# Appreciating Learning:

# Children using Appreciative Inquiry as an approach to helping them to understand their learning

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# Abstract

Understanding one's own learning (or meta-learning) is a topic of increasing interest in education in the 21st century. Children, who know how they learn, know themselves as learners. This is an important part of becoming a life-long learner in a world where the fast-pace of change creates the illusion that the future is one of greater unknown. Initiatives to help children to 'learn how they learn' often teach meta-cognition skills is isolation from the learning process; a strategy for learning that has been found to be ineffective. For children to come to see their role in their own learning, they need to learn about *themselves* and the unique strengths that they bring to their learning experiences. This is particularly so for children who struggle at school or those who do not believe they have the potential to learn.

This qualitative research examines Appreciative Inquiry (AI) as a strengths-based approach to helping children understand their learning. Four 10-year-old children (in year 6) and I engaged together in action research to design and implement an AI intervention, and then evaluate its effectiveness as an approach to learn about their learning. Social constructivist theory is used to understand the children's shifts in understandings and perceptions, prior to and following the AI intervention. Three key areas provided the conceptual framework for the thesis: social constructivist learning, meta-learning and AI.

The research project delivered new findings in several areas. The first main area of findings show that the children experienced significant shifts in their understandings of learning and perceptions of themselves as learners. The formal school context had a powerful influence on their understandings of learning and through the AI they came to view learning as taking place in a much wider context. The formal school context also influenced how they saw themselves as learners and some children believed they that, due to their low grades, they were 'no good' at learning. Participation in the AI process helped them to identify their strengths as learners and appreciate how their uniqueness actually benefits their learning.

The second main area of findings identified four key factors that are pertinent to the children's participation in AI: collaborative dialogue, agency in learning, experiential learning and children focus on their strengths as learners. Using AI

with children is not as straightforward as using this with adults and, as such, requires that changes be made to the model, the aim being to shift its orientation from being one of a progressive approach to an experiential approach.

A key objective of this research was not to impose a learning theory on the children's experience of learning, instead, through AI theory, the process allowed the children to discover their own learning theories for how they might use their strengths in their future learning. In this way, AI as an approach to meta-learning, was empowering because it worked from the ground up and from the inside out. Additionally, the 'action' aspect of the research provided a space for the children to actively make changes in their learning.

Children's perspectives were sought in order that the children themselves could inform the formulation of my research questions. This approach not only respects the children's capacity to contribute to research, but it provides authentic insights into the experiences of those who are directly influenced by the AI intervention; the children themselves. The children's perspectives warrant special attention with respect to how they might best condition the design of the methodological approach used in this research to help them come to know their learning and themselves as learners.

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[1] Pseudonyms have been used to identify the children in the research

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To my two gorgeous children Sunny and Melody, thank you for giving me reason to pursue a study on appreciating learning.

This thesis is dedicated to

Sunny

I appreciate your magnificence as a learner

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# CHAPTER 1

# Introduction

Understanding one's own learning, or how to learn, has long been an area of interest in education, but particularly in the early years of the 21st century. Educationalists, practitioners and policy makers have recognised that learning for the future requires a different kind of learner than in previous generations. With the face-paced and unknown future ahead, educationalists argue that learners now need to not only gain knowledge, but to develop a capacity for learning to become life-long learners (Claxton, 2007). *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) "has a vision of our young people as life-long learners who are confident, creative, connected, and actively involved" (p. 4). To achieve this requires shifting current concepts of transmission models and their teacher-focused learning towards a deeper understanding where learners are understood to construct personal meaning from their learning, leading to self-awareness and autonomy, even self-actualisation (Entwistle, 2000; A. Roberts & Nash, 2009). For learning to be more learner-focused it needs to involve understanding 'how' to learn, or to involve meta-learning. However, the idea of developing self-awareness suggests that it is also important to come to know one's self as a learner as part of this process.

While current initiatives in meta-learning (or learning about learning) involve reflection and developing strategies to apply in future learning, most strategies are generic and neither acknowledge nor utilise the uniqueness of the individual learner's strengths. Learning style theories in the past have attempted to address this issue, and despite recent research claiming inadequacies with the assessment and method (Coffield, Moseley, Hall, & Ecclestone, 2004), the idea of recognising 'who you are' as a learner is an important part of defining your learner identity. Developing a personalised, rather than generic, learner identity can connect learners to a sense of purpose and self-revelation (K. Robinson, 2009). Focusing on one's strengths, instead of weaknesses, is an important part of building one's perceptions of one's self as a learner. For many children who both

struggle at school and do not believe they can learn (Bassi, Steca, Delle Fave, & Caprara, 2007), it is not only important to engage in meta-learning but be given opportunities to learn about their own personal strengths in their learning and to develop positive identities as learners.

This thesis examines an alternative approach to understanding (or learning about) learning and one's self as a learner. Rather than an intervention into a problem area (or what *needs* to be learned), the focus is on what 'is' already working and instead works to amplify what already exists. I investigate the theory and method of Appreciative Inquiry (AI), which uses these strengths-based ideas, for its effectiveness with children on their learning. Drawing on social constructivist principles and an action research methodology, I present my discoveries based on an AI intervention with four 10-year-old primary school children with the intention of helping them build new and positive understandings of their own learning and themselves as learners. The action research involved the children and I, over a seven week process, firstly exploring learning, then designing and implementing an AI into their learning over four weeks, and finally presenting their outcomes and evaluating the intervention.

Many initiatives in education are designed, implemented and assessed by adults: children are rarely given opportunities to shape their learning experiences (Cook-Sather, 2010). This study sought to investigate the effectiveness of AI with children from the perspectives of the participants themselves. This research approach not only meant that the participants lent their insights on their learning experiences, but was a respectful way to research with children.

Throughout this research project, I have used the term children to describe the participants, instead of labelling them as students or pupils, which are terms that are often associated with schooling and therefore limited to the school context.

## 1.1 A Personal Narrative – background to the research

This study is the result of a personal journey towards understanding more effective ways to enhance children's learning experiences. I have been involved in education, for 17 years, in what might be regarded as eclectic and perhaps non-traditional ways. The foundations for my beliefs on learning began to form during

1996 when I completed a certificate in Early Childhood Education and Care at Bay of Plenty Polytechnic. During this time, I was introduced the newly established *Te Whāriki: Early Childhood Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 1996). From *Te Whāriki*, I developed the understanding that children actively construct their learning from within an environment that values the empowerment of children when learning is individualised, and recognises the holistic way children grow, nurtures positive relationships, and welcomes the collectiveness of learning from family and community input. These foundational beliefs acted as a springboard to many interesting paths on my journey in education.

Becoming a parent presented me with new opportunities to engage theory and practice in everyday life. I joined Playcentre, (a unique early childhood setting in New Zealand, where parents learn alongside their children) and observed many children responding positively to learning experiences that were relevant to their own learning needs and interests. I witnessed children develop a love of learning. Every day was an opportunity to celebrate the uniqueness of my own and others' children, and their individuality as learners. My desire to foster in others this deep understanding I had of children's learning led me to work for the Eastern Bay of Plenty Playcentre Association as a facilitator of Early Childhood New Zealand Quality Assurance accredited workshops for parents.

During this time I also completed a Bachelor of Social Sciences, majoring in Education, with Philosophy as my minor. One of the foci of my studies was learning and, in particular, democratic ways of learning. Significant ideas emerged from this inquiry, such as the idea that there was a need for the development of respectful relationships between adults and children with respect to the need to develop trust and a sharing of power, and the importance of having voice and agency in learning. I was able to 'test' these ideas in my everyday life with my own and other's children, and witness the powerful outcomes of allowing spaces for children to use their agency in their learning. These ideas became woven through the formation of my foundational beliefs on how children should learn. After I completed my degree I trained in Philosophy for Children (P4C) in 2006, and facilitated sessions in my home for 5- and 6-year-olds from the local community. Philosophy for Children provides children with opportunities to engage in communities of inquiry where they can learn to dialogue, question and challenge within a safe and supportive environment. I was motivated by the desire

to enhance children's dialogic skills so that they might feel confident to 'speak up' on matters that are important to them.

A turning point came when my eldest child started school. His strong Early Childhood Education (ECE) foundation in learning conflicted with formal school learning and his love of learning disappeared. His agency was actively discouraged within his classroom. The language and focus of his education now emphasised his deficiencies; what he "needed to work on". Over time, his once confident and curious attitude towards learning diminished and he developed a negative perception of himself as a learner. The development (or devolution of this situation) of his experience from day-to-day was difficult for both my son and I as a mother; I felt let down by the New Zealand education system. Over time, I understood that we were not an isolated case. During my involvement as an active parent at the school I heard many parents' stories of disappointment and at times frustration at the lack of celebration of the uniqueness of *who* their children were as people and as learners.

Concerned by the diminished holistic and personalised approach to learning, I searched for an alternative education for both my children that would work with their uniqueness and instil in them a love for learning. However, there was nothing that suited my requirements in the town where we lived. In 2008, I embarked on a journey, with a group of like-minded parents, to open a state funded special character school in our hometown, based on making learning a learner focused experience; an authentic and experiential (among other things) learning experience. After three years of advocating this type of learning, registering almost 100 students and working with the Ministry of Education, the project was discontinued due to the demographics of our community.

During 2010, I returned to complete postgraduate studies in Honours and begin my Master of Social Sciences at the University of Waikato. My postgraduate studies have been motivated by a desire to understand more about learning and to investigate approaches to learning that may be able to help children develop positive perceptions of learning and themselves as learners. In my Honours degree, I was introduced to AI, a strengths-based method of searching for 'best of' narratives, the dreaming of possibilities and encouraging these life-affirming ways of learning to appreciate in future realities. I wondered if this could be used as a

method for both helping children understand how they learn best and develop their positive perceptions as learners. This curiosity is the basis of my motivation for doing this Master's thesis.

Information on using AI with primary school children, particularly as an approach to enhancing their learning, was scarce. Consequently, before I designed a unique AI approach, I trialled my ideas with some children I knew. This proved indispensable to the design of my research project, as these children gave me feedback on the useful and not so useful aspects of their experience. They showed the necessity of having agency in their learning and wanted to share their new understandings of learning and themselves as learners with parents and teachers. This was suggestive of the potential power of this kind of research for transformational learning.

## 1.2 Conceptual framework for the research

My experiences of education have thus far led me to investigate three key areas with respect to how they inform the conceptual framework of this research: Social constructivist learning, meta-learning and AI.

Social constructivist learning, which rests on the idea that learners and not teachers are central to the learning process, was used to examine how the children built their understandings from interacting with others in the AI context. Lev Vygotsky's (1978) work is influential because it suggests that learners are not just passive recipients of their learning but that they actively seek new meanings. A social constructivist lens examines how children's previous knowledge of learning comes to influence social interaction and dialogue and, in this way, new knowledge become internalised. Vygotsky's theory of higher mental functions is described by Liu and Mathews (2005) as the ability for meaningful perception which requires discovery of 'aha' moments that lead the learner to become consciously aware (p. 394). In this research project, social constructivism was utilised to explore the children's experiences of 'aha' opportunities through the AI, and how they build upon those new understandings to create meaningful perceptions of their learning and of themselves as learners.

The second area that pertains to this thesis is the concept of meta-learning; commonly known as learning to learn or as learning about one's learning. Typically, meta-learning involves the learner being taught strategies for meta-cognition, yet this research draws on the work of C. Watkins, Carnell and Lodge (2007) who use a method of coming to know one's self as a learner through reflection, noticing, talking and learning about learning. Collaboration through dialogue (Cooke, 2001) is also a key factor. The idea is not so much to teach children how to learn but to provide opportunities for conversations on learning and how one goes about learning. Learning about learning can help children to become better learners (Claxton, 2002).

The third key area completing the conceptual framework for this research involves the concept of AI as a theory and a method. Originating in organisational development theory, AI has been internationally purported to be an alternative approach to create positive and exciting change (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). A key premise of AI is that the topic of inquiry (or focus) directs the area in which change occurs. Therefore, focusing on positive possibilities, rather than on deficits as do most problem-solving methods, leads to positive and often transformational change. AI is a method of reflecting on previous 'best of' moments, and amplifying more of those through dialogue and relational ways of knowing. Reflecting on, noticing and dialoguing on one's learning and thinking are also aspects of meta-learning. Drawing together these three areas provided the foundations from which to theorise the effectiveness of AI when helping children to understand their learning, and themselves as learners.

## 1.3 Significance of the study

There is limited research on AI with primary school children, particularly as a personal development approach to meta-learning. The positive transformational change effects reported in AI studies lead me to believe this approach could also be useful in creating positive change for children in their understandings and perceptions of learning. The aim of this qualitative study was to investigate children's understandings and perceptions of learning and provide experiences for them to shift negative views towards understanding their strengths as learners. The purpose of the action research methodology was to provide opportunities for

children to affect change in their own learning. Accessing the children's perspectives on the learning process provided authentic insights into how to engage in AI with children, as an approach to learning about learning.

This study identified significant shifts had occurred in the children's understandings of learning and perceptions of themselves as learners from participation in the AI intervention. Many children came to understand their role as a learner in their own learning and, as a consequence, developed positive identities as learners, where as previously they had not found it possible to do this. This alludes to the potential for AI to be utilised as an approach to learn about learning that additionally enhances children's beliefs that they can learn.

Four key factors were identified by the children as significant to their ability and motivation to engage in AI as a meta-learning activity. These are collaborative dialogue, agency in learning, experiential learning and focusing on strengths in learning. This research contributes to our knowledge of how AI is used with children and may assist in creating opportunities for children to do AI. As such, this research provides a valuable contribution to the sparse literature and research on AI with children as a meta-learning activity.

This research was built upon the following research question and sub-questions:

How effective is AI at helping children to understand their learning?

- What are children's understandings and perceptions of learning and themselves as learners prior to and following the AI intervention?
- What are the significant factors when doing an AI with children into their learning?

## 1.4 Layout of the thesis

Chapter Two presents a review of the literature and is separated into two key areas: Meta-learning and AI. The meta-learning section gives a background of the concept and illustrates the key factors involved and highlights the importance of developing a learner identity. The section on AI gives an overview of the method, underpinning principles and the relevant theory associated with its use. The transformational effects of AI are examined and linked to children's learning. The chapter finishes with a summary linking these key ideas that create the basis for

investigating AI both as an approach to learning about learning and as a justification of the research questions.

The third chapter outlines the research design and explains methodology, the qualitative paradigm and social constructivist theoretical framework that underpin the research. An explanation of action research is provided, along with a rationale for its use. I discuss theory and good practice for researching with children, and raise the ethical considerations that have been addressed in this research. I outline the research methods used and provide the rationale for focus groups and semi-structured interviews as a means to respectfully access children's perspectives. I explain the usefulness of reflective field-notes as a data collection method. I provide a description of the analysis used in this research and explain the trustworthiness of the study. Finally, I explain the criteria used to select the children, introduce the research context and the participating children and give an outline of the action research process.

In Chapter Four, I present findings and discussion of the analysis of the findings that relate to the first subsidiary research question: What are children's understandings and perceptions of learning and themselves as learners prior to and following the AI intervention? The influence of the school context and the role children perceive they played in their learning is presented along with the shifts in their understandings and perceptions of learning from participation in the AI. The findings are theorised in light of the relevant literature.

In Chapter Five, I present and discuss findings relating to the second subsidiary research question: What are the significant factors when doing an AI with children into their learning? Here, four key areas emerged from the data, which are presented and examined in relation to the relevant literature.

In Chapter Six, I draw conclusions about AI as a potential meta-learning activity. I explain how AI could to be adapted for use with children and I provide a model from the findings. I outline the limitations of the study and provide recommendations for further implementation of AI with children.

# CHAPTER 2

# A Review of the Literature

***Introduction***

Investigating Appreciative Inquiry (AI) as an approach to helping children understand and learn about their own learning is the key focus of this research. This chapter interrogates the as yet sparse but growing field of literature that identifies such forms of knowledge as significant to learning. I draw together ideas from meta-learning, social constructivism and AI to form a conceptual framework for investigating AI as a meta-cognitive approach to learning. As such, AI is positioned as an important mechanism for pedagogical intervention and thus sets the scene for my study.

In the first section, I explore what 'understanding (one's own) learning' entails in the current climate of educational literature. Employing a social constructivist lens, I explore current educational approaches to learning about learning, or meta-learning, and highlight key features of associated strategies described in the literature. These include but are by no means exclusive to terms such as collaborative learning, dialogue, agency, enjoyment in learning and developing a learner identity.

In the second section, I present an overview of AI and its reported use in educational research where significant links are made to effective learning and transformative shifts in perception. I draw on literature that explains the method and theory of AI, as well as the principles that underpin these. I then provide a critique of AI based on the literature that was at my disposal. Finally, I explore the small amount of academic literature on AI with children on their learning and then make a claim for the significance of the research questions.

## 2.1 Meta-learning – learning about learning

Understanding one's own learning is a concept that has been given much attention in literature on the teaching and learning process because it has been linked to effective learning. This said, it remains a complex concept because it is discussed

using different theoretical contexts under a plethora of different terms. For example, understanding one's own learning has also been called 'thinking about thinking' or 'meta-cognition' (Fisher, 1998; Flavell, 1979) which involves developing an awareness of one's thinking processes and learning strategies. Another term, 'learning to learn' (Ward & Daley, 1993) has involved learning strategies for accelerating learning while 'learning *how* to learn' (James, Black, McCormick, & Pedder, 2007) has focused on using assessment for learning. Also learning *about* learning (C. Watkins, Carnell, Lodge, Wagner, & Whalley, 2000) is a concept that has helped teachers to focus on the learning process, not just their teaching. More recently understanding one's own learning has come to mean 'meta-learning' (C. Watkins et al., 2007) which also involves one's "goals, feelings, social relations and context in learning" (p. 9). Despite the difference in orientation and practice, this terminology has in common the underlying assumption that understanding one's own thinking and learning how one learns is beneficial to the learning process.

Developing an understanding of how to learn is reported in the literature as encompassing many benefits, not only to the learner but for the teacher and the learning environment. Previous studies on meta-cognition with respect to how it enhances learning have involved spelling strategies (Pentecost & Dickie, 2011), literacy learning (McDonald, Thornley, Ciriza, Behumi, & Staley, 2011), conceptual development in social studies (Plummer, 2011), classroom dialogue about thinking (Fisher, 2009), while some have investigated meta-learning as a broad means of enhancement of all learning areas (Lodge, 2008a; C. Watkins et al., 2007, 2000). McDonald et al. (2011) found that teaching meta-cognitive skills in literacy to secondary students (over a period of 3 to 4 years) increased some student's achievement across all classes and levels. C. Watkins et al. (2000) claim that when students learn about their own learning, it brings "increased engagement in their own learning, more positive feelings regarding their learning, a better sense of ownership and responsibility" (p. 3) amongst other things. However, Claxton (2007) claims that it is not enough to teach thinking skills but a capacity to learn needs to be cultivated, such as, for example, the need to be not only able but "ready and willing to learn" (p. 119), and that developing a capacity to learn will lead to increased confidence, not only during one's schooling but in life-long learning. Learning about learning, therefore requires opportunities for

learners to engage in activities that promote this capacity to learn. This rational forms the basis of my research intervention.

Engaging in meta-learning activities is reported to be more effective for student learning than teaching meta-cognitive skills (C. Watkins et al., 2007). Previous studies from McDonald et al. (2011) of student learning have found that teaching meta-cognition skills in isolation to the learning is ineffective. Their findings suggest that learning about learning needs to be done *during* the actual learning experience. Arising from this premise C. Watkins (2001) advocates for a framework of (1) noticing learning (2) talking about learning (3) reflecting on learning (4) learning about learning. Understanding one's own learning, according to this approach, is therefore a process of coming to know one's own learning and one's self as a learner.

Numerous studies have investigated students developing their abilities to understand their learning (Fisher, 2009; Flavell, 1979). These authors explain that meta-cognition requires the ability for abstract thought, and they suggest that, for children, this develops over time as they grow, – typically as they emerge into adolescence. Yet research reports of challenges for students who struggle academically at school, when introduced to higher order thinking. McDonald et al. (2011) found in their research into approaches used to support secondary school student's meta-cognition in literacy, that some students were challenged by meta-cognitive activities, and showed reluctance to engage. Similarly, Pentecost and Dickie (2011) investigated primary school children's developing meta-cognitive skills in spelling and found that students with little meta-cognitive experience were reluctant to attempt challenging words in their spelling. McDonald et al. (2011), in contrast, suggest that low motivation to engage in meta-cognition stemmed from students' low self-belief in their learning abilities rather than their meta-cognitive experience or cognitive ability. The teachers in their study claimed that building confidence was an issue that required attention when teaching students meta-cognition. This suggests that engaging in activities that require higher abstract thinking, which are perhaps challenging for students who struggle at school, needs to additionally attend to the task of raising students' confidence and self-belief in their learning abilities.

It was also apparent in the literature that developing meta-cognition to learn about one's learning is not merely seen as an individual exercise, but involves a social aspect. Larkin (2000) argues against claims that meta-cognition is age-related, and instead believes that "social environment, pedagogy, nature of problem posed and the learner's affective state impact on the development of meta-cognition" (p. 2). Similarly, C. Watkins, et al. (2007), promote the argument that learning about learning involves developing an awareness of one's own learning (the individual's learning) and also "encompasses the social nature of the situations in which we learn, and the social nature of our motivation to learn" (p. 124). These authors claim that reflecting on your own learning, using what you already know and building on those understandings through social interactions (dialogue), leads to more meaningful and effective learning. Making meaning from social interactions is a social constructivist view of learning

### *2.1.1 A social constructivist view of learning for children*

Studies that promote social constructivist approaches to develop meta-cognition or learning about learning are concerned with the context for and strategies used when learning. Lev Vygotsky's (1978) cultural-historical theories are highly influential in the mediating strategies of people (teachers) and the learning environment. Vygotsky suggests that children's thinking is shaped by their social interactions within a given context and in particular through dialogue with others. Vygotsky posited that children actively seek their own meanings; a process termed "internalisation" (Fleer, 2010). In doing so, they become agents of their learning, or what is known as agentic learners.

In order to internalise learning Vygotsky (1978) argues that there has to be a link with the child's present reality and then an initiative taken to build on what the learner already knows (as cited in Fleer, 2010). In keeping with this tenet, Watson (2001) claims that "[t]rue understanding and advances in understandings occur when new information is not too different … with what we already know" (p. 142). Similarly, Fleer (2010) suggests that when children's everyday knowledge meets teacher's subject knowledge, it can create a powerful learning relationship, which is known as intersubjectivity in social constructivism. According to Liu and Mathews (2005) "[a] child's mental development is not [about] acquiring new functions but [about] shifts in the connections among these functions" (p. 394).

Social constructivism suggests that when helping children to learn and to learn about their learning, it is important for teachers (and researchers in the case of my research) to access the children's everyday knowledge, understandings and perceptions about learning, so that teachers can build on these aspects of children's learning and what is more, notice the shifts that occur, which would affirm that true learning has occurred. The 'context' in which the learning takes place is what influences the learning.

Studies adopting this perspective include Larkin's (2000) research of meta-learning with 5 and 6-year-olds. She claims that developing meta-cognition occurs in the social environment, where children have opportunities to express their thinking, explain their reasoning and justify their reasoning to their peers. This social constructivist approach to meta-learning (or understanding one's own learning) is argued in the literature to be a central means of promoting learning about learning.

There are three tenets of social constructivist learning, which are particularly useful to framing the focus of this research on AI as an approach to help children to understand their learning. These tenets are collaborative learning, dialogue, and agency in learning, and will now be discussed in relation to learning about learning.

### *2.1.2 Collaborative learning*

Collaborative learning is widely discussed in the literature on effective learning, predominantly with a social constructivist orientation and understanding learning as a social activity. C. Watkins et al. (2007) describe collaboration as a process that involves people's actions being focused towards achieving a shared goal. This shared goal has two main characteristics: "(1) …something new is created that could not have been created otherwise (2) … [which] takes place when all the participants can contribute to a new shared product" (p. 88). Recent research has investigated the impact of social interactions that take place while learning how to learn (Cooke, 2001; Plummer, 2011). Although learning about one's own learning is an individual process, this research has found that learning about learning can be enhanced through adult and peer support. In practice this involves activities that require discussion and the opportunities to question, explore and refine meaning, or as Cooke puts it involves "thinking out loud" (2001, p. 39). Cooke's

(2001) study of collaborative meta-learning approaches with primary school children in New Zealand found that collaborative exploratory activities were a crucial aspect to learning to learn. Successful collaboration requires learners to learn how to listen, to turn-take, to paraphrase and to encourage each other, all of which create the necessary climate that supports learners when learning to understand their learning. Similarly, Plummer's (2011) research on focus groups and their capacity to enhance conceptual understandings in social studies, found that collaboration was an effective way to enhance meta-cognitive skills because the secondary students supported each other's learning by modelling strategies, clarifying concepts, and making suggestions, as well as showing encouragement when learning. In this sense, when students collaborate during their learning, they learn *with* and *from* each other (Cooke, 2001) and, as a result, are able to actively construct new meanings from their learning.

It is suggested in the literature that effective collaborative learning may be linked to the formation of a group identity. Kriete (2003) argues that a group identity, typically developed through regular meetings and a common goal, can help learners feel like they belong to the group (sometimes termed community) and be supported in their learning. Plummer (2011) further claims that forming a group identity makes the biggest difference to student's learning because it elicits a supportive environment where members are more likely to give encouragement in relation to each other's learning. However, Reay (2006), in her work that involved consulting primary school students about the social conditions of learning, warned that "peer group cultures…[can sometimes] work against fairness, collegiality, and a sense of community in classrooms" (p. 171). Other studies report that students have said that they believe working in a group helps their learning because they reach a level of thinking which they could not have achieved alone (Cooke, 2001; Plummer, 2011). C. Robinson and Fielding (2010), in their report for the Cambridge Primary Review in the United Kingdom, found that primary school students believe collaborative learning and getting help from peers provides a sense of security in that knowing others supports their learning. Reporting from a student's perspective, it would appear that many students believe in the potential for collaborative learning to enhance their learning. Collaborative learning, and learning about one's own learning, requires learners to

explain their meaning-making to each other (C. Watkins et al., 2007). For this reason dialogue forms a significant part of research in this field.

