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School Leadership and Appreciative Inquiry in Culture of Care

Anthony Jones

University of South Florida, anthony.jones@sdhc.k12.fl.us

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School Leadership and Appreciative Inquiry in a Culture of Care

by

Anthony Jones

A graduate project report submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Education Specialist
Department of Leadership, Counseling, Adult, Career and Higher Education
College of Education
University of South Florida

Major Professor: Judith A. Ponticell, Ph.D.

Co-Major Professor: John Mann, Ed.D.

Vonzell Agosto, Ph.D.

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ABSTRACT

This capstone project was part of a group project completed by five school and district administrators in Hillsborough County, Florida. The project began because of our passion for teachers who are able to establish a culture of care in their classrooms that support students academically but transform their learning through experiences that enable them to be more highly engaged and productive students, regardless of ethnicity, socioeconomic status, perceived academic abilities, and backgrounds.

My focus in this group project was an exploration of how a middle magnet school became more diverse while increasing student achievement during the conversion to a ‘reverse magnet’ and subsequent authorization as an International Baccalaureate Middle Years Program. It explores the challenges in building a positive and equitable learning environment.

Selected literature was reviewed that concentrated on traditional schools, magnet schools, ‘reverse’ magnet schools, equity, local transportation, magnet transportation, International Baccalaureate-Middle Years Program, Appreciative Inquiry, and Appreciative Organization.

Key findings in my area of focus included increases in student diversity and achievement, identification of gaps in students’ affective experiences in the school, importance of shared narratives to build community and address implicit biases, and the role of the principal in shifting culture.

SECTION 1. INTRODUCTION

This final project report was completed as part of a group project examining the concept of a ‘culture of care’. Turnaround schools are plagued by cycles of poor academic achievement and high referral and discipline rates. Barriers to success can include high levels of poverty, teacher apathy, low teacher retention, poor student achievement, and weak leadership. These barriers can be overcome and must be overcome if we are to truly turn schools around.

Our group believes that students at turnaround schools need the best teachers - teachers who care about them, believe in them, and will not give up on them. They need teachers who will understand where they are coming from and differentiate their learning experiences to meet their needs. They need teachers who understand that the culture and climate in their classrooms is just as important as the academic lessons being taught. We believe these “superstar” teachers exist—teachers who have high levels of student achievement and whose classrooms are warm, inviting communities for learning.

We believe these teachers are able to establish a culture of care in their classrooms that support students academically but transform their learning through experiences that enable them to be more highly engaged and productive students, regardless of students’ ethnicity, socioeconomic status, perceived academic abilities, and backgrounds.

Personal focus. I am principal of a middle magnet school which serves a predominantly higher socio-economic group of families in Hillsborough County, Florida. The school is the first reverse magnet school and an International Baccalaureate Middle Years Program. Magnet schools have the expressed mission to create diverse and positive learning environments by attracting

students using a themed curriculum leading to an increase in student achievement (see <http://www.magnet.edu>). Historically, this has occurred by taking students from mostly white suburban areas into an inner city school located in a high minority neighborhood. A “reverse” magnet does the opposite.

Appreciative Inquiry is a process used by organizational leaders to challenge the traditional notions of problem solving, by focusing on what an organization does well as opposed to examining how they are operating within a deficit model. Appreciative leaders ask stakeholders three fundamental questions: What are our strengths? What does the ideal situation look like in our minds? How do we leverage our strengths to make the ideal a reality?

The appreciative approach allows students, faculty, staff, parents, and community members to engage in the betterment of their schools from a position of strength. It gives life, purpose, and positivity to discussions around making schools better. Schools that focus on their assets to make their dreams come true are better prepared to create a culture of care in each classroom.

The focus of my component in this group project centered around the following questions: What are the advantages of a themed and diverse learning environment in the suburbs for students from high minority, low income communities? In what ways might these advantages outweigh the potential equity obstacles for students who must travel from far away to make a magnet school education a reality? How might an appreciative inquiry approach support the school communities to embrace the potential of a reverse magnet school to improve success for all students?

School District Context

Hillsborough County Public Schools (HCPS) currently serves over 210,000 students, with over 15,000 certified teachers and 25,000 full-time staff. HCPS is the eighth-largest school district in the country with over 250 schools. The enrollment by race/ethnicity is approximately 40%

white, 29% Hispanic, 21% Black, and 3% Asian. Fifty-seven percent of all students are on free and reduced-priced lunch. Roughly 12% of all students are English Language Learners (ELL), and the district graduation rate for 2015 was 76% with over 14,000 students graduating.

