

# **IMAGINE `MEADFIELD': APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY AS A PROCESS FOR LEADING SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT**

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## **Abstract**

This article examines an application of appreciative inquiry (AI), a contemporary approach to organisational change that is increasingly evident in the business world, as a participative means of school improvement. AI appears relevant to contemporary themes in literature on school improvement such as self-evaluation, capacity-building and distributed forms of leadership.

Appreciative inquiry is introduced and its literature reviewed, with reference to its growing use both in business and in American schools. The authors then report on `Imagine Meadfield'<sup>1</sup>, the first known large-scale appreciative inquiry undertaken in an English secondary school, with particular reference to the experience of the head teacher (first author) who led this process. The article critically reviews this experience in order to assess the potential of AI for school improvement.

**KEYWORDS:** appreciative inquiry, school improvement, organisational change, self-evaluation, distributed leadership.

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<sup>1</sup> pseudonym

## **School Improvement**

School improvement is a vast and contentious theme; Flecknoe (2001:217) acknowledges that: 'School improvement has had many meanings over the years.' Creemers and Reezigt (2005:359) note the different origins of interest in school effectiveness and school improvement, the latter being practice and policy oriented and intended to change education in the desired direction.' Hopkins et al (1994:3) propose the following definition, which similarly emphasises school improvement as a form of practice:

'A distinct approach to educational change that enhances student outcomes as well as strengthening the school's capacity for managing change... raising student achievement through focusing on the teacher-learning process and the conditions which support it.... Improving the school's capacity for providing quality education in times of change.'

Our perspective on school improvement arises through an interest in examining the nature and effects of strategies used in pursuit of organisational change (e.g. **Author B** and Nicholls 2000). Appreciative inquiry, which we introduce below, originates in the field of organisational development (Sorensen et al, 2000) and is an example of a strategy for change that is beginning to appear in education. It is therefore relevant to review its potential for school improvement.

In England, the locus of this article's case study, strategies for school improvement include official endeavours - notably the school inspection regime of the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) - as well as informal. While this article is concerned with an informal, practice-focused strategy for school improvement, it is relevant to note a developing emphasis on self-evaluation in the stance of official school inspection (e.g. MacBeath 1999, 2002;

Ofsted 2006), which is regarded as a contributing to capacity-building for sustained school improvement. According to Cribb (2002:30), in the early years the focus of Ofsted, the English school inspection body, its focus was 'firmly on the process of inspection'. However, towards the end of the first round of inspections, Ofsted (1998, 1999) developed a programme of self-evaluation for all schools to use.

Cribb (2002:33) believes that: 'The Ofsted Framework for Inspection provided a powerful way of getting into the process of reflection and self evaluation', and that many schools have now moved to 'a more sophisticated model that reflects other aspects including the ethos of the school; the quality of relationships; the views of stakeholders including pupils of all ages; inclusion and the drive to improve teaching to enable all learners to participate in mainstream schools.'

MacBeath (2002:55) argues that inspection 'cannot achieve what "rigorous" self-evaluation can achieve', and writes that: 'When schools truly know themselves they move to a heightened level of organisational intelligence and they develop a capacity that lies at the very heart of improvement.' He suggests that rigorous self-evaluation is concerned with:

- 'The hopes and aspirations of pupils and how well these hopes and aspirations have been met;
- The professional fulfilment of teachers;
- The quality of relationships which can either promote or inhibit learning;
- The breadth of opportunities offered and the equality of access to them;
- Accessibility to parents and openness to the community;
- The school's resilience and responsiveness as an organisation, its capacity for change.'

(MacBeath, 2002:54)

MacBeath (2005:6) refers to the purpose of school improvement as 'to build the school's capacity to respond to and manage change.' Other related notions that emphasise the contribution of participation to capacity building include the 'intelligent organisation' (Bowring-Carr and West-Burnham 1997) and the 'citizenship school' (Alexander 2002), matching the emphasis of the framework for 'world class' school improvement on 'enhancing the learning experiences of pupils' (Specialist Schools Trust, 2003:4). Harber and Trafford (1999:46) state that 'students in effective schools are treated with dignity and encouraged to participate in the organisation of the school... and as a result they feel valued.' Nightingale (2003:18) suggests that 'not only is it advisable to give students the freedom to take responsibility for a far wider slice of school life...it is essential that they do so if their education is to succeed.'

The potential of self-evaluation is also contested. Devos and Verhoeven (2003:405), for example, question whether 'schools can meet these high expectations', asking whether it is possible for a school 'to reflect in an unbiased way on its own practice and to take actions consistent with its reflections?'

In contemporary discourse, notions of school improvement are linked consistently to that of leadership. Harris (2004:11), 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'. Rather than emphasising the formal leadership of headteachers, distributed leadership is a participative endeavour (Bush and Glover 2003) that 'resides in the human potential to be released within an organization' (Harris 2004:12).

