

An Appreciative Inquiry into the strengths and
complexity of the Cedar Hill Middle School learning
community

by

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B.Sc., University of Victoria, 1995

B.Ed., University of Victoria, 2001

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Abstract

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The Greater Victoria School District has undergone a reconfiguration to include middle schools in their public education system. This reconfiguration has students from grades six to eight learning in a new setting. Cedar Hill Middle school is an example of one of the middle schools that is now in its eighth year of existence. The school is the centre of the learning community that is made up of students, staff and parents. As part of an ongoing review and reflection, this research used an Appreciative Inquiry methodology to try to identify the strengths found within the learning community. Through a dialogic interview process, a sample of staff, parents and most importantly students were interviewed to collect the best experiences that they had experienced as a part of the learning community. The data was open coded to identify best experiences, categorize them, and then identify the themes or relationships between the experiences of the different members of the learning community. These relationships were then used to create a set of powerful propositions that can be used to potentially guide the growth of the Cedar Hill learning community. Through this process two main themes emerged. The first was the importance of connections within the system and the second was the need for diversity within the system. This supported the assumption that the learning community was indeed a complex system and reinforced the idea that Appreciative Inquiry is a tool that can be used to support and develop complex systems.

Key words: Complexity, Appreciative Inquiry, Middle School, Learning communities

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Lastly, I must give my deepest thanks to all of the participants who took the time out of their busy lives to share their experiences with me. You all have inspired me to continue this journey, and work, every day in an attempt to contribute to the learning community at this special place we call Cedar Hill Middle School. I hope that I have done your comments justice in this study and stayed true to the richness of your words.

Dedication

This work, as with everything I do in my life, is dedicated to my family. Whether it has been throughout my upbringing, the choices that I made as a young adult, or the directions I have taken in starting my own family, my parents and my immediate family have always been and will always be the support system that allows me to achieve my dreams. Specifically I dedicate this work to my wife, Kwyn, and our two boys, Noah and Keaton. This has been a long process that has frequently required me to be glued to computer or staying late at school. This work could not have happened without your patience and love. We have all sacrificed so that I could undergo this experience and it is impossible to put into words how much your love and support has meant to me. I look forward to returning the favour to each of you throughout your lives as you endeavour to challenge yourselves to accomplish your own personal goals and dreams.

Chapter I. Introduction

Modern schools are currently undergoing a great deal of change in response to the evolving needs of society. Many scholars have likened the traditional school system to that of a factory in which students proceed from one learning situation to the next gathering pieces of information that will hopefully enable them to be contributing members of the society (Tyler, 1947). This factory model is one that requires conformity among the students as they progress through the system and this metaphor is one that I struggle to apply to today's education system. The factory metaphor is one in which an assembly line system moves students from one place to another where they all receive the same treatment and learn in the same way which I do not feel is the best way to support student learning. My experience with the education system, as a student and a teacher, was one in which I appreciated the diversity of people, techniques and opportunities that were offered to me. Through my training as a biologist and an ecologist, I appreciate that healthy systems contain diversity within them so the idea of all students being the same did not fit with my experiences or understandings. Throughout my experiences as both an informal educator and a formal classroom teacher I have often struggled to ensure that my audience -- whether it be in a classroom, on the trailside in a provincial park or within the walls of a university -- is learning the information that I am trying to share with them. Professionals within the education field often use terms such as the "teachable moment" or the "ah-ha" moment and refer to lessons where the students just "seemed to get it". This "getting it" referred to the students being able to understand the concept and more importantly demonstrate that they could apply their learning to a new situation. This often left me wondering about the determining factor(s) as to whether or not they would 'get

it'. In my experiences with BC parks and other informal (non-classroom) settings, I would often deliver the same material (curriculum) three or four times a day to different groups and was constantly amazed by the differing results. I spent a lot of time talking with other educators about their theories or understandings of what made the difference in the level of learning between different groups. The discussion of learning often led to whether or not we believed that the students we were working with were learning the predetermined learning outcomes that we had identified going into the lesson or activity, or if their learning was being influenced by some other force that resulted in the learning of other ideas. Some of the conclusions that we hypothesized were the groups' readiness to receive the material, the relationships that we were able to build with different groups, how we were feeling on the day, whether or not the group 'got' our style of information delivery, the physical comfort of the group in terms of warmth and hunger, and even the weather since the programs were delivered outdoors. Even as a rookie educator, I had a growing awareness that there were a variety of complex factors that contribute to the learning of a group. This variation in result led me to question whether the factory-based process of learning that I was exposed to as a child was effective or if there was a more complex system of processes at play. I started to question my role as a leader, or teacher, within a learning community and to consider how my role should develop to better meet the needs of the students that I was working with.

I returned to university to get my teaching degree and was searching for more answers to the questions I had about how people learn. Howard Gardner's (1991) suggestion of multiple intelligences was one theory that resonated with my thoughts that there must be more than one way that people learn. Gardner's work suggested that people

do learn in different ways and that there are even different styles of learner. This seemed to reinforce the idea of complexity that I was faced with in my previous experiences. The concept of multiple intelligences seemed to emphasize the inadequacy of the factory model that was described by theorists such as Frederick Taylor (1947) and his 'one best system', in which all the members of the system received the same treatment.

Middle Schools in Greater Victoria

In an attempt to better meet to the changing needs of students, the Greater Victoria School district reconfigured their school structure to include middle schools starting in 2001. This move from a system in which there was elementary (kindergarten to grade seven), junior high school (grade eight to ten) and high school (grade eleven and twelve) to one that has middle schools (grade six to eight) as the bridge between the elementary and high school was one that encountered much resistance from the staff involved. I personally participated in many meetings and planning sessions in which teachers, who were not familiar with the model, were quick to identify a variety of challenges to the transition. Throughout the Victoria district conversion the concept of learning communities was repeatedly referred to by the district administration and transition team, but seldom expanded upon. Learning communities are a major component of the middle school model (AMLE, 2003) developed by the Association for Middle Level Education (formerly the National Middle School Association), an American association that developed the middle school model that was implemented by the Victoria School district. Staff, parents, teachers and students deemed it important to continually gather data about this implementation in order to make informed decisions about the strengths of this reconfiguration and to continue the development of the middle

school model within this community. This data collection has taken place in a variety of ways including: 1) workshops among district staff to give feedback on the implementation of the middle school model; 2) an ongoing monthly meeting among middle school administrators that addresses concerns and issues as they arise; and 3) an appreciative inquiry session that was sponsored by the Victoria Coalition of Parent Advisory councils. The Association for Middle Level Education, to be referred to as the AMLE, clearly recognizes that learning communities are complex by nature. They state that “students that are middle school ages (10-14 years old) form a distinct community, where they are undergoing such a rapid cognitive, psychomotor and affective development that their school communities are constantly changing and incredibly diverse” (AMLE, 2003, p.3). It is my position, based on my experience, that in order to understand middle school students’ needs we must include them in the decision making process and honour their voices in an attempt to influence decisions made about their schooling. This position is also echoed by the United Nations in their Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in which there are articles referring to a child’s right to quality education, including Article 12 which requires that “the child’s right to have their views given due weight in matters affecting the child” (Osler, p.17). Osler (2010), in her book *Students Perspectives on Schooling*, states that “quality education can in fact only be realized when young people’s perspectives are built into the policy making processes and when structures are put into place so that not only are young people listened to, but there is also scope for building and acting upon their ideas and needs” (p.11). This belief is one that is crucial to this research project and is supported through the Appreciative Inquiry process enabling everyone to give equal opportunity and equal say during the discovery

phase of the inquiry. It is my belief that this equal opportunity is one that students value and will result in a greater engagement and commitment to the change process. Such engagement, if connected with actual change, will foster greater attachment by students and lead to a more cooperative learning community. This type of learning community will allow students to have a voice which is validated by actual change. As a result, the students' influence on the community will produce a community that reflects their individual and collective needs.

Time for a change

As we continue to reflect upon and evolve the school system to meet the ever changing needs of our students and the society that they are a part of, there is a greater realization that we must move to a system that is based on personalized, individual, student-based learning. Trilling and Fadel (2009) suggest that “today’s students must prepare for the reality of 21st century work and develop deeper levels of initiative and self direction skills as they progress through school” (p. 78). For this to happen, we must work with students (and adults) to empower and listen to each student’s voice within their community to ensure that we are able to meet their individual needs. This sentiment is also in line with the British Columbia Ministry of Education’s new direction in the area of personalized learning in which it describes optimal instructional practices. The ministry’s interactive guide (BC Ministry of Education, 2011) states:

in an increasingly student-centred education system, we will see a wider variety of instructional approaches that focus on the exploratory nature of learning. These approaches could include: teachers becoming co-learners with their

students, using inter-disciplinary approaches and working in teams of teachers to support students; students being provided with more time to reflect on what they are learning and why they are learning it; teachers facilitating learning experiences for students beyond the classroom that contribute to the community at large. (p.20)

This type of structure would depend on a system in which student voices were not only valued, but essential in order to help guide the direction of the system.

The search for an appropriate tool

Throughout my graduate work, I was exposed to the idea of complexity theory and the diversity of influences that come into play to result in an emergent situation. Emergence is one of the key aspects of a complex system, explored further in chapter 2, which results in a new understanding for the participants within the system. I was struck by a personal desire to find a methodology that would support and recognize the diversity of influences on learning and allow for these influences to be identified and acknowledged. The challenge for me was to move away from my previous experience, as a quantitative scientific researcher in which I tried to eliminate the variables from my testing, to incorporating a new lens that could enable me to acknowledge all of the variables within a system and try to identify their impact. This approach meant that I had to change so that I valued the interplay of the components rather than trying to minimize their interaction. Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a qualitative research genre that allows all members of a learning community to have an equal say in the research process. AI focuses on the strengths of a system so that it can grow and become more productive

rather than identifying the faults within a system which do not support growth or development. AI is a process of organizational review and growth facilitation that has great potential for stimulating changes in educational communities. It is both a theoretical framework and a form of action research involving the review of previous experiences to determine and construct practices that recognize and acknowledge the positive attributes that can be found within a community or organization (Hall and Hammond, 1998).

Through a process of reflection, planning, and implementation, participants are empowered by reflecting on the positive attributes of a system and attempt to maximize those positive attributes and minimize the negative aspects. AI, like all action research methodologies, is intended to be an ongoing process that has been shown to be very effective in many learning communities and is easily applied to a complex environment such as a middle school community. Conklin and Hart (2009) summarize some examples of the diversity of AI research within educational systems:

There have been several studies on the effect of AI principles on educational systems... these have focused on using AI to improve system-wide student academic success, (Torres and Weisenberger, 2001), administrative actions intended to create school communities that better serve students, (Bushman and Buster, 2002; Stetson and Miller, 2003; Henry, 2005), academic advising, (Bloom and Martin, 2002), curriculum and program review (Stetson, 2005), and school system sustainability and growth (Adamson et al., 2002). (p.89-90)

AI is more than just an examination of the strengths of a system; it is rather an identification of the strengths within a system so that those strengths can be used to

develop the system in new directions. This can be part of an ongoing review process or in response to the identification of a new demand placed on the system. The development of a system, which in this case is a learning community, could be part of the system's ongoing development as a type of formative assessment or could be in response to the identification of a condition that needs to be addressed by the system. The focus on using the strengths for the development of a new reality has led some researchers to suggest that it should be termed "generative inquiry" (Busche, 2007) but for this work we will refer to the process by its original name of Appreciative Inquiry or AI to avoid confusion and to stay true to Cooperrider and Srivastva's (1987) original description of the process. The use of an AI will hopefully allow the multitude of members of a middle school community to share, learn and help identify future directions for this learning community. This use of a diversity of perspectives that are all equally valued and weighted, which is one of the main tenants of the appreciative inquiry model, ensures that all members have the opportunity to contribute to the change of direction. This equity for all opinions allows greater commitment to supporting and implementing the changes necessary within the community.

Through the use of an AI based framework and methodology, the data that is collected can be used not only to identify the strengths of a particular learning community, but also to provide data to assess the effectiveness of the middle school model and its implementation. This data provides all members of the community a voice in the creation of a set of potentially powerful propositions, which are the guiding statements that are generated to provide direction for current and future practice. As noted by Cooperrider & Srivastva (1987), these powerful propositions are statements that

are created to describe the desired or potential conditions that the system could attain. They are created by the group, and for the group, to guide the development and growth of the system. This research will attempt to identify the attributes of the Cedar Hill Middle School that are the most powerful attributes for the students' learning within the community. These could potentially include specific activities, learning opportunities, relationships or situations that resonate with the students and the other members of the learning community. These, or possibly other things, are the most positive experiences that have affected them within the learning community and were revealed through the research process. This research attempted to identify the components of the Cedar Hill Middle School learning community that participants identified as those having the most impact on the success of members within the community which were then used to develop a set of powerful propositions in order to determine whether Appreciative Inquiry is a methodology useful for guiding change while honouring complexity within the system. Once the powerful propositions were generated they were shared with participants and other interested members of the learning community and can potentially be used as guiding statements for the future development or assessment of practices and experiences present within the community.