Social service in the community. Hillsborough County, Florida has comprehensive social services. The Social Services Department “provides comprehensive case management programs as well as stabilization services to low-income residents of Hillsborough County. The Social Services Department's mission is to improve the quality of life of Hillsborough County's most vulnerable citizens by promoting self-sufficiency through interactive service delivery and strategic partnerships” (see <http://www.hillsboroughcounty.org/index.aspx?nid=281>).

To better guide parents of HCPS students to community support services, Hillsborough County Schools have an entire Student Services Department which includes: Attendance, Exceptional Student Education (Special Education), Guidance Services, Health Services, Multi-Tiered System of Supports, Non-Traditional Programs K-12, Professional Development, Psychological Services, and Social Work Services.

School choice. HCPS School Choice provides parents and legal guardians with options such as Magnet schools, Career & Technical Education programs, School Choice (parents may choose from a list of schools with space available), Out of County options, and options for military families. School Choice has become increasingly popular in HCPS with several options available:

- *Charter schools* – independent public schools operated by a non-profit organization.

According to a report printed February 29, 2016 by the HCPS Charter Office, 16,620 students are currently enrolled in Charter schools.

- *Home education* – defined by Florida Statute 1003.01 as "sequentially progressive instruction of a student directed by his or her parent in order to satisfy the attendance requirements of SS.1002.41, 1003.01 (4), and 1003.21 (1)."
- *John M. McKay Scholarship* – additional Choice options to students with an Individual Educational Plan (IEP) or a 504 Plan.
- *Partnership schools* – schools that have developed an innovative partnership between the public and private sector. Proof of employment in the partnership area is a requirement.
- *Hillsborough Virtual School (HVS)* – a school choice option for students entering grades K-12. HVS students are served by Highly Qualified Hillsborough County teachers for each class online.

Turnaround Schools

Our group's sense of the need for a *culture of care* in our schools and classrooms came from our observations of a historical and prevailing misconception in our society that many of our most poverty stricken and underperforming students cannot learn. This mentality of inability pervades our educational world and includes a subversive belief which asserts that it is okay to allow students of color and low socio-economic status to fail. It was our group's profound sense of purpose that drove our discussion to delve deeper into the context of how care, compassion, and commitment to our students might truly thwart the ills that society has constructed and allow *all* students, in *all* schools to succeed.

We derived this concept of a *culture of care* from a variety of combined resources. Utilizing the newly formulated "HCPS Octagon" that represents the eight essential tenets of a culturally positive organization, as well as embracing the Key Performance Indicators (KPI's) that our district leaders outlined as priorities, our team formulated the notion that care pervaded and

necessitated all these initiatives. Furthermore, our perspective was informed by an extensive exposure to a variety of educational reform literature that discussed the “ethic of care” and “building relationships,” along with “culturally relevant pedagogy” (Gorski, 2013; Guajardo & Guajardo with Casaperalta, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 1992, 1995). In addition, “appreciative organizing in education” (Barrett & Fry, 2008; Burrello, Beitz, & Mann, 2015; Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2008) helped us to conceptualize the need for defining, understating, and realizing that a *culture of care* in our schools and with our teachers, administrators, and most importantly students, is necessary.

The notion of “culturally appropriate” (Au & Jordan, 1981, p. 139) pedagogy began over 35 years ago and suggested that teachers in a Hawaiian school incorporate aspects of students’ cultural backgrounds into their reading instruction (Ladson-Billings, 1992, 1995). However, today’s context magnifies the importance of providing culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1992, 1995) instruction and curriculum for our students of other backgrounds, creating a sense of purpose for our black and brown children and allowing them to be reflected in the body of work that is read and studied in schools. By truly allowing our traditionally underrepresented ethnic groups the opportunity to study literature and engage in resources that mirror their population in schools, we can emphasize just how untrue the idea is that Black people don’t value education (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Moreover, as HCPS administrators and researchers, we are committed to overcoming the institutional limitations that disproportionately affect our low income students. Despite the literature that suggests schools cannot overcome the societal barriers that students bring with them every day (Berliner & Glass, 2014), we were convinced that there are teachers who are capable of excellent teaching for all struggling students (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

With our already defined understanding of the importance of “organizational culture” through both the literature and HCPS Octagon model, focusing on the shared “beliefs, values, artifacts, and underlying assumptions of groups of people” (Schein, 1999), the logical extension was to examine connections between a strong climate and culture in the classrooms and the positive impact on students’ performance.

Middle School Context

The school is an authorized Middle Years Program of the International Baccalaureate Organization located in northwest Hillsborough County in Odessa, Florida. The student enrollment is approximately 950 students from neighborhoods all over the northwest area of the county. The school is best described as a “reverse magnet.” The school has no attendance boundary. All families wanting to send their student to the school must apply through the district choice office. A lottery takes place several times in the spring of each year to decide which students get an offer to attend the school. Approximately 1,000 families make application for 340 6th grade seats each spring.

