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Appreciative Inquiry Practicum Project

Motivating Teachers to Create Positive
Change Within Learning Environments –
A Strengths Based Approach

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1. Description of organization, group, or community worked with.

Both Landers Elementary and Morongo Valley Elementary are very small schools. They are located within the Morongo Unified School District and are somewhat similar. Each school has its own culture, whereas each school serves two very different communities. The demographic information for each school is as follows:

Demographics – Landers Elementary School

Landers Elementary is located at the extreme north of the school district in a very rural community with a current enrollment of 184 students in grades Kindergarten through Sixth Grade. The school demographics are as follows: 17% of the students receive special education services, 8.9% qualify for English Learner support, and 82.2% of the students enrolled receive Free and Reduced lunches. The percentage of students by Ethnicity for Landers Elementary include 54.2 % Caucasian, 33% Hispanic or Latino, 1% African-American, and roughly 12% multiple ethnicities.

Landers Elementary employs eight regular education teachers, one special education teacher, one intervention teacher, and one split position physical education teacher. Landers Elementary also employs one administrative assistant, eight instructional assistants, and one library/media clerk along with various other classified positions.

Demographics – Morongo Valley Elementary School

Morongo Valley Elementary is located at the far west of the school district and is a neighborhood school with a current enrollment of 243 students in grades Kindergarten through Sixth Grade. The school demographics are as follows: 10% of the students receive special education services, 4.2% qualify for English Learner support, and 59.9% of the students enrolled receive Free and Reduced lunches. The percentage of students by Ethnicity for Landers Elementary include: 69.6 % Caucasian, 20.1% Hispanic or Latino, and 8.3% multiple responses.

Morongo Valley Elementary employs 10 regular education teachers, one special education teacher, one intervention teacher, and one split physical education teacher. Morongo Valley Elementary also employs one administrative assistant, four instructional assistants, one library media/clerk and various other classified positions. Both schools have a California State Pre-School on site.

2. Category of Stakeholders included in the Core Group.

Each staff is comprised of a small number of teachers and staff members, and as a result, each staff served as its own Core Group. Each Core Group consisted of the following staff members:

- Principal
- K-6 Regular Education Teacher
- Special Education Teachers
- Physical Education Teachers
- Library Media Clerks
- Instructional Assistants
- Administrative Assistants

3. What was the positive topic that the Core Group identified for the inquiry? What method was used to help them identify the topic?

Each school has minimum days built into the school's calendars. We used a minimum day at each site to start the process of creating positive change through the AI process. We began with the Landers Staff on February, 17, 2010, and with the Morongo Valley Staff on February 25, 2010 and started with the introduction of the AI principles and then developed Trust Agreements. Interviews were conducted with each staff using modified interview guide, and as a result, themes were collected and written on chart paper for the group. Each staff also developed a "Wish List" for each school in creating a "preferred" vision. The positive topics for each school were the need to create positive learning environments for students and for each staff.

4. The Appreciative Interview Format (Interview Guide)

Each staff was randomly paired in order to conduct the interviews. A 30 minute period of time was given, 15 minutes for each interview.

Best Experiences:

Tell me a story about the best time you have had as an educator. Looking back at your experiences, recall a time when you felt the most passionate, the most involved, and the most excited about your profession as an educator. What made it and exciting experience? Who was involved? Please describe the event in detail.

Values:

- Without being humble, tell me what you value most about yourself – as a person, and as a member of this staff.
- What is it that you value most about your work?
- What do you value most about this school?
- What is the single most important thing that your school has contributed to your life?

Core Values:

What have you experienced as the “Core Values” of this school? Please give some examples of how you have experienced these values.

Three Wishes:

If you had three wishes for this school, what would they be?

The paired interview process was one of the most incredible moments that I have had the pleasure of being a part of in my educational career. The range of emotions which were expressed from the individuals participating was across the spectrum. We had staff members crying and laughing out loud all in the same room. Watching and interacting with the staff members as they were recalling stories about the best times they have had as educators was truly a privilege.

5. Life-Giving Forces (Core Values)

On March 12, 2010, the staffs for Landers Elementary School and Morongo Valley Elementary School were brought together for a district staff development day, all staff was invited to attend. We reviewed the paired interviews, and the wish lists that each site created, and we started the day with developing a focus of what we wanted to create more of, a preferred future. Each site took another, more in depth, look at the wish lists they created prior and concentrated their focus on what they can control. Each staff worked independently with assigned grade levels working together. The discussions taking place were amazing. As each group recorded the Life-Giving Forces and then shared out with the whole group you could feel the positive energy in the room.

Life-Giving Forces (Core Values)

Enthusiastic Learners	Teachers Serving as Role Models
Caring Community	Becoming Heroes For Students
Happiness	Work Ethic
Curiosity	Active Learning, Self-Motivated
Self-Confidence	Developing Dreams/Goals
Recognition	Developing Relationships
Honesty	Encouragement
Caring For Students	Students Reaching Their Potential
Partnerships With Parents	Developing Confidence
Communication	Know Your Students
	Have Fun

6. Provocative Propositions – Statements

- We will have a “Recipe for Success” – Be a hero, Dream a dream, Seek to learn, and Think of others...Mix altogether with your best and all the world will be blessed.
- We will “Nourish” students to develop confidence, happiness, creativity, independent thinkers, and problem solvers.
- We will strive to be “Heroes” who are confident, courageous, courteous, creative, cooperative, and community minded.
- We will value positive contributions, enthusiasm, positive attitudes, unity, and we will celebrate our success.
- We will be “Great Teachers” and inspire “Great Learning” for students.
- We will “Sail to Success” – The winds of adversity blow on us all. It is the **set of the sail**, not the direction of the gale that determines our destination.

