

An Appreciative Approach to Middle Leader Engagement in School Improvement

Anne Raynor MA

January 2017

*Thesis submitted to the University of Nottingham for the degree of Doctorate of Education
December 2015.*

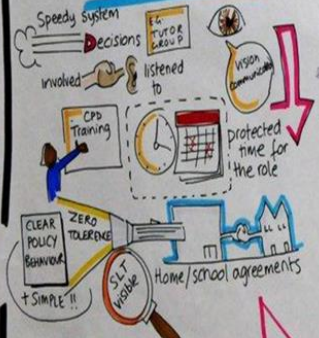
THE STORY SO FAR



THE DREAM



We need



Move to Outstanding

our gifts

flexible not afraid of change
 innovative visionary
 resilient honest reflective
 hardworking committed mad
 constructive talented supportive
 quick learners lots of ideas
 gearbox sense of humour
 dedication patience good behaviour managers

FIRST STEPS

Nigel email Mike/SIT re: working party
 Andy talk to Mike/Elaine re: interim plan
 All contribute to being OFSTED ready
 Chris+Sue+Ray to talk about outdoor play
 Find time to agree Q1/Q2 mtg agenda

Table of Contents

ABSTRACT.....	1
INTRODUCTION.....	2
THE POWER OF STORIES	3
THE VALUE OF THIS INQUIRY	6
THE RESEARCH	6
THE THESIS	8
1 CONTEXT	10
1.1 SITUATIONAL SNAPSHOT OF THE ACADEMY	10
1.2 EXIT INTERVIEWS.....	12
2 AN INSIDER PERSPECTIVE	14
2.1 HOW THE STORY IS TOLD	14
2.2 STATEMENT OF RESEARCHER’S PERSPECTIVE	16
2.3 ONTOLOGICAL AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL STANCE	20
2.4 A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVIST STANCE	22
2.5 THE DILEMMA OF INSIDER RESEARCH.....	22
2.6 THE ETHICS OF INSIDERNESS.....	24
2.7 RESPECT OF AND FOR THE INDIVIDUAL.....	24
2.8 BENEFICENCE	25
3 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY.....	28
3.1 RESEARCH QUESTIONS	28
3.2 ASSUMPTIONS.....	29
3.3 DATA COLLECTION PLAN.....	31
3.4 DATA ANALYSIS.....	31
3.5 CYCLE ONE.....	32
3.6 CYCLE TWO	33
3.7 LIMITATIONS OF THE INQUIRY	33
3.8 RIGOUR AND VALIDITY	34
4 CYCLE ONE LITERATURE REVIEW	35
4.1 WHAT IS SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT?	35
4.2 THE IMPORTANCE OF LEADERSHIP	38
4.3 DEVELOPING LEADERSHIP AND INTERNAL SUPPORT SYSTEMS	40
4.4 GOOD LEADERS USE RESEARCH AS A SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT TOOL	41
5 CYCLE ONE: RESEARCH IN ACTION.....	44

5.1	CYCLE ONE: SEPTEMBER 2009-JULY 2010	43
5.2	SELECTION OF PARTICIPANTS	44
5.3	INFORMED CONSENT	44
5.4	TIME AND COMMITMENT	45
5.5	THE INQUIRY PROCESS.....	45
5.6	STAGE 1: CLARIFICATION OF THE KEY ISSUE	46
5.7	SUMMARY OF STAGE ONE.....	48
5.8	STAGE 2 – FOCUS GROUP.....	48
5.9	SUMMARY OF STAGE TWO	51
5.10	STAGE THREE: INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS.....	51
5.11	ANALYSIS OF DATA	52
5.12	FEEDBACK TO THE MIDDLE LEADERS	53
5.13	PERSONAL REFLECTION.....	54
5.14	STAGE 4 DEVELOPING A PLAN FOR ACTION.....	56
5.15	MAKING SENSE OF UNSATISFACTORY OUTCOMES	56
5.16	A PROFESSIONAL AND RESEARCH CRISIS	58
6	CYCLE TWO LITERATURE REVIEW	62
6.1	APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY	62
6.2	APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY IN PRACTICE.....	63
6.3	ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE	69
6.4	BALANCING THE POSITIVE SPIN	70
7	CYCLE TWO: RESEARCH IN ACTION.....	71
7.1	REDEFINING THE RESEARCH QUESTION.....	71
7.2	CYCLE TWO: RESEARCH IN ACTION	71
7.3	INTRODUCTION OF THE PROJECT	72
7.4	DEVELOPING A COHESIVE GROUP	75
7.5	DEFINITION.....	76
7.6	THE AFFIRMATIVE TOPIC.....	77
7.7	THE SOAR APPROACH.....	80
7.8	SUMMARY	82
8	DISCOVERY	85
8.1	OBJECTIVES	85
8.2	AN AUTHENTIC DIALOGUE?	90
8.3	MAPPING THE POSITIVE CORE.....	94
8.4	SUMMARY OF THE DISCOVERY CYCLE	94
8.5	THE INTERVIEWS	97
8.6	SUMMARY OF THE DISCOVERY CYCLE	103
9	THE DREAM.....	105

9.1	OBJECTIVES OF THE DREAM CYCLE	105
9.2	ORGANISATION OF THE CYCLE.....	107
9.3	SUMMARY OF THE DREAM CYCLE	129
10	DESIGN AND DESTINY	134
10.1	OBJECTIVES.....	134
10.2	AN ACADEMY ASSET MAP:.....	137
10.3	FROM DREAM TO ACTION.....	138
10.4	THE PLAN OF ACTION	140
10.5	SUMMARY OF THE DESIGN CYCLE	141
10.6	DESTINY: IMPLEMENTATION, ONGOING SUPPORT, AND SHARED LEARNING.....	144
10.7	THE FINAL CYCLE: THE PARTING OF WAYS.....	145
	DISCUSSION.....	146
	CONCLUDING COMMENTS.....	170
	FINAL WORD	175
	BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	176
	APPENDICES.....	202
	APPENDIX I	202
	APPENDIX II	205
	APPENDIX III	207
	APPENDIX IV	207
	APPENDIX V	210
	APPENDIX VI	211

List of Figures

Figure 1 The stages of Cycle One	46
Figure 2 Appreciative Inquiry (AI) for school improvement.....	65
Figure 3 Pictorial representation of AI – shared with participants in Cycle Two – Potter, 2001	67
Figure 4 The steps of the Discovery cycle	86
Figure 5 Pictorial representation of the story of the Academy	117
Figure 6 Pictorial representation of how the participants felt about the Academy.....	117
Figure 7 Pictorial representation of what the participants liked/disliked	118
Figure 8 Pictorial representation of what the participants had as their desired future i.e. The Dream	122
Figure 9 Pictorial representation of what the participants feared.....	124
Figure 10 Pictorial representation of how the participants viewed themselves	127
Figure 11 Pictorial representation of the needs of the participants.....	128

List of Tables

Table 1 Reasons for staff leaving the academy.....	12
Table 2 Key themes of school improvement, adapted from Hopkins (2008)	37
Table 3 Differences between SWOT and SOAR (Stavros & Hinrichs, 2008)	81
Table 4 Diagram of the differences between a deficit approach and an affirmative approach	82

Abstract

Much has been written on the importance of increasing leadership capacity in schools and managing systems for leadership development. However, little focus has been given to creating the necessary conditions to facilitate the emergence of leadership in order to support school improvement. Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a philosophy and method for promoting transformational change within organisations, shifting from a traditional problem-based orientation to a more strength-based approach to change, which focuses on affirmation, appreciation and positive dialogue.

This research study examines an innovative appreciative approach to facilitating positive and rapid school improvement. This is achieved through qualitative analysis whereby I explore the emergence of middle leadership during an Appreciative Inquiry initiative in a large, urban Academy and identify those features of Appreciative Inquiry that were conducive to such emergence. In addition, I show that the initiative provided participants with many of the elements considered vital to leading a vibrant and democratic learning community.

These are opportunities for professional reflection and sense-making, a safe and affirming learning community, time to dialogue with others within the organisation regarding their core values and commitments, a collaborative work culture, space for networking, and the freedom to take action.

Introduction

Much has been written on the importance of increasing leadership capacity in schools and managing systems for leadership development. However, little focus has been given to creating the necessary conditions to facilitate the emergence of leadership to support school improvement. Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a philosophy and method for promoting transformational change within organisations, shifting from a traditional problem-based orientation to a more strength-based approach to change, which focuses on affirmation, appreciation and positive dialogue.

This research study examines an innovative appreciative approach to facilitating positive and rapid school improvement. This is achieved through qualitative analysis whereby I explore the emergence of middle leadership during an Appreciative Inquiry initiative in a large, urban Academy and identify those features of Appreciative Inquiry that were conducive to such emergence. In addition, I show that the initiative provided participants with many of the elements considered vital to leading a vibrant and democratic learning community. These are opportunities for professional reflection and sense-making, a safe and affirming learning community, time to dialogue with others within the organisation regarding their core values and commitments, a collaborative work culture, space for networking, and the freedom to act.

Education in England has for many years faced an unprecedented period of rapid change. Challenges - such as how to address chronic underachievement, the implementation of modern learning environments, developing inquiry or project-based learning, and how to deliver an increased level of personalisation and student agency in learning - all require schools to make significant changes to behaviours and norms that have been in place for years. Whilst “industrial model” thinking (Robinson, 2008, p. 574) may have previously served schools well, current school improvement requires a much more innovative, entrepreneurial approach to leading change. This is imperative if schools and learning communities are to ensure that they are constantly evolving and adapting to best meet student, parent, and community needs (Matthews, 2009).

Change is often one of the most difficult things for people to cope with in life, but the rapid rate of progress both within and externally to schools means that change knowledge for educators is now a “forever proposition” (Fullan & Donnelly, 2013, p. 16). This means that sustainable ways of managing change are needed as a matter of urgency. Engaging with the change process as part of our daily existence is difficult, but it is vital if schools are to remain relevant in an increasingly unpredictable and global culture. Some schools are managing this well but others, as demonstrated in this study, are struggling to rise to the challenge.

There is now a considerable body of professional work and research that addresses how schools might achieve sustainable change. Much of this stresses the importance of school leadership and the crucial role of capacity building through continuing professional development for staff. However, much of the extant literature does not emanate from practitioners. Rather, it has been written by academics, consultants, critical friends, and researchers (Harris, 2004; Leithwood et al., 2008; Day et al., 2009).

Only a minority of the current literature has been written by school practitioners (e.g. Bartlett & Burton, 2006) and much of the literature focuses on successes. The rationale of this is that schools needing to change can learn from those that have already been through the successful change process. Much less is written on the lessons that might be learned from change which has been less successful, although the value of the negative case is well known in fields such as science and medicine (Bagnall, 2012).

The power of stories

Everyone loves a good story and everyone is a storyteller. Stories engage, inspire and enthuse. We have all been storytellers from an early age, with the making and telling of stories being a way of creating meaning. This in turn leads to our understanding of reality. People relate to stories as they are part of their evolutionary makeup² and part of our primal need to communicate (Rutledge, 2011).

² <https://experiencematters.blog/2009/09/01/the-physiological-power-of-storytelling/> [Retrieved 02/07/2009]

Barthes (1967, p. 14) says that “the history of narrative begins with the history of mankind; there does not exist, and has never existed, a people without narratives”. I propose that stories are immensely important as the human brain still looks to story content as a way of making sense of things, offering a cognitive map to explain how things work and how we understand our place in the world.

Organisations strive to compose their own narrative, a core story which they create and share in order to engage and enthuse others. What is clear is that the narratives composed by organisations are told *by* an organisation, *within* an organisation and *about* an organisation. This is reiterated by Dufour et al. (2010, p.9), who state that, “all organisations have stories – typically unexplained assumption, beliefs and interpretations of experience that help members create a vision of perceived reality, explain how things ought to be, and specify ‘the way we do things round here.’ Every organisation is a living human system with conversational processes being powerful and creative sources that can bring about change (Lewis et al., 2008, p. 14). A school is no different.

But what if the corporate narrative is one of positivity and success, yet the staff in the organisation tell one of negativity, despondency, grievance, and (at times) despair? If story telling has the power to give people a voice, then what does it say about an organisation if staff struggle to find a positive narrative? In fact, what does it say if the narrative is not only negative but at times destructive and significantly impacts on both teacher engagement and a school’s ability to improve? It was into this kind of environment that I stepped three years ago.

Within days of taking up the post of Vice Principal in an inner-city Academy, I recognised that the culture was one of negativity. There was high absenteeism, a significant and quick turnover of staff and, most concerning, eighteen grievances against the leadership team had been raised during the previous year. This pervading grievance culture led to a lack of trust at all levels and an unhealthy sense of having to ‘watch your back’. There was also a culture of individualism, disengagement and classroom territorialism.

It was not that the teachers did not want the best for the young people but was more to do with an individualist culture that appeared to be a direct result of staff feeling both personally and professionally threatened by a non-supportive environment. There was little or no team working and there was a real 'us and them' culture between the senior leadership and the middle leaders, with blame being apportioned to both sides. There seemed to be a lack of strategic thought, and school improvement initiatives were floundering as the middle leadership team was struggling to put into action what the senior team was deciding were priorities. Furthermore, there appeared to be no empowerment of middle leaders and as a result they had no buy-in. A cycle of inaction, lack of trust and antagonism had arisen as a result.

I propose that it is through empowerment of the individual and teams that effective change can both happen and be sustained. However, in order for this to be successful, core conditions need to be in place. These core conditions fall into six areas and fit with Maslach et al.'s (2001, p. 400) model of engagement. They are:

- i. manageable workload
- ii. control
- iii. rewards and recognition
- iv. community and social support
- v. perceived fairness and values.

These six areas were not being addressed by the senior leadership team within the Academy. As a result, the middle leaders were continually focusing on the deficits, with negative messages abounding, even though there were clearly many good news stories within the Academy.

This was seemingly stifling creativity and narrowing their sense of being able to be effective agents of change. Having been a senior leader for many years in a variety of settings, my professional judgment was that staff at the Academy had never been given the opportunity to professionally self-actualise in a supportive environment that embraced participatory and emancipatory learning processes. This meant that pre-conceived ideas were not being challenged and there was little value being placed

on teams discovering, understanding and celebrating the positive things that were happening.

The basis of my professional practice is that positive solution finding and the empowerment of all stakeholders is a guiding philosophy to organisational change (Ludema et al., 2001, p. 191) and this raised questions about the leadership systems already in place in the Academy. It certainly did not align with Day et al.'s (2009, p. 188) suggestion that effective leaders “provided an infrastructure where it was safe to try things out.” This view was supported by the stories being told by the middle leaders, who painted a picture of frustration and disillusionment. There was a sense that they felt collectively disempowered and disengaged from Academy improvement processes. It was this negative environment that led me to develop a two-year project that had the specific intention of engaging middle leaders more actively in the school improvement process. I shall explore this throughout the thesis.

The value of this inquiry

This thesis offers an initial narrative of a change process that did not achieve its aims; and it offers a salient analysis of the kinds of conditions that need to be in place if change is to occur and be sustained.

The contribution of the study is, therefore, threefold – it adds to what is known about school change, leadership and sustainability; it offers a practitioner perspective; and it provides an analysis of the ways in which a capacity building process can be confounded by context.

This is the story of the process through which I came to make these claims to knowledge and how I have developed a different epistemology of leadership practice within the context of school improvement.

The research

As stated, this is a practitioner-researcher inquiry. It was conducted using two cycles of action research focusing on the broad question:

How can a senior leader motivate the middle leaders in the organisation to want to do new (and often very difficult) things in order to facilitate rapid school improvement within a system that stifles creativity?

The inquiry took place over a period of two years and involved two cohorts of middle leaders. The inquiry proceeded in two action research cycles, with the first being through the kind of leadership activity that is promoted in leadership training programmes such as the National Professional Qualification of Headteachers and Leading from the Middle.

That is to say, it is a classical management approach that focuses on rules, roles and procedures. It adopts what I describe as a deficit approach to school improvement. This cycle of the inquiry resulted in unsatisfactory outcomes, as I explain in Chapter One.

I subsequently changed my approach in the second cycle to one of an appreciative approach to inquiry. In Cycle Two I examine strength-based processes and their relationship to the emergence of effective middle leadership and school improvement. Specifically, through qualitative analysis, I explore the development of middle leadership during an initiative in an urban school to identify the features of Appreciative Inquiry that were conducive to such emergence. This second cycle forms the bulk of this thesis and is explained in Chapters 6-10. The thesis concludes by looking at the lessons that can be gleaned from the activities I undertook, and how these can be adapted and transferred to school improvement interventions and strategies.

In addition, I note that the initiative provided participants with many of the elements considered vital to leading a healthy learning community - a greater understanding of the big picture, opportunities for professional reflection and sense making, a safe and affirming learning community, time to dialogue with others in the system regarding their core values and commitments, a collaborative work culture, space for networking, and the freedom to act.

The Thesis

This thesis demonstrates my capacity for independent inquiry as well as originality in my methods and makes a new contribution to thinking. This claim is supported throughout with examples and evidence drawn from my own practice. This is particularly evident in the middle chapters of the thesis, in which I outline the content of the inquiry.

The inquiry reflects my own epistemology of practice, which is situated in dialogical and holistic ways of knowing (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006). The research was by nature phased and firstly sat within the paradigm of action research and then developed as an Appreciative Inquiry project.

In presenting this inquiry, the intention is for others to engage with my ideas, to respond to them, and to support me on my continuing professional journey. The structure of the thesis reflects the cycles of both my own development as a novice researcher, as well as the research itself. Because of this, I intend to share with the reader the processes that led to the claims I make. As such, the thesis is structured as follows:

Chapters One and Two: These give the reader an insight into who I am as a leader and what has brought me to this point professionally. They also put the Academy and the inquiry into context. This is important as it enables me to position the study within my own professional history and narrative. As such, I offer the readers the opportunity to become co-participants in the stories told and hope that they engage in the storyline, “morally, emotionally, aesthetically, and intellectually” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p.745). I also examine how I identified the issues and where they sit within my own ontological and epistemological stance. In addition, I offer an exploration of my chosen research methodology. My intention is, within this chapter, to enable to reader to understand that this study was a form of philosophy in action, with the authenticity of my work becoming apparent through my truthful, yet critically reflective stance. It is important that my research makes a difference – to me, to the participants and to the practices in the Academy.

Chapters Three and Four: These look at the research methodology and offer an initial literature review based on my initial intention in Cycle One.

Chapter Five: This offers Cycle One research in action, with an analysis of the initial research process.

Chapter Six: This is a further literature review focusing on the more appreciative approach to organisational development that informed my thinking and practice in Cycle Two.

Chapters Seven-Ten: These explore the second cycle of the research process. Within each chapter I offer an explanation of the research process and an analysis of my findings. I conclude each chapter with recommendations for future practice.

Discussion: This offers judgements and conclusions that I drew, based on the evidence presented in each of the previous sections.

There will be a commentary throughout, in which I will critically reflect on the processes that I have followed. I also discuss how the inquiry contributes to knowledge in terms of the school improvement agenda.

1 Context

1. Situational snapshot of the Academy

The study was conducted in a large, inner-city 11-18 mixed independent Academy situated in the midlands of England, where I was working as a senior leader at the time. Its most recent Ofsted report (2011) at the time provides a helpful overview:

“This Academy is larger than the average secondary school and located on two sites, each with its own Principal. Around 27% of the students are of White British heritage. A significant proportion is from Asian or Asian British backgrounds, mostly from Pakistani heritages. Other significant minority ethnic groups include those from White and Black Caribbean and African backgrounds. The proportion of students who speak English as an additional language is well above the national average. The proportion of students who are known to be eligible for free school meals is high. The proportion of students who are identified as having special educational needs and/or disabilities is well above the national average, although the proportion that have a statement of special educational needs is below average.”

The Academy was struggling at the time as it had poor academic results, a reputation for a chronic lack of discipline, falling rolls and an inability to recruit and retain quality staff. There were at the time around 1500 students on roll with around 300 of these being in the Post 16 centre. The intake in Year 7 was decreasing on a yearly basis because of poor reputation and student outcomes. It would appear that the Academy was on a downward trajectory, with the number of A*-C including English and Maths GCSE results becoming year on year lower than the national average.

The 2012 Ofsted report stated that in order to improve, the Academy needed to:

“Increase the proportion of students gaining five or more A* to C grades at GCSE including English and mathematics by ensuring that more of the teaching is good or better, particularly by:

- closely matching work to students’ individual needs
- providing more challenging tasks to secure students’ active engagement in learning
- providing more opportunities for students to demonstrate independent learning
- ensuring that there is consistency in the marking of students’ work

Raise standards of attainment in mathematics and ensure that students make the expected progress by the end of Key Stage 4 to at least match the gains made by students nationally”. *

Stakeholders including parents, students and professionals working within the Academy were struggling to remain positive. There was little sense that staff and students felt that they were part of a wider community of learners (Wenger, 1998) that was committed to high quality education based on positive outcomes for all. However, it did not appear that this was because of resistance but because of lack of effective direction and leadership.

Turnover of staff was very high, as was absenteeism. During initial informal discussions, I got a sense that staff felt overwhelmed and helpless to improve the situation. They commented that they felt exhausted by the unreasonable demands that were being made of them. There was a sense that they were being “drained” by leadership and that this could not be sustained (Hargreaves & Fink, 2003, p. 8).

I had several informal discussions with staff and in particular with middle leaders about the Academy and their role in the school improvement process. My initial, and informal, analysis was that the key drivers of teacher and middle leader engagement (i.e. positive involvement in whole school initiatives; attention and absorption in the (teaching) role (Rothbard, 2001, p. 655); being psychologically present and supportive of both the organisation and one another) seemed to be missing.

*The Academy subsequently went into Special Measures and was taken over by an Academy chain

Perhaps because of this, the Academy was struggling to retain quality staff, particularly middle leaders, with the average professional lifespan being less than 18 months. As an experienced senior leader, I felt that the needs of all stakeholders can be met within a caring and dynamic professional environment, where people are listened to, valued and given the opportunity to professionally self-actualise. However, this was not the case within the Academy and middle leaders in particular were disengaged from the school improvement process. In order to formalise these informal initial dialogues, I decided that I should complete an analysis of the exit interviews of staff over the previous three years. The intention of this was to identify any trends that would enable me to get a better understanding of any underlying issues. This played an important part in my developing understanding of the issues facing the Academy.

2. Exit Interviews

A good exit interview should yield useful information about the organisation in order for managers to assess and improve all aspects of the working environment,. In the case of the Academy, twenty-nine of the thirty-four staff who had resigned from the Academy in the previous year had completed exit interviews and the analysis of this yielded the following results when it came to reasons for leaving:

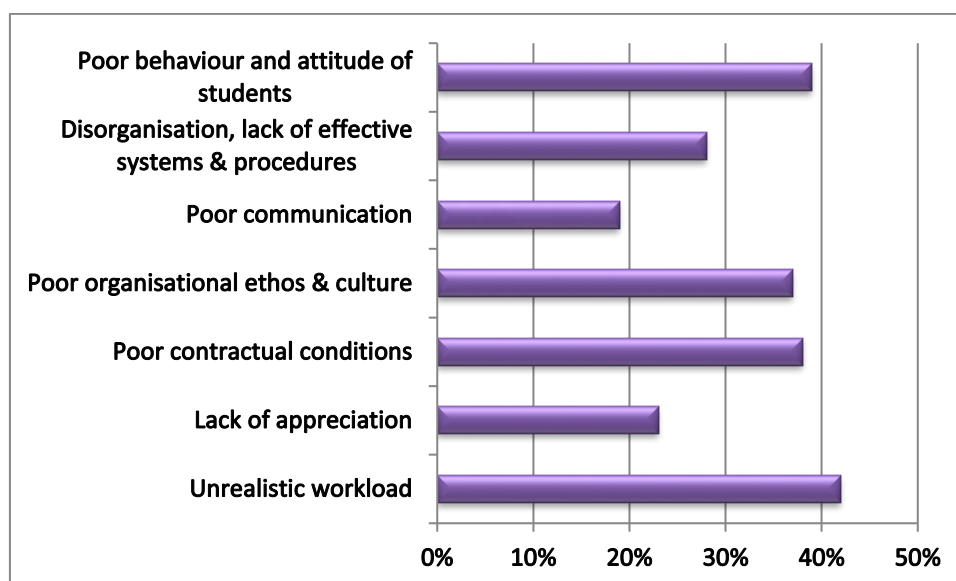


Table 1 – Reasons for staff leaving the Academy

I also analysed the comments that leaving staff had made and on several occasions, they indicated that they experienced a sense of liberation and relief on leaving the Academy. Furthermore, the exit interviews appeared to offer a sense of catharsis from the leaving employee perspective, as they appeared to offer an opportunity to give some constructive criticism and feedback. As with any strategy, the importance of the exit interviews relies on the analysis of the results. This should then be followed by actions to address any issues raised, particularly if there is a theme emerging.

These actions fall into two categories: i) remedial and preventative; for example, improving working terms and conditions, dealing with the pervading grievance culture etc.; ii) strategic improvement opportunities; for example, improved induction, management training, empowerment initiatives, process improvement etc. From the analysis I completed it was clear that work needed to be done in order to address a number of issues. However, there was little evidence to suggest that exit interviews were being used for these purposes in the Academy at the time of the study, and discussions with the Head of HR (September 2009) seemed to indicate a frustration that, whilst she was raising the issues with the senior leadership team, they were not acknowledging that there was a problem.

When considering the reasons for people leaving, at a macro-level I could hypothesise from the data obtained from the exit interviews that the core conditions for developing an effective and engaged workforce were missing. As a result, there was a high turnover of staff and those who remained had little motivation to engage in the necessary school improvement process. It would appear that the senior leadership had little understanding of how to address this, and were simply maintaining and at times exacerbating a culture that was unhealthy and unproductive. As a result, a situation of dissatisfaction and disengagement had been reached.

2 An Insider Perspective

The intention of this chapter is to situate the study within insider research and to explore my own sense of leadership and research perspective, as well as my ontological and epistemological stance. This is done through sharing my leadership journey with the reader. This is of importance, as it aims to offer to the reader an orientation into the circumstances that led to this research, as well as an insight into who I am, both professionally and as a researcher.

The intention is, if possible, for the reader to hear what is being said through the narrative of the research process I undertook; to feel what is being felt through the sharing of my personal process; and to understand that I know what I am doing and why I am doing it. The uniqueness of me as a leader and how I tell both my personal and my leadership story is a key element of this study.

The chapter ends with how I dealt with the ethical issues of insider research.

1. How the story is told

I write this thesis in a narrative style from a first-person perspective using the “I” approach (Cohen et al., 2003; Mc Niff et al., 2003, p.20), as well as using accessible and common-sense language. This is an important and conscious decision as the inquiry is about and for practitioners, rather than solely an academic piece, with the writing itself being a form of action, playing an important part in the research (McNiff & Whitehead, 2009).

The first person is used deliberately, in recognition of the informal type of writing that supports more informal relationships and self-disclosure, which is typical of qualitative research (Van Maanen, 1988). It is of note that I give emphasis to the iterative process throughout. That is to say, that by using a first-person action research framework, my intention is to move backwards and forwards exploring the narratives of others (Burgess, 2006); i.e. the middle leaders’ as well as my own.

Throughout the thesis, examples of my inner dialogue are shared with the reader. These narratives take a chronological, sequential approach and have been arranged like a road map, taking the reader from point A to point B and to point C. However, they also include reflection and at times revisit strategic points in order to seek truth and understanding. I also share the story through a variety of narratives from all the actors involved not simply my own, with the stories that are told throughout this thesis being integral to the research itself.

I share these stories throughout as a means of exploring the impact of the actions taken. Drawing on the work of McNiff and Whitehead (2009, p.13), these stories are used to say what has been achieved; to support the claim to knowledge; to describe and explain how it has been achieved; to generate a theory; and to seek critical feedback and test the validation of the theory.

The tone of writing is at times conversational as well as theoretical, as my intention is to allow the reader to get a sense of who I am, both as a professional as well as a writer. Throughout the inquiry, I take into consideration the intended audience, as this influences the narrative style. Four groups of readers who could access the study have been identified:

- i. The intimate reader – i.e. myself. Within this personal style, my own presence is recognised, as well as responsibility and ownership of the research. I make a deliberate attempt to avoid an authoritative tone, in keeping with the core concepts of an action research type of approach (Winter, 1987).
- ii. The authoritative readers - the supervisors and examiners. I attempt to balance the acknowledgement and respect of academic norms and the desire to be innovative, whilst offering a personal account.
- iii. The core readers - the participants. I strive to enable the middle leaders involved in the study to access a reader-friendly style that is not too academic.
- iv. The peripheral readers - other colleagues within the profession who may be interested in this model of inquiry, and who seek alternative models of professional practice.

In presenting this inquiry, my intention is for others to engage with my ideas, to respond to them, and to support my continuing learning and professional journey. The structure of the thesis reflects the cycles of both my own development as a novice researcher, as well as the research itself. As a result of this, my aim is to share with the reader the processes that led to the claims made, with a real-life explanation of my practice being offered. In order to successfully implement this project, I recognised throughout that there could be challenges to my own leadership.

In order to share my journey I initially offer a brief auto-ethnography in a reflexive style (Patton, 2002). The intention of this is to enable the reader to gain trust in me, both as a professional with many years' experience in the field of educational leadership, and also as a researcher. It is important for this study to be framed within my own philosophy and at no point during this project is the intention to stand apart from the research process. Therefore, in order to connect with the reader and to give credibility to my study, it is necessary to place myself in context and acknowledge that, "I, too, lead a storied life" (Winkler, 2003, p. 399).

This "personal reality" and "lived experience" is a form of "meditative inner work" (Torbert, 2001, p. 252), which I argue is an important element of this research process. My intention is that this is not offered in a self-indulgent, sentimental way (Brooker & McPherson, 1999), but as part of the process of seeking understanding through the sharing of stories (Schein, 2004). By being authentic about who I am and what I bring to the research, the intention is to add a measure of research validity (Heen, 2005; Schein, 2001), and enable the reader to gain a sense of truthfulness and congruence with the intended meaning (Burgess, 2006). Furthermore, it enables me to look at my practice through a critical lens.

2. Statement of Researcher's Perspective

I came to this study with a wealth of knowledge and leadership experience, in a variety of educational settings. I have been a teacher for twenty-two years and a senior leader for ten. By the time I came to be working at the Academy, I had already

been the Headteacher of an international school in Germany, a Pupil Referral Unit for children at risk of permanent exclusion, and a residential special school. I hold the National Professional Qualification for Headteachers and have completed the Associate Academy Principals Programme at the National College.

I hold excellent credentials in terms of leadership, both at a middle and senior level – Head of Faculty; Advanced Skills Teacher; Assistant Principal Behaviour for Learning; Vice Principal Learning and Teaching; Headteacher. All of these roles have been in the context of challenging, urban schools and I have seen my leadership philosophy, experience and knowledge develop over the years, as the complexities of inner-city school life have led to a constant definition and re-definition of my professional stance.

My professional journey began as a PGCE student in the 1980s, when I recognised that my career path would not lie in the leafy middle class suburbs; rather, I was driven by a sense of moral imperative and purpose that has shaped my career. As a probationary teacher, I felt that I was motivated by a need to work with those less advantaged than myself, and as a school leader this has become a hallmark of both my leadership belief and subsequent leadership style. My leadership has certainly been driven by a sense of moral responsibility, and an unerring belief in the ability of people to self-actualise, given the right support and professional conditions (Whetston, 2002).

My story cannot be told without referring to my father's story, as there is little doubt that this personal philosophy on leadership comes from my parents, particularly my father, who was brought up in the 1930s in the slums of the North East docklands.

He was born shortly after the first Labour Government had been elected to power in 1924 and at a time when the country was gripped by the Depression, with unemployment running at an all-time high. Life was hard, with poverty being a hallmark of these North Eastern families. The inevitable route for the majority of his peers was a life on the ship yards, at sea, or down the coal mines, but my grandmother had other plans for her oldest son, and when he was eleven he and two

friends from the same slum estate won a scholarship to Newcastle Grammar School, a fee-paying independent school.

The boys enjoyed immense academic success at school and went on to Durham University, gaining first-class honours degrees. My father's two friends both entered the world of academia and became professors, one of them later being knighted for his work in the field of astrophysics and being described in his obituary in The Independent newspaper as, "one of Britain's leading Scientists in the second half of the 20th Century" (24/9/2002), which was a real testament to an education system that enabled both social and intellectual mobility.

My father, however, stayed closer to his roots; as a committed socialist, he believed absolutely in social justice and the rights of the working people. Inspired by the politician Aneurin Bevan, my father joined the National Coal Board and became the youngest ever National Coal Board Colliery Manager.

He was also passionately interested in education. He believed that every child deserved the right to a first-class education, irrespective of their background, feeling that this should not be the privilege of a few but the right of all, through a state-funded provision that encouraged social mobility.

It was at this time, in the late 1960s, that the Labour Party introduced an anti-selection ideology and the then Prime Minister Harold Wilson's (1964) notion that comprehensive schools would be grammar schools for all. It wasn't so much the grammar schools he opposed, but the issue of second-rate secondary moderns that did not allow for academic development.

My father insisted that my sister, brother and I attend the local comprehensive school, despite us all having passed the eleven-plus exam, which gave entry into the grammar school system. He had an unerring belief that through education comes freedom, opportunity and social mobility. After all, he and his friends were living testament to that notion. Of course, he thought the answer was a rigorous academic education available to all children - a kind of grammar school with a comprehensive

intake. He was also a great believer that a person's greatest resource was knowledge itself and that learning is a lifelong endeavour. In 2013, the percentage of privately educated children getting 3 A*s at A level was three times higher than that of state school students, which is a real indictment of the comprehensive education my father had so passionately believed in.

There is no doubt that the achievement gap between rich and poor has not narrowed in recent years; in fact, as Adonis & Pollard (1997, p.61) state, "the tragic irony is that for all the good intentions, the destruction of grammar schools – in the name of equality of opportunity – only had the effect of reinforcing class divisions".

Based on the moral platform given to me by my father, my own belief system developed in terms of what a school should look like and how my leadership should support that development. Anyone of my generation who has professionally developed in the state sector in England has been channelled into certain ways of thinking; i.e. schools are and have problems to be solved, and that they are deficit models that need to be continually changed in order to be better.

These practices have been reproduced over and over again throughout the years and I have been professionally recognised and rewarded for my ability to perform in this type of culture. However, as my leadership and research understanding has developed, the principles of altruism, humility and empathic understanding of colleagues in order to effectively lead have been of significant interest, with my leadership becoming less about power, status and ego and more about a sense of equality and a real belief in the power of individual integrity and the importance of engaging everyone (students, staff and parents alike) in the school community. The issue for me, however, is the lack of commitment and low morale of many of the teachers I worked with.

My leadership experiences over the past three decades have taught me two things: firstly, my leadership has been driven by a sense of moral responsibility, and an unerring belief in the ability of people to self-actualise, given the right support and

professional conditions (Whetston, 2002); and secondly, building leadership can have a significant impact on both a school culture and on the improvement agenda. I believe that empowered and confident leaders create and enhance opportunities for success within a school culture (Cheung, 2000); this underpins the development of a school culture that is guided by the values and beliefs of all its members, which in turn influences their actions (Baker, 2002).

My experience as a school leader has further taught me that there are both internal and external influences to school culture and improvement, but effective leadership that is both active and positive provides the impetus for a successful school. This learning also influenced my perspective as a researcher, and shaped and formed my ontological and epistemological stance.

3. Ontological and Epistemological Stance

My leadership philosophy is closely linked to my ontological and epistemological stance. The ontological stance of qualitative research is that reality is socially constructed, with the interactions between individuals creating the social world, rather than it being immutable and imposed. As indicated above, I came to this study with a wealth of knowledge and leadership experience, from a variety of educational settings. This has undoubtedly shaped my own ontological view, which falls into a post-modernist way of thinking, and as such challenges conventional organisational theory.

This means that I struggle with the notion of the school as an organisational machine with the need to conform without question. I cannot agree with Carr and Kemmis (1986, p. 2), who argue that the teaching profession has always been conformist, with a significant lack of critical thinking. In my leadership experience, critical thinking leads invariably to action (Tormey, 2003) and as such is a vital part of the school improvement process. This notion draws on the work of Freire (1998, p. 117), who suggests that “bureaucracy annihilates creativity and transforms persons into mere repeaters of clichés”. My own professional view at this point was in line with what Freire says - “the more bureaucratized they become, the more likely they are to

become alienated adherents of daily routine from which they can never stand apart in order to understand their reason for being”.

I propose that a thinking school is one that does not depend solely on top-down problem-solving by the senior leadership team. Rather, it fosters the notion of tapping into the staff’s emotional, social and creative abilities, something that Lewis et al. (2008, p. 21) describe as the “organisation-as-living-system perspective”. This notion is quite exciting as after all, a school is made up of people, all with huge talents and experience to offer. That is to say, that a socially constructed organisation is one where everything is relative, i.e. what is important to me is not necessarily important to you/my story may not necessarily fit with yours, but it is my story and therefore true to me (Lewis et al., 2008). It was clear that this acceptance of one another was not a core attribute of the Academy, and ultimately this research grew into a post-modernist view of how organisations work, as a result of the notion that through story and dialogue new theories can be co-constructed.

This leads to a shared understanding of the needs of the school. However, it also sets the scene for my thinking and shapes the inquiry. Indeed, as stated by McNiff and Whitehead (2006, p. 86), “we understand our ontological values as the deeply spiritual connections between ourselves and others. These are embodied values, which we make external and explicit through our practices and theories”. It was a challenge at times to separate the relationship with the role as leader from that of researcher, and this presented its own set of issues that will be explored throughout the thesis.

The need to be vigilant about bringing my own personal bias into the research was often at the forefront of my thinking and the development of the inquiry. My epistemological stance within this inquiry is both personal and holistic, embracing the organism as an integrated whole, and based on a deep interconnectedness between the researcher and the participant. It was concerned with dialogical, empathic and hermeneutic communication. The inquiry is, therefore, situated in a tradition which implies a subjective epistemology and the ontological belief that reality is socially

constructed. This plays out in two ways: a) orientation of the participants; and b) its position within insider research.