All magnet schools are designed around a themed curriculum being implemented for students of diverse backgrounds. In the Hillsborough County School District, virtually all magnet schools are located in historically high minority areas with a charge to recruit students from more affluent and non-minority areas. The school is the reverse. It is located in a majority white, affluent area, and the magnet charge is to recruit students from more minority areas to attend the school which offers the International Baccalaureate curriculum.

Students come to the school by three modes of transportation: car, local bus, or magnet bus. There is bus service made available by the district for students living in the historical attendance area for the school before it was converted to magnet. These students live between two

and five miles from the school. Most car riders either live within two or beyond the five mile radius of local bus transportation. Approximately 75% of the students come to school by car or local bus transportation. The other 25% take magnet transportation to the school. This involves a student taking a bus from the neighborhood to a transfer ramp where they catch a direct bus. Many students who use magnet transportation live closer to the school than they do the ramp, but the magnet bus is their only option for getting to school. Most of the students who utilize magnet transportation come from the high minority areas critical to the effort to make the school a diverse learning environment. The time on the bus for students living the farthest distance can be as high as 1 hour and 30 minutes one way.

Once students arrive at the school, they are all engaged in the themed curriculum of the International Baccalaureate Middle Years Program. The school started on a three-year journey to be authorized as an IB school in August of 2011. The International Baccalaureate Organization website (<http://www.ibo.org>) indicates that an IB education is a holistic approach focusing on the education of the whole child. The IB Learner Profile purposes students to make a difference in their world through their learning by living out the characteristics of being caring, principled, open-minded, communicators, balanced, risk-takers, knowledgeable, thinkers, reflective, and inquirers. Learning in an IB school is aimed at building international-mindedness and interdisciplinary understanding.

The vision statement at the school states the goal of “empowering students to take what they have learned and use it to make the world a better place”. Is it possible for a group of middle school students from so many different places and different backgrounds to exemplify the IB Learner Profile in a forced learning community?

SECTION 2. PERSPECTIVES FROM SELECTED LITERATURE

Schools are constantly being told what they are doing wrong. In addition, virtually everyone has a school experience they feel makes them an expert on how to make schools better. This conundrum is greater when talking about schools marked by high poverty and low achievement. If this culture of “less” or “unable” settles into a school and/or school community, it can become systemic. It can drive morale, beliefs, and ultimately outcomes for students.

Schools have long attempted to change through traditional problem solving which asks an organization to identify a problem and then take steps to solve the problem. It starts from a deficit based mindset. Appreciative Inquiry (AI) provides an alternative process to traditional problem solving. Appreciative Inquiry starts with identifying what works in an organization. It is a strengths based approach. The possibilities are endless if the conversation about how to improve schools, namely high poverty and low achieving schools, can reframe their reform work around what they do well and what is possible.

Methods used to conduct the review. This review of selected literature was conducted over six articles which address the use of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) in schools. The date range for the literature search was between 2010 and the present. The University of South Florida Libraries general keyword, title, and abstract searches were used to search a variety of databases including: Academic Search Premier, EBSCO, ERIC, Google Scholar, JSTOR, SAGE, and Web of Science. Searches included the following keywords: traditional school, magnet school, “reverse” magnet school, equity, local transportation, magnet transportation, International Baccalaureate-Middle Years Program, Appreciative Inquiry, Appreciative Organization.

Sources within selected texts were cross-referenced, resulting in additional searches by author or source.

Overview of Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative Inquiry is based on a five step process (see Figure 1) purposed to make the ideal working environment a reality in any organization. The process begins with *defining* a focus. It requires the framing of an issue related to an organization in an aspirational manner. The next

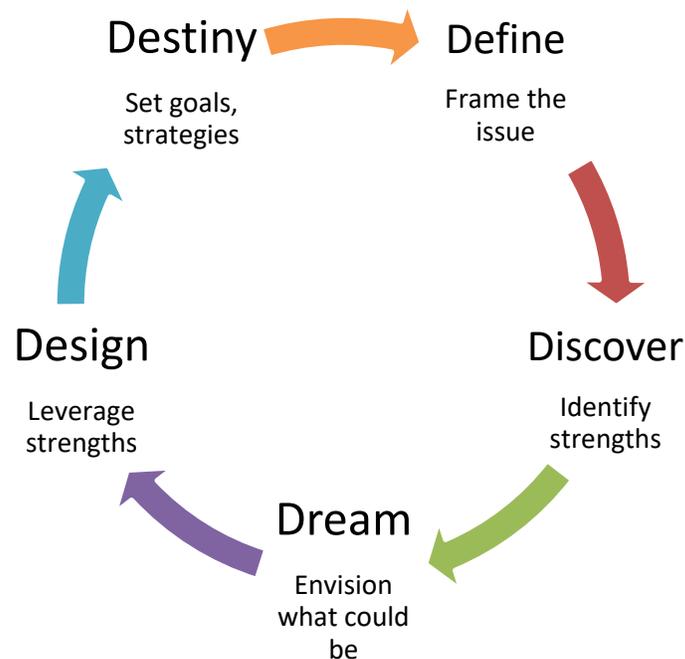


Figure 1. Steps in the appreciative inquiry process.

