

Appreciative Inquiry for Blue Moon Montessori

Background

Blue Moon Montessori (BMM) is a school situated in Bergvliet, Cape Town Southern Suburbs. The school accommodates learners from grades 1 to 7. The school was started by Jacky Price who currently serves as principal. The AI was intended to include as many of the teaching and supporting staff as were available. The group spectrum included one grounds keeper, two cleaning staff, eleven teaching staff and the principal, a total of 15. Mark Connelly, an accredited AI Facilitator, emailed Ezelle Theunissen asking if she knew of anyone still looking to do their AI practicum. He had had meetings with BMM and set a date with them to do an AI on 27 March 2014. Ezelle forwarded the email to me and I accepted the task.

Setting Up

The first meeting Mark had set up between BMM and I was on 21 March. The meeting involved Mark Connelly as co-facilitator, Jacky Price as school principal and myself as the lead AI facilitator. I learned that Mark had already met with the principal and discussed her desired outcome for the AI, though a modified interview guide had not been designed yet. I thus discovered with the principal for myself what her story was and what she wanted for the school. This information gave me the basis for modifying the interview guide. The core group thus consisted of the principal. This was less than ideal as a larger cross section would have given a richer and perhaps more balanced insight into the group. Unfortunately this was outside of my control as initial meetings had already been conducted before my involvement and this specific meeting was set up on my behalf, with no time available to arrange a meeting of a larger core group. To make the most of the meeting with the principal I used a coaching approach to discover what was at the core of her desire for change. This involved an exploration of her values at the school and what she imagined her ideal school to look like.

The positive topic of the inquiry was 'What do we need to do to continue to be the best Montessori school?'

After the meeting I spent a few hours discussing with Mark the following:

- Each of our roles for the AI
- Confirming a common understanding of the AI process and what this practically involved to ensure we are doing the same thing with the group. We used the AIFT course notes for reference
- Designing the interview guide based on our meeting with the principal
- Creating a 'to-do' list regarding media to buy, emails to be sent and other preparations for the process

I set a follow-up meeting for testing the modified interview with the principal on 24 March. Between 21 and 24 March I created the interview guide and the AI booklet (attached to the practicum application email), corresponding with Mark throughout the process.

There were some fundamental differences between Mark's idea for the interview guide and my own. I checked our understandings with my AI practicum supervisor, Ezelle, and eventually presented the interview guides to the principal on 24 March. The principal has done the AIFT and I relied a little on her knowledge from this as well as her subjective experience of the interview guide to make the final decision as to which guide would be used. I asked her to read through each interview guide and then to choose which one energized her the most. I then interviewed her using my interview guide.

The lesson I learned from the interview was to prepare the interviewee in terms of the appreciative paradigm, which I did with the total group during the AI. I had admittedly only assumed, as opposed to checked, that the principal's participation in the AIFT would have her responding to the interview in an appreciative way, stating desired outcomes. I gave feedback on the interview to Mark and checked how the results reflected on the interview design, adjusting accordingly.