4. A Social Constructivist Stance

As proposed above, this study is situated within the field of educational leadership and school improvement. The principles of social constructionism, knowledge development and organisational growth are brought together in this inquiry. Within the context of this study, knowledge is created through social interaction and social processes (Gergen, 1985). The components of social constructionism, the development of knowledge and organisational growth are linked, and are all essential to effective school leadership.

Effective leaders create the necessary conditions to facilitate the construction of new knowledge that is situational and context-driven. This is achieved through school leaders understanding and developing the areas of the organisation critical to systemic change and social reality (Fitzgerald et al., 2001).

It is important to state that my orientation as a school leader is one of respect for the development of learning communities that tap into collective intelligence and engage in meaningful and productive dialogues. This leads to a shared understanding of the needs of the school. Furthermore, it is significant to note that in choosing to adopt a theoretical framework based upon social constructivism, I am espousing my own world-view not only in leadership terms but also with reference to experiential learning. That is to say, I engaged the participants holistically and reflexively, with an emphasis on the co-creation of new knowledge. My conceptual framework is comprised of my professional experiences, epistemology and theoretical perspective.

5. The dilemma of insider research

As previously stated, this was a piece of insider research that was based on a process conducted by me as a full member of the school, rather than someone who enters the system simply as a researcher. Traditional experimental research sees

the ideal researcher as neutral, unbiased and objective, but being an inside researcher changes the power differentials, with the researcher being personally involved. Undoubtedly, “people’s willingness to talk to you, and what people say to you, is influenced by who they think you are” (Drever, 1995, p. 31). In other words, “Known or expected alignments or loyalties are crucial to the way in which an interviewer is perceived” (Powney and Watts, 1987, p. 40).

As a result, throughout the development of this inquiry I was aware of the privilege of my position, but also I kept in mind consideration of the ethical safeguards of an outsider doing research (i.e. random sampling; control groups; anonymous participants; personal influence of the researcher).

Several research traditions put forward a criticism of insider-led research – that of subjectivity; lack of impartiality; bias and validity; a vested interest in certain results being achieved, etc. As a result, throughout the inquiry I positioned myself in terms of my dual roles, gender, education etc., and also acknowledged the personal and professional contexts of the study in order to minimise this.

At the heart of this inquiry was the notion that actual and positive change would take place in the school with there being a significant contribution to practice that was underpinned by knowledge. The inquiry was, therefore, approached from the stance that I too was going through a whole new learning experience and that self-development required an understanding that was both professional and personal. I also kept in mind what Eisenhart (1988, p. 488) suggested - “the purpose of doing interpretivist research is to provide information that will allow the investigator to ‘make sense’ of the world from the perspectives of participants; the researcher must be involved in activity as an insider and be able to reflect upon it as an outsider”. It was not easy to be able to reflect on the inquiry as an outsider because I found myself an intrinsic part of the whole process.

For the purposes of this study, whilst acknowledging the issues of insider/outsider research, I take the stance that, “there are no overwhelming advantages to being an insider or an outsider.

Each position has advantages and disadvantages, though these will take on slightly different weightings depending on the particular circumstances and purposes of the research” (Hammersley, 1993, p. 426). In fact, I argue that as an insider I undoubtedly had a better initial understanding of the social setting because the context was known; I was able to understand the subtle and diffuse links between situations and events and was able to assess the implications of following particular avenues of enquiry (Griffiths, 1985, p. 211). Of course, it is much more debatable whether or not this familiarity led to deeper description or greater knowledge.

The main issue that is of note is that in my case, data collection quickly became all-consuming because I was contractually required to be on-site eight hours a day, five days a week, without any opportunity to distance myself to facilitate better reflection. This is something that is explored throughout the inquiry and is linked to the ethical stance that I took throughout the inquiry.

6. The ethics of insiderness.

The ethical basis of the research drew primarily on the principles underlying the BERA 2011 ethical guidelines. These are: respect of the person, knowledge, democratic values, the quality of educational research and academic freedom. However, taking into consideration the basic ethical principles surrounding this individual study, and through extensive reading, I decided that the main issues were respect of and for the individual, and beneficence. Each of these is explored in turn within the context of this inquiry. I gained ethical approval from the university before I started the inquiry.

7. Respect of and for the individual

To respect the individual means that each participant is treated as an autonomous agent who is capable of deliberation and has the right to make informed decisions about his own involvement and actions. This means that participants are able to enter into the research voluntarily with adequate information. Whilst in theory this sounds feasible, the reality was not so straightforward. Practitioner research within the Academy had not previously been done and it was felt that the type of research

that was being proposed would give the participants the opportunity not only to have a voice but to be an integral part of the change management agenda.

Whilst being aware that this type of participative research seemed the most satisfactory method to meet the philosophical and political aims of the project, there was a concern about the amount of time and commitment that would be expected of the middle leaders. Lack of time, as well as a sense of being pulled in all directions by the current Ofsted agenda, was an issue. In the second year this was addressed through a more realistic recognition of the amount of commitment that would be expected. A designated and protected “hour” within the school day once a fortnight was negotiated.

This meant that the middle leaders were not expected to give up their own time to participate. This led to another major ethical decision as the project was taking place in directed time (i.e. part of their contracted hours). Were the middle leaders expected to participate or was it a personal decision? I argue that just because a researcher can access the participants (after all, I held a senior leader’s post in the Academy), this does not mean that they should.

I sought consent on the part of the participants in order to avoid coercive working practices. A decision was made to invite all of the middle leaders to participate, informing them in full of the research intention, along with what their commitment would be.

8. Beneficence

This is the notion that that one should not injure a person, regardless of the benefits that might come to others. That is to say, the benefits of the research would outweigh any of the risks. The word benefit implies that there “will be a definite good for the researcher, the research participants or for the wider community” (www.ethicsguidebook.ac.uk/How-is-risk-defined-66 ,retrieved 5/11/14).However, if there are benefits, then there must by nature be the possibility of risks and subsequent harm. Harm is neither visible nor tangible and is subjective – what might

be perfectly reasonable for one person could cause harm to another, again tapping into the differing realities of individuals. They were as follows: time commitment and burden; power differentials leading to a loss of democracy; lack of confidentiality; and social and relationship issues.

The expected benefits of this study, on the other hand, were that a greater understanding of the participants' situation could be achieved and that change could be brought about through increased engagement and participation, thus making working conditions more favourable. However, there was also an awareness that the researcher's idea of "benefits" may differ from those of the participants and I was mindful to regroup at strategic points in order to allow the participants to collectively explore the benefits and drawbacks of the study.

There was a belief among the middle leaders with whom I spoke that in the Academy that there was little ethical consideration around many of the initiatives and actions that the staff were expected to undertake – the perception was that this came from the Chief Executive and the governing body, without much thought being given to the impact these initiatives would have. There was a commitment from the outset not to perpetuate this perception and, as a result, my own ethical stance was shared with the participants. An 'ethic' is a moral principle or a code of conduct (Wellington 2000, p. 54). It is concerned with the way people act or behave. The notion of a personal and professional ethical code was particularly important so that the middle leaders recognised the authenticity of the process. This led to my contemplating the dual role within the process and the need to acknowledge the issues surrounding "insider" inquiry.

As I was the initiator of the inquiry as well as a participant, the power dynamics were evident from the outset. It was important that the participants did not experience any kind of implicit pressure or coercion to perform in a given way. Furthermore, as democratic a relationship as possible with the participants was developed – something that was imperative due to the complexity of relationships. I sought to minimise the impact of "insider" bias by following a protocol that was shared with the participants. This was based around the need for open and honest action, drawing

on the BERA guidelines (<http://www.bbk.ac.uk/sshp/research/sshp-ethics-committee-and-procedures/BERA-Ethical-Guidelines-2011.pdf> retrieved 24/11/2011) throughout the process. Further to this, devising a protocol was one method of enhancing validity and rigour as it was used as a guide to ensure that the research followed the underlying principles of communicative action, regardless of the direction it took. This proved to be invaluable after the first cycle of the project.

As a result of the imprecise nature of action research, I changed both the focus of the research and the participants after the first year. In order to maintain rigour I was able to go back to the protocol and ensure that although the focus had changed, the principles of action research still applied. The protocol incorporated the study design, questions and aims as well as the process, and initiated the development of a basic model of an action research project. As this research took shape, it became obvious that the initially planned model did not reflect the process of the study, but I have chosen to include it in the thesis, as it was an important part of my own development as a researcher. I was also a participant-observer in the study. My role was to guide and facilitate, particularly during the second cycle of inquiry when we went through the various stages of appreciative action research - definition, discovery, dream and design. The whole inquiry was a learning process in line with Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle. This was evident for both the researcher and the participants. Throughout the process, I strove to be a good listener, to be adaptive and flexible, to ask appreciative questions and to interpret the answers. The intention throughout was to have a grasp of the issues being studied, and to minimise (but at the same time acknowledge) my own biases within the study (Yin, 2009).

In conclusion, conducting a research project in the Academy where I was a senior leader proved to be challenging, exciting and fraught with many difficulties and obstacles. As action research is an inherently political process involving social change (Kemmis, 1993; Williamson & Prosser, 2002), it enabled the participants to explore not only their own practice but also the governing ideology of the Academy. This was achieved through looking at the historical, economic and social influences of teacher/leadership practice, as well as those of the Academy itself.

3 Research Design and Methodology

This chapter details the research methodology used for this qualitative inquiry. It includes an overview of the research design and methodology. The inquiry was in two cycles. Firstly, it took the form of an action research project to solve a specific problem posed. Secondly, I adopted an Appreciative Inquiry approach as a theoretical research perspective, an emerging research methodology and a world-view that builds on the need for organisational learning, and organisational change within the Academy.

1. Research Questions

The initial research question was:

How can middle leaders be more engaged in school improvement?

This guided the first cycle (and year) of the inquiry and was a simple action research project that focused on identifying and solving an issue. This was developed in the second cycle (year) as the result of a deepening understanding of the needs of middle leaders, and my own developing understanding of the research process and Appreciative Inquiry, and became:

Can Appreciative Inquiry positively impact on middle leader engagement in school improvement, and if so, how and with what consequences?

2. Assumptions

I make several assumptions within this inquiry. I argue that assumptions are the basic premises related to a study that are accepted on faith or that are known to be true (Walker, 2003). This study made the following assumptions:

- i. School leaders – both middle and senior – have a positive core of experiences upon which they can draw to facilitate school improvement.
- ii. Successful school improvement has at its heart effective and experienced leadership.

As a leader-researcher, it was my initial intention to develop a piece of action research based upon bringing together a group of middle leaders who would solve the problem collaboratively in order to increase participation and engagement. This was Cycle One of the inquiry and took place between September 2009 and July 2010. The intention had the dual intention of empowering staff whilst addressing whole Academy strategic issues. This would be an opportunity for middle leaders to move to a position of engaged responsiveness, where they felt inclusive membership and able to be proactive in terms of their own professional, inquiry-based learning and their readiness to engage with the whole Academy.

As stated, the initial research question in the first year/cycle was:

How can middle leaders be more engaged in school improvement?

This was based on the principle that action research centres on people and their problems and that it offered, “a philosophical approach to the study of human problems which helps groups to share and refine their understanding of their situations in a mutually supportive environment” (Morton-Cooper, 2000, p. 14). Action research is fundamentally about change and transformation and is grounded in a desire to improve professional practice; however, throughout this cycle negative narratives and entrenched viewpoints acted as barriers to collaboration and participation and change. The middle leaders were far from emotionally present and as such were unable to engage in this process.

During this cycle of the project, the middle leaders became increasingly disengaged from both the process of the inquiry and the Academy. I recognised that their own conceptualisation about the Academy and their negative construction of themselves needed to be challenged in order for them to have the capacity for development. I shall explore this in the next chapter of the thesis.

As a result of the unsatisfactory outcomes of Cycle One, I made a conscious decision to adopt a different model after the initial year-long cycle. The second cycle of the project took place between September 2010 and July 2011. During this cycle of the study, a model of inquiry was adapted to incorporate a different theoretical model of professional development that promoted behavioural change through building a model of inquiry which was based upon a more appreciative and generative action research methodology. This became an Appreciative Inquiry model of action research.

The intention in the second year was to create a model based upon "What gives life to the Academy?" shifting the focus from a deficit model to one that recognised the potential of the organisation and embraced workforce development and engagement, thus enabling the organisation to change organically with maximum middle-leader engagement. This involved generative group discussion, interviews and thorough analysis of the information gained from these. The intention was to develop a more appreciative approach in order to challenge the guiding assumptions of the culture of the Academy, encourage reconsideration of the status quo and, "foster [ed] new alternatives for social actions" (Gergen, 1978, p. 1344).

As previously stated, the research question was developed as the result of a deepening appreciation of the needs of the middle leaders and my own developing understanding of the research process to become:

Can Appreciative Inquiry positively impact on middle leader engagement in school improvement, and if so, how and with what consequences?

3. Data Collection Plan

The following research data methods were used for data collection: semi-structured interviews; focus groups; and a collection of artefacts and documentation relevant to the case study. Fourteen teaching and non-teaching staff in various middle leader roles were involved over a period of two years.

The methodology of both cycles of the study was to follow specific protocols in questioning techniques through semi-structured interviews and focus groups within the Academy. In the second cycle there was a specific focus on extracting positive responses from the participants (Appendix i).

Data collection for the first cycle was undertaken between September 2009 and July 2010, and for the second cycle between September 2010 and August 2011. A document and policy review was conducted before the initial cycle of the study. Pertinent to this study was the current Ofsted documentation based on the previous inspection and exit interview information for the previous three years. Questions for the study were adapted as it evolved and in the first cycle focused on issues and problem-solving, whilst in the second cycle there was an emphasis on looking at the positive core of the school and leadership experiences, with a theoretical base in Appreciative Inquiry. Protocols were an important aspect of this research with an emphasis on the protection of the individuals within it. All participants were informed in advance of the nature and purpose of the study. They were assured that their contribution would be confidential and used in the study only after permission had been sought. They were also assured anonymity.

4. Data Analysis

Data was analysed on an ongoing basis throughout the project, using typological content analysis along with open coding and pattern matching to categorise and synthesise any emerging themes. I analysed data by becoming familiar with it as a set and the emerging identified categories and themes as related to the two research questions posed. Typological categories were established, through drawing on theories presented by the Appreciative Inquiry paradigm. Throughout the process, themes were identified through coding and pattern matching. Literal narrative

descriptions provided by the participants are used as significant data. The data collected were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Any participant-created documents (for example, metaphors, timeline, dream statements, opportunity/concept map and provocative propositions) were recorded and kept for future analysis. Throughout the inquiry, data analysis varied according to the specific needs of each stage and the evolving research questions. I decided to use typological analysis which included the following steps, as according to Hatch (2002, page 34):

- i. Identify typologies to be analysed;
- ii. Read the data, marking entries related to the typologies;
- iii. Read entries by typology, recording the main ideas in entries on a summary sheet;
- iv. Look for patterns, relationships and themes within typologies;
- v. Decide whether patterns are supported by the data, and search the data for non-examples of patterns;
- vi. Look for relationships among the patterns identified;
Select data excerpts that support those generalisations.

5. Cycle One

In the first cycle of the inquiry, I analysed typological data by content analysis, looking for patterns or themes in the data (Patton, 2002). This data was reviewed on an ongoing basis for immersion and to get a sense of the whole (Tesch, 1990). I then closely read the data, word by word and line by line in an open coding process (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The established codes were sorted into categories and sub-categories (Patton, 2002). Definitions were developed for each category, sub-category and code, with exemplars related to the research questions (Merriam, 1998).

6. Cycle Two

During the second cycle of the inquiry, and in response to the modified and further developed research question (that is, the Discovery and Dream cycles), typological analysis was conducted. I also reported on the ecological conditions necessary for the middle leaders to develop, as stated by the participants. These were reported pictorially throughout the Dream cycle of the inquiry.

7. Limitations of the Inquiry

Limitations are characteristics that define the boundaries or limit the scope of a study. The limitations of this study are:

- i. The lack of the researcher's experience in research methodology;
- ii. A positive bias was inherent throughout the process and is reflected in the inquiry;
- iii. Participants' construction of their story and its meanings may be distorted or have changed throughout the process;
- iv. The study was conducted in a large, urban Academy and, as such, the findings may not apply to educational structures substantially variant from this case;
- v. Being an insider researcher who was a colleague and line manager of members of the action team presented issues of permeability. Eliminating myself in favour of another interviewer might have altered the dynamic in an entirely different way.

As an action research project, the generic limitations of this type of research also need to be considered. Gregson et al., (2007) suggests that it is not easy to be both a teacher and a researcher, as it is often difficult to keep up motivation and focus due to the demands of the day job. However, in terms of this study, this did not present a real issue as the participants had designated, directed time to be involved. A critical factor when considering action research is the importance of understanding the theory and theoretical underpinnings of teachers as researchers and the impact of action research on practice and the research process.

This is all within the context that action research is not simply a professional development tool, but a legitimate form of research that generates new educational knowledge and theory. One of the issues with this was that the middle leaders had not previously participated in any form of action research or inquiry, and as such had no real understanding of the processes. However, as the cycles of the inquiry developed, this was overcome by the generative aspects of the process itself.

This was a small-scale piece of action research which was limited to one school; therefore, the lack of generalisation of the inquiry can be seen as a limitation and a weakness. It presents the world in which the participants were involved in the form of an insider perspective. This does not necessarily diminish the findings as the intention was to make the study relatable in a way that would enable members of similar groups to recognise problems and possibly see ways of solving similar problems within their own context (Bell, 1999, p.13).

8. Rigour and Validity

The insider-outsider models of action research must also be considered with regard to issues of rigour and validity (Badger, 2000; Hanson, 1994; Turnock & Gibson, 2001). Within the context of this inquiry the rigour relates to how strictly the processes of the study have been followed, something that was achieved through gathering clear evidence with a meticulous attention to detail (Roberts & Taylor, 2002). Validity in this inquiry does not refer to the positivist concept of generalisability and accuracy of measurement, but to the truth and rationality of communication (Habermas, 1984).

A further important aspect of this inquiry is that of credibility, which refers to the extent to which the readers relate the research to their own experience. The next chapter looks at the inquiry in action through a description of the first cycle of the inquiry. This supports the notion of credibility by situating it within middle leader practice within the Academy.

4 Cycle One Literature Review

This is the first of my literature reviews and it reflects my initial thinking and the theoretical underpinnings of the first cycle of the inquiry. I went on to write a further literature review at the beginning of Cycle Two. I have done it in this way as it reflects the way my thought processes developed throughout the inquiry.

In this chapter, I review the relevant literature in order to situate the first cycle of my study. It draws primarily on work that addresses school change and leadership development. I use, but also critically interrogate, this literature. Through my reading, I recognised that the situation in the Academy was not unusual, with a lack of real understanding among senior leadership teams of how best to engage staff in the school improvement process. There is a considerable body of literature that examines how this might be addressed. The study also mobilises a body of work around Appreciative Inquiry which is not generally brought into the school improvement and leadership domain. This review of literature is divided into the following areas:

- i. What is school improvement?
- ii. The importance of leadership
- iii. Developing leadership and internal support systems
- iv. Good leaders use research as a school improvement tool.

1. What is school improvement?

School improvement is the common term used to describe how schools can achieve organisational development and growth. I argue that school improvement has a moral purpose and is intrinsically linked to the life chances and achievement of all students (Harris, 2004). Hopkins (2001) defines school improvement as a distinct approach to educational change that aims to enhance student outcomes, as well as strengthening the school's capacity for managing change. Barth (1990, p. 45) similarly defines school improvement as an effort to determine and provide (from within and without) conditions under which the adults and youngsters who inhabit schools will promote and sustain learning among them.

According to these definitions, the purpose of school improvement is to positively change the relationship between the teaching and learning process and the conditions that support it. Further, the change that should take place as a result of the school improvement effort should not merely reflect an implementation of policies; rather, the improvements or adaptations of practice should transform the learning process to achieve the maximum impact on students, teachers and schools (Hargreaves, 1994; Hopkins, 2001). According to James (2008), there are some key themes that dominate the school improvement field. The table overleaf, adapted from Hopkins (2008, p. 18), summarises the key themes of school improvement and the conditions necessary for it to occur:

The principles of authentic school improvement	Examples of theoretical, research, policy or practical influences on school improvement
Achievement-focused	The moral and social justice responsibility to enhance student learning, and the unrelenting focus on the quality of teaching and learning.
Empowering in aspiration	The moral imperative of emancipation, of increasing individual responsibility, the enhancement of skills and confidence.
Research-based and theory-rich	The use of teaching and learning, and organisational development strategies with robust empirical support for the development of a variety of curriculum and teaching programmes or models; and the location of the approach within a philosophical tradition e.g. Critical Theory.
Context-specific	The influences of contemporary school effectiveness research that point to the importance of context specificity and the fallacy of the 'one size fits all' change strategy.
Capacity-building in nature	The necessity to ensure sustainability, the nurturing of professional learning communities, and the establishment of local infrastructure and networks.
Enquiry-driven	The use of data to energise, inform and direct action. The influence of the 'reflective practitioner' ethic and a commitment to active implementation.
Implementation-oriented	The research on the management of change; in particular, the importance of individual meaning, the consistency of classroom effects and the creation of a commitment to active implementation.
Interventionist and strategic	The influence of 'Lewinsian' Action Research and Organisation Development principles and strategies, and the contemporary emphasis on development planning.
Externally supported	The centralisation/decentralisation polarity of most national educational policies places increasing emphasis on networking and external support agencies to facilitate implementation.
Systemic	This relates not just to the need to accept political realities, but also to ensuring policy coherence horizontally and vertically, and the use of pressure and support to exploit the creativity and synergies within the system.

Table 2 Key themes of school improvement, adapted from Hopkins (2008)

2. The importance of leadership

There is general recognition of the central role of leadership in improving schools (Day et al., 2009). The importance of increasing leadership capacity for schools is nothing new. Over a decade ago, Fullan (2001) contended that the emphasis in education during the opening years of the 21st century will shift from standardised student achievement to leadership. He argued that in order to navigate the complexity of a constantly changing educational environment, school leaders must instil energy, enthusiasm and hope, understand the dynamics of change processes, help build relationships, exhibit moral purpose, develop schools into learning organisations, and help others to make sense of it all (Dickerson, 2011). School leaders are regarded as key to both school improvement (Fullan, 2001; Mulford, 2006) as well as the creation of a positive school culture (Peterson & Deal, 1998). And this does not just refer to leadership at the level of the Principal or Headteacher. Leadership is required at all levels - middle leaders, teachers as leaders (Fullan, 2002) and other professionals such as social workers. Dickerson (2011, p. 56) contends that these leaders must be “system leaders with the skills and experience to lead well at their level as well as a clear understanding of how their school fits in the larger system”.

The literature on effective ‘turnarounds’ repeatedly points to the importance of effective leadership and there is evidence that talented leadership is one of the strongest explanations for the success of schools performing beyond expectations in high poverty settings (Harris & Chapman, 2002). Day et al. (2009) describe the core practices of leaders in successful schools. They actively set directions, develop people, and engage in organisational redesign.

They create the conditions that allow improvement to be sustainable, and they are able to develop and adjust their leadership practices to align with the needs of the organisation (Scott & McNeish, 2013). In doing so, school leaders play a critical part in fostering learning by creating and supporting a learning culture. A UK review concluded that ‘research is more readily integrated into school life when systems are

in place to enable the school to operate as a learning organisation' (CUREE, 2003, p.5). Furthermore, evidence suggests that the dimension of leadership which matters most for student outcomes is leaders' professional development of their staff (Scott & McNeish, 2013).

A number of studies have reported on the features of successful educational leadership programmes in the UK, such as the National Professional Qualification for Headteachers and the Leading from the Middle programme (Gusky, 2000; Leithwood & Levin, 2005; Reeves et al., 2003; Simkins et al., 2006(a); and Simkins et al., 2006(b)). However, I argue that in addition to formal programmes for leadership, schools are living systems that can foster emergent leadership if the proper environment is created and nurtured. In a recent article, Mitchell & Sackney (2011) discuss the implications of schools as "learning ecologies" and note that structures and relationships may be either formally designed or informally emerge through communication and interaction. They argue that "in a learning ecology, leadership should not be hierarchical or positional; it should be natural, self-regenerating, purposeful, often spontaneous, and always directed toward issues of teaching and learning" (p. 986).

Provided that supportive conditions are in place, teachers, staff and students are able to assume the role of leadership naturally when the needs of the system and the passions and gifts of the individual intersect (Dickerson, 2011). Similarly, Frost and Durrant (2003) observed that in order to develop as leaders, teachers need freedom to experiment and opportunities to follow their passions; structures to support and facilitate collaboration and interaction, both within the school and with colleagues at other schools; space to dialogue about education; time to listen to students; as well as recognition of the development work and the emerging leadership capacity (Cole & Southworth, 2005, pp.165-166).

Robinson, Hohepa and Lloyd (2009) point out that leaders promote and participate in teachers' professional learning in two main ways: firstly, they place a strong focus on teaching and learning; and secondly, they learn more about what teachers are up against, and give them support in making the changes required to embed their

learning in their daily practice. School leaders who are effective are seen to be engaged with research themselves and encourage their staff to be research-engaged. This can be in formal contexts such as staff meetings and professional development sessions, or informally through discussions about specific teaching problems (Scott & McNeish, 2013).

3. Developing leadership and internal support systems

In recent years, schools have increasingly looked inwards to address their professional learning needs (e.g. Garet et al., 2001; Mitchell et al., 2011). Coaching, mentoring, professional learning communities, and action research are all approaches that have grown more commonplace over the last decade (Stoll et al., 2006). Increases in the degree of autonomy afforded to schools in many areas of operation, coupled with significant reductions in school budgets as part of a broader climate of austerity, mean that this trend seems likely to continue.

In England, these various developments have recently led to the establishment of Teaching Schools (with one of their key objectives being engagement in research and development), as well as school-to-school support and partnerships between schools, universities and other providers, responsible for the provision of professional learning to teachers and leaders at all stages of their career. According to Scott & McNeish (2013, p. 23), a number of writers have made connections between learning organisations and the use of research. In its simplest terms, a learning organisation means any institution that promotes an ethos of ongoing learning and development amongst its staff as part of a commitment to continuous quality improvement. Furthermore, valuing data and evidence form a key component of learning organisations (Revans et al., 1983, p. 41). Cordingley and Bell (2012) suggest that the key components of professional learning include: the availability of specialist expertise; structured peer support; professional dialogue based on trying out new things and focusing on *why* things do/don't work, as well as *how* they work; sustained enquiry-oriented learning over (usually) two terms or more; learning from the observation of others' practice; setting ambitious goals in the context of

aspirations for pupils; and the use of tools/protocols to help with evidence collection and analysis.

4. Good leaders use research as a school improvement tool

The importance of using research evidence to inform professional practice and organisational decision-making is increasingly recognised within the education sector. Scott and McNeish (2013) suggest that research matters for school improvement at a number of levels. At a national level it can provide evidence on which government education policies are more or less likely to be effective. It also matters locally – “At a whole school level, research can indicate what works in general or for particular populations of pupils e.g. those on free school meals or students with a statement of SEN. At an individual level, it can provide evidence on what teaching methods are likely to work best with specific students” (Scott & McNeish, 2013).

Within the literature, it is suggested that research can help to:

- i. Identify needs and issues, including the causes associated with diverse and inequitable student learning outcomes. Examples include studies drawing on national population samples showing, for example, the associations between social class and attainment (Feinstein & Bynner, 2004).
- ii. Cater for marginalised students. According to Scott & McNeish (2013, p. 8), an evidence-based school leader might use such research evidence to inform the development of appropriate strategies to support the learning of their particular student population groups - such as traveller children (Bhopal, 2004).

- iii. Provide evidence for 'what works', including research on what interventions are more or less successful in meeting the learning needs of students. An evidence-based school leader might use such research evidence to ensure that their school is implementing the programmes which are known to be most effective.

- iv. Assess progress towards a school's improvement, including evaluations of the outcomes of a school's learning programmes conducted either in-house or in partnership with others. An evidence-based school leader might make use of evaluations alongside other performance data to review their school's improvement.

However, just as there are different kinds of research to address different kinds of questions, there are also different kinds of research use. This was particularly pertinent to my study and will be explored below. Walter et al. (2004, p. 34) make a distinction between the 'conceptual' use of research, which brings about changes in levels of understanding, knowledge and attitude; and 'instrumental', or direct use of research, which results in changes in practice. It is the latter which some authors refer to as 'knowledge sharing' (Fullan, 2002, p. 26) or 'knowledge mobilization' (Campbell & Levin, 2012).

Several authors (e.g. Furlong & Salisbury, 2005; Bell et al., 2010) have differentiated between practitioners only making use of research produced by others, and those being actively involved as producers of research evidence themselves. For example, Bell et al. (2010, on line) describe engaging with research as practitioners using publicly available evidence, interpreting it and adapting it to their own contexts.

They describe practitioners as engaging in research when they carry out their own enquiries that address a research question; use instruments (observation and interview schedules etc.) to enable them to explore the effects of an intervention; and analyse and report on the evidence collected. Bell et al. (2010) also highlight a spectrum of research engagement. At one end, there is research which is largely researcher-led (i.e. schools involved in studies which are entirely planned, analysed and reported by academic researchers with practitioners (such as teachers) involved in implementation, data collection and review). At the other end, there is research that is wholly planned, implemented and analysed by practitioners, usually with support from external researchers. Having completed the initial literature review, I moved onto developing the research in practice. This is explored in the following chapter.

5. Cycle One: Research in Action

5.1 Cycle One: September 2009-July 2010

In this chapter, I describe in detail Cycle One of the inquiry. As stated in the previous chapter, multiple techniques were used to collect and analyse the data collected in this study. These were selected to meet the specific needs of the research questions and reflected the organic nature of the research process.

5.2 Selection of participants

The participants in this first cycle of the inquiry were not invited to participate but were selected. Tellis (1997, p. 13) states that the selection of participants in a study does not have to be done through random selection, but the researcher is to handle the selection within the condition that is available. Keeping Tellis's statement in mind, the key middle leaders of the three core subjects (the Curriculum Leaders for Maths, English and Science) as well as three Assistant Curriculum Leaders were invited to participate in a piece of action research based on raising attainment in their subject area. This was as a result of the poor GCSE exam results the previous summer, in which only 34% of students achieved 5 A*-C GCSE grades, including English and Maths. The profiles of the participants can be seen in Appendix ii.

5.3 Informed Consent

Obtaining informed consent means that the participants have agreed to become part of the research. This occurred at the outset of the inquiry, with full knowledge of what the study involved and what was expected of the middle leaders. I was clear about what the middle leaders could expect from me as a researcher in terms of their own input and informed choices about the inquiry. For example, if, during the interview, the participant asked for the tape to be turned off, this was done so and field notes were taken as appropriate. Permission was sought for specific quotes to be used in the analysis but the data was not introduced in the group discussion.

Throughout the inquiry, I maintained that as the instigator of the inquiry I had a professional and personal responsibility to ensure that the participants were protected from harm (Coghlan et al., 2005). Furthermore, the risk in undertaking action research to change practice can raise questions regarding the safety of the participants in what may be construed as a political act; therefore, I sought an agreement from the senior leadership team that any information revealed in the group would have no adverse consequences for the participants. To further ensure the middle leaders were protected, anonymity in this thesis and any publications will be ensured through pseudonyms.

5.4 Time and commitment

When designing the inquiry process, it was difficult to envisage how the middle leaders would be able to meet as a group when most had a significant teaching commitment as well as leadership responsibilities. This made the planning of the focus group meetings very difficult, and they often needed to be cancelled at the last minute.

The reconnaissance phase and philosophical principles of the inquiry required collaborative collective discussion and I was concerned that this would be impossible or ineffectual if the middle leaders were unable to meet as a group often enough. This was overcome by scheduling a one-hour meeting every week after school. This was not part of the middle leaders' directed time and therefore was a voluntary time commitment. This in itself brought issues as often we were unable to be quorate.

5.5 The Inquiry Process

The inquiry process of this first cycle involved the following stages. These will each be explored and described in turn in the next section of this thesis.

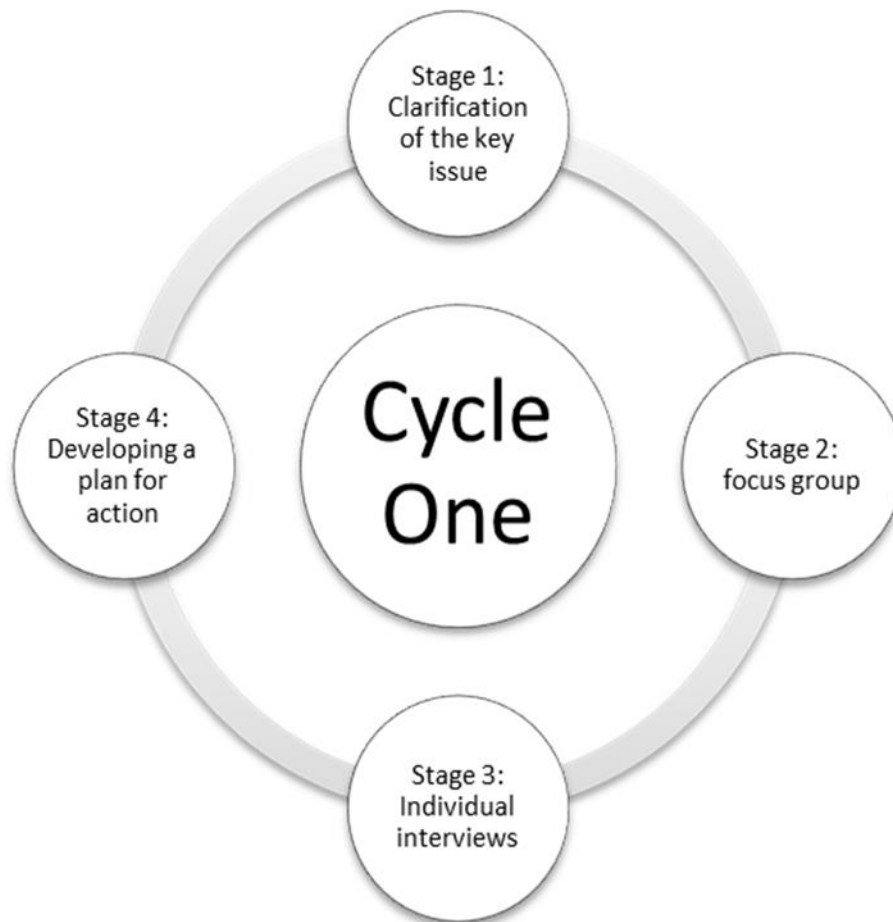


Figure 1 The stages of Cycle One

5.6 Stage 1: Clarification of the key issue

The middle leaders were introduced to the notion of action research and how it could influence and impact upon their working practices. This was done through a series of meetings that took place in September 2009. It was agreed as a group that we would meet once a week during this hour for the duration of the project. The intention was that this would be for the whole academic year.

After the research was explained, along with distributing information sheets, they all expressed their willingness to participate and signed the consent forms.

The research proposal was then introduced, with the proposed model adhering closely to Lewins' (1948, p. 206) spiral steps approach and with each cycle being, "composed of a circle of planning, action and fact finding about the result of the action" (Appendix iii).

The approach was to be sequential and orientated towards solving my suggested topic: the problem of raising attainment in the core subjects of English, Maths and Science. One of the concerns for this process was how to get the middle leaders to focus on the key issues in group discussion, especially as there was a limited time-frame to achieve this and there was a need to move beyond the negative deficit-thinking that abounded.

I decided to use a brainstorming technique and began by explaining the group process and what I would like them to do. The overarching concern in the Academy was the students' poor GCSE results in August 2009 and another concern was that too many students were failing to achieve their target grades in English, Maths and Science. The following open-ended question was asked: What are the reasons behind student failure to achieve target grades? Once everyone had finished writing, the participants read out what they had written, which was then written on the whiteboard. Similar ideas were assimilated, as directed by the middle leaders. Occasionally, clarification was sought for more information and there was often some discussion on a stated idea.

As the middle leaders read out their ideas, they often did so with explanatory statements which added clarity to what they were saying. This prevented any misconceptions which may have happened if the statements had been read in their initial form by someone other than themselves. The emerging themes were as follows:

- i. A poor Key Stage 3 curriculum that did not offer discrete teaching in English and Maths;
- ii. A lack of focus on addressing low baselines in English and Maths on entry in Year 7;
- iii. No individualised programmes of study to address underachievement in core subjects;

- iv. A culture of underachievement and a lack of recognising and celebrating success;
- v. A transient population that did not allow for continuity in the development of key skills;
- vi. Poor staffing and an inability to recruit quality-first teachers, particularly in Maths.

5.7 Summary of Stage One

The creation and development of this opportunity, in which the middle leaders were able to identify and discuss the presenting issues, was a crucial element in the success of these initial dialogues. This discussion was solely focused on the issue of the poor GCSE results in the summer and enabled them to collectively define, clarify and validate the reasons behind this. It also provided a reference point for all future activity in this cycle of the research. The next cycle of re-forming the group focuses on how the middle leaders recognised the issues but felt too disempowered and overwhelmed – and what was pervasive throughout this process was the middle leaders' sense of hopelessness and negativity, which was apparent throughout each interaction.

5.8 Stage 2 – Focus group

This next section describes the process of re-forming the group to look at how the middle leaders could work together to address the issues of underachievement. I present the group generally rather than individually to ensure that the participants of the group cannot be identified and that key ideas in the discussion cannot be ascribed to a particular individual. The intended purpose in using a focus group was to enable data to be collected that were drawn from collaborative reflection by the middle leaders.

At the end of the previous meeting, the participants were asked to think about these difficulties prior to the second meeting. The process of re-forming the group was more complex than anticipated. Two group members were unable to attend due to prior commitments, and not all participants had had the opportunity to explore findings from the previous meeting. The group began with a reminder of the aims of the inquiry, and the rules of the group process, followed by a recap of the identified issues. Each participant was given a written copy of the themes and was asked to think about how each of the issues could be addressed. They were reminded that the meeting was being recorded and that they could ask for it to be turned off at any time.

The structure of the group was informal; I acted as a facilitator by asking open-ended questions to guide and prompt the participants with their reflections. The middle leaders were invited to share their thoughts and this led onto the next idea, after some general discussion around the subject.