step is to *discover* the strengths of the organization as it pertains to the defining focus. It is what the organization does well. The discovery phase is followed by *dreaming*. It is where an organization frames the ideal environment as it pertains to the defining focus. This phase sets the bar above the status quo and forces stakeholders to focus on what is possible. The next phase is *design* where stakeholders take their strengths and begin to leverage those to making the ideal a reality. It asks the question, how can we take what we are good at to begin making the ideal a

reality? The final step of Appreciative Inquiry is *destiny*. This step is where plans are drawn up as goals which can be measured and monitored as the organization works toward making the ideal environment a reality.

Appreciative Inquiry as a powerful tool for meaningful change in organizations has long been a way of work in the business world. It is relatively new in the world of education. Tschannen-Moran and Tschannen-Moran (2011) state:

Although AI has been used extensively around the globe over the past two decades in corporations, social service agencies, the United Nations, and the U.S. military (Evan & Mohr, p. 431), it has not made comparable inroads into the educational realm. As a consequence, the research base on AI in schools is slim and primarily involves qualitative case studies. Although the results reported are intriguing, there is a need to supplement these studies with longitudinal cases that include quantitative data. (p. 431)

The articles selected for this literature review also revealed more work done in international schools than in the United States (e.g., Norway, Lebanon). Some of the school districts, however, were in urban, historically low-achieving areas of the United States.

Student Participation and Teacher Regeneration

In a case study from a school district in Lebanon (Shuayb 2014), the author stated how stakeholders were happy to hear about the positive stories experienced by the other stakeholders. Listening to these stories filled participants with energy to think about the future and how their school could be even more successful. It is these stories of success that change the old conversations about what is not working and how to fix it. The conversation becomes generative. Students were also an active part of the process as co-planners in the work of the school. The Shuayb study revealed how students' reflections on AI showed that the majority of students

pointed out how positive questioning managed to focus their attention on what works in their schools and allowed them to feel more connected to what goes on in their school.

In another study by Martin and Cabrisse (2011) on the impact of AI on at-risk students, the students shared how their most effective learning experiences were associated with relevant learning activities. The study also revealed the generative nature of the conversation as students and teachers planned together in the process. The work together led to high levels of social capacity being built between teachers and students. The article went on to state, “The AI process encourages administrators and teachers in alternative high schools to rethink traditional pedagogical strategies and to incorporate new strategies that include more relevant applications” (p. 115).

The implications for schools in these two studies are clear. The Appreciative Inquiry process, when conducted with fidelity, raised the awareness of stakeholders to the school’s vision and mission, the stories of stakeholders gave new hope to the work of the school, and the ideas shared between teachers and students led to fresh and generative ideas which increased students’ engagement and challenged teachers to try new strategies.

Importance of Principal Engagement

The AI process is often challenged at first by a lack of trust between stakeholders. The principal must be a supportive and engaged member of the process. Teachers from the United States and Israel had strong feelings that leaders must engage in the process for it to be productive (Schechter, 2015). Evans, Thornton, and Usinger (2012) observed:

Appreciative Inquiry is a positive approach to solving organizational problems and is centered on the belief that inquiry into and discussions about organization strengths, successes, and values will be transformative; pride in the individual’s organization is an

untapped resource. As such, the principal needs special skills to engage, excite, and integrate communication into the change process. For many principals, effective use of appreciative inquiry will require special training. (p. 169)

Empowering stakeholders. In an action research study San Martin and Calabrese (2010) used the first two stages of an AI cycle – discovery and dream – to interview and hold group discussions with high school students. They found that students’ involvement in the AI cycle contributed to the “transformation of their learning environment in the alternative school they attended and influenced the pedagogical practices of their teachers” (p. 111). Students identified core values which students perceived as contributing to an environment in which they best learn: friendship, trust, respect, helping others, and “meaningful dialogue with teachers” (p. 116). It was also important for the principal to offer his “cooperation and respect to students” (p. 116).

Tschannen-Moran and Tschannen-Moran (2010) looked at teacher perceptions of the collegial leadership of their principal, “that is, the degree to which the principal was open to suggestions from the faculty and that these suggestions were put into action” (p. 12). Such leadership generates faculty trust in school administration. Another important dimension of trust identified was faculty and administrator trust in students and parents. When principals are reluctant to sit with students or parents as part of an AI process or when principals listen to ideas developed by students or parents but are reluctant to follow up, trust in leadership can fade.