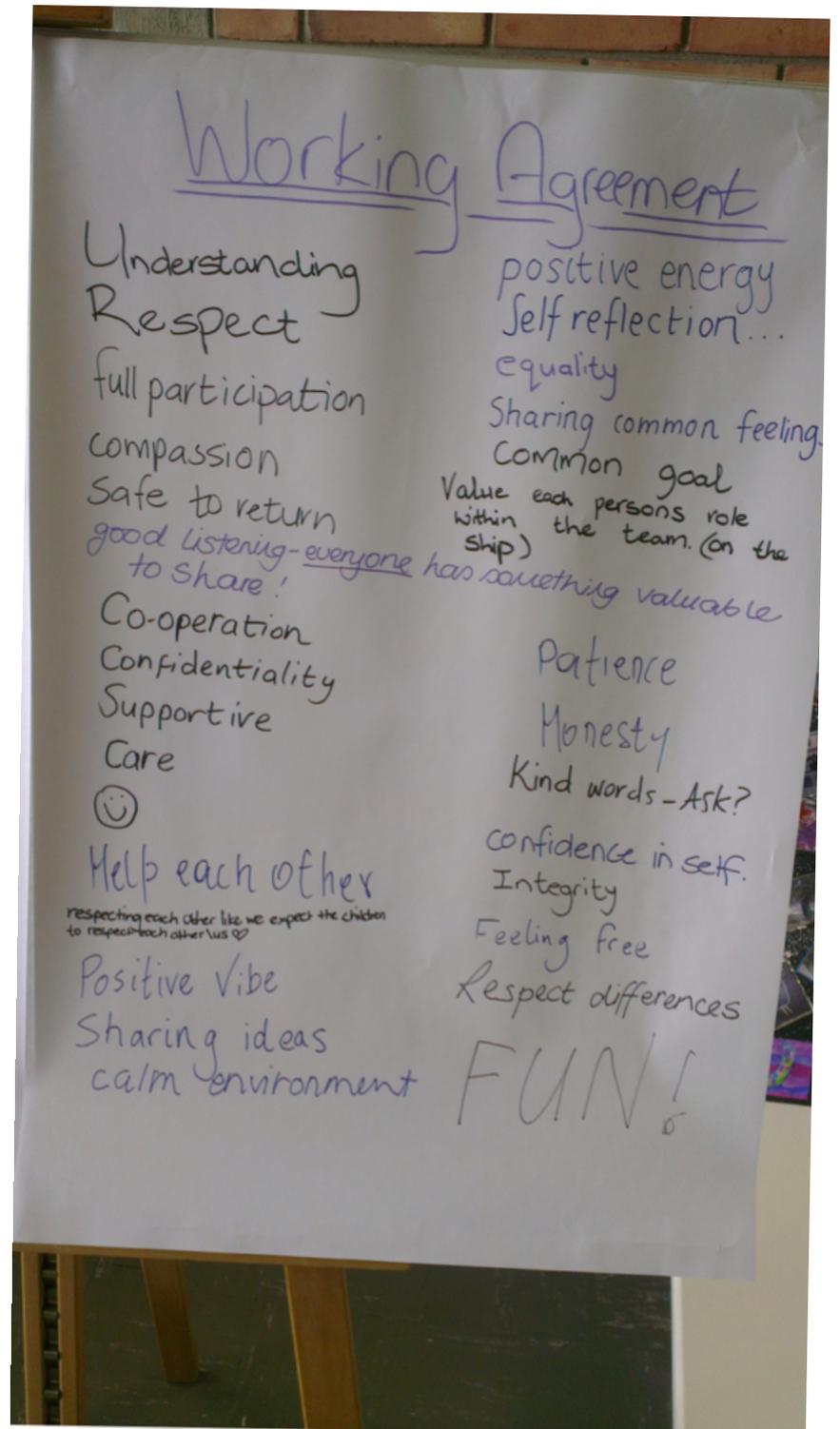
Setting up the AI Working Agreement

I started the day with an introduction of myself and the other facilitator, Mark Connelly. I gave a general outline of my skills in Coaching and Transactional Analysis. I explained that I had done the AIFT course in 2011, that I used AI principles and philosophy in my coaching and that I was doing the AI at Blue Moon Montessori (BMM) as my practicum for Facilitator certification.

I oriented the group with the booklet (attached to the practicum application email) I had made each of them, containing the schedule for the day, the modified interview guide and summary sheet.

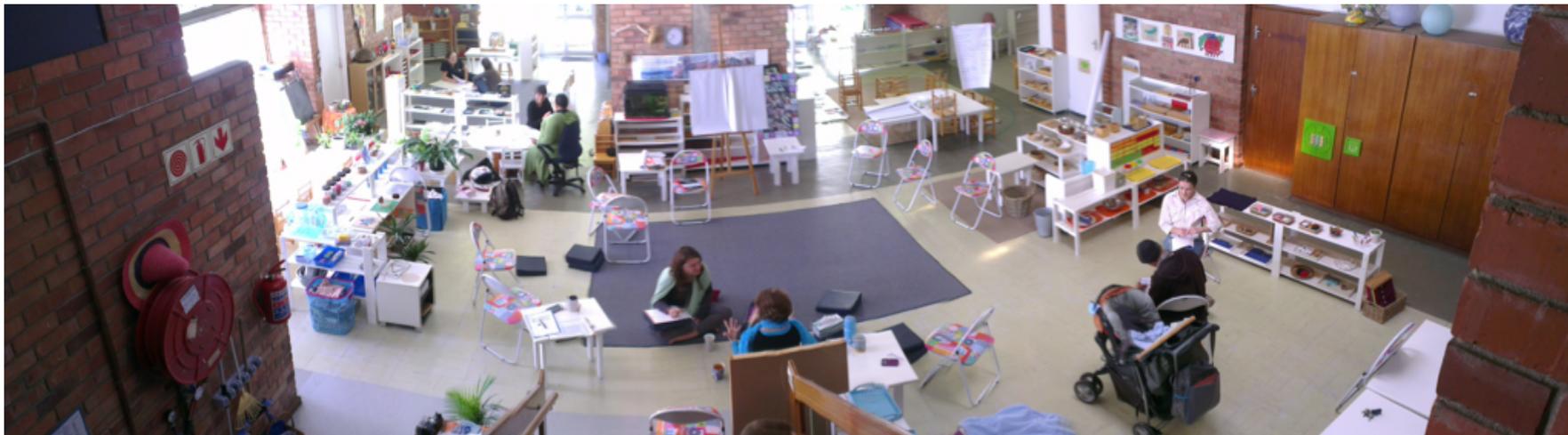
I explained the schedule for the day and gave an outline of how an AI works and the appreciative paradigm.