### *2.1.3 Dialogue and learning*

Generating a higher degree of dialogue was found in the literature to be a key factor in understanding (or learning about) one's learning. Some sources claim that it is *only* through dialogue that students can come to understand their own learning (Fisher, 1998; Lodge, 2008a). Development of language and the articulation of ideas are central to Vygotsky's (1978) theory of learning development. Although words have 'object' meaning, they also have a meaning in context and, as such, social constructivist learning occurs when language is shared and meanings are built. Expressing already lived experiences and understandings provides a platform for learners to develop their thinking and reframe understandings (Cook-Sather, 2008).

Much research has been undertaken to examine the relationship between children's understanding of learning and the role of dialogue. Fisher (1998, 2009), an educationalist on teaching and learning and thinking, firmly believes that engaging in dialogue with students prior to, during and after their learning can help students to understand their thinking and hence learn how they learn. Fisher suggests that such dialogue needs to be democratic, which is to say, that it allows students to voice, choose, challenge, question and construct their own meanings. He explains:

> Because metacognition is about what the children themselves think it is not enough to tell them what they have previously learnt and what the learning objectives are; we need to help them to think and express these in their own words. (Fisher, 2009, p. 29)

Similarly, Lodge (2008a) advocates for the use of dialogue in the learning to learn process. She claims that when students share reflections with teachers, they develop deeper understandings of their own learning. To come to understand one's learning requires learners to therefore articulate their thoughts.

In the literature reviewed, many sources mentioned the lack of opportunities for children to engage in dialogue about their learning. Lodge (2008b), in a report for

the *International Network for School Improvement*, which focused on the student voice and learning-focused school improvement, claims that many students say "that they have never spoken about their learning in school before" (p. 8). Similarly, Carnell (2004) found that many children state that their classroom experiences do not include time for talking about learning. James et al. (2007), drawing on their work from the Teaching and Learning Research Programme in the United Kingdom, further suggest that unless learners articulate their thinking, they cannot become aware of it. C. Watkins et al. (2007) claim that this peculiar absence of conversations about learning is common to many schools, yet they also believe that talking about learning is every learner's entitlement. However, because talking about learning is a core element of their entire learning experience; students need to dialogue to learn about themselves as learners. It seems that children need experiences to dialogue, and teachers (and researchers in the case of my research) need to initiate learning conversations for children to begin to learn about their learning. However, engaging children in conversations is a different experience from that of engaging adults in conversations. The articulation of thoughts may not always come easily, particularly to young children, and it may require teachers to carefully consider how best to engage their dialogue.

*Engaging other resources to support dialoguing with children*

It is evident in the literature reviewed that for children to engage in dialogue activities, in order to understand (or learn about) their learning, requires using additional resources. Learning about one's learning involves reflection and many studies have found that children, of all ages and levels, find that their engagement is greater if physical materials are involved. Watson (2001) reasons that "[d]irect physical interaction with materials is often effective in enhancing pupil's thinking, especially as many do not spontaneously use verbalisation. Having physical materials may facilitate mental reasoning" (p. 141). Cooke (2001) uses the term "visual or graphic organisers" to explain the collaborative activities he uses such as using tables, charts, diagrams as a focus for primary school children's thinking about their learning. At secondary school level, the research of McDonald et al. (2011) on meta-cognition involved the use of a reflective journal, which both teachers and students would contribute to. The teachers in this research claimed it was essential for students to write as this was what elicited their thinking.

Similarly, Plummer (2011) utilised a learning notebook with secondary school students to encourage conversations (between students, their teacher and family members) on learning to stimulate meta-cognition. Other researchers report success in engaging primary school children's learning about their learning through the taking of photos of their learning (Lodge, 2008a), through drawing their learning experiences (Lodge, 2007), and board games and activities (Cooke, 2001). It seems that careful consideration needs to be given to the environment, both in the classroom and in research settings, before involving children in activities that engage them in dialogue. Including additional resources may significantly enhance their ability to dialogue and hence deepen their experience of learning about their learning.

### *2.1.4 Agency in learning*

An important part of learning about learning is that the learner is agentic and that this plays a key role in the 'coming to know' process. Agency is defined by D. Frost and Roberts (2011) as referring to "…the nature of human beings to initiate action in an intentional and self-aware sense" (p. 70). Social constructivist theory claims that learning requires a certain amount of agency for the learner to experience "[l]earning ... [as] an activity of making meaning – construction – not simply of receiving" (C. Watkins et al., 2007, p. 19).

The need for a high degree of agency during learning is an idea that stems from the work of Dewey (1916), who advocated that learners needed to be actively involved and connected to the learning process by dialoguing and formulating their ideas, which he claimed enhances the learning experience. Agency is also often discussed in the literature alongside participation, in relation to which Hart's (1997) concept of 'the ladder of participation' has become a prominent feature. Hart describes how initiatives range on a scale of low participatory actions (where decisions that are made by adults and children are then informed), leading to high participation activities that are child-initiated, (where children make and share decisions with adults). Children who participate at the highest level of decision-making are given greater opportunities for agency, which is an important part of effective learning. Ultimately, it is when learners can be active agents that they develop responsibility for their learning; something that fosters the disposition necessary to be a life-long learner.

In social constructivist learning, agency is a significant factor in the learning process. Social constructivism (see Section 2.1.1 of this chapter for further explanation) views the learner at the centre of the learning process. While the mediating actions of the teacher are important, it is only through internalisation and actively making meaning that the learner extends what they know (Fleer, 2010). This places a significant amount of onus on the learner to 'own' their learning. Yet for children in classrooms, this becomes an issue of availability of opportunities to do so. When Lee (2006) researched students' articulated views on what makes their learning powerful, children told her that they wanted more agency in their learning, to make choices about what they learn and who they learn with, and how they learn best. However, opportunities for agency may not always be readily accepted by students. Research shows that some students interpret agency as being reflective of there being a lack of structure (Cahill, 2007) and within a school context, some respond with suspicion, dismay and contempt when asked to take responsibility for their learning (Hyde, 1992). These findings suggest that simply providing opportunities for agency may not be enough, but that mediating strategies are necessary if children are to claim their role as agentic learners.

A significant amount of literature and research on teaching and learning claims benefits of agency in the learning process. For example, Boomer (1992) claims that allowing opportunities for agency in negotiating the curriculum with students leads to increased student investment in both the learning journey and learning outcomes. Similarly, Kroeger et al. (2004) found in their research involving activities that re-engage at-risk children, that agency within the initiative led to increased participation and as well as to better academic performance. Demetriou and Wilson (2010) claim that when students in their research have agency to consult on their learning, they feel respected and taken seriously. Furthermore, they know their views are having an impact on the pedagogy and the school, they feel more confident to talk about their learning and how it might be improved, and what is more, they have a general feeling of positivity towards their learning, because their ideas are involved in creating the purpose of learning. However, research on student perspectives that does not include their teachers in the process may not always bring about a sense of agency for children. Reay's (2006) research found that students were happy to talk to researchers about their learning

but were not comfortable sharing these same views with their teachers. Interestingly, the children were happy for the researchers to act on their behalf and communicate with their teachers for them. Allowing opportunities for agency in research may not always mean that children can transfer their sense of agency to their learning in classrooms.

Despite this understanding that agency is an essential part of effective learning, not many opportunities exist for students to be agents in their own learning, according to Cook-Sather (2006) , and research has found that many students still perceive that their opinions are ignored (D. Frost, Frost, R., MacBeath, & Pedder, 2009). It is important that children have agency in the process of coming to understand their learning and that they become "…authors of their own understandings" (Cook-Sather, 2006, p. 365). The corollary to this is that any interventions in children's learning may be enhanced if they have a high level of agentic learning.

Agentic learners who take responsibility for their learning and are self-motivated may be more likely to enjoy the process. The enjoyment of learning features heavily in the literature on children's learning.

### *2.1.5 Enjoying learning*

A frequently reported finding in the literature on children's learning is that there is a significant connection between enjoyment and effective learning. This comes both from adult observations and from the voices of children themselves. Teachers have reported that using humour and playfulness in their teaching helps engage tertiary students. Younger children enjoy humour and become more engaged when their learning was based on their own interests (for example pets) (Kroeger et al., 2004). Researchers have noted that introducing surprise or fun can also help students to focus (Bland, Carrington, & Brady, 2009). As Blackman (2011) found, children are not just "stoic characters that visit classrooms: they want to enjoy what they are learning" (p. 184). Lee's (2006) research found that primary school children believed that 'having fun' was a necessary component of effective and powerful learning. Lee (2006) interpreted the word 'fun' as referring to children's sense of enjoyment in their learning experiences. Claxton (2007) claims that when children enjoy their learning, they find learning easier and more effective. Csikszentmihalyi's (1997) work on 'flow' suggests that when children

describe ‘fun’ or enjoyment in learning, they may not just be experiencing a particular type of happiness but may be experiencing a sense of “effortless action” or “being in the zone” (p. 46). He explains that being in the zone or ‘flow’ requires working towards set goals and involves a certain amount of challenge, which is not to say that people are not internally motivated. What they would appear to be doing is connecting with external experience as something that they personally enjoy and that leads to a growth in consciousness. This idea is reiterated by a student in Lee’s research, when he speaks about requiring ‘fun’ in his learning.

> [I]t’s not just the going outside type fun which is what most adults think. It needs to give us enough challenge that we have to work quite hard, but enough laughs that we can enjoy it too – Year 7 boy, 13 years. (Lee, 2006, p. 8)

Enjoyment in learning is therefore not a ‘nice addition’ to learning but in fact is essential to effective learning. However, White (2013) points out that it is not always easy for teachers to understand their role in relation to children’s humour. Her analysis suggests that laughter can often be misinterpreted, dismissed or perhaps even forbidden by teachers who fail to appreciate its significance for learning.

### *2.1.6 Developing an identity as a learner*

A scope of the literature on learning found a small amount of attention given to the idea of developing a learner identity, despite the claims of C. Robinson and Fielding (2010) that this phenomenon may play a significant role in developing children’s understanding of their role in their own learning process. A definition of learner identity was not clearly articulated in the literature. Some spoke of it as a generic capacity to understand the role a student should play in one’s learning while others referred to it as being specific to the individual learner. C. Robinson and Fielding (2010) speak of learner identity as the capacity to take more independence, responsibility and agency through decision-making in their learning, while James et al. (2007) claim that “those with self-awareness learn better” (p. 18). Other educationalists and practitioners (Prashing, 2006) have tried to form more personalised understandings of the term learner identity, for

example by theorizing learning styles. Learning style theories purport that all learners have individualised ways of learning, some superior to others, and that understanding the ways one learns can help learners to form an identity specific to their individual learning style (Prashing, 2006). However, a recent study of learning styles has highlighted some serious theoretical and practical issues, which claim that the identification of a learning style uses unreliable methods to assess that which makes it possible to say that there is a learning style (Coffield et al., 2004). Coffield et al. suggest that the idea of teachers trying to cater for different learning styles is not realistic in classrooms. C. Watkins et al. (2007) who discuss how identifying a learning style can sometimes leave learners feeling stuck with a particular identity, say that typically children's own views of learning remain the same; i.e., that their learning still requires a teacher. Identifying a learner's learning style may provide a learner with an identity but, according to this view, this does not necessarily help the learner take ownership of their learning or understand the importance of their role in their own learning.

Understanding one's role in one's own learning is important to effective learning. C. Watkins et al. (2007) reports on learning about learning that some children's perceptions of learning often do not identify the learning process and that these children tend to perceive learning as something outside of themselves. For example, Duffield, Allan, Turner and Morris (2000) found that students perceive school work as fixed content in which they simply had to memorise the answers. Similarly, C. Watkins et al. (2007), claim that many children understand learning as a transmission model, where the teacher imparts information and children are the recipients. Other studies report that children do not see the immediate use of learning, but perceive it as preparation for the workforce (C. Robinson & Fielding, 2010). The ways that learners perceive learning has a direct effect on their learning, as does the way they go about learning (Entwistle, 2000). It appears that developing a learner identity may indeed help children to realise their role in their learning.

While a learning style identity may present some issues, the idea of developing a learner identity is nevertheless important to understand one's role in learning. Cook-Sather (2008) describes her understanding of a learner identity as a process of coming to know one's self and that "learners bring complex, attenuated identities to their educational experiences" (p. 241) and that learning may not be

about change necessarily but about "reaffirming, deepening, strengthening what one already knows and believes" (p. 242). This of course would only be helpful to one who perceives their learner identity to be a positive one.

Perceptions of one's self is a significant aspect of one's relationship with learning. Children's perceptions of themselves as learners significantly affect their engagement with learning (C. Robinson & Fielding, 2010). Several studies report on the important relationship that exists between students' beliefs about themselves as learners and their achievement in their learning (Bassi et al., 2007; Dahl, Bals, & Turi, 2005; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; McDonald et al., 2011; Pentecost & Dickie, 2011). Basi, Steca, Delle Fave and Caprara (2007) found in their study on academic self-efficacy beliefs and learning, that adolescent students who positively believe in their learning abilities are not only more motivated to learn but actually perform better. In contrast, students with low self-efficacy beliefs associate learning with anxiety and show apathy and disengagement with the learning. Other research suggests that this may be because students believe that their learning is 'fixed' (Dahl et al., 2005; Dweck & Leggett, 1988), therefore perhaps resulting in a lack confidence to try. It is apparent from these studies that some children create learner identities that may not always involve perceiving themselves in a positive light. D. Roberts (2010) has indicated that increasing one's confidence is a significant factor in their engagement in successful learning activities; learning to learn needs to be learner specific. He claimed that:

> Many negative experiences of education are a result of individuals not knowing how they learn most effectively. Giving students skills to be independent learners can help them develop their learning in a way that is right for them. (p. 19)

Dutro and Selland's (2012) research on children's perspectives on high stakes testing reports that there is a link between children's perceptions of test scores and their assumptions about their competence; children believe testing is used primarily to judge their learning and performance. Moreover, the children did the judging on themselves. The labels that children place on themselves as learners, created from their socially constructed understandings of themselves, can significantly affect their learning experiences. It is therefore important to understand the perceptions children have of themselves as learners. If adults want

to help children to learn about their learning, they may need to work to shift negative learner identities which affect the learning experience.

There is an indication in the literature that developing a positive learner identity may strengthen the learning experience. Developing positive perceptions is typical of a strengths-based approach to learning. Strengths-based approaches contrast with traditional change efforts, which traditionally involve identifying a problem and introducing new techniques and skills. Instead, strengths-based approaches require a fundamental shift in the way one sees and thinks about the world and people in it, from noticing the deficits to focusing on strengths (Blundo, 2001). Typical strengths-based models involve: (1) identification of talents, (2) integrating talents into one's self-view and (3), actively seeking out ways to use their talents such that their use will lead to growth (Lask, 2010). Teachers who use strengths-based approaches in their classrooms claim that noticing student's strengths, instead of deficits, results in an enhanced learner identity (Haines, 2011) and furthermore, paves the way for success in learning which "leads to confidence, motivation, participation, and more success" (Hawthorne, 2009, p. 7). What's important is that the perceptions learners have of themselves is an important consideration in the learning experience and this identifies the need for teachers (and researchers in the case of my research), to access these perceptions to better understand children's relationship with their learning. This also suggests that using strengths-based approaches to developing a learner identity, or to come to know one's self as a learner, can lead to learners creating a positive learner identity.

Coming to understand one's own learning and one's self as a learner, through collaboration, dialogue, agency and identity lies at the heart of this research investigation into AI with children. In the section that follows, I will examine the literature that underpins the specific approach of AI as a mediating strategy for supporting children to understand (or learn about) their learning. In doing so, I set the scene for the research that follows.

## 2.2 Learning through Appreciative Inquiry

### *2.2.1 Introduction to Appreciative Inquiry*

Appreciative Inquiry is an approach to change that, unlike problem-solving methods, has a strengths-based philosophy and practice (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). In practice, AI is a method for finding strengths or best-of moments in people and organisations, and then developing a vision for how to use these strengths to inform future practice. As a theory, AI works like a lens that incorporates principles, perspectives and beliefs about how people and organisations function. In theory, the term 'appreciate' has two meanings which Whitney and Trosten-Bloom (2003) describe as "the act of recognition and the act of enhancing" (p. 2). To appreciate something is to notice the 'best of it' or things that 'give it life' and appreciate also means to increase in value. Whitney and Trosten-Bloom describe the term 'inquiry' as "the acts of exploration and discovery" (p. 3), which implies a willingness to ask questions and learn.

The linking of these two notions, appreciate and inquiry, was configured by Dr David Cooperrider and colleagues, at Case Western University, in the 1990s, as a strengths-based method for change in organisational development (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003). Together, *appreciation* and *inquiry* work on the premise that within every person or group of people something 'works' and when the focus of an inquiry is on these already existing attributes, then this creates exciting, motivational and transformative change. This belief contrasts with more traditional problem-solving views to creating change, that commonly focus on problems, deficits and needs. Instead, AI works on the belief that the type of questions we ask and what we inquire into will determine the kind of things that we find, and furthermore that these discoveries become the 'linguistic material, the stories, out of which the future is conceived, conversed about, and constructed" (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2000, p. 18). Articulating what it is people *do* want, instead of focusing on negatives, works towards "changing the inner dialogue" (Bushe, 1998) and this generates movement towards desired futures.

The literature on AI claims that AI is a process that revolutionises the way people think about initiatives for change in many different contexts (Cooperrider, 2008). Appreciative Inquiry is most commonly used within organisational development (Bushe, 1998; Cooperrider, Sorenson, Whitney, & Yaeger, 2000; M. Watkins &

Mohr, 2001) which is seen in areas of health (Reed, Pearson, Douglas, Swinburne, & Wilding, 2002), professional practice (Chapman & Giles, 2009), leadership (Walker & Carr-Stewart, 2004), adult education (Giles & Alderson, 2008), social work (Morsillo & Fisher, 2007), school improvement (Torres & Weisenberger, 2012), teaching and learning (Eow, Wan Zah, Rosnaini, & Roselan, 2010; C. Watkins et al., 2007), and as a research method and methodology (Grant, 2006; San Martin & Calabrese, 2011). More recently, AI has emerged as a coaching tool for personal development and individual transformation (Bennett & James, 2011). It is this last area, personal development, that defines the origination of the focus in my research; a feature of my research that will be addressed later in the chapter.

### *2.2.2 The method of Appreciative Inquiry*

As a method, AI has received a great deal of attention. What differentiates AI from other change methodologies is that its design is based on visions that have arisen from strengths that already exist, rather than simply from wishful thinking. While the theory of Appreciative Inquiry has produced a number of similar methods, many of which are still evolving, I will describe the most common approach. The original and most common AI model typically follows a 4 step sequence (referred to as the 4-D model, see Appendix I) of *Discovery*, *Dream*, *Design and Destiny* (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2000). Firstly though, it is important to decide on and define the topic of focus. The choice of topic is paramount because AI aligns to a heliotropic theory that "human systems grow in the direction of their deepest and most frequent inquiries" (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2000, p. 9). Topics therefore need to be life affirming, and not focused on problems or deficits. Using a constructivist lens, the topic is based on what people already know exists, how they construct new meanings using a positive lens, and leads to positive change.

Next, the 4-D sequential stages of the AI follow. As described by Cooperrider and Whitney (2000), the first stage, *Discovery*, involves reflecting on best-of moments or strengths of the chosen topic and discovering what gives it 'life'. This is facilitated by dialogue between members of the group. The second stage is *Dream* which involves envisioning a future of positive possibilities where these moments of strengths are magnified. This sets the stage for possibilities to occur. Third, the *Design* Stage requires participants to create statements that capture the *essence* of

what gives life to these 'best of' moments, which are written in the present tense. The fourth stage is referred to by leaders in the field as *Destiny* (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Starvros, 2008), although elsewhere, particularly in Australian literature, the original term used is *Delivery* (Bennett & James, 2011). This is essentially a process of creating an action plan for how to amplify the new design statements in future practice. Researchers claim that due to the positive energy that has been created, the "momentum and potential for innovation is extremely high by this stage of the inquiry" (M. Watkins & Mohr, 2001, p. 45).

### *2.2.3 The theoretical principles of Appreciative Inquiry*

Appreciative Inquiry theory rests on eight prominent principles (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003). In my research, these principles were incorporated alongside a social constructivist theory. Each principle will now be introduced and discussed as it relates to my research project, and in particular, to children learning about their learning.

*Constructionist principle*

The constructionist principle (see Chapter 3.3 for a rationale for using social constructivism as a theoretical framework for this research) of AI states that knowledge is not objective nor individualistic but resides within relationships, and is built through the use of language, dialogue and discourses which create reality (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2000). The constructionist principle refers to an understanding that learners make connections between prior knowledge and new experiences. Participants in this research therefore needed opportunities to inquire into areas of their learning that they had perhaps never given thought to before and construct new understandings of their learning.

*Simultaneity principle*

The simultaneity principle rests on the belief that inquiry and change are simultaneous occurrences, therefore inquiry is an intervention (M. Watkins & Mohr, 2001). Whatever the focus of the inquiry is, will also be the area of change. According to this principle, the focus of inquiry needs to be on possibilities and not problems, if the outcome of positive change is desired. This principle required participants in my research to inquire into their strengths as learners. It is this very process that shifts the learners' perceptions of themselves towards this focus of change.

*The free choice principle*

The free choice principle rests on the belief that when people experience autonomy, they also experience more commitment and perform better (Preskill & Catsambas, 2006). It is recommended that the environment of an AI is democratic in nature and that people can choose their level of participation (Bennett & James, 2011).

*Poetic Principle*

It is useful to use a metaphor from a poem to suggest that an organisation is constantly being interpreted and reinterpreted by each member (Bennett & James, 2011). Whether their collective thoughts of the organisation (or interpretation of the poem) are focused on the critical (negative) or focused on the positive will determine for them the reality of that organisation. Whitney and Trosten-Bloom (2003) suggest that the images we hold in our minds, together with the stories that others share, create reality. Therefore the poetic principle invites a re-consideration of past images and stories. This suggests that for the participants in this research, their perceptions of themselves as learners (their stories of reality) had the potential to be re-written with new possibilities.

*Anticipatory Principle*

Bushe (2010) claimed that the images that we hold both anticipate and inform our behaviour. In other words, what we think about is what creates our future. More so, this principle rests on the belief that when collective images combine, the energy and drive for change is magnified. This suggests that as a meta-learning intervention, AI needs to include a social aspect, which links to Section 2.1.2 of this Chapter on collaborative learning. Appreciative Inquiry may work as a reflective tool for individual learning but this principle leads to the belief that as a meta-learning intervention, a social setting may create more energy for change.

*Positive principle*

The ease with which humans focus on deficit based thinking has led researchers and practitioners of AI to notice how influential the orientation of our thinking can be on desired outcomes. Building momentum for great change requires large amounts of life affirming and positive affects (Cooperrider et al., 2008; M. Watkins & Mohr, 2001). According to M. Watkins and Mohr (2001), positivity for example, hope inspiration, and joy and achievement may create a longer

lasting momentum for change (Bennett & James, 2011; M. Watkins & Mohr, 2001).

*The wholeness principle*

Preskill and Catsambas (2006) explain the wholeness principle as including whole groups of people that bring a collective capacity. Similarly, Bennett and James (2011) explain that the wholeness principle embraces a diversity and rests on the belief that the collective differences in world views are sometimes necessary for people to shift, challenge and refine their own beliefs. The term wholeness encompasses the diversity of life. In an AI there are diverse, even contrasting opinions, thoughts and realities but it is precisely this collective capacity that brings about transformative change and, furthermore, that bring about the emergence of new understandings of our learning.

*The enactment principle*

This principle is based on the psychological concept of 'acting as if'. In other words, the idea that believing and speaking as if change has already happened can be a self-fulfilling process (Bennett & James, 2011). Eow (2010) suggests that this principle should help students to feel in control of their learning because they can vision that their experience of the future is an experience of the present. The implications of this principle for this research project highlighted the need to facilitate dialogue that used language that oriented students towards the present.

### *2.2.5 Appreciative Inquiry with children and young people*

Scoping the literature on AI involving children revealed few academic studies (Eow et al., 2010; Morsillo & Fisher, 2007; San Martin & Calabrese, 2011). These studies have been used in relation to the learning of teenagers and not in relation to the learning of primary school children. Despite this, websites such as AI Commons (http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/) indicate that doing AI with children is gaining in popularity internationally. Some of the projects listed on this website include: change efforts in schools (Torres & Weisenberger, 2012), civic engagement (Cooperrider, 2000), and youth work (Evans, 2003).

From the literature reviewed, academic research using AI with youth has predominantly involved creating change through collaborative efforts, and has not been used in an individual approach to personal development. Despite this, studies

claim that collaborative efforts lead to individual benefits. For example, Morsillo and Fisher's (2007) AI project engaged potentially marginalised year-10 students in Melbourne, Australia, in community projects of the students' choice. The project aimed to offer young people an opportunity to "explore ways to make a meaningful contribution to their local community and experience an enhanced sense of community connectedness" (Morsillo & Fisher, 2007, p. 50). Findings indicated that although the project required a more flexible approach to the formal AI structure, there were benefits to individuals;

> Each member … can feel appreciated and valued for their opinion and can participate in visioning exercises and in new initiatives to improve the particular environment within … a wider community, for mutual benefit. (Morsillo & Fisher, 2007, p. 57).

The researchers also suggested that these feelings of appreciation and value contributed to a sense of empowerment and that therefore AI could be a useful method used for a variety of purposes.

More recently, research has been done that suggests AI may be useful in informing teacher pedagogy. Eow, Wan Zah, Rosnaini and Roselan (2010) used the theory and practice model to implement AI in a Malaysian high school for students in a digital technology class. The purpose was to enhance students' creativity and exploration of new ideas, as well as using AI as a fundamental base for students to have voice, and for teachers to hear and take action on student's ideas. Interestingly, these researchers, like Morsillo and Fisher (2007) noted above, also recommended that when AI is used with young people, the 4-D approach must be flexible. The process of learning is not linear, therefore neither should an approach to exploring how to improve learning be linear.