The results of the focus group were not as expected. I had anticipated that the focus group dialogue would be able to illuminate aspects that could not emerge from interviews with individual middle leaders. In fact, what occurred was that the information collected was widely divergent and, while generally informative, was not useful in terms of the stated research problem. There lacked an open atmosphere with frequent silences and pregnant pauses. There was a concern that this appeared to be dissension and there were many disagreements and negative responses.

Two of the participants were not particularly willing to talk but another two in particular were very forthcoming and it was almost as if years of frustration and anger were coming out. The group was focusing very much on the negatives, the weaknesses, and the threats to improving attainment. This appeared to cloud their ability to think clearly to find solutions. The sense of frustration that came through was often directed at themselves as well as others. This was because they struggled to meet the expectations they had set themselves. There was little hesitation when they were about to say something contentious, as I assured them that they would not

be identifiable to anyone who was not present. The reasons for this were possibly related to the following three factors:

- i. Shared or collaborative interest: In the group process a middle leader might express an idea and another middle leader would take up the reflection, as if to enjoin and promote the conversation. I felt that they did not always express their own personal viewpoint, but collaborated with the interests of others within the group.
- ii. Time: In the group process all of the participants were highly interactive. This meant that in the 80 minutes of the interview the amount of time for any individual's input was limited. Brief comments were common throughout the interview.

When the total comments of a single participant were extracted from the transcript, the amount of information was not significant.

- iii. Negative interaction: It seemed that the process of group interaction acted in some ways to stifle, rather than promote, in-depth reflection. It was as if participants did not want to take up too much of the group's time with their own personal concerns or ideas. This may have been caused by the fact that the participants were unsure of each other, as they had not worked together in such an open forum before.

The meeting went on for much longer than anticipated, and went into the middle leaders' own time. It became a platform for the middle leaders to voice their disenchantment with the Academy, and consequently it did not reach the anticipated aim. Given these concerns, it was decided not to continue with the use of focus groups but to seek answers to the research questions through other data collecting processes. The emerging themes from the focus groups are indicated below and paint a bleak picture of Academy life and the middle leaders' role within it:

- i. a sense of coercion by the executive and senior leadership team
- ii. power relationships and territorialism blocking school development
- iii. personal relationships within the Senior Team barring promotion on merit
- iv. poor communication or miscommunication

- v. unreasonable workload leading to a distorted work/life balance and burnout
- vi. lack of voice and empowerment, leading to disaffection and disengagement
- vii. a blame culture standing in the way of risk-taking
- viii. issues around staff stress, fear and safety.

5.9 Summary of Stage Two

In conclusion, I learnt from this experience something about the limitations of the focus group process as a means of collecting qualitative data on individuals. I had thought that a focus group of middle leaders, collaboratively discussing the issue of raising standards, would give rise to insights into how we could move forward as a cohesive group, but in fact I discovered that this was not the case, and that we could be moving into dangerous territory if we continued to explore themes in this way. I therefore turned to data collection through the use of qualitative interviews, as I felt that this may be a more appropriate way of gathering data, because it would allow the middle leaders to talk without the negative influence of others.

5.10 Stage Three: Individual Interviews

Interviews have been used extensively in collecting data for qualitative research. I therefore decided to use qualitative interviews at this point, to understand in depth the experiences of the middle leaders. Qualitative interviews are most appropriately used when a rich picture is needed of people's experience and how they interpret it. In the interview process I decided to present a schedule of questions, but to keep the process flexible and exploratory. The questions asked were generally open-ended and designed to elicit detailed narratives (verbal discourse) about the participants' reflections on the reasons for poor attainment.

The individual interviews were conducted after the previous two group sessions had finished, to enable those who were unable to attend a group meeting, or found it difficult to speak in a group situation, to continue to participate.

The interviews were between 60 - 70 minutes in length and were recorded. They took place on-site in my office. All of the interviews were completed over a three-week period in the autumn term and each of the middle leaders was given an outline of the interview procedures, including a copy of the general guiding questions.

Overall, I intended that the questions should ensure that the participants felt at ease in discussing current and relevant issues, that they did not feel that their leadership was being 'tested' or examined, and that they did not feel that their views or beliefs were being judged or questioned. One of these interviews was not recorded at the request of the participant, so the data was collected through field notes. One participant became slightly distressed during the interview. She continued to talk about the Academy and her role within it, but much of this was in confidence and the only data incorporated into the discussion was with the participant's specific permission.

5.11 Analysis of data

The analysis process was quite laborious and involved several readings of each transcript. The first time was to get a sense of what was being said and then the subsequent readings were more carefully reflective, recalling the participants and their voices, emotions and expressions. To gain a sense of the whole, I read all of the transcripts in sequence rather than concentrating on only one at a time. The subsequent readings focused on each transcript until the researcher was satisfied that there was a clear picture of each meeting or interview. The researcher's impressions of the group were then noted - including structure, format, processes and outcomes - giving me an overview of the process as already described.

The next step entailed systematically working through the transcripts and noting significant areas of the dialogue. I annotated each topic in the margin, with brief descriptors and significant or relevant sentences being highlighted. Once annotation of all the transcripts was done, I analysed single transcripts one at a time, completing each one before commencing the next one. Once this was completed, the highlighted annotated data was transcribed into a thematic framework, identified by

line, page number and topic. I did this sequentially from each transcript; they were not grouped into topics. When this was complete, I made a note of key information and the insights that emerged from the data.

Once the transcripts had been summarised, I analysed the completed framework with the intention of pulling out ideas with the highlighted sentences and grouping them into clusters with similar ideas. These clusters indicated the emerging sub-themes from the data. The transcripts were then reread to ensure the voices in the data confirmed the validity of these sub-themes. Throughout the analysis of the data and identification of the emerging sub-themes, it was clear that there were circumstances beyond the middle leaders' control which dictated the education that they were able to provide.

5.12 Feedback to the middle leaders

Giving feedback was an important element of this inquiry as I wanted to ensure that the middle leaders felt empowered within (and in control of) the process. I reported back verbally to each of them in order to check for any strong disagreement with the sub-themes and content. Interestingly, this gave the middle leaders a further platform to talk about the problems facing the Academy and there came out of these feedback sessions a sense that most of the participants were quite strongly in agreement that the issues within the Academy were insurmountable unless there was a change in executive/senior leadership.

I was concerned about this lack of trust in the senior leadership team and also the despondency of the middle leaders. I decided that I did not want to leave them feeling negatively, so I gave them a reflective practice framework to help support their thinking in their own time. This was based upon John's (1995) model of structured/guided reflection. His focus was about uncovering and making explicit the knowledge that is used in our practice. Whilst this initially was developed within the field of nursing, I felt that this was appropriate within this inquiry and the field of educational leadership. The participants were not asked to share their reflective writing but to use it as a way of ordering their own thoughts.

5.13 Personal Reflection

I kept a personal reflective journal throughout the project and this became a significant part of the inquiry itself. My reason for doing this was that I recognised it as an integral part of my own process, as I was able to explore my “pre-suppositions; choices and experiences, and actions during the research process” (Mruck & Brewer, 2003, p. 3). I also wanted to monitor my own learning which, according to McNiff and Whitehead (2006, p. 65), “involves self-reflection as well as gathering data over time to show your learning has been advanced”.

During the research process I found this to be an invaluable resource to support both my learning and my ability to keep track of the process. It also gave a critical lens through which to see the inquiry and I was able to engage in an iterative approach by examining my own experiences as a learner, as well as a leader. As a result, I was able “to uncover [my] most deeply embedded allegiances and motivations as a teacher” (Brookfield, 1995, p. 32).

The knowledge and insight this initial cycle of inquiry gave was invaluable to me as a researcher, if disillusioning for me as a leader. As my position was that of a senior leader within the Academy, some of the situations discussed were uncomfortable.

However, despite the fact that I was part of the Academy’s senior leadership team, I had not worked there long enough to be a real influence on their opinions. This enabled a feeling of distance to be created from the situations the participants discussed, even though in the past (in other schools) I had been in many of the same situations. These conversations reinforced that many aspects of practice were as remembered, but also that some of the issues were more pervasive than first supposed. Or, perhaps of more importance, this may have been the first time these middle leaders were able to be together with the sole focus of discussing the reality of their practice.

One aspect that stood out was how disempowered and disillusioned the middle leaders felt with both the senior leadership team and the driving philosophy behind the Academy itself. A concern was expressed that as a publicly funded independent school, instead of the Academy improving educational outcomes for children, it was in fact having a detrimental effect. There was also an allusion to a lack of altruism within the executive team, who had become distanced from the moral purpose of the Academy.

I dedicated a lot of time to reading and rereading the recordings of the interviews. This gave me a better understanding of the issues. I also listened several times to the recordings, as through listening to the voices I could recall the meeting clearly, the feeling of the group, the attitudes, and the frustration and unhappiness. I recognised many of the situations and attitudes these middle leaders were describing, many of which had been prevalent throughout my leadership career and this was explored through my own journal. One of the issues most commonly referred to was the feeling that school improvement was beyond the realm of the middle leaders, who had given up striving to bring about significant change due to their sense of disempowerment and not being listened to. They also referred to the requirements of the Academy, as well as the economic constraints of staffing, resources and the external demands of the government (which demands improved outcomes for children year on year) as having a detrimental impact on the life-world of the middle leaders.

There was little doubt that they had adapted and learnt to work within this system to minimise the tensions that impacted on the education they delivered to their students. This meant not engaging in forms of school improvement. Comments from the middle leaders about the Academy indicated that they felt powerless and still saw themselves in terms of being the subordinate group dominated by what they described as “a dysfunctional senior leadership team”.

At the time of the inquiry, it was difficult for them to acknowledge the importance of their work and also the control and autonomy they could have over their practice.

5.14 Stage 4: Developing a plan for action

The success or failure of an action research venture often depends on what happens at the beginning of the inquiry process and on how participants are engaged early on (Wicks et al., 2009, p.244). They contend that the success or failure of an inquiry venture depends on the conditions that make it possible.

My intention throughout this first cycle of inquiry had been to create a conversational space that balanced the need for an arena where multiple realities could be discussed, while preserving the legitimacy of the inquiry itself (McNamee, 2004, p. 4). I had hoped to create a platform for the group to generate new resources for action as well as new ways of making sense to support us in moving forward with new actions (McNamee, 2004, p.5). It was at this point that both the group and the research floundered. Naïvely, I had expected the inquiry to become, “a site of coordinated meaning making” (McNamee, 2004, p. 8), but the situation for the middle leaders (and the Academy as an institution) became too difficult in January 2010. It resulted in two of the group members withdrawing from the research process, giving unreasonable workload and commitments as the reason; while two of the other middle leaders secured alternative employment in a different school, and so were unable to continue in the inquiry. This made the research unfeasible as it left only one participant.

5.15 Making sense of unsatisfactory outcomes

This attempt at developing an opportunity for middle leaders to be able to reflect upon their own practice and the organisation’s development revealed my lack of critical awareness of the obstacles that get in the way of such dialogue. This was undoubtedly as a result of my inexperience as a researcher, as from the start the necessary conditions for open and constructive dialogues were not created. As a result, the group failed to develop and thrive effectively. Drawing on Schutz’s (1958) interpersonal theory, which describes the need for inclusion, control and intimacy, the necessary framework for group development was not in place.

I also felt that the development of the research group reflected the position of the middle leaders within the organisation as a whole, i.e. early concerns are for inclusion and membership (Who am I to be in this group? Will I belong? And will the group meet my personal and practical needs?).

When and if these needs are adequately satisfied, the group focuses on concerns for power and influence (Who has power and who is powerless? Can I join with others to gain power and influence to meet my needs?) (Wicks et al., 2009, p. 244). These necessary conditions were not being negotiated, which meant that the middle leaders failed to gain a sense of intimacy and identity, and therefore became ineffective and unable to focus on any task.

I recognised that this group behaviour was essentially a form of learned helplessness. I was keenly aware that this was a malady within the organisation as a whole. Within our research group and within the Academy, there was no phased progression in terms of facilitation of school improvement. Furthermore, throughout my time at the Academy the conditions necessary for any group to develop had not been witnessed, let alone those where the primary concern moves from issues of inclusion to control to intimacy (Srivastva et al., 1977, p.34); or from forming to norming to storming to performing (Tuckman, 1965); or from nurturing to energising to relaxing (Randall & Southgate, 1980) (Taken from Wicks & Reason, 2009, p. 248). Neither interpersonal nor professional needs were being met, which in turn led to a lack of social interaction with the middle leaders within the group (i.e. the participants and the staff as a whole) and the development of a sense of anxiety (Bion, 1959).

Bion contends that this leads to a fight or flight mode, which would account for the high turnover of staff and general lack of engagement within the Academy, as well as the middle leaders' unwillingness to be involved in the inquiry.

Discussions had indicated that governmental as well as organisational demands led to a feeling of disempowerment with a focus on the system requirements rather than the life-world that was being experienced by the middle leaders. As one participant stated:

“We don’t have any control over what we are doing in this job. The government is constantly measuring us against changing goalposts and then the SLT tell us we have to reach our performance indicators within the classroom and departmentally. We are told that we need to take risks and to come up with solutions but when we do we are not given the opportunity by SLT to move them forward...or we try and then when things go wrong we are hauled over the coals and blamed. There’s a blame culture that is crippling our creativity. I’m not going to take a risk if it means me losing my job.”

Mike, 2009

This disempowerment was synthesised within the research with the group’s inability to move beyond the negatives. There was no opportunity in the Academy for the life-world of each person and the collective to be fully articulated, and one participant stated that this was reflected in the inquiry process group.

“We are all willing, but we don’t get the chance to talk together about what our values are and what we can bring as individuals to the Academy. I have been a Head of Faculty for years, but no-one knows about or values my experience. Instead of the SLT asking our opinions, they rush in and impose what they think we should be doing. There is little thought or reflection. We are even told what we have to discuss in staff meetings and there is no opportunity to just share and talk about what has worked in the past.”

Kerry, 2009

As a result of this, the middle leaders had become disengaged from any form of involvement in school improvement.

5.16 A Professional and Research Crisis

This resulted in a crisis for me in terms of the research process and I felt disillusioned with the work that I had done. I also became very dissatisfied with my role as a Vice Principal in the Academy. It was through the advancement of my learning and exploration of the inquiry processes that I began to understand that the

middle leaders needed to focus on the positive core of their work, rather than looking at the issues. After the first cycle of the project foundered, I spent some time pondering the question, “What am I trying to achieve?” I did not want to make another naïve mistake. Also, in terms of my own process, it was the right time to move on to the second cycle of the inquiry, but the experience of Cycle One left me lacking in confidence and I still was not convinced that the middle leaders had the capacity (in terms of time and commitment) to be able to fully appreciate the implications of this type of inquiry.

After the first year, I had an intuitive sense that something different needed to be done in order to support and engage the middle leaders. Change was being imposed on staff on a regular basis – almost every term there was a new initiative being introduced in the name of innovation – but staff were disengaged from the process, and as a result of this lack of ownership, the initiatives failed to become embedded in practice.

It was my sincere hope that the second cycle of this project would go some way in promoting a sense of interconnectedness and dynamism (Miller, 1995), thus re-engaging the middle leaders in the change process. The following extract is taken from my journal at the end of the initial cycle:

“I did not necessarily want to introduce a change process but I did want to involve the middle leaders in a piece of work that embraced and celebrated their humanness as we developed together a personal and dialogical way of understanding one another and being able to work together for the good of the Academy.”

August 2011

The remainder of the academic year 2009-10 was therefore spent completing a further literature review. This was in order to clarify my thinking in terms of how I wanted to move the inquiry forward, and I was drawn to the notion of Appreciative Inquiry.

I began to hypothesise that an appreciative approach to school improvement could support the building of a more cooperative capacity of leadership (Barrett & Fry, 2005, p. 23) within the Academy. In order to initiate this, I knew that we could not adopt the more traditional methodology that looked at finding a problem, analysing it, implementing a plan and dealing with resistance as an inevitable side effect of change. The middle leaders were not in a position to be able to do this due to the negative narratives that abounded. However, their willingness to engage in an alternative type of inquiry (with a focus on appreciation of “what is”) excited me.

This was a different approach to middle leader engagement and school improvement, and there was a paucity of literature around it. I have always been excited by implementing change and when I was younger, at times, I struggled with others who resisted it. Several years ago I became aware that in leadership terms this was an area of professional development for me, and I worked hard intrapersonally to accept both my own frailty and the frailty of those with whom I worked (Arendt, 1998). I was mindful of this after the first year – what I did not want to do was to overwhelm and alienate the middle leaders; nor did I want to come across as over-zealous.

When I contemplated what I was trying to achieve, I realised that the reasons were manifold, complex and interwoven. I therefore approached the second cycle of the inquiry with trepidation and wrote the following in my journal:

“This is the moment of truth when I have to start the second year of the project. I have spent many months researching and reading around the subject now. I know that I want to create something special and different; we can’t keep doing the same old, same old...I want the middle leaders to experience a more positive sense of the future. I see them looking so tired and jaded, not willing to be part of any journey. I rarely hear that learning dialogue that is unique to successful schools; it is always about how naughty a certain child has been and how difficult everything is... It saps my energy when I try to talk to them and this negativity is undoubtedly rubbing off onto the children.”

September 2011

6 Cycle Two Literature Review

I had spent the final stage of Cycle One reading about how best to move the project on and where to situate it within the whole process of the research. I therefore present the second part of my literature review (which focuses on Appreciative Inquiry) at this point in the thesis as it helps the reader to understand my process and clarify the underpinning theories behind Cycle Two of the inquiry.

The perspective on school improvement presented in the second cycle of this project arises from my increased interest in examining the nature and effects of strategies used in the pursuit of organisational change based on adopting an appreciative view of school improvement. Throughout this section of the thesis I will make reference to an appreciative stance or an appreciative approach. This is a philosophical stance that is taken when discussing the second cycle of the study, and refers to the guiding principles of Appreciative Inquiry. The underpinning philosophy is that by looking at the positive core of an organisation then change can happen “heliotropically” (Cooperrider, 1990), as a result of the energy created. I shall explore what I mean by this term later in the chapter.

6.1 Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative Inquiry (hereafter AI) originates in the field of organisational development (Yaeger & Sorensen, 2009), and is an example of a strategy for change that is beginning to appear in education. AI was originally developed by David Cooperrider (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987; Cooperrider, 1990; Cooperrider and Passmore, 1991; Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005; Cooperrider et al., 2008). It is represented in both academic literature (Srivastva & Barrett, 1988; Ludema et al., 1997) and practitioner literature (Hammond, 1996; Elliott, 1991; Watkins & Mohr, 2001). According to Ashford & Patkar (2001, p.4), ‘Appreciative Inquiry... is a strategy for purposeful change that identifies the best of “what is” to pursue dreams and possibilities of “what could be.” It is a cooperative search for the strengths, passions and life-giving forces that are found within every system – those factors that hold the potential for inspired, positive change.’

Various authors, mainly in the USA, have written about the use of AI in schools. Schiller suggests that AI can 're-form our positive images of schools into positive actions' (1995, on line). Pratt describes how an AI project in an urban school in Ohio has been used 'to promote positive cultural change and to improve the learning environment' (2002, p. 18). Hinrichs and Rhodes-Yenowine (2003, p.20) describe a project that aimed to enhance student participation in creating the school's strategic priorities through the use of 'the strength based whole systems methodology' involving all stakeholders in the change process.

6.2 Appreciative Inquiry in practice

As stated, AI is a relatively new theory which takes a positive approach to organisational development. It aims to identify good practice, design effective development plans, and ensure implementation. It focuses the research process on what works, rather than trying to fix what does not. AI therefore presents an alternative to the problem-solving approach underpinning action research and offers an affirmative approach for evaluating and envisioning future initiatives based on best practice.

Traditionally, Appreciative Inquiry is an evolutionary form of action research (Fitzgerald et al., 2001; van der Haar & Hosking, 2004) or as 'one of the more significant innovations in action research' (Bushe, 1998). As previously stated, AI's originators, Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987), criticised the lack of a useful theory generated by traditional action research studies and claimed that the problem-solving theory underpinning action research is to blame. They challenged the fact that action researchers tend to assume that their purpose is to solve a problem and thus groups and organisations are treated not only as if they have problems, but also as if there are problems to be solved. Cooperrider & Srivastva (1987) argued that this view of organising and researching reduces the possibility of generating new theory and new images of the future. As an alternative, they devised the AI model as a change management process using the positive experiences of an organisation or group to bring about change. The main philosophy of AI can be summarised as follows:

- i. In every society, organisation or group, something works
- ii. What we focus on becomes our reality
- iii. Reality is created in the moment and there are multiple realities
- iv. The act of asking questions of an organisation or group influences the group in some way
- v. People have more confidence and comfort to journey to the future when they carry forward parts of the past
- vi. If we carry parts of the past forward, they should be the parts that are best about the past (Hammond, 1996, p. 12)

Within the second cycle of the inquiry, the application of AI takes place in four stages or cycles: discovering, dreaming, designing, and delivering. These cycles are similar to the cycles found within action research, as shown below:

- i. **Discovery:** finding out the best and most positive experiences participants have had in their organisation
- ii. **Dream:** thinking creatively about the future
- iii. **Design:** designing plans for the future that reflect participants' views of good practice and visions. This cycle involves producing provocative propositions, which are statements about what the participants want to achieve
- iv. **Destiny:** the energy moves toward action planning, working out what will need to happen to realise the provocative propositions.

These cycles are presented in diagrammatical form overleaf, offering a pictorial representation of the different cycles of AI – this helped me to develop a sense of what the second cycle of the inquiry could look like.

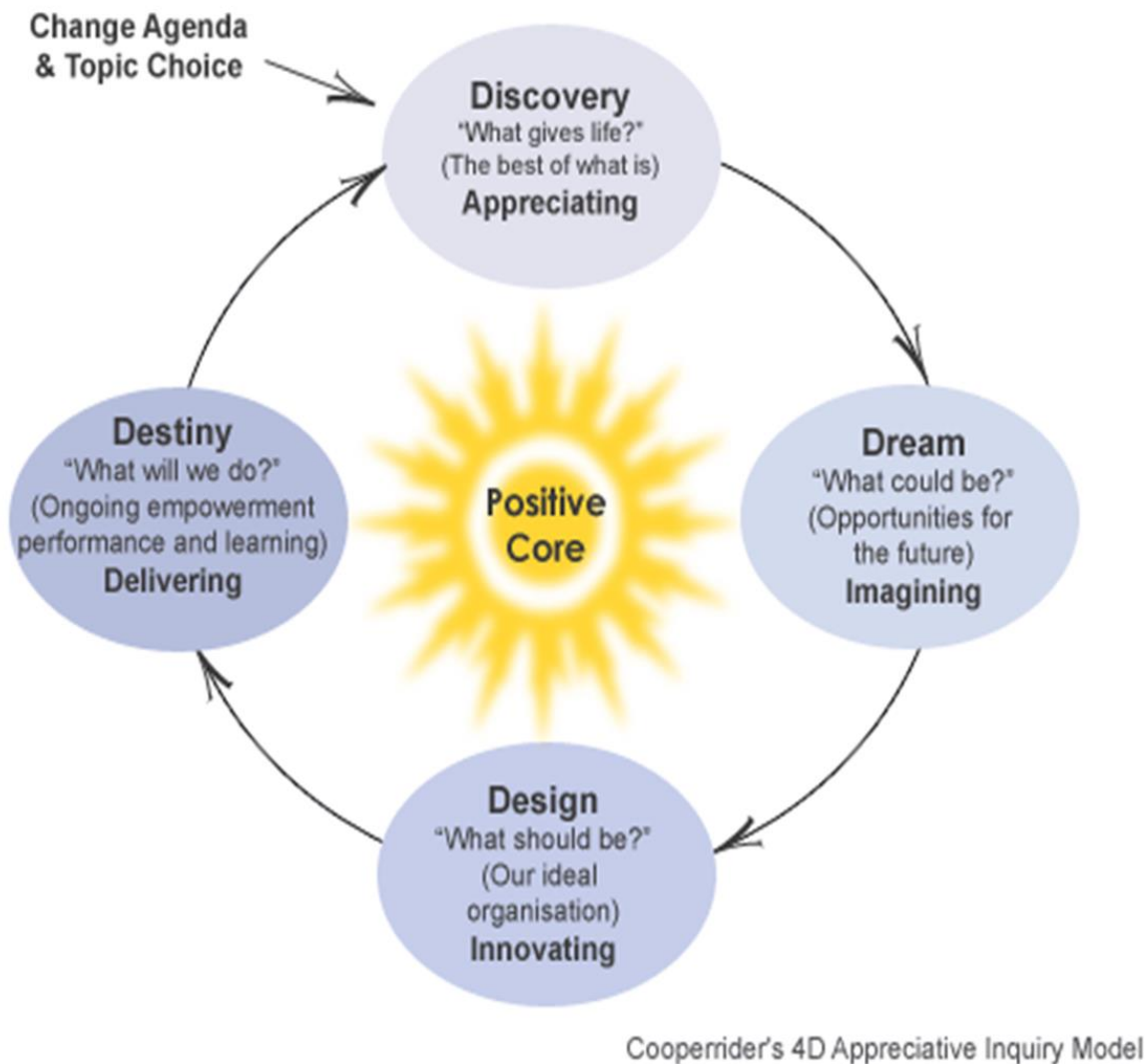


Figure 2 Appreciative Inquiry (AI) for school improvement. Each oval in the figure names the step (bold) and its purpose (underneath) – the four cycles reflect action research cycles in their design, taken from <http://tmiaust.com.au/ideasandresearch.htm> [Retrieved 18/09/2012]

Drawing on the literature presented for the purposes of the second cycle of the inquiry, I adopted a research model with an appreciative approach to serve as both the theoretical perspective and the research methodology for this cycle of the inquiry. As a collaborative, positive, and strengths-based approach to building capacity, the methodology recognises the best of the past and present through narrative experiences, whilst empowering participants to dream and look towards designing a desired future that represents a shared destiny (Cooperrider et al., 2003; Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). This cycle is an attempt to harness the transformative potential of a strengths orientation (Whitney, Trosten-Bloom & Rader, 2010, p.28).

Within the context of this study, Appreciative Inquiry challenges the problem-oriented approach often applied by action researchers. AI scholars (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005; Ludema, 2001; Ludema, Wilmot & Srivastva, 1997) highlight how deficit discourses and the traditional problem-solving approach typical of action research may lead to an exaggerated focus on the weaknesses of the organisation – an approach which Whitney and Cooperrider (2000, p.15) suggest may become a degenerative spiral. As a tool for organisational change, development and inquiry 'Appreciative Inquiry provides a positive rather than a problem-oriented lens on the organization, focusing members' attention on what is possible rather than what is wrong' (van Buskirk, 2002, p. 67).

I present a diagrammatical representation of the appreciative approach overleaf:

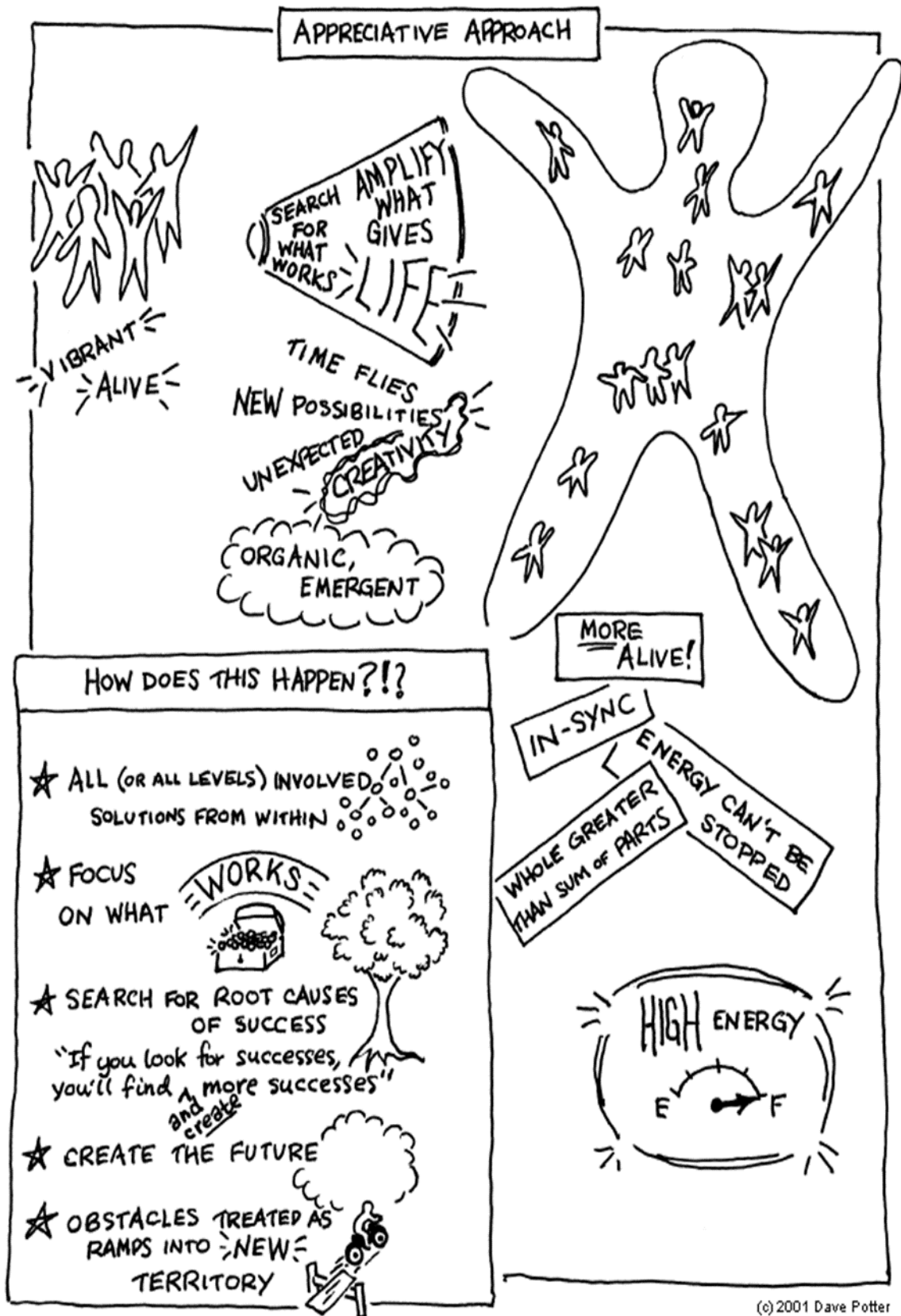


Figure 3 Pictorial representation of AI – shared with participants in Cycle Two (Potter, 2001)

Whitney & Trosten-Bloom (2003, p. 2) describe several beliefs about human nature and human organisation that are the foundation of Appreciative Inquiry, and highlight its roots in social constructivist theory. These include:

- i. People individually and collectively have unique gifts, skills and contributions to bring to life
- ii. Organisations are human social systems, sources of unlimited relational capacity, lived in language
- iii. The images we hold of the future are socially created and, once articulated, serve to guide individual and collective actions

According to Cram (2010, p. 36), a Marcel Proust quote is a favourite among Appreciative Inquiry theorists: “The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.” The transformational elements of Appreciative Inquiry reside in its claims that it generates new knowledge and that it results in generative metaphors that compel new action. Generative metaphors are sayings that tend to juxtapose two words in evocative ways that ‘unstick’ social systems - for example, ‘sustainable development’ (Bushe et al., 2005, p. 164). Whitney et al. (2003) and other authors describe several principles that inform Appreciative Inquiry.

A summary of the five ‘foundational principles’ is provided in the table below. These principles are derived from social constructionism, image theory and grounded theory. From social constructionism comes the notion that social reality is constructed and maintained through language and communication. From image theory comes the notion that people’s decisions are influenced by the images they hold of their future. And from grounded research comes the notions that participants hold the key to understanding their culture or reality, and that any research is also an intervention (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003).

The five foundational principles of Appreciative Inquiry are as follows:

The Constructionist Principle: Reality is socially constructed through language

The Simultaneity Principle: Change begins from the moment a question is asked

The Poetic Principle: Our choice of what we study determines what we discover

The Anticipatory Principle: Our image of the future shapes the present

The Positive Principle: Positive questioning leads to positive change (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003, p. 8).

6.3 Organisational Change

Appreciative Inquiry is described as a change from more conventional problem-solving approaches to organisational improvement, which tend to focus on what is not working, or what is wrong. Such approaches can include strategic planning, restructuring, redesigning work, and project management (Sullivan, 2004). According to Sullivan (2004, p. 219), the deficit-based thinking underpinning these approaches emphasises, "...problems; ... people who are perceived to be causing these problems; [criticism] of ideas, accomplishments, and the people involved; and a focus on resources that are limited or lacking."

McKenzie (2003, p. 37) argues that such problem-solving, deficit-based approaches have a negative effect on an organisation (in her case, school climate and student achievement) and do not produce effective, positive solutions that enable an organisation to change and move forward. Appreciative Inquiry, on the other hand, has been described as strength-based, asset-based ethnographic, a strategic planning model, participatory and a system-wide approach. It therefore seeks to discover what works in an organisation based on the assumption that solutions already reside within an organisation (McKenzie, 2003, p. 38).

In this way, it is argued, Appreciative Inquiry can describe a preferred future for the organisation alongside an understanding of how an organisation can build towards that future (Cram, 2010, p. 36).

Bushe et al., (2005, p. 165) examined the organisational outcomes from Appreciative Inquiry undertaken prior to 2003 by assessing every published case study of Appreciative Inquiry against the leading prescriptions of Appreciative Inquiry theory and practice at this time. Their focus was on two key outcomes: i) new knowledge or new ways of doing things; and ii) generative metaphors. They found that transformational organisational change was associated with the Appreciative Inquiry change process; namely, changing how people think rather than changing what they do. It was also associated with an improvisational, rather than planned, approach to change. “Perhaps even more radical is the prescription to let go of control in planned change efforts and nurture a more improvisational approach to the action phase in action research” (Bushe et al., 2005, p. 176). In terms of using AI as a school improvement tool, organisations are acknowledged as dynamic, whole systems that change when improvised action by members is encouraged (Bushe et al., 2005).

6.4 Balancing the positive spin

Appreciative Inquiry has been criticised for being unbalanced by virtue of its emphasis on the positive (Patton, 2002, p. 17). For example, Sullivan (2004, p.219) stresses the high level of commitment that is needed from senior people within an organisation to implement and maintain a positive focus. Others, such as Patton (2002, p. 18) suggest that a more ‘balanced’ approach may be more worthwhile. The issue therefore appears to be whether this balance will occur ‘naturally’ or whether it needs to be taken into account in a reformatting of the Appreciative Inquiry method. Opting to use AI is to choose a starting point from which to work, rather than to choose some naïve and idealistic end point at which you will arrive (Michael, 2005, p. 223).

7 Cycle Two: Research in Action

7.1 Redefining the research question

With the feedback from the middle leaders involved in the first cycle, I recognised the need to re-focus the inquiry, and it was necessary to revisit the research question and adapt it. Based on the second literature review that I completed, the redefined research question became:

Can Appreciative Inquiry positively impact on middle leader engagement, and if so, how and with what consequences?

7.2 Cycle Two: Research in Action

In October 2010 I made the decision to begin the second cycle of the project by inviting middle leaders to be involved as collaborative participants, ensuring throughout that, “participants are participants not objects of the study” (McNiff et al., 2005, p. 10). Six middle leaders across teaching and support staff volunteered to participate. When asked about their reasons for participation, they said that they “had heard about the previous year and wanted to be part of the ongoing project” (Sam). The professional profiles of the second cohort of participants are presented in Appendix ii.

In this second year of the inquiry, the participants were volunteers, with the Principal agreeing that they could have one hour per week as protected, directed time to be involved in the project. We met on a weekly basis in the first instance in order to get the inquiry up and running, but then used that time to action the project over time.

The initial meetings focused on awareness-raising as to what the research intent was; how the project was to be structured; and what the expectation and commitment would be for all involved.

I found the transition to the second cycle difficult, as I knew and understood the concept of Appreciative Inquiry but I had not led this kind of project before. I made this journal entry just before the first meeting that I had with the middle leaders:

“I just read something that really resonated with me and sums up how I am feeling about this whole project: “I know that I have a goal, which is that I want to look at my job but I don’t know what the questions are to ask but I will know when I get there...it is only by getting stuck in and...being confused and asking questions: What am I doing? Why am I doing it? that it becomes clear...” (Miller, 1995, p. 454). This is EXACTLY how I feel as I find it really hard to articulate what I am hoping to achieve...However, I do feel that I have the knowledge and skills...and surely the experience to be able to create new knowledge, don’t I? I suppose that I can draw strength from what Argyris & Schön call, “the tacit knowing of a problem whose solution we do not yet have” (1974, p. 3)

September 2010

I knew that as a group we would need to develop new skills in order to create this new knowledge. I was also aware through my reading that these skills would tap into our inter- and intra-personal development, with introspection and good communication being at the heart of effective appreciative research. We needed as a group to be able to trust our own development and learning processes, with a commitment to self-understanding; an ability to listen to and hear what others are saying and to have an empathic understanding of what their experience and reality is; a commitment to move beyond the negatives to focus on the appreciative and generative nature of dialogue; and an openness to new ways of thinking and courage to embrace the life-giving forces of the Academy.

7.3 Introduction of the project

The first step of the research process was to share with the participants the core assumptions of the project. Drawing on the work of Hammond (1996), these assumptions were:

- i. In the Academy there are many things that work
- ii. What we focus on becomes our reality
- iii. Reality is created in the moment and there are multiple realities
- iv. The act of asking questions will influence the group in some way and that the conversations and stories told will be an intervention in themselves
- v. As a group we will be more comfortable and confident going into the future (the unknown), taking things with us from the past(the known)

In these first meetings, the notion of the impact that the negative stories were having was introduced. The shortcomings of the first cycle of the project, and the need to change focus were also shared with the middle leaders as I felt that it would be disingenuous not to. They were made aware that the process was situated within the appreciative approach and involved five cycles. These cycles were presented to them and we spent some time discussing the implications of the inquiry. This is presented overleaf:

Definition: This is topic choice, the focus of the piece of work. This cycle can take on two different forms:

- i. The Academy has a problem and we will reframe this together in an appreciative way that;
- ii. The Academy does not have a problem but wants to build on its successes.

