

Learning leadership through Appreciative Inquiry

**Sheila Carr-Stewart and
Keith Walker**

University of Saskatchewan

This article briefly describes the use of Appreciative Inquiry in a number of research and leader development settings, all associated with education. The research groups varied from the intern experiences of undergraduate educational students to the work lives of superintendents. The article elaborates on the research approach for each project - particularly the work with superintendents - and how the appreciative inquiry processes helped motivate individuals to build upon their own stories and images of success.

Introductions to Appreciative Inquiry approaches

In the early 1990s, the writings of Cooperrider and his colleagues came to our attention for their attractive orientation to viewing organizations in a less functionalist fashion than most of the research literature of the time. On one occasion with a colleague, the conversation turned to the relevance of our “training” efforts with aspiring and neophyte school administrators. Were we in touch with them and their worlds? After our “content dumpings” and “process experiences,” were we leaving them with both relevant and rigorous ways to make sense of their life worlds? Would using the emerging approach of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) help us make sense of the natural

understandings and the best of individual’s preexistent images and experiences? Would AI’s theoretical underpinnings, range of applications and utility be applicable in an educational setting? In this article, we provide a brief overview of some of the distinguishing features and then reference nine recent research projects (completed and in progress) to demonstrate the range of our application and provide a platform for suggesting further initiatives. The article illustrates the process, outcomes and potential of this genre for enhancing the learning of leaders and the learning about leadership in education.

Overview of Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciating is about valuing the best in people, the root of their successes and the working parts of the world around us; affirming strengths, potentials, possibilities and capacities as well as making an effort to add value; edifying, prizing and esteeming the best of all that is around us – this is the “appreciative” part of appreciative inquiry. For our research purposes, to inquire has entailed discovering, exploring and systematically searching to understand and appreciate the particular situations and successes. Gergen (1999) comments “the emphasis on appreciation sprang from the conception of the ‘appreciative eye’ in art, where it is said that within every piece of art one may locate beauty.” We decided to ask where, in this situation, is success happening and what does it look like? According to Cooperrider et al. (2000), Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is systematic discovery of what gives “life” to a living system when it is most alive, most ►

- effective and most constructively capable, in economic, ecological, and human terms. AI involves, in a central way, the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system's capacity to apprehend, anticipate and heighten positive potential.

Watkins and Mohr (2001) state Appreciative Inquiry is

“A collaborative and highly participative . . . approach to seeking, identifying and enhancing the “life-giving forces” that are present when a system is performing optimally in human, economic, and organizational terms . . . [it] focuses on the generative and life-giving forces in the system, the things we want to increase.”

In the emerging AI literature the assumptions associated with this form of inquiry usually include the following:

- In every society, organization or group something works;
- What we focus on becomes our reality;
- Reality is created in the moment, and there are multiple realities;
- The act of asking questions of an organization or group influences the group in some way;
- People have more confidence and comfort to journey to the future (the unknown) when they carry forward parts of the past (the known);
- If we carry parts of the past forward, they should be what are best about the past;
- It is important to value differences;
- The language we use creates our reality.

Appreciative Inquiry is said to be rooted in the values of an emerging paradigm; one where people accept the complexity and subjectivity of the world; accept that change and operationalising plans is an iterative process; embrace the view that there are many paths to reach a goal; understand the world is about relationships and connections; believe that language creates reality (Watkins & Mohr, 2001). The AI approach affirms that people co-create and co-commission meaning together and that meaning and actions are co-mingled. As Gergen (1999) expressed to his readers, “it is not my game here to persuade, to win, or to educate you in the right way. It is you who must breathe life into these words. And if we're successful in this author-reader relationship, perhaps new paths will open. As we relate together, so do we construct our future.” These are the words of a social constructionist. As will be seen, our researcher-participant roles have been cast with resonating formulation. Philosophically, according to Cooperrider (2000),

AI “involves a decisive shift in Western intellectual

tradition from cogito ergo sum, to communicamus ergo sum . . . The purpose of an inquiry . . . is the creation of “generative theory,” not so much mappings or explanations of yesterday's world, but anticipatory articulations of tomorrow's possibilities. Constructionism, because of its emphasis on the communal basis of knowledge and its radical questioning of everything that is taken for granted as “objective” or seemingly immutable, invites us to find ways to increase the generative capacity of knowledge.”

