

Nourish to Flourish



Nourish to Flourish brings together practitioners' voices and creative practices, and appreciative reviews of resources that support strengths-based approaches to human interactions.

Voices from the Field



Keith Storace | Australia

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In a time when climate anxiety threatens to thwart collective action, Shaun McInerney's case study, "Applying Appreciative Inquiry to Our Own Climate Action", offers a refreshingly hopeful and practical perspective through his use of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) in educational and sustainability contexts. Drawing on his experience as a school leader and facilitator of system-level change, McInerney explores how shifting from deficit-based narratives to strengths-based, system-aware engagement can reframe our approach to the climate crisis. His reflective account illustrates how the emergent principles of AI – Wholeness, Enactment, Free choice, Awareness and Narrative – can support personal insight and collective resilience. What makes this piece especially heartening is its ability to inspire possibility in the face of complexity, inviting us to act not from fear, but from a place of connection, curiosity and shared purpose. It's a pleasure to welcome Shaun as a contributor to this issue of *AI Practitioner*, and I invite readers to engage with and enjoy his article.

Shaun McInerney | United Kingdom



Shaun McInerney is a former school principal with leadership experience in innovative inner-city schools in the UK and abroad. Now at the University of Worcester's Institute of Education working as the Strategy and Programme Lead for the School Effectiveness Team, Shaun designs and delivers leadership development, coaching school and system leaders to meet the evolving needs of young people in a fast-changing, complex world.

Applying Appreciative Inquiry to Our Own Climate Action | A Case Study

As a former principal of an innovative school in England, I was once asked for one wish to shift us towards a more relevant, responsive and resilient education system. My attention immediately turned to the deficit-based thinking that currently dominates our policy and practice. Imagine if we could shift to more positive, asset-based, appreciative default setting. What might be possible then for the hopes, dreams and aspirations for all young people within schools, and for the collective regenerative action we need to shift wicked problems outside them?

Alex Arnold's article in *AI Practitioner* in November 2023 brought me back to this moment because she applied the principles of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) to climate action. This resonated because in November 2023 I was engaged in a Sustainable Leadership Summit, organised by The Edge Foundation and Schools of Tomorrow in the UK, which convenes school leaders and their students to learn and co-create together. I was asked to contribute a plenary session to this day, informed by my role at the University of Worcester where I support school and system leaders to lead change in the education system and in my role as a trustee at The Impact Trust which supports our transition to a world of collective resilience. In this column I want to unpack my own motivations for engaging Appreciative Inquiry for this particular project; explore my choice of tools and reflect on my own learning and the emerging impact of the project.

Alex's piece was framed around the five core principles of Appreciative Inquiry which I will use to consider my own enactment. These are summarised in Quinney and Slack (2017) as: the Wholeness principle; the Enactment principle; the Free choice principle; the Awareness principle and the Narrative principle. These emergent principles encourage us to use AI reflexively, i.e. as a way of understanding ourselves in relation to the wider system as we do our work in the world.

Making our own contribution relies on us growing through the action we are taking.

This seems an appropriate lens when applying Appreciative Inquiry to our own climate action because making our own contribution relies on us growing through the action we are taking so that we can both think and act differently as we address issues that are of common concern and need collective action. In this sense climate action isn't solving a problem; we are the problem to be solved. Working with these emergent principles may help shine some light on this.

Collective action can act as a buffer against serious mental health issues arising from eco-anxiety.

Schwarz et al.

The challenge and choices

When it comes to the climate crisis, despondency is the default position for most people. However, young people can be powerful agents of environmental change and adults have a responsibility to support this while not passing the responsibility for an older generation's failures onto this next generation to remedy (Bandura & Cherry, 2020). For this reason, Appreciative Inquiry has become my default approach when working with schools and young people around this issue. The wellbeing impact of AI is well documented (Orem et al., 2007). Moreover Schwarz et al. (2022) have outlined that collective action can act as a buffer against serious mental health issues arising from eco-anxiety.

The Free choice principle: Wake up, show up and grow up!

The focus of the 45-minute session I was asked to facilitate was 'Designing a More Sustainable Future for Your School'. The purpose of the session was to use appreciation to help us reflect on our next steps so we can build on what we have learned and start to turn it into purposeful action. I organised the session in three parts using Appreciative Inquiry as an anchor.

Part 1 Grounding the learning from the day in positive appreciation;

Part 2 Setting up a "strengths, opportunities, actions resources" (SOAR) activity that enabled each group of young people alongside their teachers to plan forward; and

Part 3 Setting out a "promises activity" that invited participants to commit to a personal promise to themselves and one to their school.

I framed the session by drawing a link from the powerful learning that had occurred through the day and extending this into the realm of action. I used a provocation based on the choices we all face: to act or not act; to engage or not engage. We all, particularly the adults in the room, have a choice to "wake up; to grow up and to show up" – or not.