Core question: What do we need to focus on?

Discovery: This is to find out what the Academy's unique context is that enables us to be successful. This cycle is the heart of the process as it is all about telling the story and capturing the essence of the affirmative conversations. Through this new meaning, language and understanding is created.

Core Question: What makes the Academy unique and how does this make us successful?

Dream: This is about bringing out the hopes and dreams the middle leaders have both for themselves and the Academy. It is not like the traditional visioning activity that many schools are involved in, as there is no direct state that they will be moving towards; rather, these dreams are provocations and energisers that shift both personal and collective thinking.

Core Question: What are the possibilities for the Academy?

Design: This is the decision-making cycle that looks at the actions needed to support the changes that need to be made. It is about translating the dreams into actions. Through the articulation of propositions or statements, the middle leaders will create mini-projects that will bring about some of the images and visions within the Dream cycle.

Core Question: What do we need to do to transform our policies/processes/strategies/systems etc. to enable our dreams to flourish?

Destiny: This is about planning and moving the ideas forward with the celebration of the work that has gone on before. It draws on collaborations and teamwork to make things happen.

Core Question: Who will move this forward and how will they do it, with specific timelines?

Through further discussion, I agreed with the group of middle leaders that the intention of the inquiry would be the following:

- i. To ask questions that would stimulate new ways of thinking and learning;
- ii. To tap into their knowledge and expertise to plan and take a stand for a vision for a better future;
- iii. To stimulate dialogue and better communication systems whereby everyone feels part of the process and heard;
- iv. To integrate the vision into everyday practice which could involve developing reframing the present and finding new ways of moving forward;

- v. To commit to generating new patterns of work process and systems to help support the vision.

We agreed that this would be done through continuous questioning, either in groups or as individuals, the locating and amplifying of what was working well and discussion around how previous problems had been overcome. We made a unanimous decision to remain in the moment as to generate positive answers wherever possible.

7.4 Developing a cohesive group

Of importance in this initial stage of the process was the development of a cohesive group in which members could feel able to express themselves in the here and now (Harris, 2007, p. 9), making themselves properly known to one another. This was a key part of the inquiry and one that had been missed in the first year.

The driving force of the project at this point was the development of a sense of group identity that would enable increasing awareness through discussion that would have an impact on how the group saw the issues, thus increasing understanding and beginning the process of change (Morton-Cooper, 2000, p.16).

This reflective process of sharing beliefs, values and insights into practice issues has the potential to improve relationships, procedures and power play within the institution. Krueger (1994, p. 56) maintains that the group dynamics of participants interacting and influencing each other, and also influencing the course of the discussion, should be regarded as a limitation of groups in action. However, in action research and particularly in Appreciative Inquiry it is this group dynamics of interaction which enables the issues important to the participants to surface and become the focus of the discussion.

7.5 Definition

The next step was to begin to engage in the process of definition. In the definition cycle the intention was to create the space to enable the middle leaders to come together and discuss their practice. To understand and define how middle leaders work and look at what influences this, it was first important to acknowledge and clarify the values and beliefs they regard as fundamental to their role in terms of school improvement. The basis of action research is grounded in the shared and explicit values and culture, which, in this research, is their core purpose and moral imperative. This could only be achieved if a sense of trust and mutual respect was developed, so that people felt able to express themselves whilst being listened to and appreciated. There was a developing understanding that the group should be, by nature, homogenous – i.e. we shared common experience (we were all employed by the Academy) and we shared a common interest (we wanted to work together on school improvement matters).

There was a need to ensure that each member felt orientated within the research, as it is only through the recognition of these fundamental values that the issues arising from reflection on the reality of practice can be judged to be valid and true.

Group consensus would define the validity of the claim within the context of the specific situation. Furthermore, through orientation, anxiety would be reduced and expectations (and indeed misconceptions) would be clarified (Yalom, 2005).

This was a new type of venture for the middle leaders and there was a need for the identification of goals in order to move us forward. I was concerned that the group could flounder at this early stage if the foundations were poorly laid. Furthermore, previous group facilitation had given me an insight into the need to provide systematic reinforcement of the positives in order to develop the necessary conditions for self-actualisation. This notion of self-actualisation was an important element of this cycle of the study as, “The actualising tendency guides us all to ever more development, fulfilment, and integration, and ... this is explicitly a socially constructive force, rather than a selfish, destructive one” (Linley et al., 2006, p. 6). However, there was a need to point the inquiry in some kind of direction without pre-

empting the end results or findings, so I introduced the notion of an affirmative topic; that is to say, the topic upon which we were going to focus.

7.6 The Affirmative Topic

The initial stage of the Discovery cycle is the development of an affirmative topic. Deciding on the topic (or topics) to focus on draws on the work of Whitney & Trosten-Bloom (2003, p.7) and their belief that “Human systems move in the direction of what they study [therefore] the choice of what they study is fateful”.

This topic then guides and shapes the nature of the stories that would be produced and is often representative of what people want to discover or learn more about. It was important for the group to come to a consensus on what to focus on, with everyone having an equal voice, and every participant feeling fully engaged in the process, reflecting what Cooperrider et al. (2005, p.41) state, “all those who participate [in this process] must be encouraged to speak their minds and say what is in their hearts”. They go on to offer criteria for effective topic choice: topics are affirmative; they identify the desired topics; the group is genuinely curious about the topics and wants to learn about them; and the topic moves in the direction the group wants.

Initially, the group members appeared to keep a ‘public image’, presenting themselves in a way that they seemed to feel was professionally acceptable. However, they quickly began to open up and started to identify what they wanted to address. One of the most emotive topics that staff wanted to talk about was that of student behaviour and attitude. This seemed to be a major theme throughout the initial stages of the process and something that every member of the group felt was a topic for discussion. However, the group struggled to see this as an affirmative topic and the discussion always returned to a deficit position, with the middle leaders finding it difficult to remain positive.

Several hours were spent discussing behaviour and attitude, and it was quite clearly a painful topic for the group to discuss. At times the session was being used in a

cathartic way, with individuals sharing experiences of when they had felt hurt or disempowered by the poor behaviour of the students:

“I have to say how awful it is to work here. Maybe I am getting things wrong but I have 12 years’ experience in teaching and I have never had kids speak to me the way they do here. I had a lesson today and they were just refusing to do anything. When I challenged them they just told me to f**k off. Why would they do that? I can’t understand why they feel that I am against them. I am trying to help them; I am on their side but that just taps into my stuff. Maybe I am a macho Scotsman who expects too much but I don’t think so; is it too much to expect not to be verbally abused because I want them to do some work?”

James, September 2010

The disclosure made by this member of the group led to several disclosures from other members and the session seemed to become a forum for the telling of stories around their experiences of poor behaviour in the Academy. The middle leaders presented as having previously internalised the behavioural issues that they had to deal with and that this was in turn negatively impacting on their own confidence and self-image. They seemed to be using the session as an outlet to express pent-up feelings, with another of the middle leaders endorsing this sense when she said:

“I had a lot of time off last year. I get ill all the time and just can’t face coming in – it is too much and I wake up just wanting to cry. The thought of having the kids misbehave is too much for me and I can’t face it...[She begins to cry]...I have a problem in class and can’t seem to make things any better so I ask senior leadership team to help me, but they are powerless as well; it is ridiculous.”

Chris, September 2010

The tone of the meeting was one of angst and despair and it appeared at this point that some of the participants were sharing intimate aspects of their professional lives and in doing so were making themselves vulnerable. This was quite unexpected and there seemed to be a free flow of meaning through the group that I was not party to, as though the very sharing of the stories was tapping into a coping mechanism, i.e.

the telling and sharing of stories was a way of enabling the middle leaders to rationalise the difficulties that they were facing on a daily basis. These disclosures felt difficult to deal with as I too felt powerless to deal with the issues that we faced on a daily basis. The disclosures of the middle leaders tapped into a part of myself that was unfamiliar and the reflective journal was used in order to explore this. I made the following journal entry after this meeting:

“I am not sure where these feelings of powerlessness are coming from. I am not unfamiliar with high emotion and a need for help but this feels different – maybe it is the multiple roles that I am playing here. I am a member of the senior leadership team; therefore, it is my role to find solutions to the issues. I am also comfortable within a therapeutic setting and am well prepared emotionally to face highly charged situations....I don't doubt that the telling of stories can have a therapeutic impact and that this is an integral part of the research process but for some reason the emotion behind these stories today really threw me. What was I expecting? Chris was simply trying to make sense of her world through the story that she was telling. I need to read around this in order to make sense for myself...”

October 2010

My position as a researcher was not static and the research did not follow a neat and ordered pathway. My relationship with the middle leaders fluctuated constantly, shifting back and forth along a continuum of narratives; from one moment to the next, from one interaction to the next, and, at times, from one discussion topic to the next. There was a concern at this point regarding the need for there to be distance and objectivity, so despite having decided that the project would not be led by me, I decided that the best way forward was to adopt a slightly different stance.

The nature of this cycle of the research was not to do in-depth interviews based on the current situation and the feelings around this but to reframe those stories in order to focus on the 'best of what there is'.

The negative emotions felt by the middle leaders could hinder the research, so my intention was to develop a more generative and appreciative stance in the stories being told. As a result, in the next meeting a more strategic approach was adopted in order to focus the middle leaders on strategy and action. This was within a structured framework with a focus on the group having a strategic conversation that was grounded in their apparent emerging values. It was at this point that I decided to adopt what is known as the SOAR approach to identifying which areas of school improvement needed to be focused on.

7.7 The SOAR Approach

The strength-based approach known as SOAR has been used in several large companies to nurture, “a culture of continuous organisational learning, because stakeholders who participate in the strategy conversations learn from each other and establish collaborative working relationships. They share and create knowledge and also learn to operate through the conversation” (Stavros & Hinrichs, 2009, p. 14). Taking this into consideration, this notion of having strategic conversation seemed a way of moving the agenda within this cycle forward.

The standard strategic tool for schools has traditionally been SWOT analysis. SWOT stands for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats and is generally implemented from the top down by the senior leadership team. Frequently, there are negative consequences of using this method, which can include a lack of focus on the most important and highest impact goals, no shared vision, no plans to support goals, and no review or evaluation of the plan after it has been developed. There is also commonly a lack of involvement in the development of the plan by the people who are responsible for the implementation of it, and planning is experienced as an event and not a process. The SOAR process picks up on the Strengths and Opportunities of SWOT but also incorporates Aspirations and Results. According to Stavros & Hinrichs (2009), the main differences between SWOT and SOAR are presented overleaf.

SWOT analysis	SOAR approach
Analysis-orientated	Action-orientated
Weakness and threat focus	Strengths and opportunities focus
Competition focus	Possibility focus
Incremental improvement	Innovation and breakthrough
Top down	Engagement at all levels
Focus on analysis and planning	Focus on planning and implementation
Energy depleting	Energy creating
Attention to gaps	Attention to results

Table 3 Differences between SWOT and SOAR (Stavros & Hinrichs, 2009)

Clifton & Harter (2003, p. 112) report that organisations that focus on the positives increase productivity by one and a half times. Stavros & Hinrichs (2009, p.13) suggest that, by adopting a SOAR approach with a focus on strengths and opportunities, the weaknesses and threats are managed and reframed “weaknesses and threats are not ignored. They are re-framed and given the appropriate focus within the Opportunities and Results conversation”. This underpinned my intentions at this point of the inquiry. We explored this type of exercise in the next session in order to help the group focus and reframe the issue of behaviour through inquiring into and identifying the strengths and opportunities, rather than dwelling on the issues that we were all well aware of. The week before the next session saw me exploring how best to support the middle leaders in focusing on behaviour as an affirmative topic. I made the decision to work with the participants in reframing their thinking to bring it from a deficit position to one that enabled affirmative statements and action. I spent time coming up with ideas of what the development of affirmative from deficit meant to me and the table below was produced in order to clarify this understanding:









Deficit approach	Implication for the Academy	Strength-based Approach	Affirmative Topic
Identification of Problem 	Behaviour is a problem	Appreciating the best of what there is 	Improved ethos
Analysis of Causes 	Energy taken up analysing why behaviour is poor	Envisioning what might be 	Outstanding behaviour
Analysis of Possible Solutions 	We do not have capacity to deal with all the behavioural issues	Dialoguing about what should be 	How can we collectively create a positive ethos?
Plan of Action (Treatment) 	Time spent devising a plan – usually by SLT	Innovating what will be 	Everyone involved in visioning where we will be
Behaviour is a problem to be solved		Positive ethos is to be embraced	

Table 4 Diagram of the differences between a deficit approach and an affirmative approach

This process was shared with the middle leaders in our next meeting to see where it would take us. I suggested that we engage in a SOAR-type activity and the group agreed that this could help the participants to focus on the positives. This was not simply a way of gathering data but was an intervention in itself, as the stories, rather than opinions and analysis, with the middle leaders reliving the stories, were important. This way, genuine rapport and trust would develop, and we would get genuine experiences rather than the “official line”. Once the story had been shared from a deeply emotional place in the middle leaders’ psyche, we could begin to support one another in the process of identifying what was really important in the stories in order to develop a better future.

7.8 Summary

The appreciative topic, a component at the heart of AI, was discerned from discussions of problems and opportunities among the middle leaders within the Academy. This topic, in line with AI protocol, focuses on the hopes of the practice for a desired outcome and reframes short-term problems, crises, and dilemmas into

constructive opportunities that align with strategic goals. Once a topic has been chosen, the middle leaders move into the 4D AI cycle to help make transformative changes happen.

Transferability and implications for practice are outlined overleaf:

Determining an appreciative topic

The **focus** of the school improvement effort

Purpose

- i. The topic must be meaningful to middle leader practice and be relevant to school improvement and the school development plan
- ii. The topic must be positive and generative

Helpful hints may involve some or all of the following:

- i. School-wide focus group
- ii. Leadership practice interviews
- iii. Discussions among key stakeholders
- iv. Discussions with pupils
- v. Topics may arise from current goals or needs
- vi. Topics may address current concerns or problems

8 Discovery

Cycle One Stage One: Discovery, tapping into sources of meaning and purpose within the Academy

8.1 Objectives

During the 'Discovery cycle we uncover, learn about, and appreciate the best of "what is" and "what has been" (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003, p. 7) in the context of the Academy. This was done by focusing on the 'positive core' of the organisation, the so-called "highpoint experiences and successes" (Cooperrider et al., 2008, p. 104). The Discovery stage of the AI process involved eliciting sources of meaning and purpose among individual middle leaders within the Academy. As a result, they necessarily heard different stories. These stories gave different viewpoints, and a different version of the truth. In hearing these, the middle leaders could then come to understand that the truth is more complex, deeper and richer than they had previously assumed. A deeper understanding and connection with one another could also be achieved.

This was not used as a simple way of gathering data, but as an intervention in itself, as the questions asked change the nature of the emotional processes of the employee, enabling them to see the organisation differently. The stories, rather than opinions and analysis, with the middle leaders reliving the stories, were important. There was a need to not simply give a detached narrative from a distance or one that involved objective analysis. This way, genuine rapport and trust would develop, and we would get genuine experiences rather than the "official line". Once the story had been shared from a deeply emotional place in the middle leaders' psyche, we could begin to support one another in the process of identifying what was really important in the stories in order to develop a better future.

The Discovery cycle had several steps within it. These are as follows:

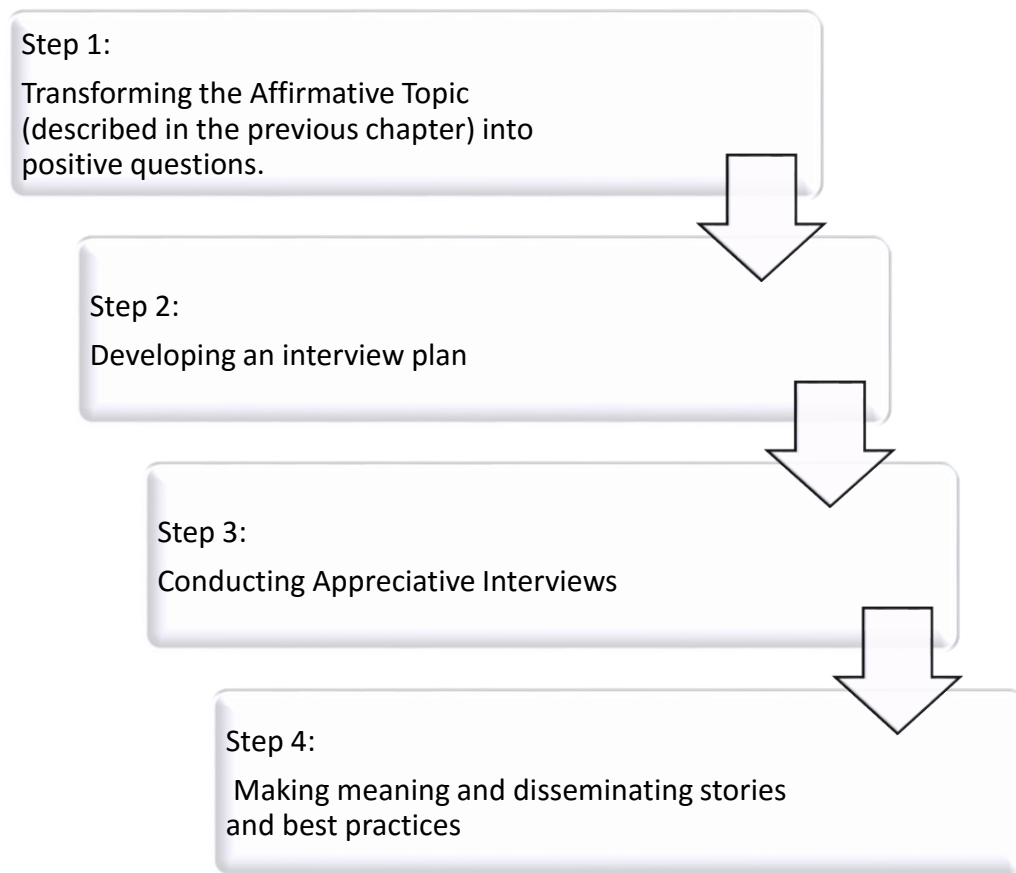


Figure 4 The steps of the Discovery cycle

Step 1: Creating positive questions

The purpose of this discovery step was to learn about our own experiences in the Academy along with what the individual commitments, capabilities and resources were. The negative stories abounded and there was a real sense that everyone was tired of hearing these negatives. The Discovery cycle, once the group had moved beyond the negative narratives, was very much about valuing one another as well as the organisation. It focused on the power of the questions and stories that were to be told. The first step to this was to identify what was working well in the Academy through carefully constructed questions, which all of the participants were asked over a period of two weeks via interviews with me. This time-frame was decided upon as it gave time for all of the middle leaders to participate, as well as allowing me the space to be able to assimilate their answers.

I paid attention to the construction, scope and assumptions of the questions asked, as they would set the direction of the inquiry – this was no random process, as each question was powerful and able to elicit maximum responses. Much thought was given to the intention and aims of the questions and the following list was produced: thought-provoking; inviting reflection; challenging assumptions or bringing assumptions to light; focusing attention; developing creativity/possibilities thinking; moving the group forward in a “heliotropic” manner.

Within the context of AI, the heliotropic principle is a fundamental part of organisational transformation. Within the context of this inquiry heliotropic is used to mean the transformation of organisational processes in a way that is self-nourishing and nurturing, and therefore more sustainable in the long run. As Cooperrider and Whitney (2005, p. 6) state, “human systems grow towards what they persistently ask questions about” with questioning serving a manifold purpose and being at the heart of effective communication and with every question having a direction. In developing questions to ground the inquiry, Bushe (2007, p.4) suggests that such questions should be generative. He argues that whilst a focus on the positive is useful, the fundamental purpose of the inquiry is to ‘generate a new and better future’. Within the context of this inquiry, the questions had the purpose of eliciting positive dialogue.

According to Lewis et al. (2008, p. 53) the effect of the question is influenced by factors such as who is asking them and in what context. Often, people feel that they have to give the ‘right’ answers and this appeared to be an issue at the beginning of the Discovery cycle.

The questioning was to be thoughtful and provocative and structured in such a way as to stimulate the process of dialogue and conversation. I wanted to elicit accounts of positive experience (Lewis et al., 2008, p. 54). The way that the question was formed was a fundamental part of the process and a directive model was chosen. For example, if the following question was asked, “Can you remember a time when you worked well in a team?” it might gain the response, “No, I can’t” or “I haven’t worked well in a team since being here”. However, if it was rephrased by saying,

“Think about a time when you worked well in a team,” the response will hopefully be narrative-rich. Furthermore, the Appreciative Interview questions assumed “...that the ‘glass is half-full’—that the topic [of the Inquiry] or quality that we’re exploring already exists in the person, the organisation, and the world. We see ourselves as detectives, trying to uncover and understand where the topic exists, why it exists, and how it can exist to a greater extent on a range of Topics” (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003, p.150).

Each question developed had a ‘lead-in’ which is to “plant that half-full assumption in the minds” of the middle leaders (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003, p. 152). I hoped that they would resonate with the “yearning of meaning” (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003, p. 152). The questions I asked were carefully thought about in order to elicit the best possible answers and are as follows:

Question 1: First, I’d like to learn about your early days with The Academy.

- i. What attracted you to want to work in the Academy?
- ii. What surprised and excited you the most about the opportunity in your early days?

Question 2: Considering your entire time as a middle leader at the Academy, can you recall a time when you felt most alive, most involved, or most excited about your involvement in behaviour management in the organisation?

- i. What was happening?
- ii. What made it different from any other time? What was giving it energy?
- iii. What were the most important factors that made it a positive experience?
(support of SLT; clear boundaries; systems; relationships)

Question 3: Let’s consider the things that you value most, specifically about a) yourself b) your job c) the Academy

- i. What do you value most about being a teacher?
- ii. What positive impact do you have as a middle leader?
- iii. What is it about the Academy that enables you to fulfil the things that you value most?

Question 4: Developing a learning environment. Imagine a future where you are inspired by the ideas, knowledge and innovations; where value is created for everyone, including students, parents, staff and the community at large.

- i. What does it feel like?
- ii. What has changed to make it happen?

Question 5: What values would you say guide the Academy? How has the Academy kept those values alive?

- i. Looking to the future, what values do you believe will inspire us to support our young people and their families to ensure the very best outcomes for them?

The sub-questions were intended to address the middle leaders' past, present, and future experiences of the affirmative topic. The 'past' or 'backward' questions address 'peak experiences' or 'high points' associated with the affirmative topic around behaviour in the Academy. The 'present' or 'inward' questions asked the middle leaders to make meaning out of the 'peak experiences' or 'high points' and to "extrapolate learnings about their root causes for success" (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003, p. 153). The intention of these questions was to be generative as I wanted them to "a) touch people's heart and spirit, b) talking about and listening to these stories and answers will build relationships, c) the questions force us to look at reality a little differently" (Bushe, 2007, p.4).

Step 2: The interview plan

It was important to create an interview plan in order to ensure that all stakeholders had a clear understanding of the expectations and their role within this cycle. The plan outlined the process for the Appreciative Interviews: Who will be interviewed? How? Where? When? The plan outlined how the 'voices' of all the middle leaders would be heard and I was keen to ensure that all the interviews were conducted in the same way.

Step 3: Conducting Appreciative Interviews

This cycle involved a detailed investigation of the middle leaders' personal perspective, as well as gaining a comprehensive understanding of the context within which the research phenomenon was located (Johnson, 2002), i.e. Appreciative Inquiry. Flexibility was the key to the success of the inquiry (Legard et al., 2003, p. 140), as it would offer a tool with which to explore the factors underpinning the middle leaders' answers (such as reasons, feelings, opinions and beliefs).

All of the interviews were consistent and lasted for exactly one hour. They took place in my office after school, as it was both quiet and private. The method of recording the interviews was an important element of the inquiry as I did not want to influence the responses. There was a need to remain present and authentic throughout the process, so I did not really want to take notes, as active listening was imperative. Using a recording device can be off-putting (Opie, 2004, p. 23) but, as in the first cycle, I felt that this was the most appropriate way of ensuring an accurate record. I invested in a small dictaphone that was not intrusive, but was adequate for recording the interviews. Once the recordings had been made, the dialogues were transcribed in their entirety – this gave me ample opportunity to read and re-read the material.

The collection and recording of the data came in the form of narrative exploration with the specific aim of stimulating the middle leaders into creating a basis for the next cycle of the process – that is, the development of the dream for the future. It could be argued, however, that the information elicited was not necessarily 'the truth'; rather, it was a co-created truth that enabled the drawing of certain conclusions. The interview in the case of this inquiry was based upon a reality created between me, the researcher, and the participant; that is to say, the interviewer/ interviewee.

8.2 An Authentic Dialogue?

A key aspect of these interviews was the dialogue created between us, as we both became 'subjects' in the inquiry. This raised the question: Was I, therefore, seen as a research instrument as our co-created reality emerged?

If the research actions impact on the research object and vice versa, then the middle leaders, as subjects, and I, as the researcher, were inter-dependent or, as Guba and Lincoln (1989, pp. 37-38) suggest, 'the inquirer and the 'object' of inquiry interact to influence one another', and 'all entities are in a state of mutual simultaneous shaping'.

The primary concept and advantage underlying the Appreciative Interview is that knowledge is generated that is revealed through dialogue. The value of the interviews was the flexibility they offered, and the rich, detailed data they provided by giving insights into events and perceptions. They allowed the middle leaders to define their understanding of the Academy in their own terms.

However, within the interview cycle the notion of insider research became an issue. I had previously been vocal about the first cycle of the inquiry. It was a subject I felt strongly about, and one I discussed frequently with both my middle and senior leader colleagues. Most of the middle leaders already knew my views of the Academy, and this knowledge possibly affected the information they chose to give me, although precisely how is unknown.

I made no attempt to minimise this kind of influence until after the research had been written up. However, it could be argued that the participants may have tailored their responses in any number of ways, for any number of reasons. By conducting insider research in two different cycles, I was experimenting with differing levels of intimacy. The middle leaders in the first cycle were less aware of my perspective than the participants in the second cycle.

The interviews during the second cycle were generally more reciprocal than those conducted during the first cycle. In the first cycle of my research, I did not generally comment upon what interviewees said. However, in the second cycle comments were often made and I added my own stories in the belief that this would strengthen our rapport and encourage the participants to contribute further. The following two transcript extracts are typical of my interviewing style in the two cycles:

Extract One: Cycle One interview January 2009

Chris: There seems to be no proper strategic senior leadership here.

Me: What do you mean?

Chris: Well, we know that the GCSE results this year were poor. We have pinpointed the reasons behind this in each of the curriculum areas...but, you know, who is going to take the lead? Who is saying what we need to do? We need a strategic plan, someone to lead new initiatives...should it be me saying what we need to do? I don't know because when I do, I get told it is not my remit...

Me: Yes, I hear what you are saying. That must be difficult.

Extract Two: Cycle Two interview October 2010

Jack: It's exhausting...you know...we know what we need to do, it's just that...well, no one listens to us.

Me: Yes, I know what you mean. I have the same issue. You know, in a leadership meeting last week, I spoke up and said that we needed to make sure that the students have a better Key Stage 3 curriculum; you know, to improve their literacy on entry. I was shot down in flames by XXXXXX on the leadership team as it is not in my portfolio...

Jack: Yes, yes. My point exactly; I am glad it isn't just me that gets shot down in flames! I have tried on several occasions to put forward suggestions and I get told that it is not in my remit; that it's nothing to do with me.

In the first extract, my own experience of senior leadership in the Academy is not shared, and I simply reflect on the impact that this must have on the participants; in the second extract, despite a desire not to, I put the words "shot down in flames" into the middle leader's mouth. The extent to which either of my own contributions furthered or hindered the joint construction of meaning is clearly an issue.

Gubrium & Holstein (2003, p.13) suggest that “interviewers are generally expected to keep their “selves” out of the interview process. Neutrality is the byword”. I defend my position by arguing that the research relationship lay at the heart of this inquiry and I would agree with Hawkins (1990, p. 417), who felt that the minimal responses used by ethnographers to elicit further information could be misinterpreted as a lack of interest.

Trust lay at the heart of this study and I contend that “the interviewing process becomes less a conduit of information from informants to researchers that represents how things are, and more a sea swell of meaning making in which researchers connect their own experiences to those of others and provide stories that open up conversations about how we live and cope” (Ellis & Berger, 2003, p. 471). Ball (1994, p. 181) discusses the possibility that “respondents may find themselves manipulated into saying more than they intend”. I remain undecided about the exact extent to which an interviewer can make people say things they do not actually mean, or reveal things they never intended to.

However, in the later cycles of the inquiry, I did come around to the idea that it is best, as a researcher, to avoid a potential lack of validity by adopting a research style that was less outgoing and intrusive than my natural disposition.

Through these initial stages of the inquiry, I felt that the middle leaders should be allowed the opportunity to off-load before we reframed the issues as a generative metaphor. This was done in the next two sessions and was used as a method of indirect data collection. I was mindful, however, not to use incidental data. Griffiths (1985, p. 210) describes how she chose not to use material from informal staffroom chats or meetings with restricted access because the collection of these data had not been negotiated: “To release such data would be a betrayal of trust and an abuse of access. Herein probably lies another key to the research position, and that is the need for an understanding of the difference between research and voyeurism”. This was significant as much of the informal narratives I was party to could have had a direct influence on my thinking. Campbell (2002, p. 41) agrees with this, preferring to

use only data from direct personal conversations, rather than anything overheard by chance. I shall explore this further later in the chapter.

Step 4: Making meaning and disseminating stories

As the intention was to locate the inquiry within an Appreciative Inquiry framework, the use of narratives as data enabled me to examine emotional and symbolic lives within the organisation (Van Buskirk & McGrath, 1992; Gabriel, 2003). It was therefore at this point of the inquiry that the narratives being told began to be recognised not only as a form of data but also as a theoretical lens (Pentland, 1999, p. 711), an emerging methodological approach (Boje, 2001, p. 46). I had a sense that this would enable and empower the middle leaders, whilst at the same time acting cathartically to allow them to move forward. This will be further explored in the Dream cycle of the inquiry.

Since Appreciative Inquiry is focused on what organisations do best, it is important to continually disseminate the stories that emerge from the Appreciative Interview process as often and to as many of the participants as possible.

8.3 Mapping the positive core

The final step of the 'Discovery' cycle is making meaning and mapping the positive core which, according to Whitney et al. (2003, p.165), means providing "opportunities for...the organisation as a whole to actively engage in deeper and deeper levels of dialogue, learning, and exploration of their desired future. It enhances organisational wisdom, and opens the doors to short- and long-term possibilities". I did not believe that as a group we had reached the position of recognising and embracing the positive core of the Academy at this point but that it would come later during the next "dream" cycle.

8.4 Summary of the Discovery cycle

An open dialogue that enabled the middle leaders to focus on their own feelings rather than those that were expected of them (either by the Academy or by the other participants) began to be developed in this cycle. The interview questions were

designed to probe into the positive core of the need to promote and improve behaviour. The questions were written to generate stories which would enrich the images and inner dialogue of the middle leaders, thus enabling them to reframe their thinking, in order to bring into synch the Academy image and their dialogue. At this stage of the inquiry, the dialogues developed fell into the gestalt theory of organisational change (Nevis et al., 1996) with the presupposition that all interaction was to be in the form of dialogue rather than discussion. Whilst I do not intend to explore this in depth, I will refer to it as it reflects my process. I made the following journal entry at the beginning of the interview process:

“I am increasingly drawn to the notion of dialogue rather than discussion. It just seems to me that discussion implies persuasion and that isn’t what I want – this isn’t about me or my beliefs and perceptions; I don’t want a debate about what is good/bad here...I want us to flow freely from A to B and back again so that we can be creative together and non- judgmental. I want to develop meaning between us, so that the conversation becomes more than the sum of the participants...isn’t that gestalt?”

Journal Entry 2011

Gestalt is a phenomenological-existential learning theory whereby differences in perspectives are explored together through continued and rich dialogue. Much of this verbal exchange is based in the telling of stories and the co-created energy between two people. These stories enable a deeper understanding of one another’s perspective, with the focus on the process more than the content of the dialogue. This resonated and I explored this process in my journal throughout the next few weeks of the research process:

“My world-view is that reality is about relating and that awareness is relational. I believe that we grow through the interaction between one another and also our environment – that has to be through dialogue. What is clear to me is that dialogue is an integral part of gestalt theory and is based on the relationship between the client and the therapist. Of course, this is not the relationship that I seek in this inquiry but when the middle leaders are talking to me there is undoubtedly a sense of them seeking to connect on a deeper level and that they do not feel separate from me as they tell their stories, almost as though they are seeking affirmation from me in the here and now. The stories have a basis in the past but the middle leaders all appear to be experiencing them dynamically with the dialogue being ‘lived’ as they share them. This would fit with gestalt theory, I think. Buber (1958) describes true dialogue as that where the integrity and autonomy of each person is maintained and neither loses his own standpoint – this is a really important element of this inquiry as it aims to liberate the participants, freeing them up to creatively imagine a better future.”

Journal, April 2011

Freedom of expression for the middle leaders was an important element of the inquiry and this was achieved through embracing their uniqueness and differences. There was already an intriguing web of knowledge developing between us; about the organisation and the participants as well as the story-telling and knowledge generation process itself. The inquiry had already become a relational process with what would be the beginning of a connectedness that would lead to positive change.

Furthermore, the gestalt theory of change advocates the idea that growth occurs as a result of inter- and intra-personal connection and awareness and this was something I wanted to pursue as an integral part of the inquiry. The questions constructed needed to enable the participants to articulate their past experiences in such a way that they became organised, meaningful, and in perspective. I also wanted them to attribute cause and agency to the middle leaders’ experiences in order for them to make sense of the world they were living in. I made the following journal entry:

“My explicit intention through the development of appreciative questions is to ensure that “the unifying storyline is a vehicle for connection. Stories are the gathering of experiences; through their thematic development, they transform otherwise unconnected events into a meaningful unity” (Polster, 1999 p.123). Furthermore, in line with my growing understanding of gestalt theory, the development of new thematic connections leads to the development of a new perception of self and environment, which surely means a new sense of reality? The following quote from Bohm (1998, p. 94) really resonates with me, “Reality was not supposed to be changed directly by perception of a new meaning. Rather it was thought that to do this was merely to obtain a better "view" of reality that was independent of what it meant to us, and then to do something about it. But once you actually see the new meaning and take hold of your intention, reality has changed. No further act is needed”. As the stories told by the middle leaders unfold, I hope to ask for clarification and encourage them to expand their stories in such a way that they challenge the homeostasis, their comfort zone of negativity.”

Journal entry, January 2011

The intention was for the middle leaders to use the interviews as an opportunity to reflect on and make sense of their past experiences with relation to what they were experiencing in the here and now (Freeman, 2010, p. 7), using hindsight to add a new perspective on the present.

Through reflection and self-reflection, they would have the space to create a new and meaningful understanding of their past within the Academy in what Freeman (2010, p. 55) describe as “recuperative disclosure”.

8.5 The interviews

The middle leaders engaged in the interview process over a period of several weeks and were eager to tell their stories. They offered open and seemingly unrehearsed information throughout the interviews and they spoke about the successes (both their own and those of the Academy). The participants were eager to engage in the

process, almost as though they were oblivious of the appreciative framework within which they were working.

There were occasions when they did drop out of the appreciative mode and they continued to speak, uninterrupted, before they were brought back on track with an appreciatively framed prompt. Only one of the middle leaders struggled to engage in the process to remain positive. There was a growing awareness that in order to elicit appreciative data, she first needed the opportunity to off-load. She reported that she was afraid to allow herself to become involved in the conversation and wanted to remain detached and “professional”. Her body language reflected this and she presented as tense and anxious. She also appeared to be hiding behind the professional persona.

This reticence to let herself go and her inclination to remain in the relative safety of the negative story resonated and made me think that perhaps it was a defence mechanism, as suggested by Morgan (1996, p.228) “it is possible to understand the structure, process, culture and even the environment of an organisation in terms of the unconscious defence mechanisms developed by its members to cope with individual and collective anxiety”.

I was attempting to encourage a way of thinking that staff were not necessarily comfortable with and I was concerned that this could threaten the *status quo*. Many of the organisation’s conversations took place in hushed tones in staffrooms and corridors, certainly out of any formal spotlight. I recognised that I had the role of catalyst in the conversational process and felt that throughout the interview there was a lack of intentionality and purpose, so I decided to take a different tack and to acknowledge her fears and concerns. She had spent ten minutes describing how difficult she found working at the Academy and how she had made a mistake taking a job there.

Me: “Yes, I think that I understand what you are saying and what the negative factors surrounding the Academy are, but I’d like us to go back to focusing on what is working. Do you find it hard to think about what...er...what is working here?”

Chris: Well, it sometimes feels as though there is nothing good about working here. You know, when I was working at XXXX school I was able to feel in control of the work that I was doing but here it feels so overwhelming.

Me: That must be really hard for you... [pause] How about we talk about how you are feeling about this interview process? Are you uncomfortable trying to identify the positives?

Chris: I suppose I am, really. When I first came to the Academy I was so excited, so looking forward to a fresh challenge but that did not last long and it is hard to stay positive when everyone around you is struggling. I seem to have lost my passion for teaching and I just feel so exhausted all the time.

October 2010

This strategy appeared to work well and Chris was able to reframe her thinking to focus more on the positives. Despite having an understanding of the appreciative nature of the inquiry, it appeared that she subconsciously became dynamically involved in the stories being told. It was almost as though she had become “caught up in the process” in a way that Elliott (cited in Michael, 2005, p.26) describes as one of those conversations with strangers that starts off formally and impersonally but ends up with a whole evening slipping away once something just “clicks” between you.

This cycle of the inquiry had gone well with a sense of putting together a jigsaw puzzle. Each interview was recorded in such a way that a determination of themes could be completed and the stories could be shared with the participants to build community awareness and pride, as well as ensuring individual confidentiality. In this way, the stories that were being told did not really have distinguishable messages or meanings necessarily, but there were emerging themes and there seemed to be evidence that the middle leaders were beginning to focus on the positives and the high points of their experiences at the Academy. Of course, the discourse was not

spontaneous and it was very much guided by the questions being asked, but there was no falsity about the induced dialogues and the middle leaders reported that they were fully involved on an authentic level with the process. An interesting turn from deficit to appreciative was noted during one of the interviews. In answer to Question 5, which was about the values that guide the Academy, Joe said:

Joe: Values? Well, I guess power, expansion...erm...a desire to take over the city...[laugh]

Me: Hmm, I hear what you are saying, but are they values?