As Burr (1995) points out there are at least four assumptions embedded in the social constructionist platform:

- It challenges positivist/empiricist ideas that the world can be known as it is through objective, unbiased observation;
- It asserts that *all* ideas and categories for understanding are the product of specific histories and cultures and are best seen as cultural artifacts;
- It proposes that our accepted ways of understanding the world arise from *shared constructions* of the world taken from our social interactions and relationships and made meaningful by the essential tool of language;
- It observes that there are many possible social constructions of the world, which may each invite different patterns of human actions and arrangements of social actions.

Of interest to organizational development and school improvement researchers and practitioners is the AI position that inquiry and change are simultaneous activities because inquiry intervenes, as people discover, learn, dialogue and construct (Watkins & Mohr, 2001; Cooperrider et al., 2000). Cooperrider also believes that “an organization's story is constantly being co-authored” (Cooperrider et al., 2000). In terms of process, there are generic descriptions for the most common phases operationalised in appreciative inquiries. The uses involve choosing to give positive attention to a phenomenon. Inquiring of others about stories that have life giving forces: then having heard these stories, the participants in the inquiry work to locate the themes of these stories and from the themes create shared images of a preferred future. These earlier phases then lead to designing ways to create that future. These generic phases will be seen, in part, through our review of recent inquiry activities to follow.

Overview of recent Appreciative Inquiry research

In our work with aspiring principals, attending a one-week Principals' Short Course, we asked the participants to think of a story of leadership success

from their work world (their success or the success of an observed other), to write the story down, to share it with several others and to identify the underlying themes, suggest common and situated ingredients for the successful experiences shared. A similar research and group process was used with teacher interns returning from four-month school placements for a final university term of reflection-on-experience before graduation. Interns were asked – “what story exemplifies the teaching experience at its best?” In small group settings, the stories were recorded, shared, and inductive themes derived and analysed. In these similar settings (neophyte or aspiring administrators and beginning teachers) we asked participants to reflect on the individual themes for relevant application to their own mode of practice, priorities and principles.

In a third study, we brought together 18 principals who had each been in their positions for less than five years. Using an Appreciative Inquiry process we sought to determine with them what their best induction experiences had been and to design a more effective

example deals with two distinct situations using action research interventions. In these cases school participants have felt beaten down, under attack, weary in their well-being or have been through the difficult times of a protracted labour dispute. Appreciative Inquiry was used to design a process that moves personal, interpersonal, organisational and system purviews onto a more positive and generative orientation.

A more detailed example of Appreciative Inquiry in work life of superintendents study

An Appreciative Inquiry research approach was also utilized in a study involving 164 educational administrators – including directors, superintendents, and assistant, deputy, and associate superintendents of public schools – all referred to as superintendents for the purpose of clarity in this article. The study sought to better understand their work lives: roles, relationships, realities and responses. The study

The inquiry process provided a strong platform for the beginning of renewal and hope for the staff and faculty

but realistically based system of induction for new principals. In a subsequent study, we conducted an electronic Delphi of first year principals to explore their stories of success, excellence, positive action and pragmatic solutions to the new demands and understandings of this new role. In a fifth study, we used Appreciative Inquiry interviews to bring description to behaviours, relationships and understandings that were aimed at fostering the development of assistant principal acumen. The assistant principals, and principals’ data from these transcripts were then analyzed for themes to later constitute a “what works best in administrative team mentorship” profile.