It is important for school leaders to take a balanced approach to the AI process, engaging in that process and conducting the process in a safe environment without bias or resistance to others’ ideas. Recommendations from stakeholders need to be followed.

Conclusion

America's schools are in need of a new way of work. Our most struggling schools need to realize they have strengths. They need an intentional process designed to take what they do well and make their dreams a reality. They need to challenge the deficit mindset of problem solving – the advantage of Appreciative Inquiry. Schools need to allow the generative process of AI to happen naturally but intentionally. Various stakeholders (students, teachers, parents, administration) all need to be a part of the process. Stakeholders need to feel vested in the vision and mission of the school.

Stories of stakeholder success need to be told, learned from, and celebrated. Teachers need to open their classroom practice to new ways of work. Most importantly, school principals need to be engaged in the work. They need to strike a balance between making AI a priority and letting it be a 'bottom up' agent of change. By doing so, stakeholders at the school will feel empowered. The needed change will be their change. The change will be from the line of inquiry opened by the stakeholders themselves based on their strengths. If Appreciative Inquiry defines the reform process in schools, over time the narrative about schools in America, namely those schools with the highest needs, will be told as aspirational stories of success.

Insights from selected literature reviewed. Three insights into the potential of the Appreciative Inquiry process for change in U. S. schools are key. First, the Appreciative Inquiry process must become a staple of principal training in the United States. This includes Educational Leadership programs at universities as well as state mandated programs at the district level to prepare new administrators. In order to inform school reform, more research would need to be conducted at the university level around AI and schools must expand its practice. There needs to be a greater volume of case studies in number and length as noted earlier in the Tschannen-Moran

and Tschannen-Moran article cited earlier in this literature review. Second, in order to understand the benefits of AI in schools, sitting school administrators must be trained in the AI process. It must become the way of work in schools. The training should include both assistant principals and principals. The training should also include teachers, students, and parents since the fidelity of the process depends on all stakeholders, regardless of title or level, being part of the process. Finally, individual schools must be allowed to adjust their application of the process to meet their own needs. Overreach by central offices will cripple the process and reduce the generative effect of school level planning.

SECTION 3. PROJECT REPORT

Appreciative Inquiry and Organizing (AOE) is a theoretical approach (Barrett & Fry, 2008; Burrello, Beitz, & Mann, 2015; Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2008) that allows individuals to reject the deficit model and harness “students’ cultural strengths” into the learning environment and organizational design (Azano, 2014, p. 62).

Instead of teaching the “decontextualized stuff” (Theobald, 1997), education might instead attend to context and offer “place conscious instruction” (Azano, 2014, p. 62), given the “power of place” (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2015) to provide students with an opportunity to take ownership in their own learning. In addition to context is the concept of culture in teaching and learning, from *culturally relevant pedagogy* (Ladson-Billings, 2009) to *culturally responsive teaching* (Gay, 2010) or *funds of knowledge* (Moll & Gonzalez, 2004). All set the stage to identify assets and resources within our marginalized students, families, and communities, providing them hope, instead of assuming our struggling students are a burden and liability (Guajardo et al., 2008; Trueba, 1999; Wyatt, 2014) as in the traditional problem-solving, deficit model.

Appreciative Inquiry is based on the assumption that finding what works right in an organization helps it focus on what is important, effective, and successful. Focusing on this positive core helps an organization think about ways to sharpen its vision, leverage its energy, and take action for change. It is strengths-based rather than deficit thinking.

Project Purpose

Our purpose in the group project was not to replicate the successes of other districts or schools, but rather to uncover aspects and behaviors of a culture of care that support systems that

overcome performance and equity gaps. We did not expect to have a cure-all that would immediately address gaps in achievement. Rather, by combining the approach of focusing on teacher-driven, practitioner-based successes, along with theoretical researched-based knowledge, we felt we might gain insight into the “complex nature of education[al] limits” that Berliner and Glass (2015) refer to in “Trust But Verify” -- limits which often leave individuals dumbfounded by complexities that at times seem inherently counter-intuitive.

Individual Focus. The school opened as a traditional middle school in the fall of 1997. The school was built in response to population growth in the northwest area of Hillsborough County. It was part of the first major construction phase in the district in over decade. From its inception, The school has been a high achieving school. Enrollment swelled to over 1,200 students in the first years the school was opened. Over time, enrollment at the school began to decline. This can be attributed to several factors: (1) growth in the geographic region of northwest Hillsborough County continued through the early 2000s resulting in new schools being built, including several schools built in part to relieve the overcrowding. (2) a case of misbehavior at the school gained wide spread media coverage resulting in unwarranted judgments being made by the community. (3) the economic downturn in 2007 to 2008 led to a decline in overall student population in the area around the school with enrollment in 2010-2011 down to the low 600s.