Rationale for this study

As the middle school model is now in its tenth year of implementation throughout the Greater Victoria School district, and its eighth year of implementation in the Cedar Hill community, there has been a significant period of time for the model to become established. It is crucial that as educators we reflect and challenge ourselves to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the model and that need has resulted in this research. As a

strong proponent of the middle school system, I believe that the system has the potential to meet the ever-changing needs of our students, but we must ensure that we are constantly assessing whether or not this is happening. The best way to accomplish that, I believe, is through collecting data from the students and all of the members of the learning community. In this study I endeavoured to identify the strengths found in one of the Greater Victoria middle school learning communities, the Cedar Hill Middle School learning community, and tried to assess whether the complex needs of the system were being met. I propose that the use of an Appreciative Inquiry methodology as a tool supports the identification of strengths while supporting the inherent complexity that is present in the system by valuing the diversity of ideas, perspectives, and beliefs of all of the members of the system. I utilized the Appreciative Inquiry approach in order to move away from a hierarchical model and strive to value all of the different participants' experiences equally. Through the collection of positive experiences and beliefs from representative participants, I attempted to determine whether it is possible to identify the strengths within the system and to use AI to provide directions for change and improvement. With a focus on the strengths and a vision of an optimal situation we were able to focus the efforts towards the creation of the best possible situation in the learning community for all members of the community. This was distilled down to the best experiences for the students, since that is the goal of the learning community and the reason that it exists. As a member of a middle school learning community I realize that all of the members of the community feel like they are contributing significantly to the system, so it was important that I tried to identify the areas that focus our efforts in order to ensure that the needs of all of the members of the community are addressed and valued

as we continue to develop the learning community. Through the process of gathering stories and perspectives from a representative group of teachers, staff, parents and especially students, it became possible to assess the strengths and identify future directions to help continue the growth of the Cedar Hill middle school learning community to meet the needs of those involved in it. I emphasize the students since they are the reason that the learning community is formed. The students are the foundation of the community and the catalyst for its creation. Through this research I sought to identify the strengths that act as guiding principles for the staff to assess the development, continuation or deletion of programs or activities that are intended to meet the needs of the students and their families within the community. As Appreciative inquiry is a form of action research, the intent was to use this study as the beginning of an ongoing process of discovering, dreaming, designing and determining our destiny (Cooperrider & Srivastva,1987) that the staff will continue to use as they develop and assess the current experiences and practices that are embraced at the school. Currently there is no set process for assessment or review of the opportunities that are provided for students and the reflection piece is one that occurs when one of the staff highlight a need for such review. This research is intended to be a catalyst for this process but also a model for all the members of the community as a process that can be used to celebrate what is present and use those strengths to continue in a more efficient and productive way.

Research questions

Question One: What are the strengths of the Cedar Hill Learning community?

The first data I wanted to collect was a list of the experiences that were the most important or meaningful to the members of the Cedar Hill Middle School community in

an attempt to identify the strengths of the learning community. I asked participants to identify the strengths within the learning community which was intended to start a dialogue around the activities, experiences and lessons that are the most memorable or influential for the staff, students, and parents that are the basis of the school community.

Question Two: Is Appreciative Inquiry an appropriate tool to support the development of a complex system such as a middle school learning community?

The second question that I was addressing was whether or not the Appreciative Inquiry methodology was appropriate, and by that I mean able to support, the complexity within this community. The questions that I specifically posed to the participants (see Appendix 1 or the next chapter) were crafted to initiate dialogue about the learning community through the identification of specific experiences or events. The data that I collected was used to attempt to identify the strengths within the system and then use those strengths to identify a direction for the continued growth of the Cedar Hill Middle School learning community as part of an ongoing effort of the staff at the school to support the ever-changing needs of the students within the system. The issues that I have addressed revolve around the complexity found within a middle school learning community and whether or not Appreciative Inquiry is a methodology that can be used to assess the strengths within the community and provide direction for the development of the learning community while supporting the complexity found within it.

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Chapter II. Literature review

Middle school communities provide a unique learning environment that is different from those found at any other level. The Association for Middle Level Education points out that “young people undergo more rapid and profound personal changes between the ages of 10 and 15 than at any other time in their lives. Although growth in infancy is also very extensive, infants are not conscious witnesses of their development” (AMLE, 2003, p.3; Wigfield & Eccles, 2002). This profound growth, and the fact that it is unique for each individual, provides a diversity that makes a middle school community incredibly complex.

Complexity theory

Throughout the literature on complexity theory there is a common theme describing individual components in a structure that are unified with others to form a system, and by their connection to other components allow them to self organize and become able to transcend themselves as individuals in order to acquire collective properties (Waldrop, 1992; Davis and Sumara, 2005). This idea of transcendence from one point to a higher point is what I would refer to as growth, or in the case of a learning community, it would be referred to as a greater level of understanding or ability. This self organization suggests that through interactions between the components within the system there will be an internal sharing of information which will result in an organization. These interactions and sharing of information form a collective pool of information that is enriched by the interactions between the components of the system and results in a collective that is greater than the sum of the parts. When applied to a middle school situation this implies that the connections and relationships that are

developed between students, staff and parents result in the formation of a collective, or community, that produces individual growth of each of its members and a transcendence of the entire learning community to which a new level of knowledge and understanding can be found. The basis of the theory of complexity is contingent upon the sharing of information, or knowledge, amongst the components of the system which in a middle school learning community include all of the members such as students, staff, parents and community groups that interact with the community. This sharing of information allows the people (components) within the system to build a common collective knowledge which can be used by each individual as well as the community to create new higher levels of understanding. In a learning community, then, each member of the community learns from all the members of the community rather than learning only from the “designated leaders” within the community. This movement from a traditional model of teacher-directed instruction to that of student centered interactive exchange of information is one of the keys to preparing students for the needs of the 21st century (Trilling and Fadel, 2009). This social construction of knowledge, or interactive exchange, is important because the collective knowledge of all of the people in the system is much more than just the sum of the individuals. This is the essence of the theory of emergence, which was described with the development of chaos theory, in which a new higher level of organization within a system arises through the collective interaction of individuals. Throughout this research, I will focus on the sharing of information through the AI process to discover the richness of the learning community. Fenwick (2008) supports the implication that sharing information within a system is crucial to the success of a system when she states, “the focus is not upon isolated actors

and objects foregrounded against some contextual backdrop, but on the dynamic, nonlinear actions and connections flowing between all of these parts” (p.106).

It is my position that the middle school learning community is a complex system. There are two main concepts within this assumption that require further explanation. The first is the definition of a learning community. The term “learning community” has undergone quite extensive usage, but it is seldom well defined due to the challenge of determining clearly defined boundaries to a community. For this research, the definition has two distinct components as identified by Kilpatrick, Barrett and Jones (2003), who state that:

The first [component] focuses on the human element of communities, and the profits that accrue from building on the synergies of individuals in common locations or with common interests as they work towards sharing understandings, skills and knowledge for shared purposes. The second is focused on curricular structures (i.e. an inanimate structure) as the means to developing 'deeper' learning of (implied) pre-determined curricular content (p.2).

This definition suggests that learning communities involve the learning of the individual but also that of the collective group. Kilpatrick et al further identify learning communities as complex systems that must respect diversity and interactions between all of its components. The Cedar Hill Middle School, then, encompasses all of the people (students, staff, and parents) as well as the context, i.e., all of the curricular and extracurricular activities that are used to help the people develop both academically and personally. For this research I have explored both aspects of the learning community by

creating opportunities for dialogic interviews that enable participants to discuss their perceptions of the best experiences that they have had.

Complexity Theory and Complex Learning Communities

Complexity theory has become more and more prevalent and accepted in the realm of educational theory (Fenwick, 2008). It was first introduced as a descriptor of the condition between order and chaos in which there is potential for great growth (Waldrop, 1992). A complex learning system forms in a non-linear process and is based on the dynamic interactions between multiple variables, within indeterminate and transient systems, through a process of *adaptation*, *self-organization* and *emergence* in order to thrive in a changing environment (Masson, 2008). Understanding a middle school learning community as a complex system, I will provide a definition of a complex system.

Complexity theory within middle schools

Davis and Simmt (2003) identified five conditions that “must be met in order for complex systems to arise and maintain their fitness within dynamic contexts” (p.147). These are: 1) internal diversity; 2) redundancy; 3) decentralized control; 4) organized randomness; and 5) neighbour interactions. If a middle school environment such as the one at Cedar Hill Middle School is indeed a complex system, then these conditions should be found within the data. Initially I will define each of these terms before showing where they are reflected in the Cedar Hill Middle School community. Internal diversity is defined as having a diversity of components or individuals interacting to form a system. This could be reflected not only by the diversity of students and adults within the system,

but also in a diversity of activities that allowed the students to meet their individual learning needs. Redundancy refers to an overlapping of experiences or skill sets among the components of the system and could be represented by a series of common experiences possessed by all students that provide commonalities with each other so that effective sharing of information can take place. Redundancy may be found in common social experiences and common learning objectives that all the students are required to meet. Decentralized control, which means that there is not one centralized controller within the system, would be present if there are opportunities for all members of the community to assume leadership within the school. This could be formalized with roles such as student leadership or informal roles such as leadership within small group or classroom situations. The idea of control and randomness is challenging and seems contradictory. Is it possible to have “organized randomness”? I suggest that organized randomness is a situation in which randomness is supported within organized structures. Davis and Simmt (2003) suggest that organized randomness, despite the fact that randomness is rooted in human cognition, may be a challenge to identify due to its subjective nature. I suggest that the subjective nature of organized randomness may allow it to be identified, but objectifying the level of organization or the level of randomness may not be possible. The challenge is in the production of an organized set of expectations and parameters that are flexible enough to allow individual expression but structured enough to provide a level of safety for all of the people involved to allow them to challenge their existing realities and allow themselves to be open to the ideas and contributions of the others in the system. Finally, the condition of neighbour interactions that characterize a complex system is found in a middle school system. Neighbour

interactions are not only present as a result of the inherently social aspect of the students involved, but they are also nurtured and encouraged by the staff and teachers in the school so that students are supported in the process of social belonging and learning. Through the identification of specific components, activities, or actions that support the complexity within this system, school planning can then use the five conditions identified by Davis and Simmt to assess and implement learning activities and experiences for its members. This would provide greater support for the complexity found within the system and result in a greater likelihood of emergent learning situations to occur. The presence of emergence would result in a greater knowledge base which in turn could result in greater learning for the members of the system. This emergence is challenging to study since the parameters of the emergence are difficult or impossible to predict. Therefore we must use a methodology that is open to the development of new boundaries and not confined to a problem solving approach to organizational design. It is my position that Appreciative Inquiry provides us such a methodology that is flexible and responsive enough that it will allow for the inclusion and development of emergent situations such as those found within complex systems.

Complex learning communities

Davis continued his work on complexity in learning systems in the book he wrote with Dennis Sumara and Rebecca Luce-Kapler entitled *Engaging Minds*, where they suggested that a complex learning system has three additional conditions. These characteristics are recursive elaboration, the ability to create memories, and the incorporation of feedback loops (Davis, Sumara, and Luce-Kapler, 2008). I believe it is the addition of these three conditions that may be ones that provide to key to the role of

the leader, or -- within the classroom -- the teacher, within a complex system. The first condition of recursive elaboration is present due to the fact that “learning systems don’t progress along linear trajectories. Rather, they unfold recursively by constantly invoking and elaborating established associations” (Davis, Sumara, and Luce-Kapler, 2008, p.201). This suggests a constructive aspect to learning that requires a constant checking in with how new understandings relate to previous ones. This cycle of exploring and checking back happens not only for an individual but also between individuals, within groups and between groups of individuals within the learning community. Davis et al. refer to these nested systems or “nestedness” as a condition of complexity within a classroom setting (p. 202). The second condition that was mentioned was the ability to create memories and specifically the aspects of selection and preservation. This creation process was referring to that of the collective. The idea that a collective in a learning community must select and preserve certain aspects so that it can retain them later is very interesting. I would suggest that it can be considered that of a prioritization since we may not be able to foresee the information that we will need but we are constantly prioritizing what information we focus on or carry with us. This process happens as individuals and as a group. Davis et al. suggest that a teacher’s role within a learning community may be more of a “commentator than that of a controller. And the teacher has a responsibility to be attentive to emergent possibility” (p.203). This recommendation may give us direction for the question as to leadership that we will consider later in this research. The last condition, the incorporation of feedback loops, is one that is crucial when considering learning communities and whether the complexity is supported or diminished. Davis et al. (2008) state that a feedback loop is “a continuous and recursive process that takes part of

a systems output and feeds it back as input” (p.204). This is one of the tenants of action research, and specifically that of Appreciative Inquiry, which has strong implications for my work. Throughout my career I have struggled with the challenge of providing assessment that helps support and promote student learning -- which could be referred to as a positive feedback loop since it amplifies the desired behaviour (i.e. learning). It is my position, supported by Davis, Sumara and Luce-Kapler, that the feedback that we give affects the effectiveness of a learning community. This position suggests that we must find a system of feedback that will support the complexity and development of an emergent condition that will result in an emergent learning community. I believe that Appreciative Inquiry is a methodology that will help us create feedback loops that will support the development of emergent learning communities.

Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative Inquiry is a genre of organizational review and growth facilitation that has great potential for revealing and facilitating changes in complex communities and specifically complex learning communities. Appreciative Inquiry (AI) was first described in *The Journal of Management and Organizational Change* in 1987 (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). AI originated in the business field but has been implemented in many different settings and can be used in all aspects of organizational design where human beings play a key role. The process of Appreciative Inquiry follows a rigorous structure. The structure begins by eliciting individual thinking and then continues through talking about strengths and personal and professional engagement with a common understanding. The outcome is often the creation of a plan for the future and a commitment to continued action by the participants. The process of Appreciative Inquiry

is developed through four stages, often expressed as the 4-D cycle: Discover, Dream, Design, and Deliver, summarized below (Cooperrider et al., 2003):

1. Discover: The first task is hearing, understanding, and appreciating what is present in a system
2. Dream: This stage involves trying to envision what is the greatest potential for the system.
3. Design: This involves the creation of a set of “provocative propositions” that add a further grounding to the process and a direction for the growth or change to embark upon.
4. Destiny: This is a commitment to action in an open ended planning meaning that, rather than decide on a single plan of action, individual or collective plans may be developed and implemented.

Since Appreciative Inquiry was developed as a business organizational development tool it is important to look at the definition of an organization in a business setting. The online business dictionary (<http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/organization.html>) defines an organization as a:

social unit of people, systematically arranged and managed to meet a need or to pursue collective goals on a continuing basis. All organizations have a management structure that determines relationships between functions and positions, and subdivides and delegates roles, responsibilities, and authority to carry out defined tasks. Organizations are open systems in that they affect and are affected by the environment beyond their boundaries. (Organization, n.d.)

