

## Enabling Dialogue : A Family Literacy Model

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*Current educational discourse has struggled to genuinely move beyond deficit-based language. Even Action Research, the predominant model for professional development and research in education, starts with the identification of the problem – the gap (Cardno, 2002). It would appear that the vocabulary for a hope-filled discourse, which captures the imagination surrounding our educational future, has escaped us. Equally important, we seem bereft of educational contexts where the experience for students is holistic and transformative.*

*Appreciative Inquiry is a research approach that seeks to facilitate change based on participant's recall moments of best practice and the subsequent processing of this information (Cady & Caster, 2000; Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; English, Fenwick, & Parsons, 2003; Hammond, 1998; Hammond & Royal, 1998). Rather than problem-centred, it is solution-focused. In this way, proponents describe it as 'dream forming' and 'destiny creating'. Based on assumptions that include 'in every organisation something works' and 'if we are to carry anything of our past forward in our lives, it should be the good things', Appreciative Inquiry energises the researcher and participants alike to reach for higher ideals (Hammond, 1998; Hammond & Royal, 1998).*

*This paper will outline an appreciative inquiry within a Family Literacy project, a bridging programme for adults, jointly sponsored by COMET (City of Manakau Education Trust), the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Social Development and Auckland University of Technology. The project is maintained within a community partnership consisting of a tertiary Institution, primary school and kindergarten. The particular research approach enabled the capture of data revealing student's accounts of transformative learning experiences within their learning community and the impact this in turn had on their wider communities.*

### Education as it should be

From the earliest times, the central thrust of education has been the fullest development of learner's character and understandings; a holistic formation of individuals (Bennett, 1997). The interactions between the teacher and learner(s) provide the context for this transformative experience wherein the purpose and

process of education was understood to be intentionally interactive and transformative.

Holistic and transformative educational processes attend to the fullest development of learners. This includes the learner's character, knowledge, understandings, and skills – described in current literature as focusing on the head, heart and hands (Kuk, 1993). Indeed an educated person was said to exhibit virtues such as thoughtfulness and hospitality as well as demonstrates the civic responsibilities deemed appropriate (Bennett, 1997). Beyond academic considerations, the provision of pastoral care further expressed a comprehensive concern for the learners. Indeed formal learning was supported by informal social contexts where teachers and learners, and indeed the wider community, interacted together. In this way, the teachers became known to their learners and their families and vice versa (Palmer, 1993, 1997, 1998). The teacher's responsibilities involved responsiveness to the learners needs within the learning moments.

Parker Palmer (Palmer, 1999) advocates that teachers must grow in their appreciation of the extent to which they presence themselves to their learners. He wishes that teachers would appreciate the extent to which they purposely engage with their learners and the extent to which there is unnecessary role playing on the part of the teacher rather than an authentic teaching posture that has integrity (Palmer, 1998). The critical point here being that, whether consciously aware of it or not, the teaching and learning exchange is holistic and influential (Taylor, 1998). Palmer (1998) reminds us that education involves an awareness and sensitivity to the many dynamic relationships between teacher and learner(s) and the facilitation of the exchanges between learners.

Proponents of transformative education identify the discourse within teaching/learning process as another critical factor. Mezirow (1991) considers the medium for deeper and reflective learning to be dialogue within the teaching/learning process. The dialogic process involves individuals critically reflecting on their assumptions and beliefs as part of the learning process (Mezirow, 1991). Being much more than a technical transmission of information, the use of dialogue implies an energetic exchange between a teacher and learner(s) on content that at times is open-ended. In short, dialogue deepens learning. Schugurensky (2002) suggests that when teachers and students *'have the opportunity to actively participate in deliberation and decision making in the institutions that have most impact on their everyday lives, they engage in substantive learning and can experience both incremental and sudden transformations'* (Schugurensky, 2002, P.67). rather than advocating greater teacher talk in academic traditionalist ways, the concept of dialogue allows for questioning and a sequence of conversation that engages one's thoughts, values and beliefs. Freire (1993) suggests that educational praxis that allows for the deep engagement of the participants is best facilitated through comprehensively constructing a learning environment toward this end (Freire, 1993). Consideration of the breadth of relationships within the learning environment opens the thought of education being a community of relationship (Giles, 2003; hooks, 2003; Palmer, 1998). In this way the teacher, learner(s) and their whanau are essential parts of the project called education.

## Is there a way forward?

Educators, and indeed our future pioneers in education, must now language our present educational scenario in a way that is dialogue enabling. Hope filled dialogue is required, with a view to restoring holistic and transformative educational practice and make it the norm for our learners.