Joe: It's hard to think, really...the problem is we seem to have lost sight of what the kids need...you know, we want to offer them the best but we almost don't know what that means anymore...it's sad but when I started here we were all up for the challenge but we seem to have lost it.

Me: So tell me about that time. What were the values that were there then?

Joe: Oh, it was a good time to be here. We felt that we were really moving forward and there was some great teamwork, you know. If you had a difficult class or situation, everyone rallied round and helped one another. There was no judgement or anyone saying that you couldn't cope... just everyone pulling together and a feeling of camaraderie and... well, you know, it felt as if we had some kind of moral purpose, if that doesn't sound too daft... We were working here for a reason and that was to support and inspire the community.

October 2010

I analysed the data in the same way I had in Cycle One and fed back to the participants. Once the interviews had been analysed, this cycle of the inquiry was consolidated and reviewed. The core question of the Discovery cycle of the inquiry was revisited:

What makes the Academy unique and how does this make us successful?

In order to further our thinking, I also sent a memo in advance of our next session, asking the participants to complete sentence starters half an hour before the start of the meeting. The intention of this was to ensure that they were in a positive frame of mind for the session and that the participants were speaking a similar language in order for the group to make sense of the stories being told. There was an opportunity for the middle leaders to learn from one another's expertise and experience, which could only be achieved through the development of a common understanding of one another.

Through this kind of activity a sense of democracy could be developed, with the participants feeling that they were on an equal footing and each of their contributions was of equal value.

I sent the following sentence starters to the middle leaders in advance of the next meeting and I asked them to think about how they could end them. The sentences were:

We are leaders who...

We are committed to...

We believe that we can...

We dream of...

The statements that the participants developed served as a springboard that enabled the sharing of thoughts in a constructive manner. During the session, engagement as well as morale was high, with participants expressing excitement in the process.

One participant said:

“It is lovely to do something so constructive and creative after a day at the chalkface – this is like a therapy session!” (Chris 2011), whilst another stated: “I enjoyed the interview as it gave me a chance to talk openly and it wasn’t all about the negatives. I am sick of moaning and being desperate for the end of the day... This is more like it, at least we can have fun and review the day positively”.

Sam, 2011

For the middle leaders, their experience was of the day-to-day frustrations and difficulties of working within a large system, the contradictory requirements, and the lack of time to think. At the same time, the group was beginning to make a point of connecting directly with features of generativity. Access to these kinds of generative experiences was important, as was the storytelling process, from both the system and life-world perspectives.

The experience of the middle leaders was developed in more organic ways as they got to grips with the generative inquiry approach, identified the positives, developed supportive relationships with their colleagues in the inquiry group, and began to engage in cycles of action and reflection that had meaning for them:

We are leaders who always do our best; have passion and commitment; make strategic decisions based on what we do best; work closely with our teams to motivate and celebrate their success; work really hard and get really tired; are honest and trustworthy.

We are committed to making things better for this community; getting these kids to behave; making it to the end of term; ensuring that everyone in the Academy is listened to and understood; making the Academy a better place to work; developing an ethos that everyone is happy to buy into.

We believe we can be the best school in town; get 50% A*-C by the end of July; all work together to make this a great school; work as a team to make us the best; fly; get these kids to behave; create a better future for the students and their families.

We dream of working in a less stressful and happier place; high expectations and zero tolerance; having the time and energy to be able to effectively do our job; having the resources to do our job properly; well-behaved children who turn up every day to learn; working in a safe environment where children want to learn.

8.6 Summary of the Discovery Cycle

This Discovery cycle revealed a significant shift in the thinking of the middle leaders, giving a positive platform from which to move on to the next cycle of the inquiry. The primacy of voice and participation was becoming evident as the complexities of the generative processes of critical action research emerge in order to empower and engage middle leaders. Critical social theory was evident as there emerged an ability to critique institutional as well as conceptual dilemmas, particularly those that were leading to domination or oppression. As a form of leadership discourse, the Discovery cycle demonstrated that adopting an appreciative stance enabled the middle leader to be accountable as well as ready and willing to reach a mutual understanding. A central assumption was emerging that truth (knowledge) is based on negotiated social agreement.

This initial cycle of Appreciative Inquiry is both applicable and transferrable within the context of school improvement. I present a summary of this overleaf:

Discovery Cycle

Tapping into what gives meaning and purpose to the individuals in the school

Purpose

Engagement of every voice in sharing personally meaningful positive stories of experiences around the topic.

Helpful hints may involve some or all of the following:

- i. Find a partner from a different role at the school
- ii. Determine time allotted for each person to share his or her story
- iii. Reflect quietly on past events; reminisce, think back, dig down, and retrieve a personally meaningful experience related to the appreciative topic
- iv. Stories may include personal/group success, accomplishment, collaboration, learning, etc.
- v. Stories may be about an event you found uplifting, rewarding, and/or emotionally satisfying; a peak experience
- vi. Prompts might be “Who was involved?” “How did you feel at the time?” “What was in place that allowed it to happen?” “What made this event remarkable?” etc.

Purpose

- i. Inquiry into the assets and strengths that have helped the practice succeed so far relating to the topic
- ii. Identify the elements/strengths that cross stories
- iii. Summarise collective assets and strengths

9 The Dream

9.1 Objectives of the Dream cycle

The 'Dream' cycle "amplifies the 'positive core' of the organisation. In so doing it challenges the status quo and magnetically draws people toward the next phase of the 4-D cycle" (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003, p. 179). For Cooperrider, Whitney & Stavros (2008, p. 44) "The 'Dream' cycle is practical in that it is grounded in the organisation's history. It is also generative in that it seeks to expand the organisation's potential, keeping in mind the voices and hopes of its stakeholders" The 'Dream' cycle utilises the best that the organisation has experienced to that point to shape its future. During this cycle all the stakeholders share their narratives and "...engage in conversations about the organisation's potential and position in the world. Dialogue about the organisation's mission (present purpose), and the unique contribution it can make to global well-being catalyses furtherance images and stories of the organisation's future" (Cooperrider et al., 2008, p. 44).

The 'Dream' cycle is about projecting the essence of the 'positive core' of the Academy into the future and describing the new stories and narratives which will emerge from it. It is an opportunity to "think big and to imagine bold possibilities for their organisation" (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003, p. 183). Therefore, in the Dream cycle, the middle leaders were asked to tap into the positive energy generated in the Discovery cycle to imagine transformed leadership practice. Participants were asked to visualise what their practice might look and feel like in an ideal world. The Dream cycle is intended to focus on envisioning the optimal practice, as if one were experiencing now what the ideal leadership practice is; not what it will be or could be.

The intention was to engage the middle leaders in moving beyond the status quo to envision a valued and vital future (Ludema et al., 2001, p. 191). The objective of this cycle was to enable the middle leaders to evolve quality visions based on the strengths and values of the Academy that had begun to be recognised in the

previous cycle. The essential task of Dreaming is to reveal the group's image of a preferred future practice by identifying common themes.

This could only be done once a more positive frame of mind about the position of the Academy had been developed. By focusing on what had worked in the past, the participants were able to move fairly smoothly onto the Dream cycle of the process in order to come up with a more positive future.

This cycle was about recognising capacity and empowering the middle leaders to be able to see the possibilities through working collaboratively together. The intention was for the group to be able to see what might be, taking the strengths that had been identified in the first cycle and developing them into creative and innovative ideas through co-constructing and envisioning the future.

In traditional narrative inquiry very little emphasis is put on the future, but for the purposes of this study the core purpose was to think about future possibilities in the subjunctive clause, i.e. what-if. By adopting this stance, the future is not static but the effect is what Bruner (1986, p. 25) states, "in the subjunctive mode is, then, to be trafficking in human possibilities rather than in settled certainties". These possibilities were the focus of this cycle, with the middle leaders engaging in anticipatory talk. That is to say, they were moving from a stance of "what-next might happen to us" to "what-next we might do" (Shotter & Katz, 2008, p. 214) using the anticipatory function of pictorial representations in order to use their past successes to develop a positive future.

I was concerned about using the word "dream" as it was important that the middle leaders did not feel that this was about fantasy or the kind of blue-sky thinking that had been so popular in management terms several years ago. This needed to have connection to reality – this cycle was about building a future based on the reality of the past and the dreams were essentially about creating possibility, direction and the energy to be able to move towards that goal.

9.2 Organisation of the cycle

My intention was to create a “commonality of direction and purpose” (Lewis et al., 2011, p. 10) based on an understanding of the present context so I decided that the best way to move forward at this point was to use a whole day, so that the middle leaders could spend a significant period of time focusing on being creative.

The aim was to co-create a vision of a preferred future. I made the decision that this day would not take place on-site, but that we would go to the National College (for Teaching & Leadership). The hope was that this physical removal to another space would enable communication and the development of a different micro-culture, allowing the group to distance itself from the “everydayness” of the situation. It was important not to fall into the “same meeting, different place” trap. The intention was to free the middle leaders from their psychological confines, with the new surroundings giving them the opportunity to break down those unstated workplace rules and politics that possibly held us all back.

It was important for the middle leaders not to have low expectations about this day and for us not to waste time using it as a bonding exercise – the intention was for us to come up with both a dream and a plan for future action.

This would be in keeping with “ecological analysis and the concept of person-environment fit” (Boyd & Bright 2007, p. 7) recognising the transactional nature between people and their environment. The stimulating physical environment as well as the generative environment of the inquiry would hopefully enable the participants to both self-actualise and see the potential for the organisation.

I designed the day with great care in order to maximise the time and designed a detailed schedule that would enable us time for reflection as well as creative thinking. The day was based around dynamic dialoguing, as the list of questions we had asked in Cycle One was revisited with the participants in advance. During the dialogue, my intention was to loosely follow the list of prior questions, using them primarily as a guide for deeply probing the issue at hand as a group.

Activity One: Sharing Stories and Memorable Moments

The middle leaders had not had the opportunity to share their positive stories with one another, although I had offered ongoing feedback during the Discovery cycle. In order to energise the group, I began by sharing the main themes that had emerged out of the previous interviews, as well as the most significant quotes within each theme. This was done by giving them a sheet with the emerging themes, as well as one with anonymised quotes on it:

Question 1: First, I'd like to learn about your early days with The Academy.

What attracted you to want to work in the Academy? What surprised and excited you the most about the opportunity in your early days?

Main themes arising:

- i. Opportunity for promotion
- ii. Personal and professional growth
- iii. Autonomy; opportunity to innovate and introduce new concepts without confines of a Local Authority school; trusted to initiate new ideas

Question 2: Considering your entire time as a middle leader at the Academy, can you recall a time when you felt most alive, most involved, or most excited about your involvement in behaviour management in the organisation? What was happening? What made it different from any other time? What was giving it energy? What were the most important factors that made it a positive experience? (support of SLT; clear boundaries; systems; relationships)

Main themes arising:

- i. Behaviour management is a whole-school response
- ii. Positive relationships between middle leaders and their teams
- iii. Teams mutually supporting one another

Question 3: Let's consider the things that you value most, specifically about (a), yourself (b), your job (c), the Academy. Without being humble or embarrassed, what do you value most about yourself as a person? What do you value most about being a teacher? What positive impact do you have as a middle leader? What is it about the Academy that enables you to fulfil the things that you value most?

Main themes arising:

- i. Being creative; forward thinking; motivated and encouraging
- ii. Middle leaders are given the opportunity to walk the walk and be forward thinking
- iii. Middle leaders have significant influence on both their own area and whole school through being creative and developing opportunities for collaborative teamwork
- iv. There is the opportunity to be responsive to need and move things forward at a quick pace if necessary
- v. Leadership at all levels is encouraged and expected
- vi. There are opportunities to learn and to grow with a quick transfer of knowledge

Question 4: Developing a learning environment. Imagine a future where you are inspired by the ideas, knowledge and innovations, where value is created for everyone, including students, parents, staff and the community at large. What does it feel like? What has unfolded or changed to make it happen?

Main themes arising:

- i. Everyone moving towards a common goal with students; parents and staff working together - not against one another - towards the same end
- ii. The development of a coherent mission statement that is based on a realistic understanding of what is needed by the families within this community
- iii. An ethos of high expectation is developed which is well communicated to all stakeholders by everyone in the Academy
- iv. Staff at all levels are clear on their roles and responsibilities and are both supported in and accountable for their actions within a culture of support and trust
- v. There is less bureaucracy and paperwork and people are valued and appreciated for their efforts.

Question 5: What values would you say guide the Academy? How has the Academy kept those values alive? Looking to the future, what values do you believe will inspire us to support our young people and their families to ensure the very best outcomes for them?

Main themes arising:

- i. A commitment to the development of innovative practices and being at the forefront of the changing political agenda
- ii. Inclusivity and the bringing together of diverse knowledge and experience
- iii. True understanding of the needs of the cohorts, their families and the community at large
- iv. Clear sense of direction and a strong, experienced and committed senior leadership team who have the necessary skills to be able to move the Academy forward

The development of respectful and trusting relationships at all levels where there is the recognition of and utilisation of the individual skill base of the study. Stories and quotations from this phase of the inquiry can be found in Appendix iv.

A transcript of their previous answers was given to them and they were allowed the time to go through it individually. The original intention was for the middle leaders to split into pairs and tell their stories through 1:1 conversations, but the consensus of the group was that they wanted to recount their story to the whole group rather than in pairs. The group took a relatively short period of time to tell their stories and there was the sense that the middle leaders wanted to maintain the positive momentum generated the previous term. Maybe this was because they had just returned from the Christmas break and were feeling rested. Whatever the reason, it was important to tap into this positivity, so that they would remain in the moment. The group was asked how they were feeling about focusing on the positives rather than the negatives and the responses elicited are shown overleaf:

James: “It feels really good...you know...I was looking forward to coming back to work today for the first time in ages; I didn’t have that awful feeling of dread.”

Tim: “Yeah, I feel that same but is it about this project? I don’t know if the two are linked...maybe I am being cynical but maybe it’s just about us being able to work together more as a team than us looking at the positives? I like the feeling of sharing.”

James: “That’s the point, isn’t it? We are sharing, aren’t we? It feels like you are getting to know me better because I am able to tell you what things are like for me but you know what? I am sick of it always being moaning... It’s boring, you know, I am bored of the negative stuff and want to look forward to something.”

Joe: “I agree, from the moment I started work here people took pleasure in telling me how bad it is to work here. It drains the energy out of you and it made me miserable. Yeah, ok, it is a tough place to work but we have to be strong and work

together to find the solutions, not constantly moan about it.”

James: “I’ve worked here the longest and I came because I wanted the challenge of an inner-city school...and boy, is it a challenge! But we don’t even look for solutions, let alone find them. I just think about how good this place could be with a proper ethos and strong leadership. I remember how excited I was when I first got my job here... There is so much potential.”

Tim: “I thought that you hated working here? Don’t take this the wrong way but...but I always thought that you were ...erm... the cynical one of the group [the group laughs]... You are the one who always challenges XXX in SLT... I am really surprised by what you are saying...”

January 2011

This exchange highlighted several things. Firstly, the process was enabling the participants to get to know one another at a deeper relational level and they were beginning to recognise previously hidden traits and strengths. I had an intuitive sense that this was as a result of the recognition of commonly held values and beliefs, i.e. in the stories, every one of the middle leaders had said how excited they had been when they were appointed in the Academy, with all but one saying that they believed that they had grown since being appointed.

The process was also developing a feeling of emotional well-being and connectedness (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003) within which there was a growing element of psychological safety. Interestingly, the group listened attentively to the stories being told but then wanted to join in and be part of the dialogue. It seemed that the individuals in the group wanted to connect with the storyteller in order to make sense of what they were saying and to explore their own reality. This would fit with what Bakhtin (1984, p. 110) proposes in that the truth is not found inside the head of an individual, but, “is born between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogical interaction”

What came to mind at this point of the process was the notion that the inquiry was the intervention in itself – the participants were becoming involved in the process of change without consciously thinking about it with a sense of momentum towards transformation – and that the group was developing a life of its own; that is to say, the participants were beginning to engage in relational as well as organisational appreciation. There was developing, “an abstract pool of resources drawn eclectically from different narratological histories” (Currie, 1998, p. 14) that formed “a single body” (p. 27) which “has converged into an increasingly shared vocabulary with increasingly similar objectives” (p. 135).

Activity Two: A Surprising Turn of Events

This activity had the specific intention of turning the focus from discovering what was working in the Academy to how these strengths could be leveraged (Boyd et al., 2007). The intention for the dialogue in this cycle was about positive imagery and dreams for the Academy’s future. It was to be practical, with the themes of the last cycle being used to design a future that was based on the successes of the past.

The emphasis on this activity was that of creativity and it was a surprise when one of the participants, Tim (who is an art teacher and a talented cartoonist), suggested that he create a pictorial representation of the session. I had previously delivered a training session to the whole staff that had involved showing a speech by Sir Ken Robinson that had been animated by RSA Animate* and Tim told the group that he was able to do this type of artwork. On the basis of that and having done his own research into the creative element of Appreciative Inquiry over the Christmas break, Tim felt that he wanted to contribute to the session. I was doubly surprised as I line-managed him and he had often been quite difficult, with us often going head-to-head as a result of him being perceived to undermine some of the work that other members of SLT were trying to do. He was also a leader in terms of the negative narrative and had a reputation for being influential over the other middle leaders. His non-engagement and disaffection at times negatively influenced the mood and attitude of many of the staff.

*(<http://www.thersa.org/events/rsaanimate/animate/rsa-animate-changing-paradigms>)

This change in attitude led me to wonder whether his self-image was changing through the inquiry process or whether he might be beginning to understand my own epistemological belief and felt some sympathy towards it. He was possibly beginning to regard me as a person rather than part of the system in which he was struggling. I wondered whether his clear resistance within the Academy was less about what Van den Berg & Hoogervorst (2004, p. 56) describe as “*trait resistance*” - i.e. a learned habitual way of behaving that impacts repeatedly on all relationships - and more about “*state resistance*” which occurs at times of high anxiety. It could be that Tim’s resistance within the Academy (which was seen as being fundamentally oppositional towards the leadership team) was as a result of his anxiety and frustration around the role.

His offer to graphically represent the Dream cycle of the process had a fundamental impact on the project both in terms of the relationships within the group and the engagement of the other participants. Seeing Tim so actively involved seemed to allow them permission to relax into and fully embrace the process. At this point, the group began to become inter-connected and multi-dimensional with an embryonic state of affiliation, or even belonging, with one another. I made the following journal entry:

“I am feeling nervous and excited about this turn of events. I am so used to Tim seeming to undermine a lot of the work done in the Academy, and here he is wanting to be an active part of the inquiry. Is he beginning to trust me/the process? I wonder if he is tapping into his creative self. Let’s face it, I have seen his work before and it is really good... We are breaking down his resistance. Maybe through living his story he is beginning to reconnect and possibly re-invigorate himself. I am not sure where this will take us but I am willing to take the risk and see where it takes us.”

January 2011

What happened during the next couple of hours, however, was astonishing and showed how the appreciative perspective enables us to move away from deficit and facilitates the emergence of new ways of thinking. Through this appreciative cycle of the inquiry, we are able to move towards expanded resources; a new matrix of meaning and practices; personal, relational and organisational enrichment, as well as innovation and change.

New knowledge and understanding was created through the middle leaders being involved in the creation of a pictorial representation and metaphor to give voice to their past, present and future.

According to Barner et al. (2007, p. 122), “a metaphor can be the verbal representation of one thing for another, or can take non-verbal form through the use of a picture”. In this case, the middle leaders and specifically Tim used visual metaphor as a vehicle to tell their story as well as to express previously untold emotion. It was as though Tim was acting as a conduit to facilitate the expression of “complex and intimate experiences which cannot easily be described because of linguistic and grammatical constraints” (Chia, 1996, p. 136). Barner et al. (2007, p. 124) states, “visual metaphors can provide a deeper and more substantial view of organizational experience” and in this cycle of the inquiry a deeper understanding of the situation arose as the middle leaders were given “a way of explaining their perceptions indirectly, yet lucidly” (Fox and Amichai-Hambrugger, 2001, p. 88), through visual metaphor. The middle leaders appeared to be making sense of the past and present by talking through both their own story and the story of the Academy so far. This enabled the participants to make meaningful interpretations of previous organisational events (Weick, 1995). As a result of this process, they appeared to develop a “shared understanding that helps frame the future” (Greenberg & Baron, 1995, p. 185).

My primary role within this stage of the inquiry was that of participant-observer. The role of participant-observer combines participation in what is happening to the people being studied with maintenance of a professional distance that allows adequate

observation and recording of data (Fetterman, 1998). As participant-observer, I found myself participating in non-passive observations whilst maintaining an insider's perspective.

The participant-observer researcher role was particularly well suited to this part of the inquiry as it allowed me to take on a variety of roles that fall between the two distinct roles that are implied. My position as researcher was one of both insider and actor (Reed, 2007), part of the culture being studied, which was in turn a significant part of the dynamics of this research process. There was a need to avoid being invasive, allowing activities and responses to occur naturally (Hatch, 2002), whilst striving to be a good listener, flexible, and asking appreciative questions.

The previous sense of disengagement that the middle leaders had experienced appeared to dissolve as they began to develop a coherence and belonging that had been missing. A condition of being affiliated to a group is belonging, and that is a risky business. At this point of the process the middle leaders took the risk of speaking out and as a result each of them was listened to and taken seriously. This unconditional acceptance and positive regard was the precondition of this section and allowed the middle leaders to feel both increased well-being freedom and agency freedom. The atmosphere in the room whilst the participants were involved in this activity was very interesting to an observer, with them all being actively involved. Tim and I worked together in order to facilitate the drawing.

Spontaneous and appreciative questions were asked to identify implicit knowledge, as well as to create a platform upon which to shape the future. This was very much a "thinking on my feet exercise" and at first this was stressful. However, as the group was working so well and positively, I too felt a sense of license and freedom within what was becoming a very supportive group. My role was that of facilitator, asking questions such as, "What have you heard? What does it look like? How will you know when you're there?" (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003, p. 189).

The first part of the process was to ask the question: **Tell me the story so far. What is the history of the Academy?** Out of this question came the following visual representation:

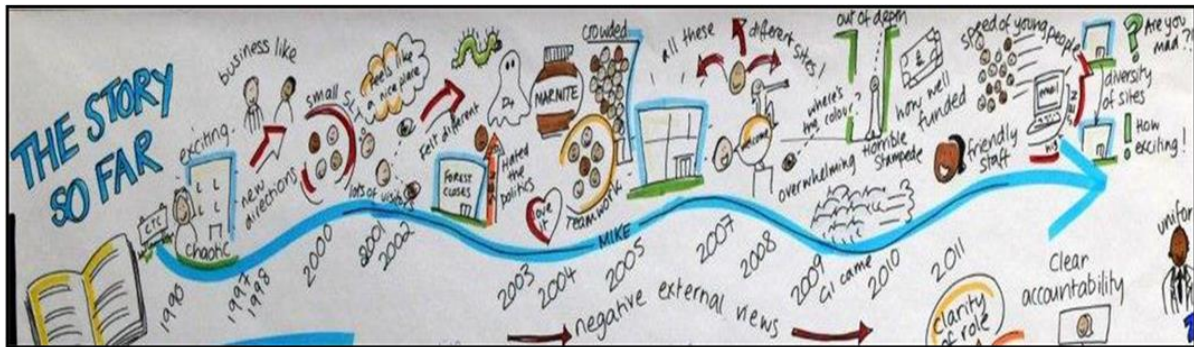


Figure 5 Pictorial representation of the story of the Academy

The middle leaders talked through their understanding of the history of the development of the Academy from its earliest point in time to the present. The way in which the middle leaders expressed themselves, as well as the way Tim represented that, was of interest. What was becoming clear through this dialoguing was that the participants had a mixture of feelings about working at the Academy, but that over the past two years things had become increasingly difficult for staff, with feelings of being overwhelmed and caught in a horrible stampede and feeling out of their depth. This section of the representation is presented overleaf:



Figure 6 Pictorial representation of how the participants felt about the Academy

It was of note that the middle leaders seemed keen to suggest that the Academy was a place that you either loved or hated and that there seemed to be little middle ground. One of the main things that the middle leaders struggled with was the internal politicking that was very apparent in the Academy. This is presented overleaf:



Figure 7 Pictorial representation of what the participants liked/disliked

There were many more examples of the ambiguity of the feelings of the middle leaders. As we moved through the Dream cycle, it seemed that this implicit knowledge that had been shared *explicitly* was giving the participants the platform to feel both excitement and fear at the thought of the future. My understanding of Appreciative Inquiry was to expect the unexpected and unintentional. It seemed that the participants had become part of a collaborative team that was learning from its own processes, using both its similarities and differences to create possibilities and develop resources.

The process itself was integrating both resolution (an understanding and acceptance of a turbulent past), and creativity (the participants sift through past experiences and select what worked and could be reshaped and recycled into the future). All the time they were reflecting on the process, both individually and as a group, to understand

what had happened, what opportunities were available, what involvement they would have, etc. It was about the development of alternatives – of thought and action.

This was an iterative journey through which “new metaphors, narratives and images are generated...increasing the number of voices that can be spoken and creating new options for action” (Ford, 1999, p.490). Through each cycle of the process the group members were continually revising and developing their understanding of the organisational issues that were facing the Academy and threatening their middle leadership role.

The next question I asked was: **Imagine a future where you are inspired by the ideas, knowledge and innovations, where value is created for everyone, including students, parents, staff and the community at large. What does it feel like? What has unfolded or changed to make it happen?** There appeared to be a collective sigh of relief and I became aware of the tension and emotion that had been in the room. It was as though they had off-loaded “painful truths that individuals would never divulge face-to-face to superiors” (Brink, 1993, p. 37) as a result of them being “too vague, too complex, or too intense for ordinary speech” (Siegelman, 1990, p. 7). The middle leaders immediately involved themselves in a group conversation about their ideal. They seemed comfortable discovering and embracing the complexity of the process as though they had developed a generative kind of knowing that was about evolution and change. They were jointly negotiating meaning through the development of a collective understanding and their use of language was far from functional but was constructive and constitutive of their reality. The metaphors that the participants were using were allowing them to reframe their perceptions, thus, “seeing the world anew” (Barrett & Cooperrider, 1990, p. 222) which would fit with Pondy’s (1983, p. 164) assertion that, “because of its inherent ambivalence of meaning, metaphor can fulfil the dual function of enabling change and preserving continuity”. This process was, above all, social in its construction, as can be seen in the following excerpt of dialogue:

Joe: “The most frustrating thing about this job is that no one seems to stick to their own job. I know that sounds strange but there seem to be about 5 different people doing my job and then it all gets muddy and we give mixed messages to the students and their parents. It’s not exactly rocket science...

James: Oh yes, I agree, what is the difference between your job and mine? I don’t even know [laughs]. There is no clarity, is there? The job gets done...and most of the time very well...you remember a few weeks ago when XXXX was kicking off outside the office, he was going to punch the supply teacher? Now, there was brilliant teamwork...We...we just got on with it and diffused the situation – it was great...

Joe: Yes, I agree, that was teamwork at its best, but can you imagine how wonderful it would be if our two roles ran in parallel without us stepping on one another’s toes? We could even support each other. [Group laugh] That would be a novelty!”

[The group goes quiet for a few seconds.]

Me: Do we think that clarity of roles is a way forward?

Chris: Yeah, for sure, it would be great.

James: I would love it, especially if there was proper accountability. I want to know that I am getting my job right...

Sam: Oh yeah, and be recognised and appreciated for it. That would feel really good, wouldn’t it?

Me: Can we think of a statement that could represent this?

James: What do you mean?

Me: Well, it's about us looking at what is working and creating a statement that bridges what is and what could be. Does that make sense? So we look at the past and then create what we want for the future. It's kind of based on the premise that we all want the best thing for the Academy as it will be the best thing for us all. It's about looking at the ideal.

Chris: So like...erm...We will work better together or we will only do the job we are paid to do. [The group laughs and groans.]

January 2011

There was a possibility of losing the participants at this point as it felt as though we were venturing into 'fluffy, happy talk' so I decided that, rather than focus on any kind of propositions at this point, the focus would remain on the dreams. The participants decided that they wanted to incorporate the nightmare as well as the dream into the pictorial representation. This felt as though it was an emotional safety net for the middle leaders. The result was as follows:

- iii. An emphasis on teaching with a specific focus on personalising learning at all levels.
- iv. All students and staff would feel safe and able to fulfil their potential in a community-based and engaged school that communicated effectively with all stakeholders.
- v. Parents would choose to send their children to the Academy; staff would be keen to work and develop their careers there.

The whole process of this exercise was quite moving and emotional and at times some of the middle leaders became overwhelmed with emotion:

Chris: I just want to feel part of something worthwhile. I am tired of feeling that I am constantly letting the kids down. I had Mr and Mrs Ali come into school the other day...you know, Krishna's parents? He joined the school in September at the beginning of Year 9. We did not have any space in any of the top option classes...you know, in Science or History, so I had to put him in a Literacy support class that was intended for kids with English as an additional language. His parents have rung in twice and then came up to find out why he was in the class. They said he was an A grade student in his previous school and that his English was perfect; he wanted to be a lawyer...and the only space was in a class for non-English speakers – what could I say? [She starts to cry] What could I say to them? It just isn't fair and I felt ashamed... It has got to change for the better.”

January 2011

This was a conversation that was, “engaging the heart” (Lewis et al., 2011), and there was authenticity as a result of the middle leaders entering fully into the process. What was of interest during this group session was that despite the issues being discussed, the middle leader participants illustrated through their interactions with each other that they were more cohesive than previous discussion had indicated. They were respectful and supportive of each other, and willing to concede that they should be more thoughtful and supportive of each other in practice. It was clearly a safe and supportive environment in which honesty and raw emotion were necessary elements in order for them to grapple with a better future. There was a

sense of unity, a shared purpose as middle leaders looking together at the issues in their practice. It was apparent that some of the middle leaders were not able to leave all the negatives behind, and this was embraced as a creative part of the process as they wanted these to be pictorially represented as well. It was interesting to see that Tim made the nightmare section much smaller than the dream section – a possible reflection (in itself) of the process, as by minimising the nightmare it becomes less scary. The nightmares reflected the fears of the participant:

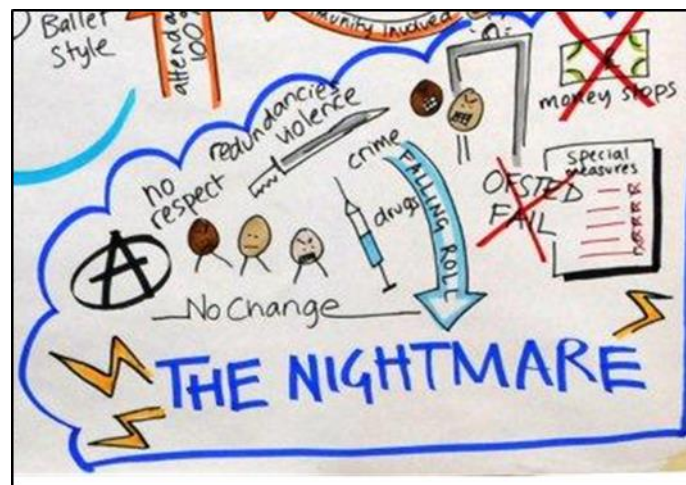


Figure 9 Pictorial representation of what the participants feared

- i. No change and the status quo is maintained;
- ii. Anarchy, violence, drugs and crime become the norm as a result of poor ethos and expectation;
- iii. Roll continues to drastically fall and less money means redundancies;
- iv. Fail Ofsted and go into Special Measures or worse (when this was explored, the middle leaders spoke about the closure of the school).

This was a low point in the session and the energy that the participants had previously exhibited was draining from them as a result of their emotional intensity. However, it was clear that they wanted to continue to talk and to dream. This process was recorded throughout as what was being said was both powerful and

pertinent to the process. One of the curriculum leaders (who asked to remain anonymous) said:

Sam: I feel that we are failing the community, you know. It feels almost immoral what we are doing. Over 50% of the families have English as an additional language and how many have SEN? What is it? 43%? We have got a moral duty towards these kids as they are so vulnerable; if they are new arrivals into the country and don't speak English, how do they know where to send their kids to school? They trust us and we are letting them down. I'd love to see a school where we are treating everyone with absolute respect, you know; the centre of the community, the hub where kids and their families can get the support and encouragement that they need. It isn't rocket science and actually we have the resources...I've never worked anywhere that has such a good staffing ratio, it's just that it is dysfunctional and everyone is pulling in opposite directions... Well, there is no direction... My dream is for a unified team who are all working towards a... I know this sounds strange... but a greater good.

November 2009

In order to support the middle leaders' understanding of what could be achieved, the criteria for what are described as provocative propositions (Cooperrider, 1990) were presented. The premise of Appreciative Inquiry with the development of statements was presented. These statements would be based in the past but would challenge current assumptions to give a preferred future. Each statement would need to be:

- i. **Provocative** – does it stretch the imagination and challenge the status quo?
- ii. **Grounded and Realistic** – are there examples of current practice that will support the statement?
- iii. **Desired** – is it what we are all working towards?
- iv. **Affirmative** – is it bold and positive?

It was very much about developing a common vision and framework within which to work, which engenders a sense of belonging, ownership and purpose, “to write the proposition, apply what if to all the common themes. Then write affirmative present-tense statements incorporating the common themes” (Hammond, 1996, p. 32). The aim was to develop a truly inclusive workplace where all employees felt part of the decision-making process, so they worked in pairs to come up with statements for each of the previously identified dreams. The conscious decision was made not be part of this session as it was important for the participants to take the discussion where they wanted, as they had a clear understanding of the expectation. At this point of the inquiry the group was finding a way to move forward in a participative and democratic approach that embraced the “psychology of ownership” (O’Driscoll et al., 2006, p.390) which enabled action “because participation in decision making provides increased opportunities for employees to exercise control and to voice concerns” (Robertson et al., 1998, taken from Lewis et al., p. 2011).

The propositions were as follows:

Ours will be an outstanding learning community where there is an ethos that is based on the highest of expectations for everyone and where everyone feels safe and able to fulfil their learning potential.

We will foster a culture of collaboration that recognises the unique roles and responsibilities of everyone (staff; students; parents and the community), and is based on mutual respect and trust, inclusivity and honest communication and supports individual growth. Internal politics will not influence our development.

The Academy will become **THE** school of choice within the city for both parents and staff as we offer a personalised learning experience for all that is rich and diverse.

They had also gone one step further and had spent some time thinking about the skills and experiences that they collectively had which could move the Academy forward. They had called these skills and qualities their “gifts” which was a very positive and generative way of describing them, showing the heliotropic process:



Figure 10 Pictorial representation of how the participants viewed themselves

The participants had also thought about what they needed in practical terms to be able to fulfil the Dream cycle. What really resonated was the sense that the lack of purpose, disorganisation and institutional dysfunction was developing a workforce that was disillusioned and disengaged when in actual fact there was so much potential just waiting to be released:

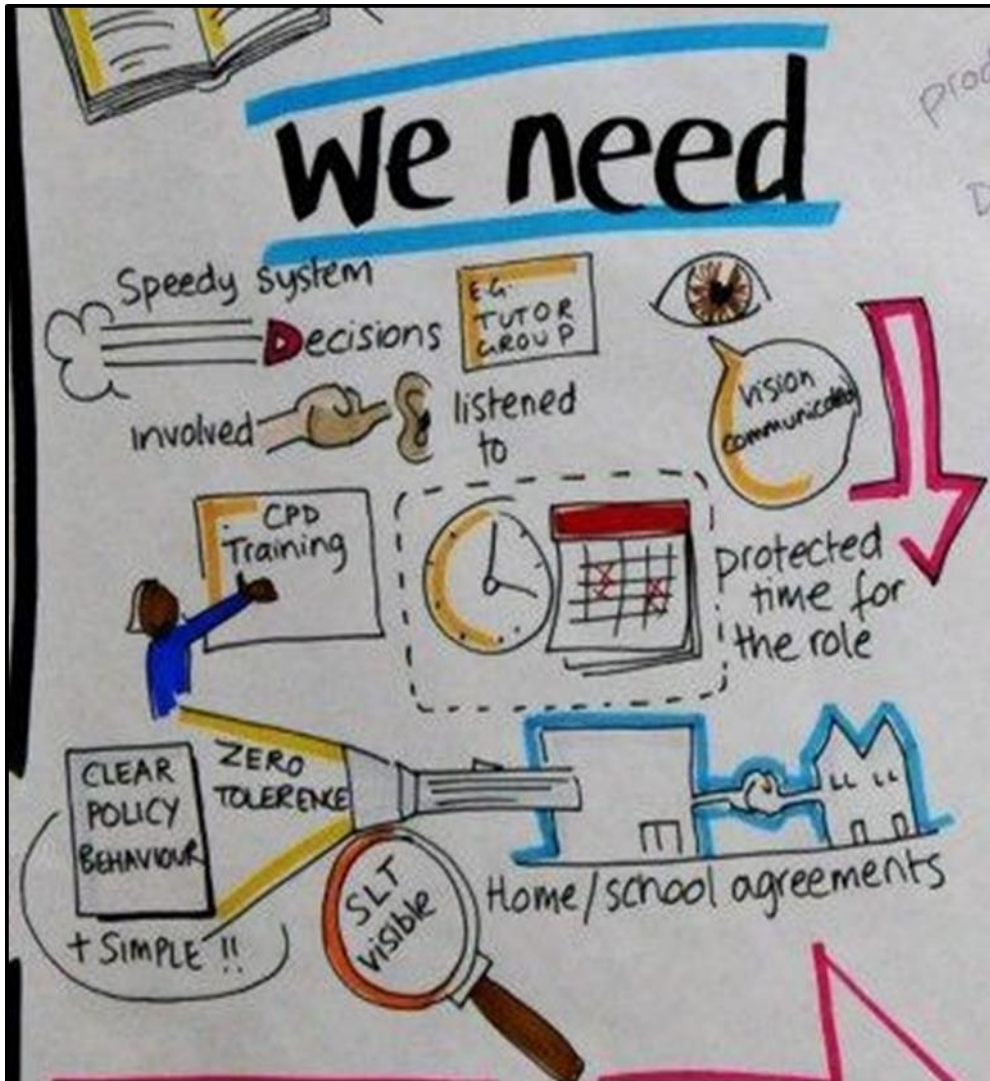


Figure 11 Pictorial representation of the needs of the participants

It was clear that the participants were now really committed to moving the project forward and they suggested that we meet the next day after school for a two-hour meeting. One of the participants said:

James: “This is one of the best training sessions I have ever had... Well, it hasn’t been a training session as it has been about us and what we need and how we can move things forward. I am so excited; let’s meet tomorrow and come up with a plan... We could start actioning it this term...well, this week even.”