Similar conclusions were reached by San Martin and Calabrese (2011) as a result of their research on empowering at-risk students through AI involving students engaging in the first two stages of AI (Discovery and Dream). The aim was for students to identify how they learn best and for these findings to influence teacher pedagogy. The study revealed four main findings: "that relevant experiences were important for learning; that a cooperative and respectful learning environment is a core value; that learning should be enjoyable; and the concept of family became a

useful metaphor" (p. 110). Their AI intervention provided an opportunity for the students to feel empowered because when they presented their learning outcomes (their findings of how they learn best) and recommendations for future teaching practice to their teachers, credence was given. This research used AI as a platform to engage students, yet it was the dissemination or space for agency that provided opportunities for empowerment. Choosing a methodology that is inclusive of children's agency is therefore important in AI interventions. A link can be made here to social constructivist learning approaches (as discussed in an earlier Section 2.1.1), which claim that agency in the learning process is an important factor in internalising learning. The dearth of academic research studies using AI with primary school children signifies a gap in the literature on using AI as meta-learning activity, for individual reflection to understand one's own learning.

Despite a strong emphasis in the literature on the necessity for AI projects to utilise the 4-D method, my search of the literature has found that some projects may not necessarily need to use this method, yet still experience benefits. Examples of work that use appreciative inquiry theory, and not necessarily the 4-D method are Glasser's (2006) AI project for her school, where she worked as a teacher, collating children's stories into a published book that sparked appreciative outcomes for the community, and Evan's (2003) work engaging youth and adults to co-construct school and youth community projects, encouraging the incorporation of appreciative values throughout neighbouring schools. Glasser's and Evan's projects above both report positive outcomes for organisations as well as individual benefits from utilising an AI theory. What is apparent is that the way AI is utilised may not be as important to the outcome as ensuring that the underlying principles of AI are present in the social interactions. the need to adhere to a structured AI method is one of the many criticisms of AI. These critiques will now be discussed.

### *2.2.4 A critique of Appreciative Inquiry*

The AI 4-D method has been critiqued for being too rigid in design (Eow et al., 2010) particularly when used with students in the classroom. Researcher practitioners Eow et al. (2010) found that, in their AI work with students in a technology class, the sequential stages of AI did not seem to 'fit' with the unpredictable nature of learning. They suggest that a more flexible approach when

using AI, where students can move between stages, suited the nature of "active, authentic and experiential learning" (p.612). Designing AI projects with children requires additional considerations to those that one would need to incorporate when working with adults. The formal AI method may not be suitable. As my research focused on using AI to help children understand their learning, it was important that they had agentic opportunities to share their new understandings and affect change in their learning. The implementation of the 4-D method of AI in this research project needed to be flexible in design when working with children. I was also mindful to be flexible in how I engaged with the children in higher order thinking (see Section 2.1.3 of this chapter) and also in the envisioning activities required when doing an AI.

Although AI has been claimed to be a useful approach to create positive change, several writers have significant criticisms. The most prominent critique is that AI does not address the problems, concerns or issues that humans naturally experience. Through over enhancing the 'positive' and 'glossing over the problems', Bushe (1998) suggests that AI can leave participants unsatisfied with the process and outcome of project. In defence of this criticism (see for example Preksill and Catsambas (2006)), it is suggested that any problems that are, inevitably, raised are strategically reframed with language that focuses on stories of hope as the basis of exploration. Advocates of AI claim that these stories of hope produce positive transformations.

There have also been criticisms of a lack of understanding around this 'positive' focus of AI. Bushe (2007) discusses his frustration with the rapid rise in interest in AI and the formation of thinking that is blinded by 'all that is positive'. Although focusing on the positive is life-affirming, Bushe claims that sometimes, if facilitated well, 'negative' type concerns can in fact bring greater generation of change in an AI. It is this generative notion that lies at the core of AI. It is when people participate in dialogue that they embrace the whole of experience (which refers to the wholeness principle discussed earlier), and which naturally includes any 'negative' thoughts, and allowing these to be generative of positive change.

A critique of AI as a research methodology is discussed in Chapter 3.5.

## Summary

This review of literature has explored the conceptual framework of this thesis, which comprises a theoretical configuration of meta-learning (or learning about learning), social constructivist learning and AI. Meta-learning, or understanding how one learns, can help children to become better learners. Key factors significant to the process of children understanding their own learning were identified as collaborative learning, dialogue, agency, enjoyment and developing a learner identity. It is clear in the literature that children's perceptions of learning and themselves as learners plays a significant role in the learning process.

Appreciative Inquiry was explored as a theory and method for creating change which shifts negative views of how to approach change. Much research has been done using AI as a collaborative way to create positive organisational change, yet it is the individual approach to personal development, to reframe any negative perceptions and find personal best-of moments in learning, that is of particular relevance to my research. AI, as a process of reflecting, noticing, dialoguing and re-creating new perceptions shares similarities with many meta-learning activities. However, little research has been done, particularly with children, on how effective AI is as a way to help children to understand their learning and themselves as learners. The literature highlighted that children's perceptions of learning and themselves as learners is such an important part of the meta-learning process, therefore it is important to understand their perceptions, as a basis for the AI to begin, and also to ascertain if and what kinds of shifts in their perceptions occur. Additionally, with little research using AI with children it is important to access the children's perspectives on what they believe to be important factors in their AI experience that help them better understand their learning.

Having the children's perspectives on such an intervention was an important consideration that formed the basis of my inquiry, which I outline in the chapter that follows.

# CHAPTER 3

# Research Design

***Introduction:***

This research project involved the investigation of the effectiveness of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) as an approach to helping children to understand their learning. A small group (4 participants) of 10 year olds from a primary school in the Eastern Bay of Plenty were selected to be involved in a seven week programme which involved them in working with me to develop, implement, and evaluate an AI into their learning. An action research methodology was employed to allow both the children and myself to co-generate the AI intervention, and evaluate the findings with the aim to provide an opportunity for the children's agency to create change in their learning. Furthermore it was an aim to access rich accounts of the student's perceptions and experiences of learning and to investigate the potential of AI as an intervention that might help children learn about their learning and themselves as learners. Research questions and sub-questions were formulated in order to facilitate and the meet of these research aims. The research question and sub-questions are:

How effective is AI at helping children to understand their learning?

- What are children's understandings and perceptions of learning and themselves as learners prior to and following the AI intervention?
- What are the significant factors when doing an AI with children into their learning?

In the following sections of this Chapter I discuss the research methodology and explain my theoretical approach to the research. I outline the ethical considerations and relate these specifically to research done with children, with reference to my inclusion as a reflexive researcher. I describe the data collection methods and analysis chosen to best fit my research questions as means of entering the research field and I show the trustworthiness of the research. Lastly, I introduce the research context, outline the criteria for participation, introduce the

participating children and provide an outline of the three phases of the action research itself.

## 3.1 Methodology for research

The journey of research, from the conception of the research questions through to my conclusions, required decisions to be made at every step of the path. How I approached this journey and made these, often difficult, decisions reflects my personal ontological and epistemological view of the world. My ontological assumptions concern the nature of what exists in the social world and whether social reality is "…external to individuals…or [whether it is] the product of individual consciousness?" (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000, p. 5). In this research, I assumed that each participant's reality was a construct of their own world and hence a subjective reality. My epistemological assumptions refer to what is acceptable knowledge and how this knowledge is created (Thomas, 2009) and communicated to others (Cohen et al., 2000). Furthermore, I assumed that the participant's knowledge about learning was subjective and constructed from their understandings and perceptions. I sought to access these understandings and perceptions of children's learning and their experiences of the AI intervention as I hope that this would enable me to address me research question by drawing from the perspectives of the children themselves.

## 3.2 Qualitative research

Gathering perceptions is a research approach that typically comes under a qualitative research paradigm. Conversely, collecting facts and seeking scientific truths and knowledge via numerical and classification is typical of a quantitative research paradigm (Burns, 2000). These two contrasting approaches to building an understanding of the social world place different and opposing values on research. Quantitative researchers, whilst believing in an external ontology value conclusions or truths that contain validity and generalizability (Bell, 2010) and many researchers working with this approach criticise qualitative research for its lack of these aspects. However, qualitative researchers argue that the purpose of research is to reveal "subjective, experiential 'life world' of human beings" (Burns, 2000, p. 11), which can only be achieved by researchers becoming involved in the lives of their subjects, rather than through objectification that

relies upon numbers and classifying systems. I felt it was important that this research project should be positioned in a qualitative research paradigm because i) this allow me to undertake fieldwork that was flexible in nature, as it is impossible to predict what will happen when working with children (Mansell, 2009), and ii) because this approach allowed me to use methods that would enable me to gather children's experiences as accurately as possible to their own understandings of their experiences.

Within each of these two paradigms lie many individual theoretical viewpoints (often confusingly called paradigms themselves), which comprise a "loose collection of logically related assumptions, concepts, or propositions that orient thinking and research" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 24). Three of the more traditional paradigms are described as: the Positivist paradigm, which is a scientific method based on rationalistic and deterministic philosophy (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006), the Interpretive/Constructivist paradigm, which involves doing research with the intention of understanding human experience (Cohen et al., 2000) and the Critical paradigm, which is an approach to research that aims to fulfil emancipatory purposes (Basit, 2010). The research for this study aims to explore students' experiences of understanding their learning, and is therefore situated within an Interpretive/Constructivist paradigm.

## 3.3 Social Constructivism

It is an epistemological assumption within the Interpretive/Constructivist that understandings of new learning from participants (including myself as a reflexive researcher) are arrived at through interaction with each other in our social worlds. It is important to explain that AI is underpinned by social constructionist theory and claims that "meaning is made in conversation, reality is created in communication, and knowledge is a subjective reality – a social artifact resulting from communication among groups of people" (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003, p. 53). In social constructionism the focus is on the artifacts. Social constructivism, while similar is used in a distinctly different way in this research in that it focuses on the children's learning that occurs because of their individual interactions within the group (Liu & Matthews, 2005). It is important in my research not only to investigate *what* new understandings and perceptions the children have but to investigate *how* they arrived at these understandings and

perceptions. As such, the methodology for this research is underpinned by social constructivist theory.

Central to social constructivist theory is the role of "social collectivity" in learning and development (Liu & Matthews, 2005, p. 391). The belief is that culture and context are integral to and influence one's understanding of society and the construction of knowledge based on this understanding. Culture and context also influence how people communicate and interact with each other but these ideas are shaped by the personal experiences and meanings that people bring to the situation (Watson, 2001). This way, people both influence and are influenced by the learning context. This incorporation of the personal into the learning experience is a prime tenet of Vygotsky's Theory of Learning (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky believed that a child's development happens on two planes: first, on the social plane and, then, on the psychological plane. From this standpoint, although learning happens from social interaction it must also affect individual consciousness as a consequence. The research methods employed in this research included both personal and social aspect of learning.

The AI intervention involved the participants in thinking about and sharing their understandings of their learning; while as the facilitator I introduced the AI method as a mediating strategy for the learning process and building upon prior understandings, resulting in new personal meanings. During this collective process, termed intersubjectivity (Fleer, 2010; Watson, 2001), the children shaped their own meanings. Because one of the aims of this research is to access, interpret and understand the new meanings of the participants' learning, Vygotsky's theory was used to inform the aims of my research agenda.

The social constructivist theoretical viewpoint that underpins the methodology required a research design that would actively and respectfully access perspectives. It was also my intention to empower the participants in the process. Therefore, an action research design was chosen as a vehicle for empowerment, as the following section explains.

## 3.4 Action research

Action Research as a method has many conceptions and applications, and while there is no universal definition, it is often referred to using seminal author Lewin's (1946) description of a cyclical process of identifying a problem, implementing a strategy of resolution, reflecting on the process and using new understandings to inform the next strategy (Bargal, 2006). In this research project, I have used Kemmis and Carr's (1986) explanation of action research as an inquiry into a social situation, that involves both collective and self-reflection, with the intention of deepening understandings and improving the situation. Unlike empirical research which studies *what* is happening in a situation, action research seeks to investigate how things are happening and engages with the perspectives of those who are directly involved (Stringer, 2007). In Stringer's (2007) preface to his book Action Research, he comments:

> …when practitioners remain locked into their own perceptions and interpretations of the situation, they fail to take into account the varied worldviews and life experiences of the people with whom they work. (p. xv)

He further explained that in action research it is the researcher's role to facilitate people's inquiry, and work *with* them to create change. Although not a practitioner at the time in which I did my research, I wanted, as a researcher, to include the perspectives of the children so that they might inform the AI intervention. By using action research as a methodology the children involved could bring about changes in their learning experiences.

Action research is described as co-generative in nature (Grant, 2006) because it allows participants to express their involvement and to have an active role in the data generation. In my project, the focus was on children working with me as a group to design the intervention (see Appendix J for an explanation). Including the children's input allowed for the sessions to run in a way that *they thought* would be suitable to their learning needs. Lewin (1946), recognised the importance of evaluations at the end of an intervention, in that these evaluations are what influence any further change and suggest alternatives to improve the intervention. This aspect of action research involves a respect for children's evaluations to inform the shaping of my recommendations. In this way, research

was done *with* and not *on* participants (Reason & Bradbury, 2006). I believe that the children's perspectives and contributions were crucial towards answering the research question: "How effective is AI at helping children to understand their learning?"

Action research also allowed for the use of flexible methods to generate data, which is a respectful method to use when research involves children. Researching with children is discussed in a later section in this chapter (see Section 3.7). Action research was also chosen as a method because it invites reflexivity that informs the research the process (Cohen et al., 2000). How I *approached change* was an important aspect of the research and this forms the basis of my research framework.

## 3.5 Appreciative Inquiry within an Action Research Framework

Within the action research framework, I investigated AI as an intervention. AI is also a method for change but utilises a distinctly different framework and premise. Although both methods have the similar objective of creating significant change within people and organisations, these methods are often juxtaposed in the literature. According to Kemmis and Carr (1986), the action research process begins with the identification of a problem that needs solving. Conversely, AI begins with the activity of discovering "what is working". Hence, the focus of action research is on solving the problem while the focus of AI is on the positive possibilities of the topic of focus. While the process of action research involves continually reflecting on the problem and the formation of problem solving strategies to ascertain if the problem has been solved, AI continually focuses on the generative nature of the positive aspects of the topic of focus and works to magnify their effects. The fundamental difference between these two methods of change is the way in which the people or situation being researched is viewed; either as a problem needing to be solved or by focusing on the positive things and what works (Egan & Lancaster, 2005). While both methods claim to create change, each approach uses a different purpose.

Researching one method for change (AI) under the framework of another (action research) may seem at first glance to be unnecessary and confusing. The reason that I have used action research as a method is provide a reflective stance when addressing the findings. Recent research has indicated that AI as a research

methodology is not critical enough and calls for an approach termed 'Critical Appreciative Inquiry" (Grant & Humphries, 2006). Similarly, other researchers discuss an integration of AI and action research as a methodology to allow for a positive focus yet also critical feedback in the evaluation process (Egan & Lancaster, 2005). However, I chose action research instead because it allowed me to focus on the children's learning process and facilitate children in being able to make individual shifts in their own learning and also to disseminate their 'findings' or outcomes from the AI, by putting the action in the research. It was thought that this could then facilitate the infiltration of new understandings of learning into their classrooms and in conversations that they have with their teachers. I also believed that using action research would allow for the benefits of the research to not only influence those involved (the researcher and participants), but also to reach a far wider audience. However, the findings indicate that my intentions did not go as planned (see Chapter 5.2.1 and also Appendix J for an explanation). Researching with children required careful considerations of power dynamics and restrictions of ethical guidelines.

## 3.6 Ethical considerations

Ethical guidelines set by the University of Waikato Ethics Committee were addressed in the major ethics application and permission was granted in May 2012. Ethical considerations involved paying particular attention to researching with children and this informed every aspect of the research design rather than being done just for decoration or for what Alderson (2004) described as to put the "cherry on the cake" (p. 102). These issues will be explained in the following section.

### *3.6.1 Gaining access to the participants*

Best practice approaches for accessing young people firstly required negotiating with the stakeholders (Board of Trustees, principals, teachers) and explaining by letter (see Appendix A) the detail and the purpose, process and intended outcomes of the research (Masson, 2004). I provided a police check (France, 2004), and demonstrated the procedures in place to ensure the children's safety and well-being. After gaining consent I issued an invitation and information letter to parents (see Appendix B), and a leaflet to the children (see Appendix C) to invite discussion. I held a meeting with the children to introduce myself and explain

what their participation would entail. The following section explains how I ensured that the consent that children gave was informed consent.

### *3.6.2 Informed consent*

Gaining informed consent from the 10-year-old students involved shaping my explanation of the research in such a way that they could understand what their participation would entail. I designed an information A5 leaflet (see Appendix C) that included pictures, used a large font and bright colours, and used language to explain the research in ways they could understand without my having to patronize them or "talk down to them" (Kellett & Ding, 2004, p. 165). The children had time to consider and discuss this information with their parents and teachers. I held a meeting prior to beginning my research project so that the children could meet me. The group of children I trialled the research questions with attended this meeting for the first 15 minutes. This was because they suggested that they would be the best people to introduce the research to the potential research children because they could explain what it 'felt' like to participate and what their informed consent might entail. I sought approval from the ethics committee, as this could be seen as breaking the privacy of their identities (discussed in Section 3.6.5). I also designed a consent form (see Appendix D) in a similar A5 style with large font, for the children to take home and discuss with their families before signing. This consent form required the child's signature to be accompanied by a parent's or guardian's signature.

### *3.6.3 Voluntary participation*

Masson (2004) claims that "[a] child must be able to understand that information is collected only so that the researcher and other people can understand the topic better" (p. 48), and will not be used against them. Because my data generation was held within a school setting, it was important for me to ensure that the children understood their participation was voluntary and that there would be no negative consequences if they chose not to participate or to withdraw. I also explained that their contribution to my research project would not be tested, so they could not fail. I explained this in the leaflet, during our first meeting, and also at the beginning of every session we held together.

### *3.6.4 Right to withdrawal*

It was important that the children understood their right to withdraw at any stage from the research. I informed them of their rights in the information leaflet, in the consent form and also at the beginning of each session. I explained, in language that they could understand, such as *"You can choose to stop coming to the sessions at any time. You won't get into trouble. Just let me, a teacher or your parent know – sweet as"* [S1]. Although I was aware of potential power dynamics (see Section 3.7.1) that may have precluded them from doing so.

### *3.6.5 Privacy and confidentiality*

Despite my efforts to maintain the confidentiality of participants, the small school setting in which the research took place meant that the children's identities would eventually be revealed when they were absent from class. Permission was granted by the ethics committee for the children that I trialled the research questions on (who were also students at the research school) to make contact with the new participants during our first meeting together, as a means of introducing the AI intervention to the potential research participants. These children assured me that participation was enjoyable (and not something that only "dumb" students would do), therefore revealing the research participants' identification would not be likely to cause them any harm.

The confidentiality of the participants' contributions was an important consideration throughout the research. Confidentiality was assured through the use of self-selected pseudonyms. My responsibility was often tested when I engaged in discussion with interested teachers and parents, which left me feeling that there was a fine line between sharing information that could benefit the child and betraying their confidentiality. I reminded the young participants at the beginning of all our meetings together that the information they shared would not be traced back to them. All data, transcriptions and personal details were stored on my personal portable hard drive, with a secured password, and kept in a box up high in my office at home.

## 3.7 Researching Children's perspectives

Accessing children's perspectives in educational research is widely researched and discussed at an international level. Researchers have long acknowledged that

children hold unique perspectives on their learning (Rudduck & Fielding, 2006) but only recently have some believed that these insights require a commitment to allow children to be active agents in shaping school reform and their learning experiences (Blackman, 2011; Cook-Sather, 2006; Demetriou & Wilson, 2010; R. Frost & Holden, 2008; Hopkins, 2010; Lee, 2006; A. Roberts & Nash, 2009; Rudduck & Fielding, 2006). The expression of children's perspectives in research is a concept that is commonly defined as children having a 'voice' in research. Despite the plethora of literature claiming contentiousness with using the term voice, it is nevertheless often discussed under many guises such as pupil perspectives, student participation (Lodge, 2008a), consulting pupils (Rudduck & Fielding, 2006), and Youth-Adult partnerships (Mitra, 2009); each using the student voice concept to access perspectives on teaching and learning. It is also important to highlight the different terms pupil voice – which typically refers to primary school children – and student voice –which often but not exclusively refers to secondary school youth.

Extensive studies done in the United Kingdom by Rudduck and colleagues (2006) at the Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP) on Consulting Pupils about Teaching and Learning project focused on different student voice initiatives, where researchers often worked with teachers, and students were consulted on issues of teacher pedagogy, their experiences in classrooms, group dynamics and designing new school buildings, among other things. In the New Zealand context, researchers Bishop, Berryman, Cavanagh and Teddy (2009) have used student perspectives in the Te Kohtahitanga programme which aims to raise achievement for Maori students at secondary school level. The programme itself is based on the idea that students' experiences and ideas can and should influence teacher pedagogy, and that this approach supports the formation of collaborative learning processes used by students. Also from New Zealand, Lee's (2006) research, on students' perspectives on what makes powerful learning, aims to allow children's voices to inform teacher pedagogy. However, Lee reveals that teachers face many challenges when attempting to honour children's suggestions. Accessing children's perspectives and not acting on their suggestions is an issue that alerts researchers to the need to consider the ethics of children's rights and well-being in research.

Described as tokenistic, some approaches to the involvement of children's perspectives in research can be "benign but condescending, cynical and manipulative" (Fielding, 2004, p. 200) when they "seek student opinion on matters identified, framed and articulated solely by researchers" (Rudduck & Fielding, 2006, p. 227), and do not lead to progress. This can leave children feeling frustrated at the lack of outcomes. This along with other "tame, reductive, and exploitive notions of student voice" (Lodge, 2008a, p. 7) has led many researchers to carefully mention the need for authenticity when engaging in pupil perspective research, which refers to a genuine interest, readiness to listen, and desire to be involved in discussion on possible avenues of action (Rudduck & Fielding, 2006). This suggests the need for research to be carefully designed such that it can be seen to respect children's perspectives by letting them know that what they say will be taken seriously (Cook-Sather, 2006), and involves them in the process, such as an action research design.

Other critiques of pupil perspectives research relates to the danger of researchers claiming a singular or universal voice. Cook-Sather (2006) warns that this view can "run the risk of overlooking essential differences among students, their perspectives and their needs" (p. 368). It is also important to note whose voice is being heard in research, not only those who are considered to be articulate but also those whose contributions may be considered to be obnoxious (C. Robinson & Taylor, 2007).

Despite the challenges researchers face when engaging with children's perspectives, there appears to be a strong advocacy in the literature which is committed to respecting children's rights to be more involved in shaping their learning experiences. Perspectives research has "challenged [the] dominant images of children as silent and passive recipients of education" (Cook-Sather, 2006, p. 133). Cook-Sather (2010) claims that many interventions in schools are designed by adults; student's perspectives are often missing. Yet, she argues, "students are best positioned to teach educators how to construct such approaches, strategies, and situations" (p. 43). It is for this reason that I incorporated children's perspectives in research. Their involvement ranged from designing the intervention, to evaluating the effectiveness of the approach. There are additional ethical issues that required careful consideration and preparation before I could embark on my research project.

Fraser (2004) suggests that when engaging children in research it is paramount that they understand what is going on. She recommends negotiating with children on the methods used to generate the data. She points out that methods are not necessarily child-friendly (which can often mean that an adult's interpretation of what child friendly is inscribed within the research) but participant friendly. In other words, the method should be negotiated by the participants, because it is the particular participants that require understanding. For this reason, the AI sessions were co-generated by the children and myself.

Best practice for involving children in research requires children to be active participants in the research. Alderson describes ethical research with children as using sensitive and flexible methods. Within this research project, methods such as focus group sessions (see Section 3.9.2) included activities which involved playing with play-dough, Lego, craft, painting and games of their choice. This increased the likelihood that the children would enjoy the sessions and hence might offer deep insights as to what they understood about the topics that my questions addressed (Alderson, 2004).

Research with children can sometimes require them to share particularly sensitive information. They may see this as an intrusion into their most private thoughts, and fear scrutiny and exposure. Adults need to be aware of this when deciding on the type of questions they wish to ask (for an explanation of these see Section 3.9.1) and go to great lengths to reduce any negative effects. Cohen et al. point out though, that what may appear innocent to the researcher may be highly sensitive to those who are researched. It is the social context of the research that makes it sensitive, not the particular topic. What's important is whether the *participants* feel it is sensitive or not. Understanding the complexities of researching with children was an essential consideration when designing this research project.

### *3.7.1 Children and power*

Significant consideration was given in this research to the position of (or lack of) power that children hold in society. Researchers must be aware that children's power is often at a disadvantage to adult power and this can leave them vulnerable and at risk of harm (France, 2004) when participating in research. Children's safety is of paramount importance in any research project. It is when their competence comes into question that the necessity for parental consent is required

to safeguard them in research. This is particularly so when it comes to issues of informed consent and protection from harm. However, adults, as gatekeepers, can create further problems for ethical research with children. When adults make the final decision for participation, it takes away children's right to be consulted and included in the decision (France, 2004), which means that children may miss out on an opportunity to participate in research when they may have wanted to. These considerations place adults in a difficult position when making decisions where research involves children. On the one hand, adults are seen to be important gatekeepers for safe-guarding of children from harm. On the other hand, they can are perceived as 'brick walls' that prevent children from making their own choices about participation in research.

C. Robinson and Kellett (2004) explain that there is a relationship between power differentiations between adults and children, and generational issues. Cultural interpretations of such factors as competence, privileges, rights and responsibilities often reinforce and maintain these differences. Perhaps it is precisely for the reason that adults perceive children as being weak and lacking in power that they internally affirm their superior power. According to C. Robinson and Kellett (2004):

> A factor that sustains unequal adult-power relations is a belief that adults have superior knowledge. Undoubtedly this is the case in some areas of life but with regard to childhood – in the sense of what it is like to be a child – then it is children who have the superior knowledge. (p. 84)

Superior knowledge, in the quote above, refers to knowledge of the particular context being researched. To understand children's experiences of childhood, adults need to engage with children's perspectives of their experiences.

