Chapter 7
Appreciative Inquiry as a Positive Approach to School's Leadership Development and Organizational Change:
Croatian Case Study

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ABSTRACT

The primary goal of this chapter is to examine the possibilities and effects of applying the principles of distributed leadership model and AI's approach positive stance into different educational contexts. Since there is a great need in Croatian school systems today to reform, the motivation for this case study is to point out that such reformation can occur from within: with a positive and collaborative inquiry that embraces shared leadership and taps into the answers that are already in the system. The presented case study shows AI approach as a shift of the focus away from problems, flaws, or weaknesses and toward the strengths of the group and their work, as identified by the involved participants themselves. The ultimate goal is to examine the powerful effects of AI to create change from within as well as to point out how the principles of distributed leadership contribute to the harmonious collaborative relationships, effective defining and implementing change and finding sustainable and creative solutions for efficient functioning of the modern and sustainable school.

TRANSFORMATIONAL POTENTIAL OF APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY (AI)

Appreciative Inquiry is a positive, strength-based approach to making change in organizations. It unleashes the positive potential within people and organizations through attention to the positive core. It suggests we build on our strengths, successes, and best practices to achieve our greatest hopes and dreams (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2008).

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) has gained prominence as an organizational development approach and has been for over 20 years used in various fields and in higher education research both as a methodology and as a collection of methods. Organizations, whether for-profit or not-for profit, have been incorporating the theory of AI, the process of AI, or both. Numerous studies reflect on the implementation of the AI approach into team building initiatives or identifying operational efficiencies, in increasing capacity-building competencies, and in dealing with challenging issues such as diversity.[1] Relatively limited literature on AI's use in education (Buchanan, 2017, Clouder & King, 2015) demonstrates that educational researchers are frequently overlooking relevant AI research published within other disciplines, so the idea of presenting a case study which examines application of AI approach in educational context was to initiate further research about its benefits and contribution to school's leadership development and organizational change.

Defined as a collaborative, strengths-based approach to both personal and organizational development, the transformational potential of AI lies in the "fusion of strength," which comes from focusing on the best of what (already) is, and "activation of energy," which is the result of highlighting positive principle and a process of re-imagining what could be. It is interesting that the inspiration for creating this approach stems from the so-called "appreciative eye" – a concept that emanates from the art world and is based on the assumption that beauty can be found in every piece of art or in every artistic form. When working on projects or initiatives in schools or communities, information gathered is very often from a negative stance by asking participants to identify what is being done badly and what needs to be fixed. Such a "deficit" model is opposite to AI's attention to the positive core, strengths, successes, and best practices that allow co-creating inspiring images of what is wanted and needed.

Unlike the traditional and overused problem-solving approach, this affirmative method of inquiry revolutionized the field of organizational development because its focus of attention is on the positive traits and processes that already exist, as key engines of change. Although AI's positive stance is the most consistently used yet most criticized aspect of AI, contemporary research claims that it is its positive core and affirmative inquiry that enables people to be more flexible, creative, integrative, open to information, and efficient in their thinking (Isen, 2000, 94). Due to its appreciative nature which is "the single most important measure that can be taken to ensure the conscious evolution of a valued and positive future," (Bushe, 2011, 92) AI has got the potential to support creation of new ideas, images, and theories that may lead to social innovations. Furthermore, AI enables the facilitation of group conversations of all sizes, and such conversations are by principles of maximizing collective intelligence supported, welcoming and listening to diverse viewpoints which in turn maximize participation and civility and transform conflict into creative cooperation. Since it is proving to be successful in all human systems, individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities in hundreds of countries around the world, it is being proposed here as a valuable approach that contributes to school's leadership development and organizational change.

When discussing AI principles and benefits, it is important to point out how the AI approach helps with the integration of top-bottom and bottom-top approaches into evaluation and self-evaluation, which

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