January 2011

There was a concern that the participants (and I as researcher) needed some time to assimilate our learning. There was also a concern that, whilst the group was becoming excited and wanting to move things forward, there was a need to involve the senior leadership team in this process, as the culture in the Academy was one of over-reliance on them to action plan, initiate and action from the top, and the group was challenging this status quo.

9.3 Summary of the Dream cycle

The Dream cycle enabled the middle leaders to create a compelling picture based on past and present realities. This picture then created energy and excitement, which mobilised the group in a heliotropic manner. Through the Dream cycle the middle leader participants appeared to have developed a growing ability to observe their own process, with the participants seeming to, “learn to work with and help each other without relying on the group leader” (Zinker, 1980, p. 60). The dynamics of the group were determined by each of its members and through this individual contribution a strong, engaged and focused agent for change was created which provided the opportunity to look at the organisation through a different lens.

I witnessed, and personally experienced, real growth throughout this cycle. Individuals and the group developed the ability to remain in the present whilst celebrating the past and welcoming the future, thus focusing on the ongoing process. They began to develop real trust and faith in the sequences of the project, understanding that by focusing on what worked in the Academy they could build and not stagnate. They were able to create together a supportive and homogenous group that was mutually supportive and accepting with a real tuning-in to one another’s emotional development.

What surprised me was that they moved from being defensive to acknowledging their frustrations and pain with minimal negative emotion. Several of the group moved from offering negative stories and entrenched world-views to being able to speak succinctly and directly about what they believed could be a better future. They expressed surprise at their own words at times, which reminded me of Merleau-

Ponty's (1964, p. 88) observation, "my spoken words surprise me and teach me my thoughts" As the process evolved, a by-product of this was an appreciation of the significant contextual issues facing the Academy and the ability to separate data from interpretation, offering objective solutions to subjective problems.

The use of metaphor was prevalent during this cycle of the inquiry. Metaphors are a way of visualising a connection between people, events and circumstances. Following the semi-structured interviews in the Discovery stage, the participants collaboratively created a visual metaphor for their past, present and future. This group metaphor was indicative of their coming together to create a better future.

I felt that by engaging in a metaphorical activity, the middle leaders' willingness to experiment allowed them to resolve issues or problems more easily and that the future that they created felt very compelling and within our grasp. The whole process felt human as though it was tapping into the middle leader potential. Following the principles of achieving communicative competence, the middle leaders had been able to explore the issues in their practice that most concerned them with the collective core values as their reference point. The impetus for this process and the collective purpose is to be able to provide optimum leadership opportunities which, in turn, could lead to school transformation.

There was uncertainty around how the senior leadership team would react to this newly empowered and democratised middle leadership team. Whilst a heightened awareness of their own thoughts and feelings towards the Academy was a desirable outcome of the process, this awareness could work counter-productively. There were always circumstances beyond the middle leaders' control which could dictate the way forward, whether they were demands from members of the senior leadership team or Ofsted, or stress as a result of the changing education agenda. The participants may wish to give the most appropriate and best leadership that is possible in the circumstances. The challenge was to be able to confront and change the issues that are within the middle leaders' control.

I saw that effective communication between the senior and middle leadership teams and support from the executive leadership team were the most essential issues impacting on the way they were able to effect change. I sensed (through previous experience) that there was a danger that a lack of communication or miscommunication on the part of the middle leaders at this stage of the inquiry would make the transformational process flounder.

The misunderstandings or assumptions which had not been clarified or resolved at the time of the original conversation and caused a split in communication could cause conflict and stress between the middle and senior leadership teams. These conflicts may then smoulder on, distorting communication and becoming impossible to be openly carried out or resolved. Within the context of the Academy this distortion of communication may occur during any interaction where the leadership team is insincere, where there is conflict or perceived different values and standards of practice or in a situation where there is unequal power and there is not mutual accountability for practice. In order for effective action to take place the middle leader to senior leader interaction must be mutual and sincere.

This cycle of the project focused more on relationship building and attention to the democratic process (Gustavsen, 2001). Constructivist in its approach, this cycle looked to enable the participants to develop their own, more positive narrative whilst recognising and embracing the pain of the past. From the beginning of the study the aim was to provide insightful accounts of processes which went beyond the story (Pring, 1999). The intention of enabling the participants to actively manage their own narrative in an authentic way, thus becoming reflexive narrators, was achieved. The middle leaders in this cycle were able to become co-researchers in the project, and in this way developed their practice with the aim of bringing reality closer to the ideal of practice (Hart & Bond, 1995).

By choosing, as a group, to construct a different view of the Academy through the development of intentional empathy, the middle leaders were able to move to a more appreciative construction of reality.

This was not based upon the development of surface “feel good” approaches to positive psychology; rather, it was about giving value to constructs such as positive affectivity and focusing on what was working and building on it as a means of supporting cultural change.

The transferability and recommendations of this cycle are presented below:

Dream

Bringing personal meaning to the group vision; creating a collective vision of the ideal; sharing and portraying a preferred future.

Purpose

Explore the ideal school of the future around the appreciative topic

Helpful hints may involve some or all of the following:

- i. Small group dialogue (4–8 people)
- ii. Envision the ideal school of the future where meaningful experiences and successes occur on a regular basis
- iii. Elicit the preferred future by framing it as an engaging or challenging question
- iv. Talk about the future as if you are in it and you are already successful; this helps to generate images
- v. Keep the focus on envisioning the optimal whole—rather than specific details or steps
- vi. Encourage fun and creativity in “drawing a picture” of the ideal practice.

Purpose

Capture the most shared images of the preferred future

Helpful hints may involve some or all of the following:

- i. Small groups report out to the large group their collective vision of the preferred school and leadership practice
- ii. Identify meaningful, shared elements of the ideal school as illustrated

10 Design and Destiny

10.1 Objectives

The 'Design' cycle "...engages groups of people in conversations about the nature of organising and about the kind of organisation that will enable the realisation of their values and dreams" (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003, p. 197). The 'Design' cycle involves the "...creation of the organisation's social architecture". The new social architecture is embedded in the organisation by generating provocative propositions that embody the organisational dream in the ongoing activities.

Appreciative Inquiry states that we are all co-creating reality in every moment. We are "both the designers of the world and the product of our own designs" (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003, p. 198). In Appreciative Inquiry organisational design is based on three key questions: What are we designing? Who needs to be involved? And how do we describe our ideal organisation? I suggest that it is the design cycle that begins the agenda for change, and therefore school improvement. This change is symbiotically engaged with the 'Discovery' cycle.

The stories and data collected in Discovery — combined with the hopes and dreams expressed in the 'Dream' — provide the organisational knowledge upon which the 'Design' or, in the case of this inquiry, the school improvement focus is developed (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003, p. 202). The Design cycle moved from a vision to a more specific plan. At this stage, the group needed to propose and discuss concrete steps that individuals and groups could take to realise the vision of their practice of the future. Inspired action was needed to move the Academy to its envisioned future, with the design cycle of the project lending itself to the question "*what should be?*" rather than the previous cycle of "*what might be?*" and "*what if?*".

It was very much about moving the group from reflection to action, with the group coming up with a concrete plan to ensure that the points identified in the Dream cycle were accepted by the senior leadership team and made reality. The hope in

this cycle was to maximise potential based on Burke's (2004, p. 32) idea that people are more likely to become actively engaged in a particular initiative when they are involved from inception to implementation, and self-organisation and self-governance are prominent (taken from Boyd & Bright, 2007, p. 134).

The focus of the next few meetings was to revisit the statements for the future, look at what the group meant by each one and devise a plan as to how operationally the propositions could be turned into actions in order to achieve them. The energy and commitment that the participants had shown in the previous stages needed to be channelled to achieve measurable goals which could be both understood and actioned by the senior leadership team. Mobilisation was not necessarily the aim of the project but it would allow the group to demonstrate tangible results.

A project plan was drawn up based on the collective middle leader wisdom that was achievable and measurable. This would enable the middle leaders to action changes both locally, within their own team, and system/Academy-wide. The focus of this cycle was to make the dreams reality through the creation and development of appropriate and meaningful policies, structures and protocol and practices. The group met the following day after school. The momentum for change was tangible and they were keen to revisit the propositions. The session was recorded with the agreement of the participants in order to continue to elicit significant data from the conversations that were taking place.

During this session Tim's unique talent and expertise was recognised and celebrated by the group:

James: This is a really great piece of work, Tim [referring to the pictorial representation]. How did you learn to do this? It is so good.

Tim: Oh, I have been able to draw since I was a kid, you know...er since I could hold a pencil... It's no sweat for me.

James: Yeah, but to put what we are saying into these... What are they? Metaphors? How come you can do that?

Tim: Well, you know, during the Christmas holidays, I was thinking about this project and what I could bring to it. I've been thinking of jacking this job in 'cos I am so tired of all the politics and being a labelled a trouble causer... not being able to do my job...I spoke to Anne about it in my performance management review and she suggested being part of this team. I thought, well...well, why not? It can't get any worse for me. Anyway, once I thought I'd throw myself into it, I did, and so over the break I read up about this type of inquiry and I found that one of the ways of doing it was to...you know, do drawings and that...so I read a bit more and I reckoned I could do it...so I did! I'm really pleased with what we did.

James: So am I. You know, yesterday I was so excited by what we had created and the potential we have for moving forward... Maybe it won't come off but at least we have tried and d'you know I feel like we're...like a team for once."

February 2011

A motivational framework guided and influenced the middle leaders throughout this cycle of the project. Tim, along with the middle leaders, appeared to be self-actualising as a result of the development of the environmental support surrounding them; that is to say that their psychological needs were being met through group process and mutual support. As a result, he (as well as the rest of the group) was heliotropically moving towards self-growth and motivation, which in turn led to increased engagement.

Through the project the middle leaders were regaining their locus of control, which was enabling them to fulfil their potential. The participants were developing the dispositional characteristics that determined whether or not they had control over what was happening to them in the workplace. This was both in terms of the strategic planning of the Academy and also their role within that, thus giving them responsibility for their outcomes. The middle leaders were encouraged to develop a

design statement that incorporated their strengths and dreams based on “What will we do? Who will support us? Who do we want to be around? Who do we want to learn from?” (Adapted from Stavros & Torres, 2005, p. 127).

It was decided that we should meet the next day in order not to lose the momentum that was clearly developing. However, I was concerned that we needed some time to assimilate our learning. I was also concerned that, whilst the group was becoming excited and wanting to move things forward, we needed to involve the senior leadership team in this process, as the culture in the Academy was one of over-reliance on them to action plan, initiate and action from the top.

I was unsure how they would respond to this newly empowered middle leader team. I cautioned against us running before we could walk, but was persuaded by the majority who were keen to move us onto the next phase. My concern was that there was clearly a growing tendency towards new and desired behaviours but that if we tried to move too quickly then these new behaviours, ways of thinking and framing of reality could be ungrounded without genuine integration into the participants’ middle leadership behaviour.

Whilst a heightened awareness of their own thoughts and feelings towards the Academy was a desirable outcome of the process, it was important that this awareness did not work counter-productively.

10.2 An Academy Asset Map:

I continued to be concerned about how best to share this with the senior leadership team, as I did not want them to feel undermined by the middle leaders as, after all, one of the perceived issues in the Academy was systemic dysfunctionality and surely this lay at the feet of the senior leadership team. I worried that unless someone had been part of the live process of the day, they would lack an understanding of what we were trying to achieve.

What had resonated with me throughout the day, and particularly towards the end with the participants having identified their “gifts”, was the notion of the assets that were surrounding the Academy. The whole point of the inquiry was to focus on the assets rather than the deficits, the glass being half-full rather than half-empty, and, drawing on the conversations that had happened that day, I produced an “Academy Assets Map” (Appendix v).

I had originally just been doodling, exploring it for my own understanding, but slowly I began to see the importance of this type of exercise. It was very much about recognising and sharing with the senior leadership team the assets that we have and then finding the resources from within to be able to move us forward. This was shared with the middle leaders the next day to ensure that they agreed with it; they were, and were also happy for us to share the pictures of the Dream session as well as quotes with the senior leadership team.

I recognised that it was better to wait until we had devised an action plan before presenting it in the next senior leadership team meeting. I also wanted the middle leaders to have ownership of it – after all, it was their piece of work (I had increasingly become a facilitator, rather than a main player, and my role and purpose had been to inspire a spirit of inquiry), and so I wanted them to feel empowered and confident enough in the process to be able to present it themselves.

10.3 From Dream to Action

Inspired action was what was needed to move the Academy to its envisioned future with the design phase of the project lending itself to the question “*what should be?*” rather than the previous phase of “*what might be?*” and “*what if?*”. It was very much about moving the group from reflection to action, with the group coming up with a concrete plan to ensure that the points identified in the dream phase were made reality.

The focus of the next few meetings was to revisit the statements for the future, look at what we meant by each one and devise a plan as to how operationally we could

turn them into actions in order to achieve them. After all, the energy and commitment that the participants had shown in the previous stages needed to be channelled to achieve measurable goals. Mobilisation was not necessarily my aim but it would allow the group to demonstrate tangible results. We needed a project plan based on our collective wisdom that was achievable and measurable and which enabled the middle leaders to action changes both locally, within their own team, and system-wide. The focus of this phase was to make reality the dreams into reality through the creation and development of appropriate and meaningful policies, structures and protocol and practices.

Two things were happening at this point:

- i. There was a sense that the inquiry itself was creating an “appreciating effect” on the relationships within the group (Bright et al., 2006), with Tim’s unique expertise being recognised. I also felt that the inquiry was strengthening the relational ties between the middle leaders, with an increased understanding of one another’s viewpoint; and
- ii. the inquiry itself was serving to expand the strengths and opportunities that the middle leaders were seeing within the organisation (Gergen et al.,2004).

10.4 The Plan of Action

I wanted the middle leaders to focus on moving us forward and to develop an action/strategy plan based on our emerging collective knowledge. There was no doubt that the participants had been inspired in such a way as to be in a position to implement what Stavros et al., (2009, p. 28) describe as, “going from possibilities to inspired action”. Whilst for me this phase was not as important as the previous process phases, I was aware of the necessity to “produce” something tangible to present to the leadership team. This came in the form of a plan of action tapping using the provocative propositions as the stimuli for action. It was structured in traditional form, with key accountabilities and timeframes. Through the development of meaningful and measurable goals the participants were able to go beyond understanding their context and producing good ideas. It gave them the template for action based on an, “upwards spiral of positive momentum” (Stavros et al., 2009).

Over the course of the next half-term we came up with an action plan (Appendix vi) that we felt would be effective and would enable us to meet our key propositions, which we had decided upon earlier in the cycle. The plan had at its core the notion of continuous improvement with inclusivity and sustainability being at its heart. It also allowed the middle leaders ownership and integrity, as well as a tool with which to move the Academy forward.

10.5 Summary of the Design Cycle

Following traditional school improvement procedures, action plans often reduce the fundamental change to a list of items to do that leaders check off as done without actually changing.

Top-down change from the Headteacher and senior leadership team only becomes an exercise in compliance by the middle leadership team with a focus on completing a task and the momentum for change and long-term sustainability increased the more we abandoned delivery ideas of action planning, monitoring progress, and building implementation strategies.

Throughout this final stage of the process the middle leaders worked cooperatively in a generative manner that was working towards the intended goal of school improvement. There was a sense of comradeship and members of the team appeared to empower one another to seek best practices to fit the needs of the Academy and then work on them to develop a plan for implementing this. The connection that developed between the middle leaders in this cycle was almost tangible, with a curiosity about one another as well as the organisation (which had previously been absent) beginning to emerge.

Self-reflection became a core practice for their leadership style at this point. This represented a break from the school leadership found in the Academy at the time, which was based upon a traditional individualistic paradigm (Gergen, 2009). It leaned more toward theories of distributed leadership (Harris, 2004; Leithwood et al., 2009) and the flexibility of the inquiry led to a snowballing of the values and action required by the group. This made it possible for the middle leaders to define a collective philosophy of leadership to act as a reference point for the rest of the inquiry and also on which to strive for improved outcomes for the Academy.

The design cycle enabled the middle leaders to get to the 'grass roots' of their practice by first collectively defining their values and beliefs of practice - their sense of what was happening in the Academy and how they would like to develop it.

Through mutually agreed values and understanding of their practice began the process of becoming a supportive and cohesive group that was able to focus on action and transformation. For the middle leaders this was an important cycle of the project as it was the culmination of the previous cycles and was a necessary by-product of the process they had already experienced. This was about the fulfilment of the Dream cycle of the project and was a pragmatic response to the need for action and a direct result of the heightened awareness of their heightened awareness.

For me it was the change (and creative) process that was of interest, rather than the end product. I had seen both individuals and the group move from a negative world-view to one which saw them engaged and energised. The main learning points to come out of the culmination of all of the cycles were:

- i. Understanding and awareness is multi-faceted and based on the past and the present.
- ii. There is an inherent drive in people to engage fully in the process of solving problems and finding better ways of being.
- iii. Growth occurs through open and honest dialogue where the focus is on the positives, whilst not denying the negative.
- iv. Individual autonomy is a crucial element of organisational development.

The transferability and recommendations of this cycle are presented overleaf:

Design Cycle

Moving a vision into a plan: Design is about sorting, sifting, and making choices about what will be

Purpose

Consider and choose a focus for a practice enhancement project from the collective “Dream school” and building on existing strengths

Helpful hints may involve some or all of the following:

- i. Map out opportunities for moving the school toward the ideal (with the topic in the middle and options as spokes off the centre)
- ii. Consider levels of interest and enthusiasm about particular opportunities
- iii. Consider characteristics of the ideal school that are most relevant and strategic at this time
- iv. Consider what is the smallest step that would have the greatest impact
- v. What needs to be done sooner rather than later?

Purpose

Create action teams around the most preferred topic(s)

Helpful hints may involve some or all of the following:

- i. Participants vote “with their feet” to commit to an action team
- ii. Consider representatives from different areas of the school
- iii. Establish mechanisms for communication

10.6 Destiny: Implementation, ongoing support, and shared learning

The Destiny phase is the culmination of the AI model. This is the stage when the middle leaders were given the opportunity to work out the nitty-gritty specifics of what would need to be done to realise the transformational blueprint for change that had emerged throughout the process. This time presents the opportunity to translate the provocative propositions from the Design Phase into tangible steps of action.

After an agreed-upon time (the Destiny deadline) of a term, the middle leaders reconvened to review, communicate, and celebrate accomplishments and learning. This gave the group a chance to validate action team efforts, have input into next steps, and revisit how the work fitted with the vision of the school of the future.

Although the Destiny stage ensured that Dreams were realised through planned actions and outcome assessments, it also encompassed plans to continue generative, appreciative learning. An essential element of the inquiry was to reflect on what had been learned throughout the process, including the small successes and skills learned during the AI process that could be applied in the future to new issues that might arise. In the future middle leaders could work together through the AI process several times sequentially, or choose to re-engage periodically to make their envisioned Destiny a reality.

10.7 The Final Cycle: The parting of ways

The middle leaders were now in the aftermath of the Appreciative Inquiry and the days and weeks following these were a busy period for the organisation. During this time, many of the activities focused on following up on the recommendations of the middle leaders and their action plan. The insights and outcomes that emerged from the process were communicated to all the members of the Academy through a series of meetings. In addition, senior leadership support did appear to be growing for the middle leadership team.

However, in the second part of the summer term the executive leadership team announced that there were to be significant redundancies in the Academy. This would involve all levels of staffing. This had a devastating effect on morale, with staff, who already lacked the necessary trust in the leadership team, withdrawing completely from any form of positive dialogue. The perception from the middle leader group was that there was no point in attempting any further school improvement and the buy-in that had begun to be a hallmark of the group began to wane. In June we reconvened as a group and the decision was taken to put on hold any further action.

In August 2011 two of the middle leaders involved in the project were made redundant along with 23 other members of staff. I felt unable to continue to work in the Academy and took voluntary redundancy in December 2011.

Discussion

This thesis is the narrative account of my research inquiry into middle leader engagement and the use of Appreciative Inquiry as a school improvement tool. Through this research I have developed my capacity for understanding the successful school improvement agenda as well as that of the motivating factors behind it. My original contributions to knowledge stem from how I demonstrate how I changed my own erstwhile and fragmented epistemologies of practice into appreciative ways of knowing and practice. From the platform of this research inquiry I am able to make the claim that I have developed an appreciative approach to middle leader engagement in the school improvement process. I grounded my evidence to this claim through the analysis reported in the narrative of my research.

The motivation for this inquiry was initiated by a desire to engage middle leaders in school improvement processes. School improvement is not simply about introducing a new initiative which can lead to low morale and disengagement, as teachers suffer from what Harris (2007, p.12) describes as “repetitive change injury”. It is more complex a process than that, requiring those involved to adopt a new way of thinking with new values, perspectives and assumptions (Schein, 2004). This inquiry did just that, as it enabled the middle leaders to “fashion a positive context” for change (Hargreaves, 1994, p. 56; Peterson and Deal, 1998).

This study therefore contributes to a growing body of literature on the use of AI in schools. It adds to the action research literature by including how appreciative measures have been developed, tested, and used in an individual school setting. As such, I have joined and contributed to the dialogue around “positivity” in the school improvement process by suggesting an alternative and collaborative model to middle leader engagement in the process.

It is my intention to break this chapter down into five sections in order to add clarity to my findings:

- i. The strategies used for data analysis
- ii. The themes extracted
- iii. The contribution to knowledge
- iv. Links to literature and
- v. Implications for practice

1. The strategies used for data analysis

The strategies were as follows:

- i. Audit trail

As I collected my data, I kept an audit trail so that I could “address the issue of confirmability of results” (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 109). I maintained a data archive as a separate document to which I was able to refer throughout the process of inquiry and throughout the writing of the thesis. By reviewing the audit trail on a regular basis, I found that every day and every interaction with the middle leaders brought new knowledge and offered insights into my both own learning (Glenn, 2004) and that of the middle leaders. It is this that I have evidenced in the previous chapters.

- ii. Research Journal (Stages One and Two)

A reflexive approach to the research process is central to action research. Action researchers are urged to critically reflect on themselves, “their pre-suppositions, choices, experiences, and actions during the research process” (Mruck & Brewer, 2003, p. 3).

These reflective practices are intended to make the researcher/writer/reader aware of the constructed nature of the inquiry which originated in the various choices and decisions that were taken throughout the process. The reflective journal kept throughout the project was a strategy whereby I was able to examine my personal “assumptions and goals” as well as clarifying my “individual belief systems and

subjectivities” (Ahern, 1999, p.2). This journal was a significant part of the inquiry itself, enabling me to monitor my own learning which, according to McNiff and Whitehead (2006, p. 65), “involves self- reflection as well as gathering data over time to show your learning has been advanced”.

My inquiry was predominantly based around dialoguing with the middle leaders and as such I became a research “instrument” of data collection. I read a lot about the traditional qualitative research methodologies but these presented research as a linear process that was un-problematical as long as the researcher focused on reliability, validity and objectivity (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Patton, 2002). My personal and professional investment in this project made me uneasy about this approach as it relies on the researcher being unbiased and non-reactive in order to increase the reliability of participant responses. My concerns resonated with what Denzin & Lincoln (1994, p. 501) calls an “interpretive crisis”- I felt that I needed to be fully involved and transparent in the research process. I drew on Scheurich’s (1997) notion that, in keeping with a post-modern approach, I could reconceptualise my findings through making visible the “baggage” I was bringing to the research.

I used the journal as a critically reflective tool in which I wrote about my emerging understanding of research methodologies and interrogated my taken-for-granted assumptions.

The prime example of this is when I revisited my research question at the end of the first stage and as a result the research design was changed. I did this as a result of integrating theoretical material, from my reading, into the journal. This integration had the dual purpose of enabling me to learn and understand new methodologies, and clarifying my ontological and epistemological stance. Furthermore, I was able to reconceptualise the inquiry as well as identifying the new theoretical lens through which to situate it. It is through the writing of the journal that I became aware of the implications of the inquiry, and began to consider who would benefit from being involved.

Keeping, using and regularly referring to my journal enabled me to make my experiences, thoughts, opinions and feelings visible. As such, it became an integral part of the research design, data generation, and analysis and interpretation process. Emergent themes were highlighted throughout the process in the journal, and this allowed me to establish patterns as well as allowing me to map my own learning and understanding as a novice researcher.

iii. Interviews and dialogues (Stages One and Two)

Interviews were an important part of the research process. I used them as an integral part of both cycles of the inquiry but adopted a different, more appreciative stance in Cycle Two. The two main types of interviews used were unstructured and semi-structured and, as stated in Cycle Two, each middle leader was interviewed twice (sixteen interviews in total over a period of six months) through a schedule which was rooted in an Appreciative Inquiry model (Laszlo and Cooperrider, 2010). All participants were involved in the interviews and data collection for the first phase was between September 2009 and July 2010; for the second phase it was between September 2010 and August 2011. Each participant was interviewed individually for one hour at the beginning of each cycle of the inquiry.

I prepared an interview guide prior to the beginning of the interviewing phase of a project (as presented in the main body of the thesis). The guide listed the key questions but did not dictate exactly how each interviewer should conduct the interview. It also left me considerable scope to initiate supplementary questions triggered by the middle leader responses. However, the guide guaranteed that I was able to cover roughly the same ground with each middle leader. In the interviews, the conversation between myself and the middle leaders was intended to be free-flowing and expansive; at times they most resembled a conversation.

The advantage of this type of interview was its free-flowing nature, which uncovered unfamiliar concepts and perspectives of which I had no knowledge or experience.

Using the grounded theory approach to data analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), I developed an interpretation of each interview, dialogue and interaction.

Kvale (1996) suggests that the theoretical context of the research constructs how interviews will be analysed. As the basis for an inductive way of making meaning of the data, I collected “detailed records concerning context, people, actions, and the perceptions of participants” (Locke, Silverman, & Spirduso, 2010, p. 288). Robson (2002, p.19) described grounded theory as “both a strategy for doing research and a particular style of analysing the data arising from the research”. The data I collected from this inquiry was thus analysed in relation to the research questions posed. This was done in order to construct an interpretation and a discussion of the results. As a researcher, it was important for me to critically interpret the data, recognise personal bias, think carefully and abstractly and be open to evaluation.

Data analysis procedures included: detailed notes made of the interview transcripts; axial coding; open coding; constant comparisons; the development of relational statements and a thorough review of literature (Strauss et al, 1998). I systematically coded, compared, organised and explored relationships within the data. The first step I then took was to conceptualise the data through asking questions such as, “What is this? What does it represent?” (Strauss et al., 1990, p. 63). I ensured that these two questions were always in my mind as I listened to transcripts of the interviews and the discussions that took place. I then produced summary sheets in order to extract primary themes and concepts. I also developed a system of short note taking, which fed into my personal journal and was an informal way of making sense of what was being said by the middle leaders. This was of particular importance in the second and third cycles of the AI as it enabled me to record, investigate and code emerging concepts. It also enabled me to explore ideas about theoretical concepts (Charmaz, 2006).

Through this analysis of the information taken from interviews and the group processes that occurred in the Dream stage of the inquiry, I was able to identify the detail, variation and relationships within the concepts being uncovered. Grouping of

these concepts is what Corbin and Strauss (1998) described as creating a “category”. Within this inquiry, categories arose from the data collected and were validated with phrases or quotes from the middle leaders, as seen throughout the thesis. Throughout the analysis of data I visited and re-visited the literature surrounding AI to extract core ideas and compare them to the inquiry process that I was involved in.

iv. Content Analysis of Pictorial Representation (Stage Two)

I conducted a content analysis of the pictorial representation the middle leaders produced. The use of images is not a new methodology but is rooted in disciplines such as anthropology and sociology (Harper, 2002). Within this inquiry one advantage of a visual approach was that not all participants were able to express themselves verbally, but felt able to participate when it was a different method of expression; Bagnoli (2009) describes this as insight conveyed by images. It was the image production that enabled me to elicit data that the middle leaders had not been able to talk about.

The process of producing the visual image allowed the middle leaders time to reflect upon and engage with the exploration of the Academy from an appreciative viewpoint. The use of visual methods served as a tool to assist with dialoguing, not as a kind of ‘add-on’ but as an important method of eliciting their understanding and experience of the Academy in its own right (Bagnoli, 2009). I did not use the data generated through this visual method in isolation because I did not want to remove the image from the context in which it was produced (Frith et al., 2005). Approaches to analysing visual images differ but within this inquiry it involved identification of themes which constructed experience. Furthermore, it was of real importance that I examined the process through which the image was created as I felt that this was a vital part of the analysis (Radley & Taylor, 2003).

v. Reliability and validity of this inquiry

Reliability is usually seen as the capacity for research results to be reproduced by other researchers at another time (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). By its nature, action research is always specific to a particular time, place and people. However, the method itself can be used – and the onus is therefore on the researcher to conduct the study in a trustworthy manner. This in turn relies on transparent, consistent, coherent and robust approaches to generating data – as explained above. To strengthen the validity of this inquiry I strove to enable the participants to have as much of a voice as possible in order to achieve a broader base upon which to draw my conclusions. The conclusions drawn and the themes extracted below are supported by gathered data.

2. Themes

Theme identification is one of the main tasks of qualitative research. Within the context of this thesis I propose that the themes presented below come from both the data and from my theoretical understanding of the inquiry. The themes in Stage One are: problems and powerlessness; low morale and disengagement and; critique and lack of trust in the senior management team.

Stage One Themes

i. Problems and Powerlessness

Most school change and improvement initiatives are led by Headteachers who, as change-agents, generally sees it as a glass-half-empty scenario (Ryan et al., 1999). That is to say, they focus on the deficit model of school improvement and, as a result, they adopt a problem-solving approach (Buchanan, 2014). In my professional experience, they often take a logical positivist perspective based in deterministic cause and effect, and use techniques that are grounded in their understanding of an Instrumental, problem-solving (rather than problematizing) approach (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). Within the context of school improvement this can be deterministic and naïve, based on limited concepts of the performativity of

organisational development (Bernhardt, 2002). This type of development programme, for example the NPQH, relies heavily on a normative and standardised model of leadership (Brundrett et al., 2006). This was the situation at the Academy, with few opportunities to focus on collaborative leadership. My analysis suggests that the main theme arising from the initial stage of the inquiry was that this problem-solving approach was not working in a school where morale was already very low, and there was a marked lack of trust in the senior leadership team.

However, I also used the problem-solving approach in Stage One of the research. I required the middle leaders to ask what was wrong or what had gone wrong. As a result, an environment had been created in which "...people spend most of their time focusing on what is not working well and they can only do this for so long without becoming demoralized and resigned to being in a problem filled work-place" (Bushe & Pitman, 1991, p. 1).

The frames or assumptions generated by this problem-solving or "what is wrong" approach limited the middle leaders' thinking about what had occurred and why it had occurred (Cooperrider, 1990, p.45). This had three consequences:

Firstly, the problem-solving framework forced the middle leaders to focus on what was wrong and to generate solutions that remained with the current practices and assumptions of the academy. In real terms that meant that the focus became one of trying to improve a dysfunctional system with incremental changes rather than creating a process that was aligned with the needs and values of the academy.

Secondly, the problem-solving approach created a negative cycle of discussion. The middle leaders were being made to feel inadequate as, "data collection [a key element of the problem-solving approach] consists of having people discuss, and often display to others, their failings" (Bushe & Pitman, 1991, p. 2). This was evident as middle leaders began to withdraw from the process as they did not want to focus on the problems. More importantly, they resisted acknowledging their contribution to the problem and continually blamed senior leadership.

Finally, as Bushe and Pitman (1991) say, “addressing problems, setting targets and working to accomplish them creates a culture of problem-centred improvement” (p. 2). This mentality had led to an ‘if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it’ Academy culture that was impeding progress. As a result, the leadership team had adopted a “learned helplessness” and waited to take action until problems were identified or created pressure on the existing system – this manifested itself in crisis management.

This mentality, confirmed by Stage One participants, is antithetical to the learning oriented/continuous improvement culture that is necessary to address the ever-changing educational landscape, as it leads to powerlessness and inertia.

ii. Low morale and disengagement

Morale in the Academy was extremely poor. Morale is a state of mind which involves feelings and emotions. It involves the attitude and perception towards the job, work environment, team members, senior leaders and the school as a whole. Positive teacher morale is usually exhibited by confidence, discipline and willingness to perform (Levin, 2008). However, this was not evident in the Academy although there were no single factors that explained the low morale, but rather a combination of related factors.

The middle leaders were far from engaged in any school improvement initiatives and as a result were less productive, less pupil-centred than they ought to ideally have been, and they were prone to withdrawing their efforts and adopting counterproductive behaviour in the form of being difficult in meetings or refusing to meet deadlines. An emerging theme in Stage One was that the senior leadership team was unclear about expectations; the middle leaders felt that there were no effective lines of communication and as a result they did not feel a sense of ownership over their work.

This low morale and disengagement was causing the middle leaders to lose interest in ‘going the extra mile’. This was as a result of not feeling valued or in control of

school improvement initiatives. The end result of this was the high staff turnover, which was having a negative impact on the pupils' learning.

The issue was that, when teachers left, they took with them the knowledge, skills and ability that helped to contribute to achieving the goals and improving the performance of the Academy.

iii. Critique and lack of trust in senior leadership team

The overarching conception of teachers of education and of middle leadership was more conditioned by the immediate challenges that they faced than a fully strategic model, and this was largely negatively framed because of the problems of the Academy. Therefore, the middle leaders' reality stemmed from that upon which they were focused (Gergen, 1990); that is to say, the overwhelming need for immediate and remedial action. Within the Academy there was a focus on the deficits and what was not working. There was significant criticism of the senior leadership team and resistance to change. In staff meetings the middle leaders would seem to listen politely; they would ask a few requisite but unimaginative questions and then go back to doing what they had always done. The next meeting would then reveal that nothing had changed and the issues were still the same. The middle leaders were at the point where they resisted every attempt to generate new ideas and ways forward. They complained of a lack of autonomy yet did not implement the necessary processes upon which to build.

Stage Two Themes

The themes in Stage Two were as follows: storytelling to engage; an increase in positive emotions; benefits of collegiality; the development of a common "dream"; a recognition of "gifts"; purposeful engagement and; conditions for learning.

i. Storytelling to engage

Creativity, innovation and positive change stem from an affirmative, narrative-rich environment. In the Academy, communication meant memos, reports and emails. All are forms of communication that tend to be reductionist and linear (Whitney et al., 2007).

They were neither encouraging “out of the box thinking” nor enhancing the generative capacity of the Academy. The concept of storytelling to engage in a meaning-making dialogue was central to the AI stage of the research project. It tapped into the concept that “stories bring AI principles and practices to life. They help people experience the shift from trying to solve problems from the past, to anticipating and focussing on the future” (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003, p. 107). The middle leaders revealed in the Dream phase of the inquiry that they were beginning to believe that dialogues enabled them connect with others. This connection and integration of their internal positive capacity with external resources enabled them to construct an alternative perspective. Within this phase the middle leaders said that they recognised that their attention had shifted away from “the problems as the motivation for change, toward infolding gifts, capabilities, potential, dreams and visions” (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003, p. 68).

“I can see that we all feel much better at work and in our role. We seem to be telling each other stories and these mean so much to us...often they are the same stories form us all.”

Chris, Dream phase, 2011

ii. An increase in positive emotions

All of the middle leaders reported the AI process to be positive, saying that it created a desire for change that was both personal and organisational. They said that they felt more positive and as a result were able to see more possibilities than before. They commented on a mental shift in the way in which they viewed both the Academy and their role within it. They all said that they enjoyed coming to work more

than ever before.

Fredrickson (2003) suggests that positive emotions give energy to both individuals and organisations, making them more effective today and in the future. As organisations are human constructions (Cooperrider, Whitney & Stavros, 2008), it appeared that the Academy itself would benefit from middle leaders who felt more positive.

iii. Benefits of collegiality

Stage Two of the process saw a combination of learning and sharing that was based on a more cooperative and collegiate approach to problem-solving. The notion of the importance of collegiality leading to a more collaborative school climate emerged as a key feature of this stage. The middle leaders reported that as a result of a more collegiate approach they felt less isolated in their role, with an increased sense of belonging and emotional well-being.

Interaction between the middle leaders greatly improved through the development of closer, more trusting relationships. This was achieved through allowing them the time and space to have a candid dialogue about who they were and what had brought them to this point.

This enabled them to gain a deeper understanding of the perspectives of their colleagues, which in turn led to a sense of being able to move forward together.

iv. The development of a common dream

Middle leaders commented that the positive focus of this AI inquiry enabled them to see the Academy and themselves from a new perspective. The positive focus, along with the sharing of stories and the confirmation that others shared their stories and experiences (Cooperrider, 2001) enabled them to see that they had a common dream that they felt able to buy into. The middle leaders were able to identify others within the group who shared their vision, which was affirming to know that they were on common ground. They reported that the strength- (rather than problem-)based

approach was both affirming and unifying. By the end of the Dream phase of the cycle the middle leaders were able to publicly share their stories and move onto how they could use these to make their collective dream a reality. The AI emphasis on developing more effective relationships between the middle leaders gave the middle leaders increased agency and openness to change.

v. A recognition of “gifts”

Within the context of this inquiry the middle leaders named their strengths as “gifts”. By allowing the middle leaders both the relational space and time to interact and reflect on their practice and the history of the Academy, they were able to engage in meaningful dialogue that enabled them to recognise what their strengths were.