As we continued through the AI process creating the Provocative Proposition, the group realized they do have control over how they choose to interact with each other, students and parents. The staffs also determined the Provocative Propositions to be something that can have an immediate affect on the classroom environment and the school community as a whole. This was clearly present when each group shared with excitement, enthusiasm, and laughter.

7. Impact or Results:

As a result of our staff development day us AI, a shift has occurred with both staff in created a more positive learning environment for students and staff. At Landers Elementary School a bulletin board was created in the main hallway with a quote that reads, “*Be the change you want to see in the world.*” Gandhi. Pictures were posted on the bulletin board which represented what this quote meant to the people on the staff who posted pictures. The bulletin board is still up today serving as a constant reminder for the staff, students, and parents of Landers Elementary School that positive change begins with the individual and a dream.

At Morongo Valley Elementary School, a dream from the wish list that was created on a minimum day is in the process of becoming a reality. A staff member had added to the list the dream of having a Community Center located at the school. Another staff member added to that dream of having a track, a gym and a pool as well. As it turns out, Morongo Valley Elementary has a Foundation which is a non-profit fundraising organization for the school. The Foundation was brought into this discussion and is currently planning how to raise money in order to purchase a piece of property located directly next to the school to build a gym and an all weather track. How amazing is that?

Prior to the March 12, Staff Development Day, I had an opportunity to share with my follow administrators about AI at a district Administrative Council meeting. Mr. Tom Baumgarten, who is the Assistant Superintendent of Instruction, asked me to give an impromptu presentation on the AIFT that I attended in February, and how I was going to use AI with staff development. So I shared with the group the principles of AI and how I designed the staff development using AI. As a result of the impromptu presentation, two things happened:

First, several other site level administrators wanted to learn more about the appreciative paired interview process and the sharing of exceptional experiences. These administrators incorporated the appreciative paired interviews into their staff developments as a starting point to creating preferred futures for their school communities.

Second, a district level colleague approached me with an idea of encouraging our administrative staff with in the Morongo Unified School District. It was a great idea so we ran with it. The dream was to start a new tradition in Morongo Unified by celebrating our successes and recognizing individuals for their accomplishments. We began this year with selecting the award winners, and then these same individuals would select the award winners for the following year and so on. We received the blessing from our superintendent to present these awards at the end of the year management luncheon, as well as presenting the video, *Celebrate What’s Right With The World*.

8. Continued Support for AI

We will continue to have AI as a foundation for our staff developments and strategic planning purposes. We will use our minimum days to revisit our Provocative Propositions, and to create new goals and new propositions. We will also use this time to celebrate our success and share our stories of success, professionally and personally.

With the coming 2010-2011 school year, we will involve parents into the AI process in order to create a shared vision for each school. Parents will be a vital part of the planning process as we continue to evolve our instructional practices so we can better serve our school communities.

9. What did I wish for in the inquiry? What did I learn about myself and my facilitation? What was my “personal best” experience related to facilitating the inquiry?

What a great experience this was. It was my wish to motivate teachers to create positive learning environments for their students, and to find ways of being creative with instructional practices. I wished that teachers could understand they do have control over how they teach, how they interact with the school communities. I wished for teachers to reconnect with the art and magic of teaching, and to do what is right for students. I wished for them to be the best for the schools, and not settle for just being the best in the schools.

Before this experience, as a principal and as a facilitator, I tended to be the problem solver...if I didn't have the answer; I was going to find the answer. After going through the AI process, I was learning to let go and became very comfortable with the teachers finding their own answers. As the inquiry process went on, the focus became the Provocative Propositions and making a difference for students. I found myself in the middle of it all coaching and guiding the staffs towards the preferred futures they had created for themselves and their students. This in its self was my personal best experience, and I am excited for the future of our school communities.

The Appreciative Interview Format

1. Best Experience: Tell me a story about the best time you have had with the school. Looking at your experience, recall a time when you felt the most passionate, the most involved, and the most excited about your profession. What made it an exciting experience? Who was involved? Describe the event in detail.

2. Values: Let's talk for a moment about some things you value deeply; specifically the things you value about yourself; about the nature of your profession; and about this school.

A. Without being humble, what do you value most about yourself – as a person and as a member of this school?

B. When you are feeling best about your work, what is it that you value?

C. What do you value most about this school?

D. What is the single most important thing that your school has contributed to your life?

3. Core Values: What do you experience as the core values of this school? Give some examples of how you have experienced these values.

4. Three Wishes: If you had three wishes for this school, what would they be?

Clarifying Questions

Tell me more.

What makes that important to you?

How did that affect you?

How has the experience changed you?

Summary Sheet

1. What was the most quotable quote that came out of your interview?

2. What was the most compelling story that came out of your interview? What details and examples did the interviewee share?

3. What was the most “life-giving” moment of the interview for you as a listener?

4. Did a particularly creative example of transformational learning emerge during the interview? If so, describe what you learned.

5. What three themes stood out most for you during the interview?