However, Harris also highlights the predominance of advocacy over evidence in relation to distributed forms of leadership, a point echoed by others (Hopkins 2001; Hopkins and

Jackson 2002; Woods et al 2004). Svedberg (2004) and Woods et al (2004) remind us that notions such as distributed leadership need to be considered as discursive devices as well as descriptions of, or prescriptions for, practice.

There appears therefore to be a substantial contemporary emphasis on capacity-building for school improvement through self-evaluation, participation, and distributed leadership. Noting the cautions expressed in the literature and the need for critical reflection, we now turn to consider appreciative inquiry (AI), an innovative strategy for change that appears compatible with this emphasis.

### **Appreciative Inquiry**

AI was originally developed by David Cooperrider at Case Western Reserve University (Cooperrider and Srivastva 1987; Cooperrider 1990; Cooperrider and Pasmore 1991; Srivastva and Cooperrider 1999; Cooperrider and Whitney 1999; Cooperrider et al 2000). It is represented in both academic literature (Srivastva and Barrett 1988; Ludema et al 1997) and practitioner literature (Hammond 1996; Elliott 1999; Watkins and Mohr 2001).

According to Ashford and Patkar (2001:4): ‘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.’

Schiller et al (2001:2) provide a number of case studies that illustrate how leaders of organisations around the world have used AI. Watkins and Mohr (2001) report case studies of the use of AI within different types of company such as NASA, Avon and British Airways,

and Vanstone (2004) describes AI as used in BP. It is also known as a community development methodology, notably through 'Imagine Chicago', which involved hundreds of residents in developing the future of the city of Chicago (Browne, 2001). 'Imagine Chicago' has seeded many other community and organisational projects across the world, hence the title of the improvement process described in this article.

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' (2003:2). 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' (2003:18). Hinrichs and Rhodes-Yenowine (2003:20) 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. Ricketts and Willis explain how the integration of structured EL (experiential learning) activities and initiatives with the AI process 'is a powerful learning combination for schools' (2003:26). Unlike the present article, these articles contain little detailed discussion of how each project has impacted on school improvement.

What are the theoretical principles of AI? Watkins and Mohr (2001:26) say that Gergen's work on social constructionism (e.g. Gergen 1978, 1982, 1994) 'has had a major formative impact on AI'. Watkins and Mohr describe social constructionism as a postmodernist theory (distinct from the 'modernist' era typified by Newtonian thinking that believed there were 'underlying rules and structures that defined the "right" way of doing things'). They also describe the influence of 'the New Sciences (quantum physics, chaos, complexity)' on AI. Cooperrider (cited in Schiller et al 2001:ix) states that he has become increasingly convinced that 'appreciative modes of management may be to our newer, self-organising systems what deficit or problem-oriented methods of management have been to command and control bureaucracy'. The reference to self-organising systems again indicates a theoretical

orientation closer to that of complexity theory (e.g. Wheatley 1999; Stacey et al 2000) than of classic Organisation Development (Bennis 1969).

Gergen argues that a 'broad cultural enfeeblement' (1994:148) arises from the application of critical social science and that the resulting 'vocabularies of deficit' have become absorbed into common organisational language, forming the basis for the construction of everyday reality. Thus Ludema et al (2001:191) 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.' AI counters this emphasis on deficit through its 'deliberately affirmative assumptions about people, organisations and relationships' (Ludema et al 2001:191). It is predicated on a radical epistemological stance which assumes that, given the opportunity to do so, human systems will orientate towards that which is perceived to be positive and life-enhancing. It turns the problem-solving style of 'needs based' forms of inquiry on their head by focusing on achievements rather than problems and seeking to foster enthusiastic and inspired participation.

According to Watkins and Mohr (2001:36), the essential ingredients of AI are, 'first, the beliefs and values that are reflected in five *core principles* (constructionist, simultaneity, anticipatory, poetic and positive) and second, five core or *generic processes*'. The five generic processes referred to by Watkins and Mohr (2001:40) comprise the 4-D cycle (see figure 1) with an additional D (definition) that emphasises the crucial requirement for the inquiry to be framed in the positive. In practice, AI involves identifying 'the best of what is' – that which enhances cultural identity, spirit and vision – in order to construct with the participants a vision of their desired future. They then achieve this vision by creating 'provocative propositions', or 'possibility statements', that move the participants towards the realisation of the vision.

**Insert Figure 1 here**

The '4-D model' (Ludema et al 2001:192 – see figure 1), which forms the framework for the majority of AI applications, moves from the 'discovery' phase (discovering the best of what is) through the 'dream' phase (dreaming of what might be), to the 'design' phase (designing what should be in an ideal future) and concludes at the 'delivery' phase (the sustaining and underpinning of the changes undertaken). The cycle can then be repeated, and the users decide how they wish to enter (and leave) the framework.