The Wholeness principle: Thinking in systems



I started the session with an image of traffic and the popular yet provocative aphorism: we are not "in traffic" we are the traffic. Reframing our perspective to encompass the wider systems of which we are a part is one of the most significant challenges of the current education system, which is focused on transmissive learning that largely ignores the appreciation of nested system within which we are all embedded (Sterling, 2007, p. 51). Addressing climate issues needs to adopt a wider and more holistic pedagogy.

Appreciative Inquiry is an ideal underpinning because it is grounded in social constructivism, which is also a core component of systems thinking. To see ourselves within the systems we inhabit, we first need to bring awareness to ourselves, then to the system, and then to integrate these so we can see ourselves within the system and imagine the potential contribution we might make. The Wholeness principle is evident in this reframe towards a more holistic, inclusive, integrated and deeper understanding of what is.

The Awareness principle: Appreciative post-its



The second phase of the session invited participants to identify one person who has inspired you today. What did they do? To frame the activity, my colleague Malika Dahl from Schools of Tomorrow related instances from her own life where the building of community through action helped her manage her feelings around the ecological and climate emergency. We used a sentence stem: “To...Thank you for...From....” and displayed participants’ post-its to help make the appreciation visible and build relationships through the activity.

Making thinking visible is an important metacognitive learning strategy that allows us to surface the role of others in our own learning process. The Awareness principle opens up a deeper understanding because it introduces a relational dimension to our understanding; one that acknowledges our emotions and intuition.

The Enactment principle: SOAR

We become who we are with and through others. The core activity for this session was a SOAR activity that encouraged teachers and their students to identify what they wanted to build on from the learning that they had done that day. The questions were framed to foster collaboration, discussion and to be accessible to participants who ranged from age ten to adult.



Strengths What strengths do you have in your team that you can use?

Opportunities As you look at your own school, what opportunities might there be for you to make a difference?

Aspirations What difference would you like to make through this? What will be different after your project?

Resources What will you need to make this a success? Who can help you?

Understanding that our reality is socially constructed affords us the possibility of creating our own narrative to support the action we want to take.

The Narrative principle: Promises postcards

We change the world one conversation at a time. Understanding that our reality is socially constructed affords us the possibility of creating our own narrative to support the action we want to take. The third phase was a “promises activity” suggested by my co-presenter, Malika, with the intention of helping people scaffold their own narrative. Offering time and space for the teams to agree promises for themselves and in relation to their school was a way of planning forward and encouraging them to build on their momentum for action.

The sentence prompts were: *My promise to myself is ... ; My promise to my school is ...*. This is reminiscent of the 5D process that connects us to the deeper purpose to our work by Defining, Discovering, Dreaming, Designing our preferred future, which is our Destiny. We invited each group to reflect on the Destiny phase of their project by sending them their promises postcards six months later.

Reflection and reflexivity

It is a rare opportunity for teachers and students to genuinely co-create. An appreciative approach creates conditions of mutuality and connection, and this was evident through smiles and animated conversation. Formative questions emerged, with participants enquiring: how do we give ourselves permission and seek permission from others to take this project forward? How do we engage people with influence to support us? How might we integrate our project into the day-to-day life of our school so it can impact our sustainability?

Participating as facilitator, I sensed what was emerging in the Appreciative Inquiry field; I noticed how participants comments reflected this:

The space opened up a sense of wonder: “I appreciate the sounds of the nightingales and storks that have returned to East Sussex”.

‘I am grateful for the opportunity to zoom out and take a wider perspective.’

Perspective-taking grows as we hear the experience of others: “It has inspired me to care more about the earth ... I am grateful for the opportunity to zoom out and take a wider perspective”.

Collaboration builds individual confidence and collective efficacy: “I appreciate everyone’s emphasis on the importance of staying positive in the face of a climate crisis”. “I now feel confident to talk about sustainability in school.” “I appreciate the work others have already carried out to help guide others to get started on their sustainability journey – it inspires hope!”

The experience of collaboration and growth is one that can, done well, give us connection, collective resilience and a sense of inclusive renewal.

Coping with the climate transition with fortitude needs to be a triumph of both hope and experience. The kind of hope we need is not one that creates false optimism, but a commanding hope that is astute and realistic (Homer-Dixon, 2021). And the experience of collaboration and growth is one that can, done well, give us connection, collective resilience and a sense of inclusive renewal.

More work needs to be done to create a deeper understanding of the potential for Appreciative Inquiry in schools. As an asset-based approach, it builds resources by strengthening the rich vein of learning and experience students and teachers have within them, and connects them to their own sense of possibility and agency. This lends itself to deeper and more holistic learning that is truly regenerative because it allows us to deepen our knowledge through action as we learn and grow, and renew, together.

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