

# Appreciative Inquiry in the Secondary School

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In 2003, I collaborated with Robin Shohet to introduce Appreciative Inquiry (AI) into our large, mixed secondary school in the East End of London. To begin with I sent invitations to all members of staff as well as approaching a number of students, and a mixed group of ten people congregated for our first meeting.

## AI group meetings

As facilitator, Robin outlined some of the theory. AI was a strategy for change which identified the best of 'what is' to be able to pursue dreams and possibilities of 'what could be'; and that it was a way of 'seeing' which affirmed the best qualities in an organisation, situation or another human being. He outlined the four stage AI process and in pairs, we interviewed each other about our 'best experience' of school. We told this as a story, in as much detail as possible and as if it were happening now. The effect of this

was instant as we felt excited about our colleagues' successes and experienced a sense of connection with them.

We looked at each others' values regarding ourselves, work and school, and once again a great deal of positive energy was released. Finally we shared our future wishes for the school, and the emphasis on the positive made these ideas seem not only desirable but achievable. We each agreed to interview several other people before our next meeting, which would include present

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members and any interviewees who wanted to join us. Teachers were encouraged to interview students and vice versa.

Eight people turned up for the second meeting and when I expressed my disappointment that more people had not been able to attend, Robin gently challenged me to express the positive side of my statement. So I said that I really wanted the project to work in my school and that I care passionately about the quality of the relationships in the school. In response, Robin said that he was feeling energised and inspired by my commitment and that, in turn, made me feel good! Already a positive atmosphere was established, but more importantly, by making conscious how our words, tone, and body language impact on others, Robin was showing how we can raise each other's self-esteem and make each other feel good in small ways all the time.

In this meeting, we identified common themes from the stories that were told and saw how AI is not a quick fix, but an approach capable, over time, of making a huge impact on the culture of the school. It is the opposite of leaping into action, which is what we usually do when we see a problem that needs rectifying.

Most interviewees had found the process a positive experience. The teachers had enjoyed having the opportunity to sit down and really listen to students - often the teaching situation doesn't give enough time for this. One member of staff related how the interviewing process had completely transformed her relationship with a particularly challenging student. He had overheard her being interviewed by a child in the AI group and had become curious. This led to her interviewing him, leading to a deepened relationship which involved her lending him a number of books on black history which validated his personal experience. I had enjoyed talking to people

I never normally encounter, and afterwards felt much more a part of a community as I greeted them in school. For me, change was already taking place. A group member said that people had been pleased to talk about what they value about themselves and their work as they don't often have time to stop and think about it.

'Respect' emerged as an important value for many in the group. One teacher told how she had once given her form a leaflet to take home and had later found half of them scattered over the stairs. She had spoken to the class the next day, explaining that when she had to spend time clearing these up, she was missing out on being with her family - and this applied to the cleaners as well. It never happened again. From this, the value of empathy was highlighted and this story showed how it could be encouraged by teachers helping students, within the context of a caring relationship, to understand the implications of their actions.

By the end of this meeting, a number of ideas had emerged, amongst which was the group's great desire for more respect in the school - for people to treat others the way they would like to be treated. Another concern was raised about the Year 11 students' leaving day. A student group member was upset that because of anti-social behaviour in the past, Year 11's were not informed of the date of their leaving day. The group felt that this conveyed to students about to embark on careers in the outside world, the message that they are not to be trusted. We thought that the Year 11's should be given the opportunity to say their goodbyes properly, both to each other and to their teachers. Another idea that emerged from the students was that of presenting to the school an assembly on AI.

By the end of this meeting there was an air of excitement and enthusiasm even though

it was nearly the end of term and everyone was tired. The steps that were being suggested were small, but at the same time, had profound implications. Throughout, Robin modelled the values we were saying we wanted: he listened, gave us time, and valued everyone's contributions equally. We sensed a tremendous potential in this way of working and felt that with the focus on feelings rather than policy, and by building meaningful relationships and valuing one another through listening, that there was real hope for a transformation of relationships in the school.

