

Ensuring an Exceptional Early Childhood Education Experience

Brief description of the organization, group, or community you work with.

This Appreciative Inquiry experience occurred at a small alternative school for preschool age children with special needs. The school program serves approximately 200 students with about 50 staff members and is part of a large public school district with a total enrollment of approximately 27,000 students. My current role within the district includes the building administration and leadership for this early childhood special education (ECSE) school.

The district has been considering a reorganization of the school for the past four years; changing from a center-based program to having the classrooms located across multiple elementary school campuses. The decision was initially based solely on the district's budget reduction efforts, however, advocacy by the school staff and parents helped to solidify the district's commitment to allow time to study the program and to make the move in a more strategic way. My goal was to ensure a high-quality education for our current students and their families, as well as maintain a positive culture for staff during a transition phase of many unknowns and help to lead them into a positive future. Appreciative Inquiry (AI) provided the process, philosophy and tools that I wanted and needed for our school.

My initial plan was to facilitate a full AI Summit experience with all stakeholders, including staff, parents and community members from the current program, as well as the new relocation sites. The success of an AI Summit and process requires the full support of upper management/district level administrators. However, there were multiple mid-year changes to upper management and the needed commitment to the AI process, including time, resources, decision-making and follow-through, did not come to fruition. I then looked then to those aspects within my leadership scope and decided to start by fully training the school staff during our fall inservice time and then to infuse the philosophy of AI into every aspect of our work; for the current school year, planning for the relocation of the program, and the transition to becoming part of new elementary school locations.

List the names and/or category of stakeholders you included in the Core Group, the cross-section of people that helped you identify the topic and modify the Interview Guide.

Our school has a school leadership team comprised of staff-elected representatives from classroom teachers, therapists and classified para-educators. This leadership team served as the Core Group for the Appreciative Inquiry. The group included two certificated teachers, a collective bargaining union representative, two therapists, two classified staff, instructional coach and myself, as the administrator.

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

The CORE Group/Leadership Team participated in an overview and “mini AI experience”, including paired interviews using the Generic Interview Guide, extracting Life Forces and developing a Preferred Vision which developed into the selection of our topic: “Ensuring an Exceptional Early Childhood Education Experience.” The fall Staff Inservice Day was set up to be both a full AI process around our topic and an educational/training experience for staff so they could continue the infusion of AI into our work, the transition and into their future.

Attach or include the modified Interview Guide they used, i.e., the Generic Interview Guide slightly modified for the positive topic of the inquiry.

A modification of the Generic Interview Guide, along with the resource Appreciative Team Building (Whitney, et al) was used to develop the following interview guide:

INTRODUCTION

In high-performing schools, an exceptional educational experience is collectively created and realized by everyone – students, staff and families. Research tells that high performing school teams have a greater impact on the achievement of students than any other factor, including class size.

High-performing schools – *have a collective commitment to guiding principles that articulate what the staff of the school believes and that govern their actions and behavior *work in collaborative teams and share a common purpose *learn from each other and create momentum that drives improvement *relentlessly question the status quo, seek new methods of teaching and learning, test the methods and then reflect on the results *constantly turn their learning and insights into action *are focused on student results *focus on bringing out the best of what works, individually and collectively *thrive in the face of challenge; aligning their strengths, optimizing resources and working efficiently toward their goals.

1. BEST EXPERIENCE

We’ve all had experiences in learning environments that were inspiring and challenging. Think back over your own experiences and recall one of those times when you were part of an exceptional learning experience – a time when learning was exciting and even if it was challenging, you and others were highly engaged and passionate about the learning.

What role did you and others play in this experience?

What or who led to this experience?

When did you first become part of this staff? Can you remember the moment of decision? What first attracted you? What is the most important factor that your involvement in this school has contributed to your life?

Now, describe a time when this staff was absolutely at its best. What role did you, the leadership and the staff play?

2. VALUES

Let's talk for a moment about some **things you value deeply**; specifically, the things you value about yourself; about the nature of your work and about this staff.

a. Without being humble, **what do you value most about yourself as a part of our school?** If we now had a conversation with people who know you the very best and asked them to share, what would they say are the best qualities they see in you, the best capabilities or qualities that you bring to your work and your role?

b. When you are feeling **best about your work**, what about the task itself do you value?

c. **What do you value most about our school? this staff? the families?** What has been our greatest contribution or important work?

d. Reflecting on these and other experiences, **what are the core leadership qualities and practices** that bring out the best in you and this staff and our work?