AI is an emergent practice, and the extent of critique is limited. Golembiewski, a respected author in the field of Organisation Development, refers to himself as an 'external "constructive critic" with respect to AI' (2000:56). He observes, for example, that AI has received little appreciative inquiry itself. Indeed the lack of evaluation is not peculiar to AI, it appears to be a feature of organisation development generally (e.g. Mirvis & Berg 1977). Golembiewski believes that AI overstates the rejection of all problem-solving approaches as being negative, ignoring the 'balance' that normally dominates these other approaches. There is a clear concern as to how it is possible to look appreciatively at a situation when there may be problems that need addressing. Bushe (2000:108) appears to support Golembiewski's concern, suggesting that 'although AI can be a truly revolutionary way in which we study and change social systems... I think appreciation needs to be balanced with critical thinking to lead us there'. It is open to debate whether a 'balanced' approach may inhibit the essential emphasis on amplifying the positive, and perhaps obstruct the energising atmosphere of the AI process.

Watkins and Mohr (2001:198) reply to this criticism by stating that 'appreciative inquiry isn't about focusing on the positive and denying the negative.' Elliott (1999:77) and Fernandez (IISD, 1999) further emphasise the importance of framing a project question in a style that leads onto an inspired response from participants emphasising strengths and successes, rather than being in a 'problematic' style that presents a 'need' to be met. Watkins and Mohr



(2001:53) emphasise the importance of choosing 'the positive as the focus of inquiry' and that 'the choice of focus will determine how the whole process will unfold' (2001:55); otherwise 'they will focus on the obstacles they face, the problems they have, the malfunctions that have caused them to be in their current situation, and so on.'

As may be surmised from the above description, AI presents the prospect of being a radical alternative to problem-focused thinking, as well as (potentially) a discursive device to divert attention from what leaders or managers may define as 'negative'. In the next section we describe a qualitative, bounded case study that evaluated an AI project, in order to illustrate how AI might contribute to self-evaluation and school improvement.

### **The Case Study**

The aim of the research, undertaken for a doctoral programme (by **Author A**, 2004, supervised by **Author B**), was to evaluate AI as a school improvement process. **Author A** had become aware of AI through his postgraduate studies and through a public dialogue session in London, where he met the Manager of Organisational Development and Learning for BP (Samuels), who subsequently facilitated the project. The methodology was a qualitative, action-orientated, bounded case study (Stake 1995) to evaluate a real AI project titled 'Imagine Meadfield' in the school at which the first author is head teacher.

Stake (1995:95) believes that 'all evaluation studies are case studies', and Lincoln and Guba (1985:358) state that 'the case study format has certain characteristics that are especially advantageous to the naturalistic inquirer.' Reviewing the strengths and limitations of case study design, Merriam (1988:33) explains how case study 'has proved particularly useful for studying educational innovations, for evaluating programmes and for informing policy.' Here, the AI was certainly an educational innovation.

The study sought to investigate:

1. What were the participants' reactions to, and experiences of, the AI?
2. What appeared to be the significant features and outcomes of the AI for the school?
3. What could be learnt from the AI about school improvement?

In the constructionist tradition, this study incorporated the paradigm assumptions of an emerging design, a context-dependent inquiry, and an inductive data analysis (Creswell, 1998). The study was also bounded by time (14 months) and by a single case (the school community). Consistent with case study design (Merriam, 1988; Stake, 1995; Yin, 1984), students and staff were identified as multiple sources of information for data collection that included illuminative interviews. These interviews involved a sample of staff and students who had taken part in at least one of the 'Imagine Meadfield' summits (see below). This bounding of the study was consistent with an exploratory qualitative case study design (Yin, 1984). Additional data comprised documents, artefacts (as shown on film), observation (again caught on camera), video film and digital camera photographs, plus over 1000 appreciative interview scripts and flip charts of the summit outcomes.

### **'Imagine Meadfield': the setting and process**

The school is a mixed, 11-18, specialist College with 1350 students on roll, including a sixth form of 200 students, located in London's commuter belt. The majority of the students live within 3 miles of the school. The school itself had been over-subscribed for 12 years. During this period it grew from having under 500 students to the current roll.

In order to enhance the school's future, and as a deliberate effort to create distributed leadership (Harris, 2004), **Author A** was keen to actively involve students, staff and governors in a collaborative form of inquiry that would inform the future strategic planning

for the school. As head teacher, **Author A** had been discussing with the head of sixth form the need to involve students and staff in drawing together the significant cultural characteristics of the current sixth form and using this information to shape its future. The head of sixth form was keen to deploy a methodology that could involve the students as well as staff in the role of interviewers, or key inquirers, in order to engage a range of stakeholders in a collaborative process.