One aim of this research was to access and accurately portray children's perspectives on their learning. I entered the research process with a belief that children have unique knowledge that is not inferior or superior to my own – rather that it is just different. I sought to access this knowledge through interpreting the research experience as research that is done *with* the children and not *on* them and, furthermore, through inviting their suggestions for ways in which they could share their views. However, school is a context where the adult-child power imbalance

is particularly acute (C. Robinson & Kellett, 2004). In schools, "adults control children's use of time, occupation of space, choice of clothing, times of eating, even their mode of social interaction" (C. Robinson & Kellett, 2004, p. 91). Children bring these cultural ideas, beliefs and the feelings that they entail to the research setting. This awareness alerted me to the importance of taking special care to establish a research environment that was democratic, inviting of voice and encouraging of children's unique power, for example, their expression of peer support and peer pressure.

## 3.8 The reflexive researcher

The notion of reflexivity refers to a process where the researcher not only reflects on their research but brings to the surface their own underlying beliefs and assumptions. These beliefs and assumptions may influence the participants' interactions in the research and the way the researcher interprets those interactions (Wilson, 2009). Reflexivity is important in action research because as Cohen et al. (2000) comment, "researchers are also the participants and practitioners in the action research" (p. 239). Cohen et al. (2000) suggest that researchers should not attempt the impossible task of eliminating researcher effects, but rather to include themselves in the research by acknowledging how their "values, attitudes, perceptions, opinions, actions, feelings etc. are feeding into the situation being studied" (p. 239). These aspects will influence how researchers go about selecting and analysing the data and also the way they interpret their findings. Showing some transparency of my position provides the reader with information that should help them in the formation of their own conclusions.

As a reflexive researcher, I acknowledge my position as an adult researcher when involving children in my research, and the power differentials that exist as a consequence of these relations. As a non-teacher working in a school setting I may have been perceived as a teacher, however I was particularly careful to attend to even minor situations where power differentiations could be more evenly balanced. This subjective input contributes to authentic knowledge because it takes into consideration the relations that exist between researcher and participants.

### *3.8.1 Creating a sense of community*

Consistent with social constructivist theories, creating a sense of community within the group was a significant aspect of the research because it supported the children's engagement, which in turn provided a platform for deep, rich and meaningful participation. Being reflexive allowed me to see the influence that creating a sense of community had on the data generation.

Creating a sense of community was, I believe, one of my responsibilities both as a facilitator of AI and also as a researcher working with children. I played a key role in initiating many formal and informal actions. I created rituals by adapting what Kriete (2003) called a 'morning meeting' approach where at the start of every session I warmly greeted each child, provided the ingredients for the group to make hot chocolate if they wanted to, brought cushions for the children and myself to sit on in a circle, and provided opportunities for the group to listen, respond and share while we discussed their views of the AI intervention, the ethics of participation and confidentiality as well as recapping the 4-D AI method. I also created a ritual and each week and when they had opportunities to plan activities for the following week and although this generated an informal learning environment, the process itself became formal and a ritual was generated through the repetitive enactment. Kriete (2003) claims that inserting rituals creates a strong sense of expectation, familiarity and comfort.

Creating a sense of community also contributed to the caring relationships that formed between myself and the children. There was a sense of connectedness (Erwin, 2003; C. Watkins, 2005) which the children showed to both the material within the AI as well as connecting with their families through the presentation. The children felt a sense of belonging (Erwin, 2003; Kriete, 2003; Schaps, 2003; C. Watkins, 2005) to the group, evidenced when they created a name for the group and identified themselves as "The Fun Learners" [S1] and also by the fact that they never missed any sessions, two children even arriving a bit unwell on one occasion because they were so keen to participate. The sense of trust (Hoffman & Levak, 2003; Mitra, 2008) was felt by many within the group, which created greater participation because the children felt safe to contribute. For example, Jasmine described her experience in this way:

Angie (researcher): *Did you feel like you could say what you wanted in this group?*

Jasmine: *Yes! Like sometimes I get chicken to say it in front of people but with people that I know then I'm not so chicken.*

Angie: *So, do you feel safe in here?*

Jasmine: *Yeah, I do. (smiles and nods)* [INT2J]

Rather than creating a sense of community just to gain research information, I resonated with Cahill (2007) in that I wanted to create a "warm collegial atmosphere [that] was understood along the lines of hospitality" (p. 300). I wanted the children to feel cared for, to know they were important (and not intimidated) and, as such, "welcoming was taken seriously" (Cahill, 2007, p. 300) in this research.

### *3.8.2 Negotiation of power and control*

Traditional layers in typical adult-child relationships, where adults hold more power, were constantly negotiated in the learning community. Shifting the power, at times, did not always go smoothly as the children and I learned how and when to negotiate our new roles. The children clearly saw a difference between their previous experiences of a learning community and the democratic principles embedded in the research context. For example, during the initial focus group session when I asked if they wanted to make up some rules for the group, they suggested aspects from their previous class treaties; *"one speaker at a time", "no shouting",* and *"respect each other"*[S1] were some of the ideas they brought with them from the classroom context. They seemed to look to me for approval on their ideas. However, I reminded them that I was not an authority at maintaining these rules and asked permission to be *"just one of the group".* The children were initially perplexed by the idea of a flattened leadership structure, which was evidenced when Steve asked *"So….are we in charge of you then?"*[S1]. They seemed unaccustomed to the shift in adult power from their usual classroom experiences.

Following this conversation, some children were challenged by the shift in the power structure. This was evidenced at times some when children went against the

grain, to test the power in the relationship between them and myself. One reflective field note entry provides an example of this experience:

*They kept interrupting each other, and not listening to one another. At one stage, the boys got their play-dough out and posted it into the heater…which was on! Oh dear. I struggled to know whether to growl at them and act like an adult with power, or to let them deal with the consequences.* [FNS3]

This reflection shows that the children were gauging my reactions against their off-task behaviour. Negotiating the balance of power was not just something done at the beginning, but required constant attention. The continuum of power slid back and forth as the children and I negotiated ways we would participate in the group. The challenge for me was, as Mitra states (2008), when the children displayed off-task behaviour, I wanted to take control back. However, I tried to be, as Mitra (2008) recommended when working with children, like a "coach" (p. 228), and foster the children's skills in being able to take responsibility for their learning and to stay on task. In this sense, I respected their abilities to learn how to engage in a different environment with a flattened leadership structure.

My intention to create a more even power structure did not always go to plan and in hindsight I understand now that I needed to negotiate more with the children around the leadership of my role. This was particularly evident during the children's presentation to their family, friends and teachers of their experiences in the AI (see Appendix J). I gave the children 'full reins' to organise the presentation in their own way, from who to invite, how to invite them, what information to present and how to present it, as well as setting up the room and the order of events.

However, it eventuated that a number teachers missed out on the presentation (two did not attend and two attended for half of the duration) due to the children not inviting them or inviting them at the last minute. Upon reflection with the group, all of the children explained that they wanted their teachers to attend but simply forgot to invite them. In hindsight, this situation demonstrated that I needed to support them in the development of their agentic skills. In the process of trying to share power, I regrettably negated my own. To demonstrate reflexivity, I can see how my desire to create opportunities for the children to hold more power influenced the outcomes of the research. The action of the research

was effected because the people with influence, the teachers, were not able to hear what the children had to say about their learning.

## 3.9 Data Generation Methods

The research methods were chosen for their suitability when doing research with 10-year-old children in a school context, and accessing their experiences and perspectives of the AI approach to learning. The main aim was to gather suitable data to represent the children's experiences (Docherty & Sandelowski, 1999). Alderson (2004) suggests respectful research with children should have flexible methods of data generation, the intention being that children should enjoy the process more and that the "findings … more accurately report their views" (p. 100). The data generation methods in this research will now be described for their suitability with children.

### *3.9.1 Semi structured interviews*

The interview, as it is used in research, has been described as a conversation (Wilson, 2009), with the purpose of one person gaining information, beliefs or opinions from the other (Cohen et al., 2000). Unlike a structured interview with prescribed questions, semi-structured interviews with a list of issues to be discussed, with "freedom to follow up points" (Thomas, 2009, p. 164) allow for greater flexibility. This interview design was chosen for specific benefits of doing research with children.

The children participated in two individual interviews each; one at the beginning of the research project and one at the end (see Appendix E for Question Guide). These interviews were conducted in the same empty classroom that our weekly sessions were held in and lasted for approximately twenty minutes each; the dialogue recorded with a Dictaphone. One child was absent for the final interview. Both the teacher and the child were contacted to organise another interview time.

Certain techniques were used in the semi-structured interviews which contributed to the successful generation of data. Firstly, it was important to establish a rapport with the children and a sense of trust (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) so that they felt comfortable sharing their authentic views. This was achieved, firstly, by engaging in small talk (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) and using an icebreaking pre-organised activity of Gloop (a mixture of corn-flour and water which combines to create a

tactile product) for the children to play with. This instantly brought a sense of fun into the environment and additionally gave them an opportunity for focused fidgeting to release any anxiety they may have had (Sher, 2006). When they began to respond to my questions, I would use what Burns terms 'parroting' or repeating back what they had said, in a warm accepting way which also facilitated the continuity of the dialogue (Burns, 2000). The children were given extra time to think and respond (Mansell, 2009), and I often joked and shared some of my own stories (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) with them. I also used attending or listening skills of eye contact, watching for body language and showing empathy which demonstrated respect for the participant's contributions (Burns, 2000). This attention to attending also required looking out for cues, and noticing the content behind the words, using what Burns (2000) terms "[a] third ear" (p. 427).

Interviewing children in a school context requires additional considerations. Kellett and Ding (2004) warn that children may interpret the research as school work. This required me to pay attention to the ease with which children responded to questions that they did not know the answer to. "An 'I don't know' response risks being thought of as cheeky" (Kellett & Ding, 2004, p. 166). I was acutely aware of my presence as an adult and the influence this may have on the children's responses. Oberg and Ellis (2006) state that "[a]pproaching children through schools tends to define research as part of schooling" and "researchers may unwittingly cast themselves in a teacher role by using a teaching stance to command the student's attention" (p. 108). This may jeopardize the researcher's role as an adult who just asks questions which she genuinely does not have answers for, which can influence both positively and negatively the ways in which children engage.

This raised an important concern for this research project. The AI intervention inherently involves children's experiences of learning, and this often involves their school context. This issue complicated the process of the interview. On the one hand, I reminded them what the purpose of the research was and that it was not school work and, on the other hand, I enquired about their learning within their classrooms. I view this complexity as both a limitation and a benefit to the research.

My approach to conducting the interviews was informed by Bogden and Biklen's (2007) suggestion that one should "set up the interview in such a way that it establishes the subject as the one who knows and the researcher as the one who has come to learn" (p. 107). I began each interview by explaining that the word 'learning' has different meanings to different people and that the purpose of the interview was to discover what the term 'learning' meant to them. I viewed each participant as an 'expert' on the topic being discussed. Burns (2000, p. 425) indicates that when participants feel comfortable about using their own language in an interview, this increases rapport. Another benefit of doing individual interviews was the opportunity to access the quiet child's views, which would have been difficult in a group interview.

The limitations of using semi-structured interviews with children in a school context were taken into consideration when selecting the method. Of particular concern was the potential lack of memory that children can have, and ability to recall and communicate this (Docherty & Sandelowski, 1999; Kellett & Ding, 2004). This issue was addressed by providing alternative ways to recall, for example using flash cards as a tool and triangulating with focus groups for participants to hear each other's recall and to jog memories. Another limitation was that children tend to "withhold emotion laden information" (Docherty & Sandelowski, 1999, p. 180), which was addressed by giving attention to building a rapport with the children, revisiting their ethical rights to confidentiality and privacy, as well as assuming an empathetic and warm approach during the interview.

### *3.9.2 Focus group discussion*

Semi-structured interviews share many similarities with focus group discussions. They both involve a sharing of information on a particular topic of study (Bell, 2010). Where they differ, is that with semi-structured interviews, the topic is chosen by the researcher, while in focus group discussions, it is the interactions of the *group* that generate the data (Cohen et al., 2000). Hence focus groups generate different *kinds* of information. Cohen et al. (2000) indicate that this may be because group interviews are less intimidating than individual interviews, meaning ideas and thoughts can be bounce about creating a feeling of safety when sharing is controversial or subjects are difficult.

Cohen et al. (2000) draw attention to the limitations of focus group discussions. They assert that power dynamics in focus groups can influence the discussion. It is difficult to ascertain whether participants' contributions are their true thoughts or whether their contributions have been influenced by the thoughts of others. Additionally, important steps should be taken to ensure that quieter participants have a voice. It was for these reasons that semi-structured interviews were used as a means to triangulate the data.

There were a total of seven focus group discussions used to generate data (see Appendix F for a guideline). One focus group at the beginning to explore learning, four focus group sessions were held during the AI intervention, one was held during the children's presentation and the final one was an evaluation of the intervention held at the end. All focus groups were held in the same empty classroom on the school grounds. The topic being discussed related to their experiences and perspectives of learning. The focus was on their emerging and new understandings of their learning.

The focus groups were loosely structured and blended learning tasks with discussion (Plummer, 2011). I originally intended to formally hold 15 minute focus group sessions at the beginning of each session. However, after the first attempt it became clear that sitting formally around a Dictaphone at a prescribed time was not an effective means to access the children's authentic thoughts because their willingness to dialogue and express themselves ceased. Thereafter, I generated the data during the *flow* of the sessions that was captured by recording the entire hour long sessions of the children's more relaxed discussion. This approach proved to be a far superior method to accessing children's perspectives, generating both longer discussion and more willing responses. Careful consideration was given to the setting, the seating, eye contact and the ability to record clear sound on both the Dictaphone and video camera (Mansell, 2009). Video also allowed me to see who was speaking, which is a limitation when one is only able to use voice recording. The video also allowed me to capture multiple voices at one time, which I found difficult to do with voice files. The recording devices were discretely positioned on a shelf in the room. The children were aware they were being recorded because I reminded them at the beginning of each session with a 'wave to the camera' comment. The children also watched themselves on previous footage, which they enjoyed, and this further enhanced

their participation *with* the researcher, and provided opportunities to clarify their previous contributions.

The benefit of focus group discussions within this research was three-fold. Firstly, the data generated was enhanced by the ease with which the children made their contributions in the group setting. Secondly, the experience of talking within the group provided opportunities for the children to think about the process of the approach and to reflect upon their learning, which enhanced their understandings. Thirdly, the focus group discussions helped me to understand the children better and work more effectively to co-create the AI approach with them.

Data transcription was done on the same day as the data was generated. Scribe software was utilised to transcribe directly from the MP3 voice files. Once finished, I watched the video footage and wrote detailed field-notes. This process greatly contributed to my understanding of the transcripts, because I was able to 're-live' each moment, and write comments, thoughts, assumptions and speculations in my reflective field-notes, directly from the video footage as against from memory. Through this process I was able to take into account the body language and provide meaning to the verbatim words on the transcripts.

### *3.9.3 Reflective field notes*

Field notes (for an example, see Appendix H) were used to triangulate the qualitative data generated from the transcripts. The transcripts recorded the words participants used, but field-notes added meaning to those words. The field-notes used in this research were not used as descriptive material for observational purposes, but were used to provide a personal account of the journey and were, as such, a useful tool for generating reflexivity. The field notes recorded feelings, intuitions and posed questions of the work in progress (Wilson, 2009). Wilson points out that it is through the use of field-notes that researchers are able to identify any emerging bias. Similarly, Bogdan and Biklen (2007) describe field notes as an opportunity for the researcher to become aware of their relationship with their participants and influence to the research setting. This informed me to generate field-notes that included: "Reflections on analysis; reflections on method; reflections on ethical dilemmas and conflicts; reflections on the observer's frame of mind" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 123). This generated data that encompassed a wide range of considerations, thus increasing the

trustworthiness of participants' contributions; something that will be discussed at the end of this chapter.

### *3.9.4 Questionnaire*

A short paper questionnaire (see Appendix G) was administered to the adults present at the final session of the research. The adults had been personally invited by the children to attend a student-led presentation of their new understandings of their learning. The purpose of the questionnaire was to access the views of people who had a vested interest with the children's learning. The questionnaire attempted to specifically collate the parents' perspectives of the programme's influence on their own understandings of how their children learn. The reason for including these adult's views in the data generation was to gain a balance of information before addressing the research question.

The questionnaire had four open questions which asked parents for their perspectives on the session that they had just attended and one category question, which asked them to circle if they were a teacher, friend, parent or family member of the child. While I collected some of the questionnaires at the end of the final session, some parents took the questionnaire home to complete; their child returning it to me the following week at our final evaluation focus group session.

### *3.9.5 Analysis*

Qualitative data analysis is described as "the process of systematically searching and arranging the transcripts [and] field notes … [that] enable[s] you to come up with the findings" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 159). Firstly, transcripts were created on the same day as they were generated, from the semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. The field-notes that were generated after reflection on the sessions and upon viewing the video helped me to re-capture intimate details. The video also helped me to reduce researcher bias in that it allowed me to separate the distinctive interactions within the group from another, as if from an outsider's perspective, which also enhanced trustworthiness of the research.

Secondly I grouped relevant data from all sources (semi-structured interviews, focus group discussion, the questionnaire, field-notes) to generate a collective

answer to the research question and sub questions. Organising data in this way explored the themes in a systemised and clear way.

Thirdly, the data was analysed using Network Analysis as described by Thomas (2009). It began with a constant comparison process, where words, sentences, phrases and also the meanings behind them (Bell, 2010) were sorted into categories. As the categories emerged from existing data, they were constantly compared with new data, and the categories shifted to accommodate the new information. The text was coded and arranged in a hierarchical network of categories. Thomas (2009) uses the analogy of a tree trunk representing the main category with branches representing sub-categories and ideas were conceived of as branching off from the main trunk. The aim of the analysis was to make connections between the ideas in the data, connect the findings, and offer explanations and insights. The classifications were refined and revisited many times, and this led to the sub-categories shifting through the analysis.

Unlike quantitative research, qualitative data analysis often occurs during the data collection stage. However, Bogdan and Biklen (2007) advise that a beginning researcher is best to put their energies into generating the data and wait until this phase is completed before beginning their formal analysis. This advice was taken into consideration, yet minor on-going analysis was conducted during data generation to ensure that the focus of the questions and discussion was indeed providing a response to the research question. Also, because I was co-creating each session with the children on a week-to-week basis, minor on-going analysis helped my understandings of the effectiveness of the process and I could summarise key points and present them to the children for clarification of their perspectives.

### *3.9.6 Trustworthiness*

Ensuring that any research holds credibility is an important key to the conduction of worthwhile research. Unlike quantitative research, which requires objective validity (Cohen et al., 2000), evaluating qualitative research relies on the trustworthiness of the research. Trustworthiness is often described as using triangulation, which Cohen et al. (2000) explain as "using two or more methods of data collection in the study of some aspect of human behaviour" (p. 112). Relying on one method may limit or create bias, or distort the researcher's views. For this

reason, using multiple methods can provide a broader lens for understanding the topic or issue being researched. However, Bogdan and Biklan (2007) argue against using the term triangulation as a means of ensuring the realization of trustworthiness. They claim the word is often used imprecisely by researchers, hence leaving the reader confused and less able to make judgements on credibility. They suggest that it is better to explain in detail the different ways that trustworthiness can be ensured.

In this research project, three data collection methods; semi-structured interviews, focus groups and field-notes, provided a multiple lens on the children's perceptions and experiences. Semi-structured interviews collected data that was shared one-on-one with me; the children revealing intimate information that they perhaps would not have shared if their peers were listening. These interviews were audio-taped and transcribed on the day of their generation. Focus group sessions provided a different source of data, which was generated from collective views. Each hour-long session was audio and video-taped, with transcription done on the same day as this data was generated. The collection of field-notes data added tone and expression to the transcripts, as well as my own interpretations of the children's meaning behind their words, and these field-notes were written alongside the transcription process which provided 'fresh' thoughts and memories. Although I maintained authority over the coding and categorising process, key ideas were presented to the children during discussions throughout the data generation and during the final focus-group to check for accuracy in interpreting their meaning. Rigour during analysis was determined by the provision of an audit trail that included the name of each child and the data method that their views were generated from.

Ethical considerations when researching with children were to the forefront of my mind as the research was conducted. I worked to create a sense of community (see Section 3.8.1) and negotiated power and control in the setting (see Section 3.8.2) to help the children feel at ease and to willingly contribute their authentic perspectives on their learning experiences. Although, I was also aware that their perspectives and also mine, were influenced by the research context.

## 3.10 The research process

In this section, first I will outline the context for this study. Then I will present the criteria used for the selection of participants, and introduce the research children, after which I explain the three action research phases of this study.

### *3.10.1 Introduction to the context of this study*

This study was done at a primary school in the Eastern Bay of Plenty in New Zealand. The school is a decile 9 school with a fluctuating roll of approximately 300 students. A high percentage of Pakeha/European children attend the school. Students predominantly came from within the zoned school district. At the time of the research, the school was in the design stages of a re-build due to leaky buildings, hence there were spare classrooms on campus, one of which was designated as the regular place to conduct the weekly data generation sessions for this research study.

As the researcher, I also had a personal connection with the school. It was the school of my hometown. It was also the school where my youngest child was attending in year two at the time of the research. I knew the school grounds, the environment, the principal, and many of the teachers and students. The research participants were all in year 6. The school was chosen because it had a previous history with engaging in innovative approaches to learning, for example, inquiry learning, and I considered it would be accepting of research on a new approach to teaching and learning. However, I was aware of my relationship with the school and ensured this became a reflexive part of the research; always making my connection transparent throughout the data generation and analysis.

### *3.10.2 Criteria for participation*

In my original research proposal and ethics submission, selecting participants was done from an initial invitation to all year 6 students (10-year-olds) and parents from the chosen school to participate, then randomly selecting two boys and two girls from the respondents. However, once I trialled the research questions on a group of children I knew, their perspectives influenced me to change this selection process. It was evident from this group of children that rapport played a significant role in the ease of dialogue, communication, trust in establishing an honest flow of ideas, thoughts and perspectives. The children themselves also

raised this point. It was also evident from these children that the AI intervention would benefit children who perhaps struggle at school or have low confidence in their learning potential. Therefore, I wrote to the Ethics Committee and requested that teachers select two boys and two girls who already had a rapport with each other and that they might benefit from a learning intervention that focused on their strengths. This request was accepted due to the justification made on account of the perspectives of the group of children who trialled the research questions. I met with the head-teacher of the school to discuss the research and answer any questions.

### *3.10.3 Introducing the children of the study*

Four senior school teachers selected one child from each of their classes, based on predefined criteria (see Section 3.10.2). Four children were selected: two boys, Steve and Ryan and two, girls Jasmine and Zoe (all pseudonyms)

**Zoe** described herself as a "sporty kid", who enjoyed playing outdoors. The eldest in a family of three children, she lived with her mum and dad. Her mum described her as a shy child, who did not contribute a lot in the classroom and said that both Zoe's teacher and she herself tried to encourage Zoe to speak up more "because it's good for her". Zoe's academic learning was just below the national standard for all her formal subjects. Zoe said she liked writing and art. She said she enjoyed school. She talked positively about her family.

**Steve** described himself as a child who loved using technology (xbox and computer games). Steve lived with his mum, dad and younger brother and sister. He was a talkative and humorous child who moved around a lot. His mum confided that he had difficulty learning and she had taken him to a specialist to assess his problems, and arranged for a tutor to help him with his learning. In the individual interview, Steve said that he was not very good at learning but that he *was* really good at scootering.

**Ryan** described himself as a "kid who loves soccer". He had an elder brother and lived with his mum and dad. A tall, softly spoken child, Ryan enjoyed a laugh. His teachers described him as a compliant student who just gets on and does his work, however they were aware of his low self-confidence and worked on ways to boost this. Ryan confided that he struggled with school work and that he had a

tutor to help him. He also confessed that he didn't think he has had any amazing learning experiences. He preferred physical activities, and lived for his soccer.

**Jasmine** described herself as an animal lover. The middle child of three, she lived with her mum and dad. She used her imagination in her conversations and liked to express her thoughts. She talked a lot about her family and how they helped her with her learning. She particularly liked maths and free writing, but also liked rock climbing. Her teacher expressed that although she is not a high-needs student, she sometimes struggled to grasp concepts in certain subjects. Her academic achievement in all subjects was just below the average national standard level for her age. Jasmine expressed that she enjoyed school and liked learning. She wanted to be a vet when she grew up.

### *3.10.4 The research process*

An action research process guided the project as I sought to address the research question relating to the effectiveness of AI with children as an approach to help them to understand their learning. Two sub questions were used to investigate the research question were:

- What are children's understandings and perceptions of learning and themselves as learners prior to and following the AI intervention?
- What are the significant factors when doing an AI with children into their learning?

The research took place over 20 months and involved nine data generation moments which were executed during three key action research phases.

Details of the data generation (see Appendix J for a detailed account of what each session entailed):

- Semi-structured interviews: Exploring understandings and perceptions of learning
- Session one: Exploring understandings and perceptions of learning.
- Session two: Implementing the Appreciative Inquiry
- Session three: Implementing the Appreciative Inquiry
- Session four: Implementing the Appreciative Inquiry
- Session five: Implementing the Appreciative Inquiry
- Session six: Presentation of outcomes
- Session seven: Evaluation of intervention
- Semi structured interviews: Evaluating the intervention

Details of the three action research phases; Reconnaissance, Intervention and Evaluation, are outlined below.

***Reconnaissance***

*Phase One: Gaining access to and informed consent from the children*

The first phase involved gaining access to the children which involved gaining informed consent from gatekeepers to the children's well-being and safety. Firstly, I contacted a school to invite their participation in the research. After an initial phone call to the principal to gage interest, an information letter was sent to the BOT, Principal and teachers, to invite them to select four participants based on research criteria. Ethics of my research involving children was outlined and I illustrated ways that children's safety and wellbeing was paramount (see Appendix A for details). I met the school's criteria for when adults work with children and undertook a police check.

Once the teachers had selected four children to participate, I talked with the head teacher to discuss the research, she booked an empty classroom as the regular research site, and I handed her the information leaflets to give to the children.