I asked the group to work in pairs and take 2 minutes each way to discuss what values they appreciate when learning and working in a group, then write these on a sheet at the front of the class. Each person then had an opportunity to ask about other's values and explain their own. This exercise is useful in setting part of the contract for the work ahead and invites people to buy in to the process. The Working Agreement is then displayed for the rest of the day as a reference for working with others.



The Working Agreement

Discovery 1: Inquiring into Exceptionally Positive Moments

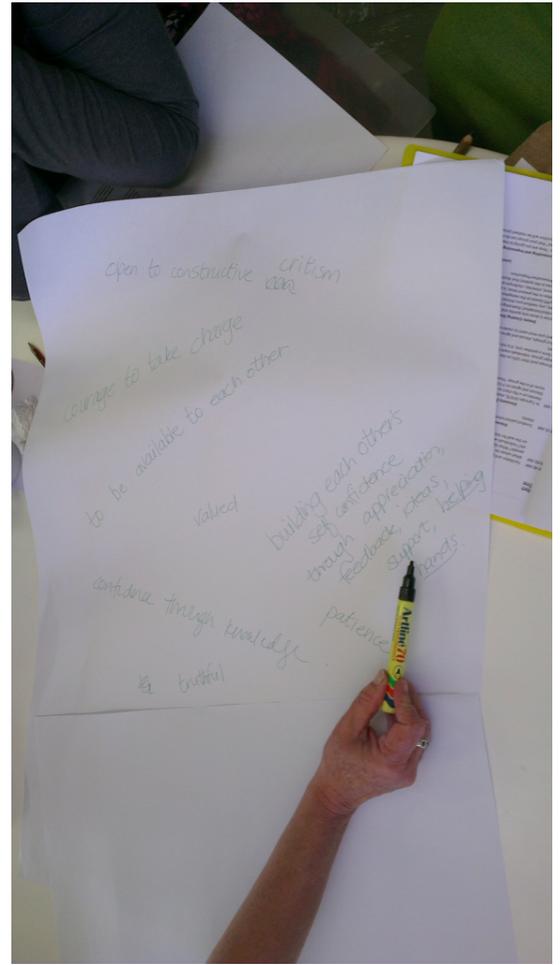
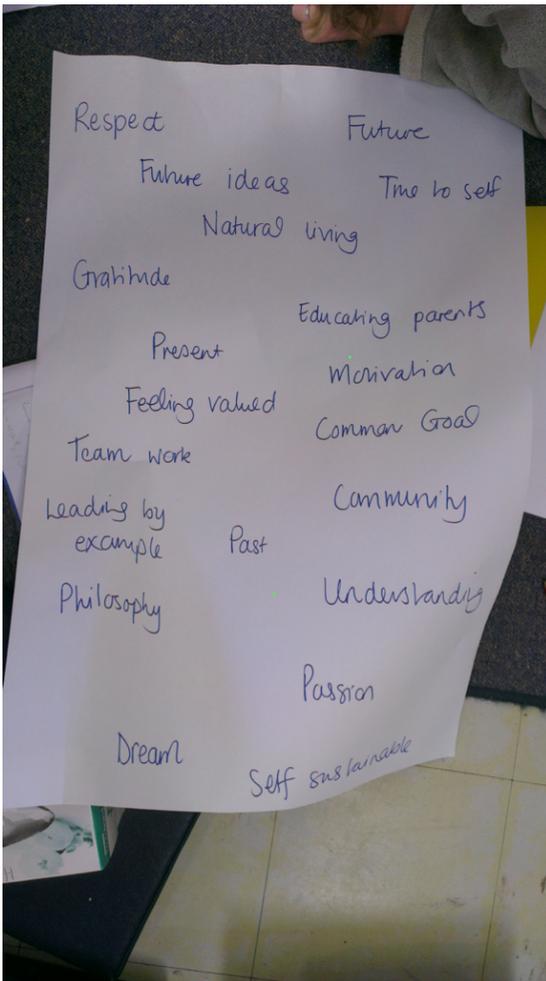
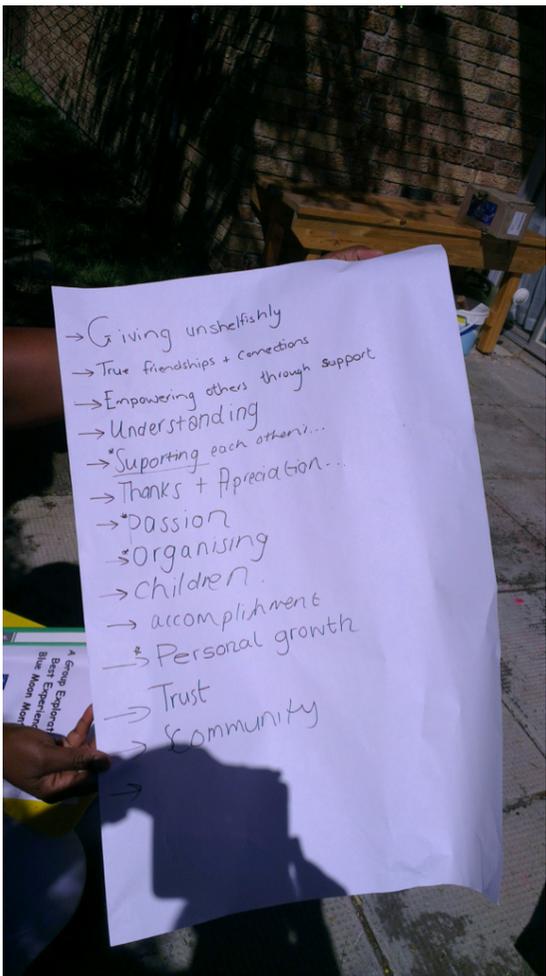