After this the process seemed to stall. The assembly idea, which had seemed so promising, came to nothing as the teachers who were facilitating it were already overstretched and could not give the planning process the time it needed. Our group was not expanding in the way we had anticipated and there was some anxiety about where we were going to go with it next. At the final meeting, Robin announced that he had spoken to the headteacher, who had agreed to the AI group going on a residential to further the work we had begun.

### **AI group residential**

The residential was attended by some of the students from the original group, plus others invited by staff, as well as the senior leadership team, several middle leaders and a parent governor – 18 altogether. I was looking forward to the weekend because it was an exciting project to be involved in, but at the same time I was feeling exhausted and wondering if I would have the stamina to see it through. Sitting in the circle on the Friday evening, I felt slightly awed to think that this was taking place as a result of the faith the core group had had in what they wanted to achieve. I felt some responsibility

for the event and found myself hoping that these teachers who were sacrificing time with family and friends to be here, would enjoy it and be inspired by it. But I also felt quietly confident that everything would be alright.

As usual we began by interviewing each other. One of the positive stories to emerge from this was how happy the staff had felt about the success of the Year 11's leaving day. The students had been told the date on which it would take place, had behaved well, and altogether the day had been a resounding success. Members of the original AI group were thrilled to hear that their discussions had borne fruit. What had happened was that a senior teacher in the group had gone back to the leadership team with the concerns that had been raised and as the team had previously held discussions on this subject, the AI input had been the catalyst to bring about the desired change.

During one exercise when small groups were sharing their findings in the form of drawings, I was delighted when a rather retiring student agreed to present our group's ideas. It was wonderful to see one staff member in action as she gave him her support in creating the image, also encouraging a rather shy girl to give a presentation of her group's findings. The safe and accepting atmosphere of the group seemed to make it possible for some of these students to find the courage to stand up and speak in public.

I found it validating to be in the company of so many people who were taking the AI approach seriously, and it was helpful to pool resources with others who could suggest fresh and creative solutions whenever we seemed to get stuck. For me, the residential provided the sense of support I had been needing to enable me to move forward with projects I had previously been interested in. After the weekend, and largely as a result of conversations with various people, I was

inspired to attend a Marshall Rosenberg talk on Nonviolent Communication (NVC) in education. Finally, I could see its potential as a tool to help create positive relationships at school. But this was only part of a broader theme that had emerged during our group-work – that of 'emotional literacy'. Subsumed under this heading were other topics such as: circle time, assemblies, staff training, an emotional literacy group, assertiveness, the AI approach and relationship building. Other subjects of interest were: catering, the environment, and cross-curricular projects.

I was aware of how strange it must have seemed to the students to be calling their teachers by their first names, but what

particularly stood out was the mutual respect between teachers and students. This was borne out at the end of the residential when people were writing down their comments and both teachers and students recorded their appreciation of each other. The students were impressed by the quality of relationships between themselves and the teachers on the residential. They enjoyed the atmosphere of democracy and respect that prevailed and some of them saw members of staff in a much more positive light afterwards.

### **Middle leaders' residential**

At around this time we had carried out a Values Assessment in the school. This is an online method in which people pick out from a list of about 100 values, the ten that are most important to them as individuals, the ten that they see manifested in the school and the ten that they would ideally like to see the school exemplify. Some of these values are positive and some are less so, or 'potentially limiting', and one of the potentially limiting values that showed up on the middle leaders' chart was that of 'anti-social behaviour'. The appearance in the personal and desired columns of the value of 'caring' pointed to a strong desire for greater care and respect so we drew up a questionnaire that addressed this as follows:

'Some people might say respect is an important part of a healthy relationship. It is naturally there with people with whom we feel comfortable. Sometimes, perhaps when some students are there against their will, we may have to earn it.

