

Reflections on Brampton Manor School's Appreciative Inquiry Residential Workshop

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In the contemporary context for schooling, with the emphasis on narrow definitions of achievement, on the tendency to value only what can be measured in certain ways and on an endless stream of mandated targets, there is often precious little room for sensitivity to the emotional aspects of learning. Indeed, the drive for hard-nosed results and for above-average performances, there can be a tendency to write-off the affective domain of education or, at least, view it pejoratively, as 'touchy-feely', 'wishy-washy' or worse. If anyone attending the Brampton Manor residential started in any doubt that such views are misplaced, their doubts would certainly have been dispelled by the end of the workshop.

As one of the school's parent governors, my own interest in Appreciative Inquiry (AI) had been stimulated from two, very different sources. Firstly, my own professional background, formerly as the headteacher of a behaviour support service and, more recently, as an education consultant and trainer, included a continuing search for constructive and empowering responses to children and young people. Secondly, and much more significantly, my son had for some time been active in a small group of students

and teachers that was exploring possible applications for AI within the school.

Without detracting at all from the efforts of that group, its effectiveness at moving forward the Appreciative Inquiry agenda was limited in the early stages. This was due to a number of factors beyond the group's control and which were largely addressed prior to and during the residential workshop:

- the limited amount of access to the consultant who facilitated the group;
- pressures on the school's senior management team that limited their take-up and encouragement of AI at a whole-school level;
- pressures on other staff which limited their availability to carry out development work with students between meetings of the group.

The combined effect of these factors was that, for some time, Appreciative Inquiry lacked sufficiently fertile ground in which to flourish.

The turning point in the prospects of growth of AI at Brampton Manor School came once it was 're-potted' within a broader development context. As part of the ongoing commitment to improvement, senior and middle managers identified the need for a refreshment of the school's values and mission. Serendipitously, the AI consultant, Robin Shohet, held an offer from the US-based organisation, Cultural Transformation, to deliver training in values assessment and to analyse a set of value assessment data. Not only was the offer taken up by the school, but it also served as a stimulus for

renewed AI activity, with the school's Senior Management Team (SMT) committing time and resources to the residential workshop. While the sustained involvement of staff and students in the AI group had ensured that there was a source of energy for the development, without the commitment of the SMT the means for the fire to take hold would have been in doubt. Indeed, as with other developments, the support of the SMT can be regarded as a prerequisite of successful introduction of AI approaches to the school

If the SMT's basic support for the workshop and the associated development was important, their acceptance of a diverse workshop group was all the more so. For, whereas the SMT and middle managers were used to residential sessions on school development, the inclusion of other staff, a governor and, especially, students was a new and significant departure. This highlights the second prerequisite for the successful development of Appreciative Inquiry, namely, that most, if not all, the school's constituencies need to be engaged in the process.

I do not think I was alone in not knowing quite what to expect of the workshop. Although all participants had had some prior exposure to principles of the AI approach, at the outset of the event there was a genuine sense of uncertainty about how things would pan out. Far from being problematic, the uncertainty was another essential ingredient of the workshop, for it meant that participants were open to each other's ideas and to their own learning. This was apparent from the earliest stage of the workshop, when participants conducted Appreciative Inquiry interviews with a partner and the fact that the pairings cut across 'party lines' added to the potency of the process. Exposure to the reflections and ideas of different constituencies within the school had an empowering effect for all

participants and in so doing highlighted that empowerment is a central tenet of AI.

From interactions at an individual level, the workshop evolved to include group work on a number of themes and priorities identified by participants. Again, the appreciative openness of participants to each other's contributions was a central feature. Here it is worth noting that the conditions created for this exercise encouraged what in transactional terms can be described as Adult/Adult transactions. This reflected the equality that is inherent within Appreciative Inquiry, which enables traditional divisions and differential power to be suspended and replaced by a process of mutual and unconditional regard.

Furthermore, by focusing on 'live' issues within school, e.g. the quality of meals, opportunities for integrated study projects, etc., the small group element of the workshop had a creative characteristic. As defined in the government publication, *All Our Futures: Creativity, Culture & Education*, 'creativity involves doing something. People are not creative in the abstract; they are creative in something – in mathematics, in engineering, in writing, in music, in business, in whatever'. In the context of the AI workshop, the groups' creativity was linked to the challenge to have an impact on real aspects of school life.

By itself, the Brampton Manor Appreciative Inquiry residential cannot be credited with a transformation of the institution; however, it serves to illustrate the transformational qualities of AI and made a tangible contribution to the development process. While the overt focus of the collaborative group work was on the development of practical responses to a number of key issues, it is arguable that the greater and longer lasting impacts were below the surface and concerned the quality of the relationships that were facilitated through the workshop.