The school district was awarded a Magnet Schools of America grant in 2010. The decision was made to “re-open” the school as a magnet school with the charge of being authorized as an IB World School. Each member of the instructional staff had to re-apply for their current position at the school. A new principal was hired. Approximately 60% of the teaching faculty was retained. The school “re-opened” as a middle magnet school in the fall of 2011. The students who were to be 7th and 8th graders starting in the spring of 2011 were allowed to stay at the school. The

incoming 6th grade class for the 2011-2012 school year came from many areas that were not historically served by the school but did not reflect the diversity goals of a magnet school. The incoming 6th grade class for the 2012-2013 school did reflect the desired diversity. It is from this class of students where a case study representing two types of students reveal the successes and challenges of students coming together from different places and backgrounds to create a diverse learning environment.

Increased Student Diversity and Achievement

The school became more diverse racially and socio-economically over the three year IB authorization process. There was also evidence of student learning gains over the same time period (see Table 1 below).

Table 1

Enrollment over First Four Years as a Magnet Middle School

	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014	2014-2015
Total Enrollment	717	785	869	947
Retention Rate	94%	96.9%	96.1%	96.7%
% Black Enrollment	6	9.5	12.2	13.3
% Non-White Enrollment	40	48	55	60
% Free/Reduced Lunch	27	32	38	43.4
Total FCAT Points	646	693	696	NA
% Making Gains in READING	68	71	74	NA
% Making Gains in MATH	73	79	79	NA

Gains were seen in overall school enrollment, black enrollment, and overall non-white enrollment. FCAT (Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test) gains in total points and percentage showed gains in reading. Learning gains in math held constant in the last two years. Florida transitioned to a new assessment during the 2014-2015 school year. Data were not available at the time of this report and will be hard to compare to previous FCAT data. The 2014-2015 school year saw gains in total, black, non-white, and free/reduced enrollment.

Students, teachers, and parents are given climate surveys each year by the school district. While diversity and achievement goals have shown increase over the past four years, school climate results from the 2014-2015 survey showed mixed results from stakeholders (Table 2).

Table 2

Spring 2015 Climate Survey Data in Key Areas of Academics and Culture

Respondent	Survey Item	% Response
Students	I enjoy coming to school.	36.2
Students	My teachers want me to do my best.	82.0
Students	My teachers care about me.	55.0
Students	Students at this school treat others with respect.	25.0
Students	I respect students even if they are different from me	95.0
Students	My teachers ask me what I think about school.	19.0
Parents	The school works w/ families to promote the health and well-being of students	74.5
Parents	The school provides enrichment opportunities	89.0
Parents	This school is meeting the academic needs of my student.	82.0
Parents	The school informs families about community resources	68.0

A strong majority of parents indicate the school provides a rich learning environment for students and meets their academic needs. A strong majority of students perceive that teachers want them to do their best. However, students did not perceive as strongly that their teachers cared about them or ask what they think about school. Only 36% of students indicate they enjoyed coming to school. Students' perceptions of student-student relationships showed that while students saw themselves as respecting others different from themselves, they perceived that in general students did not treat each other with respect at the school.

A Tale of Two Students

John and Dante (fictional students) represent two groups of students, those living close to the school (John) and those living farther away (Dante). At school, both Dante and John have seven 50-minute class periods with a 50-minute enrichment/lunch period. They have teachers who have made a choice to work at the school, who passed a magnet screening with the district, and who have been trained in International Baccalaureate pedagogy and themes. During the school day, both students have equal access to resources (e.g., guidance, nursing, psychological, and administrative services designed to meet their needs). Both are aware of the extracurricular opportunities afforded to students. Both have a desire to move on to a magnet high school and then on to college. Both know the academic expectations at the school are high. They know teachers will help them during lunch or after school. They both have been recognized in some way for academic success. Both know the school has an honor code. Dante and John know each other by name, but they do not know very much about one another.

The two boys also reflect some differences. John is a white male who lives in a two parent household four miles from the school. Both parents hold advanced degrees. His father is in management in a large firm in the Tampa area. His mother works from home and is very active

in the school and community. John is not on free or reduced lunch. His father drops him off on the way to work. John arrives thirty minutes before the bell rings. He eats breakfast some mornings. He starts his day with friends in the cafeteria and then transitions to the gym. His mother picks him up in the afternoon. At lunch, John is directed to sit with his first period class, most of whom either get dropped off by car or ride a local route bus to school.

