
APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY: USING PERSONAL NARRATIVES FOR INITIATING SCHOOL REFORM

In January 1993, the authors of this article, all instructors at LaSalle University in Philadelphia, began an ethnographic study of school cultures in three urban Catholic high schools. The project was inspired largely by the research of Bryk, Lee, and Holland (1993) who, in *Catholic Schools and the Common Good*, observed that specific components of the Catholic high school curricula, community, and administration have been especially effective in educating students from minority and disadvantaged backgrounds.

We selected three Catholic high schools in Philadelphia--the coeducational Cardinal Dougherty High School, Little Flower Catholic High School for Girls, and Northeast Catholic High School for Boys--that have had marked success in addressing the needs of minority and disadvantaged students. We then sought to identify aspects of each school's culture that contributed to its effectiveness, especially focusing on those elements identified as potentially important in the research by Bryk, Lee, and Holland (1993). In approaching each school culture, we used "*appreciative inquiry*" (AI)--an ethnographic method that uses interviews with various members of the school community, including staff, students, administrators, parents, and alumni.

Because the *appreciative inquiry* process is not a research method designed specifically to compare and contrast results from different schools, we report here on the application of the process within just one school, Cardinal Dougherty High School. We focus on Cardinal Dougherty because, among the three schools studied, it best represents the typical urban high school: it has a largely unionized faculty (39 lay faculty--23 men and 16 women) in addition to 12 nonunion religious, and it has a growing, coeducational student body (520 boys; 525 girls) that is socioeconomically, racially, and religiously diverse (9 percent Asian, 24 percent black, 15 percent Hispanic, 52 percent white; 80 percent of the students are Roman Catholic and 20 percent non-Catholic).

We describe here the *appreciative inquiry* process, explain how it was used with the Cardinal Dougherty High School community, review selected results of the Cardinal Dougherty *inquiry*, and discuss how the results can influence school reform. It is important to stress that *appreciative inquiry* can be used to guide school reform within any school community--public or private, from the elementary through the secondary level.

Appreciative Inquiry (AI): Background and Process

Developed at Case Western Reserve University in the late 1980s by David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva (1987), *appreciative inquiry* (AI) is an ethnographic method for examining the life of an organization. It has been used by several corporations and

nonprofit organizations, including Amnesty International, Deloitte and Touche, and Greenpeace, and governmental agencies such as the South African government under Nelson Mandela. AI had, however, never been used with schools until we conducted our study. It involves as many members of the school community as possible in a systematic *inquiry* into what is most enriching and life giving about that community. Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) contend that an organization frequently spends a disproportionate amount of time and resources addressing discrete problems and not enough time identifying and enhancing what the organization does best. They conclude that when various stakeholders begin an assessment of their organization by first appreciating what the organization does best, they are better prepared to address any negative dimensions or problems that may appear later in the process.

We believed that this method would be especially effective in assessing the positive dimensions of a school's culture, while simultaneously providing, at the end of the process, quantitative data that could help administrators and teachers to reform elements of the school program.

Constructing a Questionnaire

At the beginning of our study, we taught a group of administrators, teachers, students, parents, and alumni the AI process. Each of those persons then conducted between six and eight interviews with members of the school community. The interview protocol had two sections. The first included generic questions such as the following: "What are your memories of your school when it was at its best? In particular, what teachers, classes, activities, or events surface most vividly in your mind as representing those times when your school was at its best?" "What is your school doing now when it is at its best?" "What is it about this school that makes these experiences possible?" The second section consisted of more focused questions selected by the interviewers.

During the interviews, as each respondent recalled positive images of the school's success, the interviewer, by using focused follow-up questions, clarified the respondent's memories and kept them framed around specific classes, events, teachers, and so forth. In part two of the interview, the interviewer probed the effectiveness of particular dimensions of the school program, such as block scheduling, coeducation, and faculty morale.

The interviewers used written notes and tape recorders to capture the positive images and stories. We then synthesized and transcribed all of the ethnographic data into several hard-copy texts, which we distributed to selected interviewers at the school. Shortly afterward, we held meetings with those interviewers at LaSalle University, where the data were analyzed. There we guided the interviewers, who worked in groups, as they identified recurrent themes and observations in the interviews. The themes were condensed into "propositions," a process that was perhaps the most challenging component of the project. For instance, the Cardinal Dougherty High School community generated forty-seven interviews, yielding fifty-six pages of text. The propositions included the following:

- Cardinal Dougherty provides opportunities for students to be exposed to all types of people, cultures, and ethnic groups.
- Teachers freely give their time to parents by responding to questions and concerns.
- Teachers go beyond rote learning to help students think for themselves.
- Boys and girls equally share leadership responsibilities in school activities.
- Teachers help students in all tracks to perform at their best.
- Intensive scheduling promotes a significant, measurable increase in academic achievement.
- The fifty-seven propositions were then transposed into a questionnaire that was given to all members of the school community. Each respondent to the questionnaire was asked to rate each proposition on two scales, one "ideal" and one "real." The highest score on the ideal scale was 7 (It would be ideal if this were always true about Cardinal Dougherty), and the lowest score on the ideal scale was 1 (It would be ideal if this were never true about Cardinal Dougherty). Similarly, the highest score on the real scale was 7 (This item describes something that is always true about Cardinal Dougherty), and the lowest score was 1 (This item describes something that is never true about Cardinal Dougherty). Ratings between 7 and 1 reflected gradations of the assessment by using qualifiers such as "seldom," "sometimes," "often," and so forth. Thus, the "ideal" ratings measured respondents' views of what should be, whereas the "real" ratings measured respondents' views of what is.

On the questionnaire, propositions were not numbered, and those that dealt with similar topics (e.g., discipline, tracking) were separated, thus minimizing the probability that respondents would perceive them as a single category and rank each item within the category the same.

In addition to ranking each proposition on the "ideal scale" and the "real scale," respondents were asked to provide personal information. All students were asked to indicate their gender, race or ethnicity, year in school, English class track level, participation in extracurricular activities, and plans after graduation. All teachers were asked to indicate their gender, race or ethnicity, total years of teaching experience, and years teaching at Cardinal Dougherty. With this information we were able to examine whether teacher or student characteristics were associated with the ratings they provided.

Students at Cardinal Dougherty responded to the questionnaire in their English classes, which were extended so that the students could address the propositions thoughtfully and teachers could answer any student questions regarding the propositions. Faculty and administrators responded to the questionnaire during a staff meeting. Although the primary focus was on faculty, students, and administrators, a few randomly selected parents and alumni were also asked to rank the propositions at home. We then collated

the data and discarded the questionnaires of respondents whose responses suggested a high degree of insincerity (e.g., all 1s or 7s).

Results: Analysis of Selected Data from Cardinal Dougherty High School

The mean response to the "real" items (across all items and respondents) was 4.97 (SD = 1.15). That is, on average, respondents rated the propositions as being "often" true, thereby indicating a relatively favorable opinion of the school's curriculum, instruction, administration, and sense of community. For students, the mean rating across all "real" items was 4.95 (SD = 1.17); for teachers it was 5.39 (SD = .64). In analyzing the data, we classified the propositions into thematic clusters: tracking, multiculturalism, intensive scheduling, creativity and individuality, discipline, and faculty-administration relations. We used those clusters for two reasons: Doing so made the analysis more statistically manageable (we dealt with six thematic clusters rather than fifty-seven individual items or propositions), and it reduced measurement error. That is, the reliability of a composite score (such as the average response to several items dealing with discipline) is higher than the reliability of any single rating (e.g., for a single item dealing with discipline).

It is not within the scope of this discussion to provide a full analysis of each of the fifty-seven items or even of the six thematic clusters. Rather, we present a few results that illustrate how such data can be used to identify areas of strength within the school program that teachers and administrators may refine and build on, as well as areas of weakness that may warrant reform.

One basic approach for analyzing the data is to compare differences in responses by various stakeholders on the "real" scale. For instance, sophomores provided higher (i.e., more favorable) ratings for "real" items dealing with intensive scheduling, as well as for "real" items dealing with creativity and individuality. Does this indicate that teachers of sophomores are using more effective student-centered instruction within the intensive scheduling model to foster creativity and individuality? If so, what are those teaching strategies? If not, what else might account for the high scores? Similarly, female teachers provided higher (i.e., more favorable) ratings for "real" items dealing with individuality and creativity than did male teachers. Are female teachers using different methods of instruction or more creative modes of evaluation, such as portfolios or rubrics derived from multiple intelligence theory? If not, what might account for these differences in ratings? It is also significant that creativity and individuality items were rated lower than other areas by both students and teachers, again suggesting that teachers may want (and need) to learn new ways to help students move beyond rote learning by encouraging them to experiment and openly express their ideas and beliefs.

Little difference was found between women and men students in their "real" ratings concerning discipline, intensive scheduling, multiculturalism, and creativity and individuality. Yet, the women tended to rate tracking items higher than did the men, suggesting perhaps that males do not perceive effective teaching practices as distributed equally throughout all tracks. Why might this be the case? In a similar context, upper-track students rated tracking items higher on the "real" scale than did lower-track

students, which supports much of the current research on the negative effects of tracking on lower-tracked students (Oakes 1985).

In regard to multiculturalism, students in upper tracks gave higher "real" ratings to items in that category than did students in lower tracks. That result might have been somewhat anticipated because greater concentrations of minority students appear in lower-track classes. However, while African American students rated items in this category higher ($m = 5.31$) than did white students ($m = 5.27$), Latino students rated these items lower than did all ethnic groups, including Asians. Although the Latino mean was not dramatically low (5.04), it may suggest that the school community should rethink its strategies for addressing more directly the cultural needs of Latino students.