This definition has many connections to complexity theory, such as the fact that an organization is open and is affected by the environment surrounding it and the environment that it affects. AI provides a set of procedures and processes that help support the definition of an organization as well as the growth/development of the organization. These processes may not occur in any particular order; therefore, a sound understanding of the appreciative inquiry theory, research and principles is necessary so that the processes can be identified and nurtured as they appear (Watkins & Mohr, 2001, p. 37-38). There are eight assumptions that are fundamental to AI. These are:

1. In every society, organization or group, something works
2. What we focus on becomes our reality
3. Reality is created in the moment and there are multiple realities
4. The act of asking questions of an organization or group influences the group in some way.
5. People have more confidence and comfort to journey to the future (the unknown) when they carry parts of the past (the known).
6. If we carry parts of the past forward, they should be what is best about the past.
7. It is important to value differences.
8. The language we use creates our reality (Hall and Hammond, 2001).

These assumptions seem straight forward and easy to comprehend, but in practice can be somewhat challenging and different from some of the traditional models such as realist and scientific approaches used for social research. Realist and scientific approaches rely on a more linear “cause and effect” model of a system that attempts to isolate variables and

identify the resulting impact on the system. Appreciative inquiry recognizes the complexity within a system and suggests that all components have an impact that is not easily repeated due to the fact that there are multiple realities that can vary from moment to moment. One of the assumptions mentioned above states that there are multiple realities and that the realities are dependent on where we place our focus. This implies that realities are individual for each person in a system and if this is the case then each person potentially could have a unique reality. This is one of the key concepts of complexity theory in that the acceptance of diversity of realities increases the potential for novel approaches to an issue or problem. This diversity of realities increases the collective knowledge pool and increases the potential for a novel approach to emerge. This is a much different method of studying a learning community than the traditional scientific method of trying to minimize the variables at play. Hammond and Hall (2001) point out that “assumption four, the act of asking questions of an organization or group influences the group in some way” (p.3), also counters the traditional social research model that the researcher can remain a neutral observer or interviewer. I believe that a researcher’s very presence in the group changes the group dynamics in some manner. This also refers to assumption eight, suggesting that “the way researchers word questions influences the group in some manner” (p.3). If assumption eight is true then as qualitative researchers we must not be focused on isolating ourselves from the research process, but rather accept that we are a part of the process and acknowledge that the knowledge we bring and questions that we choose to pose have an impact on the group that we are studying. One additional assumption that I believe is crucial to the support of the assumptions of AI is that all voices of the group should be heard. This means that all members of a community should have the opportunity to be

involved and give input into the AI process. AI is based on the premise that mutual respect, valuing, and appreciation are essential for people to reach their potential (Srivastva & Cooperrider, 1990). This inclusivity and recognition of the presence of multiple realities is crucial so that the plans that emerge out of the inquiry represent that of the collective. This collective vision honours a process in which everyone has had the opportunity for input and will therefore be more willing to support potential change(s).

Resistance and change

One of the great challenges that proponents of systematic change face is resistance from the participants in that system. Generally, based on my fifteen years of experience both as a teacher in formal and informal settings, teachers are working diligently to provide the best possible learning experiences for their students -- teaching is a profession that involves a great deal of personal commitment so many teachers take great pride in their expertise and practice. Teachers generally put extensive time and thought into their pedagogy and with the time and energy invested come a pride in their work. This pride can result in a tendency to be resistant to change unless it is consistent with their beliefs and experiences. This resistance to change is a belief that is prevalent in the research as well. As Richardson (1998) states,

As I looked into the literature on teacher change, the sentiment I found expressed was that teachers do not change, that change hurts and that is why people do not change, and that teachers are recalcitrant. The literature suggests that teachers resist doing whatever is being proposed because they want to cling to their old ways. Change makes people feel uncomfortable. This view of change in teaching practice dominated the educational literature until the early 1990s. (n.p.)

Richardson then goes on to point out that this statement does not reflect her experience and that teachers are constantly faced with change and are in fact very capable of change if they have some control over the change process. One of the challenges with some models of systemic change is that the methodology tends to focus on the deficits that are found within the system rather than focussing on the strengths. For teachers and all of the staff that take such pride in their work, it is very challenging to focus on the deficits that may be present in their current practice. Appreciative Inquiry provides an alternative approach in which the focus is placed on the best of what already exists in a system or organization. This allows proud individuals to be more open to sharing their experiences since they are focussing on the aspects that are working well in the system rather than just focussing on their challenges or shortcomings.

Focussing on the Positive

AI provides a process in which we as teachers and leaders within the community can move away from a focus on the negative, during which we try to identify the problems or deficits within an organization such as a school, and start to look at the strengths or potential of the organization to provide successful experiences to the members of the learning community. The deficit model of assessment has a long history and seems to be engrained in our culture. Egan and Feyerherm (2005) state that:

finally, we have noticed there is a perverse belief that struggling is an honorable pursuit. In our culture we seem to have a belief that struggle and pain signify growth. We go to the gym, work out hard, and then talk about with some degree of bragging how “hard” we worked, how much effort we put into taking care of our bodies! What if life and work were effortless that what we wanted flowed

from what we could imagine and then create? We are suggesting that the process of change need not be one of pain and struggle, but one of stirring the imagination, creativity, and energy of people. (n.p.)

This idea of needing to struggle or overcome individual weaknesses in order to grow is the main tenet of the deficit model of assessment which suggests that one must identify what is lacking or missing and then improve on it. The approach that is used in Appreciative Inquiry is that the strengths are present and we do not need to overcome something that is missing but enhance what already exists. This alternate approach allows the participants, including staff, students, and their families, to engage in creating a new vision based on their previous success and empower them to grow in new directions. Isen's (2000) research shows that people experiencing positive feelings are more flexible, creative, integrative, open to information, and efficient in their thinking. This efficiency allows them to focus on the challenges at hand, create applicable solutions, and implement them rapidly so that they can see results quickly that will reinforce the change. This is especially important for middle school students who are developmentally looking for experiences that are immediate and personally relevant to their current reality. By introducing the process of Appreciative Inquiry to the members of a school community, there is the potential for rapid growth and engagement as they celebrate their accomplishments and move forward empowered to continue to look for greater success. A review of the research demonstrates significant success in applying AI in a variety of settings including large group, small group, private, public, and globally. In public venues, it has been used as a change and evaluation process in multiple settings: government, health, and education (Bushe & Kassam, 2005; Calabrese, 2006; Freitas,

2006); business and religious organizations (Browne, 1999; Kinni, 2003); and global settings to empower people to transform their lives and that of their villages (Murrell, 1999; Thatchenkery, 1999).

Current research also suggests that traditional methods of reform that focus on the problems or deficits within a school are ineffective due to the unwillingness of the participants to link their actions with low student production (Garcia and Guerra, 2004). This reflects the fact that teachers care so greatly about the success of their students that it is difficult to link their low academic development with the efforts that the teacher has made to ensure their success. The link between low student production and a teacher's beliefs and pedagogy is difficult to acknowledge when the teacher has committed significant time and available resources to try to ensure their success. Teachers are very passionate about their profession and work very hard to ensure the best for their students so when the students struggle, it is difficult to assume an unbiased perspective to assess the progress when they are personally invested in the situation. AI has the potential to focus on the positive actions that empower all members of the community and to overcome the challenges that have been encountered by other organizational analysis models focusing on deficits or other negative aspects of a learning community. The key to the AI process is that the positives are used to generate a change in the community. Appreciative Inquiry has gained popularity as more organizations become familiar with the process and learn about some of the results that it has generated (Dick, 2004). Organizational change facilitators have reported a greater engagement from participants since they have been able to share their personal experiences. Rather than spending a great deal of time focussing on what was missing, which often was unknown to the

participants, they could instead focus on the attributes that were already present (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2003). By focussing on the positives, the engagement of more of the members of the community can be promoted due to the fact that people feel heard, and able to share stories of successes that they have had; this process has the potential to enable participants to do just that (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2003).

Some scholars suggest that one of the hurdles that AI faces is that it becomes one of celebration of the current situation rather than one of looking to a new better situation within the system (Bushe, 2007). This is a key critique of AI that needs to be addressed.

Not just celebration, but also growth

It has been suggested that AI must focus on the generative, not just the positive (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). This means that we are not just looking at merely celebrating the strengths in a system, but using those identified strengths to develop and enhance the system in some way. Bushe (2007) suggests that we should change the name from AI to “Generative Inquiry” since it is more than just appreciating the strengths in a system, but rather identifying strengths and then using those strengths to create a direction for growth. He goes on to state:

Generativity occurs when people collectively discover or create new things that they can use to positively alter their collective future. AI is generative in a number of ways. It is the quest for new ideas, images, theories and models that liberate our collective aspirations, alter the social construction of reality and, in the process, make available decisions and actions that weren't available or didn't occur to us before. When successful, AI

generates spontaneous, unsupervised, individual, group and organizational action toward a better future (Bushe, 2007).

This generative approach to change allows participants to create new approaches to challenges that they face. This takes the four-D cycle of Appreciative inquiry and suggests that it has a direction. This direction is illustrated in Figure 1 as the arrow that is

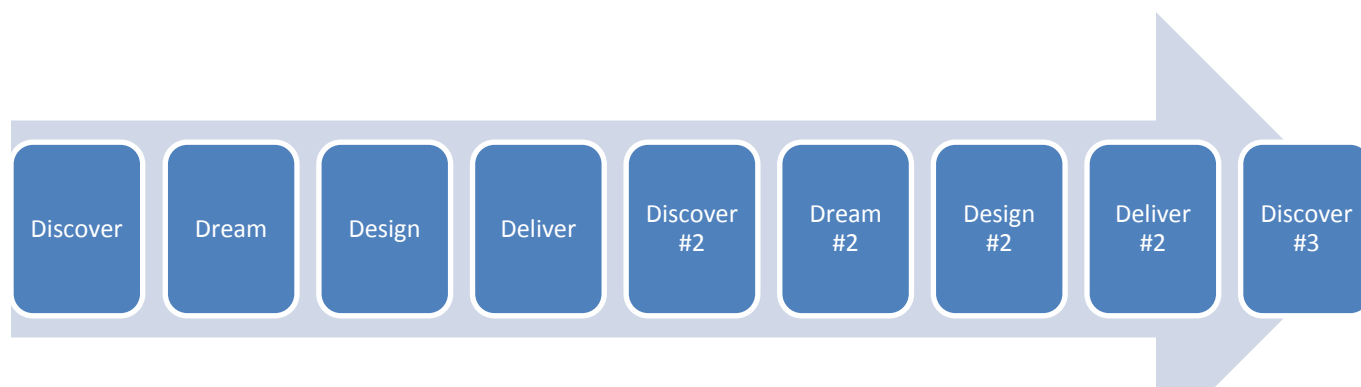


Figure 1 Generative Vision of Appreciative Inquiry

behind the cyclical Appreciative Inquiry process. The direction that is generated is a product of the repetition of the cycle and is responsive to the results of each individual completed AI cycle.

In a middle school some of the challenges are focussed around meeting the learning needs of the students and preparing them to be successful at high school and to nurture their development as lifelong learners. The generative approach empowers participants to alter their current practice since they have been an integral part of the development of the inquiry and therefore are engaged in the transformation process. As middle schools are still relatively new to the Victoria School district, it is important that the staff, students, and families involved in middle schools reflect on their implementation and use the experiences and the lessons we can learn from those

experiences to continue to shape the model as it develops. This reflection and implementation is part of an action research model that is promoted by the district and the feedback is encouraged by school and district administration. It is encouraged as a process for the development of short term and long term school goals that are reviewed annually by district administration. Moreover, the process of being a reflective practitioner is one that is promoted throughout the education field (Adler, 2006) and is promoted as a professional development goal at a school, district, and provincial level.

Applications of Appreciative Inquiry

The application and effectiveness of AI has been demonstrated in many similar situations to that found at Cedar Hill Middle School. The Victoria Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils (VCPAC) implemented an AI process to study the effectiveness of the middle school implementation within the district and the preliminary data was very well received by all members of the district. As part of that process, I had the opportunity to speak to many of the participants who were very excited by some of the propositions that were generated, specifically the main one which was around giving a variety of learning opportunities to students. This inquiry process is ongoing and each school has been tasked with the implementation (the “destiny phase” as described by Cooperrider et al., 2003) and there are plans for a future gathering to continue the process. The Vancouver School Board has also used the process of AI at eight different sites and found “convincing evidence of transformational change in areas related to student learning” at four of the sites it studied (Bushe, 2007). Bushe defines transformational change as “changes in the cultures of their systems that should increase

student learning – things like a significant shift in how teachers view their role, collaboration and partnership between teachers in the service of learning where none existed before, much greater engagement and voice of students” (2007, p.1). These sites were variable in that some were single school sites and some were multi-school sites. Bushe found that two of the remaining sites reported positive incremental change and the remaining two had mixed or no change. One of the sites with mixed or no change was a multi-school site and at the site one of the schools that incorporated AI did report “substantial positive incremental change and adopted AI as an ongoing process” (Bushe, p. 2). Bushe also found a correlation between the degree of change and the motivation of site coordinators as change agents. Bushe noted that there was “a clear pattern of correlation between level of school sponsorship before the summit and degree of change” (2007, p. 8). This implies that the degree of change may be dependent on the sponsorship or level of support that is found within the system prior to the introduction of the Appreciative Inquiry. The question then becomes whether a learning community has the leadership that can nurture the potential for change or generate the support among the members of the learning prior to the implementation of the appreciative inquiry process.

Challenges with Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative Inquiry, like any intervention, needs careful consideration and critique. As Richer (2007) reported, the variable she hypothesized would change as a result of Appreciative Inquiry, the retention rate for nurses on an oncology unit, did not. For Peele’s (2006) quantitative study, Appreciative Inquiry increased group identification mid-task and increased team effectiveness post-task. Peele also tested Creative Problem

Solving and found that it generated equally reasonable and potent outcomes. Peele went on to suggest that the effectiveness of AI in his study was in identifying strengths and supporting complexity, but that it depended on the acceptance of AI as a methodology by the participants in this study. Any critique of AI must extend to assumptions of what can be called “positive.” Social construction dictates that what is “positive” is variable and relies on local interpretation (van der Haar & Hosking, 2004). It may be that, in cases where one person attempts to impose a particular view of reality, positive or not, on another, the results will be perceived as negative (van der Haar & Hosking, 2004).