It is to this end that the Appreciative Inquiry approach is being championed in this paper as an approach that enables dialogue that is restorative, generative and hope filled (Bushe & Coetzer, 1995; Cady & Caster, 2000; Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999; Elliot, 1999; English et al., 2003; Hammond, 1998; Hammond & Royal, 1998; Reed, Pearson, Douglas, Swinburne, & Wilding, 2002; Watkins & Mohr, 2001). A key assumption within this approach is that *'if we bring the past forward, we should bring the best'* (Hammond, 1998). In addition, this approach enables a renewed sense of purpose and the development of shared understandings as to the nature, purpose and future of education.

An appreciative inquiry is initiated in the stories of the participants with regard to episodes of best practice, these being when the educational practice is in accord with those values which are part of our educational philosophy. Additional data is gathered through the consideration of educational experiences in their most ideal state. This part of the process is, at times, referred to as the *'miracle question'* (Hammond, 1998; Hammond & Royal, 1998). It is only after this data has been caught that the group processes of constructing provocative propositions and an associated action plan occurs.

The power of Appreciative Inquiry is its ability to draw participants into the process of describing and speculating from actual stories. That is, the participant's stories provide a grounded-ness to the dialogue about future educational experiences.

This paper describes the findings of an Appreciative Inquiry with students participating in a Family Literacy project. The project is a pilot programme, jointly sponsored by COMET (City of Manukau Education Trust), the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Social Development and Auckland University of Technology. The research approach enabled the capture of student's accounts of transformative learning experiences.

## Context of the Research

The family literacy programme is a partnership involving Auckland University of Technology (AUT), which supplies the qualification being studied, Rowandale School which supplies the classroom where the students meet to study, and Manurewa West Kindergarten.

The adult students who wish to enter the programme are required to have a child attending either the primary school or the kindergarten involved in the partnership. Part of the adult learner's daily programme involves their working with their own children in the child's classroom or early childhood environment. In addition, a monthly group outing involving the adult students and their whanau occurs. Up to 90% of the students in this study have had limited or unsuccessful experiences in mainstream public schooling and, for some, this programme was their first experience

of studying for many years. As a consequence, one of the main aims of the programme is to make the learning experience enjoyable and worthwhile, while giving the students the opportunities to grow and develop in their other role as parents.

### Educator and Researcher

The research project underpinning this paper was conducted by Sharon Alderson, who has been contracted as the lecturer to the family literacy programme since its inception. Sharon's knowledge and experience in early childhood education forms the basis of her learning and teaching approach, as well as the foundation for the provision of an academic programme focused on early childhood education. Drawing upon her relationship with the learners participating in this programme, Sharon completed an Appreciative Inquiry under the supervision of David Giles. Sharon seeks to create an environment of trust and acceptance with the students. In this way, Sharon hopes that students will have an individual voice, engaging with other learners in positive and meaningful ways. Where meaningful relationships are developed between students, it is hoped that better outcomes for learners and an enriched sense of wholeness for the learning community are anticipated.

### The purpose and nature of the research

There is much literature regarding the retention rates of students in bridging (2<sup>nd</sup> chance) programmes. The observation of the researcher in this context was that students sustained their commitment to the literacy programme. The purpose of this research was to identify the processes that positively impact the social interactions that were occurring between the teacher and learner(s). The research will consider the feedback of past and present students in the programme as they recall the nature of the learning environment they experienced and the extent to which this influenced them as learners. The study sought information on what the students perceived to be working well as Appreciative Inquiry works on '*the assumption that whatever you want more of already exists in all organisations*' (Hammond, 1998; Hammond & Royal, 1998). Using the Appreciative Inquiry approach involves the adult learners in a positive, non-threatening experience. The focus of their contribution was positive and appreciative.

The research intends to identify common themes within the stories given, analysing the stories for emergent strategies and practices. The appreciative inquiry sought to answer the following research question.

**What are the positive aspects of the social dimension of the learning environment associated with the Family Literacy Programme?**

## Gathering and Processing the Stories

Initially, informal group interviews were conducted with each year group of student participants. Participation in these group meetings was voluntary with students having the right to withdraw from the study at any time. The questions asked at this time were:

1. Can you provide two significant memories you have about your learning within the Family Literacy Programme?
2. If your learning in the Family Literacy Programme could be perfect for you everyday, what would the learning environment be like?
3. What social aspects of the learning community have most contributed to your success?

These discussions were taped, with transcriptions being completed in the process of the research.

### *Observational Journal*

In the course of the research, the researcher's personal observations were recorded. These recordings spanned a period of four months.

### *Individual Interviews*

A sample of students was interviewed with a view to ascertain more in-depth observations from the students.