3. THREE WISHES

You now have **three wishes** that when granted will create extraordinary, positive change that brings out the best in you, this team and our work together. What are they?

4. OPPORTUNITIES AND INNOVATIONS

As you think about trends in early childhood education and special education, consider the field of learning in general. Look beyond our traditional classroom and school year traditions and consider trends and opportunities that may be relevant to designing an innovative and highly effective 21st century ECSE program. As we look to redesign our program to meet the needs of our students and the future they will help to develop, what trends, opportunities and innovations do you see?

5. OUR FUTURE

Though we always hope for and work hard to achieve success, we are occasionally surprised by a measure of success that far exceeds our hopes and dreams. Such surprising successes are born of a synchronistic coming-together of people, talents, resources and timing. High-performance teams frequently experience the surprise of success, as they work together in extraordinary ways to achieve extraordinary goals.

Imagine it is 2020 and our program has successfully transitioned to elementary school sites. The program has become internationally known for its innovation in learning and teaching. Our students have made astounding strides in learning achievement. Our families are actively learning and participating as partners in their children's education. Staff are inspired and energized by the collaborative work.

You've met someone from another state who has heard about our progressive program and they want to know more. Describe our new system and what makes it exceptional and effective.

- * How is the new school program better or more compelling than what we'd originally hoped for?
- * What were the positive contributing circumstances that came together to create this success?

- * What role did you play in designing and living into this innovative system?
- * How has this innovative system enlivened you and the community?
- * What are you most proud of?
- * What do students, parents and staff say?

What method of interviews did people use to inquire into exceptionally positive moments, face to face paired interviews, or some other way?

Staff divided into “improbable pairs” (a concept presented as part of the training). Prior to the paired interviews, we also reviewed an “Interview Guide” to help staff focus on the listening deeply, asking questions that followed the “energy” to draw out details, taking notes, and completing the summary. The interview time was scheduled over the lunch period and gave pairs over two hours to go through the interview guide and complete their summary notes.

Attach or include a list of the Life-Giving Forces (what they MOST wanted to create MORE of) that the group identified in the stories they shared.

There were strong, common themes that came out of the interviews. Although they were sometimes worded differently, every group had these same themes:

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| *It takes all of us focused on kids | *Value of family as partners |
| *Positive, collaborative teamwork | *Parent involvement |
| *Working together to make it happen | *Shared beliefs |
| *Commitment by all | *Community involvement |

Attach or include the Provocative Proposition(s) the group or organization created from the LGFs.

An exceptional early childhood experience is grounded in the belief that all children have limitless potential and meaningful contributions. It includes families and the community to create a vision and collaboratively develop a plan to positively impact and educate all children and to ensure future success and participation in the community.

Our whole community comes together with a shared vision for an exceptional early childhood experience for all – young children, their families and their staff.

An exceptional early childhood experience is the result of the innovative and collaborative teamwork within the creation of a global community. Our students, families, excellent educators and community members come together to build an environment of enriching and individual growth for a confident future.

Involving the entire community takes early learning for our children to where no one has gone before. Together, WE soar!

Early Childhood Education – solving the puzzle by sharing the work of a meaningful education with school, family and community.

We are a circle of students, families, friends, educators and community partners – collaborating for the education and growth of children so they may be happy, life-long learners who contribute positively to society.

Attach or include the Strategic Intentions the group or organization developed to realize the Provocative Proposition(s) they created.

Staff developed a list and signed their personal commitment, as well as school-wide focus goals. The “big ideas” centered on increasing parent and community involvement, expanding opportunities for children with special needs to be educated with typically developing peers, and developing relationship and a sense of community with the new elementary schools.

- +Expand partnerships and blended and inclusion teaching opportunities with Head Start classes.
- +Work with the union to “count” typically developing peers on caseloads and to increase the number of peer models in classrooms.
- +Work group to refine the supports and protocol for family home visits and home supports.
- +Seek community members and organizations’ support for getting more families to the center (e.g. bus passes).
- +Create parent group to help plan and communicate the relocation decision when it comes.
- +Create more family engagement opportunities (look at more options for time and types).
- +Partner with elementary schools to offer family events that align P-3.
- +Increase public awareness of the program, including increase for student referrals, involvement opportunities and funding needs.
- +Use social media to engage families and community
- +Go to trainings with elementary staff to show the alignment of a quality educational experience.
- +Post celebrations and successes publicly, considering confidentiality (staff room, facebook, school newsletters, District newsletter and website)
- +Take initiative to make the first contact with principal and teachers at the new schools.
- +Support each other by all staff coming together regularly to celebrate and support our good work.
- +Identify positive opportunities for ECSE students to engage with elementary students (Reading Buddies)
- +Be part of the elementary school community to develop a shared vision of an exceptional education experience for ALL children.