Besides analyzing and juxtaposing the ratings for "real" items by different stakeholders, we found equally intriguing the analysis of real versus ideal scores, because differences between these rankings suggest gaps between what is and what should be. Many of those gaps were so small as not to warrant attention, whereas others were striking. For example, with the proposition "The dress code at Cardinal Dougherty fosters a sense of pride and confidence in students," faculty rated the ideal as 6.24, while students rated it 5.22, indicating that faculty have a stronger belief in the affective benefits of the dress code. Curiously, though, faculty rated the real as 3.93 (a 2.31 difference from their ideal), while students rated the real as 4.29 (a .97 difference from their ideal). Thus, although students apparently do not value the dress code as an ideal, they evaluate it as being more effective than do the faculty in actually "fostering a sense of pride and confidence."

Sometimes the absence of a difference between groups is noteworthy. For example, there were no differences in the ratings provided by lay faculty and by religious faculty. In contrast, how long someone had taught at the school affected their opinions about some areas but not others. For example, the number of years that teachers had worked at the school was not related to their opinions about discipline or multiculturalism, but those who had been teaching at the school for many years had less-favorable opinions than other teachers about intensive scheduling. That suggests that teachers with longer organizational tenure may be more skeptical than others concerning changes in instructional approaches or curricula and that additional efforts may be needed to gain the endorsement of those teachers for such initiatives.

It was also interesting that students with family members who had attended the school (more than half the students) did not provide different ratings than other students, thereby indicating that students' opinions about the school are not strongly influenced by the opinions of family members who have also experienced the school and its culture. On the other hand, participating in extracurricular activities (about half the students do so) was strongly related to students' opinions. In every area (multiculturalism, intensive scheduling, discipline, tracking, and creativity and individuality), students who took part in extracurricular activities had more favorable opinions (i.e., higher "real" ratings) than other students. Although the direction of causality is not clear here (Do favorable opinions about the school lead students to participate in extracurricular activities, or does participation in extracurricular activities create more favorable impressions of the

school?), this finding suggests that additional efforts to engage students in activities outside the classroom may play an important role in shaping students' opinions about many aspects of school life.

Students' goals after graduation were also related to their opinions about the school. Specifically, students who planned on attending a four-year college (about three-fourths of all students) had more favorable views concerning discipline, multiculturalism, intensive scheduling, and tracking than did students who planned to pursue other education (e.g., a two-year degree) or full-time employment. A skeptic might say that that finding merely indicates that "better" students plan to attend a four-year college and also like the school more than other students. But at another level, the finding points to the importance of raising the aspirations of other students and creating interventions that more fully engage them in the life of the school.

Conclusions and Implications

The appearance of *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education 1983) prompted more than thirty formal examinations of public education by various private foundations as well as by state and federal agencies (Pulliam and Van Patten 1995). A review of several of those documents reveals that macro-level reforms typically address issues somewhat removed from direct instruction in specific learning contexts, such as national recommendations for improving teacher training (e.g., The Holmes Group 1984) or social and political strategies for developing school choice programs (e.g., Goals 2000: Educate America Act 1994). In contrast, micro-level reforms result in state or local recommendations (e.g., Children Achieving: Action Design Plan 1997) that focus on the instructional and curricular needs of specific regions, school districts, or schools.

The *appreciative inquiry* process is best understood as a strategy for initiating micro-level reform within a single school, reform that is both affective and analytical. The process reconnects teachers and administrators to their passion for teaching and to their sense of mission; for students the process enhances school pride and fosters recognition of the bonds that students have with peers and teachers alike. Moreover, AI's approach counteracts exclusive preoccupation with problems that all too often de-energize teachers, staff, and sometimes administrators themselves. In short, AI provides input about "what we are doing well" and "what we may want to do more of" as opposed to "what we are doing wrong."

However, AI is more than a program for generating positive feeling. The AI questionnaire contains critical information about the values and implicit judgments of hundreds of stakeholders; that information suggests areas where latent energy for change may exist. Once teachers and administrators recognize those areas, they are better prepared to analyze the results of the questionnaire closely and to identify gaps between where teachers, administrators, and students are and where they would like to be. In effect, that analytical phase of the AI provides a "site-based compass" for reforming specific, micro-level components of the educational program, while preserving the "sense

of community membership" that is frequently threatened by the reform process itself (Meier 1995).

Finally, AI can provide deeper understanding and appreciation of the school's mission and goals. By focusing everyone's attention on what is best about the school, the AI process often blends in with, and nourishes, the sense of possibility embedded in the school's mission. By involving so many of the school's stakeholders, AI also reinforces the likelihood that the school's mission will be embraced by an increasingly broad constituency.

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