

Ellen Grondine

ATTENDED: AIFT OCTOBER 24-27, 2007NORTHERN ESSEX COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Appreciative Inquiry Certification Project

Inspiring Parents and Teachers to Collaborate in
Developing Dynamic, Strengths-Based
Relationships

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This project documents the creation of three integrated Appreciative Inquiries specifically designed to inspire creative classroom culture, encourage teachers to celebrate their daily work and engage parents in collaborative relationships with the school, teachers and staff.

Appreciative Inquiry Certification Project:

1. Description of organization, group or community you worked with.

The appreciative inquiry was designed for a large grammar school serving a diverse population of families in the low to moderate income range within a predominately bilingual community. The Principal of the school responsible for the leadership of over 200 faculty and staff serving grades kindergarten through eighth grade. The principal was greatly concerned about the feedback he was getting from parents who had either observed or experienced a negative interaction with a teacher or staff member within the school. Many parents shared that they did not feel welcome. The principal also felt that his leadership team was lacking in direction and he found that more often than not discussion surrounding the internal work was negative and focused upon what was not working rather than looking at areas where things were working well. He was also keenly aware that the State mandated standardized testing was taking a toll on the creativity and freedom teachers had within the classroom and this was contributing to the negative environment.

2. Category of Stakeholders included in the Core Group.

- Principal
- Assistant Principal
- Special Education Director
- Office Administrative Assistant
- Team Curriculum Directors (Teachers within the school responsible for dissemination of curriculum and implementation support for colleagues)

3. What was the positive topic that the Core Group identified for the inquiry? What method did you use to help them identify the topic?

The Core Group met to discuss AI and how it can be used as a method of promoting positive change. The theory, principles and origins of AI were also shared and discussed (PowerPoint enhanced key components). The Core Team was relatively small (7 members) so I asked that each member spend a few minutes quietly reflecting on a time that they felt that they were at their best in their work. After 10-15 minutes we shared our stories. I gathered the themes and posted them on a flip chart. Members identified common themes and then created a vision statement in relation to the work ahead.

The Core Team identified three specific areas where an appreciative approach will be used:

- a. Create a team environment and support a culture shift among the faculty and staff within the school where all members of the school community feel welcome and contributions are valued.

- b. Develop an opportunity for a paradigm shift for parents and teachers from one sided information dumping to one of collaborative sharing with a goal of enhancing and strengthening parent-teacher communication.
- c. Provide opportunity for teachers to conduct appreciative inquiry in the classroom to engage students in activities to identify what is working well in the classroom and as a means of giving teachers feedback and insight from/about their students.

Based on this discussion we decided that a series of faculty/staff trainings would be offered to engage the school community in discussions and workshops surrounding Appreciative Inquiry prior to addressing the parent-teacher communication components and student engagement. Since the school was large in size, members and various schedules, we decided to begin with the K-4 teachers. This group consisted of approximately 75 members including those who served on the core team. This plan allowed for more manageable group sizes and provided opportunity for those engaged in the process to consider becoming part of the Core Team in the future.

The schedule was created to allow all members of the lower school to attend and was divided into a series of one-hour workshops. Please see schedule below:

GRAMMAR SCHOOL
WORKSHOP/MEETING SCHEDULE
FALL 2008

<i>Time and Date</i>	<i>Topic / Activity</i>
Session I. 3:15-4:15	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Appreciative Inquiry Over-view ➤ Strengths Based Education ➤ <i>Celebrate What’s Right with the World (video)</i>
Session II. 3:15-4:15	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Paired Discovery Questions ➤ Collection of Themes ➤ <i>Power of Words (video)</i>
Session III. 3:15-4:15	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Dynamic Community Relationships ➤ Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations, and Results
Session IV. 9:00-11:00	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Positive Parent-Teacher Relationships ➤ Over-view ➤ Action Steps
Session V. 3:15-4:15	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Shared Discovery/Experiences ➤ Feedback

A timeline and overview was created for the Core Team to provide details and guidance.

Public Schools Workshop Task and Timeline

Each workshop will be approximately 60 minutes with one 120 minute workshop in November. A sample schedule is provided below.