A sixth study, using paired interviews with Appreciative Inquiry questions, sought to find out from over 40 student leaders on several Canadian campuses, and just under 40 leader educators and leader employers how leadership and leadership development might best be conceived and operationalised in the context of higher education initiatives. A seventh application of Appreciative Inquiry invited faculty, staff and student leaders in a college of education to participate in several iterations of this approach. The college had suffered major downsizing losses, balkanization by departments, isolation and fragmentation of research and programme initiatives and morale depreciation during the 1990s. The inquiry process provided a strong platform for the beginning of renewal and hope for the staff and faculty. A similar

culminated in a four-hour workshop with the superintendents to process the findings. The study stopped short of its action research potential by not moving into the work design and renewal of process stages. The most unique aspects of the study design were the use of constructionist appreciative inquiry forums (group events), an electronic Delphi and a survey. The forums were also designed to provide dialogues about education and educational leadership and to dream about the most promising future for superintendents, their organizations and constituents. We modified the Delphi technique to electronically collect the responses of participating superintendents and to engage them in trend identification exercises that would deal with the terms of reference for the particular study.

Primary roles and relationships of superintendents

From the Delphi activity, we heard that superintendents were not so much “direct delivery” people as brokers, resource finders, connectors, board advisors, parent involvers, field-savvy leaders, big picture people, encouragers, collaboration facilitators, communicators and reflective practitioners. They were required to be on the creative leadership edge, both locally and within the context of inter-agency collaboration. Superintendents identified the most important issues and potential challenges in their work lives as: funding, diversity, staffing, curriculum actualization, enrolment ➤

- changes, new demands, personnel morale and pressure from external mandates.

In another Delphi round, we asked participants these questions:

- Looking to the future, what do you see as the primary roles and relationships of superintendents?
- To what extent will these vary within the superintendents and their particular settings?
- What will be the assumed boundaries (limits) to the roles and relationships of superintendents?

Their responses highlight roles as partnership builders, guardians of public education, and instructional leaders. For brevity sake we have only listed the categories or theme of response, without supporting examples. They defined their future roles as an amalgam of: partnership builders and brokers; programme deliverers; guardians of public education; curriculum and instructional leadership; encouragers; change agents; negotiators, stewards, advocates and visionaries; district management; and vigilant accommodators of the common good.

Enhancing effectiveness of work life roles, relationships, and realities

In the survey phase of this study, we asked superintendents to respond to the following open-ended question: *“If you could enhance the effectiveness of one of your roles or sets of relationships, what would this look like (include why and also how this might be accomplished)?”* In the superintendents’ responses there were a number of important themes dealing with more effective work with partners and interagency players. Superintendents indicated some of their professional development needs, including the affirmation that a critical component of their work life is developing the people within their school district. The following themes were identified by the superintendents: partner, union, agency and community relationship enhancements; process enhancements; professional development enhancements; operationalizing reflective practice; and role priority and teamship adjustments.

The best of what is: the work lives of superintendents

Appreciative Inquiry recognizes that “people are highly motivated by their own stories and images of success” (www.appreciativeinquiry.ca). In this section of the article we review the responses of superintendents to questions related to the best aspects of their current work lives. Superintendents emphasized the successes of leadership initiatives, attitudes and responses to situations, stories from the field, superintendent reasons for hope, and an overall sense from superintendents of those aspects of their work lives that they most appreciate.

Superintendents were asked to arrange themselves in pairs and to interview each other using five prepared questions. Each superintendent was given 15 minutes to respond to the questions with their colleague listening to their responses and then record the highlights from these interviews. The “Appreciative Inquiry” questions asked were as follows:

1. Think back over your last several years as an educational administrator (and Superintendent). Tell me about a high point in your experience, a story about when your passion was ignited, you felt most engaged in education, you were excited, enthusiastic and a time when you were most alive in your work.
2. Putting modesty aside, what do you value most about yourself, your work, your school district, the superintendent’s organization and education in this province?
3. What core factor(s) give(s) life to your work as an educator (without it, it would not be what it is)? Give your response in the form of a story or incident.
4. What do you see going on in your work world that give you hope? As you think about students, communities, organizations, colleagues, and others – where do you see evidence of authentic and sustained progress, need-meeting activity, heroes, exciting innovation and life giving force?
5. Imagine the year is 2005, we’ve been asleep; your work circumstances (as a Superintendent) are exactly as you wish them to be. What do you see happening? What are people doing? Saying? What’s different to today? What is the same? What surprises and delights you?

