

# Values Assessment and Appreciative Inquiry in a Challenging Secondary School

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Anyone who works in education knows we are in a constant cycle of change; we never quite catch up with ourselves and are always absorbing new research or new government initiatives and targets. All this makes for an exhausting working environment and as a member of the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) it is hard to ensure that all you are doing has impact, is followed through and has everyone on board.

It is really the getting everyone on board that is the biggest challenge of Senior Leadership because by everyone you are talking about all teaching staff, non-teaching staff, students, parents, governors and the local community. In a time-pressured environment and with a list as long and diverse as that, how do you guarantee that all have a voice and feel an ownership of the school's vision and development al plans for the future? The answer lies in using an Appreciative Inquiry approach to get all groups talking and using a Culture Values Assessment to measure where you are and guide the moves forward.

What follows is a personal account of my involvement as senior leader, in the school's moves towards AI and our use of the Corptools Values Assessment.

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## How I Became Engaged

I became involved in Appreciative Enquiry while on the way to a Primary school to give an assembly. I was in a mini cab with two African drums and two students. A Year 8 boy asked 'fill this in please miss'. When I read the AI interview that he had given me it was obvious that I could not fill this quickly and needed to give the questions some thought.

I came back to the questionnaire during a cover lesson for Science. I was trying to ignore the behaviour of a particularly difficult Year 10 student who, in an attempt to get my attention, always misbehaved when I went anywhere near him. I was attempting to answer the questions when this student approached me. My heart sank but at least it was a chance for some positive interaction! I had never had such an interesting discussion with him; we really talked about the answers and how we responded. I had to go along to find out more about Appreciative Inquiry.

## A New Language for Schools

My first AI meeting was a different experience to any I had previously had in school. I'm used to operating at a fast pace in order to get all the aspects of my job done – I think I'm what Robin Shohet referred to in the meeting, as an 'adrenalin junkie'. The students at the meeting talked eloquently about respect and their role in the school. It seemed clear to me though that the teachers involved were already over stretched in all that they had taken on and although their commitment was strong they would be hard pushed to find the time and push through the ideas. The meeting interested me but it

struck me as being something quite hard to grasp and have impact on, in a school of our size, without involvement from a greater range of teachers.

At this stage the possibilities of AI were still not clear to me but I was acutely aware that we needed to examine our culture and ethos outside the classroom. So much work on ethos in schools can seem 'wishy-washy' and a bolt on extra rather than integral to the life of the community on a day-to-day basis. It was the discovery of the Values Assessment tool that really began to move my thinking forward.

We had our first briefing on Values Assessment in February 2003, I approached it knowing nothing about Values Assessment and feeling wary of taking on too much as a school. The briefing on the Values Assessment was quite difficult to grasp, without examples it felt 'wishy-washy' and again I didn't come away with an idea of how we could use it as a school. One thing that was clear to me was that this was a way of engaging in the spirituality within a school and then building on it. It was this that got my interest. Although at this stage I was unsure about exactly how useful the AI approach and the Values Assessment would be, I found the language a breath of fresh air in a school context and wanted to hear more.

## Measuring Culture

In order to show my commitment I gave up a weekend to go on a training course run by Phil Clothier from Cultural Transformation Tools. For me the weekend was an invaluable experience; one I wouldn't have missed for anything. As a member of the Leadership

Team of Brampton I am aware of my role in having the vision and implementing it. Yet there are times when one realises that other groups within our community see the school very differently. How to turn this into something beyond anecdote and how to move a school's culture forward are difficult issues and the Values Assessment gave us way in.

An approach like the Values Assessment gives a school community a measure of where they are as a culture – at last here was an approach which could give us a concrete measure of our school culture and move us into being able to examine the views of different sectors of the community in a practical way.

The power of AI in taking the data from the Values Assessment forward became clear.

However, one of the obvious factors to successful leadership of any school is to make sure all you are doing as a school links together and adheres to the vision of the school.