The teachers talked with the children's parents and gave them an information leaflet. With the parents' verbal consent for their children to meet me and find more information, I arranged a meeting with the children. I met the children to discuss the AI intention. I worked to ensure they understood the ethics of the research and also the purpose and that their perspectives were an essential part of answering the research question: "How effective is AI at helping children to

understand their learning?" and also that they would have opportunity for agency in dissemination. After gaining their and their parents written consent they chose their own pseudonyms to safe guard their anonymity and I informed them of the regular time and place the AI intervention would be held.

*Phase Two: Exploring learning*

Phase two involved exploring understandings and perceptions of learning and learners. This involved a one hour long focus group session. Firstly, a sense of community was established for the children to feel comfortable and safe in the research setting. The children shared their collective views on learning through discussion during games and activities. Semi-structured interviews were held to generate data on the children's understandings and perceptions of learning and themselves as learners prior to the AI intervention. This phase was an important part of the meta-learning approach so the children could know their understandings and identify any shifts that occurred from participation in the AI intervention.

***Intervention***

*Phase Three: Implementing the Appreciative Inquiry*

Phase three involved implementing the AI over four sessions, each approximately one hour long, held on consecutive weeks. Data generation in the form of focus groups took place during each session. Each session was co-generated between myself and the children therefore while I had originally designed a plan to follow, it was flexible (see Appendix J). Using participatory research methods, such as creating a sense of community (see Section 3.8.1) and negotiating power with the children, generated an environment where the children felt sage to contribute their thoughts and generate rich data for the research. Reflective field-notes were taken upon reflection on the video recordings of each session.

Data from focus groups was transcribed on the day it was generated and coding and categorising was done throughout and key ideas were summarised and consulted with the children.

*Phase Four: Presentation of outcomes*

The children chose to present their outcomes of their AI experience to their families and teachers. This was an opportunity to for them to have agency in their

learning and share information on what they had learned about how they learn. The presentation was held in the same classroom as the research site, at 3pm one day after school. Children had agency to select an audience of their choice.

***Evaluation***

*Phase Five: Evaluating the AI intervention*

Phase five involved evaluating the AI process. A further one hour long focus group was held and also individual semi-structured interviews to generate the children's perspectives on their experiences in the AI intervention. This phase served two purposes. Firstly, it was an opportunity for the children to reflect on their prior understandings and perceptions of learning and notice if they had experienced any shifts in these. In this way, this phase not only evaluated the intervention but also contributed to their meta-learning. They thought about their thinking and in the process learned about their learning.

Secondly, the children evaluated the AI process by contributing their perspectives on the useful and challenging aspects and offer any suggestions for improvement.

Key ideas from analysis were summarised and shared with the children.

*Phase Six: Analysis and writing*

Phase Six involved analysis of all data from semi-structured interviews, focus groups, questionnaire and reflective field-notes. Data was coded and categorised into themes. Analysis was done alongside writing which involved many drafts and helped to 'unpeel' the layers of analysis to reveal the heart and meaning of the data and theorise on the research questions.

## Summary

This chapter has presented the qualitative, social constructivist theoretical approach that has been used in this action research project. The ethical approach to doing research with children was highlighted. Considerations were given to the learning environment and levelling power and control when working with children. Data generation methods were presented along with the analysis used and trustworthiness of the research. The research context was outlined, explaining criteria for selection of participants and an introduction of the young participants. A description of the action research process was given. Great care and attention

has been given to bringing children's perspectives into the investigation and the use of action research in AI, which not only respects the children's abilities to make meaningful contributions but also their capacity to make a significant contribution to field of AI research with children. The data generated from the research and my interpretations will now be presented and discussed in Chapters 4 and 5.

# CHAPTER 4

# Findings and Discussion: Shifting Parameters

The question of how effective Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is at helping children understand their learning lies at the heart of this thesis. An action research methodology framed my investigation, thus I have already asserted that the method of AI might provide children opportunities to come to understand their own learning and themselves as learners. Examining the children's experiences and perceptions of learning prior to and following the AI sessions provided a means for the children and I to ascertain whether or not a shift in their understandings and perceptions had occurred and hence answer the first subsidiary research question.

The chapter that follows firstly presents findings related to the children's understandings and perceptions of learning prior to the AI intervention and examines the influence of the school context on learning and on themselves as learners. Secondly, this chapter discusses the children's new and emerging understandings and perceptions of learning and themselves as learners. The findings are theorised in relation to the influence of the AI intervention, True to action research methodology these findings are presented and concurrently discussed with my own interpretations in light of the relevant literature.

## 4.1 The children's understandings and perceptions of learning and themselves as learners prior to the AI intervention

Central to the research design, I initially set out to access children's understanding and perceptions of learning prior to the AI intervention. This was important for three reasons. Firstly, to know to what extent the AI intervention had influenced their learning. Secondly, so that I could understand their current perceptions of learning and could extend their learning from the position they were at (Cortazzi & Hall, 1998). Thirdly, it was important for the children to verbalise their understandings and perspectives so when they built upon them as part of the AI process, it would become obvious to *them* that their understandings had changed.

This recognition of growth, or meta-learning, was an important aspect of the AI intervention because it allowed the children to know if and how their understandings had shifted. The children were individually interviewed and then a focus group session was held in which their understandings and perceptions of learning emerged. These will now be presented.

### *4.1.1 "I've never really thought about how I learn" – Children's understandings and perceptions of learning*

Prior to the AI intervention the children in this research shared views of learning that related in some way to their experiences in the school context. Firstly, they all understood learning as a content acquiring activity. During their initial individual interviews, the subject of learning was discussed, and I used a similar open question with each child. (From here after the researcher is referred to by Angie).

> Angie: *Today, we are going to be talking about learning because learning means lots of different things to different people, what I think learning is, could be different from what your teacher may think it is which may be different to what YOU think it is. So when I say the word learning what do you think about? What pictures or words come to your mind? Tell me more about the word "learning"*. [INT1]

The children's responses all focused on the formal learning at school, and acquiring content:

> Zoe*:* *Reading, writing, maths, things we do at school, ummm* [INT1Z].
>
> Steve*:* *Um, I think it's um, reading things and writing and learning things for when you get older* [INT1S].
>
> Ryan*:* *Um, like, learning is reading and maths and getting taught things like learning about stuff and ahhh, um like learn more about something that you don't know about* [INT1R].
>
> *Jasmine:* *I think learning would be um about doing work, and…ummm learning is when you learn about stuff you didn't know, like, I didn't know much in kindergarten*. [INT1J]

These responses emphasise the product of learning and not the process. While some children did indicate that their understandings of learning were not restricted to the formal curriculum areas, these were related to *what* they were learning and not *how* they learn. Their comments suggest a link between the success of learning content and the formal nature of learning in classrooms. For example, children viewed the literacy and numeracy projects (which were predominant in the class daily timetable) as a significant aspect of their learning. This finding is consistent with a Scottish study from Duffield, Allan, Turner and Morris (2000) which found that students understood learning to be a fixed content activity and had come to consider themselves as simply school 'pupils' and failed to see themselves as learners. This suggests that the children in my research did not understand their role as a 'learner' in how they learn.

All the children in this research perceived that learning required a teacher to teach them. When I asked *"How do we learn things?"* [INT1] children shared understandings of learning as an experience that required the role of a teacher. For example Ryan said *"It's um, getting taught stuff"* [INT1R] and similarly Steve said *"I learn maths from the teacher teaching me"* [INT1S]. Some children did indicate that the role of teacher could extend to their family members, for example Steve said *"My Nana helped me learn the five times (tables)"* [INT1S], and similarly Jasmine shared *"When we go for walks my Dad gives me maths equations"* [INT1J]. However, their understandings nevertheless were that learning still required someone to teach them and was focused on school content. Zoe's understandings of learning extended beyond school content, which was illustrated when she discussed learning in her rugby team. She said *"The coach teached us, that's how I learnt"* [INT1Z]. Then in a similar discussion on how to learn she commented *"My sister learnt to use a sharp knife at preschool, the teacher taught her"* [INT1Z].

This finding again raises the question of whether or not the children see a role for themselves in their own learning. Like the children in Duffield et al. (2000) research, C. Watkins, et al. (2007) found that children pointed to the teacher as being responsible for their learning. Lodge (2008a) claims that children believe that, "schools are traditionally places where learning is done to them" (p. 8). If children believe they are passive recipients of learning, then it is questionable as to the level of ownership they may have of this process. While it is difficult to

ascertain the exact role these individual children believed they play in their learning, it is clear they understand the importance of the role of the teacher in their learning.

It is, perhaps, unsurprising that the children talked about how learning was for successfully gaining skills that would prepare them for when they entered the workforce. For example, in her interview Jasmine said:

> *Learning would be about how to do maths equations for when you are older, when you want to be a vet or something, like me*. [INT1J]

Similarly, Steve shared:

> *Learning's when the teacher tells you a new maths equation and then you use it for when you are older, you might need it if you're going to do measurements, like if you're a builder*. [INT1S]

Consistent with C. Robinson and Fielding's (2010) research, children in the present study understood the purpose of education as a route to gaining skills that prepares them for the workforce rather than seeing learning as an experience to invest in the present. These findings imply that learners, including the children in this research, do not see the immediate use of what they are learning in the classroom and instead see it in terms of its future value. The children's understandings appear to align with a traditional view of learning. Despite a common discourse among educationalists on the nature of learning shifting from 'what to learn' to 'how to learn' and towards being relevant to the learner through learners being more active and involved, for the purposes of developing into life-long learners (Claxton, 2002, 2007; Lodge, 2008a, 2008b; C. Watkins et al., 2007), these children did not, at the outset of this study, understand learning in these ways. Dewey (1916) claimed in the early 1900's, that relevant, active and lifelong learning was becoming a significant feature in educationalists' discussions on learning, and a large amount of literature and social media now advocates for these new views in 21st century concepts in learning. The shift in view seems to have reached Government level because *The New Zealand Curriculum* has "…a vision of our young people as lifelong learners, who are confident and creative, connected and actively involved" (Ministry of Education, 2007), and many schools and teachers claim to see the advantage of shifting

pedagogy to fit with this new understandings of learning (Lee, 2006). Yet in 2012, when this initial research took place, children still held traditional views of learning. Their understandings of learning appear to have been influenced by their lived experiences within the school context. This finding illuminates how schools and teachers need to be mindful of the programmes and initiatives currently used or being introduced into schools, and the hidden messages they may be sending out to children.

Data analysis found that at the beginning of the research the children displayed a low level of critical self-reflection on their learning. This was evident from the children's own voices when recounting their prior learning experiences. All the children claimed they had never engaged in reflective conversations or practiced meta-learning and thinking about *how* they learn is not something they said they had ever done before. For example, as this discussion between Zoe and myself illustrates:

| | |
|---|---|
| Angie*:* | *So, do you ever have chats or conversations with adults about your learning?* |
| Zoe: | *(Shakes her head)* |
| Angie: | *You don't talk to your teacher about your learning?* |
| Zoe: | *No.* |
| Angie: | *Mum or Dad?* |
| Zoe: | *Yea, mum and Dad.* |
| Angie: | *Ahh, so what do you talk about when you talk about your learning with them?* |
| Zoe: | *We talk about what I've learnt, like, she'll say "What did you learn today?" and then sometimes um we will say things and some days we won't.* |
| Angie: | *Have you ever thought that you have any ideas or suggestions about what could make your learning better?* |
| Zoe: | *No, I don't ever talk to the teacher about that*. [INT1Z] |

Similarly, discussion with Steve:

| | |
|---|---|
| Angie: | *So, have you ever thought about how you learn best?* |
| Steve: | *Ummm, ummmm, ah, when I'm like….not really, no one's ever asked me that question before.* |

Angie: *Don't worry. Do you ever have conversations or chats with adults about your learning? (long pause). Have you ever offered your suggestions?*

Steve: *I've never offered suggestions*. [INT1S]

These comments illustrate the children believed they lacked opportunities to hold conversations on how they learn and engage in meta-learning.

These findings are consistent with research that accessed children's perspectives on their learning. Lodge's (2008b) report, which collates student perspectives on their learning, claims that children say "that they have never spoken about their learning in school before" (p. 8). Similarly, Carnell (2004) found that many children who spoke about their classroom experiences made no reference to time taken for speaking about learning. C. Watkins, et al. (2007) claim that this peculiar absence of conversations about learning is common in many schools, yet they also believe that talking about learning should be every learner's entitlement and core element of their entire learning experience. The children may not have understood the significance of reflecting on their learning. Although the children appeared to have low self-reflection skills, they also had limited opportunities to engage in such an activity. Such a finding suggests that for children to learn about their learning, they need opportunities to talk about and reflect on their learning.

### *4.1.2 "I'm no good at learning" - Children's understandings and perceptions of themselves as learners*

The formal school context plays a significant role in how the children perceive themselves as learners. Findings that emerged from the data indicated that prior to the AI intervention the children measured themselves as learners based on their grades at school. This was particularly evident for two children who believed their low grades meant they were poor learners. The dialogue below between Ryan and myself illustrates this point:

Ryan: *I haven't heard back from my teacher this term, but last term I got really low grades in maths.*

Angie*:* *Is that a bad thing? To get low grades?*

Ryan: *Yeah, low grades is bad (he drops his head, and goes silent).*

Angie: *Have you ever thought about what would help you to learn it better?*

Ryan: *Yep. I just need to work on it more, and um, go over it (glum face).* [INT1R]

Furthermore, I asked Ryan *"Can you remember a time when you've had a really good learning experience?"* and I was surprised when he answered *"Um, probably not, not really".* I clarified whether it was that he just could not remember and he confirmed *"I'm not very good at learning"*. He often talked about how he was not good at spelling or writing, and when he spoke about learning it was focused on what he needed to do to achieve, for example, he shared, *"I just need to work on it, cause I'm never going to get better if I don't work on it"* [INT1R].

Similarly, Steve also believed his academic achievement was a measure of his success as a learner and, like Ryan, he often commented on what he needed to do to achieve academically, in order to be a 'good' learner. In the initial interview, Steve mentioned he had a tutor to help him with his academic learning and when I questioned him about whether this activity was helpful, like Ryan, he replied *"Um, na, I'm no good at learning"* [INT1S]. This finding is consistent with the work of Dutro and Selland's (2012) on children's perspectives on high stakes testing. Their findings report a link between children's perceptions of test scores and assumptions of competence; children believing that testing is primarily used to judge their learning and performance, and the children did the judging on themselves. Claxton (2008) claims that the school context, with a strong focus on testing, is shown to "cause even bright students to slump in their confidence and enthusiasm to learn" (p. 20). It appears that self-belief in learning plays a significant role in successful learning.

Both Steve and Ryan perceived themselves as poor learners due to their low grades, despite their considerable talent in other areas. Both Ryan and Steve have exceptional talent outside of academic schooling. Ryan was a talented soccer player and represents his region in this sport. Steve has exceptional skills at gaming and said he has 'clocked' every xbox game that he has ever played *"It's eeeeasy as"* [S1], he said. Neither Steve nor Ryan perceived their talents as a measure of successful learning. Their yard-stick for measuring learning is limited to achieving high academic grades in the school context and this significantly impacts on how they see themselves as learners. Researchers have found that

children believe what is measured is valued and therefore learning that is not measured is not valued (C. Watkins et al., 2007).

However, grades only measure a portion of a person's learning. Therefore, emphasis on testing can be understood to lead to the exclusion of other important areas of learning. Research on student perspectives claims that students are aware of this imbalance in their schooling experiences and that some are even concerned by this issue (C. Robinson & Fielding, 2010). The increased focus on raising achievement in schools, in New Zealand and across the world, has left little room for teachers to give time and value to other kinds of learning (Dutro & Selland, 2012). For Steve and Ryan, learning in other contexts did not register as important. Their success at learning in other non-school contexts did not contribute to their sense of worth as learners. This signifies a need to help children shift their focus of learning from academic achievement to a wider context, so that they can re-story their understandings of themselves as learners, and appreciate their strengths as learners. This action research project was initiated with the intention of providing children with the opportunity to enhance their understandings of learning, with particular interests in drawing attention to the uniqueness of children's process of learning, and to shift their perceptions towards appreciating who they are as learners.

Evidently, children with a lower self-belief in their learning ability show a lack of confidence to engage in their learning. During the initial interview, I provided a set of cards showing different emotions, and Ryan chose the card 'nervous' [INT1R] to describe how he felt about his learning. Furthermore, he was frequently seen to be disengaged from the learning during the initial stages of the AI programme, particularly when activities involved focusing on brilliance and best-of moments in learning. This was also evident in the group discussion during the Discovery Stage (see Appendix J) that involved finding stories that described when learning had been really good for them. Ryan showed reluctance to participate and moaned *"Ohhhh, do we have to? I don't have any"* [S1]. Ryan also showed a low level of confidence the following week when we were doing an activity on brilliance, commenting: *"I'm not brilliant at anything"* [S2] and then proceeded to roll around on the floor and even tried to distract the others in order to shift the focus away from his perceived deficit. It appeared that Ryan's beliefs

about himself as a learner impacted on his confidence and led to disengagement in the learning experience.

Similarly, Steve also believed he was a poor learner and this impacted his confidence to engage in learning conversations with his teacher. His dialogue with me during the interview illustrates is point:

> Angie: *So do you ever talk to your teacher about what things could help you to learn?*
> Steve: *Um, not really.*
> Angie: *Ok, so why not? I'm just curious.*
> Steve: *Ummm, ahhh, I'm probably too scared…'cause I don't really want to tell the teacher.*
> Angie: *Why not? What are you worried about?*
> Steve: *Ahhh I don't know…'cause then she knows things (he laughs nervously).* [INT1S]

The important point here is that children's preconceptions of themselves as learners have a powerful influence on their learning. This observation has been made by previous studies which highlight the importance of the relationship between self-belief and learning (Bassi et al., 2007; Dahl et al., 2005; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; McDonald et al., 2011; Pentecost & Dickie, 2011). Basi, Steca, Delle Fave and Caprara, (2007) for example, found in their study on academic self-efficacy beliefs and learning that adolescent students who believe in their learning abilities are not only more motivated to learn, but perform better. In contrast, students with low self-efficacy beliefs associate learning with anxiety and show apathy and disengagement from the learning. Other research suggests this may be because students believe that their learning is 'fixed' (Dahl et al., 2005; Dweck & Leggett, 1988) and, therefore perhaps lack confidence to try. Similarly, in research that is more specifically related to my own research, researchers of metacognition skills of students report that some students with low self-belief find engagement in metacognitive activities challenging (Pentecost & Dickie, 2011), while other students were reluctant to even try (McDonald et al., 2011). My research has encountered similar findings. Such reports signify, as C. Robinson and Fielding (2010) discovered, that children's perceptions of

themselves as learners significantly effect their engagement with the learning. This suggests serious implications for teachers and other practitioners involving in trying to improve children's learning because it appears from this research that significant consideration needs to be given to raising children's self-beliefs as learners in order to help them *believe* that they can learn more effectively.

Shifting children's understandings of how they learn towards appreciating themselves as learners, through an Appreciative Inquiry approach, was the intention of this research. . It is timely to now present and discuss the children's understandings and perceptions of learning and themselves as learners, following the AI intervention.

## 4.2 The children's understandings and perceptions of learning and themselves as learners following the AI intervention

My analysis showed that during and following the AI process, children experienced a shift from their prior understandings and perceptions of learning towards appreciating their unique role in their own learning. Over the course of four weeks, the children were involved in an AI into their learning to identify moments when they were learning at their best, to notice a common theme in these moments and to identify what I termed a learning essence (which were moments when *they felt* that they truly 'shined' in their learning, however the children negotiated to use the term "brilliance" instead because they said they could better understand it). The aim of this process was to enhance their understandings of learning and themselves as learners (see Appendix J for a description of the AI model used in this research). The following sub-section will present and discuss the children's new and emerging understandings of learning. Following this, the children's new perceptions of themselves as learners and the influence of the AI is theorised.

### *4.2.1 "When I'm talking I know I've learnt it" – Children's new understandings of learning and of themselves as learners*

Throughout the AI process, the children progressively demonstrated a heightened awareness of how they learn as they discovered their own unique strengths, or "brilliance" in their learning. My dialogue with Steve provides an example of this point:

| | |
|---|---|
| Angie: | *So, what's going on in your brain when you're moving, like just now you were spinning around and around, so do you zone out?* |
| Steve: | *Na, it actually helps me to listen.* |
| Angie: | *Really? Wow, tell me about that.* |
| Steve: | *Um, I dunno, I just focus on what's being said.* |
| Angie: | *So moving around actually helps you to learn?* |
| Steve: | *Yeah, I guess it does.* [S4] |

After some time thinking he later confirmed: *"When I'm moving, I'm listening at the same time and it helps me to learn"* [S5] . I reminded Steve that in his stories of 'best learning' he was also engaging in physical activity and he came to his own understanding that 'moving around' as he termed it, was one of his brilliances. Steve didn't limit his understandings to just one learning essence and through dialogue discovered another brilliance:

| | |
|---|---|
| Angie: | *When you are being funny, how do you feel?* |
| Steve: | *Cool, and funny.* |
| Angie: | *Does it feel like you're being yourself, like true to you?* |
| Steve: | *Yes (said with unusual quiet which seemed like a realisation and proudness).* [S4] |

Steve's second learning essence related to his role in generating a positive and enjoyable learning environment for others. He came to understand that when he was experiencing these moments of, what he termed, brilliance it was also helpful for him to learn better. Later he commented: *"When I'm being funny, I feel like myself, my thoughts come back to me"* [S5]. Steve's comments show he had developed new understandings of learning and shifted his views to appreciate other ways he learns. His comments show that he had also come to new understandings of himself as a learner.

Similarly, Jasmine also indicated that she had developed new understandings of herself as a learner. She discovered through the AI that speaking or being in dialogue were moments when she learns at her best. She commented:

> *Well, now I know that when I ask questions in class people might think that I'm talking too much, but I know that it's my brilliance and that I've learnt it.* [INT2J]

The children's comments indicate that they now understood an aspect of how they personally learn. These children had previously understood particular aspects of their identity, but had never made the link to it being helpful in their learning. For example, Jasmine knew that she was 'a talker' but didn't know that being in dialogue involved moments when she was learning at her best. Similarly, Steve had always felt that he had a knack for creating an enjoyable atmosphere for others through humour, but he had not thought about how it benefited his own thinking and learning. During AI conversations, the Poetic Principle of AI (see Chapter 2.3) suggests that, like poetry, the stories we tell about ourselves can be re-interpreted and re-written depending on the topic we choose to inquire into (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003). Inquiring into peak areas, where children felt they truly excelled, was key to shifting their understanding about what had occurred. They had opportunities to re-story their narratives of themselves as learners, and come to know that part of their identity can also be understood to be valuable when they are learning. M. Watkins and Mohr (2001) claim that AI, as an intervention, "articulates an alternative view of how we shape our future" (p. 25). Previous research on AI with adults indicates that a shift in perspective is a common outcome of this experience (Wood, 2007). However, there is little research that documents how primary school children experienced these experiences. This research therefore provides valuable new information on the potential of AI for use with children in shifting their understandings of their learning.

It was also apparent that through the AI process some children developed new and positive understandings of themselves as learners. Zoe, who had previously believed that her inherent shyness and preference not to speak was a weakness, shifted her understandings of herself as a learner from a deficit disposition to a positive one. She discovered that her learning essence was that she was an excellent listener. "*I'm listening and thinking at the same time"* [S4]. She realised she would wait and listen to everyone's dialogue and formulate her thoughts before articulating them. Like Steve, she discovered two brilliances. She also discovered that she was excellent at knowing and enforcing the rules. Zoe made a

link between her two brilliances when she said *"I'm listening to know the rules better"* [S4]. As she progressed through the AI she came to understand that these 'brilliances', as she termed them, were a part of who she was as a learner.

The AI had provided opportunities for Zoe to reframe her understandings of learning to focus on 'what *is* working' in her learning and in the process came to value these aspects. Literature on AI claims that the Positive Principle brings affirmative language to the setting and "shifts people's attention away from problems as the motivation for change toward unfolding gifts, capabilities, [and] potentials" (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003, p. 68). A plethora of studies on AI indicate that it is precisely this focus on the positive core that generates momentous change. People are more enthusiastic and motivated towards positive thinking, a shift than thinking about the problems or what isn't working (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). It appeared that Zoe had experienced a shift in her understandings of herself as a learner due to the AI's deliberate focus on her positive core. In the process, Zoe developed new understandings of learning when she realised her perceived deficit had become an asset to her learning.

Some children, as a result of AI intervention, demonstrated a shift away from traditional concepts of how to learn in the formal school context towards understanding other ways of learning. For example, Ryan previously had quite firm understandings of learning that were limited to the school context and he initially found it difficult to conceive of and value other types of learning. Through the AI conversations he built new understandings of learning and of himself as a learner. This was evident when he discovered, similarly to Steve, that his learning essence was *"moving around"* [S5], or *"fiddling with stuff"* [S5] (which meant playing with something in his hands) and that he preferred learning moments that involved doing activities and not sitting still. I also reminded him of his stories of 'best learning' and they were centred on a physical activity. Ryan stated *"Making things is fun, I learn better"* [S6].

Ryan had shifted his understandings of learning towards valuing physical movement, which is not typically viewed as a learning strength or as a way that enhances his learning in the school context. The AI process provided opportunities for him to use new language to describe learning and himself as learner, which resulted in a significant shift from his previous understandings of

learning. Literature on AI explains this process as constructionism, stating that "meaning is made in conversation, reality is created in communication, and knowledge is generated through social interaction" (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003, p. 53). In other words, it was through dialogue with the group that Ryan came to shift his understandings of himself as a learner. Furthermore, Ryan verbalised links with his new understandings of learning and his future intentions for learning. In this sense, the AI process was generative. Whitney and Trosten-Bloom (2003) explain that "words matter. They not only make a difference, they literally bring things to life" (p. 56). This shows the potential of AI and its key principles, as an intervention to help children better understand themselves as learners.