They commented that they felt more confident in taking risks as they had colleagues to support and encourage them. It was apparent through these dialogues, particularly in the Dream phase, that the “construction of selves and relationships are interdependent” (McNamee et al., 1999, p. 22). The hallmark of this was that the middle leaders generated new insights into who they were as leaders and the elements that contributed to peak performance (Bushe et al., 1995). This insight was the foundation upon which the middle leaders were able to build new ideas and practices, offering them an opportunity for both professional and personal growth.

vi. A sense of empowerment

In the process of sharing their stories, which in turn led to a more common understanding of one another, the middle leaders felt that they were generating enthusiasm. At the same time, this more positive approach to the issues facing the middle leaders gave them an increased sense of self-esteem and more energy to engage in the change process. The middle leaders reported that as a result of the AI project they felt empowered, thus leading them to feel more motivated and disposed to take action. It therefore had an enabling effect on the participants.

“I see more possibilities and potential than I did before, as well as something positive, when previously I could only see negatives. I want to make things happen; I feel excited.”

Chris 2011

By the time the middle leaders had reached the Destiny phase they were already a self-organising group that had the potential to co-create a better future for both themselves and the Academy. They had the self-knowledge and confidence to develop what they needed to actualise their dreams. They were certainly much more excited about building a better Academy than fixing the broken one.

vii. Purposeful engagement

Most of the middle leaders experienced AI as a process that created engagement with the process of school improvement and one commented that it was impacting on school culture. As commented on in the Discovery phase of the inquiry, middle leaders agreed that through dialogues and conversations they were able to “generate a new sense of reality and thus of possible actions” (McNamee et al., 1999). Furthermore, the relationships that they developed with one another enabled them to be engaged in a process of mutual discovery and learning. The middle leaders found themselves more able to seek possibilities based upon positive expectation and a belief that change could actually occur. Through experiencing the exploration of the Academy from a creative and collaborative stance, the middle leaders found themselves more willing to engage in the provocative process of inquiry and dialogue.

viii. Conditions for learning

The relationships that the middle leaders developed with one another, as well as the positive dialogue, were fundamental conditions for facilitating their engagement. This

was beginning to occur as a result of conditions being more conducive to enabling change.

The salient conditions for the process of engagement and change within this inquiry were: “the presence of other, reflective discourse...and opportunities for committed action” (Daloz, 2000, p. 112). Inquiry, dialogue and storytelling informed by AI constructed the conditions essential to challenging the old ways of thinking and developing a new perspective that enabled change. As an outcome, the middle leaders gained a sense of empowerment and motivation to take action.

Overall, my analysis shows that AI was experienced as creating positive emotions, focusing on strengths, to increase the confidence and self-esteem of middle leaders, vision future possibilities, create better engagement and create an alternative perspective in order to see themselves as agents of change. The project provided the structure and initial impetus to share knowledge (Avital & Carlo, 2004) and to avoid the “mutual reinforcement of poorly informed habit” (Little, 1990, p. 525). Moreover, it offered a contrast to the traditional approach to change and change management.

3. Contribution to knowledge

The idea behind this approach to school improvement is that, for the middle leaders, the school itself can be a place of learning for everyone, using everyday activities and experiences as a basis for inquiry and cultural change. To this end, I contend that the change in the middle leaders’ perception of the Academy and subsequent actions was in itself a contribution to knowledge. The culture change for an admittedly small group of middle leaders was an achievement in itself and as such is a relevant claim for both action research and Appreciative Inquiry.

In a world in which the challenges the middle leaders faced were increasingly complex and interrelated, and where universal solutions appeared to have reached their limits, this inquiry led to more context-sensitive, adaptive, and innovative understandings and responses. I argue, therefore, that this form of inquiry provides a

way of representing the perspectives and subjectivities of diverse actors (including those leading the research process) in all their complexity.

Through this inquiry I have also made a practical contribution to the resource bank of teacher knowledge created so that other practitioners may tap into it and gain from the experiences (Snow, 2001). On a personal level it is exciting to think that other practitioners and leaders might learn from my experiences and transform them in such a way that they are able to use them effectively to improve their own practice. I will explore this contribution throughout this section.

Ideally, as a researcher, my desire was to contribute to new knowledge in terms of a form of school improvement strategy that might be practically applicable to any school environment. There are many traditions of school improvement but research has had a strong focus on student outcomes; a more effective school is generally defined as one that promotes better student outcomes than would be predicted on the basis of student intake characteristics (Teddlie & Reynolds 2000; Sammons, 2007). I argue, however, that creating the conditions that promote greater school effectiveness is a necessary but not sufficient condition for successful school leadership (Day et al., 2009).

What most school improvement approaches have in common is the idea that creating knowledge for change is not only a linear but also a political process (Pettit, 2010), and that the way in which this process is facilitated will shape the outcomes. Because it stands in contrast to the more usual problem-based approach, this study has the potential to transform educational leadership so that it shapes the culture of the school, as it provides a valuable approach for ongoing school improvement interventions. Its distinctiveness stems from the ways in which it brings together three constructs, Appreciative Inquiry, middle leader engagement and school improvement, from a practitioner perspective. Throughout the study, I was unable to find any literature that linked more than two of these constructs together.

My second contribution is therefore that the AI strategies that I have proposed provide a practical example of how middle leaders can be encouraged to become actively involved in the school improvement process. This is a marked departure from existing school improvement studies, which position interventions and school improvement strategies within ‘what works’ or problem-based paradigms that are proposed by government-led training programmes such as the NPQH. Furthermore, I focused on middle leader engagement in the process from a practitioner perspective – not as the Headteacher acting as the agent of change, but as a member of the senior leadership team. The middle leaders’ practice was informed by the philosophy and principles of AI and guided by the 4-D AI cycle, and as such the results of the research indicate the following outcomes: i) Middle leaders become more involved in the change process; ii) existing assumptions are challenged in the context of school improvement; iii) a new, more positive perspective is constructed; and iv) action is taken.

My third contribution is that there is currently little research about how AI impacts on school improvement. Schools, like other organisations, resist changes to strongly held beliefs, practices and norms that determine “the way we do things around here” (Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Schein, 2004). This resistance is based in political or emotional reasons (Dickerson, 2011). Politically (as seen in the Academy), resistance threatens the norms and values proposed by the senior leadership team as necessary for improvement.

Middle leaders, as was the case in the Academy, may feel threatened and anxious about their ability to adapt to the new processes and practices expected within school improvement initiatives. They also bring negative past experiences into attempts to instigate change – these have a negative impact on their readiness to change. Furthermore, their identity and perception of themselves as middle leaders may be challenged through the school change process. This in turn leads to a reluctance to change and adopt a new way of thinking. School leaders wishing to implement rapid and effective change need to recognise the impact of negative emotions on the process. I propose that middle leaders need confirmation, and to be

reminded of the positive aspects of a school instead of doing the opposite, which is to criticise and look for weaknesses.

Middle leaders are an important asset to school improvement and when they are appreciated for their contributions and seen for their strengths, they begin to self-actualise and work towards a common goal. When focusing on what a school wants to achieve, rather than what it wants to avoid, and when not investing time and effort in analysing its negative aspects, the possibility of reaching a desired future is increased.

As a result of this action research project, I offer a new approach to middle leader engagement – an approach that I have created through my own deepening leadership understanding and practice. I have shown that middle leader engagement in school improvement can effectively happen through generative dialogue that is based on recognising and celebrating the positive life forces that drive a school, which in turn leads to improved awareness and engagement. This can be achieved through adopting a generative and appreciative action research approach that meets the emotional as well as the professional needs of the middle leaders.

Fourthly, I propose that AI can be used as an enhanced action research methodology. Traditionally, action research can be used as an effective process of organisational development and can be successfully implemented in schools in order to effect change (Hopkins, 2001). AI's originators Cooperrider and Srivastara (1987), however, criticised the lack of a useful theory generated by traditional action research, claiming that the problem-solving theory that often underpins action research is to blame. They challenge the fact that action researchers tend to assume that their purpose is to solve a problem; therefore, organisations are treated not only as having problems but also as having problems that need to be solved.

Cooperrider et al. (1987) argued that this view of organising and researching reduces the possibility of generating new theory and images of the future (Shuayb et al., 2009). As an alternative approach, AI was developed. This inquiry thus

contributes to this appreciative approach to action research and transfers the principles of AI into schools as a school improvement tool that is both collaborative and participative in its approach.

It suggests a reconfiguration of action research in schools that goes beyond merely a problem-solving framework. This research suggests that AI is a valid form of action research of organisational (in this case, school) life. It has generative capacity and a “capacity to challenge the guiding assumptions of the culture” (Gergen, 1978, p. 1399) and as such is able to produce a theory of change, which emerges from the change process itself.

Fifthly, the study contributes to understandings about the ways in which middle leaders might contribute to school change. All leaders must become actively involved in initiating school transformation and this inquiry was based on the premise that middle leaders are the engine room that drives this transformation (New Perspectives in Middle Leadership, National College of School Leadership, 2003). My initial action research cycle attempted to engage with middle leaders in order to test the hypothesis that professional development based in action research encourages (middle) leaders to involve themselves as learners. This was changed in the second stage to AI. The AI action research process can be used with middle leaders to uncover explanations to questions about the best way to improve their own leadership practices. AI-driven action research engages the participants in the process of examining and reflecting on how to improve practice, studying the literature and research related to their inquiries, and then implementing a strategy intended to improve current practice.

A final contribution of this study is that it offers a starting point for comparative studies of AI as a school improvement tool. As such, it sits within the fields of organisational development and school improvement, by describing the knowledge creation process by clearly offering an alternative approach that empowers middle leaders.

4. Links to literature

This section will give a brief overview of the findings of the inquiry and their relationship to previous work in this area.

In contemporary discourse, notions of school improvement are linked consistently to that of leadership. This inquiry supports the notion that it does not have to be the head who leads school improvement and that is how others are engaged that is the crucial element for success. This is in line with Harris (2004, p. 11) who, noting that the influence of leadership on school improvement appears powerful but indirect, argues that 'distributed forms of leadership can assist capacity building within schools which contributes to school improvement'. The second phase of the inquiry, rather than emphasising the formal leadership of Headteachers, offered an alternative and distributed approach to participative endeavour (Bush & Glover, 2002) that drew upon 'the human potential to be released within an organization' (Harris 2004, p.12). The middle leaders played an important role in internally generating change and sustaining improvement instead of waiting for externally mandated changes. Stage Two of the inquiry therefore supports the notion that engagement in the process is due to the emotional work of building collaborative, trusting relationships (Harris & Lambert 2003, p. 38) that empower middle leaders.

Given that many researchers have included in their research the topic of school improvement and change (Bolman & Deal, 2003; Bruffee, 1999; Durrant & Holden, 2006; Sergiovanni, 2000), this inquiry adds to the notion that it is important to find a workable way of engaging all members of the school community in this process. It indicates that influence from middle leaders is not contained within the confines of classrooms, but extends to include all those impacted by innovative leadership skills through recognising ways to improve schools (Andrews et al., 2002; Childs-Bowen et al., 2000; Danielson et al., 2000). The notion of leadership and innovation that is shared (Harris & Lambert 2003, pp. 5-7) to engage middle leaders in the school improvement process is seen in the second phase of the inquiry. Childs-Bowen et al.'s (2000, p.20) suggestion that the significance of modifying the school culture to encourage middle leaders to take more proactive leadership roles is borne out by the

involvement of the middle leaders within this inquiry to step toward engagement in successful school improvement.

The findings further suggest that middle leader engagement and capacity is “multifaceted” (Fullan 2006), involving both those internal school conditions (leadership conditions, school culture (level of collaboration and connectedness among middle leaders) and structure) and those factors supporting them externally (such as policymakers, school improvement requirements, local community etc.) in generating and sustaining the necessary conditions, culture and structures; facilitating experiences and opportunities, ensuring interconnectedness and synergy between all the constituent parts (Cooperrider, 2009). Given the same external factors (such as the school improvement agenda), each school tends to respond to them differently based on their internal structural, cultural and leadership-capacity predispositions. The way in which the school internal culture and context interact is what really determines whether improvement is successful or not. Consequently, contextual middle leader development is needed if improvement efforts are to be sustained. Hopkins et al. (1997) recognised that this kind of middle leader involvement in the school improvement process needs to be differentiated and contextualised.

Since most school leaders struggle to meet the expanding expectations of the role, the importance of a shared approach to school improvement has been explored by many researchers (Andrews et al., 2002; Marks & Printy, 2003; Treslan, 2006; Yukl, 2006). Childs-Bowen et al., (2000) declare that senior leaders must invest time in reflecting on their “personal beliefs about leadership and the empowerment of others” (p. 30). In light of such research, the significance of spending time exploring personal beliefs in order to modify the school culture should be extended to middle leaders, encouraging them to take a more proactive role toward successful school improvement (Childs-Bowen et al., 2000). The analysis of data in the second phase of the inquiry indicates that time spent looking at personal beliefs led to enhanced and sustained engagement in the school improvement process.

One of the main concepts from earlier work which has been applied to this study is that of Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider, 1980). AI has been described simultaneously as a philosophy (Cooperrider et al., 2008), social technology (Burke, 2011), constructive inquiry process (Cooperrider & Avital, 2004), and most often as a change intervention (Bunker & Alban, 2006). This concept has proved to be a useful one in the description of the middle leader engagement in school improvement identified in the data. More generally, the findings of Chapter 7 seem to back up the various assertions in the literature that middle leaders do seem to make an active contribution to the ongoing process when they look at it through a different, more positive lens. Their engagement in individual and group activities makes a contribution to the overall process, as does task adaptation and spontaneous contributions.

The fact that it was not the Headteacher leading the initiative was significant, as already noted. By having the Assistant Head as the facilitator, the middle leaders were pushed to dwell on “what might be” rather than “what is”. This is a major aspect of AI that differentiates it from other strategising school improvement approaches. It is also why AI tends to be more associated with change interventions than strategising (Gergen, 1996). This inquiry offers a “methodology that takes the idea of the social construction of reality to its positive extreme” especially with its emphasis on metaphor and narrative. It builds on “relational ways of knowing, on language”, and it adds to the potential as a source of generative theory (Gergen, 1996, p. 368). In the context of this inquiry, AI’s future-oriented framework is a significant break from convention. Traditional school improvement is grounded in the analysis of data collected from its past. This inquiry supports the notion that historical data analysis, both quantitative and qualitative, is crucial for understanding the school in order to develop strategy.

Ludema et al. (2001, p. 191) explain that organisations have learnt ‘how to be deficient and problematic.’ The result is that people in organisations ‘gain an expert knowledge of what is “wrong” with their organisations.’ The AI approach in this inquiry counters this emphasis on deficit through its ‘deliberately affirmative

assumptions about people, organisations and relationships' (Ludema et al., 2001, p. 191). It is predicated on an epistemological stance which assumes that, given the opportunity to do so, middle leaders will orientate towards that which is perceived to be positive and life-enhancing. The findings of the Dream phase of the inquiry support Cooperrider's (1990) belief that the guiding, positive image of the future is deemed a powerful vehicle for driving positive actions in an organisation.

The data generated in the second phase of the inquiry supported the idea that images of the future become the equivalent of a strategic focus or vision of the organisation (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). As Elliott (1999, p. 61) observes, the appreciative approach 'can play a part in helping the whole organisation to reflect on its conscious and unconscious emotional life', a notion that is supported in the data produced in the Dream phase.

5. Implications for practice

The approach taken to school change and improvement in this study was founded upon four principles set out in the AI approach (Whitney et al., 2007). Designed into the change initiative, these principles created a context for change that was at the same time an image of the ideal organisational culture and a living practice of that image.

Through this project I have demonstrated how this AI model can be used as a valuable school improvement tool. The following four points demonstrate the implications for practice this project had:

- i. An unquestionable commitment to middle leadership – I wanted to implicitly trust the middle leaders in their contribution to the school improvement process. The importance of their role is unquestioned and as such can serve as a way of encouraging middle leader engagement and contribution. This in turn will lead to improved morale.
- ii. A willingness to invite and innovate new forms of cooperation - we began with an extra-ordinary stance toward cooperation among the middle

leaders to the school change effort. This can be transferred and used in either single schools or as a group of schools coming together.

- iii. A “storytelling” narrative model of organisational culture – the second phase of the project demonstrated that we all recognised the power of stories to guide human life personally and collectively.
- iv. A commitment to Appreciative Inquiry as an organisation-wide, integrative change process - Appreciative Inquiry could be woven into interventions and processes including: management and leadership training, an organisational school-wide improvement process, and a framework for positive change instead of the traditional deficit model of school improvement.

These principles as well as the process that I have used could be taken up by other leaders in other schools in order to test them in their situation.

Concluding comments

The rationale for the study was to develop a better understanding of how Appreciative Inquiry could be used to involve middle leaders in the school improvement process. The contribution of this study (as my initial premise posited) has been to show how this can be achieved and how the necessary conditions for this to happen need to be in place. Through this inquiry, I have made a practical contribution to the resource bank of middle and senior leadership knowledge so that other practitioners may tap into it and gain from the experiences (Snow, 2001).

On a personal level it is exciting to think that other practitioners and leaders might learn from my experiences and transform their leadership practices in such a way that they are able to effectively to improve their practice. However, this process has been a painful one for me and one that has changed my world-view. The following chapter will aim to present conclusions from the research undertaken.

The research question in the second cycle of the inquiry was: Can Appreciative Inquiry positively impact on middle leader engagement, and if so, how and with what consequences? The process and results of this thesis endorse and validate the Appreciative Inquiry approach, and realise in both theoretical and practical terms the anticipated results. The contribution of the study is therefore three-fold – it adds to what is known about school change, leadership and sustainability; it offers a practitioner perspective; and it provides an analysis of the ways in which a capacity-building process can be confounded by context.

A fundamental assumption of Appreciative Inquiry is that systems grow in the direction of the questions they ask. Hence, if we ask what is thriving within a system, we will nourish the system's development in a generative, forward direction.

Conversely, if we look for what is wrong, we will be more likely to push a system in the direction of continued dysfunction. AI does not propose that we ignore our problems; rather, it just attends to them with a different mind-set. It addresses

dysfunction through harmonising a system with that which it normally does well. This is a real paradigm shift in terms of school improvement. And this process is all centred on the quality of inquiry. The main strengths of AI identified and validated in this study include:

- i. Enabling school leaders to provide a new, positive outlook through avoiding stereotypical answers
- ii. Empowering middle leaders to recognise and identify good practice within their school
- iii. Building on these good practices in order to introduce and implement school improvement change
- iv. Experimenting with new ways of thinking is a critical and exciting source of learning
- v. Accepting there is an inherent drive in people to engage fully in the process of solving problems and finding better ways of being
- vi. Recognising that growth occurs through open and honest dialogue where the focus is on the positives, whilst not denying the negatives

Appreciative Inquiry within the context of the Academy represented a significant shift in the way that middle leaders thought about and approached school improvement. The Appreciative Inquiry process within this study revolved around revealing the positive core of the Academy as well as its “most positive potential”; it was about examining the Academy’s strengths, hopes, and dreams (Whitney et al., 2010; Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005).

This challenged traditional models of school improvement that focus, in contrast, on the problems, weaknesses, and deficits of the organisation (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2003). The middle leaders moved from adopting a deficit-based approach to change, to a type of value-added positive approach. By adapting the approach or view by which the middle leaders confronted change, the outcomes also changed. However, not all groups or environments are suitable for the AI approach and it could be argued that the Academy at the time of the inquiry did not offer the core conditions for effective school improvement. There may be some schools where the traditional problem-solving model may be the optimal way forward. In other cases, there may be a lack of leadership support for the kind of collective dreaming and inspired self-initiative that AI asks of its participants. Some Headteachers will not feel comfortable with the middle leaders having a voice in terms of school improvement! In this case, the more traditional top-down linear process may still be more appropriate. And even if a school seems in a position to embrace AI, there are potential landmines that can derail the process. For example, does the group have the collective courage and will to implement a process with no clear outcome? AI takes a leap of faith that some groups may not end up buying into.

Although this inquiry did not promote the whole-school change I had hoped for in school improvement terms, a close examination of the process of inquiry implementation suggests that it was successful in engaging middle leaders in developing a sense of shared purpose and identity that enabled some of them to discover, envision and implement meaningful change objectives and to learn from the change process. The middle leaders involved in the second cycle of the inquiry wished to view themselves as valued and valuing members of their collaborative learning experience. By doing this, they were actually choosing some traits and behaviours to work towards a more aesthetic (life-enriching) learning experience.

As such, they moved from a negative space to one where change (albeit individual and not organisational) became an intrinsic and inevitable conclusion. In giving the middle leaders time and space to think, perceive, and act in a positive manner, they began to feel good about themselves, their professional experience, and those with whom they shared it.

This in turn became a motivating factor. The middle leaders began to understand instinctively as well as cognitively that the energy for change that was being created was one that improved and enriched everyone. Furthermore, the energy produced in the second cycle, along with the special insights that the middle leaders showed, stimulated intellectual interaction in those who were initially more reluctant to engage.

This inquiry was an organisational experiment and a small-scale test. The benefit of this is that every outcome has value as it revealed new ways of thinking and acting. After reflecting on what was working in their individual and intertwined systems, the middle leaders used their findings as grounding to design specific changes. As a model, this project enabled the middle leaders to look at the Academy through a different, more appreciative lens that had its basis in a values-driven epistemology. It is this lens that creates a more enhanced awareness of the past and the present, thereby shaping the future, shaping reality and leading to the development of action and change.

In addition to the new and positive attitude to their role concerning school improvement processes, the middle leaders also went through a challenging process through which they revealed creative ways of both self-actualising and supporting the development of the school. This form of professional learning and inquiry is transferrable as it is:

- i. **Appreciative:** it assumes that every school system is working; therefore, one of the primary goals is to discover the positives through generative dialogue
- ii. **Applicable:** it is a fundamentally pragmatic approach to building on what is already working in an school
- iii. **Collaborative:** everyone involved in the process is a co-researcher and contributor to the process, and is therefore empowered by the democratic process
- iv. **Provocative:** it assumes that the middle leaders in a school are able to guide its realistic evolution and development through generative dialogue.

Returning to the factors that impacted negatively on the effectiveness of this type of school improvement exercise, as discussed, the Appreciative Inquiry process is built on the creation of new and exciting possibilities in the face of situations that render us without a voice or resources. These possibilities are not necessarily apparent or available. In this inquiry it was our challenge to construct and discover them and facilitate them within a culture that did not have the systems and procedures to allow them to easily emerge, and where the crucial internal and external pressures did not allow for success. Schools in challenging circumstances face tremendous pressures in today's educational and political landscape. They are under pressure to produce outstanding pupil outcomes whilst contending with poor facilities, lack of time, poor pupil behaviour and engagement, and an unrealistic workload. Therefore, even if motivation is generated by the initial AI stages, competing demands and limitations mitigate against them being able to translate this motivation and vision into changes that may make more work in the short term, even if they have the potential to be beneficial in the long term.

Final Word

Paradoxically, the end of this inquiry represents the end of my exploration of leadership practices in the Academy yet marks the beginning of a whole different cycle of my personal practice of leadership. It is this transformational change that I now believe to be reflected in my revised research and leadership practice. I have since found that by reaching beyond the operational, into the social, economic and political context of school leadership, I have become increasingly aware and suspicious of an educational agenda in which empowerment and creativity are viewed suspiciously and a one-size-fits-all approach to school leadership is eschewed. Whilst on a personal level I embrace what Gergen (2008, p. 12) terms as “an invitation to create new ideas and practices in the sense of bringing about new and more promising world conditions” I fear that personal empowerment and creative problem-solving through tapping into positive thought and action will remain on the back-burner for a while.

Bibliography

Adonis, A. & Pollard, S. (1997). *A Class Act: The myth of Britain's classless society*, Hamish Hamilton: London

Ahern, K. J. (1999). 'Pearls, pith, and provocation: Ten tips for reflexive bracketing', *Qualitative Health Research* 9 (3), pages 407–11

Andrews, D., Crowther, F., Hann, L. & McMaster, J. (2002). Teachers as leaders: Re-imagining the profession, *The Practicing Administrator*, 1.

Arendt, H. (1998). *The human condition* [2nd ed.] University of Chicago Press: Chicago

Argyris, C. & Schon, D. (1974). *Theory in practice: Increasing professional effectiveness*, Jossey Bass: San Francisco

Ashford, G., & Patkar, S. (2001). *The positive path: Using Appreciative Inquiry in rural Indian communities*, Winnipeg, Manitoba: International Institute for Sustainable Development

Avital, M. & Carlo, J.L. (2004). What knowledge management systems designers can learn from Appreciative Inquiry. In D. L. Cooperrider & M. Avital (Eds.), *Constructive discourse and human organization 1*, Elsevier: Amsterdam, pages 57-79

Badger, T.G. (2000). Action research, change and methodological rigour, *Journal of Nursing Management* 8 (4), pages 201–207

Bagnall, P. (2012). *Facilitators and barriers to leadership and quality improvement: The King's Fund Junior Doctor Project*. The King's Fund: London

Bagnoli, A. (2009). 'Researching identities with multi-method autobiographies', in B. Harrison [ed.] *Life Story Research*, Sage Benchmarks in Social Research Methods, 3, Sage: London, pages 376–97.

Bakhtin, M.M. (1984). *Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics*. [Ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson] Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press

Baker, K. (2002). Organizational culture [Online]
www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/doi/benchmark/ch11
[Retrieved 02/05/2009]

Ball, S.J. (1994). *The micro-politics of school: Towards a theory of school organisation*, Methuen: London

Barner, R. & Higgins, J. (2007). "Understanding implicit models that guide the coaching process", *Journal of Management Development*, 26 (2), pages 148 - 158

Barrett, F.J. & Fry, R.E. (2005). *Appreciative Inquiry: A positive approach to building cooperative capacity*. Chagrin Falls, OH: Taos Institute.

Barrett, F.J. & Cooperrider, D.L. (1990). Generative metaphor intervention: A new approach for working with systems divided by conflict and caught in defensive perception, *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 26, pages 219-239.

Barth, R.S. (1990). *Improving schools from within*, Jossey-Bass Publishers: San Francisco

Barthes, R. (1967). Roland Barthes, 'The death of the author', in *Image-Music-Text*, Hill and Wang: New York [translated by Stephen Heath]

Bartlett S. & Burton D. (2006). *Introduction to education studies*, Basic Books: New York

Bell, J. (1999). *Doing your research project: A guide for first-time researchers in education and social science* [3rd Edition] Open University Press

Bell, M., Cordingley, P., Isham., C. & Davis., R. (2010). *Report of professional practitioner use of research review: Practitioner engagement in and/or with research*. Coventry: CUREE, GTCE, LSIS & NTRP.

<http://www.curee-paccts.com/node/2303> [Retrieved 26/03/2012]

Bernhardt, V. (2002). *The school portfolio toolkit*, Larchmont, NY: Eye on Education.

Bhopal, K. (2004). Gypsy travellers and education: Changing needs and changing perception, *British Journal of Educational Studies* 52 (1), pages 47–64

Bion, W.R. (1959). *Experiences in groups and other papers*, Basic Books: New York

Bohm, D. (1998). *Unfolding meaning*, Routledge: New York.

Boje, D.M. (2001). *Narrative methods for organizational and communication research*, Sage: London

Bolman, L. & Deal, T. (2003). *Reframing organizations: Artistry, choice, and leadership* [3rd ed.], Jossey-Bass Publishers: San Francisco

Boyd, N.M. & Bright, D.S. (2007). Appreciative Inquiry as a mode of action research for community psychology. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 35 (8), pages 1019-1036.

Brink, H.I.L. (1993). Validity and reliability in qualitative research. *Curationis*, 16 (2), pages 35-38

<http://www.curationis.org.za/index.php/curationis/article/view/1396>

[Retrieved 04/08/2009]

Brooker, R. & McPherson, I. (1999). Communicating the processes and outcomes of practitioner research: an opportunity for self-indulgence or a serious responsibility? *Educational Action Research* 7 (2), pages 207-21

Brookfield, S. (1995). *Becoming a critically reflective teacher*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass Publishers

Bruffee, K.A. (1999). *Collaborative learning: Higher education, interdependence, and the authority of knowledge* [2nd ed.] Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.

Bruner, J. (1986). *Actual minds, possible worlds*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press

Brundrett, M.T. Fitzgerald, A. and Sommefeldt., D. (2006). The creation of national programmes of school leadership development in England and New Zealand: A comparative study, *International Studies in Educational Administration* 34 (1), pages 89–105

Buchanan, P. (2014). *Appreciative Inquiry: A path to change in education*
<http://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1137&context=etd>
[retrieved 11/09/14]

Bunker, B. & Alban, B. (2006). *The handbook of large group methods: Creating systemic change in organizations and communities*, Jossey-Bass Publishers: San Francisco

Burgess, J. (2006). Participatory action research: first person perspectives of a graduate student. *Action Research*, 4 (4), pages 419-437

Burke, W.W. (2004). Organizational development. In C. Spielberger [Ed.], *Encyclopedia of applied psychology* Elsevier Ltd: Oxford, pages 755-77

Burke, W.W. (2011). *Organization change: theory and practice* [3rd ed.], Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Bush, T. & Glover, D, (2002). *Pilot new visions evaluation: First interim report*, Nottingham, NCSL

Bushe, G.R. (1998). Appreciative Inquiry with teams, *The Organization Development Journal*. 16 (3)

www.gervasebushe.ca/aiteams.htm [Retrieved 10/03/11]

Bushe, G.R. (2007). Appreciative Inquiry is not (just) about the positive
OD Practitioner, 39 (4), pages 30-35

Bushe, G.R. & Coetzer, G. (1995). Appreciative inquiry as a team development intervention: A controlled experiment, *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 31 (1), pages 13-30

Bushe, G.R., & Kassam, A.F. (2005). When is Appreciative Inquiry transformational? A meta-case analysis, *The Journal of Applied Behavioural Science*, 41 (2), pages 161–181

Bushe, G.R. & Pitman, T. (1991). Appreciative process: A method for transformational change, *Organization Development Practitioner*, 23 (3), pages 1-4

Campbell, R. (2002). *Emotionally Involved: The impact of researching rape*, New York: Routledge

Campbell, C. & Levin, B. (2012). *Developing knowledge mobilisation to challenge educational disadvantage and inform effective practices in England: Discussion Paper*, Educational Endowment Foundation: London

Carr, W. & Kemmis, S. (1986). *Becoming critical: education; knowledge and action research*, Lewes: Framer

Charmaz, K. (2006) *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*, Sage: London

Cheung, C.Y. (2000). 'Cultural Factors in Educational Effectiveness: a framework for comparative research', *School leadership and Management*, 20 (2), pages 207-225

Chia, R. (1996). Teaching paradigm shifting in management education: university business schools and the entrepreneurial imagination, *Journal of Management Studies* 33 (4), pages 409-428

Childs-Bowen, D., Moller, G., & Scrivner, J. (2000). Principals: Leaders of leaders, *NASSP Bulletin*, 84 (616), pages 27-34

Clifton, D.O., & Harter, J.K. (2003). Investing in strengths. In K.S. Cameron, J.E. Dutton, & R.E. Quinn [Eds.], *Positive organizational scholarship*, San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, pages 111-121

Coghlan, D., & Brannick, T. (2005). *Doing action research in your own organization* [2nd ed.] Sage: London

Cohen, L., Manion, L. & Morrison, K. (2003). *Research methods in education*, Routledge Falmer: London

Cole, M.J. & Southworth, G. [Eds.] (2005). *Developing leadership: creating the schools of tomorrow*, Open University Press: Berkshire

Cooperrider, D. (1990). Positive image, opositive action: the affirmative basis of organizing. In S. Srivastva and D. Cooperrider [Eds.], *Appreciative Management and Leadership*. Jossey-Bass Publishers: San Francisco.

<https://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/intro/classicsDetail.cfm?coid=647>

[Retrieved 08/03/2011]

Cooperrider, D.L. & Avital, M. (2004). Introduction in Cooperrider, D.L. & Avital, M. [Eds.] *Constructive discourse and human organization: advances in Appreciative Inquiry, 1*. Oxford, UK: Elsevier Science, pages xi-xxxiii

Cooperrider, D.L. & Passmore, W.A. (1991). "The Organization dimension of global change", *Human Relations, 44 (8)*, pages 763-787

Cooperrider, D.L. & Srivastva, S. (1987). Appreciative Inquiry in organizational life. In Woodman, R. W. & Pasmore, W.A. [Eds.] *Research in Organizational Change and Development, 1*, pages 129-169

Cooperrider, D.L. & Whitney, D. (2001). A positive revolution in change. In Cooperrider, D.L. Sorenson, P., Whitney, D. & Yeager, T. [Eds.] *Appreciative Inquiry: an emerging direction for organization development campaign*, IL: Stipes, pages 9-29

Cooperrider, D.L. & Whitney, D. (2005). *A positive revolution in change: Appreciative Inquiry* Stamford, CT: JAI Press

Cooperrider, D.L., Whitney, D. & Stavros, J. M. (2008). *Appreciative Inquiry handbook*, Bedford Heights, OH: Lakeshore Publishers

Cordingley, V. & Bell. (2012). *Understanding what enables high quality professional learning - A report on the research evidence*, Centre for the Use of Research Evidence in Education (CUREE) Pearson School Improvement

Cram, F. (2010). *Appreciative Inquiry MAI Review*, 3, pages 34-38

Currie, M. (1998). *Postmodern narrative theory*, St. Martin's Press

Daloz, L.A. (2000). Transformative learning for the common good in Mezirow J. and associates [Eds.] *Learning as transformation: critical perspectives on theory in progress*, Jossey-Bass Publishers: San Francisco

Danielson, C. & McGreal, T. (2000). *Teacher evaluation to enhance professional practice* Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

Day, C. Sammons, P., Hopkins, D., Harris, A., Leithwood, K., Gu, Q., Brown, E., Ahtaridou, E, & Kington, A. (2009). *The impact of school leadership on pupil outcomes (DCSF) Research report: DCSF – RR108*

Deal, T.E., & Kennedy, A.A. (1982). *Corporate cultures: the rites and rituals of corporate life*, Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co

Denzin, N. & Lincoln, Y. [Eds.] (1994). *Handbook of qualitative research*, Thousand Oaks: Sage

Dickerson, P. (2011). *Social psychology: Traditional and critical perspectives*, Pearson Publishing: London

Drever, E. (1995). *Using Semi-Structured Interviews in Small-Scale Research. A Teacher's Guide*, Scottish Council for Research in Education: Edinburgh

DuFour, R., DuFour, R., Eaker, R., & Many, T. (2010). *Learning by doing: a handbook for professional learning communities at work* [2nd ed.] Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree

Durrant, J. & Holden, G. (2006). *Teachers leading change: doing research for school improvement*, Paul Chapman Publishing: London

Dutton, J.E., & Heaphy, E. (2003). The power of high-quality connections. In K. S. Cameron, J.E. Dutton & R.E. Quinn [Eds.] *Positive organizational scholarship: foundations of a new discipline* San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler, pages 263-278

Eisenhart, M. (1988). Agency- and institutional-theory explanations: The case of retail sales compensation, *The Academy of Management Journal* 31 (3), pages 488-511

Elliot, J (1991). *Action research for educational change*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press

Ellis, C. & Berger, L. (2003). Their story/my story/our story: Including the researcher's experience in interview research. In J. F. Gubrium & J. A. Holstein [Eds.], *Postmodern interviewing*, Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, pages 157-18

Ellis, C. & Bochner, A.P. (2000). Auto ethnography, personal narrative, reflexivity: researcher as subject in N. Denzin and Y. Lincoln [eds.] *The handbook of qualitative research* [2nd edition], Thousand Oaks: Sage, pages 733-768

Feinstein, L. & Bynner, J. (2004). The Importance of cognitive development in middle childhood for adulthood socio-economic status, mental health, and problem behavior, *Child Development* 75 (5), pages 1329–1339

Fetterman, D.M. (1998). *Ethnography step by step* [2nd ed.]. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications

Fitzgerald, S.P., Murrell, K.L., & Newman, H.L. (2001). Appreciative Inquiry – the new frontier. In J. Waclawski & A. H. Church [Eds.], *Organization development: Data driven methods for change*, Jossey-Bass Publishers: San Francisco, pages 203-221

Fox, S. & Amichai-Hamburger, Y. (2001). The power of emotional appeals in promoting organizational change programs. *Academy of Management Executive*, 15, pages 84-95

Freeman, M.P. (2010) *Hindsight: The promise and peril of looking backwards*, University Oxford Press

Freire, P. (1998). *Teachers as cultural workers: letters to those who dare teach*, Boulder, Westview Press

Frith, H., Riley, S., Archer, L. & Gleeson, K. (2005). Imag(in)ing visual methodologies [Ed.], *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 2 (3), pages 187-198

Frost, D. & Durrant, J. (2003). Teacher leadership: rationale, strategy and impact, *School Leadership and Management*, 23 (2) pages 173-186

Fullan, M. (2001). *The new meaning of educational change* Teacher College Press: NY

Fullan, M. (2002). *Leading a culture of change*, Jossey-Bass Publishers: London

Fullan, M. (2006). Change theory: A force for school improvement, *Centre for Strategic Education, Seminar Series Paper 157*, Victoria.

<http://michaelfullan.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/13396072630.pdf>

[Retrieved 30/03/2012]

Fullan, M., & Donnelly, K. (2013). *Alive in the swamp: assessing digital innovations in education*, New Schools Venture Fund: New York

Furlong, J. & Salisbury, J. (2005). Best practice research scholarships: an evaluation, *Research Papers in Education*, 20 (1), pages 45-83

Gabriel, Y.A. (2003). *Story telling in organisations: Facts, fictions and fantasies*, London Oxford University Press.