Conducting Paired Interviews

The group was introduced to the interview guide by reading through the questions, explaining their purpose and providing the opportunity for questions from the group. The way in which the interviews were to be conducted was explained to the group and this was supported by a written explanation above their interview guides. The group was asked to form pairs and interview each other face to face. One group formed a triad and although their interviews took a little longer, they discovered stories as richly as the other groups. Coincidentally, this triad had two members who shared the same native tongue and one who had a different home language. The two sharing the common language spontaneously started speaking their native tongue, leaving the other member out of the loop. Some ad hoc contracting on the way forward ensued and the group continued in English. A learning point on this is perhaps that individuals who find it easier and more expressive to relate the energy and life giving moments of their stories in their native tongues may choose to be paired together in this phase of the process; it may make for a richer discovery.



Discovery 2: Sharing Stories and Identifying Life-Giving Forces

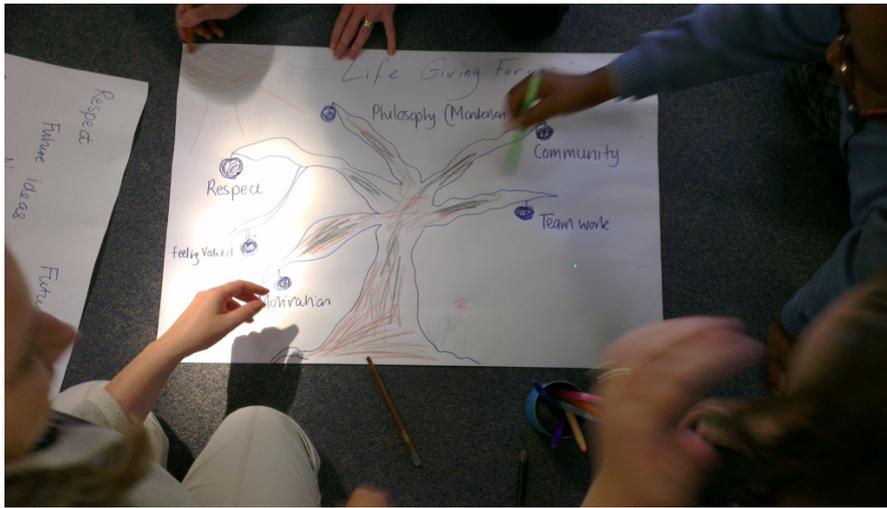


Themes discovered in the group discussion



Sharing themes in the larger group and using sticky dots to reveal common loci of energy





Group 1, 2 and 3's LGFs

Montessori philosophy, community, team work, motivation feeling valued and respect.