A second challenge that is faced by organizations that take on the AI process versus some of the other types of Action Research is the commitment of time. As Egan and Lancaster (2005) state, “The long-term commitment to AI may be more challenging for organizations than other interventions” (p.44). Egan and Lancaster go on to explain that with other forms of action research there is often a more determined timeframe in place since once the problem is solved then the research can be finalized. This is not the case with AI since it is an ongoing cyclical process in which the review and reflection is part of the synthesis of the new direction. This results in a timeframe that is infinite and that can be daunting to some organizations.

A final challenge with AI is that much depends on the intentions of the leaders and facilitators as well as on the commitment of the first contributors to the process. As Barge and Oliver (2003) describe, interpersonal communication recognizes that “certain conversational acts, such as turning points and transgressions, can trigger relational reconfiguration” (p. 139). Meaning and power, contested within organizations or among individuals, has been shown to dampen appreciative intentions (Barge and Oliver, 2003).

This statement suggests that AI could be less effective in situations where there is a strong hierarchical structure. By extension this may suggest that AI could be most applicable to complex systems due the fact that one characteristic of complex systems is that of decentralized control. That being said, leadership and the implementation of change is something that requires further examination if we are to consider how changes in complex systems can occur.

Implementing change in middle schools

The view of leadership is changing in our modern learning communities. As we move away from the view that school leadership should be a top down hierarchical model to that of supporting the complexity within a system, the leadership roles have become more diverse (Uhl-Bien, Marion and McKelvey, 2007). The challenge becomes how we implement leadership within a community that we identify as complex, which by definition means that there is a condition of decentralized control. This suggests that different members of the system can be in control at any one time. This theory is supported by the Appreciative Inquiry methodology since it values all contributions from all members of the system, and decentralized control also suggests that any member could be in control at any moment. This is much different than a hierarchical system where leadership flows from the top of the hierarchy downwards, but this hierarchical system is only one of several views of leadership that is becoming less and less accepted (Hopkins and Higham, 2007). Within a school learning community there are many types of leadership and many leadership roles. These include the school administration, district administration, teacher leaders, student leaders and parent leaders. The research suggests

that principals have a critical role in creating the conditions necessary for school improvement to occur, but if decentralized control is present then all members of the community must play a role in creating the necessary conditions. Champy (1995) sums up much of this research when he states, “if someone in a key leadership position is opposed to change, an improvement initiative is almost certainly doomed to fail (in Dufour and Eaker, 1998, p. 183)”. Having said this, the idea of sharing leadership and supporting all members of a learning community as they attempt to improve the learning conditions for students is crucial. All the members of a system have the potential to derail a learning initiative but all members also have the potential to contribute to building the momentum or capacity necessary to maintain an improvement’s initiative. This would suggest that leadership is not a single person’s role, but rather a characteristic of a collective. If the learning community is indeed a complex system then there must be the condition of decentralized control which is contrary to that of a hierarchical, top-down approach.

There has been much research around different types of leadership that are required within complex learning systems. Uhl-Bien, Marion and McKelvey (2007) suggest:

In CLT(Complexity Learning Theory), we recognize three broad types of leadership: (1) leadership grounded in traditional, bureaucratic notions of hierarchy, alignment and control (*i.e.*, administrative leadership), (2) leadership that *structures* and *enables* conditions such that CAS (Complex Adaptive Systems) are able to optimally address creative problem solving, adaptability, and learning (referring to what we will call, enabling leadership); and (3) leadership as

a *generative dynamic* that underlies emergent change activities (what we will call, adaptive leadership) (p.299).

Given my view that a learning community is a complex system then the theoretical underpinning methodology of AI, as will be discussed in chapter three, is an appropriate choice since it recognizes all members of the community as potential leaders from whom all data is equally valued.

There has been a consistent commitment by the staff at Cedar Hill to critically examine the choices and decisions that shape the school within its professional community. This commitment to reflection and self examination is present in the data and suggests that Cedar Hill Middle School has highly motivated site leaders who have demonstrated a high level of commitment to a process of self reflection and therefore can provide support to implement change within the system. Within this type of setting the role of the administration team is no longer that of the sole leader, but more towards a shift to a “leader of leaders” (Dufour, Dufour and Eaker, 2008, p. 310).

Appreciative Inquiry as differentiated from Action Research

Appreciative Inquiry is a form of action research in that it is a cyclical process in which data is collected, changes are implemented and new data is collected and evaluated to assess the change that was made as well as being a basis for the next cycle of change. I believe the effectiveness of AI as a methodology lies in the focus on the strengths within the community. Traditional action research, in my experience, tends to focus on the deficits within a system and then implement changes to address the identified challenges/problems. Egan and Lancaster (2005) explain that most forms of action research are based on problem

solving whereas Appreciative Inquiry does not try to address a problem, or deficit within a system, but tries to identify strengths that can be used to help further develop the system. They continue on to quote Zemke (1999) who stated that with AI, “the idea is to look at an organization as a positive force, understanding its strengths, and figure out how to refine and enhance what it—or a system within it—is already doing well” (Zemke, 1999; Egan and Lancaster, 2005).

With many forms of action research, the focus on the deficits, or problems within the system, can often become the driving force and lead to a situation where so many deficits are identified that solutions are hard to imagine and implement. With Appreciative Inquiry, the process of forming strong questions, listening to all parties involved, focusing on the strengths, and planning to maximize those strengths for the development of the community provides a research genre that allows participants to engage without fear of focusing on their faults or shortcomings to overcome a challenge or problem. This ongoing cycle of change identifies strengths, engages participants and promotes growth towards a situation that is deemed utopian by all the members of the system rather than spending large amounts of time and energy focussing on what is not working or missing from a system. The members of the community are able to celebrate success, create an action plan that they can take ownership of, and implement change in a direction that is desirable for their learning community.

Chapter III. Methodology

Appreciative Inquiry is a genre of organizational review and growth facilitation that has potential for revealing and facilitating changes in complex communities. AI is a form of action research which is a collaborative type of study in which the researcher is considered a part of the system. In educational situations, action research often takes the form of educators collaborating with each other or critical friends to: 1) assess their practice; 2) develop new strategies; 3) implement them; 4) observe to see if there is a change in the results; and 5) to re-assess so as to redevelop new strategies and continue to observe as part of an ongoing cyclical process (Dick, 2004). AI is a type of action research, but what makes AI unique from other forms of action research is the focus on the strengths or positive aspects within the system which are used to help guide the development of the system. Similar to many forms of action research, AI was developed to involve four specific steps that allow participants to: 1) discover the strengths within a system; 2) dream of new possibilities for that system; 3) design a new action plan; and 4) deliver a new perspective for the growth of the system process (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). This process of reflection, planning, and implementation can empower participants by reflecting on the positive attributes of a system and trying to maximize those positives in an attempt to further minimize the negative aspects (Hall and Hammond, 1998). AI, like all action research genres, is intended to be an ongoing process which has been very effective in many complex communities within the business world and can be easily adapted and applied to a middle school community as demonstrated by the variety of examples of AI being used in educational settings.

Appreciative Inquiry is a strength-based intervention, predicated on the theories of social construction, the simultaneity principle, the poetic principle, the anticipatory principle, and positive thinking (Cooperrider et al., 2003). These five theoretical principles are briefly summarized below:

1. **Social Construction:** Appreciative inquiry recognizes that social knowledge, human competence and organizational destiny are formed in the collective imagination and expressed through individual reality.
2. **The Simultaneity Principle:** Appreciative Inquiry understands that as soon as a question is asked the process of change begins. Inquiry is itself an intervention.
3. **The Poetic Principle:** Appreciative Inquiry holds that people's pasts, presents, and futures are endless sources of information and perpetually open to interpretation.
4. **The Anticipatory Principle:** Appreciative Inquiry believes that any group's future is its most significant driving force.
5. **Positive Thinking:** Appreciative Inquiry operates on the notion that asking positive questions and seeking positive answers will result in completely different outcomes from typical problem solving or analyzing failures (Cooperrider et al., 2003).

The process of AI is broken down into a series of steps that are part of an ongoing cycle of organizational change. This series of steps is often referred to as the four D's: discover, dream, design, and deliver/destiny as mentioned in the previous chapter (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). The first step is that of discovery. During the discovery

phase participants are invited to discuss any possible thoughts around a guiding question.

As Hummel refers to in his work:

The heliotropic nature of AI engages people in organizations to realize what gives life to them and their organization when they are most effective. Instead of maintaining a problem-solution oriented approach, AI searches for the best of what exists within people and organizations (Norum et al., 2002). In evaluating a program, evidence is gathered of what is valued about current structures. This awareness of peak experiences is then used to envision the preferred future (Kerka, 2003). Questions used in AI research are stated in the affirmative—using positive language to evoke data primarily in the form of stories. AI questions guide participants to ponder what is best in their organization (Hummel, 2007, p. 16).

Once the strengths have been identified and recorded, they are used as a basis to develop the new plan of action. Hummel summarizes the AI process as:

the researcher facilitates participants to discover, dream, design, and define their destiny. Discovery occurs through engaging people in the articulation of strengths through comprehensive interviews. The dream phase is facilitated through a collective analysis and formation of vision statements. Possible propositions of the ideal organization are articulated in the design phase, intended to affirm each person's capacity and positive core. The final phase, destiny, enables members to sustain momentum for ongoing positive change (Hummel, 2007; Thatchenkery, 1999).

In other words, Appreciative Inquiry is a form of action research that has four components to it. The first is the discovery stage in which participants are invited to share stories of their greatest experiences within a system. These stories are used to uncover what is working well or the strengths of the system. Once the strengths are uncovered/realized, the participants are asked to “dream” and try to imagine the best case scenario that they could envision for the organization or system that they are involved in. This is often summarized as vision statements or the description of a utopian situation in which everything they could imagine is possible. The third step is the design stage in which propositions or planning statements are made that support the strengths that have been identified and try to nurture those strengths in an attempt to improve the entire system using the resources that are available to and within the system. This process produces a plan of action that can then be implemented and reviewed through subsequent AI processes or other reflective practices. And finally is the destiny stage in which the propositions from the previous stage are nurtured and supported and the change is monitored in an attempt to identify the new situation. This assessment can be in the form of more story collection, and specifically stories relating to the Appreciative Inquiry process which brings us back to another discovery stage which can start the whole process anew.

This Appreciative Inquiry examined the learning community found around Cedar Hill Middle School in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada. Cedar Hill Middle School is a diverse middle school in the Greater Victoria School district that currently has an enrolment of approximately 450 students from a variety of socioeconomic areas. For the purposes of this study I define the organization, or learning community, as the body of individuals that are directly involved in the daily activity of Cedar Hill Middle school

which includes administration, staff, students, and parents. This project involved the collection of data to identify the themes, and specifically strengths, found within the Cedar Hill Middle school learning community. The goal of the project was to try to understand and appreciate the complexity within the Cedar Hill middle school learning community and analyze whether or not Appreciative Inquiry is a methodology that can support the complexity and produce a deeper understanding that can guide the future direction and growth of the school community. Through a series of interviews with students, parents, and staff, as described in further detail in the Data collection section below, stories and experiences were collected so as to identify ideas about the strengths of the community and ways that the people that make up the community would like to see it grow or change. Given that the students are the focal group for which decisions are made within the learning community, it was vital that they were involved in the research process. The data was collected through a dialogic interview process in which the interviewer collected responses to five guiding questions. These questions were:

- 1) What is one of the best experiences you have had in (attending)(working in)(your connection with) Cedar Hill Middle School or the Cedar Hill Middle School community? Why was this one of the best experiences?
- 2) What do you think we could do even better to help all our students succeed? Why do you think your suggestion will help all our students succeed?
- 3) In three years from now, what is the best that you can imagine for Cedar Hill Middle School students staff or parents? Why would you like to see this happen?

4) Given your experience in the Cedar Hill Middle School learning community, what do you feel are the best learning opportunities that will prepare students for high school?

5) Given your experience in the Cedar Hill Middle School learning community, what do you feel are the best learning opportunities that will prepare students to be lifelong learners?

These questions were intended to be open ended so the participants were able to use any experience that was meaningful to them and general enough that they could be answered by any member of the learning community. The questions were specifically asking for the “best” experiences in an attempt to identify strengths and they were well received by the participants. Each question was readily answered and the challenges that were faced by the participants were usually in choosing one such event or experience. Many of the participants enquired as to whether they could describe more than one event or experience and were happy to give multiple responses for several of the questions. The third question was interesting in that the timeframe chosen was three years and that was deliberate because I wanted to challenge participants to try to identify actions that could happen in the timeframe of a middle years student who went through the three year program. It also provides a timeframe that could be used for future Appreciative Inquiries as part of the cyclical nature of the methodology.

Student researchers

For this project students were involved in the compilation, synthesis, and identification of strengths found within the school community. Students were invited, through a series of public address announcements, to come to a meeting to find out about the project in which they could share their ideas and experiences about how to make Cedar Hill Middle school better for students. The students who attended were informed about the project and requested to get parental consent to take part. Upon parental consent, student research assistants were provided with the interview questions so that they were familiar with the interview content. Then the students were asked to take the questions home and interview other members of the community. This was most often their family and the data was collected in written form with the parents writing their responses below the questions on the question sheet. The students then returned the sheets, with their consent forms, prior to being interviewed themselves. The student interviews were conducted at the school and were digitally recorded so that they could be downloaded into NVivo9 and coded. The written parent responses were manually transcribed into NVivo9 for coding. The data collected was open coded and then returned to the student researchers to confirm that the themes identified were similar to the information that they had intended in their interviews and the information that they had collected from their parents, and to ensure that the categories that I identified in the data analysis were consistent with the beliefs and opinions of the students. Having the students take the role of researcher reflects my belief that students should be the focus of the community and it ensured that the identified themes were relevant and apparent to the students involved.