As AI offered this opportunity, a pilot project to shape the future of the sixth form was initiated (Adamson et al 2002). In this, staff and students together formed a shared image and developed ideas collaboratively, with enthusiasm and laughter. The pilot AI seemed a very positive experience for all involved, such that, without prompting and within days of the pilot being completed, staff and students were asking Author A whether another project could be organised. The year 10 manager had been so impressed by the collective designs produced by the staff and students that she wanted the same for the 240 students in her year. A subsequent planning discussion decided to attempt a whole organisation AI, in similar style to 'Imagine Chicago' (Browne, 2001).

As with the pilot, and following discussions with the Chairman of Governors, a core team was formed to take a strategic role in planning and implementing the proposed project. **Author A** felt that this core team should consist of enthusiastic stakeholders - students and staff who would feel empowered to collaboratively plan the proposed whole-school inquiry. This entailed some letting go of control on the head teacher's part; at the same time we note that the recruitment of those perceived to be 'enthusiasts' constitutes a form of political control over the voices most likely to be heard.

Over the next few months, a core team of 12 students (a boy and girl from each year, except the Upper Sixth who had exam commitments) plus 4 staff and **Author A** designed and implemented the AI. A facilitator (Samuels) helped maintain the intended positive,

appreciative focus, as the team developed a commitment to a search for strengths in the school and avoided slippage into a 'problem solving' mode. This positive focus was reflected in the interview protocol (see figure 2), which the team developed and tested with other students and staff.

**Insert Figure 2 here**

The core team then moved on to plan the inquiry itself, using the 4-D model (figure 1). In order to generate maximum involvement, the group decided to seek a way to involve all students, staff and members of the Governing Body, subject to time, space and budgetary constraints. As a result, 275 interviewers (4-5 interviews each), comprising 240 students and 35 staff, were to conduct the interviews. The aim was to invite participation as interviewer or as a volunteer to be interviewed. There was no exclusion on the basis of enthusiasm or anything else, thus in this respect opportunity was created in principle for multiple student voices to be heard. .

Selection of the interviewers was through a process that ensured both proportional and equal opportunity representation across student ages, staff seniority and experience. This was achieved by a series of introductory talks at assemblies and staff briefings, followed by direct approach to those groups that were under represented, such as a group of year 10 students and support staff.

The interviewers were then to participate in a one-day summit in the school sports hall, comprising the *discovery* (of the best of Meadfield) and *dream* (the future of the school) phases of the AI. At the completion of the dream phase, all participants were invited to attend the design phase, comprising two 2.5 hour summits. In all, about 45 participants were able to attend in order to consider what could be done to create the *dream*. All of this would be input into the formal strategic planning process for the *delivery* phase.

## **A student disappears**

No sooner had everything been planned than tragedy struck. On the day before the school finished for the Easter holiday, a female student disappeared without trace while on her journey home. From that date the school was at the centre of the police inquiry and under the media spotlight.

At the start of the Summer term the core team met and were asked by **Author A** and Samuels how they wanted to proceed with regard to the planned AI. The team unequivocally recommended delaying the project until the Autumn. At that time **Author A**, as head teacher, was prepared to accept that cancellation of the project might have been appropriate.

However, in the light of the clear commitment to the project by the core team, **Author A** consulted at length with the inquiry facilitator as well as other senior staff and members of the Governing Body. All agreed to support the recommendation of the core team, whose view that the project should not be abandoned seemed to reflect the perspective of the whole school community.

Core team meetings continued. In June the team realised how useful it could be to interview some of the staff and students who would be leaving. It was decided to conduct appreciative exit interviews in order to gain interview experience and to obtain data that could be included with information from the main interviews (**Author A** et al 2003) .

After the Summer holidays the core team met and finalised plans for the AI, ready for an October start. However, it was then that the missing student's body was discovered. The investigation became a murder inquiry, and the school community sought to cope with the sadness and grief that resulted from this news. As head teacher, **Author A** was fully committed in dealing with the implications of this, including supporting her family.

Understandably, the trauma and uncertainty had placed the school community under immense strain, with many students and staff deeply affected. As a result of this tragic situation the daily running of the school during the six-month period was delegated to the deputy head teacher.

Within a few weeks a memorial service was held and the school community tried to come to terms with the preceding six months. After careful consultation about the revised timing of the project with staff, students and Governors, the AI was then scheduled for the late Autumn. Even after what had been a significant delay, the core team had maintained their enthusiasm for the project. Given the negativity that had understandably pervaded the school, the AI appeared to represent an opportunity for a more optimistic look at the future. Whether this also mitigated against the surfacing of more challenging issues is difficult to say.

### **`Imagine Meadfield' begins: the discovery, dream and design phases**

To train interviewers for the inquiry, the 275 volunteers gathered one afternoon in the sports hall and received 90 minutes' instruction in the basic concepts of AI, followed by a practice interview. All interviewers were then asked to complete between four and five appreciative interviews in the next 10 days, which they would bring to the discovery and dream summits (see figure 3). Timetabled slots were created for the student interviews, and an after school session was set aside for staff to interview other staff if they wished.