Time/Date	Facilitator/Participants	Topic and Activities	Comments
Session I. 3:15-4:15 (60 minutes)	Ellen Grondine Lower School Teachers and Staff	Celebrate What’s Right with the World Over-view of what is working well-Strengths Based Education/Teachers Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations and Results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set up PowerPoint • Set up DVD player • Make copies of program dates and topics • Review Marsh School Improvement Plan
Session II. 3:15-4:15 (60 minutes)	Ellen Grondine Lower School Teachers and Staff	Words (video) Forum Workshop format Paired Discovery Question	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set up PowerPoint • Set up DVD player • Over-view of Appreciative Approach and Appreciative Questions • Flip charts • SOAR Handouts (collect)
Session III. 3:15-4:15 (60 minutes)	Ellen Grondine Lower School Teachers and Staff	Dynamic Community Partnerships Parent-Teacher Relationships (over-view)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paradigm Shift handout with workshop description • Over-view of SOAR results and application to the parent teacher workshops
Session IV. 9:00-11:00(120minutes)	Ellen Grondine Lower School Teachers	Dynamic Community Partnerships Parent Letter Over-view and process Volunteers for implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Handouts • Samples • Practice timeline

4. Interview Guide (Paired Discovery)

Appreciative Inquiry
Interview Guide

Paired Discovery:

Please take notes and use your skills as an interviewer to carefully listen to your partner's experiences, visions and stories. Listen for the life giving themes. (20 minutes, 10 minutes each)

Best Experiences:

Tell me a story about one of the best experiences you have had working with a dynamic team. As you reflect on this experience, recall when you felt most alive, most involved, and/or most excited about your involvement. What made this such a wonderful experience? Who was involved? Please describe the event in detail.

Values:

Without being humble, tell me what you value deeply about yourself as a team member.

Without being humble, tell me when you feel best about your work on a team.

5. Faculty and staff shared stories and then collected themes and created Provocative Propositions. This information was gathered and used to frame the next two

workshops as described below and sent in an email to prepare the group for the next meeting:

Once again it was wonderful working with all of you and engaging in appreciative activities. I have compiled the lists of themes from your stories and I have listed your exceptional commitments to your school, colleagues, students and community. Wow! What an incredible place to be!

Commitments: (7. Provocative Propositions)

- We commit to make learning fun through motivation and cooperation.
- We will share little things every day with students and faculty to contribute to positive experiences and relationships.
- We will commit to support our team members to achieve their sense of accomplishment through our words and actions.
- We will commit to listening deeply so that others feel heard and appreciated.
- We will commit to find one person every day to compliment or give recognition.
- We will stretch ourselves to work together to produce positive results...we will show up!

Themes: Exceptional Teams: (6. Life- Giving Forces)

- | | |
|------------------------|----------------------------|
| • Commitment | Supportive |
| • Encouraging | Connections |
| • Motivation | Satisfaction |
| • Realization of goals | Relationships |
| • Fun | Motivation |
| • Inspirational | Respect |
| • Mentoring | Friendship |
| • Leadership | Humor |
| • Determination | Accomplishment |
| • Supportive | Dreams |
| • Realization of goals | Honesty |
| • Fun | Recognition |
| • Inspirational | Closeness (family feeling) |

As we prepare for our next meeting please take some time between now and then to reflect upon an exceptional and inspiring interaction you have had with a student/s. What made this

experience memorable? What did you see in this student/s that perhaps they had not seen in themselves?

Below is a quote I thought you might enjoy reflecting upon. Have a fabulous weekend.

“Go confidently in the direction of your dreams. Live the life you have imagined.”

Henry David Thoreau

8. The group engaged in two consecutive workshops specifically designed to apply the new appreciative skills to their work in relation to parent-teacher conferences as outlined in the task and timeline.

Workshop 1: Appreciative Inquiry: Inspiring Parents and Teachers to Collaborate in Developing Dynamic, Strengths Based Relationships

(Session III.) Appreciative Inquiry is a highly adaptable philosophy and process for engaging people in building the organization and world that they want to work and live in. AI assumes that every living system has untapped stories of excellence and that these stories, when systematically explored and shared, release positive energy.

This interactive workshop will provide an introduction to Appreciative Inquiry and the ways in which it can be applied to every day life, the school community, parent-teacher conferences, team meetings and the development of individualized educational plans.