The data was collected, in accordance with the principles of AI, using two data collection techniques: personal interview and written questionnaire response. The principles of AI (social construction, the simultaneity principle, the poetic principle, the anticipatory principle, and positive thinking) suggest that all realities are unique and equally valid, that all contributors have an equal voice in the process, that all experiences are sources of information, and that the type of questions posed will have a significant impact on the results (Cooperrider et al., 2003). The interviews with the participants were recorded, electronically coded using the software program NVivo9 to identify the frequently mentioned strengths within the community. These strengths were coded and used to create categories of responses. The categories were shared with the interviewees to ensure validity. As previously mentioned, the school district had already initiated an AI into the effectiveness of the middle school system and continues to seek sources of data to better understand this type of community. The district AI questions were used as a reference since they were designed to consider the district implementation whereas this research focused on one learning community within the district. As mentioned earlier, this research intended to analyze the effectiveness of AI as a tool for complex systems and specifically for the Cedar Hill Middle School learning community. The questions posed as part of the VCPAC inquiry were similar in their wording since they were trying to identify the best experiences but did not go on to specifically look at the idea of preparing students for high school (question 4) or to be life-long learners (question 5), which I added in order to address two of the goals that are posed for middle schools. This study will provide further information to the work done by the VCPAC and can hopefully be used in conjunction with the general district-wide information indicating trends that

were starting to emerge from the inquiry to provide a better picture of the middle school implementation process in this area. The district inquiry consisted primarily of the first two stages of the AI process and it remains to be completed so this research can in turn act as a model for the completion of the project that was part of the inspiration for its genesis. By studying one school I will be able to identify the strengths but also identify some specific initiatives to help influence the schools goals and daily practice.

The art is in the questioning

Through the previous AI that was initiated at a district level, three questions were used to initiate the data gathering. These same questions were modified slightly, in response to the focus on the Cedar Hill learning community, and were used as the first three questions used posed to the participants. These questions were chosen since they were intended to start the discussion about any aspect of the learning community that the participants valued. They were very effective at initiating conversations since they were broad enough that all of the participants had things to contribute. The first three questions were:

- 1) What is one of the best experiences you have had in (attending)(working in)(your connection with) Cedar Hill Middle School or the Cedar Hill Middle School community? Why was this one of the best experiences?

- 2) What do you think we could do even better to help all our students succeed? Why do you think your suggest will help all our students succeed?

3) In three years from now, what is the best that you can imagine for Cedar Hill Middle School students staff or parents? Why would you like to see this happen?

These questions were very effective at generating dialogue about what the participants truly valued within the Cedar Hill learning community. The third question provided a small enough window in time for the participants to imagine achievable goals that could be implemented over one cycle of students that go through the school. Many of the participants asked about the resources that may be available and the response given to them by the researcher was to imagine the best case scenario given all the resources they would need. This answer was to ensure that the participants were not limited by perceived or real limitations that may actually be present in the system.

The first three questions were good to initiate the discussion about the strengths of the Cedar Hill learning community, but I really wanted to try to guide the participants through the AI process so I felt that I needed to ask two more questions that were more specific to my particular research context. Questions four and five were added in an attempt to identify experiences that help to better prepare students for the larger contextual goal of graduation and establishing a pattern of becoming a lifelong learner.

These questions were:

4) Given your experience in the Cedar Hill Middle School learning community, what do you feel are the best learning opportunities that will prepare students for high school?

5) Given your experience in the Cedar Hill Middle School learning community, what do you feel are the best learning opportunities that will prepare students to be lifelong learners?

All of the questions were intended to initiate a dialogue about the best experiences that the participants had within the learning community. They were left very open ended so as not to limit or restrict the possible answers that the participants might have given. I also did not want to limit their responses by asking them to identify the “strengths” in the community since I felt like that might have caused confusion about the definition of “strength”. The intent was rather than to have a conversation about what constitutes strength, the strengths would reveal themselves through the participant’s responses.

The questions were generated to try to follow the AI process. When we overlay the questions on an image of the four-D AI cycle we can see how the questions guided the participants through the AI process (see Figure 2). Question one represents the discover phase in that it asked the participants to describe a best experience that they had within the learning community. From there we moved to question two that asked participants to dream of anything that we could do better within the community. Question three combined both the design and deliver aspect by asking participants to imagine the best possible situation that could be in place over a three year time period and that then brings us back to the discovery of more specific examples of experiences that were specific to two of the perceived goals of the middle school system. By moving the participants through this AI process, it enabled them to build a vision of the perceived

strengths within the learning community and then use that vision to answer the more specific questions four and question five.

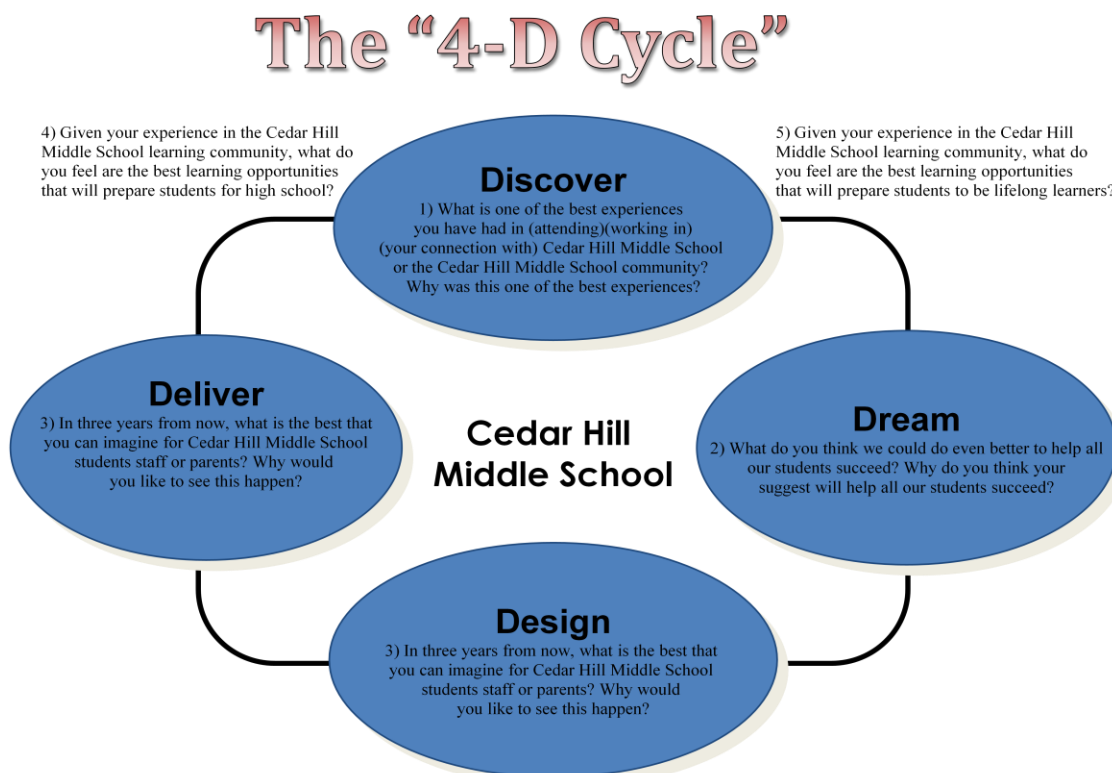


Figure 2 The AI cycle that was guided by the interview questions

Data collection

Data was collected over a three month period in which students, staff, administrators, and parents were invited to take part in this project through school announcements, and newsletters. The invitations resulted in twelve members of the community coming forward and this sample included five teachers, three students, two parents, one support staff and one administrator. The sample was able to represent many of the components of the learning community and the diversity of the learning

community. The students in the sample consisted of primarily grade eight students who were beneficial to the study since they had three years of experiences to draw upon when they answered the questions that were posed to them. The grade six population was not eligible due to the fact that I am the researcher and a grade six teacher in the school and did not want to have any potential power over concerns. The students interviewed for this research may have been students of mine in grade six, two years prior to this project, but none of them are ones for whom I currently have any input into the assessment of their academic progress. I interviewed these students and the interviews were recorded using a digital recorder as well as a written response sheet (see Appendix 1). The students were given a copy of the questions to take home in order to interview the community members which also enabled the students to be familiar with the questions and be able to use the written copy of the questions to interview their parent or parents and collect their responses. The students then returned with the parents' responses on the paper which was included as data. Then the students were interviewed to get their responses to the inquiry questions. Their data was collected last so that they had time to experience the process, become familiar with the questions, and contemplate their responses.

A second method of data collection involved staff interviews that were conducted with the staff at the school. The staff surveyed included teachers, administration and support staff. Staff members were invited to answer the questions either through a written response or by an oral interview. All of the staff members were provided with the questions ahead of time so that they were familiar with the questions that were to be posed to them. Some participants answered the questions prior to the interview and then referred to their written responses as a basis for the interviews that were conducted. Once

all of the data was collected, it was transcribed electronically and then coded to identify recurring categories and themes. This coding was done by listening to the interviews and identifying the answers that were given to each of the questions. These answers were marked as nodes that were tabulated for frequency and relationships to the other nodes identified. Once all of the data was coded the frequency of each node was examined to see which were the most prevalent strengths identified. These strengths were used to form categories of nodes.

Once the data was collected and categories identified, those categories were shared with the student researchers to confirm that the trends identified were consistent with the ones that they intended and collected from the participants that they interviewed. I wanted to have the student volunteers involved in the entire data collection process, providing them an opportunity to review the identified categories to ensure that the categories identified also resonated with their stories and personal experiences rather than only my own interpretations. The students provided some interesting insights to the data that was collected and were generally very supportive of the themes that I had identified. This process ensured that the voices heard are primarily those of the students, since the community that we are creating should be designed to meet their needs. The challenge then becomes how to incorporate the data collected, given the logistical challenges, i.e., scheduling, curriculum structures, etc. that are faced within a middle school community.

Once the interviews and written responses were collected the data had to be organized, categorized and analyzed to find the consistent themes generated by the data within the responses of the participants. The data was uploaded into a qualitative analysis

software program called NVivo9. This program was then used to listen to the stories that were shared in an effort to identify events or experiences that were common among the participants as well as the experiences that were unique to each participant. Initially all of the interviews were listened to from beginning to end and a list of experiences or perceived strengths in the community was made. These strengths were created as nodes in the analysis program as I wanted to ensure that I had a comprehensive set of nodes created prior to actually coding their appearance in the data. Once the list was generated, the data was analyzed a second time to try to identify the precise locations within the interviews or written responses where the nodes were mentioned. Once all of the data was processed a summary sheet was printed off to see which of the nodes were found consistently in the responses of the participants. The nodes were analysed for their frequency in appearance as well as the number of participants that referred to the node. The nodes that were identified as being found in the responses of the majority of participants were then used to identify the trends in the data that will be discussed in the next chapter.

Challenges to the data collection process

I would be remiss if I did not take time to reflect on some of the challenges of the data collection process. The first was the sample of participants surveyed. As a teacher within the learning community that I studied, I was very careful to avoid a power over situation with my participants. This meant that as a grade six teacher, I did not interview any of the grade six students. The students surveyed were actually all grade eight students and that only represents one third of the student population. Another challenge was that the participants were all volunteers who had to see enough value in the project to commit

their time and energy to take part. I believe that this limits the sample to a specific group of people who may not represent the entire learning community. I also would suggest that the familiarity with the methodology itself may have been a limiting factor, since I am not sure that people are familiar with the Appreciative Inquiry process and that may have caused some to be resistant to getting involved. For future cycles of this inquiry I will be challenging myself to try to get more participants and to try to create structures that will allow more voices to be heard. The interview process itself may be a limitation due to the fact that community members may not be comfortable with the process or willing to give up the time necessary. Trying to find other alternative and innovative methods to collect data from as many members of the community as possible will be an ongoing challenge for future cycles of this inquiry.

Chapter IV. Findings

This research project set out to determine the best practices that are found within the Cedar Hill learning community using an Appreciative Inquiry approach. As part of this study the data was coded to see if the conditions for a complex system, as established by Davis and Simmt (2003), were present and would be supported by the AI methodology. This research yielded findings that were consistent among all of the participants surveyed that strongly support the suggestion that middle school learning communities have a high degree of complexity and have characteristics that are consistent with those found in complex learning systems. Whether it was administration, staff, teachers, parents or students, there were certain strengths that were common to all of their experiences. There were also certain areas of improvement that were consistently noted among all of the participants that were involved. The consistency in these trends allows for the development of clear themes and will support the construction of strong new initiatives in the future development of this learning community and for the final deliver/destiny step of this initial cycle of the Appreciative Inquiry process.

The strengths that were identified within the learning community can be categorized in five specific areas. These areas are:

- a) The **professional expertise** of the staff working with the students;

- b) The **diversity** of curriculum based and extracurricular learning experiences that are provided for students;

c) The **relationships** that are created and nurtured between all members of the learning community but specifically between staff and students;

d) The **student centeredness of efforts made at the school** to maintain student engagement and celebrate student academic and extracurricular success; and finally

e) The **willingness to challenge** what is known and to be open to new ideas.

These areas provide some clear attributes that can be used to guide the future development of the school community. Once the strengths are shared with the staff, they can be used as underpinnings to the work that is done to meet the needs of the students. I think rather than directing the practice, it is important that when practices are developed, or reviewed, that they are assessed against the themes that were identified as the strengths of the community. If this guided decision making happens then the themes can both support the strengths as well as use the strengths to improve the experiences for all members of the learning community. For this to happen it is important that the themes are examined within the context of the data that they were identified. These trends strongly tie into the conditions of a complex system and reinforce the hypothesis that this community is indeed a complex system. If this is the case then it is important that we use the conditions to further guide the development and growth of the system to support the strengths within the complex system so that it can realize its potential as a learning system.