### **Insert Figure 3 here**

All students and staff who had undertaken appreciative interviews then took part in the main discovery and dream summits in the sports hall. The remainder of the school (those not involved in the main summit) met in their tutor groups for a mini appreciative summit for part of the day. These 'mini-summits' consisted of a presentation to each year group by **Author A**,

followed by time in tutor groups working through the following topics (chosen by the core team as relevant and potentially useful to the inquiry):

- Rest and Recreation
- Environment
- Learning
- The image of the school.

The data from the mini-summits – the wishes and images of those students not involved in the main summit - were introduced into the design phase of the main summit.

At the start of the discovery summit, interviewees were placed in groups of 10 around the sports hall. The groups explored what was ‘underneath’ the stories about Meadfield ‘at its best’, using a flip chart to record important phrases. Each group then displayed their ‘themes and wishes’ on the wall of the sports hall. All participants then walked around observing the themes and noticing what people were ‘wishing for’ from all the groups.

The dream summit followed after lunch. Delegates were asked to visualise the school in 10 years’ time, as if the ‘wishes’ had come true. Groups of 8 were asked to share their images, and then to create together a physical representation of these images in any form the group felt was appropriate to present their ‘dreams’ to everyone else in the hall. As well as using paint and coloured materials, one group sang their vision, another group presented a poem and one group took the assembled audience on a ‘virtual tour’ of the future school.

The enthusiastic applause that greeted each presentation seemed (to **Author A**) genuine and highly respectful of each presenter. **Author A’s** impression was that the AI was not only producing ideas for the future but also generating much commitment to continued involvement in developing those ideas.

Before everyone departed at the end of the dream summit everyone present was invited to the design summits (see figure 3) that were already fixed to take place on two after-school sessions. Many said that they could not come owing to prior commitments. However, a total of forty-five students and staff attended the two sessions. The objective of the design summits was to explore what would have to change in order to make those images become real.

For the design summits, all the dreams from the main summit had been clustered (by Samuels and other members of the core team) into themes, such as ‘communication’, and placed on the walls of the sixth form centre. When the delegates arrived they were asked to move to stand by the theme that interested them. This formed work groups whose task was to translate the dreams and visual images into short prose statements called (in AI) ‘provocative propositions’ or ‘possibility statements’. Watkins and Mohr (2001:141) describe possibility statements as ‘a set of unique statements that paint a picture of the group’s vision of the organisation’s most desired future.’

One example of a possibility statement produced at the summit, under the theme of ‘Atmosphere’, was:

*Students and staff always aim to work towards higher standards than they ever imagined possible giving them a sense of achievement. We are all backed up and encouraged by support from others and are given advice based on each others’ knowledge that we share together. With everyone’s inputs the ideas that were once just ideas in brief soon get put into practice and achieved.*

By the end of the second evening the groups produced a number of different possibility statements, each of which would be incorporated into the strategic planning for the school.



## **The Delivery Phase**

For the delivery phase the project findings were organised into areas for development. These areas, which had been identified prior to the design summit as already described, included:

- Atmosphere and expectations;
- Learning and opportunities;
- Resources and facilities;
- Communication;
- Community partnership.

**Author A** wanted the results of the project to become embedded in the strategic planning for the school. Certain points from the AI provided useful information on the school culture, and possible direction for change, which could have been omitted from the planning process by senior staff, however well-meaning, who had not had in-depth involvement in the project. This perhaps highlights an aspect of the radical potential of AI, through reducing the likelihood that students' ideas will be discounted or censored by staff.

The Chair and Vice Chair of Governors agreed that all governors would be fully briefed on the outcomes from the inquiry; the Governors then accepted the recommendation from the Chair that all the outcomes from the AI would inform the strategic planning process for the school. The Governing Body linked each of the areas for development with an existing Governors' committee and arranged for links with student council and other focus groups to facilitate the development of each area. In addition, each area formed a part of the school improvement plan and so would link directly into the formal strategic planning process.

In summary, by involving over 1000 members of the school community, 'Imagine Meadfield' created shared images for the future and produced over 200 ideas and wishes. These ideas and wishes have led to changes including the following:

- Students can now drink water in lessons (without needing the permission of the member of staff);
- A playground has been set aside for quiet sitting and conversation. A member of staff has obtained sponsorship for seats and plants to enhance the attractiveness of the area. In addition a memorial garden has been completed;
- Various changes have been made to the school uniform;
- To improve communication in the school, a company has donated a plasma screen that is used in the main school foyer in order to present school news and updates on daily routines;
- The student council now meets even more regularly than before;
- A large hard standing area has been built on the field, providing a much needed additional playing and match area;
- Significant decoration and refurbishment is taking place to improve the condition of the school building.