Previous research on AI with children and learning has typically focused on creating organisational change, for example, to influence teacher pedagogy (Eow et al., 2010; San Martin & Calabrese, 2011). In these studies, the focus is on learning, but it was a generic view that applied to all learners, it does not generate understandings of individual essences nor are they designed for individual personal development. This research sought to investigate the effectiveness of AI in helping children understand their learning; a focus which is oriented towards creating a learner identity. In contrast to C. Robinson and Fielding's (2010) interpretation of learner identity as a generic process, the learner identity the children developed in my research was specific to each learner and through the AI process, they had come to know themselves as learners.

The unique learning essences each child discovered through this AI intervention differs from the idea of a learning style, which has been found to be an ineffective approach to learning (Coffield et al., 2004). This AI intervention took children beyond surface learning, to experience what Entwistle (2000) calls Deep Learning which is where learners create personal meaning and develop greater self-awareness. It appeared that the AI intervention shifted the children's understandings of learning because it involved them learning about *their own* learning. This suggests that AI has potential as an alternative meta-learning activity because rather than teaching strategies for learning, AI provided opportunities for children to come to know *themselves* as learners. This finding provides a significant contribution to the field of AI and its effectiveness in supporting children to better understand their learning and themselves as learners.

### *4.2.2 "Now I know I can do anything" – Children's new perceptions of themselves as learners*

It was evident in the findings that participation in the AI had shifted the children's perceptions of themselves as learners. The AI experience had helped them to identify their strengths and incorporate these into their self-concept. Evidence showed that this affected their self-efficacy and enhanced their self-beliefs in their learning potential. Dialogue between Steve and myself during our final focus group illustrates this point:

Angie: *Has this AI programme helped your learning?*

Steve: *Yep, a lot! Cause before I didn't know anything about how I learn, I just knew, well, I didn't know my brilliances, and now I know them so I learn a bit better.*

Angie: *Has the AI helped your leaning outside of school?*

Steve: *Well, I think it has, cause now I know I can do anything.*

Angie: *Did you not know that before?*

Steve: *Well, I just never really knew about it before*. [S7E]

Steve's comments show a shift in his perception of himself as a learner from 'no good' [see 4.1.2] to be able to 'do anything'. Steve's Mum also affirmed this when she commented on the AI intervention, *"I think he's really benefited from this. He seems more confident in himself ….in all areas"* [QS].

Similarly, Ryan showed he had experienced a positive shift in his perceptions of himself as a learner throughout the AI process. His comments during the final focus group demonstrate this:

Angie*:* *Has this AI programme helped your learning?*

Ryan: *YES! Now I know what my brilliance is and how I learn best!*

Angie*:* *Cool! So HOW does it actually help you?*

Ryan*:* *I fiddle with stuff. It helps me to concentrate more when I fiddle and use my hands*. [S7E]

Despite Ryan's preference not to elaborate in his sentences, it was also obvious that his perceptions has shifted when he showed more confidence to engage in the

learning by more readily participating in activities and contributing his ideas and thoughts.

Zoe also experienced a shift in her perceptions of herself as a learner. The AI has helped her to affirm her beliefs of her own strengths. Her comment illustrated this when she shared her thoughts on the AI intervention:

> *It makes me think more about my learning and how we learn 'cause I didn't really know before, 'cause I like doing lots of stuff but I knew I was good at more stuff.* [INT2Z]

These children's responses emphasise that through the AI they have come to perceive that their learning potential has increased and they have formed positive identities of themselves as learners. This finding is consistent with literature on AI which claims that developing positive self-beliefs is often a typical outcome of AI projects with youth. Research shows that AI creates opportunities for self-expression and positive affirmations of identity (Morsillo & Fisher, 2007) and also helps students to realise their self-worth and develop a personal sense of empowerment (San Martin & Calabrese, 2011). However, in contrast to criticism of AI raised in the literature review in Chapter two, AI's focus on the positive did not appear to frustrate the children, they appear to be *relieved* that that focus is not on their problems. It was the positive focus on their strengths which they felt most attracted to and which was evidenced in their enthusiastic comments on their best parts of the programme being "finding your brilliances" (see Chapter 5.4).

The children's new positive identities, as learners, have helped them to believe in their learning potential. However, Claxton (2007) claims that there is a danger of not challenging children, claiming that avoiding difficulty does not "stretch student's capacity to learn" (p. 125). Yet research on a meta-cognitive intervention shows that students with low self-belief are reluctant to even try to learn about their learning (McDonald et al., 2011). This finding suggests that AI may work as a 'first step' when helping children learn about their learning because it enhances self-belief in learning, which builds confidence which then engages them in more challenging meta-cognitive activities.

## Summary

This chapter has firstly identified that the children's prior understandings of learning and of themselves as learners were based on traditional concepts of learning which were influenced by the formal school context. The children's initial lower levels of self-reflection on their learning identified a need for conversations on learning to take place so children could practice and see the significance of reflecting on their learning. Some children perceived themselves as poor learners due to their understandings of successful learning being related to academic grades and this significantly impacted on their engagement with learning. Helping children to believe they can learn needs more serious consideration in the teaching and learning relationship.

Secondly, this chapter has shown that through the AI intervention, the children's understandings shifted towards the point where they realised the importance of the role they played in their own learning. Their perceptions of themselves as learners also shifted such that their once deficit identities became positive identities. This research suggests the potential of AI as an alternative meta-learning activity, not only for enhancing learning, but for children to come to know themselves as learners in the process of their own learning. Appreciating who you are as a learner, can positively influence your learning.

The next chapter will present the findings related to the children's perspectives on AI intervention, and the important factors which contributed to their enhanced understandings of their learning.

# CHAPTER 5

# Findings and Discussion: Factors of Influence

The thesis ascertains that children experienced shifts in their understandings and perceptions of learning and of themselves as learners through their participation in an AI intervention. In addressing my research question, "How effective is AI at helping children to understand their learning?" it was also important to investigate the factors that attribute to these shifts, both from my perspective and from the perspective of the children themselves.

In the chapter that follows, I present findings and discuss, from a social constructivist theoretical perspective, the specific conditions that contribute to the efficacy of AI with young children. The first section relates to the significance of collaborative dialogue when doing AI with children. The second section highlights the mediating opportunities for agency in AI and its influence on effective learning for children. The third section explains my use of the formal AI model and the importance of including experiential learning with children. I conclude by presenting evidence of the children's appreciation for these opportunities as a means of coming to know their strengths as learners.

## 5.1 "It was better learning in a group" – Collaborative dialogue within Appreciative Inquiry

The children found that collaboration with the group enabled them to participate in the reflection process of AI, to discover their brilliance as individuals. Engaging in individual meta-learning was challenging and some children showed difficulty during the reflection process. Although I was expecting collaboration to be an important aspect of the AI, I was surprised at how essential it was to the method (see Discovery Stage in Appendix J) of the intervention. While an important part of the AI process for the children was being able to articulate their reflections on their learning, this was not always easy.

The dialogue below illustrates my point:

Angie: *So what's your favourite learning experience*

Ryan *Soccer*

(Pause)

Angie: *Ahhh, all right, so can you remember a time when you were learning soccer at your best?*

Ryan: *um keeper*

Angie*: You learnt how to be keeper?*

Ryan *When I was little*

Angie *Can you remember a time, go back in your memory*

(Pause)

Ryan *I can't remember anything, um, I played with the ball*

Angie *Tell me about that*

Ryan *Ummm I don't know*

(Pause) [S2]

Prior to the AI intervention, all the children revealed that they were not familiar with discussing how they learn (see Section 4.1.1). Furthermore, Ryan's experience, as recounted above, demonstrated a difficulty in engaging in these types of reflective learning conversations (also see Section 5.3 for further examination). This finding is consistent with an example explicated in Lodge's (2008a) work on learning about learning projects, where it is explained that "in the early stages of talk about learning, they need to practice the language" (p. 11). Lodge describes one teacher's experience of engaging children in conversations on learning where the teacher claimed "many children had very narrow views about learning"; adding that, for children to engage in learning about (and talking about) learning, it "requires deliberate and explicit action" (p. 9) from facilitators.

This finding is also consistent with what we find in the literature on AI. Bushe (1998) reflexively explains that when he is facilitating AI, he notices he frames, shapes and embellishes people's stories in order to facilitate them being able to talk to each other more easily. It appears that participating in AI requires careful consideration, forth type of mediation required to help participants engage in AI dialogue.

Despite experiencing initial difficulty discovering their learning essences during individual reflective learning conversations, the children enthusiastically engaged

in collaborative dialogue with the group. Here, they contributed their thoughts on each other's learning essences, which appeared to 'plant a seed', encouraging the children to reflect on and then build on their new understandings of how they learn. For example, during a spontaneous activity, when I was setting up the research video camera, the children gathered around me and requested to watch previously recorded sessions. While we were watching the footage, the following collaborative dialogue ensued:

| | |
|---|---|
| Angie: | *Can you see what Zoe is doing?* |
| Jasmine: | *She's a very good undercover boss.* |
| Angie: | *Let's listen again. (we replay the footage)* |
| Steve: | *She's telling everyone the rules.* |
| Jasmine: | *She a good boss, not a proper boss, but a very good boss. (Zoe giggles)* |
| Angie: | *Do you see what she's doing.* |
| Steve: | *She's doing nothing.* |
| Angie: | *It looks like she's doing nothing…but what's she actually doing?* |
| Steve and Ryan and Zoe: | *THINKING!* |
| Angie: | *Well it looks that way. Tell us Zoe, can you remember?* |
| Zoe: | *Yep, I was listening….and when I'm listening…..* |
| Angie: | *What's happening for you?* |
| Zoe: | *Well, I'm listening and thinking at the same time. (A look of pride in her smile as she bows her head)* [S4] |

After some quiet thinking time Zoe revealed *"I'm listening to know the rules better"*. I reminded Zoe that in her stories of 'best learning' there were elements of listening along with elements of either knowing or enforcing the rules. Through collaboration with the group, Zoe came to believe that listening and knowing the rules were her unique learning essences.

Similarly, Jasmine also found her learning essence from collaboration with the group:

| | |
|---|---|
| *Steve:* | *Jasmine is always talking.* |
| *Angie:* | *mmm hmmm* |
| *Steve:* | *Actually, Jasmine talks about everything she's thinking.* |

*Zoe:* *Yeah, she always shares her ideas, she's a real talker.*

*(Jasmine is sitting on her hands. She wiggles her feet and giggles)*

*Jasmine:* *It's funny cause my favourite Mr Men are Little Miss Chatterbox and Mr Chatterbox (books)*

*Angie:* *Wow really!*

*Jasmine:* *Yes, I love to talk and actually it helps my thoughts to come.*

*Angie:* *Wow, that's cool. So have you found a special brilliance then?*

*Jasmine:* *YESS!!* [S4]

Collaborative dialogue was essential for the children to learn about their learning. This finding is consistent with a social constructivist approach to learning (Blackman, 2011; Cooke, 2001; Cortazzi & Hall, 1998; James et al., 2007; Plummer, 2011; C. Watkins et al., 2007); the social constructivist approach stemming from idea that learners build on their previous understandings and create new meaning from social interactions with others (Cortazzi & Hall, 1998). Many authors, who write about learning to learn approaches, claim that when collaborating, it is the dialogue that is key aspect. Cooke (2001) claims that learning to learn involves exploring and reshaping meanings, however, for primary school students learning is much easier when doing it 'out loud' in dialogue. Plummer's (2011) action research, on focus groups to enhance meta-learning, claims that collaborative learning allows the secondary school students to verbally support each other by clarifying and confirming ideas. It was the supportive collaboration that enabled learners to learn from others.

Affirmative dialogue, due to the AI focus on strengths, was also a significant factor of the collaboration. It was not only collaborative dialogue but affirmative collaborative dialogue that impacted on the children's experience of discovering their learning essence. Having an aspect of themselves affirmed by the group seemed to be a powerful factor. The affirmative AI group dialogue and focus on strengths appears to shift children's perceptions of themselves as learners towards a positive learner identity. Having others validate an essence of 'who you are' seems to have a significant impact on the children's perceptions of themselves as learners. While Reay (2006) warns that group dynamics in social settings can sometimes work against fairness and collegiality, the children in this project seemed to have created a group identity that affirmed the merit of the AI

principles ‘support’ and ‘affirmation’. This finding is consistent with Cooperrider and Whitney’s (2005) assertion that in AI settings, group identities can be created that are both effective and supportive to collaborative learning.

An important aspect of this finding was that the children themselves had identified the importance of collaboration in their learning. Their evaluations indicate their realisation that they had come to new understandings of themselves as learners *because* of the help of the group. For example:

> Angie: *So what was it like learning in this group?*
> Jasmine: *Um, really fun, being a part of the group ‘cause we got to do things not just by ourselves but with others.*
> Angie: *And was that helpful?*
> Jasmine: *YESSSS! Like it was helpful to have people around cause they were um, it wouldn’t be just you (her) commenting on everything, they would help you to understand*. [INT2J]

Steve and Ryan both agreed that collaboration with others was necessary to learn about themselves in the AI process:

> Angie: *Do you think you could concentrate and contribute and find your brilliances if we were to do this outside?*
> Steve: *Yeah, but we would still need to talk to you about it.*
> Ryan: *Yeah we need to talk in a group cause that’s how I learnt my brilliance.* [S7E]

These responses illustrate that the children *understood* that collaboration with others is a highly significant influence on the success of the AI model. In this sense the children had come to understand that they had learnt “with and from each other” (Cooke, 2001, p. 40). Student’s acknowledgment of the benefits of collaboration in their learning is also affirmed in the literature (Plummer, 2011; C. Robinson & Fielding, 2010). C. Robinson and Fielding (2010) claim that children have said they don’t see getting help from their peers as a weakness but rather as a “security, knowing others can help” (p. 23-24). This finding is also important because it demonstrates that the children were not hindered by the help of their peers. The children in my research *knew* what was helpful to them when engaging

in the AI, which is an important contribution to the evaluation of the AI intervention.

## 5.2 "Well, we sort of teach ourselves really" – Agency within Appreciative Inquiry

From a social constructivist point-of-view, the many opportunities for agentic learning in the AI intervention played a mediating role in helping children to internalise what they had learnt about their learning. The first agentic learning opportunity the children experienced occurred during the Discovery Stage of the AI (see Appendix J). As outlined in Section 5.1 of this chapter, the children discovered their learning essence through collaboration with the group. The group did not, however, *decide* the learning essence of each person; the group dialogue merely 'planted a seed' (see Section 5.1). The final decision was the responsibility of the individual learner. This process allowed the learner full agency when getting to know their learner identity and, as such, appeared to be a powerful catalyst for the desiring of more agency in their learning.

As the facilitator, I provided the AI framework as a mediating strategy and in the process the children came to their own new understandings of their learner identity. This could be described as a process of intersubjective relations which Fleer (2010) describes as a powerful learning relationship that connects the subject matter of the teacher (in this case the AI method) with the learners' everyday knowledge. An important aspect of the intervention was the agency that enabled the children to become "…authors of their own understandings" (Cook-Sather, 2006, p. 365). C. Watkins et al. (2007) claim that "[l]earning is an activity of making meaning – construction – not simply of receiving" (p. 19). In contrast with many learning style initiatives (that involved adults assessing children's learning without the children's input (Prashing, 2006)), the children devised their own theories for how they learn best, rather than have it presented to them in an adult assessed manner.

The AI also provided opportunities for the children to envision how they could be agents of their future learning. The final stage of the AI (see Destiny Stage in Appendix J), involved the children thinking ahead to how they might use their new understandings of their learning (their learning essence) in their future learning. The children enthusiastically envisioned changes in the way in which

they had been learning in their classrooms and devised suggestions for their teachers, which they later presented in dissemination (see Appendix J). For example, Ryan said:

> *I would tell my teacher to give me something to play with, like a pencil case or something in my hands. This helps my brain to think.* [S5]

Similarly Steve stated:

> *So next time I'm in class and I'm moving around, it would help if the teacher didn't growl me, 'cause it's actually helpful for me, like when I'm moving…my thoughts come back.* [S6]

These comments indicate that, in this context, the children took ownership of their learning, and showed responsibility towards wanting to improve their conditions for future learning. In contrast to their prior understandings of learning (see Chapter 4.1.1) where they perceived learning being done *to* them, the children had a new sense of their agentic role in their learning. The significance of this finding is that the agentic nature of AI allows for a ground up approach to learning theory. The children discovered their own theories of how they learn best and ways to use their strengths as learners in their future learning.

The children's presentation (see Appendix J) provided another unique opportunity for multiple layers of agency to be explored. They expressed their agency with respect to their use of content, their expression of style and in organisation of the structure of their presentations. I anticipated the children sharing their journey of the AI with the audience, and presenting their findings in relation to each of the four AI stages, which they did. Unexpectedly however, they unanimously decided to not only present their outcomes (their 'brilliances' as they termed it), but to *use* their brilliances to conduct their presentations. They made a connection between how they learn best and how they would organise their presentations:

| | |
|---|---|
| Angie: | *Ok, so let's do our presentations. Have you ever been to a presentation before?* |
| All: | *No* |
| Angie: | *Well I've been to lots. Sometimes you can play games and stuff and there are other ones where you just sit and watch* |

Jasmine: *Yes! Let's play games! Like Have You Ever (see Appendix H#2)*

Angie: *OK so what do you need to organise?*

Ryan: *Chairs…*

Steve: *…cushions. We can play Fruit Ball*

Jasmine: *Me and her [Zoe] will do Have you Ever Learned.* [S5]

Then Ryan commented:

*Well, we'll have to play a game or something cause that's how I learn"* and *"I'm going to do a game with them (the audience at the presentation) because that's my brilliance* [S5].

Similarly Jasmine commented *"I know, I'll start the whole thing, cause I'm the one that likes to talk"* [S5]. These comments illustrate that as a consequence of the AI process of agentic learning, the children had internalised what they had learned and had come to know themselves as learners, and more importantly, the significance of their role as active agents in their learning. This was particularly evident in Jasmine's evaluative response:

*Angie:* *So what do you think learning is now?*

*Jasmine:* *Well, it's like using your brilliance, well…we sort of teach ourselves really*. [INT2J]

What is also evident is that the children did not only want to present their outcomes to the audience but they wanted their audience to experience similar opportunities to learn about their learning, as they had, via the games and activities. The AI process had positively shifted their understandings of learning and as a consequence they were eager to facilitate others such that they might have similar experiences. The children wanted further agency to influence others' learning. The following group dialogue provides another example of this finding:

Jasmine*:* *Hey, we should do a documentary.*

Ryan: *Yeah!*

Jasmine*:* *Or we could do an interview of kids and what they think about learning.*

Ryan: *Or we could ask junior teachers to interview the juniors.*

Angie: *So why would you do that? What's the purpose? What would you ask?*

Ryan: *To discover what they do, like, how they learn!*

Steve; *Yes!*

*(Lots of loud, fast and competing voices)*

Jasmine: *We would say "How do you learn?*

Zoe: *But they might not know.*

Steve: *We can ask them what their brilliances are and see if they know how to use them.* [S4]

The children claimed responsibility to take their learning experiences beyond themselves and to reach out to others. Unfortunately, the limitations of my ethics proposal to the University of Waikato prohibited the exercising of their agency in this case. Nevertheless, this example indicates that the children had internalised their learning and shifted their perception of themselves as learners to teachers.

This finding is consistent with prior research on learning initiatives involving a high degree of agency, decision-making and taking responsibility for learning. In A. Roberts and Nash's (2009) research, students were actively involved in making decisions, evaluating and taking responsibility for their learning, which is consistent with the highest level of Hart's ladder of participation (where children share decision-making with adults). In line with Cook-Sather's (2008) comment on effective constructivist learning, these children experienced an opportunity to "re-frame already lived experiences and develop new vocabulary, and ways of thinking, about their future learning" (p. 242). Although, Cook-Sather warns that constructivism makes it hard to assess what others have learned, Jasmine's evaluation of the presentation suggests that she had indeed internalised her learning and become an owner and a teacher of her new understandings of herself as a learner. To illustrate, she said *"It was really cool cause we could teach the teachers what we had learnt. Now they know what I know."*[INT2J]

Evidence showed they had been thinking of their future involvement in the AI approach to learning. They wanted to participate in a presentation that I was delivering to the University on my research:

*Steve:* *Can we come?*

*Jasmine:* *Yeah, can we come pleeeese?*

*Zoe:* *So we can tell them how we found our brilliances.*

*Steve:* *Yeah, and like tell them how to find their brilliances!*

*Zoe:* *And we could play games again!* [S7]

Again, research ethics inhibited their agency to participate. However, these examples indicate that the children eagerly sought opportunities for agency. Their idea of learning was still future focused, yet it was no longer an outcome for the future but one of further agency to affect others' learning They had internalised their learning and in the process, transferred their understandings of learning into a much wider context outside of themselves. They now understood their role in their own learning and perceived that they could make a difference.

Cook-Sather (2010) claims that few opportunities exist for children to be agents, to create, design and take ownership of their learning and this was also the case for the children in this research project prior to the AI (see Chapter 4.1.1). This finding strongly suggests that AI was an effective strategy in helping children to understand their learning because the agentic nature of AI led to the internalisation of the learning and in the process, facilitated the children in coming to know themselves as learners.

It is interesting to note that the bringing together of action research and AI could create such an affirmation of agency for children and yet ironically, it was the research process itself that limited its manifestation. This highlights the unique ethical considerations of research with young children and suggests that more flexibility may be needed in research projects that involve agentic learning, so that children can gain the full benefits of the agency they acquire within the research context.

### *5.2.1 Agency was limited to the context*

While action research sets out to establish sustained change (Stringer, 2007) these findings suggest that the sense of agency that these children felt was limited to the AI context. Although the children displayed agency and desired further agency within the AI intervention, some children later confided that this agency would not transfer to their classrooms. Dialogue during the final interview with Steve illustrates this consciousness:

Angie: *So, Steve, have you had a chance to discuss with your teacher your new understandings of how you learn best?*

Steve: *No*

Angie: *Do you think you will?*

Steve: *Dunno*

Angie: *Do you feel confident to talk to her about it?*

*Steve: NO! (said with certainty and a "as-if" laugh).* [INT2S]

This finding contrasts with the findings of Demetriou and Wilson's (2010) research, which found that when students were given opportunities for agency in their learning it led to an *increase* in their confidence to talk to their teachers about both their learning and how to improve it. The difference is that their research involved classroom *teachers* providing opportunities for agency in their own classrooms, while my position as a researcher involved me working with children outside of their classroom context. However, the children in my research were motivated to share their views with their teachers and parents within the AI context at their presentations. This outcome is also consistent with Reay's (2006) research, which found that children eagerly engaged in conversations with the researchers but were not comfortable at sharing their ideas on learning with their teacher. Interestingly though, students in Reay's research were happy for researchers to act on their behalf and to communicate with their teachers. What is important is that despite my best intentions to create sustained agentic change, this finding illustrates that agency was limited to the AI context. Therefore, it can be said that 'change' in this research was experienced at the level of the individual and not in the broader institution of education; the school.

## 5.3 "It was kinda hard to understand" – Experiential learning within Appreciative Inquiry

It was not necessary to understand the AI model in order to participate. The findings show that the children found experiential learning the most significant aspect of their experience. These primary school children found the initial Discovery Stage (see Appendix J) of the AI process challenging because it involved independent reflection which some children found difficult. For example, when I recognised 'best learning' moments in my dialogue with Ryan, he became strained and offered very little in the way of a response, frequently

saying *"um, it's so hard to remember"* [S2]. Similarly, Jasmine also found the Discovery process difficult; her comments illustrating that she found it hard to engage in reflection when she offered imaginative stories instead of actual ones:

*Jasmine:* *So can I tell any story I want?*
*Angie:* *Yeah, of course.*
*Jasmine:* *Ok, well I'm going say about a little blue hippo and his friend purple monkey.* [S2]

She later explained that she found it hard to comprehend the Discovery Stage of the AI process:

Jasmine: *Well, it was kinda hard to understand.*
Angie: *What parts?*
Jasmine: *The parts where we had to remember stuff. My memory was not that good at remembering stuff.*
Angie: *What about understanding the words Discovery, Dream….*
Jasmine: *No they were easy to understand.*
Angie: *So, was it just hard when…. Do you mean remembering when we had a great learning experience?*
*Jasmine:* *Yeah. Like, I didn't know what you meant.* [INT2J]

One explanation of this finding could be linked to research which claims that young children are limited in their meta-cognition (Flavell, 1979) and that their ability to reflect on their thinking only develops alongside their development of abstract thought (Santrock, 2002). Previous studies on the development of meta-cognition in youth also found that some children find the process of acquiring a meta-cognitive capacity difficult (Pentecost & Dickie, 2011).

Another possible explanation for why the children found the Discovery Stage difficult may have to do with their interpretation of the term 'learning'. Perhaps inquiring into 'best of' moments in learning was challenging (see Appendix J) because their understandings of learning were limited to the school context. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) explain that different words have different meanings to different people and that it is important for researchers to ensure that participants understand the specific term that they might be using in the way that they themselves mean it to be used. This was the reason for allowing time at the

beginning of the interviews to access children's perspectives on learning and then allowing a further period of one hour in the session for discussion of the term 'learning'. However, perhaps the amount of time that I had requested was not long enough. I learned that it is very important to spend a great deal of time exploring the term 'leaning' prior to doing AI with children on their 'best-of-moments' in learning.

The children also showed difficulty when doing Stage 2 of the AI; the Dream Stage (see Appendix J). Their engagement indicated that they could not envision learning in the future. It was only when I suggested that we use The Learning Cards as a tool to help with forward visioning that the children began to engage in the activity at a basic level.

The children's comments also indicate that they did not need to understand the formal 4-D structure in order to engage in the AI: it was the experiential nature that was most important for them. Some children's responses to my questions implied that they already understood the AI process. For example:

> Angie: *How about the Appreciative Inquiry, did you understand what it was?*
> Zoe: *Yep.*
> Steve: *Yep. It was about how to find your brilliances and how to achieve it.* [S7E]

Yet when I questioned the children further during the individual interviews, Zoe's response indicated that her true understanding of the formal AI process was to the contrary.