### *Written Documentation*

A range of written documentation was available for inclusion in this research project. This documentation included student's ongoing feedback about the programme. Similarly, within the first month of joining this programme the students wrote of one positive aspect that had happened for them since starting. As part of their academic programme students were introduced to the assessment tool called 'Learning Stories'. One such opportunity was provided for the students to record a story about something they had enjoyed or that had influenced them during the course so far. Unexpectedly, one student also kept a personal 'Learning Journal' from the onset of the course. This was voluntarily and confidentially offered to the researcher for use in the research.

## The Research Findings

There were numerous recurring themes within the research data. These themes have been summarised as:

- The role taken by the adult educator is critical for the learners
- The atmosphere for learning was socially enabling
- The importance of recognising family/whanau
- The need for inclusiveness of all learners

### *The role taken by the adult educator is critical for the learners*

The research findings are very explicit in identifying the role of the adult educator as critical in this type of educational context. The educator is required to wear many hats in the course of their work. It is important that the educator develop warm, reciprocal relationships within their learning community, as students consider them as a friend, a confidant, a companion and as teacher. A sample of some of the student's comments shows this:

- "...a tutor who can be a friend as well"
- "...a tutor being so flexible just to meet my needs"
- "...[the] teacher has [a] major influence...has inspired me"

- “Sharon as a tutor is easy to talk too...[we] can come to her with anything, even when she is not cool with it, it is ok”
- “...a tutor that cared about me and my family... made me feel special, made it where I wanted to be, apart from home”

Taylor (1998) tells us that the teachers’ role in building trust, care and facilitating the development of sensitive relationships amongst learners is fundamental to the fostering of transformative learning. As a member of the learning community, the teacher sets the stage for transformative learning by serving as a role model, demonstrating a willingness to learn and be influenced themselves (Benseman, 2004).

*The atmosphere for learning was socially enabling*

The participants clearly identified the importance of having fun while learning and the value of being able to share their experiences with each other. The learners themselves recognised the importance of a warm, supportive, non-threatening and enjoyable environment (Benseman, 2004). As some of the participants said:

- “...games about getting to know each other”
- “...class activities involved in working with each other”
- “...mix and mingle with others in a comfortable zone”
- “...getting to know and accept other people through talking, games and group activities”

Sefa Dei (2002) suggests that people are continually forming their connections with others. Educators need to provide a learning environment where learners can support each other and develop warm and equitable relationships (Sefa Dei, 2002). By promoting interactions where experiences and ideas are shared and by developing the concept of a caring environment, learners are more likely to foster support and trust with each other. Knowles (1970) suggest that activities conducted prior too, and during the learners first sessions, could greatly affect their learning outcomes and relationship building within the learning community (Knowles, 1970).

*The importance of recognising family/whanau*

Participants were very explicit about the importance of involving their family/whanau with them on their learning journey. Opportunity needs to be proved for students to celebrate and share their learning experiences with others from within the learning environment and with those from outside it. The family/whanau were seen as essential for providing support and encouragement. The family literacy programme has a commitment to upskill parenting skills, with the involvement and inclusion of the wider family/whanau being imperative to this. The students recalled times when the wider family/whanau were included as follows:

- “...whanau night concert – mixed cultures, fun, acceptance of other cultures”
- “...getting to know my kids”
- “...spending time with my child”
- “...meeting everyone’s family and partners”
- “...whanau PACTT in hall, what a fantastic night”

*The need for inclusiveness of all learners*

Individual development can only go so far without a supportive learning community and this is evident with these learners. To create an inclusive, caring and respectful culture within the learning environment, it is important for learners to understand and incorporate their own identities and those of their family. A sense of community is what binds the learners together and in turn generates its own value system.

Tisdell (1995) suggests that what happens in any learning environment in terms of inclusiveness will depend on *'the adult educator's personal experiences with various systems of privilege and oppressions, the educational context, and the participants and their characteristics'* (Tisdell, 1995). Part of the researcher's reflections demonstrates the view that people are continually forming in connection with others. As the research is showing, this can be achieved in creative ways where the learning community is an exciting, fun place to be. The participants expressed this inclusiveness as follows:

- "...not being judgemental"
- "...helping and getting help from others"
- "...getting to know the other students... more inclusive of their cultures now"
- "...sharing experiences during class"
- "...learnt to ask for support...people are there to help"

### Concluding Comments

This research suggests that amidst an education system with priorities and values that appear incongruent with the central concerns of education, there are educators pioneering educational contexts where student's learning is holistic and transformative. Indeed the positive aspects of the social dimensions of the learning environment can be both experienced and articulated by the learners within the process. The Family Literacy Programme has been intentional in providing educational experiences that influence individuals within the context of their family/whanau. The findings of this research report that the influence of the programme extends to the interdependent and interconnectedness of the learning community itself. Indeed a new discourse has emerged from an enabling research dialogue. The use of the appreciative inquiry approach has enabled the imaginative capturing and speculating on educational experiences that results from rich and grounded stories of educational experiences.

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