*Impact or Results: What organizational, group or community **attitude, process** or **structure** changes have people made as they move toward realizing the Provocative Proposition(s)? What progress have people made toward their Strategic Intentions or Initiatives or Pilot Projects? What stories of success can you share?*

Our school traditionally has several committees every year, many of which have been in place for a long time, but don’t seem to always make much progress or have good staff participation. Typically we passed around the list of committees in the fall and beg staff to sign up to be on one. Rather than continuing with these same committees, we decided as a staff that committees would be created based the ideas and feedback from our AI experience. As a result, we had fewer committees that were led by those staff who had the strongest passion and energy for the work. The outcome has been more focused work from the committees with better follow-through. This has also had a positive impact on my work as the building leader. I have had to manage committees less with fewer reminders or pleas for help and follow-through.

The planning for the school's reorganization and relocation includes all aspects of our program; classroom teams, therapy departments, office staff, assessment team, playground, equipment, curriculum, etc. We developed a protocol that is used to examine and make recommendations for every aspect of the school's work. Those staff who feel the most passion and energy for that "layer" sign up to be on the team. The team members meet together, collect "best experience" stories from staff and go through the protocol (*see "ECSE Program Recommendation" form*).

The final decision and timeline for our school's relocation came in mid December. One of our first moves was to gather a parent advisory group of current and former parents and representatives from school staff. We met together and went through a mini-AI training. The parent advisory team, along with our school staff, helped to lead our first large group parent meeting in January. The parent meeting included some basic information about the reorganization/relocation and about our vision of moving forward with the best of our program and looking to capture new opportunities. We then gathered "Best Experiences" and "3 Wishes" through interviews. A follow-up interview guide was developed for staff to use with parents who were unable to attend the meeting. This process allows us to have the voices of all of our parents and ensure they are part of the reorganization/relocation of the school.

The elementary sites for relocation have been identified and I am now working with those administrators in some AI basics. I have made the staffing assignments to determine which elementary sites my school staff will go to in the fall. The plan is to next have the new early childhood staff meet with their new elementary staff family and together envision and create their preferred future.

What will you do to ensure that people continue to move toward realizing the Provocative Proposition(s)? How will you help them gather stories of success? How will you help them celebrate? How will you, as the AI Facilitator, support their ongoing success?

Our school has put into place time to celebrate our successes throughout the year; our weekly staff bulletin, monthly school potlucks, staff meetings, school newsletters, and district newsletters. There is also a committee working to plan an end of the year celebration. This event will also serve an important role in recognizing and celebrating what's ending (based on William Bridges' model) as we move into the new program model.

I hope to see my staff continue to use the principles and tools of AI in their new schools. I have tried to emphasize with staff their role as leaders in modeling and infusing AI into their interactions and work. My new role in the fall will include some designated time to continue working with the early childhood staff in their new locations, allowing me further opportunities to support and facilitate AI.

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?

I had an opportunity to provide a day long overview and mini-AI experience during the summer to a group of almost 30 high school college-career-tech education (CTE) instructors from three different school districts who were looking to improve their teaming and leadership. The experience really helped me hone the agenda and timelines for the training I did later with my staff and the feedback from the high school CTE participants gave me a lot of confidence.

Nevertheless, I found myself very nervous about what would happen with my staff. My wish for their AI experience was to empower them with the energy and creativity to make this year a great year for our current students and families and in planning for and moving into a new future. During the fall AI experience, I clung tightly to the mantra I had learned in my training, "Trust the process"! I was so grateful to see my staff fully engaged in every phase of their AI experience and to witness their energy and creativity unfold. The AI experience was a great way to begin our school year together. The process naturally set up a positive, collaborative school culture. The interview process was also very helpful in building new staff connections through the "improbable pairs".

Throughout this school year, I have tried to provide guided practice for staff to celebrate successes and to encourage and support the infusion of AI into our work. I have discovered that I also need supports and tools for myself. Therefore, I have some favorite quotes from my AIFT in my office to remind me to consider how AI can be infused into all my leadership activities. I also have "best experience" and celebration items on my meeting agenda template.