We were doing other work around culture and ethos and learning and teaching which had to link with the ideas for using AI:

- African-Caribbean Achievement Project
- Attendance and Behaviour Strand of KS3 Strategy
- Assessment For Learning

In the short term the Values Assessment had to inform our Development Plan and our actions 04-05, whilst linking together the other projects. As a Development Plan for a school is written in May and already planned before that, we had to move quickly to get our Values Assessment completed, if it was going to have impact in 04-05. After my first AI meeting this was my next experience of the clash of cultures between our school and AI.

Nonetheless, in the long term I saw this as the beginning of a change in attitudes and expectation of all staff of students; a way for the Leadership team to think of staff as whole human beings; a chance to remember that our role is to create independent, balanced human beings who are able to flourish in the world as citizens.

## Residential

Neil Berry, our headteacher, had already committed to paying for a residential to support AI and he left the planning to Lesley Bond and myself. After the Values Assessment weekend we were passionate about the need to bring diverse groups within the school together in a way that had not previously happened.

We booked 16 rooms at a hotel in Essex and arranged for six Year 10 students, six members of SLT, one Learning Mentor, one Parent governor, two AI consultants and one African-Caribbean Project consultant (her involvement was important in my determination to link together other ethos and culture initiatives) to come together over a weekend to follow through an AI.

I was excited about the residential for two reasons: To work with the students in this way was completely new to my experience as a teacher (and to any other teacher I know) and it would give me the chance to really understand what AI was all about.

The difference in relationships for the weekend was clear when we all introduced ourselves with first names – I could feel the excitement from the students – it hit me then what an unusual situation they were in and I wondered how they would cope. I was quickly reassured when Robin Shohet posed one of his first questions and the adults all

froze or remained slightly comatose, while the students leapt straight in. A student commented to me afterwards that he found it amusing that the teachers who were so confident at school all seemed shy all of a sudden!

One of our first activities was to interview each other in pairs. I was with a student and enjoyed her company enormously – outside where we were talking the atmosphere was relaxed and jovial between all people there. I got an insight into her perfectionism and her ambition both for herself and the school – something I hadn't been aware of before.

The evening meal was also wonderful – probably one of the first times the students had ordered from a menu like that and we all laughed and joked our way through the evening – barriers came down and people opened up and shared details about themselves.

The next day the group work really emphasised that we were sharing experiences, not having to knock down suggestions or control responses – we were all sharing our hopes and dreams for Brampton.

The most memorable moment for me came when we were responding to DFES consultant's session and were asked to think about positive relationships with teachers/students. A student shared about her relationship with me with the group. She said that I had never given up on her and seen her spark. I had given her the chance to prove herself by giving her responsibility and I had shone a light into her life. That's why I work as hard as I do and why I feel as passionate as I do – you don't often hear a student say something like that – it gave me the strength to keep going and continue striving to make our school better. I will never forget the weekend and it's one of my career highlights.

## Following Through

In a busy school environment exciting initiatives like AI and the projects that came from the weekend can so easily slip down the priority list and end up being wasted. As the SLT member most closely linked to this, I was not prepared to see this happen and kept it at the top of my priorities.

The Values Assessment was completed in June. I was nervous about the results – particularly the possible levels of entropy, a term used to define negative values like bullying. One of the consultants for Cultural Transformation Tools, Joan Shafer, was over from America, and her feedback was really focused. I was delighted to see the whole school and student results – it showed what we had achieved over the past five years as a school. However, the results from the middle leaders were worrying in that there was a gap between the values they that were important to them personally and those they saw operating in the school.

We decided to take the chance to feedback on the Values Assessment and follow up on AI at a Saturday session involving the original participants from the residential and to get the participants to do some focused work on the values.

It was a mixed group to feed back to - ideal when looking at whole school – SLT, students and one governor. The discussion we had was extremely positive and very revealing. Lesley Bond, the school counsellor and I asked people to look at the words Caring, Achievement and Commitment and discuss how they see those in our current culture. We then looked at Respect and how we would want to see that reflected in our culture. For me the discussion that stands out is from one of our students, who commented on the fact that teachers sometimes show a lack of respect to other teachers in the way they refer to them in

class. I know that I've been guilty of saying things along the lines of I don't care what Miss/Mr So and So does, in my class we do things my way. Certainly gave me food for thought – you think you have thought of all of the dimensions but then someone else's experience reveals something completely new.