The researchers asked the superintendents to provide the most quotable quote that they had heard from their colleague during these interviews. Many of the superintendents paraphrased their interview partners’ words with their own. Superintendents talked about the delight they experience in their work developing teachers, administrators and building community capacity. They describe the privilege and satisfaction of providing leadership teams of educators and staff. Participating superintendents described their experience of strong collegiality in both their school districts and within the superintendent organisation. The selected quotations and reflections provide a small window into the lives of these superintendents.

■ *Observing Growth and Learning*

I feel that I’m making a difference for teachers and students. I would like to be able to make decisions without any fiscal restraints.

■ *Capacity Building for Positive Impact*

My job is to give parents, teachers and school

systems the capacity to be self-advocates. “Capacity-building” is an important activity.

■ *Hope in the Team*

There is real teamwork between the board, administrators and school administration. Fulfillment when there is a marked difference in the schools and students because of my work.

■ *Working Together Works*

The synergy of community-based education that promotes the development of an education system that is student centered and effective so that students realize their potential.

■ *Passion, Satisfaction and Watching Good Things Happen*

My partner spoke passionately about the feelings of success he felt and saw in the kids in all the activities that take place in and at school. Schools care for children. He saw in the celebration of children’s education as the hope for the future.

The superintendents’ work life themes related to “the best of what is”; we heard superintendents observe that their colleagues were “very pro-students, teachers, and parents.” It was obvious that many superintendents are optimistic about public education presently and in the future. They feel they can and do make a positive impact on education for the children in their school districts. They are quite optimistic in the work they face and tend to see change as a challenge; not something to be avoided. One forum participant reflected, during her interview with another colleague, that “making a positive difference to student learning, being valued for what she brought to the work, helping change things for the better, supportive colleagues [was what motivates her].”

It was clear that superintendents enjoyed their direct influence on teachers and students in ways that make a difference. They observed that people are willing to change or take risks for the sake of children and that ultimately people are involved in education because of the students. “The chance to see the curriculum actualized – to see in action the things we work so hard to bring about.” This was what motivated many of the superintendents we heard speak of their work lives.

Many superintendents related the belief that education in their province is proactive and progressive. “We are meeting the needs of our public education audience.” “Our [Superintendent] organisation is a very prestigious organisation.” One superintendent said, “with all its problems, this is a great place to be at this time. We can work together because we talk to each other. The talk now needs to turn to collaborative action. Change has to reside in the communities and with our youth.” Working together was thought to be the key.

This, of course, raised the importance of superintendents being enablers, facilitators and providing environments that would allow staff and agency partners to respond to the challenges.

Back to the Future

At this juncture, we move the attention of the reader beyond the best of what is in the work lives of superintendents, to describe the dreams, prognostications and aspirations of superintendents. Using data collected from Delphi, superintendent forums and surveys, we explore what might be: the future of education as it relates to superintendents within the context of provincial education and the anticipated work life of superintendents. We asked participants to place themselves in the year 2010 and “look back, and what do you see as having occurred during this period that has so revolutionised the educational scene; that teaching and learning has moved into a new era of actualisation?” One superintendent wrote:

I would hope to see that education has restructured itself in several very dramatic ways. First school districts, as we know them no longer exist. There are human service areas where the complex needs of children, youth and families are served through linkages of social services, Aboriginal agencies, health services, and so on to the community education center. Educational opportunities are available to meet the needs of all ages (a birth-to-death education and community establishment). Cooperation has moved to true collaboration - that is pooling of resources (human and financial) and facilities – to provide relatively seamless service delivery within local regions.