> *Angie:* *And how about the Appreciative Inquiry process, did you understand it?*
> *Zoe:* *What one was that? Was it the first one?*
> *Angie:* *It was the whole thing. Discovery, Dream, Design, and then Achieve it*
> *Zoe:* *Oh, um yea. (not convincingly).* [INT2Z]

Despite Zoe's comments indicating difficulty in comprehending the formal AI process, she nevertheless still engaged in the programme and experienced shifts in her understandings of learning (as indicated in Section 4.2.1).

Other children claimed they found the times when I explained the AI 4-D's tedious and unnecessary, for example Jasmine shared *"it would be better if you told us what we were going to do and what the fun parts would be*" [INT2J]. I was surprised at this comment because I thought that by explaining the four steps at the beginning of each session, they would feel reassured that I *had* told them what they were going to do. It appeared that Jasmine did not want to know the structure of the model, but simply the activities or 'fun parts'. I designed the AI model to be more student-led, and therefore hopefully more child-friendly and experiential. The model was co-created with the children's choice of the activities as I thought this was a respectful way to acknowledge that the children would know activities that would best support their learning. Yet I took time at the beginning of each session to explain the AI steps, Dream, Discovery, Design and Destiny because I also wanted the them to understand the AI process, so that they would feel it was being done *with* them and not *on* them. Despite my intentions, the children nevertheless did not need to understand the AI in order to participate in in the process. The children's evaluations and obvious enthusiasm throughout the intervention show that the 'doing' was more effective and they engaged them more readily for reason that they were actively learning.

Such a finding shares similarities with from the findings of Eow et al. (2010), who did an AI project with young people and discovered that the formal AI structure was too rigid in its design to get the best effect. They claimed that the sequential approach did not allow for the 'messiness' of how learning actually happens. Similarly, Morsillo and Fisher (2007) found that their AI research, with young people on how they learn best, required an experiential approach, just as I did in the case in my research project.

Experiential learning was most significant for the children's engagement in the AI. When the children described experiential learning, they often used the term 'fun'. For example:

| | |
|---|---|
| Angie: | *So, tell us about learning in this group* |
| Ryan: | *Fun!* |
| Steve: | *It's fun as!* |
| Zoe: | *Very fun.* |
| Steve: | *Awesome because we got to learn HOW we learn* |

Zoe: *Yeah and we got to learn how WE learn best.* [S7E]

The words children use to describe their perspectives may not always be interpreted by adults in the way that they were intended by the children (Cook-Sather, 2010). Therefore, as Cook-Sather recommended, it's important to understand the meaning behind the word 'fun'. In the literature, there are many examples of children reporting their learning as 'fun'. Lee (2006) explains that for the children in her research, their use of the word 'fun' related to enjoyment. This type of enjoyment can also be explained by what Csikszentmihalyi (1997) terms 'flow', which describes people as being in a state of "complete immersion in an experience" where there is "a sense of effortless action" (p. 46-47). These moments of pure attention, he claims, come from having a clear goal and immediate feedback, and lead to more focused attention and motivation. For the children in this research, it appeared that when they were engaged in 'fun' activities and dialogue, they may have been in moments of 'flow', which led to their positive engagement with the learning. This finding suggests the importance of taking the children's evaluations seriously and including 'fun' activities which engage them in the learning, into the design of learning interventions. Making sure, however, to understand that adults and children's ideas of 'fun' can differ, meaning it is important to consult children's perspectives to ensure that there is an authentic and effective activity that is suitable to the individual.

The children's engagement in the learning increased as a consequence of the experiential nature of the AI intervention. The activities and games provided opportunities to scaffold the children's learning in such a way that these opportunities engaged the children's interest and helped with their reflection and the articulation of their thoughts. The games were physical, the children were loud, they laughed a lot and they competed for the spotlight. This is consistent with prior research on teaching reflection skills that includes other resources (Kroeger et al., 2004; Lodge, 2008a; C. Watkins et al., 2007). The work of Kroger et al. (2004) on using photo-voice, of C. Watkins et al. (2007) on tool of drawing and the work of Lodge's (2008a) method of taking photos of learning all suggest that primary school children do indeed have the ability to reflect on learning, once they are encouraged to engage with resources rather than discussion alone. For the children in this research engagement in reflection and dialogue was enhanced through physical games and activities. This finding suggests that I did not need to

spend time explaining the AI process to the children because it was the experiential nature of the process that was most important. The success of this AI model relied on shifting from a progressive model to a hands-on experiential approach that did not require me to explain the model itself.

## 5.4 "The best part was finding our brilliances!" – Knowing strengths as learners

The findings suggest that children perceived that their experience in the AI intervention was both a worthwhile experience and beneficial to their learning. During weekly discussions and reflections, as well as during the final interview, they explained that this was because they now understood *their own* learning better. For example, when I asked Jasmine if her understandings of learning had changed she replied:

> *Well, its kinda changed, but it's hard to explain the way it's changed. Now I know what learning is I know what to find in learning. Now we know more about learning cause we learnt about it, we've learnt about our learning… and it's easier to understand more.* [INT2J]

Jasmine's comment suggests that she experienced a positive shift in understandings of learning.

Others explained their new understandings in greater depth with respect to how they came to now utilise their brilliance to enhance their learning. Steve's conversation with me during the final interview illustrates this achievement:

| | |
|---|---|
| *Angie:* | *Has this programme helped your learning?* |
| *Steve:* | *Yeah, a lot, cause I didn't know anything about how I learnt, I just, I didn't know my brilliances and now I know them so I learn a bit better.* |
| *Angie:* | *So how does your brilliance help you to learn?* |
| *Steve:* | *It helps me by…so… when I can't figure something out, I'll be funny or I'll start playing with something and I'll start to get it.* |
| *Angie:* | *Is this helpful?* |
| *Steve:* | *Yeah cause if there's someone next to me I can just tell them something funny and it's helpful.* [INT2S] |

This dialogue shows that Steve believed his learning had been beneficial because he now better understood himself as a learner. What is important is that Steve not only developed new understandings of his learning but that he *knew* he had, which clearly shows a new meta-cognitive awareness. This was a key aim of the intervention.

What the children's comments also indicate is that they valued finding their strengths as learners. Identifying their strengths such that these strengths enabled them to form a new view of themselves as learners, led them to believe they could learn better. This finding is consistent with the findings of other strengths-based approaches, which have similar features underpinning AI, and which typically involve: (1) identification of talents, (2) integrating talents into one's self-view, and, (3) actively seeking out ways to use their talents such that they will lead to growth (Lask, 2010). As with Lask's (2010) claim, this strengths-based approach was effective because it empowers children to develop and utilise their talent, as against undermining them through playing the role of fixing their weaknesses. Furthermore, Whitney and Trosten-Bloom (2003) claim that the simultaneity principle of AI posits that "people move in the direction that they inquire into". This suggests that children's very area of inquiry and their best learning had in fact moved their perceptions of themselves into this new area of development. Articulating what they 'do' want, instead of focusing on their weaknesses changed their 'inner dialogue' (Bushe, 1998) and Durto et al. (2012) claim, the stories children tell themselves, with regard to their potential to succeed, impacts on their engagement with their learning. For the children in this research, AI's focus on the positive core helped them to not only come to know their strengths as learners but to believe that their strengths could help their learning.

This finding highlights the significant relationship between the children's positive perceptions of themselves as learners, in the context of particular learning approaches, and the success of their learning. Focusing on their strengths – both their collaborative and individual strengths – was important to achieving this effect. The children's evaluations have provided an insight into what this experience was like for them and these findings concur with those of Cook-Sather (2010), who claims that "students are best positioned to teach educators how to construct such approaches, strategies and situations. Only students can tell educators what it feels like to experience those conditions" (p. 43). Clearly,

consulting the views of children about their learning, a fundamental component of the AI intervention, has the potential to provide opportunities for children, and adults, to learn effective ways to support further learning.

## Summary

The focus of this thesis was investigating the effectiveness of AI as an approach to helping children to understand their learning and themselves as learners. This research has provided insights into children's experiences of learning and more specifically into their experiences in and perspectives of AI.

The children interpreted the AI intervention as being easier to do in collaboration with the group because collective dialogue allowed them to reach a high level of engagement in reflection on their learning. Reaching this level of reflection was challenging when they were on their own as individuals in isolation from one another. The children also found that both a high level of engagement and internalisation of the learning occurred when they were given space for agency in their learning. They eagerly accepted these opportunities and what is more wanted greater agency so as to influence the learning of others. The study highlights the important point that doing AI with young children differs from that of doing AI with adults in that children prefer an experiential approach. In other words it appears that young children do not need to have the formal model explained to them in order for them to participate. The AI intervention was beneficial to children's learning – not only because it was enjoyable – but because the process supported them in understanding their learning and their strengths as learners. However, a salutary message is offered by the children themselves when they make the point that AI is unlikely to thrive in conventional classrooms. I take up this point in the concluding chapter that follows.

# Chapter 6

# Conclusion

From the outset of this study I had a strong affinity towards AI as a method that would support children to learn about their own learning and themselves as learners. However, it was not until I entered into a primary school and worked alongside 10-year-old children that the significance of AI as a ground-up approach to children's learning became clear to me. A key feature of this research was that AI did not impose a learning theory on the children's own experience of their learning, but rather allowed them to discover their own strengths and to develop their own theories for how they might use those strengths in their future learning. This action research studied shifts in children's meta-cognitive processes of learning about learning and drew out insights into children's perspectives on the effectiveness of the seven week AI intervention into their learning.

This final chapter summarises the research findings, acknowledges its potential limitations, and makes some recommendations for future research and practice.

## 6.1 Summary of findings

While my overarching research question "How effective is Appreciative Inquiry at helping children to understand their learning?" provided the focus for my investigation, the question itself was underpinned by my desire to understand the impact of AI on the understandings and perceptions of specific learners on their own learning.

*Shifts in parameters*

Prior to the AI intervention, all the children had similar understandings of what learning is, which is to say, that it relates to their formal school context. They identified the principal features of the transmission model of learning; that it is characterised by the acquisition of content and is teacher-directed. As such, learning was often described as *what* they had learned rather than *how* they learn. They neglected to describe the role they saw for themselves in their own learning.

The children also perceived learning as preparation for the workforce – what they had to do when they were older – and failed to find the capacity to describe the immediate use of learning. The children's low level of critical self-reflection highlighted a need for opportunities for learning conversations and suggested how I might help them to notice and talk about *how* they learn.

The children's perceptions of themselves as learners were also limited to the formal school context and academic achievement, leading some children to believe that, despite considerable talent in areas outside of school, they were poor learners. The findings of this research project were consistent with findings of the literature that focused on how children's perceptions of themselves as learners influences their engagement with the learning and their motivation to learn (Bassi et al., 2007; Dahl et al., 2005; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; McDonald et al., 2011; Pentecost & Dickie, 2011; C. Robinson & Fielding, 2010). Some children, due to perceived deficits in their learning potential, demonstrated reluctance to participate in the early stages of the intervention. This finding raises an important issue regarding the effectiveness of any learning experience in school – if children do not *believe* they can learn then it is likely that their learning will be impaired.

Following the AI intervention, findings show that attending to children's perceptions of themselves as learners is an important consideration in the teaching and learning relationship. As a result of the intervention children's understandings and perceptions of learning indicated a greater awareness of how they learn and a deeper understanding of their learning. The AI facilitated a meta-learning process that provided opportunities to re-construct their understandings of learning and facilitate its appropriation to a much wider context than was possible previous to the intervention. Unlike some approaches to meta-cognition, which teach strategies to learn, this approach focused on the children's already existing strengths as learners and through reflection, helped them to see how, what they already do, can be helpful to their future learning. To this effect, they were learning about *their own* unique learning. It is this significant point of difference in the social constructivist approach that led to the children's meaningful shifts in understandings. As such I make the claim that the AI process helped these children to come to know *themselves* as learners.

In keeping with their heightened perception of their own learning capacity, the children's perceptions of themselves as learners shifted from negative to positive during AI. Instead of focusing on their weaknesses or what they needed to learn, the AI mediated opportunities for them to focus on their strengths (or 'brilliance' as they termed it). Discovering their unique strengths as learners (or 'learning essence'), and having this affirmed by the group, increased their self-efficacy and self-beliefs and, as such, empowered their learning potential. Through AI, the children constructed new and positive identities of themselves as learners, and many of them actually came to *believe* that they could now learn. These sorts of shifts in perception, which are typical outcomes of AI projects, suggest the potential of AI to be utilised as a strengths-based, meta-learning activity for children to come, to not only to know *themselves* as learners but to know *their strengths* as learners. However, some children perceived this newly acquired agency would not be readily accepted in their classrooms. As such, their agency probably has to be said to be limited to the AI context. There perhaps needed to be a stronger connection with the children's teachers in order for change to increase from the level of the individual to the level of the educational institution.

*Factors of influence*

Collaborative dialogue was an important factor in the children's ability to engage in the AI. The findings show that despite their initial perplexity when individually reflecting on their learning, their engagement significantly increased when they were in collaborative dialogue. Collaboration was not only beneficial to the process but, in fact, was necessary for the children both to reflect on their learning and to re-shape their new meanings of learning and of being learners. Moreover, the children claimed that it was not just collaborative dialogue but *affirmative* collaborative dialogue that was most effective in their experience. Affirmative dialogue is at the core of AI work, and it is this factor which Cooperrider and Whitney (2005) claim creates the positive group identity that generates change. Therefore, although collaboration is an important part of social constructivist approaches to learn about one's own learning, this finding indicates that an affirmative collaborative dialogue, such as the type encountered in AI, generates the support that children need in order to engage in reflection on their learning and themselves as learners.

Opportunities for agentic learning were found to be a significant factor of influence in the children's experience of AI. Being agentic learners in the AI, led to significant engagement and hence significant internalisation of the learning. This was evidenced when they chose to conduct their presentations of their learning outcomes (their 'brilliances') *using* their learning outcomes in their delivery. AI allowed the children to discover their own theories of how they learn best. The children were motivated by these opportunities to acquire the agency that took their learning to higher further levels than I had anticipated, which was evidenced when they showed a desire to be teachers and influence others so that others could learn what they had learned.

Experiential learning was found to be an important factor in the effectiveness of the model. Unlike doing AI with adults, time spent explaining the formal process was at times confusing and unnecessary for these 10 year olds. They preferred the 'doing' part of the AI. Consistent with previous research studies on AI with children, success relied upon the possibility of shifting from a progressive model to one that was flexible, hands-on and experiential in its approach. The children's perspectives on the AI process indicate that some of them found reflection difficult (which can also be linked to an earlier finding on collaborative dialogue). Yet consistent with Dewey's (1916) learning theory, when the children were able to be actively involved, they significantly engaged with the learning; something they achieved through the inclusion of games and activities. It was clear that their sense of enjoyment at being active learners led to being immersed in learning with a sense of "effortless action" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). It is therefore important to adapt the AI model when employing it with young children especially as it does not appear to be so important to explain the process to them as one would an adult.

The following model summarises the various factors, as mentioned above, that contribute to children's capacity to think about their learning in deeper ways when participating in an AI into their learning. The mediating context, practice, strategies and players, taken together, set the scene for a positive learning experience that supports children in the development of their re-visioned meta-cognitive understandings.

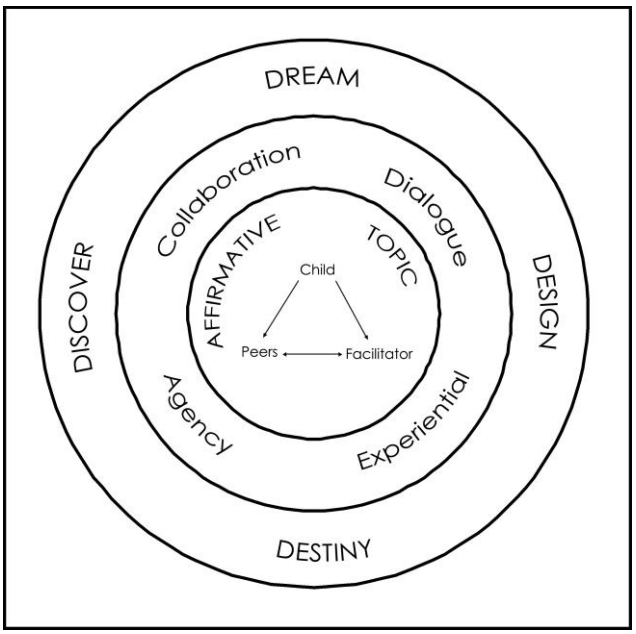


**Figure. 1. Appreciative Inquiry with children on their learning**

The model represents a significant adaptation to the original AI model (see Appendix I) that formed the origins of my intervention. Rather than a sequential process, the AI learning model above is conceptualised as a series of influential circles that exist within the learning context. Each circle influences the process. Starting with the inner most relationship, the child, their peers and a facilitator discuss the Affirmative Topic. Moving towards the next outer circle, the process is influenced by collaboration, dialogue, a high level of agency, and experiential learning (or 'doing' activities and games). Then, moving towards the next outer circle, the process is influenced by the AI 4-D aspects; Discover, Dream, Design and Destiny in a flexible non-linear process. At each of these interconnected circles, the learner is actively involved in a positive experience of learning about their learning.

*AI as a mediating strategy for learning*

As a meta-learning activity, AI mediates shifts in children's understandings and perceptions of learning. The AI process of reflecting on past learning, noticing strengths, shifting perception and envisioning how to utilise strengths in future learning helps children to identify their role as learners and, as such, to begin building their identity as unique learners. Over time, the children involved in this research project came to know themselves, not just as learners, but as learners with the potential to succeed at what they do. This research shows that there is

potential for AI to be utilised as a meta-learning activity that additionally enhances self-belief in learning potential.

However, AI with children is not as straightforward as it reportedly is with adults (Eow et al., 2010) . This study suggests that, to be effective with children as a learning about learning intervention, AI must be adapted to allow for the flexible nature of children's learning; something the above model provides a guideline for. The model is derived from an assembly of concepts that draws on the substance of children's perspectives, which in essence provide us with deep insights into what the experience was like for them.

The children's perspectives have significantly contributed to my capacity to answer these research questions. It can therefore be claimed that the argument of my thesis was derived from the most authentic position, meaning that the theory of my argument is generated from the authentic perspectives of those who lie at the heart of such research: the children themselves.

## 6.2 Limitations of the research

A limitation of this research project resides in the 'action' component of action research that seeks to make a change on a systems level. Despite designing the research to facilitate an opportunity for the children to share their outcomes in a presentation, the fact that some of teachers were not present (due to the children forgetting to invite them) did not allow the children's new theories of their learning to filter into the children's everyday classroom. We can therefore say that it was the people with the power, the teachers, who did not contribute to the possibility of further development in the children's learning. That some children indicated that they believed their new sense of agency was not likely to thrive in the classroom may be linked to this lack of communication beyond the research process.

If future research can access teacher's views, during and following AI interventions, on how children's learning should be eventuated in the classroom, may yield more systemic and sustained shifts for both students and teachers.

## 6.4 Implications for further research and practice

*Implications for practitioners*

This research is one of few projects, that implements and documents AI as a strengths-based learning-about-learning intervention with children. This research draws attention to the idea that understanding one's learning can significantly influence children's perceptions of themselves as learners. This study has shown how having conversations with children on *how* they learn is beneficial to developing new perceptions. Using a strengths-based approach, such as AI, provides a platform for conversations that begin from an affirmative position, which is particularly helpful for children who have a low self-concept as a learner or do not believe that they can learn. Teachers could be encouraged to engage in appreciative conversations to help children lift their perceptions of their learning potential, which would help them to better understand and engage in their learning.

Shifting the conception of learning from one of transmission towards a learner-focused model is essential for children if they are to come to appreciate their role in their own learning. Conversations about learning, even with very young children, are given primacy in this approach. This study has shown how engaging in conversations with children on how they learn will bring to the fore their understandings and perceptions on learning. These insights can help adults to know children's current knowledge, which provides a starting point to extend and shift these so the children can come to know their role in their learning.

This study clarifies core factors of children's meta-learning, and shows how, when incorporated into an AI model, AI can be utilised as such an approach. The challenges faced by 10-year-old children in this study draws attention to the need for an adapted model, such as the one utilized in this project, to avoid or overcome potential challenges.

The action research approach provided opportunities within the research context for the children to disseminate their outcomes. This feature is also recommended as being essential in any future AI interventions if children are to use their agency to further affect their learning. As part of action research with children, an ethic of respect for children's rights to agency was a predominant concern (as indicated in

Chapter 3.7). The formation of agency was a key finding and reflection of the effectiveness of the children's internalisation of the learning.

This study demonstrates that consulting children can provide adults with insights on children's experiences in learning interventions. Therefore practitioners should take encouragement from the discoveries from this research, that consulting children before, during and following an AI intervention on their learning can significantly enhance not only the design but the also the outcomes.

*Implications for researchers*

There is little comparative research on AI with children in the context of the personal development approach to learning. Based on the experience of this study, further research using AI, with the purpose of developing programmes for children to understand their learning and come to know themselves as learners would be worthwhile. This particular research project used a small group setting and, as such, any further investigation of AI as an approach to children's learning, may advance understandings of its potential in classrooms if done on a larger scale may.

The intervention was researched in a school context and further research in other non-school contexts (for example youth development, social work with youth) could identify the potential of AI to be useful as an enhancement of children's perceptions of themselves as life-long learners.

Further questions arise out of these findings regarding the potential of AI to make a long term difference to children's understandings and perceptions of learning. Would an intervention, by definition, be momentary and short-lived within the lived realities? Is learning in the school context such an overwhelming influence that children soon forget the learning they gain through their AI experiences. Can classroom practices realistically cater for children's desires to be active agents and learn to their strengths?

*Concluding thoughts*

This study has engaged the perspectives of four children who have shared their thoughts on their experiences of AI as an approach to learn about their learning. Their insights have demonstrated that, despite some challenges, their participation was beneficial to both help them deepen their understandings of learning and to

come to know themselves as learners. They believed that through this process they became better learners. Their theories of how they learn best were generated from the ground up, which was not only effective but empowering. Perhaps this is why they wanted others to experience what they had experienced.

As Cook-Sather (2010) suggests "[s]tudents are best positioned to teach educators how to construct such approaches, strategies and situations, Only students can tell educators what it feels like to experience those conditions (p. 43). Children's perspectives of learning should be a powerful impetus for teachers to want to tailor their pedagogies so as the children's understanding of their own learning might benefit their future learning in a more fulfilling way. On the basis of this action research project I suggest that such pedagogies may be well informed by AI.

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# APPENDICES

## Appendix A

### Letter to Board of Trustees, Principal and Teachers

May 2012

Dear Principal, BOT and teachers of Beach School,

I am writing to ask permission for you to invite four students to participate in a research project which contributes to my Master's Thesis being completed at the University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand.

My research interest is concerned with utilizing a strengths-based approach to helping students 'learn how to learn'. The research will investigate how Appreciative Inquiry (a detailed process which focuses on what is already working) can be used to help students develop an understanding about how they learn best. Appreciative inquiry (AI) is reported around the world as an effective tool to create transformative change within groups and individuals, however there is little documented research of AI as an approach to use with young people on their learning. This research is designed to implement an Appreciative Inquiry with a small group of participants and gather student 'voice' and perspectives on: their current understandings of learning, the process of the Appreciative Inquiry and evaluations of the approach. Student perspectives contribute to an authentic assessment of the effectiveness and worth of such an approach.

**Why is this project important?**
Learning to learn (metacognition), a requirement within the New Zealand curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007), plays an important role in maximising student learning potential. Many approaches to help students develop metacognition are based on solving a problem. There is sparse research on using positive approaches to understanding learning and there are very few research projects which focus on using Appreciative Inquiry (a strengths-based approach) with young people in order to do this. This research will implement the Appreciative Inquiry approach in focus group sessions and will concurrently generate deep insights on how students develop their understandings of their learning. It is intended that information from the findings will contribute to our understanding of effective ways for adults to enrich their conversations with students about their learning.

**Who will be involved in this project?**
Four students, aged between 9-11 and myself as researcher.

**How will the students be involved?**

- Teachers to select 4 students to invite to participate in the research. The criteria for selection is based on 3 factors: equal gender balance of 2 girls and 2 boys, general disposition towards learning (this research may benefit students who feel that learning is difficult for them or lack self confidence in their learning ability), and that the students are friends or have a rapport with each other, as this may enhance their comfortableness when sharing their views, thoughts and emotions as well as contribute to their enjoyment of the sessions.
- There will be 2 individual interviews (20 minutes each interview) and seven weekly focus group sessions, (one hour per session). Start date is expected to be around the beginning of June and finishing beginning of August, with 2 weeks of school holidays in the middle.
- The individual interviews will gather information on student's perceptions and understandings of their learning before and after the AI approach.
- The procedure of the 7 group sessions :

Session #1 Introduction and rapport building session –talking about their learning and how the next 6 sessions will run.

Session #2 Start the 4 step (4-D) Appreciative Inquiry. *Step 1* (Discovery). Finding 'best of' stories of when learning has gone well.

Session #3 *Step 2*. (Dream). Visualising what 'awesome' learning looks like, to them.

Session #4 *Step 3*. (Design). Within these stories, find the essences or strengths of the student that is present in each story of 'best' learning.

Session #5 *Step 4*. (Destiny). Design an action plan for ways to use these new discoveries of how they learn best.

(Each session will involve fun activities for the students to play with eg art, craft, Lego, music, drama. There will be focus group discussions at the end of each session to access student's perceptions and experiences of each session).

Session #6 Presentation of new learning –Students will be encouraged to invite parents, family and teachers to a group session where they will individually share their new understandings of their learning and present their findings. A brief questionnaire will be given to invitees to share their thoughts on the session.

Session #7 Follow-up session. As a group we will discuss student's evaluations of the project.

- All sessions will be recorded on video to allow me to see, rather than hear from a Dictaphone, who was saying what, and this will increase the quality of interpretation of data.

**What is required from the school?**

I invite you to meet with me to discuss the nature of the research, procedure, parameters and responsibilities.

Teachers select to invite participants. I will send these students an information leaflet and their parents an information letter.

I will meet with students and their parents to discuss the research and any queries.

The project requires use of appropriate space to conduct the seven sessions and 8 interviews.

I also request use of the daily notices to place a reminder to the students and teachers on the day of each session and interview, indicating time and place to meet me.

