets of life. That's especially true in intergenerational contexts such as schools. Whether the focus is on the learning of new academic, athletic, or social skills, the positive engagement of students with each other and with adults is essential. In the absence of trust, learning is impaired. The energy for learning is diverted into self-protective or even retributive directions. In the presence of trust, learning is enhanced (Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, & Hoy, 2001; Tschannen-Moran, 2014 2004). The energy for learning becomes more focused on learning.

It was this recognition as well as the recognition that trust and respect at every level (adult-to-adult, adult-to-student, and student-to-student) was an area of needed growth that led CCS to make the cultivation of trust and respect a primary focus of its AI process. It utilized AI to explore the dimensions of instances where trust and respect was higher to see what could be learned for and applied to instances where trust and respect was lower. It also reviewed the experiences of other districts to see what could be learned there as well.

One district initiative specifically designed to foster greater trust and respect involved training district employees and the Board of Education (BoE) in Nonviolent Communication (NVC), a communication process designed to facilitate the respectful understanding of people's feelings, needs, and desires (Rosenberg, 2005). NVC gives people tools for honest expression and empathetic reception of feelings, needs, and desires even when confronted with hard-to-hear messages. In

preparation for a district-wide training in this process, four small-group sessions were held involving more than 50 people, including teacher-leaders, administrators, and the BoE. This was followed by a one day in-service involving all of the district employees. This training led to a follow-up Board workshop, training for the Freshman Learning Community, student initiatives, and a practice group seminar.

Community Pride and Involvement

One of the things that was clear to the participants planning CCS' AI process was that it would be difficult for the schools to improve significantly without significant improvement in the level of community support for and engagement in the schools. There was also recognition of how the community's low pride in CCS was inhibiting a robust level of community involvement.

Community pride and involvement was thus selected as a second focus of CCS' AI process. Community engagement is the degree to which a school can count on involvement and support from parents and community members as well as the extent to which it provides the community with information about its activities and accomplishments. Schools with strong community engagement are responsive to the needs and concerns of parents and community members and, as a result, are better able to marshal community support when needed. Tschannen-Moran, Parish, and DiPaola (2006) found that middle school students were more likely to demonstrate success on state assessments in schools where teachers felt that parents and community members were working actively with their schools to ensure student success. By engaging their communities in positive ways, educational administrators and teachers are more likely to experience favorable results for their students.

Several new initiatives to engage parents and the community at-large grew out of CCS' AI Summit. These included:

- the founding of a Grandparents' Association that came to play an active service role within the schools and at school events,

- the founding of a district-wide Parent-Teacher Organization to facilitate communication and to support parental involvement across schools and school levels,
- the use of the school-district website to circulate electronic copies of building newsletters,
- the creation of a new staff position to serve as school-community liaison,
- the hosting of a Town Meeting by the BoE, using the AI paired-interview process, to celebrate and plan for the arts programs in the schools.

These and other initiatives enabled CCS to subsequently pass two important operating levies.

Student Achievement and Success

After launching the AI process at CCS, numerous new initiatives to improve student achievement and success were added to those that were already underway. The process worked delightfully well. It not only assisted CCS to better meet state indicators of school progress and success, it also assisted CCS to develop a system-wide climate that was much more conducive to student achievement. As schools respond to the pressures of the accountability movement to improve student achievement, attendance, and graduation rates, there is a growing recognition that the quality of interpersonal relationships, across generational lines, is a strong predictor of these outcomes. In the academic year following CCS' AI initiative, the entire district, not just one building, met AYP for the first time ever. This uplifted and encouraged people such that AI became more deeply embedded as an ongoing part of the Crossroads' culture.

The Five Principles of AI

AI is undergirded by five principles that are well illustrated by the intergenerational experiences of the people of CCS. These five principles, the positive, constructionist, simultaneity, anticipatory, and poetic principles center on the nature, relationship, and quality of dialogue that AI enables (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2008). In CCS, the adult and student constituencies were in true dialogue. The way that happened revealed the underlying truth of the five principles of AI: they build effectively and essentially, one upon another.

We have represented these five principles in the image of a pyramid to show how they are related to each other and work together to generate positive

actions and outcomes (Tschannen-Moran & Tschannen-Moran, 2010). See Figure 1.