Workshop 2: Parent-Teacher Conferences and Collaborations: Understanding Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations and Results

(Session IV) The Appreciative Inquiry process invites people to consciously choose to seek out and inquire into their own and other people’s lives and to explore their hopes and dreams for the future.

This interactive workshop will provide an over-view of Appreciative Inquiry and the tools and guidelines for applying this approach to parent-teacher conferences and collaborations.

The goal of this Appreciative Inquiry is based on the idea that building positive, collaborative relationships among parents and teachers will improve our combined understanding of the child in the center of our energy, good will and respect and will provide insight and a shared understanding of child centered goals and aspirations.

9. **Impact or Results:** As a result of the workshops and the work pertaining to positive and productive parent-teacher parent conferences and communication the following tools were developed and applied during the scheduled parent-teacher conferences.

For Teachers and Parents: Understanding Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations, and Results

The goal of this Appreciative Inquiry is based on the idea that building positive, collaborative relationships among parents and teachers will improve our combined understanding of the child in the center of our energy, good will and respect.

We will work towards shifting an old paradigm of how we share information in the context of a parent-teacher conference to a new paradigm of a strengths based, sharing of insights and experiences. We will work towards a shared understanding and celebration of who this special individual (the child) is as a whole person and what they bring to the world.

The Old Paradigm:

Parents arrive at school somewhat tentative, worried, excited, and overly concerned to “find out” how their child is doing in school. Often parents are wondering if their child is “behaving”, making friends, performing well in comparison to peers, and seeks to find what the teacher actually thinks of them as parents and who their child is in another environment. This creates an imbalance in the relationship and falls under the assumption that the teacher knows all there is to know about the child.

Teachers prepare to meet with parents and share work samples, measurement evidence, information based on observation and experience within the classroom and school setting. Often teachers are worried about sharing concerns, are reluctant to disclose information for fear of hurting a parent emotionally and are most times working within a very tight time constraint. We find that often, even when all of the reporting is positive, parents are still left wondering how their child “measures up”. This creates an imbalance in the relationship and falls under the assumption that the teacher is the source of all information and that parents have little to share; who their child is at home or in their community has little to do with who the child is in the classroom.

The New Paradigm:

Parents arrive at school prepared to share their reflections of their child based on memories and experiences of who their child is in the home, family and community. They are ready to share information based on strengths and opportunities and are ready to collaborate with the teacher to further define/identify aspirations and desired results.

Teachers prepare to meet with parents and share their reflections of the child based on experiences and memories of who this child is in school. The teacher is ready share information based on strengths, opportunities and is ready to collaborate with parents to further define/identify aspirations and desired results.

Getting Started: Preparing for Collaboration:

1. Prior to the scheduled collaboration parents should be given the **parent letter** along with the **interview guide** which will explain the process (this should be completely transparent and parents should be encouraged to give the teacher a call prior to the meeting time if

clarification or further explanation is needed). Remember, the goal is to share information and this is a new process for many parents. The parent letter should be sent with the **interview guide**.