The feedback continued when I gave the SLT a debrief on the headlines from our Values Assessment.

## Working group

Peter Whittle, another Deputy Head and I met shortly after this debrief to brainstorm how to incorporate the initial feedback to staff and continue with the work from the AI Saturday. We began to look at the time line – we didn't get it finished as each point

opened up a lengthy discussion. Time is always an issue in schools. Once again we had to keep AI and Values Assessment top of our list of priorities if we were to ensure it got the time it needed to progress it. At this stage I think we had grasped the data more than the underlying principles of the Values Assessment and AI – we began to decide how we wanted to steer staff – and how this would then be incorporated into the Development Plan.

## Understanding AI

We continued our SLT debrief with Lesley Bond present. Peter and I fed back our ideas for the beginning of term. Lesley quickly pointed out that we were losing the democratic approach that makes the Values Assessment and AI so valuable, by telling





staff that we were focusing on respect in a benevolent 'we know what's best for you' way. Other members of SLT also gave feedback about how to involve other members of the school community without frightening them – bearing in mind we have never done anything like this before and had not had the chance to do the work we had done on the residential.

We agreed to meet with Lesley to re-examine plans. It made me remember to keep reflecting and consulting – something that can be hard when time is so pressured and you want to keep driving something forward.

## **Democratic Feedback**

We now had to consider how best to feed back to staff, middle leaders, non-teaching staff and students in a democratic manner following logical time frame. We are still in the middle of this process but so far this academic year we have done the following:

## **September - Middle Leaders' Residential**

We knew feeding back to our middle leaders would be a potentially difficult session. I believe that their job is the hardest in the school and we needed to be sensitive to the

demands of their day-to-day jobs. Our main aims were to give them time as a group to overcome divisions between the curriculum and pastoral leadership and to get them to feel a sense of ownership of the work we did as a school over the next academic year.

It was clear that we needed to use the Appreciative Inquiry approach as we were in danger of opening up purely negative comments and not achieving a sense of moving on. We discussed the fact that both Peter and I were associated with one particular group and could taint the process. So we had to call in a more neutral facilitator – Robin Shohet.

Luckily, Robin Shohet and his partner, Joan were able to come on the weekend. However, our next concern was the reaction of our middle leaders to the AI approach. We were keen that the process got to the design stage as quickly as possible or they would feel a sense of frustration after giving up their weekend for work. Again a clash of cultures, but in view of the audience, I still believe it was a necessary demand.

We had already agreed that we needed to base the AI around respect, a wish to put a positive value on the negative value of anti-social behaviour that had been shown up in the values assessment. In retrospect this was a mistake and again showed a lack of understanding of the principles of the Values Assessment and, to an extent, AI as we were ignoring what they had told us and setting our own agenda. The weekend had some ups and some downs but there has been a positive impact in creating an atmosphere where middle leaders take on ownership of their own whole school projects, to improve the day-to-day life of the school.

## October - Whole School Feedback

When planning for whole school feedback we were again concerned that the staff didn't have the opportunity to simply complain about behaviour and students. As a result we decided to use the Appreciative Inquiry interview to get people talking to each other in a positive way. This went well and created a vibrant atmosphere among our 140 staff.

After lunch the middle leaders fed back on the two projects that had come out of their weekend.

Unfortunately, one of the middle leaders not involved in the residential had been involved in the planning and they ended up asking people to discuss all the problems with common areas and suggest solutions. Of course this was against the entire approach we had focused on all day, and people immediately came up with reactive solutions and didn't focus on what was working well. The power of the weekend became obvious when you saw so clearly the different approach of someone not yet exposed to AI.

## Next Steps

We are planning to feedback to students over two Citizenship lessons – using prefects as facilitators. We are inviting fifty prefects to go through an AI themselves on a Saturday in school, so that they can work with the younger students. I'm looking forward to this as my journey so far has shown how open students are to this approach and I know that if we are to move our ethos forward we have to harness the enormous energy of our students. We've undoubtedly made mistakes on our AI journey but I'm changed by my experience on AI and the Values Assessment – I will take the approach to any future school and use the strategies to lead a school which strives to hear and value the voices of all in its community.

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