**What are the Ethical Issues?**

- ☑ This research will follow the University of Waikato's Ethical Conduct in Human Research and Related Activities Regulations 2008.Participation in the research is voluntary.
- ☑ You, the parents and the students have the right to decline involvement in the research. I will hold an information session for all stakeholders to meet with me to discuss the nature of the research and ask questions. I will also send an information and invitation letter to the parents and leaflet to the students. The selected participants will be given a consent form to read with parents, discuss, sign and mail return to me.
- ☑ Students will be informed that they can withdraw from the research up until the analysis stage of the research (31 August, 2012). Their identities will be given an assumed name and the research will make no link to the school.

**How will the school benefit from participating in the research?**

With an increasing focus on 'learning to learn' within education today, this research may be a key opportunity for your school to participate in leading edge research. Each participant may benefit from a new understanding of how they learn best, and the findings may reveal new understandings for teachers on effective partnerships with students via engaging in conversations with them about their learning. To ensure a school wide benefit, I will also offer to present the findings to the teachers, students, parents and community. It is hoped that the participants themselves are involved with this process, if they choose to be. This research will gather evaluations on the Appreciative Inquiry approach to learning, from the perspectives of *your* students. This will, I believe, give an authentic assessment of the worth and usefulness of such an approach to learning.

You can contact me either by email, letter or phone indicating your involvement. I eagerly await your reply. Kind regards Angelena Davies

# Appendix B

## Letter to parents

1st June 2012

Dear Parent or Caregiver,

I am writing to ask permission for you to invite your child to participate in a research project which contributes to my Master's Thesis being completed at the University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand.

My research interest is concerned with how students understand their own learning and investigating a new strategy to help them understand their learning, or "Learn how to learn". The strategy is called Appreciative Inquiry which is a detailed process that will focus on things that already 'work' for students and capture the 'essence' that is within each child that helps them to learn at their best.

**Why is this project important?**

Learning to learn is a requirement within the New Zealand curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007) and plays an important role in maximising student learning potential. Many approaches to help students learn how to learn are based on solving a problem. There is sparse research on using positive approaches to understanding learning. This research will implement the Appreciative Inquiry approach in focus group sessions and will generate deep insights on how students develop their understandings of their learning. It is intended that information from the findings will contribute to our understanding of effective ways for adults to engage in conversations with students about their learning.

**Who will be involved in this project?**

Four students, aged between 9-11 and myself as researcher.

**How will the students be involved?**

Teachers have invited 2 boys and 2 girls who are friends with each other and who may benefit from developing a new understanding of how they learn best. These students, and their parents, are invited to meet with me to discuss the research and any queries. You or your child can reply to me with a call or email to confirm interest.

- There will be 2 individual interviews (20 minutes each interview) and seven weekly focus group sessions (one hour per session). Start date is expected to be around the beginning of June and finishing beginning of August, with 2 weeks of school holidays in the middle.
- The 7 group sessions will involve: talking about learning and what we think learning is. Finding stories of when learning has gone really well. Visualising what awesome learning looks like to them, finding a theme or essence within these stories that is unique to the child, and talking about ways they can use these new understandings to help their future learning.
- Presentation of new learning –Students will be encouraged to invite parents, family and teachers to a group session where they will individually share their new understandings of their learning and present their findings. A brief questionnaire will be given to invitees to share their thoughts on the session.

- All sessions will be recorded on video to allow me to see, rather than hear from a Dictaphone, who was saying what, and this will increase the quality of interpretation of data.

**What are the Ethical Issues?**

- ☑ This research will follow the University of Waikato's Ethical Conduct in Human Research and Related Activities Regulations 2008.
- ☑ Participation in the research is voluntary. You and your child have the right to decline involvement in the research. I will hold an information session for you and your child to

meet me and find out more information on the nature of the research and ask questions. A consent form will be sent home for you and your child to read, discuss, sign and mail return to me.

- ☑ Students will be informed that they can withdraw from the research up until the analysis stage of the research (31 July, 2012). Their identities will be given an assumed name and the research will make no link to the school. You will be given information on the research via email (or post if preferred) throughout the research.

With an increasing focus on 'learning to learn' within education today, this research may be a key opportunity for your child to participate in leading edge research. Each participant may benefit from a new understanding of how they learn best, and the findings will reveal new understandings for teachers on how to engage in effective partnerships with students via conversations about their learning. To ensure a school wide benefit, I will also offer to present the findings to the teachers, students, parents and community. It is hoped that the participants themselves are involved with this process, if they choose to be. This research will gather evaluations on the AI approach to learning, from the perspectives of *your* child. This will, I believe, give an authentic assessment of the worth and usefulness of such an approach to learning.

You can contact me either by email, letter or phone indicating your involvement. I eagerly await your reply.

Kind regards

Angelena Davies

## Your rights

- This is not a school project so you can choose to join or not. You will not get into trouble if you choose not to join.
- You can stop participating at any time. Just let me, a teacher or a parent know, sweet as.
- It is not school work so you won't get tested on it and there is no way you can fail. Teachers will *not* know about what we do unless you choose to tell them.
- All the things we talk about will be keep private. When I write about the project or talk to others I will use a pretend name for you so no one will know what it is you have said.

So would you like to join me for some fun sessions to discover how you learn BEST?

Talk to your parents about it and meet me on Wednesday 6th June 8.30am at school and I'll tell you all about it. After that you can decide if you want to join.

Contact me if you have any questions: **Angie Davies - researcher**

07 312 6108 0274 485 969 angelena@vodafone.co.nz


# Learning How I Learn BEST

A research project by Angie Davies:

Hi, I'm Angie Davies and I'm doing research for the University of Waikato.

Research means to find out about something. I want to find out about a new way to help students learn. I am looking for 4 students to join me and together we will come to understand how YOU learn best.

## What will happen?

Firstly, I'd like to ask you some questions about your learning. This will take 20 minutes, during school time.

Then, 2 girls and 2 boys will work with me as a group every week for 1 hour during school time. We will meet for 7 sessions.

## What will we be doing?

Each week we will be talking and playing with fun things while you are finding the ways that you learn BEST.

Some of the things you can choose to work with are:

Art

Craft

Music

Lego

On the 6th week you will have an opportunity to do a presentation for your parents, friends or teachers or whoever you choose to invite. You can share what you have learnt about your learning. You can choose how you want to do it, like power-point, movie, song, drama, poster or speech.

Then I will meet with you by yourself for 20 minutes during school time to talk about your learning again

On the 7th and final week we will discuss how you thought the whole project went.

Afterwards, you will have an opportunity to design a way to present your thoughts about the whole project to the school, teachers, parents or whoever you want. But only if you want to.

I, _____ (print your full name), agree to participate in the *Learning how I learn BEST* project.

I understand that the purpose of this project is for Angie to gain an understanding of how students learn. There will be 4 students from Ohope Beach School involved.

I know that I can choose to participate. I also know that I can choose *not* to participate and will not be punished. I know that this is not a school project, so I won't get marked or tested (so there's no way I can get it wrong). Angie is a researcher, not a teacher and just wants to get some information about how I learn to help other adults understand more about learning.

I agree to participate in 7 group sessions with the other 3 students. Each session will be video recorded and be 1 hour long. We will talk with Angie about our learning and we can choose some fun things to play with to try to understand how we learn best.

On the 6th session I will be able to invite my parents and teachers and who-ever supports my learning to a celebration where I can show them my new understandings of how I learn best. I will also participate in 2 interviews with Angie where we will talk about my learning for 20 minutes each time, one interview at the start of the project and one at the end.

I know that the information from this project will be used for Angie's University study. It may also be used to tell other teachers and adults about the project and how good or not good it was in helping us understand our learning.

I know that Angie will use a pretend name when she writes and talks about me in the project so people won't know who I am.

I know that at the end of the project, Angie will meet with us and tell us about the information she will tell other adults and teachers. I can choose to tell other teachers and adults too, with either posters, power point presentation, movie or how ever I want.

I know that it is OK if I don't want to participate at any stage during the project and I can tell Angie, my parent or a teacher that I don't want to go anymore.

My parents or I can ring Angie (07 312 6108) or email her angelena@vodafone.co.nz if we have any questions or worries.

I understand about this project and want to join.

Name of student

_____

Signature of student

_____

Parent Consent:

I understand the purpose and process of the research and I agree to my child participating. I believe my child has a full understanding of what they are consenting to. I know that the research has approval from the Faculty of Education Research Ethics Committee and my child will be protected by the University of Waikato's Ethical Conduct in Human Research and Related Activities Regulations 2008 and all harm has been minimised.

Name of Parent

_____

Signature of Parent

_____

Date: _____

Please drop into the office before Friday 8th June. Thank you

# Learning how I learn BEST

**Consent Form for Participants and Parents to sign**

Researcher: Angie Davies

Contact Number: 07 312 6108 0274 485 969

angelena@vodafone.co.nz

Supervisor: Dr Rachel McNae, University of Waikato

Contact number: 07 8384500 ext 7731

# Appendix E

## Semi Structured Interview Guide

**Individual interview guide held prior to AI programme: (approximately 20 minutes)**

- Tell me about the word "learning". learning means lots of different things to different people, what I think learning is, could be different from what your teacher may think it is which may be different to what YOU think it is. So when I say the word learning what do you think about? What pictures or words come to your mind? Tell me more about the word "learning.
- Where do you learn things?
- I want to know more about your learning. Tell me about when learning is really easy for you. Prompt- lets choose a situation of learning (ie at school). Prompt-let's think of a time.
- When you have a really good learning experience, how does it feel? Can you tell me a time?
- Have you ever thought about what makes learning easier for you? Tell me.
- Why do you think it was good?
- How does it feel when learning is easy? (use emotion cards to prompt)
- Have you ever thought about what makes learning harder for you? Tell me.
- Have you ever thought about what things you need to do or have around you to help you learn at your best? Tell me about this.
- Do you ever have conversations and talk to other adults or teachers *about* your learning? Tell me about this, like who do you talk to? What sort of things do you talk about? Do you feel confident to say what you want? Do you feel they really listen?
- Do you ever have suggestions or a good idea about how you could learn something better? If so, did you talk to an adult or teacher about it? If not, why not? If yes, tell me about that story. Did they 'do' anything about your suggestion? Did you feel you were listened to?

**Final interview guide held following the AI intervention: (approximately 20 minutes)**

- Thinking about the whole programme, from the first session together till the last session with your family and friends, tell me about the best parts?

Prompt- together we will reflect on each of the seven sessions. And why these were the best parts?

- If we were to do the programme again, what would you suggest we change and why?
- Do you think you have a different understanding of your learning now? Tell me about that.
- How did it feel to have conversations with me, an adult, about your learning?

- Did you feel you could say what you wanted? Was there any time when you didn't say what you wanted to? Why was this? Tell me about it.
- Tell me about presenting your new understandings of your learning to your family and friends and teacher. What did it feel like to have them learn your new way of learning?
- Has it made a difference? Have there been any changes to the way you learn at school? What about at home? Has this programme made a difference to the way you learn now?

# Appendix F

## Focus group discussion guide

**Focus group discussion guide held during AI sessions**

- Let's talk about learning again, let's discuss what you think learning is now. Prompt – tell me about any new learning.
- Have you noticed your learning? In here? In your classroom? At home?
- What is it like learning in this group? Is it different from learning in other situations? Tell me about this.
- What was it like to be able to choose what to play with? Why do you think you felt this way?
- Do you feel you are able to say what you want? And are your thoughts and ideas listened to?
- Is it different talking together in this group, than other groups? At school? With teachers? With family? Why do you think this might be?

**Focus group discussion guide held following the AI intervention: Evaluation**

- Thinking about the whole programme, from the first session together till the last session with your family and friends, tell me about the best parts? And why these were the best parts?
- If we were to do the programme again, what would you suggest we change and why?
- Do you think you have a different understanding of your learning now? Tell me about that.
- What was it like to have conversations with me, an adult, about your learning? How did it make you feel? (prompt-emotion cards)
- Did you feel you could say what you wanted?
- Tell me about presenting your new understandings of your learning to your family and friends and teacher.
- What are your thoughts on how to tell others about the programme? Would you be interested in presenting some of your findings? To who? And how?

## Appendix G

Questionnaire - for attendees of the children's presentation

**Your thoughts please**

- What have your found most interesting about the presentations today?

- What did you learn about your child/student and their learning

- Was it valuable for you to attend this session? Why or why not?

- Do you think anything will be different in the way you help your child/student learn things now? And how?

Please tick: Teacher Parent Family
Friend

Thank you very much for attending the presentation today. I appreciate your time in completing this form. If you have any queries feel free to give me a call

---

Angie Davies, researcher (phone number supplied)

# Appendix H

## Example of Field notes

First session: Rapport building June 19th 2012

The children arrived with enthusiasm (phew). However 3 came after the bell had rung and one was 10 mins late, which meant we didn't start until he arrived. I had Hot Chocolate for them to make themselves to warm up/icebreak and to make them feel comfortable.

We began by sitting in a circle and discussing the last interviews and a bit about what we will be doing, they didn't seem particularly interested or worried about what we might be doing today or in the future. They seemed happy to be at the session. I opened a box of lovely coloured pens and they seemed very excited about this, all choosing and arguing over colours and having equal amounts of pens each.

We talked about their ethical rights again, I reminded them of their right to withdraw and of their right to privacy, they chose their fake names and seemed to enjoy this. I also showed them the camera and the Dictaphone and they seemed ok with this. It was easily seen but not a prominent feature within the room, (on a shelf) so this appeared to not hinder their responses. The Dictaphone is small enough to not be a large feature and it was just sitting among the other things in middle of circle (camera, books, pens)

We discussed the conduct of the co-constructed sessions, and my role as participant. My only rule was that they don't put their hand up, because I'm not a teacher. I invited them to make some of their own rules. They made up a rules not to steal each others pens and joked a bit about a rule that no one is "allowed to say Hi" and seemed pleased that I let this 'silly' rule apply. This was a way I could show them my adult power does not rule in this group.

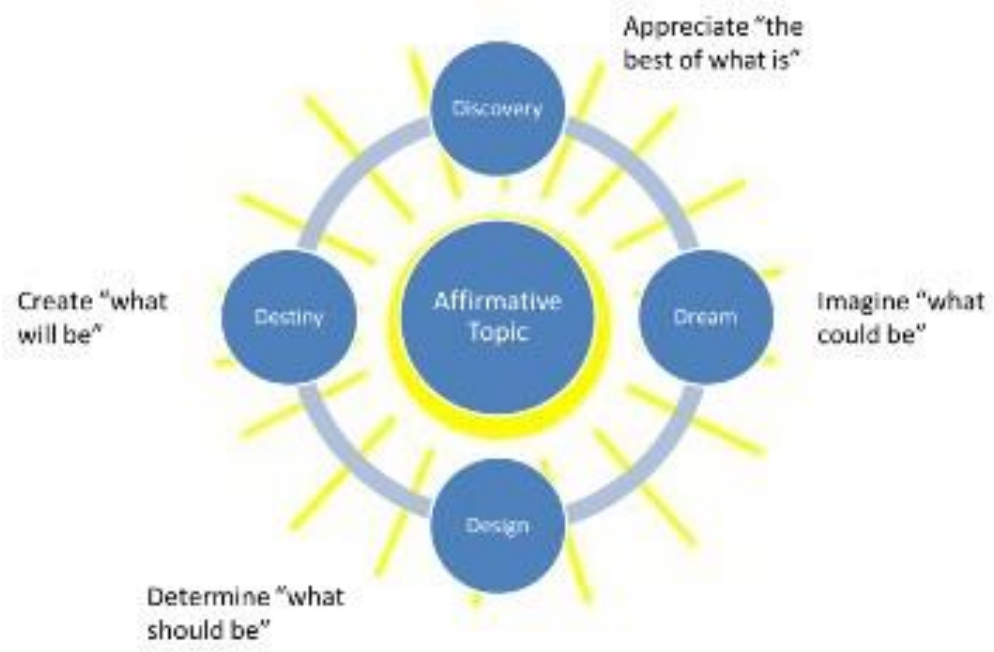
We explored their understandings of learning. Dialogue was a bit stilted just sitting and talking and sometimes they drifted off and lost focus. Arguing over pens seemed to be important to them. So we did an activity (Gloop) and also a flash card game where I asked them if there was any learning going on in certain photos. This game was great for them to explore and verbalise their thoughts on learning and how they learn.

Reflections: reflexive, who I am and how I think

My presence in the group today, highly influenced the way the group conducted, contributed, felt (emotions), and participated. However, this is actually an important part of the research. To shift the adult power/presence to allow young people the space to shift their thinking, their own habits of learning and thinking. When I didn't growl them for being 'naughty' or being distracted or being 'silly', this showed them that a) things are different in this group and b) they are in charge of/can monitor their own behaviour and contribution. This research is not designed for me to be objective, but to research how I interact with the children, and how this influences the AI method AND the process of understanding learning. I also am a learner in this group. The research has a very meta-learning effect on me too.

## Appendix I

A typical Appreciative Inquiry Model



## Appendix J

The Appreciative Inquiry Intervention

Within the action research process, the AI model was implemented. The action research involved 7 sessions altogether: one group session on exploring learning, four group sessions implementing the AI 4-D model, one group session to present and share their outcomes to an audience of their choice, and lastly a group session to evaluate the intervention.

The AI model used in this research involved an adaptation of the 4-D model of Discovery, Dream, Design and Destiny (see Appendix I).

**The AI intervention: A guideline I designed before implementation**

| | |
|---|---|
| Session One | Exploring understandings of learning |
| Session Two | Discovery Stage. Reflecting on 'when learning has been at my best' and dialoguing to find a learning essence, while involved in an activity to support discussion. |
| Session Three | Dream Stage. Visioning of 'what learning could look like if it was always at my best', while doing an activity to support discussion |
| Session Four | Design Stage. Writing a provocative proposition, or statement of their learning essence, while doing an activity to support discussion |
| Session Five | Destiny Stage. Making an action plan for how to use new understandings of themselves of learners in their future learning, while engaged in an activity to support discussion. |
| Session Six | Presentation. Disseminating the outcomes of their AI experience to an audience of their choice |
| Session Seven | Evaluating the intervention |

## The AI intervention: how the intervention eventuated

### *Session one*

The first session was a rapport building session and opportunities to explore understandings of learning. It began with the children making a hot chocolate and a discussion on the ethics of the research and the children's rights. I introduced a game about learning and also an activity (making a messy substance called Gloop) to engage the children's sense of enjoyment. Group dialogue ensued while engaging in the activity. The children engaged in conversations more effectively and enthusiastically during the activities and less so when we sat down formally in a focus group. We played The Learning Game (see Appendix K) to explore the children's understandings and perceptions of learning We also talked about Appreciative Inquiry, and finding our essences or what gives life to our learning. Together we negotiated to use the term brilliance instead of essence because the children had a better understanding of what this term meant. We also discussed what the children wanted to 'play' with the following week and planned session two.

### *Session two*

The second session was the first step in the AI model- Discovery. It began with the children making a hot chocolate and a reminder of the ethics of the research and then involved the children engaging in a craft activity (of their choice) while thinking about and discussing their stories of when learning had been at their best. Each child gave 3 stories each. We tried to find links in their stories that may reveal what their learning essence might be. Each story was recorded on Dictaphone and I later made transcriptions from these to share back with the children At the end of the session we discussed and planned activities for session three.

### *Session three*

The third session was the second step in the AI model – Dream. However because the children had not yet discovered their learning essences, the AI step Dream could not be done yet. The session began with the children making a hot chocolate and a reminder of ethics of the research and then involved 'playing' with Lego (activity of their choice) while we dialogued about learning and how we learn.

Then we played The Learning Game again (see appendix K) which brought about much enthusiasm and dialogue and also an activity on Brilliance (see appendix K). Through dialogue the children began to see some themes emerge in their areas of brilliance and make links to their learning. While we read over some transcripts of previous sessions the children also began to make connections between their brilliances and themes in their stories of 'best learning moments'. We discussed and planned activities for session four.

*Session four*

The fourth session was planned as the third step in the AI model, but this needed flexibility due to the results from the previous week. It began quite spontaneously as I was setting up the video camera and the children wanted to watch themselves. So we sat for a long time reviewing the past footage. The children and I made connections between some children's brilliances that had emerged from the previous week and their actions on film. The group dialogue that ensued generated great enthusiasm and it was during this group dialogue that all children 'discovered' their learning essences.

Next, they engaged in a play-dough activity (of their choice) where they made and then played with play-dough. During this time they had an opportunity to do step two of the AI- Dream which involved dialoguing of what their learning could look like if it involved them utilising their learning essences, which they did so during dialogue while playing with play-dough. This was unsuccessful. So I then suggested we use learning cards (picture cards of children doing various activities) as a tool for them to imagine, if that was them in the picture, how could their brilliance help them to learn that thing? This activity helped them to make connections with events and aspects of their own lives for when they could use their brilliance to help their learning. This was an alternative approach to the traditional AI Dream Stage and was more successful at engaging the children's ideas. We then discussed and planned activities for session five.

*Session five*

The fifth session was originally planned as the fourth and final step in the AI model, but again this needed flexibility. The children had, the previous week, planned to make a documentary of learning by interviewing other children in the school. However, once I consulted with my supervisors we decided that due to my

ethics proposal, this was not possible. With the video cameras already arranged, the children decided to interview each other and myself, with their own questions they had formulated on learning, how to learn and learning essences. It was during this time that the children did stage 3 of AI – Design. They created statements (or provocative propositions) while they were interviewing each other for example Jasmine said *"I'm learning at my best when I'm talking"* [S5].

Next I suggested that we write or draw these new understandings (or provocative propositions) on paper. They each wrote a statement describing their brilliances, and then ways in which they could use this to help their future learning, hence completing stage 4 of AI – Destiny.

We then evaluated their outcomes and discussed the following week's presentations. I informed them that they could be active agents and have many choices in who to invite and how they wanted to conduct their presentations. Jasmine and Zoe decided to write personal invitations for their parents and verbally ask their teachers, while Steve and Ryan decided to verbally ask their teachers and parents. We agreed that the following week we would spend time organising the presentation.

*Preparation session*

This unplanned group session did not generate any data, it was simply an opportunity for the children to work on their presentations. Steve and Ryan chose to make a combined power point while Jasmine and Zoe chose to make a poster each (which they had also been working on at home). They also decided to engage the audience in some of their favourite games that we had played over the sessions. We practiced these with usual excitement and laughter.

*Session six*

The sixth session involved the children presenting their outcomes from their AI into their learning. The presentation was mostly child-led however I organised the IT aspects. All of the children's mother's attended, two fathers, one grandmother, two siblings, and two teachers (for half of the presentation). The boys presented the first half, firstly by playing a game they had learnt in the intervention (see Appendix K), with the audience and then talking to their power point presentation. The girls presented the second half by playing a game they had also learnt in the intervention (see Appendix K) and then presenting their posters. Each child had

an opportunity to share their experience of the programme and their new understandings of their learning and how their learning could better utilise their brilliances. At the end, the parents asked the children and me questions and then filled in a questionnaire of their evaluations of the programme.

*Session seven*

This was a focus group session to evaluate the programme. I designed and utilised The Pebble Game (see Appendix H #4) to gather the children's thoughts. Another high energy game that produced laughter and the children said they enjoyed immensely.

# Appendix K

## Activities and Games

### Activity #1 The Learning Game

Required props

5 cushions in a continuum. 1 = Really helpful, 2 = sort of helpful, 3 = sometimes helpful sometimes not helpful, 4 = not helpful, 5 = makes it harder to learn.

How to play

Players stand on a base line a few meters away from the continuum of cushions. One person (typically the facilitator) reads out a question from the list of questions below. The rest of the group runs to stand on the cushion that represents their thoughts and answer to that question. The facilitator can invite players to share their reasons for choice of cushion. Players then run back to base line.

List of questions

Does writing help you to learn?

Does reading help you to learn?

Does eating help you to learn?

Does singing help you to learn?

Does quietness help you to learn?

Does noise help you to learn?

Do other people help you to learn?

Does working by yourself help you to learn?

Does competition help you to learn?

Do tests help you to learn?

Object of the game

- To provide opportunities for players to reflect on their learning, critically think about how they learn and to verbally share their thoughts with others, whist in a physical activity.
- To provide players with exposure to language around learning.
- To provide opportunities for players to language their own learning.

**Activity # 2 Have you ever…**

Props

Chairs or cushions, one for each player minus one. Ie 5 players = 4 chairs

How to play

Players sit on a chair or cushion. One player volunteers to stand in the middle. This person starts a question with "Have you ever…" then finishes the statement with something related to learning. For example, "Have you ever learned something off the internet?" or "have you ever learned something really hard?" or "Have you ever had fun while learning?"

The seated players think about the question and if they HAVE done that learning they must move seats with someone else. There will always be one seat short so the game can be rushed and physical (and involve a lot of laughter) to beat other players to a seat. The person left standing then asks their own question "Have you ever….". Facilitator can invite players to share their experiences with the group.

Object of the game

- To provide opportunities for players to reflect on their learning, critically think about how they learn and to verbally share their thoughts with others, whist in a physical activity.
- To provide players with exposure to language around learning.
- To provide opportunities for players to language their own learning.

**Activity # 3 Finding Brilliance**

Props

Felt pens, paper, container

How to play

Firstly, invite the children write or draw all the things that they think they are 'brilliant' at, making the list as large as possible, exploring many different contexts. Then offer to share these with the group

Secondly, invite the children to write the name of each person in the group on a separate piece of paper. Then anonymously write or draw things that they think their peers are brilliant at. Fold up the piece of paper and put into the container.

Thirdly, facilitator selects pieces and paper out of container and reads to the group.

Object of the game

For children to identify and expand their understandings of strengths in learning

To increase the children's sense of confidence/success in learning

**Activity # 4 The Pebble Game**

Props

A box of pebble sweets

How to play the game

Children each select a different colour of each pebble. Researcher calls out a colour and corresponding question. Children answer the question if they choose and then eat the sweet. Make sure that there are enough colours for as many questions. Allow the children the opportunity to select a colour to correspond to a question that they may have.

Object of the game

To make the focus group discussion more enjoyable for the children to engage in, rather than sitting in a formal discussion.