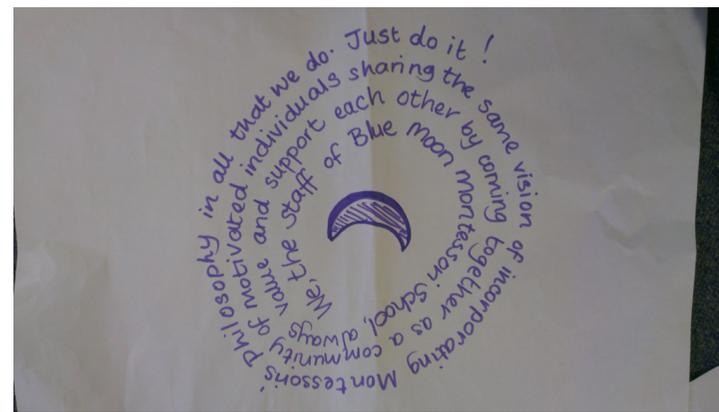
Organizing, passion, supporting each other and empowering others, community, personal growth, trust.

Building each other's self confidence through availability, appreciation, feedback, ideas support and helping hands; working towards common goals through defined vision; commitment and courage to take charge and be creative.

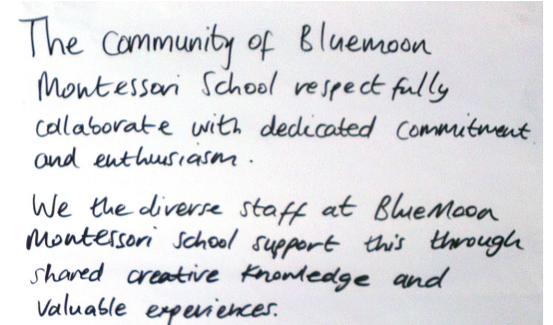
Dream: Creating Shared Images of a Preferred Future



Each member of BMM empowers personal growth and provides a platform to LEARN and gain EXPERIENCE + CONFIDENCE to be the driver of your OWN DESTINY.



We, the staff of BMM school always value and support each other by coming together as a community of motivated individuals sharing the same vision of incorporating Montessori Philosophy in all that we do. Just do it!



