



ENHANCING LEARNER AGENCY: ENGAGING APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY TO SUPPORT SCHOOL TRANSITIONS

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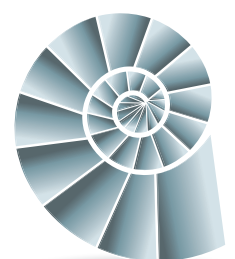
There is a growing body of literature highlighting the various challenges both teachers and students face when students transition between schools, (e.g. from intermediate to high school), with very little focus given to transitions within school contexts. The nature of common transition processes frequently positions students within a deficit model as individuals needing to be fixed, reflects managerial rather than pedagogical decision-making, (e.g. fluidity, staffing considerations, time management, maximising time on task and minimising disruption), and can lack overall pedagogical focus. As a team of educators and researchers, we strongly believed that **Appreciative Inquiry** had the potential to be an innovative practice which can aid in creating coherent learning pathways for a more seamless education experience.

Transitions are an important part of educational journeys - physically and culturally (Paki & Peters, 2015). We believe that by changing the way we view learners and perceive our teaching practice, we can expose, shift and counteract traditional models of teaching and learning which continue to suffocate innovation, curiosity, and the courage to try new things. Appreciative Inquiry supports the notions of dialogue and reflection which we believe can be suitably linked to transitions within schools (Peters & Roberts, 2015). Like teaching, it is a relational practice (Gibbs, 2006). It prioritizes students and their success, illuminating to those supporting the student in their learning, important elements which have the potential to enhance learner agency. This often occurs through the provision of new information about the strengths students bring to their learning which teachers, students and families can use to develop personalized learning plans, better align

WHAT IS APPRECIATIVE

INQUIRY (AI)? At its heart, AI is about the search for the best in people, their organizations, and the strengths-filled, opportunity-rich world around them.

AI is not so much a shift in the methods and models of organizational change, but AI is a fundamental shift in the overall perspective taken throughout the entire change process to 'see' the wholeness of the human system and to 'inquire' into that system's strengths, possibilities, and successes.





teaching practices and approaches to support students, making “a faster and greater difference to ... students learning outcomes” (Ministry of Education, 2015, p. 4).

A project following this philosophy was located in a rural primary school in the Waikato district. It investigated children’s understandings of learning to assist current and future teachers to shift their pedagogical approaches in order to provide learning experiences which are more meaningful and relevant for learners. Through using Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005) a learning community which could confidently and meaningfully inquire into how students were ‘learning at their best’ was created. Students and teachers worked collaboratively to generate a sense of agency about their own identity as learners working within this learning community. Central to this approach was its collaborative and relational nature, where students shared the information they discovered about themselves as learners with teachers and whānau to strengthen support structures, enhance teaching pedagogy and improve the overall transition experiences within and between classes.

Emerging findings from this work illustrate that appreciative inquiry has the potential to foster both student and teacher agency to effect change in learning and teaching relationships. This inquiry approach supported students to articulate their own learning needs, and engender a sense of belonging across learning spaces. This inquiry also provided both teachers and students with new information to respond to these needs in meaningful, creative and courageous ways.

If you would like to learn more about this project, we will be sharing findings from this work at the upcoming national **NZEALS Conference, April 18-20**. We look forward to seeing you there.

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