The professional expertise of the staff working with the students

The first category that was present in the data was that all of the participants surveyed commented on the quality and professionalism of the staff that work at Cedar Hill Middle School. The students, parents, and staff referred to the collegiality, high standards, approachability and professionalism displayed by the staff at the school. Each of the different groups of participants had characteristics that were more common in their interviews. For example, the students repeatedly referred to the approachability of the teachers and the link between the teachers and their success. The first evidence was presented by Charles, a pseudonym for one of the student participants who is a male grade eight student. Initially he struggled with middle school, but over his three years at Cedar Hill he learned a great deal about his own strengths and weaknesses. Charles has developed into a more confident student, and person, based on his observable pride in his latest academic and personal achievements that was not evident in his approach to school when he was in grade six. His comments summarized the importance of quality staff quite succinctly. He stated *“if you have awesome teachers then the year will be awesome”*. This indicates his belief that the teachers are the basis of the learning community and that they influence the results of that community for the students in the community. This sentiment was echoed by the other students such as Sarah and Jennifer, two grade eight students who made statements such as *“there is always someone you can go and talk to”* and *“the teachers are always working hard to help us with the work”*. Sarah expanded the idea of talking with teachers when she was asked how it was different than elementary school *“teachers are nice in elementary school but in middle school, because you are older, you can be yourself with the teachers in middle school and*

they understand you". Sarah's statement "*they understand you*" suggests that relationships are formed and that the students feel like the teachers can connect with them. Sarah and Jennifer also referred to the instructional practices that teachers use when they said:

we were in class when the teacher got this ah-ha moment that he realized that when he was teaching kids that he should try and teach them from a perspective of how they (the students) learned, not how he learned, the different concepts and I thought that was interesting since some of my teachers in the past have taught how they (the teachers) understand it not how we do.

They went on to explain how the teachers at Cedar Hill "*try to teach the concepts in different ways like instead of just reading from the book, we watch videos and the teachers tell us stories, sometimes they get boring, but usually they are pretty interesting and they relates them to real life so then you can think about different things.*" Jennifer went on to add that "*the teachers work hard to teach how the kids learn, and work hard to make sure we can relate to the information*". These comments really emphasize the desire of the teachers to help make the learning personally relevant to each of their students and the belief that they must strive to engage the students using a variety of techniques. This belief was also echoed by the parents surveyed, which was reflected in Lisa's statement regarding the music program at the school. Lisa is a parent who had one daughter complete her education at middle school while her second daughter has just completed grade seven. Lisa comments on one of the major strengths of the Cedar Hill community as being the teachers: "*the teaching is fantastic and this results in the kids*

being enthusiastic and involved". She continued on to identify the band program as an example of excellence in that it *"has a high percentage of the school involved and students really love being a part of it and performing with their friends for their families"*. Lisa has had both of her daughters in the band program and mentioned that it was one of the things that she heard great things about before her oldest daughter came to Cedar Hill. There was also consistency in the staff interviews that highlighted the expertise that was shared with them by their colleagues in terms of a diversity of teaching techniques as well as the willingness to share, learn from, and support each other.

The staff participants more frequently referred to the collegiality and professionalism that they experienced from their coworkers within the staff community. There was a recognition by all of the staff interviewed that the quality of their colleagues was very high in terms of professionalism, support for each other, and knowledge base due to their diverse teaching backgrounds areas of expertise and experiences. One member of the staff, Ingrid, has recently joined the Cedar Hill staff from another Victoria middle school, stated that *"people give their energy here"* and that *"the level of professional enquiry and questioning in this school is quite exceptional"*. Ingrid went on to describe some of examples of the giving being found in the community based charity events such as the annual drive for the Saint Vincent de Paul. Ingrid commented about *"the professional rigor and research"* that goes on and specifically referred to some of the work being done by a group of teachers involved in an action research project around improving numeracy for the students. She states,

my involvement with the action research group has been really rewarding since there is a group of staff working together even though people are coming from all ends of the spectrum as far as pedagogy. This is a school that is comfortable with the inquiry process and asking questions and questioning things. Even if people have very strong views everyone is able to weigh in.

She explains that she believes the expertise is a result of the “*extensive level of training in terms of the high percentage of staff that has undergone, or are currently involved in, graduate work or professional study of their personal pedagogical practice*”. This ability of staff to examine their own practice and beliefs about what they are doing within the learning community was also demonstrated by the openness and willingness of the staff to be part of this project. Many staff members were willing and eager to participate and spent a great deal of time during the interview process explaining in detail their experiences, beliefs and hopes for the future development of the community. The interviews, which were intended to last between twenty and thirty minutes, were much longer, with one staff member talking over seventy minutes and then approaching me the following day in an attempt to further clarify their answers. This in-depth sharing of beliefs and hopes for the future development of the community, which we will explore in further detail later in this chapter, led into the next area of strength that was the diversity of opportunities that have been developed for the student population at the school due to the expertise of the staff since diverse experiences are crucial to the development of opportunities for middle years students.

Diverse school cultures within a Middle School mindset

As middle schools were implemented in the Greater Victoria School District, many of the programs, curriculum and learning experiences were created based on the staff that was assigned to each individual school. Despite the fact that each of the middle schools was striving to implement the same model of middle schools with the same four pillars and the staff was given the same training and transition preparation, there was a great deal of variation in the interpretation of how that model should look. This has resulted in a diversity of middle schools throughout the district due to the fact that different individuals were involved in each school's development. This resulted in a learning environment at Cedar Hill, and every middle school in the district, that is a direct result of the expertise and passion of the members that created it. As a result of the dynamics in terms of staff, the interpretations of the middle school model and the clientele at each middle school has resulted in diversity in the district in terms of middle school cultures. This diversity was touched upon by both Ingrid and Stan, who has been at the school for the past two years. Stan reported that *“this school is very different from the last school I was at due to the staff that are here. The personalities may be similar when you compare them as individuals but there are different strengths and challenges when they are considered as a group”*. This statement speaks directly to complexity theory and the fact that even though the components in two systems, or in this case learning communities, may seem similar, when you put them together and start to consider the relationships between them; there is the potential for a completely different result or feeling within the system. This has also resulted in each middle school having its own specific set of curricular and extracurricular learning experiences. Cedar Hill has identified music and the arts, whereas another school has decided that their focus would

be on creating a 'Global' middle school. This diversity of school events, customs, traditions and even timetables, is the next trend that was identified in the data.

The diversity of curriculum based and extracurricular learning experiences

All of the participants in the survey commented on the diversity of opportunities that were created for all members of the learning community. They mentioned a variety of events that bring the whole community together. The parents surveyed mentioned events such as concerts, learning fairs, and recitals since they *"give us a chance to see what the kids are learning and doing"*. Tanya, who is Jennifer's mother, commented that *"attending concerts and seeing students perform or display their work such as in the Cultural fair were the best experiences that I had at Cedar Hill"*. The teachers who were surveyed referenced some of the multi class or school wide assemblies and events, but the main experiences that were consistently referred to were the ones that were organized by, or at least with, students. Stan lists a few of the experiences: *"We do offer so much. We celebrate student achievement. Recognition assemblies are great. Like socially, like I said the fairs, we do all kinds of things where we open things up. There are athletic events like the Celtic Clash"* (a staff versus grade eight students hockey game that the entire school attends), *"and the Scream"* (a staff versus grade seven students soccer game that takes place on Halloween), *"and those are all very social since there are opportunities for the kids to interact and support each other."* These events were mentioned since they increase student engagement with their learning and their community. The concept of student engagement was mentioned by each of the staff that was surveyed and they suggested that the key to engagement was the provision of a *"diversity of opportunities to meet the needs of the diversity of students that attend the*

school.” These opportunities range from whole school sporting events that “*help the kids feel like they are part of a bigger group*” to the clubs that were identified by the students since they “*give a bunch of different activities for everyone to find something they like*”, to project work that allows kids to “*have say over what they work on, who they work with and how they work*”. When discussing the curriculum based opportunities, several of the staff referred to the pedagogical approach of project based learning as the tool that offers the most support to the individual learning needs of each student. Stewart, a grade seven teacher who has been at Cedar Hill since the transition to middle school, talks about project based learning as “*a process right, its research, its planning, you demonstrate your learning and your teach it to someone else. That’s truly the way to learn. Teach it and you will learn it.*”

Lynda, a teacher that has been at Cedar Hill since its opening as a middle school, identified project based learning as a pedagogy that supports creativity and collaboration and is “*where kids are at*” in terms of what “*really meets their needs and allows them to fully demonstrate what they are capable of doing*”. She goes on to explain that project based learning “*teaches them not just the curriculum but how to get along with people and that is something for their future employment. It even allows them to add so much more in terms of creativity.*” Several of the other staff also identified project based learning as the direction that the staff is going and hoping to implement more broadly. Stewart acknowledged that “*right now it is done with the grade six cultural fair and the grade eights have the socials fair in the spring which is also great, and so we (the grade sevens) need to look at something that we can do to that is project based.*” Project based learning provides a pedagogical approach that allows students to “*have say over who they*

work with, what they work on, how long they work with it and where they work”, as described by Ingrid, ensuring that they have the choice to make things more meaningful to themselves. The purpose of this approach, as reported by the teacher participants, was to increase personal relevance to hopefully increase the engagement of the students and result in a higher potential for learning. This approach is reflected in the current research on 21st century learning skills and follows the mandate that is being proposed by the provincial government which has stated: “The vision of a 21st century K-12 education system is rooted in personalised learning. It focuses on providing students the skills they need to participate in a knowledge-based society, while also allowing them to explore an educational path that is best suited to their interests, their capabilities and their chosen future” (BC Ministry of Education, 2011).

One of the necessities, and results, of project based learning is that the teacher, or facilitator, must be willing to identify the strengths and the weaknesses of each individual and then support their needs (Hmelo-Silver, 2004). Project based learning allows students to demonstrate their learning through the creation of artefacts that represent what they have learned. This pedagogical approach often incorporates problem-based learning as a guide to direct the inquiry or learning, but always requires the teacher to have an understanding of the uniqueness of each student (Barron et al., 1998). The artefacts produced are specific to each individual student and depend on an appreciation of the diversity of student learning, which ties in directly with the foundations of appreciative inquiry. Appreciative Inquiry is a methodology that allows the teacher to identify the strengths of individual students and then help them approach a project in a manner that maximized their strengths and as a result of that supported their weaknesses. Project

based learning requires the teacher to teach a group of individuals rather than a class. As mentioned earlier, this pedagogy has been demonstrated by staff with some of the educational fairs that have been presented at the school. Through the organization and delivery of the fairs other classes are always invited to take part and witness the learning that has taken part. This also allows staff that may not be familiar with this pedagogy to experience it and learn about its benefits. The process of assessing the strengths of each individual student enables the teachers to connect with each student and build a relationship with them. Relationship was the third trend that was clearly identified within the data.

The relationships that are created and nurtured within the community.

The attribute that was the most frequently commented on by all of the participants in this study was the commitment to the development of strong relationships between all members of the learning community but specifically a focus on the creation of strong connections between staff and students. This development of relationships was identified by all of the staff surveyed as their most positive experience in the learning community and also as the main impetus for the staff remaining a part of the community. This is interesting in that the staff are the members of the learning community that have chosen to be a part of the specific community through their application to work in a specific school. Although there are some exceptions, for example where students chose to attend a school outside of their catchment area, the students and their families generally become part of the Cedar Hill community based on the elementary schools that they attend and/or the geographical location of their homes. As a result of this they do not often have the luxury of choosing whether or not they will become part of the learning community. Staff

members, on the other hand, are able to have more choice in whether or not they join a specific school community through the job application process and there is much discussion among staff about the culture at individual schools during this process. This choice is also available once they have joined a school staff in the fact that they can choose to remain a part of the Cedar Hill community. Cedar Hill's situation is one in which there have been annual opportunities for staff to leave due to a decrease in enrolment over the last few years. I can attest to this due to the fact that I am one of the lowest staff members in terms of seniority and each of the last six years I have been the least senior teacher. This means that each spring I was told I was in jeopardy of being "excess to needs" if no other staff member expressed a desire to leave the school community. Each year I have been fortunate to stay at the school as a result of other staff that have chosen to leave for a variety of reasons. The opportunity for staff that were not comfortable or happy in their roles to leave for other assignments has resulted in a staff that are committed to working within this school community. The indication from the staff surveyed is that they chose to remain a part of this community because of the strength of relationships that they have developed between each other and the relationships they have developed with the students and their families. As a staff member at the school myself, I can readily attest to the strength of the relationships formed between myself, my colleagues, my students and their families. I encounter former students and their families daily in the community where I live, and at least once a week I have former students come back to visit the school and my class. As a school we have had to go so far as to post signs reminding returning students that they are welcome to visit but must do so at specified time so no to disrupt the classes that are in session.

The strength of these relationships was mentioned by all of the participants with statements such as the one made by one of the students who said, *“the best part is that there is always someone that you can go to talk to”* and a teacher participant who said, *“the best experiences I have had were the ones that build relationships with kids”*. The teacher explained that the reason was that *“where she came from the attitude was that having connections with kids was not that important, the students came through classes, relationships were formed, but not as important as here in middle school”*. She referred to field trips, school wide events, and team based activities, but the most powerful experience was the week in which she worked with and built connections with a group of students that she would not necessarily get to know otherwise. She continued to say that *“I did not understand the importance until I started connecting with students that I don’t even teach”*. She described this year’s “Clan Week” in which teachers were given a blended group of kids (grade 6, 7, and 8) and her experience where she *“ended up connecting with a girl that obviously has some learning issues but I really like. She waves to me in the hallway and that connection is very important to me. This activity has taught me a lot about teaching.”* She then went on to say that the relationships are *“what keeps me going”* when she is exhausted and feeling overwhelmed by her job. The administrator surveyed recognized the strength of the student/staff relationships as a primary focus of our school that *“goes beyond academics and is about the kids feeling a sense of purpose”*. These phrases emphasize a culture in this community that cherishes/values connections and identifies them as a necessity for the students and staff to be successful.

One area that did surface as an area of need regarding the relationships within the community was that around the connections between staff and parents. One teacher

referred to the need for better communication within the parent-student-teacher triad and she stated that *“a lot of times the triad is imbalanced”* and *“the solution to the imbalance is the communication piece”*. This was also found in the parents’ responses who were hoping for *“better communication through sources such as websites and electronic information bulletins”*. This need is one that will be explored further in the analysis section of this research.