2. The **interview guide** will create the framework for collaboration. Please see attached interview guide. **Both the teacher and the parent** begin the process prior to meeting.
3. **Active Listening:** Parents and teachers will share their stories. While the parent is sharing, the teacher is an active listener (no interruptions, agreements, affirmations; resist the urge to add information or agree or disagree with observations). Teachers will then share their stories. While the teacher is sharing, the parent is an active listener (no interruptions, agreements, affirmations; resist the urge to add information or agree or disagree with observations). The most important part is to really listen, enjoy the story and take notes on what you hear the other say. Parents take notes while teacher shares and then teacher takes notes while parent shares. *Each is allowed 7 minutes to share and the listener is responsible for time keeping.*
4. **Retelling:** Once each story is shared; the teacher will share what she/he heard the parent say in the telling of his/her story. Next, the parent will share what she/he heard the teacher say in the telling of his/her story. This activity is an enlightening exercise in sharing how we listen to one another and gives insight to what the active listener is actually hearing in the story. *Each is allowed 5 minutes to share what they heard the other say.*
5. **Strengths:** After the shared retelling of what we heard; parents and teachers will identify common themes and related strengths pertaining to the child. This is the first step in developing the S.O.A.R. sheet (strengths, opportunities, aspirations, and results, please see attachment).
6. **Opportunities:** Once strengths are identified collaboratively, parents and teacher will now identify opportunities. This is where parents and teachers come to agreement on what they would like to see more of for the child. For example; both the parents and teacher have identified that the child has a keen sense of self, is compassionate toward friends and patient with peers. The parents would like to see more of this compassionate behavior in the home toward siblings. Both teacher and parents identify activities at school and at home where this strength can be given opportunity to develop further. This is the second step in collaboratively identifying opportunities on the S.O.A.R. sheet.
7. **Aspirations:** After opportunities are developed parents and teachers identify aspirations. What would be the ideal next steps for this child? This could be related to placement the following year, additional services to enhance skill development, dreams for a strong social, emotional and academic future. What are our combined hopes and dreams for this child?
8. **Results:** Results can be gathered in several ways and should be identified via a compilation of the ideas, identified strengths and based on the opportunities provided to the child. The teacher may wish to formalize the action steps that will be taken in relation to opportunities within the school and goals identified in the aspirations work. Parents may wish to pay particular attention to the opportunities and aspirations developed through the process and pay particular attention to instances where these areas are further developed and strengthened outside of the school environment.

Interview Guide:

Parents should consider this question reflectively prior to coming to school. Parents may wish to write down the answers to the questions (informally) and think about the story and special moments, memories they would like to share in the telling of the story.

Parent Question

1. Tell me a story about the best day you have ever spent with your child, an experience that made you laugh, gave you insight or inspired you. Where were you? Over what period of time did it take place? What do you think made it an exceptionally memorable and positive experience?

Teachers should take time to reflect on exceptional experiences and carefully consider the questions prior to collaborating with parents. Teachers should record special moments and memories they would like to share in the telling of the story.

Since teachers will be conducting several collaborative meetings it is suggested that reflection of individual children be carefully scheduled so that the story and the inspiration can be reflected upon perhaps no more than one day prior to the meeting.

Teacher Question

1. Tell me a story about the best day this child has had in school this year, an experience that made you laugh, gave you insight or inspired you. Where were you? Over what period of time did it take place? What do you think made it an exceptionally memorable and positive experience?

Share the stories and identify life-giving forces (strengths). Brainstorm high-point themes on the SOAR sheet as outlined on the page prior.

S.O.A.R.

Strengths:

What themes/strengths emerged in the telling of the stories?

Identify strengths, successes, potentials, possibilities.

Opportunities:

Now that we have identified areas of strength; how do we create more of what is working well? What opportunities can we identify both in school and at home where these strengths can be applied to strengthen, support, and develop areas that may need more attention? How can we help this child to reach his/her greatest potential?

Aspirations:

What are our dreams for this child? What dreams does this child have?

Results:

What action steps will we take? How will we include the child? When will we share our stories again?

(Sample Parent Letter to be sent prior to paired discovery)

Dear Parents,

I am looking forward to seeing you in the days ahead during parent-teacher conference week. I would like to extend a warm welcome to each and every one of you and hope that you will be able to participate in this important activity. As parents you have a wealth of knowledge and information about your child and I am hopeful that you will have time to share some of your insights with me so that together we can plan and share in your child's growth and development.

Attached you will find some material developed to make use of our time together in a new and meaningful way. Please read through the attachments and take some time to review and reflect upon the *Interview Guide*. Please feel free to call with questions or if you are in need of further clarification.

Once again, I appreciate your time and attention!

Sincerely,

10. Supporting Ongoing Success:

Teachers were asked to come back and share experiences at the close of each semester. Participants were asked to reflect on the process, share experiences and work with the principal to identify additional opportunities to engage parents in the process of developing new ways of gathering parental insight and participation in the school community.

This project is ongoing for the next several semesters. Feedback and information will be collected and reviewed with the core team and those who are actively engaged in using Appreciative Inquiry as a means of communicating with parents for the next few years.