Dante is a black male that lives twenty-five miles from the school. His mother has a strong desire to see her son be successful. She works in a blue collar job for a large organization in Tampa. The magnet bus is the only option for Dante to get to school. The first bus picks him up at 5:50 a.m. This bus has K-12 students from his neighborhood that will be attending a magnet school. He gets on a second bus at a district transfer station about 6:25 a.m. His second bus arrives around 7:25 a.m. giving Dante five minutes to eat breakfast and get to class. At the 2:55 p.m. dismissal, Dante will take the bus home via the transfer ramp and then to his neighborhood. On most days, Dante is home by 4:45 p.m. Some days it is much later. At lunch, Dante is directed to sit with his first period class of which most also ride the magnet bus.

While Dante for the most part enjoys coming to school, he does feel some level of disconnect. Dante spends more time in student affairs than most students. Sometimes he feels it is because of his race. Sometimes he says it is in response to being stressed out after a long bus ride or something happening on the long bus ride home. He references how most staff members at the school are not black. Dante also states how the school only seems to call his mom when things are going wrong. He feels the need to catch the bus each afternoon excludes him from many things at the school. He can't stay after school to connect with other students or teachers. He was very excited to have played football in his last semester at the school. He also enjoyed the 8th grade dance. He said it was one of the rare times the whole grade felt like one group. He also

notes that very few adults have ever asked why he feels the way he does and if those feelings are a source of frustration.

In summary, both students have a chance to thrive academically at the school. Both students have access to amazing resources on campus to include world class teachers. However, there is not equity of time available to utilize the resources. Dante is on a more limited time frame than John. More people at the school understand John than Dante. Also, the boys do not fully understand one another. There has been little to no intentional effort by the school to facilitate understanding. Staff treats the students with equality but often miss the chance to apply equity. Overall, both boys have enjoyed their experience at the school.

Shifting the Culture

The mission of Magnet Schools of America is “Providing leadership for high quality innovative instructional programs that promote choice, equity, diversity, and academic excellence for all students” (<http://www.magnet.edu/about/our-mission-and-beliefs>). The organization’s website also describes the five pillars of the magnet philosophy: Diversity, Innovative Curriculum and Professional Development, Academic Excellence, High Quality Instructional Systems, and Family and Community Partnerships.

A report on magnet schools from the U.S. Department of Education states, “The theory behind magnet schools as a desegregation tool is simple: Create a school so distinctive and appealing—so magnetic—that it will draw a diverse range of families from throughout the community eager to enroll their children even if it means having them bused to a different and, perhaps, distant neighborhood” (U.S. Department of Education, 2004, p. 1). On this measure the school experience was successful. Its magnet transition did result in the school becoming more diverse with an increase in black student enrollment from 6% to 13.3% and an increase in

non-white student enrollment from 40% to 60% over four years (Table 1). Academic excellence also increased with overall FCAT points increasing from 646 to 696 over three years, Reading gains increasing from 68% to 74%, and Math gains increasing from 73% to 79% (Table 1). However, busing to distant neighborhoods provides unique challenges in the reverse magnet model. It is not enough for a magnet school to increase diversity. The school needs to work in an appreciative manner to help sustain a strong culture over time. As the diversity pillar of Magnet Schools of America states:

Diversity is a cornerstone to offering students a global educational experience. Schools, through recruitment and lotteries, strive to have student populations that are reflective of the community. Culturally competent educational environments model empathy, respect, and working collaboratively with a variety of persons. (See What Are Magnet Schools – Pillars of Magnets at <http://magnet.edu/about/what-are-magnet-schools>)

The International Baccalaureate Middle Years Program provided a framework, not only for an attractive theme but also to build sustainable community. The mission statement of the International Baccalaureate is to “develop inquiring, knowledgeable and caring young people who help to create a better and more peaceful world through intercultural understanding and respect” with the goal to “encourage students across the world to become active, compassionate and lifelong learners who understand that other people, with their differences, can also be right” (see <https://www.ibo.org/about-the-ib/mission/>). This approach to learning is appealing to students, parents, and families in the recruiting process of a magnet school. It gives a framework for not only high academic achievement but also meaningful holistic education.

Appreciative Inquiry. The Appreciative Inquiry approach has come out of the business world and into education as a tool to build capacity for long term success by focusing on culture

and climate and asking the right questions (Barrett & Fry, 2008). The AI approach centers on shared decision making that is rooted in taking organizational assets and using them to make the collective dreams of all stakeholders in an organization a reality. In their work around appreciative schools, Burrello, Beitz, and Mann (2015) cite the work of Postman (1995) who contends that students, parents and teachers need shared narratives – a sense of personal identity, a sense of community life, a basis for moral conduct – that provide an inspired reason for schooling. For this to happen, there must be input from all stakeholders. Their dreams must be factored into creating learning environments.