### **Evaluation of the Case Study**

This section considers the results from the AI and briefly relates these to descriptors from MacBeath's self-evaluation framework (2002:54). Following this, we reflect critically on the AI process.

Three main themes emerged from the research:

- The **inspired responses** at the summits of the students and staff who were taking part in the inquiry;
- AI as a means of **unlocking the door to culture** and the learning environment; and
- The development of a **collaborative change strategy**.

### **Inspired responses at the summits**

A member of staff remarked that he felt the inquiry had been ‘very positive, especially the big summit.’ He also commented that: ‘If I think back to how we felt at the end of that, there was a big high with lots of energy, lots of good ideas.’ Another member of staff explained how she noticed that: ‘The enthusiasm of the students was best’, adding that ‘it was very infectious.’ A third member of staff involved in the entire AI commented : ‘I realise now that seeing the positive does give more energy for change and bring forward ideas.’

A fourth member of staff added that: ‘It was amazing really.’ She continues: ‘We had the whole school involved. The idea is amazing – to get the whole school giving their input into what we can do with our school.’ She also commented: ‘It was so rewarding to be part of the dream phase and to see the realisation that ‘we can make a difference’ and then moving to consider how to mobilise in order to make it happen.’

Whilst enthusiasm per se is insufficient as a measure of effectiveness, comments such as those above indicate that the AI process inspired those involved and created a positive environment from which creative ideas were generated.

### **Unlocking the door to culture and the learning environment**

Asking students and staff for stories that illustrated the school at its best produced significant data about the strengths of the school and its culture. Examples included:

- The good teacher: friendly and helpful, support and encouragement given, understanding and approachable, enthusiastic, make you feel confident, motivated;
- The conditions that enhance a rich learning environment : Student – teacher bond, students and teachers get on well, mentors and peer supporters, students support each

other, mistakes are OK, rewards and praise, exciting teaching methods, respect for others, caring community, team spirit;

- The physical environment: Safe, respect for our environment, no litter, bright, coloured walls, more displays.

The AI also revealed aspects of the culture that appeared unique and were perceived to contribute to the success of the school. For example, one of the staff highlighted ‘the value of relationships between students and staff.’ In addition, the same member of staff remarked about the value of the ‘non formal teaching time such as the bits of time around lesson time.’

The importance that students placed on experiential learning, as advocated by Ricketts and Willis (2003), within a positive, supportive culture emerged as a key issue. They particularly valued the opportunities for residential and day trips as part of the enrichment of the curriculum. The students also valued the theme days and being able to take part in activities such as sport, music and arts festivals.

### **Developing a collaborative change strategy**

One member of staff, having been involved throughout the inquiry, commented on the collaborative and participative process: ‘It realises the ability of students to strategically plan alongside staff’, adding that he believes ‘it gives a voice as well as confidence.’ He proposed that the process ‘is a new change strategy as a result of which a holistic picture is developed that creates energy, momentum and ownership for change’ and which produces a ‘really powerful mandate for change.’

The atmosphere created in the discovery and dream summits appeared to inspire those taking part into realising that they could ‘make a difference’ and resulted in suggestions that appeared to be owned strongly by those involved. A number of participants spoke of the

'buzz' that was created in the main hall, and how rewarding it was to be part of a process in which everyone worked together.

Several members of staff who were involved spoke of the expectation that things would change and commented on the importance of participants being aware of the changes being made as a result of the inquiry. One participant added, 'I'd like changes to come about because of what's happened. Otherwise the whole impetus and positive atmosphere will be lost and become a major disappointment.'

Those attending the dream summit had become very motivated to create and plan the school of the future. In parallel with this enthusiasm and energy was an expectation that these ideas and plans would be implemented. The study revealed that staff and students strongly valued being 'listened to', as they were involved in conversations and discussions about the school. This finding is supported by Nightingale (2003:22) who reports that: 'Involvement in conferences and workshops encourages students' skills, confidence and understanding.'

In summary, in relation to MacBeath's (2002:54) framework of descriptors on capacity for school improvement, there appears to be evidence that 'Imagine Meadfield' impacted upon:

- The hopes and aspirations of pupils and how well these hopes and aspirations have been met;
- The quality of relationships which can either promote or inhibit learning;
- The breadth of opportunities offered and the equality of access to them;
- The school's resilience and responsiveness as an organisation, its capacity for change.

Author A's personal view is that while AI does not offer a complete substitute for an inspection process, 'Imagine Meadfield' was worthwhile, with benefits for school improvement including:

- more active involvement of staff and students in the decision-making within the school;
- the alignment of student ideas and aspirations with the formal strategic planning process for the school;
- grounding the self-review process on the learning experiences of students;
- identifying and influencing the school's culture;
- tangible improvements to the school's environment and facilities;
- accelerating the school's capacity to implement change;
- gaining an awareness of how well staff and students' hopes and aspirations are being met.