**1.** Best experience. Tell me about the best experience of respect you have had at Brampton. What made it good for you? How did you feel? What was the setting? Who

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was involved? Picture the event as if it were happening now. Describe the event in detail.

**2. Values.** What are the things you value deeply; specifically, the things you value about yourself, your work and your school:

**a)** Yourself. Without being too humble, what do you value most about yourself as a human being, a friend, a parent, a colleague, a citizen and so on? With relation to respect what qualities do you respect in yourself?

**b)** Your work. What qualities do you value and respect in your colleagues and your students? What do you imagine they might respect in you?

**c)** Your school. What about Brampton's practices do you value and respect? In relation to respect what is the single most important thing that you have learnt at Brampton?

**3. Core life-giving factor.** How do you imagine respect contributes to the life blood of Brampton?

**4.** Imagine it is 2005 and everything you want to have happen around respect has been put in place. What changes have been made and how have you contributed?'

We now embarked on a process of discovery during another residential attended by 22 senior and middle leaders.

On the Friday afternoon I was anxious because I was unsure how the staff would react to this new approach. During the planning meeting prior to the initial session, core group members explained to Robin the importance to them of completing the 'design' phase before the end of the weekend. Robin was clearly uncomfortable with the speed at which they wanted to move, and outlined his own need for a slower pace, pointing up a tension between these two approaches.

During the initial interviewing process I was working with the headteacher. He spoke first as I made notes. After giving his answer to the first question, he was moving on to the second, when I told him how I had felt about the incident he had related. This encouraged him to elaborate and we ended up going deeply into his story. I was amazed by the personal and professional journey he had made and, full of admiration, experienced a sense of real connection. When we reached the last question which was about our vision for the future of the school, I was thrilled to hear him say that AI would be our modus operandi from now on. He saw it as being integral to the way we do everything at school and said that in fact we were already working along those principles because now in senior leadership team meetings when the conversation begins to take a negative turn, someone realises this and they turn it around to focus on the positive. I was amazed and delighted to hear how thoroughly they had taken this approach to heart.

The next morning, while debriefing the answers to the first question in small groups, some people experienced problems as the conversation became derailed and negative and they struggled to get it back onto a positive note. Fortunately they were able to come up with some life-enhancing themes to take back to the plenary, the three most important being: listening, appreciation and trust. Other groups had come up with the same or similar words and it was good to discover a sense of unity.

When it came to going through question two in small groups, Robin asked the original pairs to join with another pair. This meant that when our partner told the others of the positive qualities we had mentioned to them, we were present to hear this and to experience others' reactions. I found it quite difficult to hear my partner comment positively on me, especially as he added his

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own appreciations, and I was overwhelmed when the other two added their comments. It was much easier to praise my partner and I wished we had had longer for this part of the exercise because telling each other what we appreciated about them was a wonderfully enjoyable and affirming experience.

During the small group debriefing of question three, some people seemed to be treating the task rather flippantly. I felt concerned about this but at the same time it was clear that they had absorbed a lot from what had taken place so far, so maybe this was their way of dealing with potentially threatening ideas and feelings. The feedback from this session was very enjoyable and lively. Some kind of alchemy seemed to have taken place because the atmosphere in the large group

was extraordinary. There was a sense of great safety and I found myself reacting with spontaneity and a total lack of self-consciousness. People burst into applause after each presentation and there was laughter, engagement and a tremendous appreciation of each other.

Our small group engaged with question four in a lively manner. It was clear they had needs that they wanted the school to meet. This was echoed in the larger group and after everyone had fed back, it emerged that two common themes were: 'Staff Care' and 'Common Areas'. The large group split exactly in half to address these topics and the brief was to come up with concrete and specific proposals to take back to school on Monday. I chose the first topic and the group decided to address the subject of meetings. This was clearly important to them as they discussed it animatedly, and concentrated on details.

During the afternoon coffee break I had had an interesting conversation with two middle leaders about yoga and meditation for workers. We talked about how some of our teachers burn oil or incense and how students can find it helpful to be given time just to reflect. These sorts of ideas came to form another strand of the 'Staff Care' agenda. It would be interesting to see what would happen next.