Garet, M.S., Porter, A., Desimone, L., Birman, B. & Suk Yoon, K. (2001). What makes professional development effective? Results from a national sample of teachers. *American Educational Research Journal*, 38 (4), pages 915-945

Gergen, K.J. (1978). "Toward generative theory". *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 36, pages 1344-1360

Gergen, K.J. (1985). The social constructivist movement in modern psychology, *American Psychologist* 40 (3), pages 266-275

Gergen, K.J. (2008). Therapeutic challenges of multi-being, *Journal of Family Therapy*, 30 (4), Pages 335–350

Gergen, K.J. (2009). *An invitation to social construction*, Sage: Los Angeles

Gergen, K.J., & Thatchenkery, T.J. (1996) "Organizational science in a postmodern context" *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 32, pages 356–378

Gergen, M.M., Gergen, K.J. & Barrett, F. (2004). Appreciative Inquiry as dialogue: generative and transformative, *Advances in Appreciative Inquiry* 1, pages 3–27

Glaser B.G. and Strauss A.L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: strategies for qualitative research*, Aldine de Gruyter: London

Glesne, C. & Peshkin, A. (1992). *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction*. White Plains, Longman: NY

Greenberg, J. & Baron, R.A. (1995). *Behaviour in organisations: Understanding and managing the human side of work*, Prentice Hall: London

Gregson, J. & Sturko, P. (2007). Teachers as adult learners: re-conceptualizing professional development, *MPAEA Journal of Adult Education*, XXXVI (1)

Griffiths, G. (1985). Doubts, dilemmas and diary keeping in R.G. Burgess [Ed.] *Issues in educational research: qualitative methods*, Lewes: Farmer Press.

Guba, E. & Lincoln, Y. (1989), *Fourth generation evaluation*, Sage: London

Gubrium & J. A. Holstein, J.A. (2003). *Postmodern interviewing*, Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, pages 157-18.

Guskey, T.R. (2000). *Evaluating professional development*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin

Gustavsen, B. (2001). New forms of knowledge production and the role of action research, *Action Research*, 1 (2)

Habermas, J. (1984). *Theory of communicative action, volume one: Reason and the rationalization of society* translated by Thomas A. McCarthy. Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press

Hammersley, M. (1993). On the teacher as researcher, *Educational Action Research*, 1 (3) pages 425-445

Hammond, S.A. (1996). *Thin Book on Appreciative Inquiry*, Plano, Tex.: Thin Book Publishing

Hanson, E.J. (1994). Issues concerning the familiarity of researchers with the research setting, *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 20, pages 940–942

Hargreaves, A. (1994). *Changing teachers, changing times: teachers' work and culture in the postmodern age*, Cassell: London

Hargreaves, A. & Fink, D. (2003). *The seven principles of sustainable leadership*. Teachers' College Press: New York

Harper, D. (2002). Talking about pictures: a case for photo elicitation, *Visual Studies*, 17 (1), pages 13-26

Harris, A. (2004). Improving schools in difficult contexts: Towards a differentiated approach *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 52 (4), pages 417–431

Harris, A. & Chapman, C. (2002). Democratic leadership for school improvement in challenging contexts, *International Electronic Journal for Leadership in Learning*, 6 (9)

Harris, A. & Lambert, L. (2003). *Building leadership capacity for school improvement*, Open University Press

Harris, B. (2007). *Supporting the emotional work of school leaders*, Paul Chapman Publishing: London

Hart, E. & Bond, M. (1995). *Action research for health and social care: a guide to practice*. Buckingham, Philadelphia: Open University Press

Hatch, J.A. (2002). *Doing qualitative research in education settings*, State University of New York Press

Heen, H, (2005). About feelings in action research. *Action research*, 3 (3), pages 263-278

Hinrichs, G. & Rhodes-Yenowine, S. (2003). 'The Sacred Heart Griffin High School: AI and a faith based school intervention', *AI Practitioner*, page 20

- Hopkins, D. (2001). *School improvement for real*, Routledge Falmer: London
- Hopkins, D. (2008). *A Teachers Guide to Classroom Research*, McGraw-Hill Education
- Hopkins, D. & MacGilchrist, B. (1997). 'Development Planning for Student Achievement' in *School Leadership and Management*, 18 (3) pages 409-423
- James, F. (2008). *An exploration of school improvement theory and practice in secondary schools in Trinidad and Tobago*. University of Warwick Institute of Education. Paper presented at the British Educational Research Association Annual Conference, Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh
- Johns, C. (1995). Framing learning through reflection within Carper's fundamental ways of knowing in nursing, *Journal of Advanced Nursing*. 22, pages 226-34
- Johnson, J.M. (2002). In-depth interviewing In *Handbook of interview research: context and method*, [Eds. J.A. Gubrium and J.A. Holstein] Sage Publications, London, pages 103-120
- Kemmis, S. (1993). Action Research and Social Movement: A Challenge for Policy Research, *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 1(1)
- Kolb, D.A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development (Vol. 1)*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Krueger, A. (1994). *Focus Groups: A practical guide for applied research*, Sage: London
- Kvale, S. (1996). *Interviews - An introduction to qualitative research interviewing*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

Kvale, S. & Brinkmann, S. (2009). *Interviews*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

Laszlo, C., & Cooperrider, D.L. (2010). Creating sustainable value: A strength-based whole system approach, in Tojo Thatchenkery, David L. Cooperrider, Michel Avital [Ed.] *Positive Design and Appreciative Construction: From Sustainable Development to Sustainable Value Advances in Appreciative Inquiry*, 3, Emerald Group Publishing Limited, pages 17 - 33

Legard, R., Keegan, J. & Ward, K. (2003). In-depth interviews. In *Qualitative research practice – a guide for social science students and researchers*, J. Ritchie and J. Lewis [Eds.], Sage Publications, London, pages 138-169

Leithwood, K. & Levin, B. (2005). *Assessing School Leader and Leadership Programme Effects on Pupil Learning (Research Report RR662)*, London: Department for Education and Skills

Leithwood, K., Mascal, B., Strauss, T. (2008). In K. Leithwood, B. Mascal, B. and T. Strauss [Eds] *Distributed leadership according to the evidence*, Taylor & Francis: New York

Lewins, K. (1948). Group decision and social change in E Maccoby, T. Newcombe & E. Hartley [Eds.] *Readings in social psychology*, Holt Reinhart: New York, pages 330-344

Lewis, S., Passmore, J. & Cantore, S. (2008). *Appreciative Inquiry for change management: Using AI to facilitate organizational development*, Kogan Page

Lewis, R., Donaldson-Feilder, E. & Haranil, T. (2011). *Management competencies for enhancing employee engagement*, Research insight, London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development

Linley, P.A., Joseph, S., Harrington, S. & Wood, A. (2006). Positive psychology: Past, present, and (possible) future, *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 1, pages 3 - 16

Little, J.W. (1990).The persistence of privacy: Autonomy and initiative in teachers' professional relation, *Teachers College Record*, 91 (4), pages 509-536

Locke, L.F., Silverman, S.J., & Spirduso, W.W. (2010). *Reading and understanding research* [2nd ed.] Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

Ludema, J.D. (2001). From deficit discourse to vocabularies of hope: The power of appreciation. In Cooperrider, D.L. Sorenson, P., Whitney, D. & Yeager, T. [eds.] *Appreciative Inquiry: An Emerging Direction for Organization Development*. Champaign, IL: Stipes

Ludema, J., Copperidge, D. & Barrett, F. (2001). In P. Reason & H. Bradley [Eds.] *Handbook of action research: participative inquiry and practice*, Sage: London

Ludema, J.D., Wilmot, T.B., & Srivastva, S. (1997). Organizational hope: Reaffirming the constructive task of social and organizational inquiry, *Human Relations*, 50 (8), pages 1015-1052

Marks, H.M. & Printy, S.M. (2003). Principal leadership and school performance: Integrating transformational and instructional leadership, *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 39 (3), pages 370-397

Marzano, R., Waters, T. & McNulty, B. (2005). *School leadership that works: from research to results*, Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

Maslach, C., Schaufelli, W.B. & Leither, M.P. (2001). "Job burnout", *Annual Review of Psychology*, 52, pages 397-422

Matthews, P. (2009). *How do school leaders successfully lead learning?* www.ncsl.org.uk [Retrieved 12/12/12]

McKenzie, A.S. (2003). Change from within, *American School Board Journal*, July, pages 37–38

McNamee, S. (2004). *Therapy as social construction*. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/289377106_Therapy_As_Social_Construction [Retrieved 05/11/ 2010]

McNamee, S. & Gergen, K.J. (1999). *Relational responsibility: Resources for sustainable dialogue*, Thousand Oaks: Sage

McNiff, J., Lomax, P. & Whitehead, J. (2005). *You and your action research project* [2nd ed.], London: Routledge Falmer

McNiff, J. and Whitehead, J. (2006). *All you need to know about action research*, Sage: London

McNiff, J. & Whitehead, J. (2009). *Doing and writing action research*, Sage: London

Merriam, S. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education: revised and expanded from case study research in education*, Jossey-Bass Publishers: London

Michael, S. (2005). The promise of Appreciative Inquiry as an interview tool for field research. *Development in Practice*, 15 (2), pages 222–230

Miles, M. & Huberman, A.M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook*, Sage: London

Miller, C. (1995). *The empowered leader: 10 keys to servant leadership*, Broadman and Holman Publishers, Nashville, TN

Mitchell, C., & Sackney, L.(2011). *Profound improvement: Building learning-community capacity from living systems principles* [2nd ed.] Taylor & Francis: London

Morgan, D.L. (1996). *Focus groups as qualitative research*, Sage: London

Morton-Cooper A. & Palmer A. (2000). *Mentoring, preceptorship and clinical supervision: A guide to professional roles in clinical practice*, Blackwell Science: Oxford

Mruck, K & Bruer, F. (2003). Subjectivity and reflexivity in qualitative research—The FQS Issues Forum: *Qualitative Social research* 4 (2), Art. 23

Mulford, B. (2006). *Leadership for school and student learning: What do we know?* Keynote address, Australian Centre for Educational Leadership, Fifth International Conference, University of Wollongong, 16 February

Nevis, E.C., Lancourt, J. & Vassallo, H.G. (1996). *Intentional revolutions. A seven-point strategy for transforming organizations*, Jossey-Bass Publishers: San Francisco

O'Driscoll, M.P., Pierce, J.L., & Coghlan, A. (2006). The psychology of ownership: work environment structure, organizational commitment, and citizenship behaviors. *Group and Organizational Management*, 31 (3), pages 388–416
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1059601104273066> [Retrieved 12/12/10]

Opie, C. (2004). *Doing Educational Research*, Sage: London

Patton, M.Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* [3rd ed.] Thousand Oaks, Sage Publication

Pentland, B.T. (1999). Building process theory with narrative: From description to explanation *Academy of Management, The Academy of Management Review* 24 (4), page 711

Peterson, K.D. & Deal, T.E. (1998). How leaders influence the culture of schools, *Educational Leadership* 56 (1), pages 28 - 30

Pettit, P. (2010). From data-informed to data-led? School leadership within the context of external testing. *Leading & Managing*, 16 (2), pages 90-107

Polster, E. (1999). *The self in action*. In From the radical center: Selected writings of Erving and Miriam Polster, MA: GIC Press, pages 219-237

Pondy, L (1983). The role of metaphors and myths in organization and in the facilitation of change. In L. Pondy, T. Dandridge, P. Frost, & G. Morgan [Eds.], *Organizational symbolism* Greenwich, CT: JAI, pages 157-166

Potter, D. (2001).

<https://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/practice/toolsModelsPPTsDetail.cfm?coid=845>

[Retrieved 12/10/2009]

Powney, J. & Watts, M. (1987). *Interviewing in educational research*, Routledge Education books

Pratt, C. (2002). Creating unity from competing integrities: A case study in appreciative inquiry methodology. In R. Fry, F. Barrett, J. Seiling & D. Whitney [Eds.], *Appreciative inquiry and organizational transformation: reports from the field*, Westport, CT: Quorum Books, pages 99–120

Pring, R. (1999). Reflecting on the reflective practitioners in Ai-Yen Chen & John Van Maanen [Eds.] *The reflective spin: Case studies of teachers in higher education transforming action*, Singapore: World Scientific

Radley, A. & Taylor, D. (2003). Remembering one's stay in hospital: a study in photography, recovery and forgetting, *Health: An Interdisciplinary Journal for the Social Study of Health, Illness and Medicine*, 7 (2), pages 129-159

Randall, R. & Southgate, J. (1980). *Co-Operative and Community Group Dynamics. Or Your Meetings Needn't Be So Appalling*, Barefoot Books: London

Reed, J. (2007). *Appreciative Inquiry: Research for Change*, Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications

Reeves, J., Turner, E., Morris, B. & Forde, C. (2003). 'Culture and concepts of school leadership and management: exploring the impact of CPD on aspiring head teachers', *School Leadership and Management*, 23 (1), pages 5-24

Revans, R.W. (1983). "Action Learning: Its Terms and Character", *Management Decision*, 21 (1), pages 39 – 50

Roberts, K.L. & Taylor, B.J. (2002). *Nursing research processes: an Australian perspective*, Nelson: South Melbourne

Robertson, Q.M., Moye, N.A. and Locke, E.A., (1998). Identifying a missing link between participation and satisfaction: the mediating role of procedural justice perceptions. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 84 (4), page 585

Robinson, S.L. (2008). Trust and breach of the psychological contract, *Administrative Science Quarterly* 41, pages 574-593

Robinson, V., Hohepa, M. & Lloyd, C. (2009). *School Leadership and Student Outcomes: Identifying What Works and Why Best Evidence Synthesis* <https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/series/2515/60169/60170>

[Retrieved 10/10/ 2011]

Robson C. (2002). *Real World Research: A Resource for Social Scientists and Practitioner-Researchers* [2nd ed.], Blackwell: Oxford

Rothbard, N.P. (2001). "Enriching or depleting? The dynamics of engagement in work and family roles" *Administrative Scientist Quarterly* (46), pages 655-84

Rutledge, P.B. (2011). *The psychological power of storytelling*.

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/positively-media/201101/the-psychological-power-storytelling> [Retrieved 18/01/2011]

Ryan, F.J. Soven, M., Smither, J., Sullivan, W.M., & VanBurskirk, W.R., (1999). Appreciative Inquiry: Using personal narratives for initiating school reform, *The Clearing House* 72 (3), pages 164-167

Sammons, P. (2007). School effectiveness and equity: making connections, *Executive summary. CfBT*.

<http://coe.fau.edu/research/conferences/icsei2006/documents/Sammons/keynote.pdf>
[Retrieved 23/11/2011]

Schein, E.M. (2001). Clinical inquiry/research. In P. Reason & H. Bradbury [Eds.] *Handbook of action research; participative inquiry and practice*. Sage: London

Schein, E.M. (2004). *Organizational culture and leadership*. [3rd. ed.], Jossey-Bass Publishers: London

Scheurich, J.J. (1997) A postmodernist critique of research interviewing. In *Research method in the postmodern*, Falmer: London

Schiller, M. (1995). *The Case Story of Avon Mexico*

<https://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/practice/toolsCasesDetail.cfm?coid=13570>

[Retrieved 23/02/2009]

Shuayb, M., Sharp, C., Judkins, M. and Hetherington, M. (2009). *Young people's perceptions of effective community cohesion practices*. Slough: NFER

<https://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/AEN02/AEN02.pdf>

[Retrieved 12/12/2011]

Schutz, W. (1958). *FIRO: A Three-Dimensional Theory of Interpersonal Behavior*. Rinehart: NY

Scott, S. & McNeish, D. (2013). *School leadership evidence review: using research evidence to support school improvement*, National Centre for Social Research for CUBeC

Sergiovanni, T. (2000). *The Life world of Leadership: Creating Culture, Community, and Personal Meaning in Our Schools*, Jossey-Bass Publishers: San Francisco

Shotter, J. & Katz, A. (2008). Articulating a practice from within the practice, itself: establishing formative dialogues by the use of a 'social poetics', *Concepts and Transformations*, 1, pages 213-217

Siegelman, E.Y. (1990). *Metaphor and meaning in psychotherapy*, New York, Guilford Press: London

Simkins, T, Morgan, A, Coldwell, M, and Close, P (2006a). In-school leadership development: theory and practice in three national programmes in England. *Paper presented at the European Conference on Educational Research, Geneva*

Simkins, T., Coldwell, M., Caillau, I., Finlayson, H. and Morgan, A. (2006b). Coaching as an in-school leadership development strategy: experiences from Leading from the Middle, *Journal of In-Service Education*, 32 (3), pages 321-340

Snow, D. (2001). 'Collective identity and expressive forms.' University of California, Irvine eScholarship Repository. <http://repositories.cdlib.org/csd/01-07> [Retrieved 21/07/2009]

Srivastva, S. & Barrett, F.J (1988).The transforming nature of metaphors in group development: A study in group theory, *Human Relations*, 41 (1)

Srivastva, S., Obert, S. & Neilsen, E. (1977). Organizational analysis through group process: A theoretical perspective for organization development. In C. Cooper [Ed.] *Organization development in the U.K. and U.S.A.*, The Macmillan Pres: London

Stavros, J.M. & Hinrichs, G. (2009). *Thin book of SOAR: building strengths-based strategy*. Bend, OR: Thin Book Publishers.

Stavros, J., & Torres, C. (2005). *Dynamic relationships: unleashing the power of Appreciative Inquiry in everyday life*, Chagrin Falls, OH: Taos Institute Publishing

Stoll, L., Bolam, R., McMahon, Thomas, S., Wallace, M., Greenwood, A. & Hawkey, K. (2006). *Creating and sustaining effective professional learning communities*, DfES Research Report RR637, University of Bristol. Available at www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RR637.pdf [Retrieved 18/05/2010]

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*, Sage: London

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* [2nd ed.] Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi: Sage Publications

Sullivan, M. (2004). The promise of Appreciative Inquiry in library organizations. *LibraryTrends*, 53 (1), pages 218–229

Teddlie, C. & Reynolds, D. (2000). *The International handbook of school effectiveness research*, Falmer: London

Tellis, W. (1997). Application of a case study methodology. *The Qualitative Report*, 3 (3) <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR3-3/tellis2.html> [Retrieved 4/09/2009]

Tesch, R. (1990). *Qualitative research: Analysis types and software Tools*, Falmer: New York

Torbert, W. (2001). The practice of action inquiry. In P. Reason & H. Bradbury [Eds.], *Handbook of action research; participative inquiry and practice*, Sage: London

Tormey, R (2003). *Teaching social justice; Intercultural and development education perspectives on education's context, content and methods*. Ireland Aid and Centre for Educational Disadvantage Research

Treslan, D.L. (2006). Transformational teacher leadership in the classroom: Any evidence? *Education Canada*, pages 58-62

Tuckman, B W. (1965). 'Developmental sequence in small groups', *Psychological Bulletin*, 63, pages 384-399.
<http://dennislearningcenter.osu.edu/references/GROUP%20DEV%20ARTICLE.doc>.
[Retrieved 14/01/2010]

Turnock, C. & Gibson, V. (2001). Validity in action research: A discussion on theoretical and practice issues encountered whilst using observation to collect data. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 36 (3), pages 471-477

van Buskirk, W. (2002). Appreciating Appreciative Inquiry in the urban Catholic school. In R. Fry, F. Barrett, J. Seiling & D. Whitney (Eds.), *Appreciative Inquiry and organizational transformation. Reports from the field* Westport, CT: Quorum Books, pages 67-97

van Buskirk, W. & McGrath, D. (1992). "Organizational stories as a window on affect in organizations", *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 5 (2), pages 9-24

Van den Berg, M. & Hoogervorst, J. (2004). *Enterprise architecture: Compelling pets to start*. Diemen, Sogeti

van der Haar, D. & Hosking, D. (2004). Evaluating Appreciative Inquiry: a relational constructionist perspective In: *Human relations*, 57 (8), pages 1017-1036

Van Maanen, J. (1988). Tales of the field: On writing ethnography. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 34 (2), pages 307-311

Walker, K. (2003). Why evidence-based practice now? A polemic. *Nursing Inquiry*, 10, pages 145–155

Watkins, J.M., Mohr, B.J. (2001). *Appreciative Inquiry: change at the speed of imagination*, Jossey-Bass Publishers: London

Walter, I., Nutley, S., Percy-Smith, J., McNeish, D., & Frost, S. (2004). *Improving the use of research in social care (7)*.: Social Care Institute for Excellence and The Policy Press: London

Weick, K. (1995). *Sense-making in organizations (Foundations for organizational science)*. Sage: London

Wellington, J.J. (2000). *Educational research: Contemporary issues and practical approaches*, London: Continuum

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge University Press

Wicks, P.G & Reason, P. (2009). 'Initiating action research: A review of the challenges and paradoxes of opening communicative space'. *Action Research*, 7 (3), pages 243 – 262

Whetston, J.T. (2002). Personalism and moral leadership: the servant leader with a transforming vision. *Business Ethics: A European Review*, 11 (4), pages 385-392

Williamson, G. & Prosser, S. (2002). Action research: politics, ethics and participation. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*. 40, pages 587–593

Winkler, G. (2003). Ethical issues in narrative research. *Educational Action Research*, 11 (3), pages 389-402

Winter, R. (1987). *Action research and the nature of social inquiry*. Aldershot, Gower

Whitney, D. & Cooperrider, D. L. (2000).The appreciative inquiry summit: An emerging methodology for whole system positive change. *OD Practitioner* 32 (2), pages 13-26

Whitney, D. & Trosten-Bloom, A. (2003). *The power of Appreciative Inquiry*, Berrett-Koehler: San Francisco

Whitney, D., Trosten-Bloom, A. and Rader, K. (2010). "Leading positive performance: A conversation about appreciative leadership." *Performance Improvement*, 49 (3), pages 5 -10

Yaeger, T & Sorensen, P.F. (2009). *Strategic organization development: Managing change for success (Contemporary trends in organization development and change)*. IAG Publishers

Yalom, I.D. (2005). *The theory and practice of group psychotherapy* [5th ed.] New York: Basic Books

Yin, R. (2009). *Case study research: Design and methods*. SAGE Publications

Yukl, G. (2006). *Leadership in organisations* [6th ed.], Prentice Hall: New Jersey

Zinker, J.C. (1980). The developmental process of a Gestalt Therapy group in B. Feder and R. Ronall [Eds.] *Beyond the hot seat – Gestalt approaches to groups*, New York: Brunner/Mazel, pages 55-67

Appendices

Appendix I

APPRECIATIVE INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to be part of this inquiry and for this interview.

As you know, I am hoping that this project will support the middle leaders in the Academy in the pursuit of a more positive strategic vision. As you also know, the Academy has a rich and textured history but at the moment we are struggling to

ensure the best outcomes for our students and my perception is that morale is very low.

So I'd like to spend the next hour with you to get your perspective on what has given life to The Academy; what we can learn from our history, paying particular attention to the moments when we were at our best; what it is important to preserve as we change; and what our hopes and dreams are for this organization in the future and how we can take the best of our past and use it as a springboard to the future.

The information you provide will be used to develop a statement of values for middle leadership in the Academy, which takes into consideration our past and inspires our future.

My interest is to learn about the Academy from your experience. Your comments will be combined with others' anonymously and a report will be prepared to review with the senior leadership team.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

PERSONAL INFORMATION

Name:

Job Title:

Time with the Academy:

Questions asked: EXPERIENCE WITH THE ACADEMY

1. First, I'd like to learn about your early days with The Academy.

- a. What attracted you to want to work in the Academy?

- b. What surprised and excited you the most about the opportunity in your early days?

2. Considering your entire time as a middle leader at the Academy, can you recall a time when you felt most alive, most involved, or most excited about your involvement in behaviour management in the organisation?

- a. What was happening?
- b. What made it different from any other time? What was giving it energy?
- c. What were the most important factors that made it a positive experience? (support of SLT; clear boundaries; systems; relationships)

3. Let's consider the things that you value most, specifically about a) yourself b) your job c) the Academy

- a. Without being humble or embarrassed, what do you value most about yourself as a person?
- b. What do you value most about being a teacher?
- c. What positive impact do you have as a middle leader?
- d. What is it about the Academy that enables you to fulfil the things that you value most?

4. Developing a learning environment. Imagine a future where you are inspired by the ideas, knowledge and innovations, where value is created for everyone, including students, parents, staff and the community at large. What does it feel like? What has unfolded or changed to make it happen?

5. What values would you say guide the Academy? How has the Academy kept those values alive? Looking to the future, what values do you believe will inspire us to support our young people and their families to ensure the very best outcomes for them?

Appendix II

The profiles of participants in Cycle One:

Role	Qualified Teacher Status	Time at the Academy
Head of Faculty (Maths)	Yes	1 year 5 months
Head of Faculty (English)	Yes	2 years
Head of Faculty (Science)	Yes	9 months
2 nd in Faculty (History)	Yes	4 years
2 nd in Faculty (English)	Yes	9 months
2 nd in Faculty (Science)	Yes	1 year

The profiles of the participants in Cycle Two:

Role	Qualified Teacher Status	Time at the school
Assistant Principal (Me)	Yes	5 months
Curriculum Leader (Tim)	Yes	1.8 years
Curriculum Leader (James)	Yes	2 years
Year Learning Leader (Chris)	No	6 months
Year Learning Leader	Yes	7 years
Year Learning Leader	Yes	1 year
Pastoral Manager	No	3 years

Appendix III

The term action research was first used by Lewins (1948) to describe the simultaneous process of acting and researching, using research as a means to act upon.

Carr and Kemmis (1986, page 162) describe action research as a form of self-reflection. Retrieved from http://labsome.rmit.edu.au/iki/index.php/Action_research (02/03/09)



Appendix IV

Stories & Quotes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "The single most important contribution the Academy has made in my life has been the opportunity to grow as a person on a professional and personal level. I have been offered the opportunity to be a middle leader at a very early age and straight after being an NQT... and have been trusted to do my job." (Curriculum Leader 1) • "I came to the Academy on the GTP. I soon became a middle leader and that was really exciting because I had loads of ideas that I have been able to

implement.” (Year Learning Leader 3)

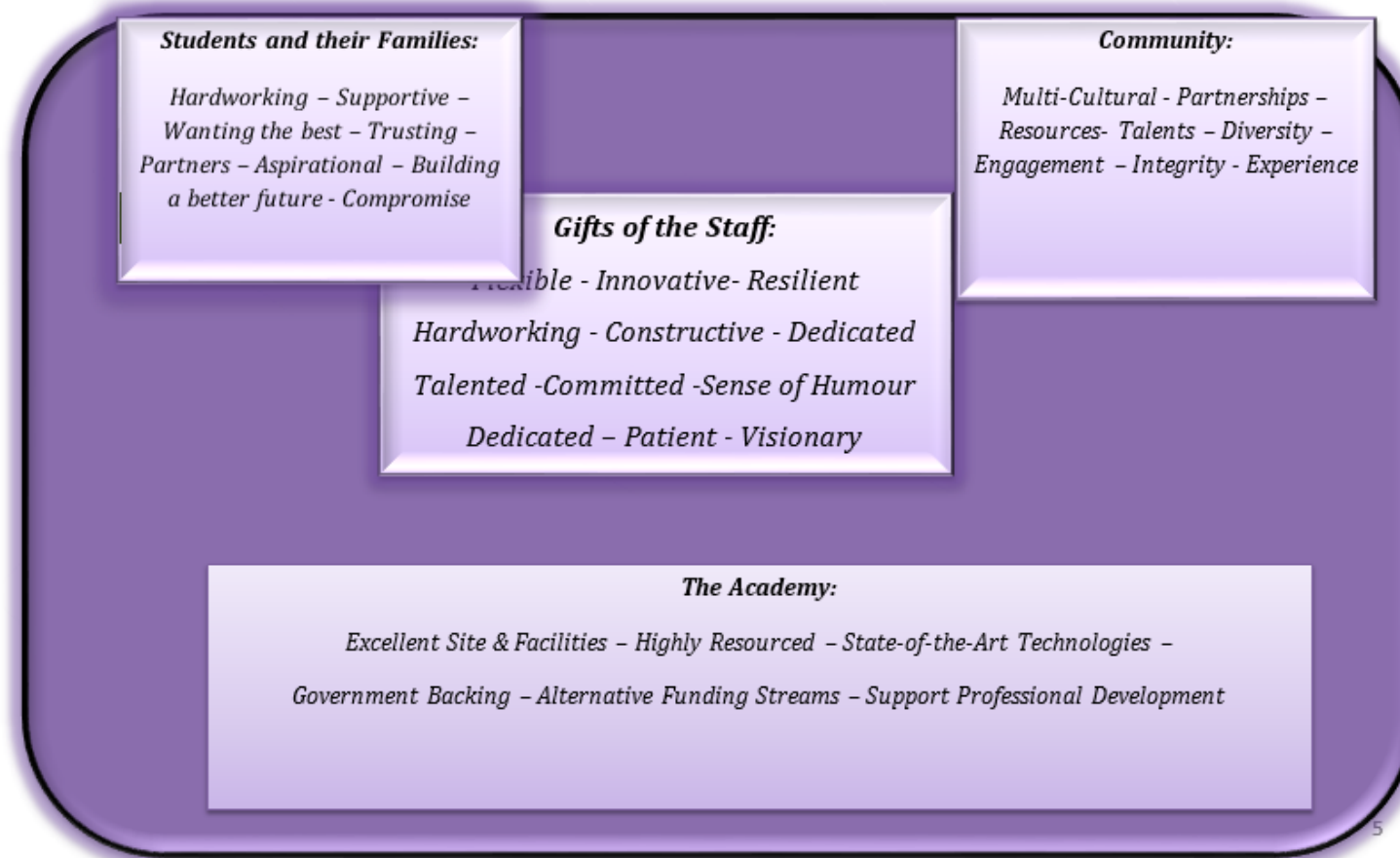
- “I used to work in an LA comprehensive school and if we wanted to introduce something we had to plan for ages ahead but here we can introduce something and as long as we are willing to commit to doing the work then we can run with it.” (Year Learning Leader 1)
- “A real high point for me was when I had the best performance management review.” (Pastoral Manager)
- “I like the way that the Year Learning Leaders each work within their own team in a vertical way but also horizontally so that they get ideas off one another and are not just working in isolation.” (Year Learning Leader 3)
- “There are some days when dealing with poor behavior just becomes too much and there was a day when I just walked out of assembly as the kids were being so naughty and refusing to be quiet for me. I actually started crying as I left the hall and several of the kids saw me. What really surprised me was how other staff took over and finished the assembly. Another teacher followed me to see if I was ok. I was told that I did not have to do assemblies for a while and the next time I came into one it was obvious that the kids had been told off for upsetting me and had to apologise. It felt good that my colleagues cared enough about me to support me in this way and recognised the impact that the poor behaviour was having on me.” (Year Learning Leader 2)
- “Everyone brings something different to the table.” (Year Learning Leader 2)
- “In my last school I had been part of an initiative to develop higher expectations of behaviour and attitude. It had been quite successful, so I thought I’d mention it in our team meeting. Everyone was up for it and so I ended up leading on it firstly with my year group and then with the whole of the Key Stage.” (Year Learning Leader 3)
- “I know we complain when yet another initiative is brought in but at least we feel as if we are moving forward.” (Curriculum Leader 2)
- “I know...I just know...that if we were to just define what we stand for and what we want for the Academy we could be so successful. We just keep missing the mark. There are so many good staff...and kids...that want to get it right, we need

strong leadership and we will fly.” (Curriculum Leader)

- “A mission statement means nothing if you don’t live and breathe it. I want to be proud to work here...” (Year Learning Leader 3)
- “We all need to know what the ethos is so that we can buy into it properly.”

Appendix V

Asset Map



XXXX ACADEMY PLAN

January 2011– January 2012

Developing the action plan

Context: This is a plan devised by a group of middle leaders in the Academy. Senior staff and governors have been involved throughout the process.

Areas for development

The areas for improvement identified are:

Key Proposition 1: Ours will be an outstanding learning community where there is an ethos that is based on the highest of expectations for everyone and where everyone feels safe and able to fulfil their learning potential.

1. Develop a simple and manageable Behaviour Policy;
2. Ensure that all stakeholders are aware of the policy & expectations for the students;
3. Introduce restorative practices so that all staff feel able to effectively use them;
4. Develop close and effective partnerships with parents and carers;
5. Ensure that SEAL is an integral part of all that we do.

Key Proposition 2: We will foster a culture of collaboration that recognises the unique roles and responsibilities of everyone (staff, students, parents and the community) and is based on mutual respect and trust; inclusivity and honest communication; and supports individual growth. Internal politics will not influence our development.

1. Middle leaders will be clear on their roles and responsibilities – this will be made available to students and parents;
2. Performance management will be effective with success criteria clear and adhered to at all levels;

3. Develop an ethos of inclusivity which does not tolerate workplace bullying;
4. Encourage teamwork at middle leader level through the development of collaborative working practices;
5. Encourage parental participation by ensuring that interpreters are available and that parents' meetings can take place off-site.

Key Proposition 3: The Academy will become THE Academy of choice within the city for both parents and staff as we offer a personalised learning experience for all, which is rich and diverse.

1. Ensuring there is an effective target-setting process in place;
2. Using tracking data to set children targets that they know and understand and which are shared with parents;
3. Ensuring middle leaders are rigorous in checking standards of work across the Academy.

The curriculum will be relevant and will meet the needs of all of the students.

SUMMARY of KEY PROPOSITIONS

<p>Key Proposition 1: Ours will be an outstanding learning community where there is an ethos based on the highest of expectations for everyone and where everyone feels safe and able to</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> i. Develop a simple and manageable Behaviour Policy; ii. Ensure that all stakeholders are aware of the policy & expectations for the students; iii. Introduce restorative practices so that all staff feel able to effectively use them; iv. Develop close and effective partnerships with parents and carers; v. Ensure that SEAL is an integral part of all that we do.
-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

fulfil their learning potential.	
<p>Key Proposition 2: We will foster a culture of collaboration that recognises the unique roles and responsibilities of everyone (staff, students, parents and the community) and is based on mutual respect and trust; inclusivity and honest communication; and supports individual growth. Internal politics will not influence our development.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Middle leaders will be clear on their roles and responsibilities; ii. This will be made available to students and parents; iii. Performance management will be effective with clear success criteria; iv. Develop an ethos of inclusivity which does not tolerate workplace bullying; v. Encourage teamwork at middle leader level; vi. Develop collaborative working practices; vii. Encourage parental participation by ensuring that interpreters are available/ parents' meetings take place off-site
<p>Key Proposition 3: The Academy will become THE Academy of choice within the city for both parents and staff as we offer a personalised learning experience for all, which is rich and diverse.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Ensuring there is an effective target-setting process in place; ii. Using tracking data to set children targets that they know and understand and which are shared with parents; iii. Ensuring middle leaders are rigorous in checking standards of work across the Academy; iv. The curriculum will be relevant and will meet the needs of all of the students.

Key Proposition 1: Ours will be an outstanding learning community where there is an ethos based on the highest of expectations for everyone and where everyone feels safe and able to fulfil their learning potential.

<p>In order to achieve this we will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Develop a simple and manageable Behaviour Policy;➤ Ensure that all stakeholders are aware of the policy & expectations for the students;➤ Introduce restorative practices so that all staff feel able to effectively use them;➤ Develop close and effective partnerships with parents and carers;➤ Ensure that SEAL is an integral part of all that we do.	<p>This means that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">1.1 the standard of behavior throughout the Academy will never be less than satisfactory and will show steady continuous improvement over the life of this action plan1.2 tracking pupil behavior will be linked to the performance management system within the Academy1.3 governors will have good knowledge and understanding of the tracking procedures and will hold the Academy to account for its performance1.4 a common proforma will be adopted and used in each key stage so that behaviour management is consistent and enables teachers to deliver quality lessons1.5 communication systems will be developed to ensure that all parents/carers are aware of the expectations - we will ensure that we involve parents at every stage of their child's education
------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

	<p>1.6 restorative practice will be used by everyone</p> <p>1.7 SEAL is written into SOWs and not just to be used by pastoral staff</p>
--	---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Proposition Detail:

Ref.	Target(s)	Action	Who	Time	Resources /Costs	Success Criteria	Monitoring	Evaluation (Impact)
1.1	Standard of behaviour throughout the Academy will never be less than satisfactory and will show steady continuous improvement over the life of this action plan	<p>a. Additional support will be provided for those children who are identified as struggling.</p> <p>Through improved tracking of behaviour the Academy will set challenging but achievable targets.</p>	YLL		None	The outcome targets identified above are - at least - met.	<p>Termly:</p> <p>Relevant YLL to: Review progress towards the outcome targets for each year group with the HT.</p>	<p>Termly:</p> <p>Scrutinise the tracking data to evaluate the quality of the data collected and what is being done with it.</p> <p>Report to GB committee at next meeting.</p> <p>If it looks as if targets will not be met, what action is being taken to improve the situation?</p>

1.2	Tracking pupil behaviour will be linked to the performance management system within the Academy	A rigorous programme of monitoring the quality of behaviour and a process of self-evaluation will be established. Training will be provided where identified.	HT	S Apr '04 R Termly E Dec '05 And then ongoing	£3000 for training costs.	By July 2011 all behaviour is satisfactory with at least 50% good or better. Judgements made using Ofsted criteria.	Termly: Close monitoring of the quality of behaviour action taken quickly where the quality is not being met.	Dec '0x & July '0x: HT to: check lesson observation reports to determine whether the quality of behaviour is improving. make a judgement on the impact of performance management. report to the GB.
-----	-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	----	--------------------------------------------------------	---------------------------	---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Ref.	Target(s)	Action	Lead Person	Start/Rev/End	Resources/Costs	Success Criteria	Monitoring	Evaluation (Impact)
1.3	Governors will have good knowledge and understanding of the tracking procedures and will hold the Academy to account for its performance	Pupil progress will be discussed each term by the full governing body. There will be a standing agenda item to discuss the issues to ensure all governors have sound knowledge and understanding of the process.	Chair of RC		N/A	All Governors have sound understanding of the tracking process. There is evidence through scrutiny of the governing body minutes that challenging and appropriate questions are being asked in order to hold the Academy to account.	Termly: Chair of GB ensures the GB receives a report from the Chair of the RC and the issues raised are fully discussed.	Jul 0x: HT reports to GB on what percentages of children reached their respective targets in each class.

1.4	A common proforma will be adopted and used in each key stage so that behaviour management is consistent and enables teachers to deliver quality lessons.	Following staff discussions, the DH will ensure an agreement is reached whereby a standard planning proforma will be used at each key stage.	DH	S 01/11 R Half termly E 07/12	£200 release time for the DH to develop the proforma.	All staff use the planning proforma from Jan 2011. Planning meets success criteria in 1.6.	Sep '0x and half-termly thereafter: DH monitors planning, ensures all staff are using the proforma and judging the quality of what is seen. Report to HT	Termly: HT provides report to GB on the quality and consistency of planning and what impact this is having on pupil progress.
-----	----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	----	-------------------------------------	----------------------------------------------------------	--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------