### **Critical Evaluation**

The epistemological emphasis of AI on the positive should not be taken to imply that AI in practice offers a non-contentious strategy for change that circumvents dissent or organisational politics. Equally, AI may also operate in a relatively conservative manner, appearing to offer more radical potential than it delivers. As Harris points out: 'It would be naïve to ignore the major structural, cultural and micro-political barriers operating in schools that make distributed forms of leadership difficult to implement' (Harris 2004:19).

The process by which the AI attempted to involve all stakeholders in a 'level playing field' of collaborative strategic planning and review, revealed that a number of staff were uncomfortable at the prospect. The reaction to the inquiry by certain members of staff indicated a perceived threat to their authority and concern over apparently relinquishing

power to other staff and even students. For example, one member of staff expressed his concern that the acceptance of certain proposals emerging from the inquiry was a case of ‘management “giving in” to students’ (Author A, 2004:113). In this respect, ‘Imagine Meadfield’, opened up some challenge to existing structures of power and privilege and illustrates the potential for hostility to distributed leadership noted by Harris (2004:21).

Whilst encouragement for listening to the student voice appears to be developing apace it is also problematic (Fielding and Ruddock 2002; Rudduck and Flutter 2003; Fielding 2004; McMahon and Portelli 2004), problems can arise if the student involvement is not carefully introduced. Martin et al (2005) advocate the prior exploration and questioning of possible assumptions about the effects of listening to students, including that it will result in increased engagement in school work, improved performance and behaviour. Equally they signal the risks of assuming that listening to and acting on students’ voices will be unproblematic, especially with respect to issues of control currently held by adults. ‘Imagine Meadfield’ has illustrated the latter issue in particular. Consequently, Martin et al (2005) warn that involving student voice can lead to resentment and disillusionment for both teachers and students.

These concerns about voice and participation can usefully inform an AI, but do not negate its potential. Fielding and Bragg (2003) describe how one school employs an approach similar to AI by involving students as researchers to identify good practice in teaching. The government agenda is also actively encouraging the development and utilisation of student voice in England through a number of different strategies, including the collation of data about student perceptions within the Ofsted school self-evaluation framework.

‘Imagine Meadfield’ also illustrates that leading an AI process involves politics and the exercise of power, even if (as in any process of organisational change) actions might still be framed by managers as a rational response to technical problems. For example, the decision to recruit enthusiasts to the core group could be rationalised as best serving the objectives of the

AI; equally it could be seen as a political decision to exclude potential dissenters. Even if through personal choice, those not taking direct part (for example as interviewers) sometimes felt excluded and their responses and sense of involvement needed to be managed. Staff who, along with everyone else, had received the invitation to join in the project but chose not to become involved, including members of the senior management team, later complained of feeling 'left out' and sought to question the rationale for some of the outcomes. The reasons for not taking part included 'not having time', 'I'll make it if I can' to a complete 'blinking' of the inquiry. Some staff who were asked to supervise the 'mini-summit', felt they had been 'left with the rest'.

There were clearly political consequences for staff. The AI was part of an intentional plan on the part of the head and Governors to create more collaborative school procedures and planning. Reactions to the inquiry therefore exposed the extent to which staff were willing to be involved in collaborative processes with other staff and students.

It was also evident that the process was managed persuasively in some respects. For example, enthusiasm alone did not recruit sufficient commitment to the AI. Despite all students being invited at assemblies, and in tutor group messages, to put their names forward to take part, fewer students volunteered to be trained as interviewers than were required. This shortage was overcome by year managers selecting the appropriate number of students in their year group to make up the required quota.

The proponents and leaders of such a process may see their actions as democratic and enabling participation, especially by invoking discourse such as that of distributed leadership, yet be unaware of exercising power in subtle ways. While AI creates the semblance that 'everything is up for grabs', leaders can still exercise tacit control over the definition of the situation and the boundaries of the agenda (Lukes 1974). Thus the extent to which the list of practical improvements from this AI represents effective school improvement (Flecknoe



2005) is debatable. Some changes could be seen as peripheral environmental issues that result from avoiding enquiry into underlying conflicts and issues of control, authority and so on.

## **Conclusion**

What might we conclude from this case study about the potential of AI for school improvement, and the implications for leaders?

First, the evidence of 'Imagine Meadfield' suggests that AI can involve members of the school community in decision-making, which may assist in the creation of a positive and democratic ethos. AI could represent a way to counter the exclusion of young people from a consultative process.

Second, the potential of AI for engaging directly with a school's culture is probably illustrated most graphically by the way the AI configured around, and ultimately may have assisted the community to cope with and recover from, the tragic circumstances described above. As Elliott observes, the appreciative approach 'can play a part in helping the whole organisation to reflect on its conscious *and unconscious* emotional life' (1999:61). Equally, and without in any way wishing to be cynical about the benefits experienced at Meadfield, the extent to which any organisation can reflect *consciously* on its unconscious life is likely to be limited.