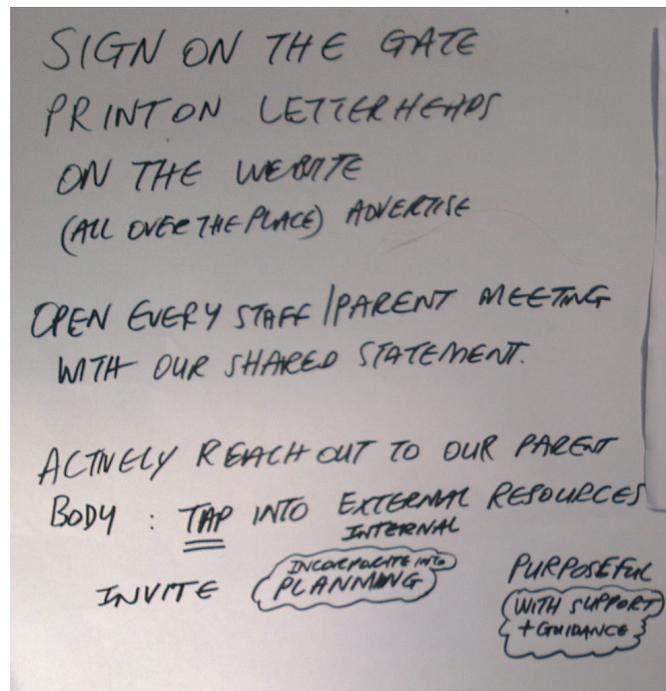
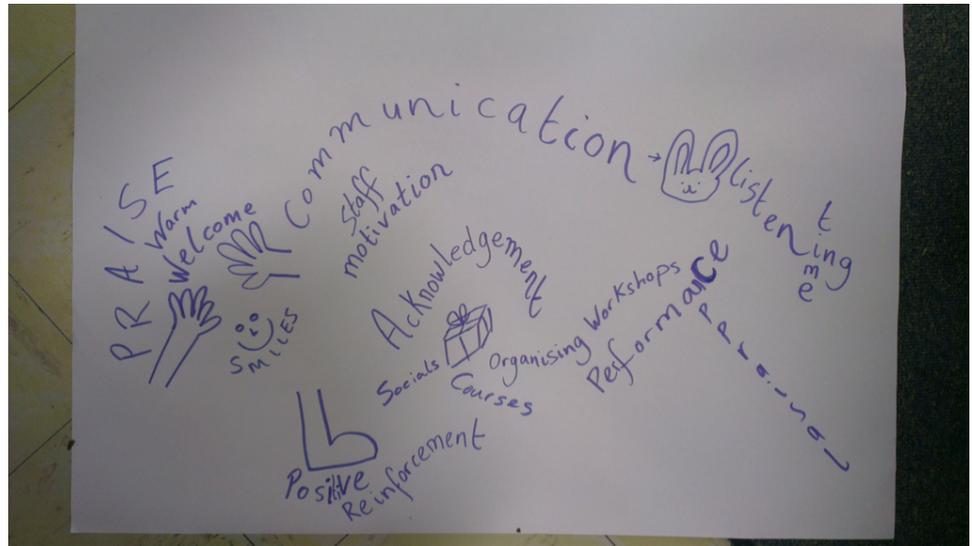
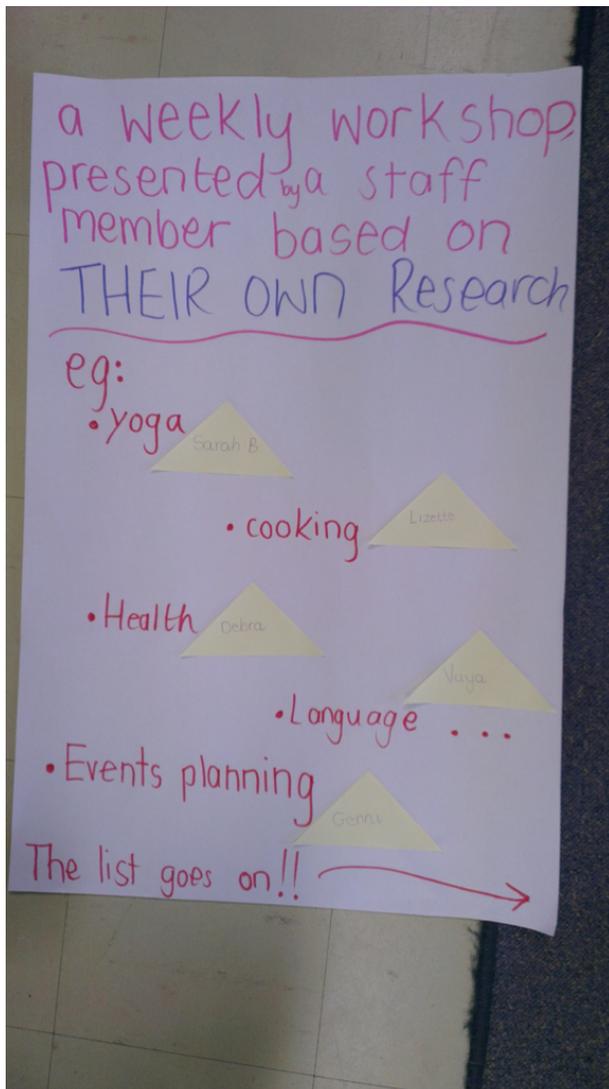
Groups designing their visual images and Provocative Propositions

The community of BMM school respectfully collaborate with dedicated commitment and enthusiasm. We the diverse staff at BMM school support this through shared creative knowledge and valuable experiences.

To inject fun, energy and creativity into the process I did an improvisational game called 'Appreciating Circle' with the group. The group stands in a circle. One person makes a gesture and a sound. The person on their right copies this and this carries on around the circle. It's fun to see how the gesture and sound changes as it gets 'copied'!