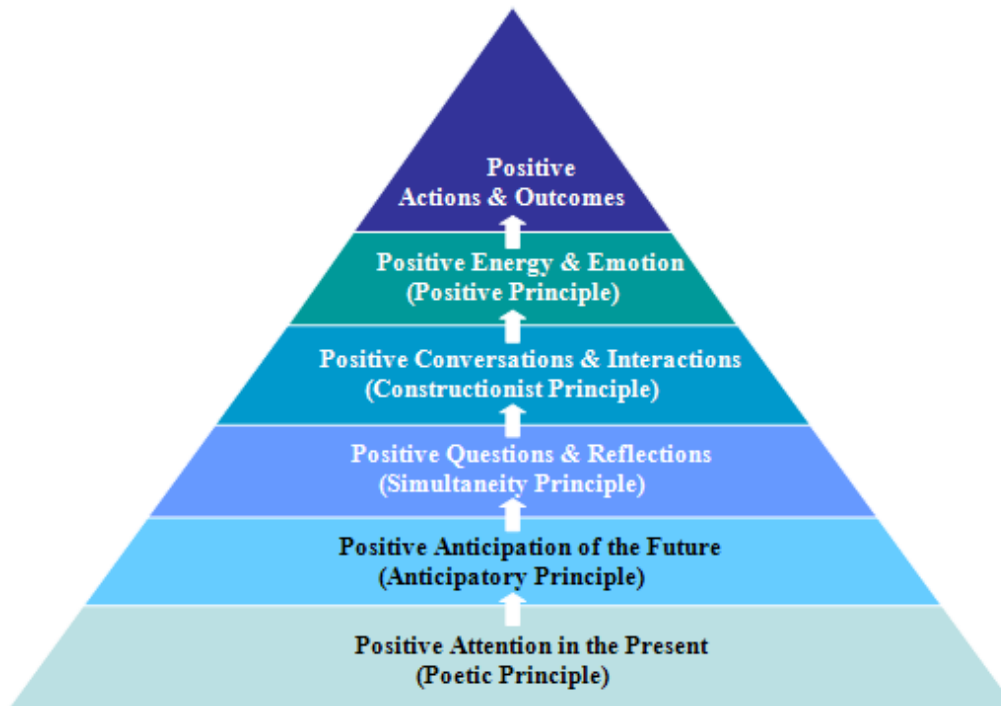


Figure 1. The Five Principles of Appreciative Inquiry (Tschannen-Moran & Tschannen-Moran, 2010).

The Positive Principle

Positive actions and outcomes flow naturally from the orientation and force generated by positive energy and emotions. Discouragement – the diminishment of courage – moves people in the opposite direction. It robs people of vision and power. Encouragement – the development of courage – has the opposite effect. It awakens vision and power. This certainly proved to be true at Crossroads. By working together with positive questions and foci at every stage of the process, adults and students were able to better trust and learn from each other. Awkward or even adversarial relationships became easier and mutually reinforcing. By using the AI approach, adults and students developed and diversified what was working well between them into a more productive and robust norm.

The Constructionist Principle

If positive energy and emotion hold so much potential for good, how do we get those? The

constructionist principle asserts that positive energy and emotion are constructed through positive conversations and interactions with other people. It's not always easy to bring about those positive interactions, especially when the stakes are high and people are struggling to realize positive joint outcomes. It may seem so much easier to notice and to focus on trying to fix the squeaky wheel than on fanning the flames of positivity. That's because of the way pain tends to get our attention. Problems beg to be analyzed and fixed; in organizational or social contexts. When something isn't working right we want to find the cause and, in so doing, we too often shift into the blame game. In schools, it's especially easy for teachers and school leaders to point the finger at students and to thereby construct a negative reality of tension and resistance.

The Simultaneity Principle

When we do harm in this way we typically do so in no time at all. As soon as we ask about, focus on, and try to fix problems we can instantly

amplify them into being bigger than they really are. It works the same way when it comes to asking about, focusing on, and trying to amplify strengths. The instant we turn our collective attention in that positive direction, the instant we shift to that positive approach, people and processes start shifting in positive ways as well. As the old saying goes, “Whether you think you can or think you can’t, you’re right.” Our thinking determines our reality and it can do so in the twinkling of an eye. That’s because our thinking has such a formative impact on what we say and do. By asking a new question, telling a new story, and/or making a new reflection we instantly shift the energy and direction. Focusing on problems tends to deplete available energy by leading us down a path of fault finding and blame. Focusing on the good stuff, on the other hand, tends to increase energy, renew hope, and bolster creativity. And it does all this in the twinkling of an eye. We saw this at work at CCS, as the entire system shifted its focus to the strengths of the community and its schools only to discover there were many delightful surprises and strengths.

The Anticipatory Principle

If positive questions and reflections are of such critical importance to the tenor and substance of our conversations, where do those come from? The anticipatory principle asserts that our questions and reflections flow from the things we anticipate happening in the future. By anticipating what things look like at their very best, people become more creative, resourceful, and resilient in looking for ways to make it so. In CCS, the discovery of so many positive dynamics and outcomes generated the hope that CCS could once again be a place where people were proud to say they lived or were from.

The Poetic Principle

If positive anticipation of the future sets the stage for positive questions and reflections, how do we get that? Forming the base of the pyramid upon which all the other principles are built, the poetic principle connects hope with mindfulness and intention with attention. The more we attend creatively and actively to the positive, life-giving dimensions of the present moment, the more

positive will be our intentions for future moments. The engagement, excitement, and positive momentum for change generated by the AI process at CCS could certainly be described as poetry in motion.

Conclusion

This process provided evidence of how AI gave one struggling school system and community new reason to hope for better days and to invest in bringing those hopes to fruition. By celebrating the best of the present, district participants were able to dream even brighter dreams for the future. As the conversations changed, a new social reality was constructed and a cycle of positive energy was built as people encouraged one another to live from their values and to be their very best. Openness is a key ingredient when it comes to any change process. Systems cannot and do not change when key players have their brows furled, their arms crossed, and their toes tapping. It is much more likely to happen when they have smiling faces and open arms. Organizational change requires positive energy and excitement the part of as many players as possible. This is a key understanding of AI in general and it is especially true of AI in schools. By not approaching its problems with a traditional SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) approach but by utilizing a strengths-based SOAR (Strengths, Observations, Aspirations and Resources) process, district participants were truly able to soar toward a positive future. CCS thereby evoked the willingness to, capacity for, and reality of change. CCS utilized AI to sneak up on its problems, one might say, in order to minimize resistance and maximize openness to change. Instead of focusing on what was wrong but rather on what was right, CCS was able to achieve not only established goals and objectives but to also frame and articulate new goals and objectives.

In CCS, AI proved to be a wonderfully effective way to turn things around. AI unleashed open and creative energies for change. Schools are intergenerational communities in which the key players have a common, vested interest: the energetic participation of one and all in the learning process. In intergenerational efforts such as the one that took place at CCS,

strengths-based, change-oriented conversations become all the more evocative. When elementary as well as secondary students engaged with various adult players and constituencies in appreciative conversations, so as to create new visions of the future and new capacities to make it so, the likelihood of their coming to pass was enhanced.

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