Efforts are student centered to maintain engagement and celebrate success

As mentioned earlier there is a diversity of events and experiences provided to include and support all students, but one trend that was strongly found in the responses was the perception that not only is there a diversity of opportunities but that all of the opportunities are ‘student centered and student focussed’. The earlier categories identify a diversity of opportunities and a focus on relationships, but this category refers to the focus within this learning community to ensure that all of the school events involve students in the organization, development and delivery of the event. This was evident in the repeated discussion of student leadership and student recognition amongst all of the participants in this study. Despite the majority of the events being initiated by the staff, there is a focus to *“have students involved from the start with the organization, planning and running of the event”* as stated by Lexi, a grade six teacher who has been at the school since its transition to a middle school. One of the students identified the formal leadership programs but also commented that there are *“different groups and different kids that speak at assemblies, not necessarily in leadership, and kids in band and fine arts and athletics are all ambitious”*. She goes on to comment that *“when you give kids*

opportunities then they are more driven". These statements not only reflect the opportunities that are available for students, but the underlying belief of this individual that if the students are provided with the opportunities then their engagement and motivation increases.

Not only was it mentioned by students, staff, and parents that students were given a variety of leadership roles, but also that these roles and accomplishments were celebrated. In fact it was the one trend that was strongest in the parent interviews with statements such as "*the evening concerts and fairs are a highlight*" and "*we love that there are so many chances to see our kids do well*". Not only was the presence of this recognition noted, but it was an area that the parents and students wanted to see increase further. Not only did they want to see more recognition but they had some interesting ways to expand and provided rationale for this expansion such as "*we should have awards that would like, motivate us and if we had assemblies at night we could invite other people from other schools or, like, people from our community*".

The willingness to challenge what is known and to be open to new ideas.

The last main category that was evident in the staff and student interviews was the willingness for staff to try new things and be open about the experimentation with new technologies and learning techniques. One indication of the staff's willingness to challenge what they know was evident by the responses to this study. Despite the fact that it was the end of the school year and many of the staff were admittedly exhausted, they were more than willing to volunteer their personal time to be a part of this study. Many of the interviews lasted three times as long as expected and even then several of the staff

wanted to continue to talk to me following the interview time. This may be, as mentioned earlier, due to the fact that a large percentage of the staff have undergone or are currently undergoing graduate work and are committed to a process of reflection. There was also a recognition by one of the teachers, who will be referred to as Chris, interviewed that not only are people open to change but also conscious of making the change more sustainable. Chris has been a part of the school community since its inception as a middle school and stated *"It's more about being open to change and open to ideas. We have had colleagues here in the past that have jumped on every bandwagon that went by. That was great, but you have to take your bits and pieces since it is a lot of hard work."* These statements demonstrate that there is a constant introduction of new ideas into the school community and that staff are very selective of the ideas that they incorporate into their daily practice. Chris continued to say that *"sometimes its hard work, but I've really had to change to meet the needs of the kids"*. Another staff member, Julie -- who has also been at the school since the inception, said that *"I've had a lot of conversations with people that have challenged my thinking"* and then she continues to say *"I'm at the point where I'm ready to blow apart my program that I have been developing for 15 years"*. This was in response to some learning that she had been doing as part of her graduate work and through discussions with other staff at the school that caused her to re-evaluate everything that she believed to be true about teaching and the pedagogical choices that she was making. This willingness of the staff to challenge what they take for granted and reflect on the practices that they use every day is a strong indicator of their commitment to self examination and the willingness to experiment and try something new always with the focus of trying to better meet the needs of the students. Even the students surveyed

identified that the teachers were willing to “*try to teach the concepts differently. Try different ways of experimenting and even letting the students teach the concepts to each other because even if you get it, it helps to hear it other ways*”. This insight that teachers are willing to experiment is a clear movement away from the traditional role of teacher as the expert sharing their knowledge with the students and a step towards one in which knowledge is created as a group. I believe that the teachers’ willingness to model their continued learning for the students and their families has helped to create an atmosphere in which students see teachers as life-long learners who challenge what they believe to be true. This modelling encourages students to challenge what they know and has resulted in a learning community that is willing to be critical and reflective of their practices and therefore be more willing to experiment and be open to change. I think the commitment to learning, and yet to respect the diversity of the professionals in the learning community, was summed up beautifully by one of the teachers who said “*It’s a personal thing. For me when there is something new, I want to learn about it*”. This eagerness to learn results in a greater diversity of professionals due to the different perspectives that they bring and the willingness that they have to learn about new ideas or practices. The willingness to learn and share creates a larger collective knowledge and a greater potential for growth within the community.

One of the greatest strengths within the Cedar Hill community that was identified by many of the participants was the band program. This program is one that has been identified by the staff as a crucial part of the Cedar Hill community. The band program at Cedar Hill has over fifty percent of the student population involved in it and the staff have worked to make it as accessible as possible for all students that are interested. This

has resulted in the development of a timetable that allows students in the band to have three hours a week of class time within the regular timetable, which is the highest timetable allocation of any middle school in the Victoria district. This program seems to personify the five strengths that were mentioned above. Lisa, the parent of two students that have been through Cedar Hill, summarized it nicely when she said:

The band program is highly involved. It has a lot of kids in it. The teaching is fantastic. It has a lot of options. It meets the needs of lots of kids. The parent involvement is good. There are lots of concerts and things. It is one thing that brings a good chunk of the school community together, which I think is important.

This program and the attributes that have been built into it seem to represent all of the trends that are valued within the Cedar Hill learning community and it is clearly a program that is supported throughout the entire school. Cedar Hill has committed the highest amount of in-school class time to the band program and has the majority of students (approximately 65%) actively participating in one or more of the musical ensembles at the school. The students are excited and perform in the majority of the school assemblies and have received top marks at the festivals that they attend. The music program in the school provides a great model containing all of the attributes that could be used to develop other programs within the learning community.

Complex systems and Appreciative Inquiry

Upon reviewing the five themes that were identified in the data, I considered whether or not the learning community is indeed a complex system and if this complexity is supported by the AI methodology. A return to Davis and Simmt's (2003) work that

identified five conditions for the development and maintenance of a complex system (internal diversity; redundancy; decentralized control; organized randomness; and neighbour interactions) can be used as a baseline to identify complexity emerging within the system. These conditions, along with those found within a complex learning system as discussed later in this section, may provide insight when considering the growth and development of this learning community. The first condition of internal diversity was heavily found within the diversity of experiences, pedagogical approaches and relationships formed within the community. This diversity is identified and supported through the AI methodology in that all members of the community are entitled to an equal voice so that their perspectives and experiences are valued and used in the process. The second condition of redundancy was present in the common experiences that were provided to each member of the community. These common experiences help to form a skill set and experience set that allow all of the members to feel part of the collective as well as having some of the basic skills that they require to be successful. The effort in the school by the staff to have groups, such as the numeracy group that was identified by Ingrid, that are working to develop common language indicates a real commitment to helping students have redundancy in their language, skill sets, and roles. AI allows us to gather these common experiences and share them with the community and therefore increase the redundancy within the system. Decentralized control was present by the indication by staff, students and parents that there were many opportunities for all students to take the lead and be a part of leading one or more aspects of the school community. The leadership program is one example but there are many others such as community food drives, leading of assemblies, performing in music groups or clubs or

even developing programs for other students in the school, in which decentralized control can be found. Organized randomness is defined by Davis and Simmt (2003) as “a structural condition that helps to determine the balance between redundancy and diversity among agents” (p. 155). This can be found with some of the pedagogical choices that are made by the staff of the school. One example may be through the use of project based learning. Project based learning allows for individualization of a learning process (i.e. diversity) and also a common set of expectations or requirements for the completion of the project (i.e. redundancy). This type of pedagogy that gives a common set of expectations but allows the students to demonstrate their learning according to their personal strengths and experiences is an example of organized randomness. Lastly, the presence and development of neighbour interactions is probably the most well developed condition in this learning community based on the participants’ responses. As mentioned earlier, every person interviewed commented on the presence and importance of the connections that were fostered and developed between staff, students and their parents. These connections are what form the learning community and what has resulted in the quality of experience that the members of the community enjoy. These neighbour interactions were found in every interview and the Appreciative Inquiry methodology was able to collect stories of these interactions as well as support the creation of new ones through the interview and data collection process. The presence of these connections or relationships that are diverse and unique to each member of the system is an indication of complexity and that challenges the traditional factory model. This is an important realization for all the members of the community because it establishes some new indicators other than those that have been previously used to assess school systems. With

the five conditions found within the learning community there is a reinforcement of the identification of this system as one that has potential for complex emergence, but more importantly the Appreciative Inquiry methodology seems to both acknowledge and enhance the complexity in the system. The five principles of Appreciative Inquiry (as discussed in chapter 3): social construction, simultaneity, poetic, anticipatory, and positive thinking are all supported by complex systems and in turn support the complexity within the system. I think if we look at the three additional conditions suggested by Davis, Sumara and Luce-Kapler (2008), we find some indication of memory and feedback loops, but to increase the emergent situation potential for the Cedar Hill Middle School learning community there needs to be continued focus on the development of recursive elaboration and the development of more nested networks. The recursive elaboration could be recognized in the form of projects such as the social studies fair that the student take part in during grade six and then again in grade eight where they are able to revisit what they have done in previous years and use that to build upon. The nested networks might be a matter of strengthening the connections between all members of the learning community and ensuring that all members feel like they are involved and connected to the learning community. The insights that have been gained by this methodology regarding the complexity within the Cedar Hill learning community suggest that Appreciative Inquiry is an effective tool for studying complex systems such as a middle school learning community.

A vision for the future

Appreciative Inquiry is a methodology that tries to identify what is best with an organization as well as what needs to be further developed so I would be remiss not to

include a brief discussion on the hopes and dreams of the participants of this study as well as a brief description of what my hopes and dreams would be for this learning community. All of the participants referred to a learning community that better met the needs of the students. The students phrased it as *“the teachers should continue to try to teach us as individuals rather than the way they were taught”*. The parents referred to *“providing a diversity of opportunities for our kids to succeed”* and *“we love to come into the school and see our kids excelling at academics and athletics”*. The staff spoke about *“breaking down the walls and developing ways that students can be more successful at school and at life”*. Each of these ideas supports the idea of the development of a system that is capable of meeting the needs of each of its members, and specifically the students since they are the reason that the system exists, in a unique and personal way. The vision of system was developed in which all of the members come together and work together to collectively produce a responsive and emergent system that is greater than the sum of its parts.

My vision is very much along those lines of those mentioned above. My vision, or dream, for this learning community would be a continued and even greater focus on creativity. I would like to see creativity to be a focus in terms of how we teach, how we encourage students to explore learning, and how we try to find new ways of incorporating the resources that we have in the community in terms of students, staff, and especially parents. I would like to see the staff continue to develop new ways of helping students demonstrate their learning and support them as they grow to become successful lifelong learners. I would love to see more collaboration between different classes, teams, grade levels and tracks (English and French immersion) regarding learning activities and

sharing of knowledge. I believe that the programs and pedagogical practices at Cedar Hill are exceptional in many ways and one of those ways is the willingness of all members of the learning community to try to find better ways to meet the needs of students. I am encouraged and excited by the potential that I see within the staff and the potential I see within the changing climate around the role of schools in the 21st century. I think that if we continue to challenge, to question, to listen, and to share among all members of the learning community then we have the potential to continue to develop programs and practices that will support students through their middle years and empower them to meet their limitless potential.

Chapter V. Analysis

As we return to the research question of trying to identify the strengths within the Cedar Hill Middle School learning community it is important that we look at the common themes within the data and categories that were created. The data provided four clear themes that deserve further consideration. The first theme that emerged was the importance of connection.

Connections

According to the responses of the participants of this study, connection is the most important aspect of the learning community. This is supported by much research and one of the principles of learning outlined by the British Columbia Ministry of Education (1995) states that “Learning is both an individual and a group process”. This principle is found in the rationale section of each of the ministry curriculum documents that date back prior to 1995 and suggest that there is a need for group interaction or what I would refer to as connection with others. Some may argue that without connection there is no system and therefore connections are the glue that holds the system together. The connections are crucial and the need for structures that support the connections was supported by all of the participants. These structures include communication tools, events in which all members of the community can come together and ongoing reaching out so that the connections that are made can be fostered and strengthened. In my seven years as part of this community I have worked very hard to develop and support events and activities that connect students to staff and to other students. I have also worked hard to support events that connect students to the community in general. Over the past seven years I have seen the support for these types of events and activities grow and grow so that they are now

considered part of the school's culture. The Cedar Hill staff gives their time and energy to help run and support a variety of events and to generate new ideas and opportunities for connections between staff and students to be made. This has led to a reputation that our school values whole school events that foster a sense of social responsibility for each other and for those in our local and global community. Through the identification of the importance of connections there was an indication from some of the participants of this study, specifically the parents, of an area that could be strengthened even more and deserves consideration as the school community continues to evolve.