It took one group in particular a really long time to design their visual images and my thought on this is that they put a lot of thinking energy into this aspect as opposed to opening their creative selves. Noting this, I suggested that the exercise was not focussed on logic but more expression. There was deep resistance to this input from one member in particular, who seemed to take a leadership role in this group. I'm still working on how to approach this challenge if it recurs.

Design: Innovating and Improvising Ways to Create that Future

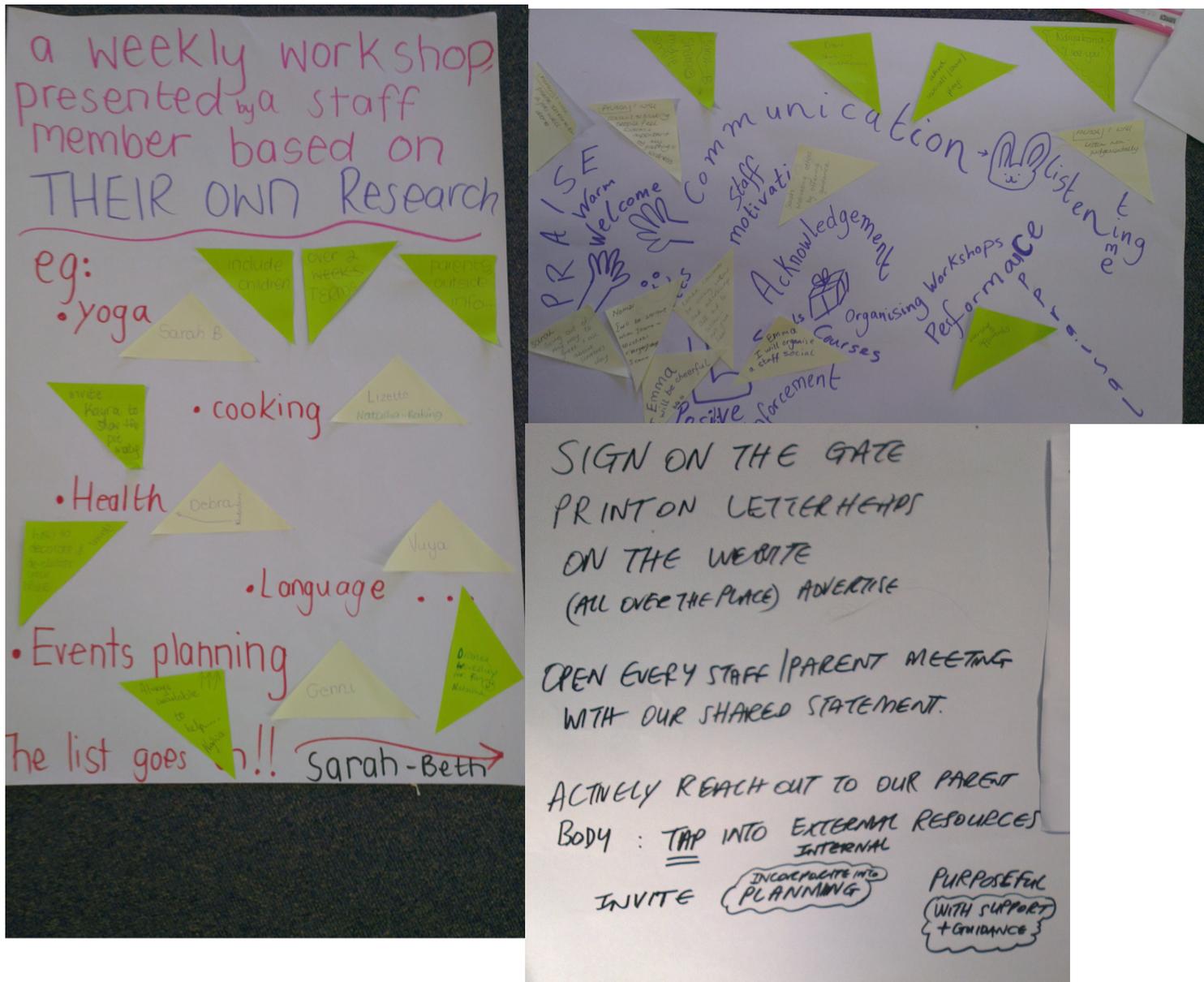


The Strategic Intentions set were:

A weekly workshop presented by a staff member based on their own research, eg yoga, cooking, health, language, events planning, etc.