Third, the case underlines that an AI is necessarily political and that apparently benign, rational intentions to encourage participation and to distribute leadership could function to repress or discount diversity and dissent. Leaders are still likely to exercise power and control in various ways, even if unaware of this or denying it with their rhetoric. AI can limit as well as create opportunity for student voices to be heard, and we have raised the question of the

extent to which Imagine Meadfield's outcomes are peripheral rather than central to school improvement.

Fourth, there are substantial practical implications. It became apparent that a full AI is extremely time consuming and difficult to fit into the rigid timetabling structure of a secondary school. The task, and the significance for the success of an AI, of generating whole-school commitment to this process should not be underestimated. To organise a limited AI involving, for example, a single year group would have been easier to organise and would have involved finding a suitable day on the school calendar when the cohort could have been taken off timetable. To organise an AI involving the whole school was a different proposition altogether, presenting significant logistical difficulties for rooming, staffing and events already programmed into the calendar as well as providing training in interviewing. There are questions of whether attempting an AI – especially for an entire school – needs the involvement of an experienced consultant or facilitator; Wikely et al (2005) emphasise both external and internal change agency as key factors in school improvement. The experience of the AI leads **Author A** to conclude that the involvement of a facilitator who was external to the organisation, and familiar with the format of AI, was significant. This accords with much of the AI literature too (IISD, 2000:5). On the other hand, an assumption that a skilled facilitator is necessary could have developed as a result of case studies being written up by external facilitators who present themselves as being the key to a successful project.

Finally, the limited research to date into AI means there is a need for further critical evaluation of the theory and practice of AI. Theoretically, AI is clearly located as a form of social constructionist thinking, with strong links to literatures concerned with leadership and organisational change including complexity theory. Whilst the AI literature to date seems dominated by 'success stories', its emphasis on the affirmative and positive does not mean that AI is easy, anodyne or politically neutral, as is illustrated by some studies in the field (e.g. Butcher 2005). At the same time, the tendency of the literature to present AI as an

innovative technology, and to fail to consider it also as discursive and political, merely serves to emphasise the need for critique. We suggest that AI's optimistic epistemological stance is likely to remain contentious, but deserves to be taken seriously as a radical alternative to many strategies for change, and treated with appropriate scepticism rather than either cynicism on the one hand, or naivety on the other.

To sum up, this research is, to the authors' knowledge, the first case study evaluation to consider the impact of a whole school AI in England. The experience of 'Imagine Meadfield' suggests that AI can involve an entire school community in a process of collaborative school review, and can engage with school ethos and culture. It can yield practical benefits, in a way that may build capacity for school improvement. In terms of implications for school leadership, AI is demanding and requires the ability to support participative decision-making. It appears compatible with contemporary emphasis on self-evaluation and distributed leadership, acknowledging that the notions must be treated critically in order to avoid treating AI as an apolitical technology for change.

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<b>Discovery</b>	Discovering the best of what is through appreciative interviews.
<b>Dream</b>	Dreaming of what might be and sharing these Dreams by presenting as dramatic enactments.
<b>Design</b>	Designing an ideal future by drafting possibility statements.
<b>Deliver</b>	The sustaining of the changes undertaken through communication of intended ideas and the utilisation of groups in order to strategically plan and implement the required action.

**Figure 1: The Appreciative Inquiry 4-D Cycle**

1. Student: Think about the best teacher you have had at Meadfield. Tell me about a time you were having a brilliant experience in his or her classroom. Teacher: Will you please tell me a story about the class you most enjoyed teaching.
2. Will you please tell me about a time when you felt most excited and enthusiastic here at Meadfield? It may have been in the classroom or not.
3. Can you please share a time here at Meadfield when you knew that you mattered and it helped build your confidence.
4. Can you think of a story that demonstrates the caring atmosphere at Meadfield?
5. Will you please tell me about a time when you felt you were encouraged to excel and given the support to do so?
6. What is at the centre of this school, which if it did not exist, would make Meadfield totally different than it is today?
7. If you had three wishes for Meadfield which would make it an even better place to learn and work, what would they be?
8. If you came to school tomorrow and one small thing had changed making the school better, what would it be?

**Figure 2: Interview Protocol**

February:	Core team formed – develop protocol for inquiry
June:	Pilot study by undertaking exit interviews
November 14 <sup>th</sup> :	Interviewer training
November 14 <sup>th</sup> /26 <sup>th</sup> :	Student and staff interviews
November 27 <sup>th</sup> :	Main `discovery` and `dream` summits (sports hall, all day)
November 27 <sup>th</sup> :	Mini-summit for remainder of the school (part day)
December 3 <sup>rd</sup> /5 <sup>th</sup> :	Design summit

**Figure 3: Flow Chart of the Stages of `Imagine Meadfield`**