The framework for magnet schools, the International Baccalaureate Middle Years Program, and Appreciative Inquiry give the school an opportunity to reframe its mission in a more aspirational and student-centered way.

Activities and discussions. With my leadership team, we designed activities to engage school and district leaders, teachers, and students in dialogue around implied biases and building positive school culture. One activity was around Creating a Sustainable Positive School Climate. The activity began with explaining to participants (students, teachers, and/or district leaders) that the goal of the conversation is to determine what the school will look like long after authorization or initial implementation of the reverse magnet model. We distributed a reading that focuses on the importance of an appreciative topic, one written in affirmative and aspirational language. Participants in groups worked on refining language of an appreciative topic. The next step was for the group to identify strengths they have observed in the school around the topic. Then the group outlines what the dream or ideal school climate would look like in the school. A narrative is created. The following questions guide the group's discussion: What happened to allow success? What part did you play in the success? What three wishes do you have to help the school

reach the level of desired success? This information is shared with the large group. The information is narrowed down to a manageable number of items. Members of the large group are asked to align themselves to the part of the “dream” most appeals to them. This alignment creates new groups that are asked to design actionable steps toward accomplishing the goal of making the dream reality. The groups then set measureable goals that help guide and pace the actionable steps. At the end of the session, you have aspirational, specific, and actionable goals around a common desire in the promotion of positive school culture.

Another activity involved training in the concept of Implicit Bias. The training begins with groups looking at different pictures of Santa Claus and Osama Bi Laden. The pictures only reveal certain parts of their faces and head gear. Participants are asked to give their thoughts based on what they think is seen in the picture. The basis for the training is that all people , even those with good intentions, have biases. The goal is to equip people to effectively deal with the biases. Next participants view slides of students from various races in various poses. They share out the stereotypes attributed to each picture. The share out will also reveal many different perspectives. This is followed by the many groups that have historically experienced the effects of bias. It also needs to be stated to the group that some stereotypes are based on facts, but it does not justify decision making based on the stereotype. The next activity is a ‘privilege walk’. Participants line up facing a proctor and are asked to take steps forward or back based on statements about their upbringing. This reveals the reality that not all professionals start from the same place. More often than not racial patterns will be evident. The activity ends with a practical discussion around ways to limit the impact of implied bias in our work with students.

Reflections

I was hired as the principal to lead the transition of the middle school to a magnet International Baccalaureate Middle Years Program in the spring of 2011. The authorization

process was to take three years and require three major areas of transformation on the campus: (1) the demographics of the school would need to become more diverse in order to fulfill the mission of magnet schools; (2) the staff, students, and community would need to be trained and immersed in IB pedagogy for us to demonstrate mastery by the time of the authorization visit, and the level of academic excellence expected by the school district and community would need to grow; and (3) the school would need to develop a culture of support, equity, and purpose beyond the authorization process.

Data presented in this case study serves as evidence that the school is more diverse now than when it served as a neighborhood traditional middle school. In order to reach this level of diversity, many students travel great distances and with great sacrifice. Retention rates show that students who start at the school stay at the school in overwhelmingly high numbers. The case study also showed there are many challenges presented in a reverse magnet school.

The students, staff, and community embraced the ideals of IB in a relatively short amount of time. There were some moments of angst at the very beginning as some students felt the school changed happened ‘to them’ as opposed to ‘for them’. Teachers quickly took advantage of the opportunities to be changed in a new way of teaching through IB. Students began to speak in terms of IB language and take on the challenge of using what they have learned to make community impact.

Goals in my first three years were around how we were going to be authorized as an IB school. As I reflect now, that was not totally the wrong path, but we needed more to build a new narrative about our school. After the 2014-2015 school year, our first after authorization, I realized that more emphasis should have been placed on overall school culture so as to sustain growth and focus after authorization, building community among students from different neighborhoods.

We will be an IB school for the next generation and maintain a strong school culture where students feel cared for, heard, and supported – this is key to long term success. Future plans focus more on building relationships between students of varying backgrounds at the school, developing mentoring programs for those who struggle both academically and behaviorally, and cultivating strong teacher-leadership that focuses on hearing various perspectives.

The mission of IB and the reason people enter the educational profession are the same; it is a desire to impact the whole child in mind, body, and spirit. It goes beyond academics, beyond just bringing diverse students together, and beyond a three year authorization process. It is building genuine community in a unique setting. It is my renewed focus as the leader of the school going forward. It speaks to why I became an educator. I want to make a life-long difference in the lives of children. Student achievement targets will change. The goal of reaching and ministering to children will not change. It is there that I want to channel my focus and passion. The learning environment at the school needs to be equitable for all students in an environment that helps make learning meaningful. The extra bonus will be the positive impact on student achievement.

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