Praise, warm welcomes, communication with listening time, staff motivation, acknowledgement, positive enforcement, organizing workshops, performance appraisals.

A sign on the gate with the PP, PP printed on the letterhead and website, all over the place and marketing; opening every staff/parent meeting with shared statement, actively reaching out to their parent body, tapping into external and internal resources; incorporating resources into planning, purposeful use of resources with support and guidance.



After designing their projects, individuals within groups used yellow post-its to make contributions, offers and requests to these. Then individual groups' projects were shared by explaining in more detail what they entailed to the larger group. Each group made contributions, offers and requests to other groups projects using green post-its. By this stage of the larger process the individuals had expended a lot of energy and this was quite visible, yet in sharing their projects and designing how they intended working together the groups livened up a lot! Each group was invited to choose their own representative to whom to be accountable and who would take the role of coordinator and oversee the general process.

The attitude change I observed was in the school staff's focus on community, in terms of reaching out to external resources as well as making use of the rich in-house resources and the means to enhance these relationships. The school staff invited me to check in with them how they were progressing with this at intervals in the future.

Moving Forward: Sustaining an Appreciative Approach and Supporting the Process

In order to invite a sustainable path forward, I asked the group what they intended to do to keep their projects, an appreciative attitude and the energy they felt during the process so far, alive and growing. The group mentioned the following:

- Calling the facilitators back for follow-up AI work at the end of July
- Making use of facilitators to check up on the school's process
- Reflecting on how personal goals were reached
- Stating a suggestion box
- Making a wish list
- Creating a collage of their successes
- The group would appreciate a monthly motivational message from the facilitators

I offered my skills in AI, as a coach and TA practitioner (student) to assist both individuals and groups at the school as needed. The group was asked to discuss how they would be mindful of AI when returning from their inter-term holiday in such a way as to continue where they had left off from the work done on the day. This involved a discussion involving the facilitators and group involving the following:

- Options to manifest the energy felt during the AI process in a sustainable manner
- Posting celebrations of success in dedicated areas for all staff to see
- Displaying the PPs where they can be seen by staff and parents
- Where the responsibility lay for keeping the process alive and what roles the facilitators would play
- Some staff expressed an interest in learning more about the AI process itself and what is behind it, the option of staff doing an AIFT was discussed

In future work with the school, I intend to first correspond with them by asking what is going well, what the most useful processes are which they have employed, what they would like support and what they would like to know more of. If invited to visit them I will play the role of asking them to share stories of success using an appreciative approach, asking them how they best celebrate individually and as a group, what would have the most meaning in celebrating. I find the approach of asking the individuals and group how they would like to proceed highly empowering, both in terms of the energy they experience, their intellectual stimulation, their buy-in and ultimately their autonomy.

The question (10) in the report format regarding realising PPs, success, celebration and support seems to invite the facilitator to 'help' the group. Perhaps I misinterpreted this question but I would like to give this feedback on how it came across to me. The questions under this section made me feel like I am invited to take these responsibilities ('helping' the group with realising PPs, success, celebration and support) for the group I worked with. I have a strong awareness of the power of responsibility and what responsibilities each party takes. I believe that my role is most powerfully and authentically served by setting realistic agreements on what goals are desired, designing what roles each person/group plays, creating awareness in discovering and reaching the goals, creating the plans to realise them, supporting the client by using the process (and other process like coaching I have learned along the way) and holding a positive Pygmalion for them and working towards their autonomy by nurturing their own accountability and appreciative thought process and being.

My wish for the AI was to play a role in which the group learned something about themselves, for them to experience and take on the appreciative paradigm, create life-giving and energizing processes within their organisation and to spread a culture of non-judgment, positivity and reframing. What I learned about myself was:

- I am capable of designing and running an AI powerfully
- I will ensure my involvement from the beginning of the process (the set-up meetings which take place weeks before the AI)
- I will 'prime' the Core Group regarding the appreciative paradigm before their test interview
- It is OK to provide more structure in keeping to the time schedule

My best experience was stretching and aligning the thinking of the individuals and groups when they designed their PPs! It was an opportunity for me to deeply nurture personal and organisational growth.

The clients gave me permission to tell their story and they were made aware that this included Company of Experts.net sharing this story with others.

I did my AIFT between Jan and Feb 2011 and my trainers were Luke Younge and Ezelle Theunissen.

I invite you to stretch my own thinking on AI and would appreciate your positive feedback where due.

Sincerely



Alex van Oostveen