Superintendents were divided into groups and each given one of the following questions:

- In what ways do you anticipate that the roles and realities of superintendents will change over the next number of years?
- What do you anticipate the job design and work life of superintendents will become like over the next few years? What will be the significant changes in your job design and work life in the next few years?
- What will your workload, workweek, workday, work setting, work roles, work relations, work realities - be like?
- What about colleagues - what will their work lives be like? What do you imagine a day in the life of a person in your current position will look like?

In the themes below, superintendents provided their responses to these questions and by so doing provide a basis for further dialogue amongst superintendents: ➤

- ■ More day to day responsibilities;
- More complicated, conflictual and challenging;
- Even more relationship focused (external);
- Lone rangers looking for support;
- De-centralization of instructional supervision;
- Sustained and increasing demands;
- Increasingly politicised agenda;
- Structural changes;
- More paper-pushing, less school contact;
- Accountability pressures will increase;
- Status quo: Been there – done that;
- Outside box thinking required;
- Political advocates and convincers;
- Expanded professional development;
- Lengthened work week: broadened portfolios; fewer superintendents;
- Emphasis on transagency work;
- Emphasis on leading learning;
- Equity issues attention.

Most superintendents focused on recounting the high quality of education conveyed to the people through the K-12 public education system. Nonetheless, this celebratory and affirming set of dispositions is becoming overshadowed with the realisation that the task of continuing to serve the people with sustained quality of education is a daunting task. Mitroff and Denton (1999), say “if an organization or situation is to transform itself, a crisis - better yet, a series of crises - is absolutely necessary.” They say that transformation is usually preceded by a deep crisis of meaning, without knowing what the solutions are; which in turn, leads to an openness to change.

The process of Appreciative Inquiry used for the Superintendent Forums provided the opportunity for superintendents to develop provocative propositions or statements of what superintendents want their school districts and professional organisation to be. Superintendents considered what might be. Their statements, some listed below, affirm a future reality based on the best of their common experiences. In other words, superintendents developed statements based on a combination of experienced successes and ideals. In this final section, we provide several exhibits of these provocative statements:

Superintendents are committed to providing the highest quality of education for all students no matter where they live or the challenges they face. Superintendents readily offer support to their colleagues as they strive to improve the quality of education for all students.

Our district is a people-centered organisation committed to creating an ethos that provides opportunities for renewal and innovation. As

educational leaders we are facilitating change founded on educational research and best practice.

We are committed to leading learning organizations. We envision educational and societal processes that value creativity and flexibility in designing opportunities to meet the individual needs of kids. Working with our partners, we will ascend the mountain to enable us all to see a better world.

We provide vision-driven leadership in our communities by helping every child reach his or her personal potential (academically, socially, spiritually and physically). Our success contributes to the development of productive, safe and inclusive communities. Our success depends on our partnership with parents, other elements of our community, and other social agencies.

Appreciative Inquiry facilitated superintendents, and participants in other research groups identified in this article, focusing their energy to identify the best within their organisations, to acknowledge “the best of what is already working today” and “dream of what could be if you were to build on and leverage current successes for even greater achievement,” in order to design the best “blueprint for achieving peak performance” (www.breakthroughsunlimited.com). We have found the social constructionist and positive frames of Appreciative Inquiry to be exceptionally helpful in our research and consultative practices. **MiE**

Sheila.Carr-stewart@usask.ca

Keith.Walker@Usask.ca

References

Burr, V. (1995). *An introduction to social constructionism*. London: Routledge.

Cooperrider, D.L., Sorensen, P.F.Jr., Whitney, D., & Yaeger, T.F. (eds) (2000). *Appreciative inquiry: Rethinking human organization toward a positive theory of change. Campaign, Ill.:* Stipes Publishing L.L.C.

Gergen, K. J. (1999). *An invitation to social construction*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.

Watkins, J. M., & Mohr, B.J. (2001). *Appreciative inquiry: Change at the speed of imagination*. SanFrancisco: Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer.

www.appreciativeinquiry.ca Accessed January 23, 2003.

www.breakthroughsunlimited.com/itm0008.htm. Accessed January 23, 2003.