Appreciative Inquiry has provided a framework that I believe has had a positive impact in just the ways I had hoped – by giving staff energy and focus this year for our work with students and families, empowering staff and families in planning for relocation and in co-creating a new future in new school teams and improving my skills as a school leader.

Have you received permission from the "client" or "clients" to tell us their story? In other words, does Company of Experts, Inc. have permission to share this story with others? If not, who would Company of Experts, Inc. need to contact to receive permission? If you could please answer each question as if telling us a story. Attach any materials that you may use such as power points, agendas, etc. It helps for us to "experience" your facilitation. Also, if you take pictures and we may use those, please include them.

I have modified this report so that it does not include the specific school or district names and therefore, it can be published, if you believe it will be helpful to others.

PRIMARY RESOURCES

The Center for Appreciative Inquiry, AIFT Training Manual, 2012.

Whitney, Diana, Trosten-Bloom, Cherney and Fry. Appreciative Team Building. iUniverse, Inc., 2004.

STAFF REFLECTIONS

What did you value most about this AI process?

Reaching and defining some goals for ECSE.

The continuity of shared ideas between each group/the wonderful diversity of ideas.

The time given to engage in the interviews—very meaningful.

Listening to all the creative ideas, concerns and solutions.

Opportunity to refresh my listening skills and the appreciation of the work we have already done and the future work we need to do together.

To see and reconfirm what my values are and also the values of others and the global values of our center.

Getting to know another staff member on a deeper level.

Really enjoyed that the focus was on positives and the positive actions we can take as we move forward to create an exceptional ECSE / ECE experience.

The working together to achieve greatness with a common goal for the kids!

How can we build on our conversations? What are our next steps?

Really focus and be realistic.

Come together in focus groups or committees to set up a plan of action for short term and long term goals/ set a timeline –meet at lunch time.

Schedule time during all staff meetings so we all are participants.

Identify and commit to the goals/follow through with our plans.

Continued communication between staff.

Set up a calendar of group meeting times throughout the year—do not have this new responsibility be in addition to, but in place of.

How do you see AI being used in our work (here and now? for relocation?)

It focuses on the positives about the move and not the negatives.

It assists us in determining our goals and bringing them forward because we will need to advocate for our program wherever we go.

As soon as we know our new location, it will help us plan how we can begin our melding with the new school staff.

Continue to use the interview process because it really gives the opportunity for all voices to be heard in a safe and informal manner.

It can help frame our thinking and actions as we move forward.

It helps build team commitments in our work with kids, getting to our strengths, and understanding how we can use our strengths to bring forth action.

It keeps all staff “on the same page” with better communication and moving towards our mission.

It facilitates working together for a smooth move.

It could be used in a modified way to get more information from parents. Have parents tell us their stories. This might be a way to get parents involved in the move and our vision.

This process could be used on a smaller scale, at staff meetings, to help with forming committees.

It is most helpful to work with unexpected peers to get/see different ideas and perspectives

Relocation: have staff in our new locations do this process with us and work toward teaming before we even move.

What else would you like to share?

The interviews were AMAZING!

It was a whirlwind experience--needed more time to process.

This was a great experience. We need to keep the momentum going.

Provide a "pick me up" snack during the next session.

The session was too long and may have been more effective in two sessions instead—too intense.

This was really fun and eye-opening.

Keep moving forward; while we might feel stopped sometimes, by circumstances, our dreams are the fuel that will push us through!!

ECSE Program Recommendation

Program Layer:

Team members:

Goal(s) / Timelines:

Please answer the following questions and provide any supporting documents:

1. Describe this layer of our ECSE program. Please include the **importance or impact on our students, families and/or community**. Include any relevant supporting data or reference to legal requirements.
2. How does this align **with District and Special Education goals and with our ECSE program's CORE Beliefs?**
3. With this layer of our ECSE program in mind, think of a time when this process/ program was working exceptionally well. Fully explore what it was about yourself, the situation, the task and others that made this a "peak" experience.
4. List together the attributes and themes that have made the program/process highly effective.
5. Imagine that 10 years down the road, this program is being honored as exemplary in its practices and results.
6. What **recommendations** are being made for this program/layer for relocating ECSE to the specific elementary locations? Include relevant details regarding locations, resources, staff, equipment, space, processes, timelines, etc.