This project has also shaped yet another project entitled: *Intentional and Inspirational Creative Classroom Culture*. Teachers were encouraged to consider an appreciative approach in the classroom to further explore the culture as it exists and to include students in the defining, discovering, dreaming and designing of and in relation to the classroom environment. Teachers were coached in developing appreciative questions. They were asked to engage the children in the classroom in paired discovery activities as a means to obtaining a better understanding of the individual child, provide opportunity for feedback about what was working well in the classroom, and to include the children in the process of identifying strengths, opportunities, aspirations and tracking results. The goal was to develop and understand an Appreciative Learning Culture to foster and create meaningful, reflective and collaborative learning systems within the school. This project is ongoing and currently in the infancy stages (more to come).

Initial feedback has been truly inspiring. Teachers and parents have found the common themes in their stories and have reported the following:

- a. Parents come prepared and excited about the conference
- b. Teachers are prepared and feel hopeful and excited about sharing their stories
- c. Both parents and teachers found that the listening was as important as the telling
- d. Both parents and teachers found that for the first time they were talking about their child's strengths both inside and outside of the school environment and that most often the strengths they identified were similar and that the child was using and applying these strengths to many aspects of his/her life.
- e. Both parents and teachers reported that they had new insight and a deeper connection between home and school. One teacher shared that in her 20 years of teaching this was the first time that she ever cried at a conference, she was so moved by the parent's story and she felt so connected to the child and his family in a way she had never experienced.
- f. Teachers and parents found this was an effective communication strategy for all children (those who were considered typically developing and for those who were identified with special needs)
- g. Teachers and parents found that the identification of strengths, opportunities, aspirations, and results provided a shared language and a collaborative understanding of how they would move forward together in defining and designing the future for the children.

- h. Teachers and parents reported that while the stories were different the strengths were the same. They felt that they were looking at their child through “new eyes”.
- i. Teachers reported that this professional development activity was among the best they have experienced throughout their teaching careers.
- j. The principal reported that his lower school team seemed energized and excited about their work.

Finally, I plan to work with the school and principal for the next several semesters and continue to ask for feedback, capture stories and send inspirational quotes and reminders to the list serve via email every week.

11. What did you wish for in the inquiry? What did you learn from the inquiry about yourself and your facilitation? What was your “personal best” experience related to facilitating the Inquiry?

This inquiry was a wonderful experience. My wish was to develop a way to support the principal, teachers, parents and children in finding a way to communicate with one another in a meaningful way and to create an experience where all involved could connect with the magic and wonder of learning and teaching. My wish was for every child to feel connected, valued and cared for in the home and at school for whom they are and what they bring to this world.

What I learned about myself was that when I take the time to listen deeply and reflect upon what has been shared in conversation; the answers, solutions, ideas and inspirations flow freely from concept to action in relation to Appreciative Inquiry.

One example was when I first met with the principal of the school. I listened to his “worries, concerns, and frustrations” and then upon reflection asked him to reframe his concerns into a positive “dream” statement. An example of this was when he stated “I don’t ever want to hear another parent tell me that they do not feel welcome and/or they have observed a negative interaction between staff and children”. We worked together to reframe; “Parents are welcome in the school and feel that their contributions are important, they observe meaningful and caring interactions among the staff and children”. As we worked together to identify who should serve on the core team, he was able to reframe his thoughts and become engaged and excited about the process, he began to see what was right with the team he had constructed.

I learned some wonderful things about my facilitation. I found myself coaching, listening carefully and becoming comfortable with the silences and uncertainty at the beginning of the process. I recognized that for many of the teachers involved that this work was hard and somewhat risky. They were vulnerable and needed support and freedom to tell their stories and dream about what

they really wanted in their lives both in and out of the classroom. As a facilitator I found my strength in patience and understanding. I found that I planned well and knew where we were going and could let the process and the human spirit lead the way.

My personal best was when I prepared for each of the sessions. The work was intense and thoughtful. I worked diligently to insure that I created each of the components with care. I found that once I arrived to share the next steps via my facilitation that my planning allowed for me to be in the moment with the participants. I could listen deeply, laugh with them, discover with them and all the while lead and support the group along the way to the next steps in realizing dreams and destiny.

I believe that this project is a new beginning and a wonderful opportunity for the K-12 community to reconnect with one another and to create a culture of shared ideas and collaborative communication. The three separate yet connected inquiries within this project are just one way that AI can be used to enlighten, inspire and create a respectful and nurturing environment where children and adults can learn from one another and share in meaningful life experiences.