### **Whole school AI**

What did happen next was rather unexpected. On the first day of the new term there was a staff training day on 'Ethos and Culture', during which the results of the Values Assessment were conveyed to everyone and staff were invited to use AI 'respect' questionnaires as an aid to telling their stories. This highlighted some very painful feelings for the large group of teaching assistants who were present and I

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facilitated a separate meeting where they gave voice to their unhappiness. Using NVC principles, I recognised this as the expression of numerous unmet needs, and translated it into their deep desire to be consulted, appreciated, have their work recognised, be valued, respected and included. They wanted missing staff to be replaced, more resources, information, and discussions with senior leaders. A deputy headteacher came over to hear what they had to say and affirmed the value of the concerns being raised. Two further meetings were held at which the group refined their ideas, making them more specific before presenting them to senior leaders.

The two groups which had emerged from the middle leaders' residential, 'Staff Care' and 'Common Areas', became working groups which continue to meet to address issues of interest. The latter has been allocated a

budget of £10,000 to bring about environmental improvement, whilst the former is coming up with plans to help staff relax and enhance their well-being through such measures as shorter, more productive meetings, on-site beauty treatments and leisure facilities, an ironing shop and a creche. Two local NVC trainers will be giving a presentation to senior leaders with a view to introducing this way of relating into the school. Prefects will be trained in AI and the Values Assessment results will continue to be tackled in this way.

### **AI as a learning experience**

Introducing AI into the school has been a tremendous learning experience for me. At first I had hoped that it could work through convening a group of interested people, and although this bore fruit, its influence was limited. This was because, with teachers working at full stretch, their AI tasks became relegated to the bottom of the pile if other demands were coming from their line managers. What did make a difference was when we asked for and received the backing of senior leaders. Then, time and funds were made available for the work, notably the two residentials, in-service training time and ongoing working parties.

One of the interesting aspects of AI is its unpredictability. Projects that seemed to be popular at one time were dropped whilst others continued. Seeds that were sown at an early stage bore fruit unexpectedly at a later date. Important themes kept recurring until they were addressed. This unpredictability often led to feelings of insecurity and anxiety in people who were used to the problem solving approach and liked to feel in control of what was going on. There was a reluctance to allow the AI process to unfold in its own time and way. It tended to become rushed along at the

school's frenetic pace and I often feared that all the goodness in it would get squeezed out. There was a curious ambiguity in the school's attitude to AI. On the one hand AI was valued and adopted it as the modus operandi, but on the other hand, there seemed to be an unwillingness to credit it for the changes that took place. Maybe that is to be expected - after all, AI does not aim to bring in something completely new; it deliberately builds on what is already working well. So when it acts as a catalyst to bring about change, people tend to claim that they were planning to make those changes anyway.

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Another of my discoveries was the seeming indestructibility of the process. The school's initial tentative embracing of it may have limited its power to some extent, but good always emerged. Some people were alarmed by the reaction of the teaching assistants because they were unused to the way that AI uncovers the truth of a situation. Others, though, could see that it was healthy for these long-standing grievances to come to light as they could now be dealt with. Asking people about their feelings and values can lead to all kinds of unexpected results.

As a result of the AI, I see physical changes around the school, with brighter, more attractive corridors and classrooms. Teachers' time is saved as meetings have become more productive, and support services have been introduced to make their lives more pleasant and stress-free. On a personal level, I have changed too. I now feel more a part of a community where before I was fairly isolated, not belonging to any particular department. The shared AI experience has connected me to people throughout the whole school community and I feel more relaxed, valued, and authentic than before.

It can take time in an organisation for the realisation to take root that the most effective and innovative change comes about through trusting the energy and creativity that comes from a values based approach. AI has much to offer -above all, a positive atmosphere established through the coming together of people who share their best experiences, deepest values and greatest wishes for the future.