The area that should continue to be a focus, which was mentioned by some of the participants in the study, is fostering the connection between parents and the other members of the community. The idea of a triad of students, staff and parents was a valuable metaphor that was used by one of the participants and I think that as we continue to grow as a school community, the communication between the different members of the community needs to be a primary focus. I would even suggest that one of the goals for the school community needs to be how we ensure that all members of the community are informed and have a voice in the ongoing development of the learning community. I believe that this would be considered one of the conditions that Davis, Sumara and Luce-Kapler refer to as 'nested systems' or in other words the connections between different systems such as students and their parents. As a grade six teacher I have had many discussions with parents about their struggles with trying to figure out their role in the school and trying to maintain a balance between being actively involved but also giving their child the space that they need to branch out on their own. Many parents feel like they are not welcome in the school due to the fact that their children are trying to be more

independent and parents are trying to support that independence. This feeling of exclusion is something that as a school we need to continue to focus on so that we can support not only the students but their families as they transition from elementary to high school. Through developing more efficient ways of communicating to parents and receiving communication from parents, I feel that the community will become stronger and more productive. This need is also recognized within the district growth plans that are completed by each school since one of the mandatory identified growth areas is that of communication. In the 2011 version of Cedar Hill's growth plan it states "that communication will take the form of newsletters, parent information nights, Parent Advisory and School Planning Council meetings, assemblies, and the newly changed and updated website" (Cedar Hill Growth plan, 2011) This improved communication can be facilitated by some of the technologies that are available such as websites, blogs, and wikis, and some work has been done already with an investment in making the school website more user friendly in appearance and in the contact information that is available to families. This specific focus on communication is one that I believe will be crucial to continue effective growth in the Cedar Hill Middle School learning community. This position is hinted at in the position paper that was put out by the NMSA (now known as the AMLE) entitled "This we Believe" in which they identify the need to create "school-initiated family and community partnerships" (pg.17). They identify the challenges the parents face with being involved and encourage middle school staff to "reach out to the parents in partnership" (p.18). I would suggest that we need to take that even further and not identify parents as partners to what goes on but an integral, and equal, part of the learning community. In the terms of complexity theory, they are components of the

system that have an equal impact to that of the teachers or students. If this is the case then we must find new ways to ensure that parents, staff, and students are all given a voice in the development of school activities, events, and curriculum. Currently there is a Parent Advisory Council (PAC) and a school planning council, but these two groups are poorly attended so as a staff it is imperative that we either support these groups or try to identify why they have such a small representation of parents. The responses that I had to this study from parents suggest that not only are their voices are not heard but they do not feel like they are even informed of the events and activities at the school so they do not have an opportunity to speak up even if they wanted to. This lack of communication or communication breakdown is one theme that must be addressed and is supported by researchers such as William Doll (2008) who suggests that the relations are the “heart of the systems view” (p.202). If this is indeed the case, which is a perspective that is reinforced by this study, then we must ensure that the relationship between parents and the system is of primary importance. This must be addressed and be a focus of the continued development of the school so that we can include a diversity of voices from staff, students, and parents. We constantly focus on the relationships that are built between staff and parents and have a multitude of strategies and experiences in place to support their growth but based on the data collected in this study, we must use some of these strategies to foster the relationships for parents within the community. This would lead to a proposition that states at Cedar Hill we must continue to focus on strategies, structures and situations that encourage and support the integration of the parents’ voices into the learning community. Parents need to be consulted to find ways to strengthen their involvement and contribution to the learning community so that they are equal partners in

the system who can contribute to the diversity of the system. This need for diversity was the second theme that was prevalent in the data.

Diversity

The second strong theme that came out of the data was the need for diversity within the learning community. The topic of diversity came up in a variety of areas and has some strong implications for learning within the community. These areas included diversity of learning opportunities, diversity of teaching styles, diversity of activities, and the diversity of leadership. Diversity was generally required due to the fact that we are working with a diverse population of students; therefore if we are trying to meet their needs as individuals, there is a requirement that we have a diversity of opportunities to do just that. Traditional models of schooling in which a group of students moved through the curriculum at the same pace and in the same order required homogeneity so that students could all progress along the same learning path together. This led to a push for students to be streamed, or sorted into groups according to ability and aptitude. Recently we have moved away from this model although some education systems still try to use it since it is a way of targeting limited resources to the highest needs students. What was found in the responses from these participants was a real desire for diversity of learning opportunities to help the students engage as individuals. Staff, parents and particularly students spoke about their desire to be exposed to a variety of ideas and activities so that they could determine what was best for themselves. This is also reflected in the BC Ministry of Education's (2011) Guide to personalized learning in the 21st Century that states "Imagine an education system that responds to the uniqueness of every learner with flexibility in where when and how learning takes place" (p.12). One metaphor that

connects well with students at middle school is the combination lock. They relate to this metaphor since for many of them, when they start in grade six they receive a locker and must learn how to open a combination lock for the first time. A combination lock can be used in that to unlock each student's learning potential we must have a specific combination. These combinations consist of a variety of events that may be the same for a variety of students but the application is unique for each individual learner. If we use only one combination, or sequence of events and experiences, it may work for a few of the students but will not work for all of them. Some of them may even be able to open their locks with numbers that are close to their combination, but others will not. We need to give them the resources they need (the numbers), help them determine the best sequence that works for them (the direction they turn the dial), and help them understand the connections (or the order) that has the highest potential to unlock their learning.

This need for diversity can also be found when referring to the diversity of teaching styles. The staff and students remarked about one of the strengths was that there were teachers that were willing to try new things and to challenge what they believe. This is shown through the teaching teams that "team teach" and learn from each other about their pedagogy and are able to observe the results and implement some of those techniques into their own teaching style. Some may suggest that this sharing may result in a move towards homogeneity, but it is just the opposite. The complexity that is formed by these different teachers coming together and sharing ideas and experiences results in questioning, discussion and a new understanding that is greater than just the sum of the individuals' contributions. This process takes time and must be supported so that it can be successful. This support could be in terms of release time or just the implementation of

other structures that free up teachers to have time to discuss and share. This concept of supporting teachers to share and develop novel pedagogical approaches leads to the second powerful preposition that could be used in the learning community. This would be to design and implement structures that allow teachers the flexibility and time to come together and work as collaborative teams to develop pedagogical systems to better meet the needs of all students. There are some signs of these potential structures in the 2011 school growth plan which states that:

During each Advisory team's weekly common Literacy block, Advisory teachers will combine their classes to allow one team member per week to meet with their team's Learning Support Teacher on a rotational basis. The focus of these meetings will be planning ways to differentiate the curriculum for individual students. (p.6)

This identification of a creative way to free up teaching staff to work with others is a step in the right direction to create and implement pedagogy that better meets the needs of individuals and progress to a system of 'personalized learning' as promoted by the provincial ministry. This system of personalized learning is one that is much different than was traditionally found in schools. For this to happen there needs to be a new shift in how we teach and what our image of schooling entails. I feel that these changes may be misunderstood to some and one of our roles as teachers is to share the rationale with those that are not familiar or comfortable with this new approach to schooling. It may seem chaotic, or complex, but that is because it is complex and our role as teachers is to support that complexity. I think that, as teachers, we tend to default to what is familiar

and, as shown in this research, we need to challenge ourselves to try new things so that we can teach in ways that the students learn. We need to step out of what may be our comfort zones and challenge what we believe to be true. This modeling will help our students and colleagues develop and become more equipped to deal with the changing demands of society so that lifelong learning can occur. This leads us to the third theme which was the role of middle schools in our community and our district.

The Role of Middle Schools

The role of middle schools is one that is controversial among some of the staff that teach within these structures. Some have suggested that the primary goal of middle school is that of a bridge between elementary school and high school. This would imply that the goal of middle school is to give students the skills and knowledge that they need to be successful at high school. Others have suggested that middle schools are a place of exploration to help students explore and develop as learners with some of the skills that they will need when they graduate school and enter our society. I would suggest that based on the responses that I gathered, and much like the learning community itself, the role of a middle school is more complex than either of these individual suggestions. Middle schools provide a diverse range of services and due to the fact that they are complex systems, their role is unique to each member of the learning community. If in fact middle school learning communities require diversity and connections, the role that they play will be different for each member of the community due to the fact that each member experiences a different set of connections within the community. This implication means that the role of middle school staff is to provide a diversity of experiences and to nurture the creation of connections between all members of the

community. One of the pillars of the middle school model in the Victoria school district is that of exploration, and that would be in line with the findings of this research. Middle schools are indeed a place of exploration; I would suggest that all schools should be places of exploration, but the conditions found in a middle school learning community are unique. To support this exploration we must create a diversity of structures to build connections and then use those connections to support the growth of our students through the exploration of a diversity of experiences. These types of connections are not only between students within one class, but should be expanded to include connections between individuals in different classes, teams, grade levels and between French immersion and English tracks. This was shown in the data with the reference to activities such as Clan Week, programs such as the band program and pedagogical practices such as project based learning. The role of a middle school is not that of preparation but of creating connections and diversity so that there is the greatest chance for our students to be successful both when they reach high school and throughout their lives.

Leadership within a complex learning system

The final theme that came out of the data was the importance of leadership within a complex learning system such as the one found at Cedar Hill Middle School. This leadership was not one in which there was a desire for a hierarchical system, but rather a diversity of leadership roles taken on by a variety of individuals. I think this supports the theory of decentralized control as suggested by Davis and Simmt (2003), and the message from the participants strongly suggests that there are leadership roles assumed by a variety of individuals that include staff, students, and administration. I believe that one of the strong findings in this research was that of the expertise of the teachers in this

learning community. The teachers interviewed were very open about the challenges that they faced and were also very quick to share the work that they were doing to meet those challenges. I believe, as mentioned in the previous chapter, that there is a great deal of expertise within this learning community and a willingness of the staff in the community to take on leadership roles. This produces a situation in which leadership can be diversified and shared amongst a variety of individuals, which supports the complexity within the system. I also think that this shared leadership results in a new vision and approach to leadership in which the role of a leader is redefined to be that of a facilitator, or supporting body, that builds the connections and provides the stimulus for learning to take place. As Davis, Sumara and Luce-Kapler (2008) suggest, the role of the teacher or leader becomes that of a facilitator who organizes structures that support the complexity within a class, acts as a collective consciousness to link previous knowledge or experience to those the members of the collective are currently exploring, and provides feedback to support the development of the conditions that may result in an emergent situation. I feel that this requires an expertise and willingness to challenge what is known within a community. The staff, students, and parents surveyed all identified these traits as one of the strengths of the Cedar Hill learning community and these traits support the decentralized control necessary for complexity to occur and flourish. I think that it is important to recognize that this move away from a traditional system in which there is a defined hierarchical system of leadership to that in which a variety of individuals take on leadership roles is crucial to support the complexity necessary for emergent learning situations. This requires a new approach to leadership that allows for this diversification of roles and opportunities for individuals within the system to take on leadership roles as

well as the comfort among those that have traditionally been responsible for the leadership of the community to relinquish their “grip on the reins” so that others may take the lead in an attempt to support the complexity within the community. Since all members in a complex learning system have the potential to take on leadership roles, this shift in leadership requires all members of the community to be aware of the role that leaders play to support complexity within the system. This means that all members of the system must be willing to support the structures such as the communication channels and feedback loops, and contribute to the collective conscious of the system. This shared leadership is crucial for complex learning systems to increase their emergent potential and is necessary if we are to adapt to the changing needs of all of the members within a learning community.

Chapter VII. Conclusions

The final aspect of the research question posed was that of the applicability of the Appreciative Inquiry methodology to a complex system such as the learning community at Cedar Hill Middle School. This potentially has the greatest potential for changing the day to day practices in middle schools throughout the Greater Victoria school district. Appreciative Inquiry has been adapted by many educational organizations as a tool for organizational change and development. It is my position that this process can, and should be, one that is an integral part of an educational organization's reflection and development so the challenge becomes how this methodology becomes implemented into the daily practice at Cedar Hill Middle School.

I believe the first step to effectively using this research is to establish opportunities where the categories and themes in the data can be shared with all members of the learning community. Through a presentation to the staff at a staff meeting and a presentation to the parents through the monthly parent meetings, for which an invitation can be placed on the school website, it is important to make as much of the learning community as possible aware of these findings so they can be used as a catalyst to generate change. It is the data itself that generates the discussion and the discussion that allows the growth to occur. As mentioned earlier, Appreciative Inquiry is an ongoing process and the cycle never stops since the discussion of the findings leads to more sharing and a greater understanding of the best experiences in the system or learning community. I feel that this model of ongoing inquiry and the ongoing identification and collection of strengths within the community will allow the community to continue to grow in a way that increases the potential for students to be successful. I feel that a

discussion about the needs of the students, as individuals, the parents and the teachers will continue to challenge and refine what the members of the community to believe to be the best practices of the school community. If the ongoing focus is on the strengths rather than the deficits, the deficits will be addressed or become less impactful. We, the members of the Cedar Hill learning community, must move away from the idea of working harder and move to a situation where we are working more effectively and that translates to focussing on our strengths and celebrating where they can take us. Just because the work is enjoyable does not mean that it is any less valid or impactful and we must be aware of this.

Throughout this project I have been struck with the compatibility of this methodology with the complexity of the Cedar Hill learning community. I have truly enjoyed this process and was continually surprised by the insights that were gained through the interviews and data analysis. I believe that this process has identified strengths as well as areas that we can continue to focus on to better meet the needs of the entire community. I look forward to sharing this with the staff and students and encouraging this process as an annual cycle which challenges those within the community to ensure inclusion for the entire community. I believe that through the facilitation of an Appreciative Inquiry as an annual review it will not only improve the pedagogy and teaching practices, but it will also strengthen the connections between all members of the community. This strengthening will increase the effectiveness of the system and make it a more inviting and productive place for all of its members. I believe that this will result in the production of better learners, a more active parental group and a more motivated staff.

As educational organizations are becoming more focussed on meeting the needs of its individual members, it is crucial that there be an ongoing reflection and assessment of their effectiveness. Appreciative inquiry provides a tool that can be used to facilitate the reflection and development or reinforcement of the practices that are found within a complex system while at the same time reinforcing and nurturing the complexity that characterizes the community. It has the potential to change the way we practice and develop professionally as teachers while bringing the learning community closer together and increasing the chances of meeting the needs of all of its members.

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Appendix 1. Questions to Guide AI Interviews

1) What is one of the best experiences you have had in (attending)(working in)(your connection with) Cedar Hill Middle School or the Cedar Hill Middle School community?

Why was this one of the best experiences?

2) What do you think we could do even better to help all our students succeed? Why do you think your suggest will help all our students succeed?

3) In three years from now, what is the best that you can imagine for Cedar Hill Middle School students staff or parents? Why would you like to see this happen?

4) Given your experience in the Cedar Hill Middle School learning community, what do you feel are the best learning opportunities that will prepare students for high school?

5) Given your experience in the Cedar Hill Middle School learning community, what do you feel are the best learning opportunities that will prepare students to be lifelong learners?